

Voice of America Reporter Charged in Uzbekistan

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A journalist working for Voice of America has been charged with a series of offences in what rights defenders say is the latest attempt to stamp out independent reporting.

Abdumalik Boboev, 41, was charged on September 13 by the Tashkent city prosecutor's office, and released pending further legal action.

He had worked for the United States broadcaster Voice of America, VOA, since 2006, using the pseudonym Malik Mansur. He did not have official accreditation in Uzbekistan, since the authorities have routinely denied this to reporters since shutting out foreign broadcast outlets like VOA, RFE/RL and the BBC since 2005, when these media reported the bloodshed in Andijan in May that year.

The array of accusations against Boboev includes illegally crossing the border, libel and the publication of material containing threats to national security. The offences carry penalties of up to eight years in prison.

Prosecution officials produced documents they claimed were evidence, including a statement from the Monitoring Centre of the Communications and Information Agency.

This body is regularly called upon to produce "expert assessments" of journalistic material that then serve as the basis for prosecutions. Earlier this year, for example, it found that pictures of rural life taken by photographer Umida Ahmedova constituted libel – not of any individual, but of the entire nation. Ahmedova was released following an international outcry in which the Monitoring Centre's findings were ridiculed. In August, it produced more findings for a prosecution case – this time, journalist Vladimir Berezovsky was accused of libelling the Uzbek government, as an institution.

In violation of all legal procedure, the investigating officer at the prosecutor's office, Husan Husanov refused to give Boboev copies of the evidence and other documents, as he said the case was "secret".

Surat Ikramov, heads of the Initiative Group of Independent Human Rights Defenders, says this evasive action points to a stitch-up.

"The indictment contains over 100 pages, all of them based on printouts of materials that Boboev produced for Voice of America," he said. "His lawyer wrote a letter to the prosecutor's office requesting written copies of the indictment, but to no avail."

The way the case has snowballed in recent months is telling.

In January, Boboev was among six independent journalists summoned to the Tashkent prosecutor's office to face questioning about their work, in particular their contacts abroad. Boboev refused to go, since no formal summons was issued.

The same month, he was stopped at the border after a trip to neighbouring because his passport was missing a stamp that Uzbek border officials should have put in it earlier. This bureaucratic omission, rather than the suggestion that Boboev had at some point sneaked over the border undetected, formed the basis of the initial criminal charges against him.

Allegations that Boboev published material that was libelous and threatened national security were added on only later. The evidence produced by prosecutors but not made available to the accused seems to consist largely of printouts of VOA material.

Yelena Urlaeva, head of the Human Rights Alliance in Tashkent, says the charges reflect the systematic abuse of freedom of speech in Uzbekistan.

"The authorities don't want anybody to tell the truth," she said. "There are already very few independent journalists left here, and even those who remain are to be silenced."

Human rights groups say at least ten journalists are serving jail terms in Uzbekistan on politically motivated charges.

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