

90 YEARS OF HISTORY: TAJIK PRESS NOW AND THEN

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During the early 1990s, the Tajik print media was considered the most free in Central Asia. The media was subsequently divided by the civil war. Now, the Tajik press is slowly going through a rehabilitation process.

On March 11, 2002 Tajik celebrated Press Day, a holiday to commemorate journalists and is seen as journalism's unofficial birthday. Dignitaries came to speak at the celebration, led by Majlisi Namoyandagon Deputy Chairman (lower chamber of the Tajik Parliament) Abdumajid Dostiev, the President's State Adviser Ibrohim Usmonov, and Minister of Culture Karamatullo Olimov. Mr Usmonov read an address from President Rakhmonov who said, "We are grateful to you for your high sense of responsibility and worthy contribution in building civil society."

PROGRESS IN STAGES

Ninety years ago on March 11 1912, Tajik's first newspaper, *Bukhoroi Sharif*, was launched in Bukhara, capital of the Bukhara Emirate. *Bukhoroi Sharif* was published by Mirzo Muhiddin Mansurov, a tradesman and an intellectual, who involved other outstanding people including Sadridin Aini, Abdukodir Muhiddinov, and Mirzo Siroji Khakim. The newspaper was printed in Kogon town, a Bukhara suburb.

After the Soviets took over Central Asia in 1920, the region was artificially divided into several national-territorial units. The first newspaper in Tajik *Ovozi Tajik*

(Voice of Tajik) was published on August 25, 1924 in Dushanbe, the newly declared the capital of the Tajik Autonomous Republic incorporated in the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic. Five years later Tajikistan was admitted as an independent republic within the Soviet Union.

During the Soviet era the Tajik media, as with other media in the Soviet Union, were under the control of the CPSU. Newspapers could not change the editor-in-chief without permission from the CPSU Central Committee, said veteran Tajik journalist Mazkhabsho Muhabbatshoev who between 1986-1995 was editor-in-chief of the republic's most influential newspaper *Tojikistoni Soveti* (now *Jumhuriyat*), an organ of the Tajikistan Communist Party. The CPSU would interview new editors-in-chiefs about their ideology, which ensured that Lenin's slogan "the media is a collective organizer and advocate" determined the form, methods and contents of journalism during the whole Soviet period.

NEW INDEPENDENCE

When Gorbachev introduced *perestroika*, the Tajik media actively stepped into the transformation process. In the early 1990s the media in Tajikistan was the freest

in the region. During this decade, some 40 independent newspapers existed. However, political parties curtailed freedom of the press and Tajikistan's civil war divided the media into two confronting factions. The official press was the state propaganda mouthpiece. Journalists who supported opposition forces published their newspapers and magazines abroad. These were disseminated illegally throughout the country. Illegal newspapers abroad included the *Sadoi mujohid* (Voice of mujaheddin), organ of the armed opposition groups; *Paiki piruzi* (Victory news), the first colored illustrated newspaper reporting about the Tajik refugees living in foreign countries; and *Najot* (Salvation), an organ of the Islamic Party of Renaissance.

NEW PROBLEMS

"Seventy-nine journalists were murdered over the last decade," says Mukhtor Bokizoda, chairman of the Foundation for Memory and Rights of Journalists of Tajikistan. "The well-known ones include Murodullo SHERALIZODA, Pirimkul SATTORI, Zuhuriddin SUYARI, Muhiddin OLIMPUR, Ptahon LATIFI, Victor NIKULIN, Dmitry KARATYGIN, Isqandari KHATLONI, and Saif RAKHIMOV. All these murders were due to their professional activities." According Mr Bokizoda, the eleven years of independence were very difficult for the national media and journalists. However, the current 'Tajik Law on Press and Other Media' meets international legal standards,

including standards on freedom on expression. Yet the instinct of self-preservation has become the journalists' main censor. Many registered daily papers are not published for financial reasons. The sole paper published three times a week is the government's *Jumhuriyat*. The rest of the 250 print editions registered with the Ministry of Culture are weekly newspapers and magazines. Some magazines are only published once a month or even bimonthly.

"Printers are facing serious issues as well," says Manzurkhon

Dodokhonov, director of the *Sharqi Ozod* printing complex. "Whereas our newspaper department during the Union era used to print 1,200,000 copies a shift, now it prints at most 30,000-35,000 copies. Printing equipment is obsolete. It has been used for more than 20 years and now makes it impossible to manufacture quality print products.

Despite this fact the printing complex's output increases every year due to internal reserves. Whereas in 2000 our printing house issued some 22 newspapers, now

we print over 30 newspapers and magazines."

Despite the latest difficulties, the Tajik press is going through a rehabilitation process. During the Press Day function, Deputy Speaker Dostiev and Culture Minister Olimov emphasized that the Tajik press is slowly turning the corner. Independent print media play a serious role in Tajikistan's information market. For example, the weekly *Asia-Plus* was awarded a diploma for its rapid and authentic information. This proves that Tajik press is moving forward.