

Reporters Without Borders

Uzbekistan's 23 December presidential election

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Public media in President Karimov's service

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**Coverage of the 23 December presidential election by the public
media.....3-7**

A trade that is risky and hard to practice.....8-13

Reporters Without Borders went to Uzbekistan on a tourist visa from 19 to 28 November to evaluate the press freedom situation and to set up a mission to monitor media coverage of the campaign for the 23 December presidential election.

Uzbekistan's 16 million voters were expected to reelect Islam Karimov, the former First Secretary of the Communist Party of Uzbekistan, for a third presidential term. Karimov, who will be 70 next month, won the 1991 presidential election with 86 per cent of the vote and the 2000 one with 91.9 per cent. An opposition candidate, poet Muhammad Solih, managed to register for the 1991 election but had to go into exile afterward and has remained there ever since. Karimov's only rival in the 2000 election, Abdulkhafiz Jalalov, said afterwards he voted for Karimov.

In theory, the Uzbek constitution bans more than two consecutive presidential terms. But as this provision was only introduced in 2002, it is matter of dispute whether it prevents from Karimov serving a third term.

This time, Karimov has three candidates running against him. One of them is a woman, which is a first. But none of them is a public figure of any significance and all have supported the Karimov regime. The repression exercised by the government in recent years has forced both the secular and religious opposition into exile and all the real opposition parties have been banned.

State media coverage of the 23 December presidential election

The campaign for the 23 December presidential election ran from 19 November and to 22 December. Reporters Without Borders carried out its monitoring from 26 November to 22 December.

The Reporters Without Borders team monitored three dailies – *Halk Suzy*, *Narodnoe Slovo* (Voice of the People) and *Pravda Vostoka* (Truth of the East) – two TV stations, *TV Uzbekistan* and *Yoshlar*, and *Radio Uzbekistan*, the main public radio station.

It monitored news bulletins, special election programmes and current affairs programmes on the national television stations, *TV Uzbekistan* and *Yoshlar*, and *Radio Uzbekistan*. It also analysed articles in the dailies *Halk Suzy*, *Narodnoe Slovo* and *Pravda Vostoka* about the elections and about parliamentary and government activity.

Uzbekistan

With 27 million inhabitants and an area of 447,400 sq km, Uzbekistan is the most populous of the five former Soviet republics of Central Asia. A landlocked country surrounded by landlocked countries, it has been ruled by Islam Karimov since 1 June 1989, when he became First Secretary of the Communist Party of Uzbekistan. It proclaimed its independence on 1 September 1991. Uzbeks make up 87 per cent of the population. Other ethnic groups include Russians (5 per cent) and Tajiks (4 per cent). The majority speaks Uzbek, a Turkic language, and is Sunni Muslim. For years the Soviet Union portrayed Uzbekistan as a successful combination of socialist modernity and Islam. But it is now in the grip of authoritarianism, which the regime says is required to combat Islamic terrorism, and there has been a significant pauperization of the population, of which nearly half is younger than 15.

Karimov everywhere in broadcast media programmes

News bulletins and news programmes

In general, the broadcast media's news bulletins and news programmes paid little attention to the election campaign, concentrating instead on social and economic subjects.

TV Uzbekistan dedicated 5 hrs 41 mins to subjects in which no participant in the campaign was mentioned, 3 hrs 5 mins to the incumbent president, and 2 hrs 3 mins to all of the candidates. Similarly, *Yoshlar* dedicated 3 hrs 15 mins to reports in which none of the relevant political actors was mentioned, 2 hrs 48 mins to President Karimov's activities and about half an hour to the candidates. *Radio Uzbekistan* dedicated only 17 mins 30 secs to the candidates, as against 1 hr 23 mins to the incumbent president and 3 hrs 14 mins to stories not involving any of the political actors concerned.

No voter appeared in any of the reports about the elections and no televised debate was held. Similarly, no broadcasts compared the candidates' programmes. The candidates were not seen appealing to the electorate for their votes, and no speeches by candidates were broadcast. Throughout the monitoring period, the government, including President Karimov and parliament, received by far the greatest number of direct mentions on the air.

