

# POST-CONFLICT AFGHANISTAN AND THE MEDIA IN TAJIKISTAN

*Turko Dikayev, independent journalist, Kulyab, Tajikistan*

**Despite the direct effect that the reconstruction of post-Taliban Afghanistan will have on Tajikistan both at home and abroad, the country's journalists seem to be ignoring the issue, mirroring the scope of reporting within Tajikistan itself.**

With Afghanistan so close by, the news media of Tajikistan are amazingly silent about the important processes underway within the country. As for journalists' failure to even travel to Afghanistan to cover the ongoing anti-terrorist operations, the excuse is that even the most successful of the generally impoverished and harassed Tajik media outlets are unable to send their correspondents to the field. On the other hand, the unilateral support extended to the Northern Alliance by the Tajik government along with its strategic partner, Russia, has put paid to objective coverage by Tajik reporters.

The post-Taliban reconstruction, though, is quite another story. Tajikistan is likely to play a significance role as might be inferred from the visit to Dushanbe by Hamid Karzai, the Chairman of Afghanistan's Interim Administration. Tajikistan was the first country Karzai visited following the Tokyo International Conference of donor countries for Afghanistan.

Many experts point to the lack of analytical skills in the over-

whelming majority of Tajik reporters as the reason why there is, firstly, no in-depth material focusing on the reconstruction of post-Taliban Afghanistan and, secondly, why there is no analysis of the potential impact the developments in the neighboring country have on Tajikistan.

## **THE PROFESSIONALISM?**

"I see two reasons for this," states the prominent Armenian journalist Mark Grigoryan, who is familiar with the Tajikistan press. "The first one is of purely professional nature. I am afraid that many of my colleagues are not sufficiently professional to be able to analyze the situation. For analyzing a situation implies a hunt for hard-to-get evidence, including finding and assessing facts, and having the ability to get outside of realities and facts. Certainly, it is easier to wait for the Russian newspapers to publish material and then copy it. Certainly too, it is much easier to collect material that is just at hand. By the way, the Tajik press, to the best of my knowledge - I may be mistaken, though - was not too active in writing about the war itself, with events being treated in a one-

sided manner, especially during the last years of the war in Afghanistan." The local reporter Lidiya Isamova also complains of the lack of professionals able to give adequate coverage of this topic: "The worst of all is that the Tajik reporters lack political analysts capable of projecting the current developments."

Lidiya Isamova says there are other factors for the absence of publications focusing on the situation in post-Taliban Afghanistan. He feels that, "our journalists are now capitalizing on reports about the anti-terrorist operations, deployment of aircraft and the allied troops in Tajikistan's airfields. The post-war reconstruction is a theme of the future and so remote that nobody has ventured an opinion on it yet. Also, hostilities in Afghanistan have grown so common that many believe the post-conflict recovery is an intricate process of the distant future. It is quite possible that the very active operations by the United States in Afghanistan suggest that they will not withdraw from the zone of its geopolitical interests overnight. Yet, nobody wants to make it plain in advance that peace and post-war construction in Afghanistan will be done without the direct involvement of the Central Asian countries and Russia."

According to Umed Babakh-anov, the Editor-in-Chief of the popular Asia-Plus news agency, it would be premature to speak about the rebuilding of post-Taliban Afghanistan. He said that, "the post-war reconstruction in Afghanistan has not yet started. With the Interim government only a few months old, the situation in Afghanistan remains uncertain. So, there is nothing to write about. At least reporters of Asia-Plus are seriously concerned about what is going on there."

### THE BIG GAME

Perhaps, lukewarm attitudes assumed by some of Tajikistan's news media may well be due to the fact that they are themselves overwhelmed by problems. "Another reason," says Mark Grigoryan, "on why Tajikistan's media is not too keen on the Afghanistan topic is, as I see it, of a more political and geopolitical nature. Historically, Afghanistan has been on the other side of a big game between Russia and Britain first and then Russia and the USA. Besides, the current developments in Afghanistan call up painful recollections in Tajikistan."

Nuriddin Karshiboyev, the president of NANSMIT (National Association of Independent News Media of Tajikistan) agrees that geopolitics is an issue here. He says that, "I would also mention a syndrome of frustrated hopes. During the anti-terrorist operation, Tajikistan, as a strategic partner of Russia, hoped to be allowed to play a more important role in Afghanistan and more than a mere logistics terminal for goods and weapons. These hopes have not come true. A major power, Russia, has, in fact, started playing for its own

strategic geopolitical stakes in the region."

### MEDIA DEBATES

Local reporters, even while attending various debates and discussions on Afghanistan, never use information picked up at these events. The debates themselves, albeit interesting at times, are given scant coverage. They never participate and never organize similar debates. Clearly, such practices makes their reports on Afghanistan less informative. It does not accelerate the consolidation of analytical journalism in this country. According to Nuriddin Karshiboyev, the "oversights of reporters is not confined to the controversial reshaping of post-Taliban Afghanistan, of which the reshapers themselves have but a very vague idea. It also manifests itself in the way the journalists address various matters on the home front. The absence of analytical journalism accounts for the fact that motives for frequent reshuffles in power structures, and changes in home and foreign political priorities proclaimed by the country's leadership, remain unclear to the broad range of readers, viewers and listeners." Natalia Brooker, the director of an independent journalism school feels there are many reasons for this. She says that, "the journalists are to blame for limiting themselves to a set of just a few topics. They seem to be afraid to stick their nose out of the boundaries they've fixed for themselves. That's why the vast majority of themes remain out of their view, which eventually makes Tajik reporting rather superficial. The reconstruction of post-Taliban Af-

ghanistan is one of these themes. I'm certain that few realize this issue would make a great topic for an article. They do not aim to explore how these developments may impact on Tajikistan. In my opinion, this is due to economics preventing editorial boards from having a news analyst on the payroll. As for the handful of full-time journalists, they are veritably universal minds having to deal with any task they are assigned. They are not in a position to fish out major points from the flow of information, make a comparative or quantitative analysis of a situation and extrapolate it to Tajikistan." This is not just the case for reports on the Afghanistan issue. There are very important issues related to this country's home and foreign politics that pass unnoticed and uncovered by reporters. Sometimes they just miss reportable subjects, sometimes they prove unable to foresee a possible turn of events or, at times, simply

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dare not raise this issue or another in their newspaper articles. As Dr Rashid G. Abdullo, a well known political scientist, states, "the situation in Afghanistan is strikingly reminiscent of one in Tajikistan. It's a toss-up which is worse, as they say. Our reporters have not developed a stance of their own in these issues as yet. I think that is why they decide they had better keep silent than make a bad shot. On the one hand, it is a wise decision. On the other, though, it is a mistake. It is only at the historical moments of great rift that one can learn to become a truly analytical reporter."