

SUPERVISION OF UZBEKISTAN'S PROVINCIAL NEWS MEDIA TIGHTENS

Khakkul Mirzo, reporter, Uzbekistan

Not so long ago the provincial press of Uzbekistan felt it was relatively free compared with national media. But the situation has changed dramatically, and there are significant facts that have caught the attention of the public in Samarkand province.

There are about sixty newspapers, magazines, radio and television stations currently operating in Samarkand, one of Uzbekistan's largest cities. The newspaper *Darakchi*, which boasts a circulation of over 200,000, the largest in Uzbekistan, is published here. One of the first non-governmental television stations, STV, was also established in Samarkand. This has grown into a large media holding, including two TV channels, FM radio broadcasting and six newspapers. It seems as if the conditions are right to stimulate free growth of news media and encourage expression of the entire spectrum of ideas that are circulated in Uzbekistani society. That's what editions of Uzbekistan's most liberal newspaper, *Samarkand*, were saying.

AUTOCENSORSHIP

Samarkand newspaper has produced a number of extremely critical articles whose headlines speak for themselves: "Do you have censorship?" "Regionalism fetters the nation", "What we need is a climate of openness", "Nothing else but the free press can tell the truth", "What should a national newspaper be like?" All these reports made an immediate appeal to the general public. All

of them, albeit somewhat abridged, were reprinted by national newspapers – an indication of their topicality. A number of foreign radio stations also made comments on these articles.

But censorship was on the alert, and the reporters were well aware of it. Nearly all the articles criticizing local-level government officials were allowed, while no attack against national government authorities, ministries or institutions was tolerated. Any attempt at "discrediting" the central government in print was nipped in the bud. For example, you could write about unlawful actions of the police but you were not allowed to cast shadow on the Interior Ministry at large.

To be more precise, it is attempts to draw generalizations that have brought the most negative reactions from the authorities, demonstrating that they still view news media democratization within certain limits. So, when *Samarkand* newspaper had the nerve to raise the forbidden theme of mobilizing students to harvest cotton there was a hostile reaction. The publication gave a real picture of the situation. The author, armed with facts and figures, elaborated on the evil practice of bringing in urban residents as "volunteers" to

assist villagers by arguing that this had adverse effects on cotton farm development.

The article won general acclaim. The readers praised the publication, and their letters were published. In contrast, local bosses gave it a hostile reception. The censors saw that any ideas of reprinting it in the national press were out of the question and clouds began to gather over the newspaper's editor-in-chief, Tashpulat Rakhmatullayev. The former governor accused *Samarkand* newspaper of "failing to understand the political importance of the cotton harvesting campaign".

When in April 2001 Tashpulat Rakhmatullayev attempted to publish an article openly denouncing censorship, the material was suppressed and, before long, the newspaper found itself on the verge of closure as its founder, the city hall, blocked finance. In the meantime, the province's Zarafshan newspaper began to publish special supplements focusing on domestic affairs in Samarkand, while local government officials started questioning the need for a city newspaper. In the end, a total of 25 issues, instead of 52, appeared in print during 2002.

Surprisingly, when the city authorities needed to notify the public about the location of polling stations during the upcoming referendum (held in January 2002), they remembered that they had a newspaper of their own – even

though by that time it had not been published for four months. The editorial board prepared a four-page issue, of which two pages were reserved for editorial materials, including T. Rakhmatullayev's article "Word and soul" subtitled, "An open letter to our colleagues who have embarked on glorification".

While checking the layout of the issue, the head of the provincial press department M. Eraliyev ordered that the article be censored. The editorial board of provincial Zarafshan newspaper was ordered to prepare a new make-up of the issue, realizing that the editorial staff of Samarkand, a city newspaper, would never obey his order. So, fellow reporters from Zarafshan, having forgotten about fatigue and journalists' solidarity, reworked the fourth page of a newspaper that they had nothing to do with, to replace the article "Word and soul" with their own material. Also, they removed from the output data the name of Samarkand's editor-in-chief, Tashpulat Rakhmatullayev, to replace it with the words "Editorial Board". Ironically, Zarafshan's editor-in-chief F. Toshev is the chairman of the democratization and news media support fund in Samarkand province.

What a piece of democratization! Beleaguered T. Rakhmatullayev was forced to resign. He alone felt the stranglehold of "democratizers".

SILENCIOUS MEDIAS

More than a year has passed since *Oina* (Mirror), another Samarkand-based newspaper, launched a struggle for a fair decision on its fate. Obeying the orders of its boss M. Eraliyev, the press department of Samarkand province suspended this

newspaper, a Tajik-language schoolchildren-oriented periodical.

This decision, according to Mr. Eraliyev, was taken after one of the newspaper's founders, the Samarkand-based office of the Kamolot fund, decided that it would no longer support the newspaper. Mr. Eraliyev made a reference to Article 16 of the Mass Media Law and item 9 of the Regulations of news media registration procedures in the Republic of Uzbekistan. Neither the law nor the Regulations have provisions for the cessation of a publication in the event of resignation or replacement of one of its founders. Under item 9 of the Regulations, a communication medium is to be re-registered if there are any such changes.

