

Uzbekistan: Internews "Victim of Media Purge"

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Journalists accuse the Tashkent authorities of trying to muzzle the independent media before the upcoming elections.

Tashkent's decision to suspend the activities of Internews for six months is being viewed as an attempt to silence independent broadcasters in the run-up to the republic's parliamentary elections.

The international media organisation, which is the main sponsor of Uzbekistan's foremost independent television stations, was served with a temporary suspension order by the Tashkent city court on September 13.

Analysts believe that the order was issued to silence the NGO in advance of elections scheduled for December, and in doing so stifling anti-regime sentiment on the television stations it supports.

The authorities have denied these allegations, and maintain that Internews was suspended after staff there had failed to remedy "numerous legal violations" discovered in June of this year.

Tashkent claims the NGO did not register its trademark; inform the authorities of a change in its location; illegally produced and distributed bulletins and conducted business outside the capital despite being registered as a city-only organisation.

Internews described the justice ministry's move as "hurried". By law, the agency had 30 days to address the authorities' concerns, but it claims that it was taken to court before this period elapsed.

Internews Uzbekistan's director Khalida Anarbaeva told IWPR that she believes the court verdict was politically motivated, and connected to the activity of the organisation, which is primarily funded by the United States government.

She points to one Internews projects, which monitors violations of journalists' rights, as another reason why the authorities might want them out of the picture in the run-up to the elections. Four hundred and fifty such breaches were recorded in one year alone.

Internews has also been heavily involved in training many independent television and radio workers in Uzbekistan, and has produced a number of programmes broadcast in the former Soviet republic. It has also raised the quality of private media outlets by providing technical, educational and legal assistance.

Anarbaeva believes that as the Uzbek authorities disapprove of all non-state media operating in the country, this move has been designed to effectively gag independent broadcasters in the run-up to December's ballot. Without support from Internews, she argued, the republic's private stations may not be able to deliver objective coverage of the campaigning and the poll.

She points to the closure of five independent channels linked to Internews, which were stripped of their broadcasting licenses at the end of August, as further proof of her theory.

On August 27, Bekabad television, which broadcasts to the Tashkent region, vanished from the airwaves, as did Mulokot TV in Kokand, Ishonch TV in Termez and Nurofshon in Karshi.

Three days earlier, the Jizak region's long-established popular private channel Bakhtior-TV also stopped broadcasting, apparently after a "technical fault".

Bakhtior-TV has been broadcasting successfully for more than a decade, and two of its most popular programmes – Zamon, Ochick Osiyao (Open Asia) and Jaraen (Process) – were made in partnership with Internews.

Anarbaeva told IWPR that in her view it was "obvious" that these five stations had been targeted as they were successful, independent and had received technical assistance from Internews.

"At the moment, many regional private stations are being asked to stop working with Internews," she claimed. "Employees of these broadcasters are even being advised not to enter our offices in Tashkent."

Urgench journalist Kudrat Babajanov told IWPR that the move against Internews reminded him of how the authorities closed several private stations on the eve of the last parliamentary elections in 1999.

"The same tactics are being used this time," he said. "As election time nears, the media is being purged to make sure it is loyal to the authorities."

Tashkent's decision to suspend Internews follows the spring closure of the local branch of the Open Society Institute/Soros Foundation, which also sought to support democratic change and media development in Uzbekistan. The international community has voiced concern that the authorities appear to be targeting civil society in the run-up to the elections.

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