

INDEPENDENCE IN EXCHANGE FOR STATE GRANT-MAINTAINED SYSTEM

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With Tajikistan political freedom and market relations still in their infancy, some independent electronic mass media within the country are sacrificing their independence for the state's support benefits.

Hardly typical of the all journalism in Tajikistan, the instance of a television studio operating in the city of Kulyab is suggestive of long term moves. Virtually the only window on the outside world throughout the civil war, the station is now forced to give up its status as an independent broadcaster to merge into a state-run broadcasting network.

The history of the Kulyab television station is characteristic of the situation in which Tajikistan's electronic news media are operating. Being a de jure private broadcasting company, the Kulyab station has never, in effect, acted for others, government or otherwise. Only during the war did it serve the Popular Front, which had been formed in Kulyab to "restore the constitutional system" in this country. At the time, though, both the warlords and provincial leaders would gladly take cameramen and reporters along to the battle fields.

STEADY DECLINE

During the post-war period, the authorities for a time kept maintaining close relations with electronic mass media. It was a matter of vanity for them to back up a television network, to show government military, social, financial, educational programs, etc. But as peace arrived in this

country - or at least, bids were being made for national reconciliation - the warlords gradually grew cool towards television. Many reporters left Kulyab, and the studio was languishing in poverty during the last two or three years.

BUDGETS OVER BEAUTY

"I am also committed to freedom, independence, freelance creative work," says director of the Kulyab studio Safarali Ergashev. "But, romantics apart, I've got a lot of down-to-earth business to attend: procure equipment, hand out monthly wages and a great deal of other things. And it gets worse. With Kulyab's infrastructure gone, businesses, organizations and enterprises idle I cannot collect money even by commercial broadcasts. It would be crazy to expect any revenues from commercials for there is nothing to advertise. Nor will you earn much by placing private announcements. Old chums are not going to loosen their purse-strings at my first call for help. On the other side, for how long are you supposed to go cap in hand to fellow bankers."

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) helped the station to buy needed equipment, but that was the end of it. Cooperation with

other international organizations like the Red Cross, Counterpart Consortium and Internews did not move beyond complying with a few short term requests.

SURVIVAL OVER CHOICE

Out of despair, one is thinking about starting to work for the local authorities. But this does not help settle matters, either. "We are constantly accepting orders from the local government (*hukumat*) but the trouble is the government never pays for the programs they have commissioned," complains Safarali Ergashev. "What's the good of, say, having a *hukumat* owing you 9,000 somonis (about US \$3,615)? I bet they will never give the money back - they just don't have a lot of money in their budget. It has not become a regular practice in Tajikistan to go to court. As they say, all we have to do is pray for the glory of Allah, or take out a loan."

In a situation where a station works for a local government for peanuts or nothing at all, it is quite wise of the management to give up its symbolic independence and, with its content remaining basically unchanged, switch to a public network - a step that would enable them, at least, to survive.

GROWTH OVER IMAGE

On the other hand, consideration should be given to the impact this move may have on the station's image. "While deciding to change the status we pondered over a lot

of aspects, being aware that not everybody will welcome our move and that many viewers would turn their backs to the screen,” says Ergashev. “Yet, there’s no alternative. All we can do is either close down the studio and go home or try to make a U-turn and see what will happen. The existing equipment will stay at our disposal but our salaries will grow by 100 percent, our team will grow to five people. They promise to buy new equipment. But what really matters is that local administration-ordered programs will be budget-funded.”

PRIVILEGE FOR SOME

This seems to be the major, if not the only, advantage. Yet, many experts are doubtful. “It’s hard to say what Kulyab Television will benefit from switching to the state television network,” says Kholmurod Niyozov, head of the information and educational broadcasting of the provincial Khatlon telecasting studio, under which the Kulyab TV is supposed to work (although for the time being the Kulyab TV has been allowed to report directly to the State Television Committee in regards to property and finance management). But advantages are clear. The television station’s expenditures will be included in the republican and provincial budgets. Also, it would be a relief on the tax side since the authorities, it is

claimed, are going to allow taxes in a way of mutual offsets with water, gas, or electricity suppliers.

What’s more, this would help the station to win over new viewers. Niyozov concedes that “It’s only this province’s government that we are under. The outsiders’ programs are seldom allowed to come out, unless permitted by big bosses. Meanwhile we have one advantage. We can broadcast nationally through the republican channel from 7.00 pm to 8.15 pm. Other Kulyab broadcasters do not enjoy this privilege for the time being”.

STATE CONTROL

Both sides have gained from the move: Kulyab Television continues to operate, even though in a new status, with the state gaining control over it. Also, there is no longer a broadcasting frequency registration problem – a regular headache of the government since the State Committee is able to control the frequencies of only large broadcasters, while smaller companies remain out of its reach. That explains why the state television, already overburdened with serious financial problems, is so eager to assume extra expenditures by absorbing small studios like Kulyab Television.

SURVIVAL OVER QUALITY?

“As I see it, the state television

network represented by the Committee for Broadcasting under the government of Tajikistan, having monopolized electronic reporting across the country, looks like just suffering from delusions of grandeur, as it stubbornly refuses to share this market with other actors,” says Rustam Buriyev, the director of the *Mavchi Ozod* (Free Wave) independent television studio of the Voseh district located in the very same Khatlon province.

“Suffice it to say, they display a great deal of ingenuity as regards their right to license television products and would never agree to grant a license to any of their potential rivals.

“That’s just the case here: they have chosen to get the studio under their wing than to allow it, assisted by someone else, some day have its own vision to highlight the professional passivity of national television.

“Our district’s authorities, too, were planning to create a TV studio of their own, but had later to give up the idea as it was contrary to the national law concerning television and radio broadcasting”.

Whether this case, singular at the moment, will grow into a trend, no one can say.

Nor is it known whether the quality of the programs and skills of their writers will rise.

The question is not so much quality as just surviving.