Being well aware that these arguments cannot serve as legal grounds for closing down the newspaper, M. Eraliyev, in the preamble of his order mentioned "mortal" sins that the editor-in-chief had allegedly committed. The order read that Rakhim Mavlonov was not up to his responsibilities as an editor-in-chief. It claimed that his political awareness was inadequate, resulting in biased reporting, such as questioning the achievements gained by the Republic after independence, and that some of its publications were found to be triggering inter-ethnic animosity.

These arguments were followed by a conclusion: due to the editor's lack of professional skills the newspaper's quality has gone down causing a torrent of complaints from readers. Eventually the founders were forced to quit *Oina* newspaper.

The order sounded untenable, and there were ample reasons for that. First, it was only the city office of the Kamolot Fund that

disapproved of the newspaper's content, while *Oina*'s second founder, the Simo firm, could not possibly view the newspaper as redundant and good for nothing as its own president was the newspaper's editor-in-chief, Rakhim Mavlonov.

As for charges of instigating inter-ethnic animosity and making remarks that undermined independence then it should be asked, why didn't censorship examine those publications? If the newspaper really published some dubious materials it was the censors that were to blame, not the editorial board. The point is that Mr. M. Eraliyev took words and phrases out of context to give them a different meaning. For example, a phrase reading "Samarkand, like Bukhara, is the cradle of Tajik culture", in his opinion, runs counter to the official policy of Uzbekistan. But it is a universally known fact that the founder of Tajik literature, Rudaki, came from Samarkand, where he wrote his first poems in Tajik. Then why can't the city be described as the cradle of Tajik culture?

The true cause of M. Eraliyev's anger was that the newspaper's just criticism did not let certain officials rest. Says *Oina*'s editor-in-chief R. Mavlonov: "True, the newspaper made public the appalling conditions in Tajik schools, exposed the shortage of textbooks and other literature as well as the cuts in the number of Tajik schools and classes throughout Samarkand province. At the same time, we are blamed for undermining Uzbekistan's territorial integrity and sparking interethnic tensions. The authorities' deliberate actions left more than 3,000 subscribers of *Oina* without their favorite newspaper".

R.Mavlonov appealed against M.Eraliyev's order to the Prosecutor's Office of Samarkand province, which advised him to go to court. After that, the press department chief changed his position. He didn't mention his order of March 28 2001 any more, including during the trial. A package of documents that R.Mavlonov prepared for the newspaper's new registration started traveling through courts of various levels ranging from the Temiryul inter-district civil court to the economic court. This court, in its session presided over by judge G.Kuvayeva on November 16, 2001, ruled that the press department must register Oina newspaper.

One could say, that the truth has prevailed. But following M.Eraliyev's appeal to the economic court a verdict was made saying that the newspaper was not a legal entity and, therefore, the economic court was not authorized to consider this case. Later, in February 2002, Uzbekistan's Supreme Economic Court upheld this decision.

At present, the entire body of materials prepared by R.Mavlonov is in the Temiryul inter-district civil court. Thus, the circle is closed. While the trial goes on the newspaper must remain silent.

CRITICISING POLICIES

There are indications that punishment for criticism is

becoming a consistent policy of local authorities. The fate of Khilol newspaper, which was published in Kattakurgan as the media arm of the National Democratic Party's district office, is a good case in point. One of its articles, signed by editor-in-chief Yuldash Zakirov, revealed mismanagement practices in the district. The author associated numerous flaws in the district with what he saw as an incorrect manpower policy. Moreover, he accused the district leaders, and primarily Governor M.Khudoyarov, of selling out their positions. The article ends with a daring question: "Is there a market for government positions in Samarkand province? Ask Governor Erkin Ruzayev"

Many were surprised, as few journalists would be bold enough to write that in a country like Uzbekistan. Even if there were to appear a similar article, the vigilant censors would never let it pass. How, indeed, can it be possibly explained that an article like that could slip past censorship? Only by the fact that district newspapers, which have turned into virtual newsletters of the district authorities, have begun to escape the eye of censors, grown accustomed to seeing them report only on farm work, great achievements and happy life in the country.

Punishment followed immediately. The Kattakurgan district council of the People's

Democratic Party at its meeting on November 6, 2001, decided to suspend Khilol newspaper. Financial problems were used as a pretext. According to Yu.Zakirov, the party functionaries had never before discussed the newspaper.

But this was not the end of the matter. The district governor made a claim against Yu.Zakirov for moral damages he allegedly incurred following the newspaper's publication. He estimated the damages at 2 million sums (an equivalent of about US \$1,400). The district court of Kattakurgan met the Governor's suit. Besides, the behavior of the stubborn editor was discussed at a number of meetings attended by the province's deputy governor and the head of the press department. In an interview with the Uzbek service of Radio Liberty, Yu.Zakirov said that unidentified people wearing balaclavas warned him that if he didn't stop criticizing the governor he would be expelled from Uzbekistan.

A news-kiosk vendor, a friend of mine, complained to me of the poor demand for local newspapers. To my question about the reasons he responded that it was due to mediocrity of content. "Newspapers ignore what really concerns people. They are not involved in real life. Journalists do not have the courage to tell the truth," he concluded. There are many in this country who share his view.