TV Uzbekistan and *Radio Uzbekistan* broadcast reports on all four candidates in their news programmes, with Karimov getting most mentions. *TV Uzbekistan* dedicated 1 hr 4 mins to him as opposed to 59 mins to the three other candidates. *Radio Uzbekistan* gave him 11 mins as against 9 mins 38 secs to the other candidates. Karimov was virtually the only candidate covered in *Yoshlar*'s news programmes. One of the other candidates, Asliddin Rustamov of the People's

Democratic Party (the former Communist Party), who is a deputy speaker of the parliament's lower house, was given only 72 secs by *Yoshlar*.

The broadcast media's news and current affairs programmes failed to give voters proper information about the political choices being offered to them. The public was completely ignored in the reports on the campaign.

Special programmes

Under an agreement signed between the state-owned National Television and Radio Company (NTRC) and the Central Electoral Commission, and the legal provisions governing the presidential election campaign, the NTRC was supposed to play a central role in coverage of the campaign and to give equal access to the candidates in special programmes on both its TV and radio stations.

Public television's campaign coverage took the form of open-access programmes, that is to say, recorded interviews with candidates, reports on their meetings with voters, and official spots lasting about 60 seconds.

These programmes were grouped in series and were broadcast several times a week on prime time on both stations. The reports on candidates' meetings, broadcast during news bulletins and special programmes, were identical on both channels. The national radio retransmitted the special programmes broadcast by *TV Uzbekistan* and did not do any of its own reporting.

The candidates were also given a chance to present their election programmes and answer questions from moderators that were not very challenging. Karimov was the candidate who got least time in these special broadcasts because he did not present his programme in an interview. This was the case with both TV stations, whose broadcasts were virtually identical, and with the national radio stations.

Although Karimov had the least air time in these special programmes, his campaign spots were the only ones in which the candidate was named in the voice-over. The names of the other candidates were never pronounced in their spots. This gave Karimov a distinct advantage, especially as regards radio listeners.

Islam Karimov

Islam Karimov was elected president with 87 per cent of the vote on 29 December 1991. He took his oath of office on the Koran. A 1997 referendum extended his term until 2000. He was re-elected on 9 January 2000 with 91.9 per cent of the vote. A referendum in 2002 extended the presidential term of office from five to seven years. Karimov is expected to be comfortably re-elected again in the 23 December election, in which none of the three rival candidates is a real government opponent. He is on the Reporters Without Borders list of “Press Freedom Predators.”

President on page one more often than his “rivals”

Front-page space with a special format was set aside for campaign coverage in every issue of the monitored dailies. Reports were written about all of the candidates, but the coverage was limited to their public meetings. The content of the articles was provided by the state news agency *UzA* and was virtually identical. The same candidate profiles were repeated in all the reports

Karimov was always linked to reforms and economic successes while the other candidates were described as “representing an alternative in the democratic process of the elections.” The space allocated to each candidate varied from paper to paper but Karimov always got more. He got a total of 6,228 sq cm of space in *Halk Suzy* (compared with 3,480 for his rivals), 6,932 sq cm in *Narodnoe Slovo* (as against 3,148 sq cm) and 5,446 sq cm in *Pravda Vostoka* (as against 3,220).

News reports provided a platform for the government, parliament and president. These reports were many about official ceremonies or economic or social achievements or referred to government members in connection with charity initiatives or cultural events. References to the incumbent president in this kind of report can only be compared with reports that mentioned no relevant political actor. *Halk Suzy*, for example, dedicated 26,944 sq cm to the president as against 9,381 sq cm to stories with no political actor. The corresponding figures for *Narodnoe Slovo* were 16,937 sq cm against 10,236 sq cm.

Significant quantitative advantage for the incumbent

All of the monitored media ran lots of stories about Uzbekistan’s economic and social successes without mentioning who had initiated and sustained them. On the other hand, the president and government were systematically mentioned in connections with such events as the start of the

“Year of Youth” or the “Year of Social Protection.” The end result was the current government’s portrayal as the country’s sole political actor.

The government enjoyed a considerable quantitative advantage in the news bulletins. Many reports were broadcast during the campaign which had no direct link to the elections but were about the government or referred extensively to it. A lot of these reports portrayed President Karimov as the architect of the country’s economic and social stability, to the clear disadvantage of the other candidates.

