

UZBEK CENSORS ARE MAKING THE KORAN POLITICALLY CORRECT

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Nothing seems to be holy for the censors in the Uzbek capital Tashkent. Official numbers on HIV are withheld from the public, the Pope disappears from newspaper agendas and now even the Koran is worked on with the censors' red pen.

Page layout and ordering is one of the most important events of the editorial life of any newspaper. All arguments over what news should be put on this or that page, or which article should be replaced with more urgent news have already been left behind. At last all the pages have been made up and signed off by the Editor and the issue is ready for print.

THE OFFICIAL CENSOR

There is, however, one more barrier to be crossed: that of the Inspectorate for the Protection of State Secrets in the Press, or the official censor, a sub-division of Uzbekistan's State Publishing Committee. Without the Inspectorate's permission and stamp no printing house, irrespective of property rights, will ever print any newspaper.

Officers in this department do not feel the slightest confusion that the country's Constitution and various laws «On publishing,» «On the protection of journalists' professional activities,» and «On mass media» forbid the control of the Uzbek media. In various forms the laws confirm that: «No censorship is allowed in the Republic of Uzbekistan. No one has the right to demand that a journalist have his articles or other material approved by someone else, to require him to alter his text, or to complete-

ly deny him the right to print (or broadcasting) any information or message.»

However, as the saying goes, «Laws are sacred, but executives go their own way.» During the years of Soviet power, and for the 10 subsequent years of independence, media workers believed in the immutability of this saying to such an extent that they acted as "internal censors" themselves. Thus, sharp, burning issues that would interest readers, remain out-

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side their attention, as they are certain no such news will be published. Why should they waste their time and energy for nothing? There is therefore such scanty circulation of newspapers they are simply unpopular. Some of the press even agree that who are censors guided in their work by the Law «On the protection of state secrets», which includes «information of special importance ... military, political, economic, scientific and technical and other items of information protected by the State» would also protect them from possible errors. But when the Inspectorate's officers roughly interfere in editorial life, this provokes deep

aversion and indignation. Even experienced journalists became nervous trying to guess where a censor will find a fault, because no one can follow the thread of official thinking.

EDITING THE KORAN

When a contributor to Pravda Vostoka, Lev Savelyev, was told that the censor had problems with his article «With Lent and pray» he just shrugged his shoulders. His interview with the deputy of the main imam of Tashkent had been agreed with the Committee for Religions. According to this experienced journalist, who has worked

in the media for many years, there was nothing seditious in the article. He was therefore amazed when he saw the corrections made by the censor, whose problems lay with the text of the main book of Islam, the Koran, which hasn't been changed since the middle of 7th century.

While talking to the journalist, the cleric had quoted ayats from the sacred book. These ayats (according to a translation by the outstanding Arabist and academician I. Yu. Krachkovsky) were cited in the article. The ayats (Surah 2. The Cow, ayats 179-180) state: «Oh, those, who have believed! You are decreed to the Lent, as

well as to anyone, who was before you, possibly, you will be God-fearing! - for the days counted off; and those of you, who is sick or on way, then - for a number of other days. Those, who can do this - redeem by feeding a pauper...» How's that?! In Uzbekistan there are no poor people! The word «pauper» sounded blasphemous, so the censor changed it to: «If someone appears ill and a wanderer on way, he may observe the Lent during some other days (for days missed during the Lent).» The article was published with these corrections.

In general, articles on the subject of freedom of conscience are seldom found in newspapers. Articles prepared for publication will be refused rather than allowed for publication. For example, this happened with a report by Savelyev headlined «Sail to the depth», about Pope John Paul II's visit to Kazakhstan, during which time tens of thousands of Catholics from neighboring countries, including Uzbekistan, arrived in the capital, Astana. The Uzbek Catholic Center sent a Pravda Vostoka reporter to Astana, so that its readers could learn about this great event, however the article was never published. The Chief Editor got a call from the authorities, who, without beating around the bush, had categorically demanded he call off publication.

«No extraordinary situations can occur in Uzbekistan.»

Klass, the newspaper for teenagers, prepared two pages with a series of articles about the work of the Ministry for Emergency Situations. The articles reported on situations when rescuers had come to the aid of children in trouble: someone who had thrust his finger in a keyhole and could not pull it out; someone's cat that had fall-

en in a well; a girl who found a snake near her bed and did not know what to do. Both pages contained many stories, all about everyday life and all with happy end-

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ings: MES rescuers helped the children. Telephone numbers to call in case of emergency were also given. However, when the censor got the pages he demanded that the articles be initialed by the MES.

The MES Deputy Minister read the articles approved them and agreed that they were very necessary and useful for children. He even called the censor and confirmed that he supported their publication. Even so, the censor demanded, firstly, that a photo, in which there was a group of rescuers in camouflage uniform, be removed. The reason was that the people in the photo were in military uniform but the MES is not a military organization. Secondly, the censor has ordered that the headline «The emergency situation» - under which all the articles had been combined - be removed. The reason given was that “no emergency situations could occur in Uzbekistan”, and that the MES had been created to assist other countries in case of emergency. Another headline - «A school of survival» - suffered the same fate. The reason given was that “we do not survive, but live”.

Excessive caution and the principle “better cut all future crops, that to let weeds grow”, causes censors to see revolution in stories in which there is not a hint of any state secrets. For example, during a visit by Russian President Vladimir Putin to Uzbekistan,

Pravda Vostoka published a series of articles about homeless children. One article included a photo of children with a European appearance (according to the cen-

sor), although the author, S. Eshkov, said that the group was in fact Uzbeks, Tartars, and Kazakhs. However, the picture was removed so that the Russian visitor wouldn't think that Russians languish in poverty in Tashkent.

Articles about AIDS have been regularly excluded from editions of the medical newspaper Oila shifokori (Home Doctor). It was categorically forbidden to report the number of HIV-infected people registered in Uzbekistan. Censors completely dislike this topic, and believe that digging around in the dirt will spoil people's moods, or that someone at the top reading about it would be displeased knowing there are people with such a bad illness in the country. Reasoning that these articles would open readers' eyes and, maybe, help them escape from the terrible danger, were unsuccessful.

HOLIER THAN THE POPE

For justice's sake it is important to note that after the recent events in Afghanistan some slackening by the censor has been felt. Articles have appeared that wouldn't have been published until quite recently. No one knows for sure the reason for this «thaw» yet, though there are many theories. However, there is too little ground for optimism, because the Inspectorate staff is still the same and they cannot suddenly change.

I became convinced of this while talking to the above-men-

tioned L. Savelyev in his office. The day before his article about the autumn call to military service had been published. A censor had asked whether the Ministry of Defense press service had approved the article. Mr. Savelyev

answered in the affirmative and showed the censor his signed copy. The censor then reproached him: «You shouldn't mention the name of the city where the recruits have gone to. You'd be better saying that they have left for their place

of destination. Well, I shall rebuke the military censor, so that he does not make such mistakes in future.» It is unclear what state secret there is in the name of a regional center, however, we felt sorry for the military censor.