

# MEDIA ADULATION: THE TAJIK PRESIDENT ASKS TO TONE IT DOWN

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**The President of Tajikistan stated in an address that the media should “not to allocate excessive attention to the President’s personality.” Local journalist Gulchekhra Mansurova looks at how the republican media has responded to this request.**

Almost all of the Tajik media, regardless of ownership, published excerpts from a presidential address made this year. The newspaper *Vecherni Dushanbe* published the entire text under the title ‘The President warns...’. In this address, President Emomali Rakhmonov emphasized that, “recently speeches allocating excessive attention to the President’s personality have become more frequent in different contexts in the media. Television channels reiterate many times, sometimes to the prejudice of other programs, the broadcasts to which the President has made. There is no control as to where portraits of the President are put, nor how many.”

## EXCESSIVE ADULATION

It is easy to find numerous examples that backup the President’s claims. For example, the fact that “television channels many times reiterate, sometimes to the prejudice of other programs, the broadcasts to which the President has made,” relate to the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Independence of the Republic. At this time, the national television channel again and again interrupted broadcasts of other channels (Russia’s ORT and RTR) to highlight the festivi-

ties dedicated to this holiday that took place in the capital’s Frunze Stadium.

## STOPPING THE TREND

Furthermore, the President emphasizes, “excessive laudations on the leader and indulgence to statements towards him do no good. Examples are numerous both now and in the past. We can see the results of ‘chiefism’ and exaltation of personality in some countries, including those neighboring us.” It seems that the President’s words were bolstered by an article ‘The Lord of the Turkmen’ published in the newspaper *Asia-Plus* on January 3, 2002, which was the first one in the series of articles about ‘The Leaders of the Commonwealth’. After the article was published, the Turkmenistan Embassy complained about the tone of the coverage and the newspaper had to publish in their next issue an article entitled ‘Turkmens love their President’. Next in the series were presidents Leonid Kuchma, Nursultan Nazarbayev, Askar Akayev and others. In a response to whether *Asia-Plus* would write about the Tajik President Emomali Rakhmonov in the same critical fashion, Marat Mamadshoev, *Asia-Plus* deputy editor-in-chief, said “no”.

In commenting about the country’s media activities, President Rakhmonov noted that, “as far as these matters are concerned, the newspapers, radio and television must be led by the principal goal of providing people with official information about the national leader’s activities; allocating the largest attention to the resolution of issues and the involvement of ordinary toilers, village workers.” In this connection it would be poignant to cite Dodojon Ruziev, deputy editor-in-chief of the newspaper *Jumkhuriyat*, who said “the publications of this newspaper necessarily referred to the President and quoted his speeches, notwithstanding the article genre and topic. Particularly numerous were articles about the presidential Decree to allocate 70,000 hectares of un-irrigated land to farmers for their private use; and the plots were referred to as ‘presidential’. It turned absurd sometimes. One of the regional journalists has come it too strong by writing something like “In accordance with the presidential Decree peasants of the [name] farms have begun the sowing campaign...”

## WHY THE EXCITEMENT?

There are several theories to where the excessive adulation came from: through backroom orders from the ‘top’ or due to pressure from the official media directors? Galina Nazarova, national coordinator of the inter-regional NGO Women in the

Media of Central Asia (WIMCA), said: "Above all this is the oriental mentality of our journalists." Khaidar Juraev, editor-in-chief of the official Uzbek-language *Khalk Ovozi* newspaper, said that "Some comrades really tried to show their pseudo-patriotism by chanting the praises of the President in their publications and television broadcasts. For four years with this newspaper as editor-in-chief, not once was I pressured to write something about the President. The task of our newspaper is to report about the activities of the President and the Government and to inform people about governmental decisions – that is exactly what we do."

#### **WE HAVE WHAT WE WANT**

Here is a curious example. In the same quoted issue above of *Vecherni Dushanbe*, a young correspondent published a New Year Holiday poll among politicians, public servants and ordinary readers on the theme 'The Best Present in Your Life'. Two rather high-ranking officials "allocated excessive attention to the President's personality", to put it mildly. One of them said at the end of his answer: "Today Tajikistan, headed by the distinguished Emomali Sharipovich Rakhmonov, is a world-known country and enjoys high reputation and respect among other countries." From the other official: "The best present which I could have only dreamt of is peace our President has brought to Tajikistan." I wonder if the newspaper editor read the presidential address before putting his signature on the newspaper for printing?

Presidential press secretary Zafar Saidov believes that "This address is very timely because history knows many examples of

what continuous glorification of some politicians may result in. Social issues should be solved, and glorification of leaders only impede this task. Particularly now when we are entering a new stage in the history of Tajikistan; one where post-conflict rehabilitation and sustainable development has begun."

#### **WHAT'S IN A NAME**

Zealous functionaries wanted to do the President this type of disservice several years ago by a draft decree entitled 'On the Protection of the President's Personality'. This disallowed directors of companies and agencies of using the word 'president' as their position in a company. President Rakhmonov understood the trick and did not sign the draft decree. Nevertheless many company presidents hastily made new business cards with the word 'president' replaced by 'director', 'chairman', etc.

The republican media limited themselves to small reports about the Presidential address and tried to forget it. Mazkhabsho Muhabbatsho, an observer with the *Tojikiston* newspaper, pointed at this lack of response from Tajik journalists in his article 'Bootlickers are Leader's Enemies, or Deliverations after President E.Sh.Rakhmonov's Address' in issue 2, January 11, 2002. The author wonders why the local media are as silent as a grave whereas this address has been discussed worldwide in different medias. The author stresses that leaders of different ranks have got accustomed to continuous laudations towards them coupled with lack of effective criticism. They are fed by different 'writers' who write vapid books about them and their

relatives; these books are then sold to the staff directed by those flattery lovers. Therefore, any serious criticism provokes a strong negative response. The author cites several examples from *Tojikiston* weekly's experience where functionaries have taken critical publications as personal insults. "If leaders want to figure in history they should refuse services of bootlickers and sycophants," he writes. "One can leave a good memory behind him by honest labor only." He remembers old Soviet but still very popular jokes about "deeply respected and beloved" Nikita Sergeyevich Khrushchev, Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev and others.

#### **TIMES ARE A CHANGING**

Several months have passed since the presidential address. Is there any result; are there any tangible changes? According to Dodojon Ruziev, his newspaper *Jumhuriyat* is a vivid example for the changes: references and quotations from the President's speeches are no more demanded. "We only use a quotation if it is indispensable. Formerly we had to publish many pictures of the President, even old ones. Now we have partly abandoned that practice." Marat Mamadshoev stated that, "Tajikistan has never had such a great 'chiefism' like that in neighboring countries. Nevertheless it was an unpleasant thing when a movie or a talk show at ORT or RTR was interrupted at the most interesting moment in order to once again reiterate a report about the President's foreign trip or a speech. Some changes are notable. The Tajik television has begun to less frequently show his old speeches and trips. This is already a good thing indeed!"