One of the most striking aspects of the media coverage during the monitoring period was the overwhelmingly positive or, at worst, neutral nature of the domestic news. There was no bad news from inside the country. International coverage, on the other hand, very often focused on negative events such as natural disasters and road accidents.

Recommendations

On the basis of these findings, Reporters Without Borders recommends that, during the next presidential election, the state media should:

- while maintaining the principle of equal access for all candidates and respecting national regulations, develop a more varied approach to campaign coverage and include debates that allow discussion of the candidates’ records and refer to the ordinary lives of the public;
- increase the proportion of news reports and offer broader coverage of the campaign in general in news programmes;
- develop independent editorial policies and restrict the broadcasting of programmes that confer an undue advantage on the incumbent president if he or she is a candidate for reelection.

Campaign coverage’s legal framework

The legal framework for the coverage of the 23 December election campaign was defined in the “Regulations of the Central Electoral Commission concerning the use of the media by the candidates, political parties and pressure groups” and the “Accord between the Central Electoral Commission and the Uzbek National Television and Radio Company.” The former stems from the “Law on the Election of the President of Uzbekistan,” the “Law on the media” and the “Law on the Central Electoral Commission.”

The rules stipulate that the campaign starts on the day candidates are registered and they ban any campaigning on election day itself. They call for fair access for all candidates to both print and broadcast media. The media are required to monitor and keep a record of the air-time or space accorded to each candidate and to report it to the CEC. The state media are also required to give the candidates free air-time or space. Private media should provide equal access to all candidates

on equal economic conditions. But no legal provision defines the candidates' access to the privately-owned media further.

The rules put a limit on the free air-time and space: 40 minutes a week for each candidate on each TV station, and no more than 10 per cent of the total newspaper space. The candidates can buy air-time or space (at rates that must be the same for each candidate) within the limits of the maximum free air-time or space. The fees must be paid to the media via the CEC. The rules ban any censorship or modification of the content provided by the candidates.

The media must refrain from any defamatory or insulting statements. They are warned not to permit anti-constitutional propaganda, incitement to racial or religious hatred or to war, or propaganda in favour of activities that could jeopardise public health or morality. The vague nature of these provisions lends itself to different interpretations. The charity-related activities of the candidates cannot be covered.

If the rules are broken, there is no legal provision for reparation aside from the right of response and the possibility of taking the matter to court if the media concerned refuses the right of response. Neither of the two national agencies overseeing media activity nor the CEC are identified as institutions that could receive and handle any complaints from candidates.

The order and timetable of the special election programmes on the state TV and radio stations appear in the appendices of the agreement between the CEC and the NTRC. The agreement places a limit of 15 minutes on the total time allocated to each candidate's spot on each TV station, without specifying whether this limit applies to just free access or to free and paid access.

A trade that is risky and hard to practice

Reporters Without Borders met about half of the independent journalists still in Uzbekistan, which was ranked 160th out of 169 countries in the organisation's latest world press freedom index. All of the journalists agreed to be interviewed but all asked not to be identified.

“Everything is decided at the top, it's democratic centralism”

A veteran journalist who has worked in many neighbouring Central Asian countries including Afghanistan said: “Even there, people talk more freely than here.” This view is shared by many Uzbek journalists. Some go so far as to say there are no independent media in Uzbekistan, that the government apparatus and president's office check everything that is published in the local press. “Every journalist employed by an Uzbek media is as dependent as in the Soviet era,” one said. “Owners want their media to defend their interests. Everything is decided at the top, it's democratic centralism.”

Many journalists have left, or fled, the country. “The best have gone and those who have replaced them often have no training in journalism and no idea of what the job is about,” said a local stringer for a foreign news media. Those who have stayed and work for the local press have learned the lesson. Many take it for granted that certain subjects cannot be broached. Similarly, many foreign journalists think it is impossible to report in Uzbekistan and NGOs hardly request visas any more. The ferocious repression of recent years is an effective deterrent. “It is possible to do journalism here but many do not even try,” the stringer said.

This sounds like a criticism of those journalists who comply with the government’s demands. But the reality is tough. It is not easy to survive on the salaries that the Uzbek media pay. The average salary is 100 dollars a month, which is not enough even to feed oneself. So how do they get by? Some do “promotional” reports. Many have second jobs. Others have left the country or are trying to leave.

What subjects can they cover? Sport, culture and traditions. Some say they can even tackle social issues such as AIDS, drug addiction and drug trafficking as long as they always stress that the government is doing everything possible to put an stop to the problem.

Journalists know they will be punished for the least departure from the rules, and the rules are always changing. Something that can be discussed today may be off-limits tomorrow. A metaphor or a joke could always be misinterpreted or could be taken too literally. “You know, there is an anecdote about this,” one journalist said. “An entertainment show host interviewed a doctor about all the medicines you can get for minor ailments without a prescription. After going through a long list, the journalist dared to crack a joke about the bomb you could make if you mixed them all together. He was fired.”

Another journalist who did the weather forecast on a programme for young people on public TV channel was told to change a comment he had planned to make. He had been going to say: “It will be hot but, thanks to the north, not too hot.” They said to him: “What does this mean? You are referring to Russia?” The unexpected is the rule in Uzbekistan.

Traitors who sell out their country for dollars

Independent journalists who work for websites based abroad or foreign news media are not a lot better off. There are only 20 of them in the entire country and half are based in the capital. It is a community that mostly meets online and suffers from the isolation necessary for its protection.

“Traitors who sell out their country for dollars” and “puppets manipulated by foreign powers jealous of Uzbekistan’s success” is the kind of rhetoric that the government reserves for these journalists. One of them said: “Journalists employed by foreign media are likened to spies. The authorities do not understand how we work. There were many arrests after the revolution in

Ukraine in particular. Members of the intelligence services or the anti-terrorism department came and questioned us. They summoned us for interrogation. They suspected we paid people to say things. They fabricated campaigns to discredit us.”

The many difficulties they can encounter cover a broad spectrum ranging from obstructive red-tape to physical aggression or even arrest. Some have been threatened online, by means of messages recalling what happened to other independent journalists. Some have received threatening phone calls. Some have had stones thrown at their homes, or at themselves on the street. Posters have been affixed to walls on the streets of the capital offering erotic services at a phone number that happens to be the offending journalist’s number.

There have obviously been arrests and trials. Although less frequent, there have also been beatings. At least two journalists, including Ulugbek Khaidarov, were beaten up in 2005. Sometimes equipment is targeted. The Russian-language daily *Trud* has ceased to publish because the press used to print it has supposedly been under repair for the past year and a half. Only the president’s office would be capable of getting this press running again.

“We are all virtual political prisoners and the authorities can do what they want with us,” one journalist said. Jamshid Karimov, a contributor to dissident websites and nephew of the president, learned this to his cost. He has been confined to a psychiatric hospital against his will since October 2006. He went missing in the city of Jizzak on 12 September 2006 after visiting his mother in hospital and reappeared a few weeks later in a psychiatric clinic in Samarkand. He is still there, although the doctors have described him as “stable, in good health, intelligent and educated.”

Journalists are sometimes given “friendly advice” and sometimes reprimands. They are told that if they “behaved better, everything would be easier” for them and their family. “You never know when some misfortune is going to occur. If you write about something sensitive, you begin to notice that people are following you, asking your neighbours questions about you,” a young Tashkent-based journalist said, adding, “they try to scare you.” Another said: “I have been told that my phone is being tapped and my emails are being read. This is like the Cold War. And the how question that counts is – how far will they go?”

There are no foreign journalists permanently based in Uzbekistan and foreign media that employ local journalists are often forced into administrative contortions and delicate compromises. They are subject to a February 2006 law that obliges their local stringers to request authorisation from the foreign ministry (MID). Those that fail to do so are breaking the law and can be prosecuted, as *Deutsche Welle* stringer Natalia Bushuyeva was. Charged in March with failing to have accreditation, she chose to flee the country.

When journalists apply for authorisation to work for a foreign media, they are submitting to a long and arbitrary process that can take months. When they finally receive a permit, it is often

for a period that is shorter than that stipulated in the law. In the meantime, compromises often have to be made. It is not unusual for foreign media to have to choose between running a story on an important but sensitive subject or killing it in order to be able to maintain their presence in Uzbekistan. Some employ people who are registered as technicians but are in fact doing correspondent work and are sending their stories to Moscow to be published under a different byline.

Getting access to official information is also often an impossible task. A journalist employed by a foreign news organisation said: “In practice, we can no longer address requests to the MID’s press service. We could before Andijan. But now the people who answer are police. There is no longer anyone to transmit information. It is the result of instructions from the authorities, who want official information to be passed through just one channel, which is Press-uz.info. Officially, this is just the club of the young journalists at the Uzbek University for Foreign Languages. But in practice, all it does is follow the directives of the Presidential Security Committee.”

The Andijan uprising

There was an uprising on 13 May 2005 in Andijan, in the Ferghana valley, which has seen many inter-ethnic clashes in the past. It was triggered by the trial of 23 men alleged to belong to the “Akramiya” Islamic sect. Troops opened fire on a crowd. Human rights organisations estimate that more than 800 people were killed. The authorities put the death toll at 170. They say they reacted to an attack by radical Islamists who had foreign help.

These are not the only difficulties. In a country where all decisions are centralised and the nomenklatura is split into rival clans, it is vital to have good “contacts.” One journalist described how he signed up for an Internet connection and had been paying for it for months without actually getting a connection. His many phone calls to the telecommunications company had borne no fruit. Finally he described his plight to a friend employed by the public TV broadcaster and the problem was solved. Journalists without accreditation can still get often get into official news conferences thanks to their extensive network of friends.

The government’s reactions are often incomprehensible. A news media that was in Andijan for the uprising and reported what happened live was surprised to be congratulated by the government for its “objective” coverage. But *Deutsche Welle*, the public broadcaster of Germany, a country that favours relaxing sanctions against Uzbekistan, has been hounded. One of its journalists who was in Andijan and covered the uprising was publicly denounced by the state media as an “enemy of the government.” After returning to Tashkent, he spent four months living in fear, every night thinking they were going to come and arrest him. “But they never came,” he said.

Internal rivalries within the government may sometimes explain the unpredictability. A critical article on a sensitive topic may sometimes be possible and even encouraged by a politician because it discredits a rival.

After Andijan, media muzzle perfected for presidential election

“Before Andijan, we were watched, we knew it, we saw who was in charge of us and each of us acted as if it did not matter,” a journalist said. “But since then, relations have become tougher. We have had threatening calls and some of us have been beaten.” The pressure on civil society has been stepped up. In October 2005, the authorities targeted the local independent press and the foreign media present in the country, as well as human rights activists. The *BBC* had to close its bureau. Two months later, *Radio Free Europe* had to follow suit. But the increase in authoritarianism had begun before this. Sabirjon Yakubov of the Uzbek newspaper *Hurriyat*, for example, had been arrested in April 2005. He ended up spending a year in prison without ever being tried. The events in Andijan just gave the authorities the pretext they needed.

Control of news gathering and dissemination has been reinforced in the runup to the 23 December presidential election. Surveillance and harassment has been stepped up, focusing above all on *Deutsche Welle*'s local stringers, some of whom were facing a possible 10-year prison sentence on charges of defaming the president and defaming Uzbekistan before being finally amnestied. All Uzbek journalists saw this as a pre-election message to them. The content of the local press has changed. “Not a single newspaper has published critical stories,” a young Uzbek journalist said. “All of them have had to limit themselves to positive news. There are no more criminals and not even any more road accidents. It's ‘News from Paradise’.”

To reinforce this control, Beruni Alimov, a member of the special services employed by the presidential press office, was appointed to the Electoral Commission press centre. His job is to make sure that everything proceeds according to the president's wishes.

The news programmes on the public TV stations do not report public discontent of any degree, let alone popular demands. They consist of unbroken stream of celebrations, inaugurations and successes. As for international news, only the negative stories get play: fires in Malibu, a road accident in Poland or rioting in France. The *Press-uz.info* news agency's despatch on 19 November giving the Central Electoral Commission's list of authorised election candidates was recited word for word on the evening news on one of the public TV stations three days later.

Independent media - tolerated but powerless

Most independent journalists think the authorities tolerate them because they have very little influence on the Uzbek public, which is too busy earning enough money to get by. The economy has slumped, and the stagnation is reinforced by the country's isolation. The society seems to be

going backwards. The streets of Tashkent are deserted by eight in the evening. Billiards and motorcycles are banned. There are never many people to be seen in public places. The markets offer nuts and bolts, repaired pipes and used shoes for sale. Almost all of the drivers of the private cars that are used as taxis have a second job. The average monthly wage is about 70,000 sums (35 euros).

All that is left of the economic opening-up announced at the start of the 1990s is the memory of promises of a better life. “Almost half of the population is less than 15 years old,” a journalist said. “All they have heard of is Timur (a 14th century sovereign and conqueror who has become the national icon) and Karimov. There is no longer any education worthy of the name. Students

The Uzbek media

Uzbekistan has more than 900 newspapers and magazines (50 per cent of which are owned by the state) and about 100 radio and TV stations. Around 60 to 70 per cent of them do not have their own programmes and just broadcast those of other stations, especially Russian ones. There are four news agencies, of which all but one is state-owned. No news media has a critical editorial line. There are no longer any independent media.

The leading news media include the national news agency *UzA* (www.uza.uz/ru/) and the National Television and Radio Company (www.mtrk.uz/). It owns *Radio Tashkent International*, which broadcasts in Uzbek and 11 foreign languages. The print media include the daily *Pravda Vostoka* (www.pv.uz/), the oldest newspaper and mouthpiece of the cabinet, and *Narodnoe Slovo* (<http://narodnoeslovo.uz/>), founded at President Karimov’s initiative to be parliament’s mouthpiece. *Uzbekistan Today* (www.ut.uz/), a daily launched in September 2006 that is published in English and Russian, champions Karimov abroad. It is directly controlled by the president’s office. The weekly *Delovoi Partner Uzbekistana* (<http://dp.uz/>) was created by the ministry of foreign economic relations, trade and investment and by a company owned by the president’s eldest daughter, Gulnara Karimova.

Officially, the news agency *Press-Uz.info* was founded by the journalism faculty at the Tashkent University of Foreign Languages but in practice it is controlled by the president’s office and in particular by the National Security Bureau (SNB). The only privately-owned news agency, *Turkiston-Press* (<http://turkiston-press.uz/>), was founded in 1998 at President Karimov’s initiative and continues to be controlled by the state by means of state-owned companies and personal links. The news agency *Jahon* (<http://jahon.mfa.uz/>) is owned by the interior ministry.

must interrupt their studies to help with the cotton harvest, our former ‘white gold’.” Racketeering and clientelism add to all that oppresses Uzbek society. “If one of us were to accuse a businessman of corruption, people would have forgotten within a couple weeks,” one

reporter said bitterly. “It would be naive to imagine we really have any influence. People do not read us. Most of them do not even speak Russian. And those that have a computer already know everything that is to be known.

Another journalist disagreed, insisting the population was not fooled. “I did a series of reports about the problems of access to water in Central Asia,” he said. “It’s a crucial topic for the region. It showed me that people are well aware that the authorities manipulate them and they take precautions. When a journalist from a government news media asks them questions, they tailor their response. When they are interviewed by a foreign news media, they know they can say the truth. The government has been using rumour and spin for such a long time that nowadays, when someone is criticised in the official media, we start to think well of them.”

It is largely thanks to government media manipulation that journalism has lost its prestige. “Young people are not longer turning towards journalism,” said one experienced reporter. “Those whose education goes back to the Soviet era and who remember perestroika still have some respect for this trade but not those who were born later. Political journalism does not interest them and they do not understand how it works. They think every newspaper is the mouthpiece of some branch of the government or institution.”

A colleague of his said: “Our work is seen as counter-propaganda. People have more faith in the Russian media, which in their view have not sold out to the west and are not government accomplices either. *NTV* broadcast a very tough report on Andijan, just after the events. After that, it was no longer accessible. Anti-Americanism and mistrust of the west are widespread.” Another added: “All you need to restore faith in journalism would be for most journalists to describe and portray what is going on in the country.”

Those interviewed do not expect any rapid change. A foreign editorialist specialising in Central America put it like this: “Islam Karimov’s sole programme is the defence of his interests. Sanctions will have little or no impact on him. Iran will always buy his gold and gas. The Uzbek economy, and that is what interests him, is not in the least integrated into the world. This is Uzbekistan’s weakness, and the government’s strength.”