

OPEN AND PRIVATE INFORMATION AREAS IN TAJIKISTAN

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Tajik public officers often deny journalists access to information, claiming state secrecy as their motivation. In this way it is difficult to obtain information in most of the country's civil service structures.

Despite the fact that the Law 'On the Press and Other Mass Media' (articles 5 and 6) of the Republic of Tajikistan stipulates that governmental, political and non-governmental agencies and their officials, should provide the media with relevant information - except state or other legally guarded secrets, power representatives are often very reluctant to cooperate with journalists. They either refuse information to them under the pretext of secrecy or ask the journalist to get written permission from the minister who, as a rule, will be 'making a business trip' at that moment.

TWO CLASSES OF AGENCY

Conventionally, the Tajik journalists divide government agencies into open and private. E.g., every Tajik journalist knows that the Health Ministry is one of the most inaccessible. Workers at this ministry always ask a journalist to seek permission from the minister himself. The situation is similar at the Ministry of Education. Therefore, in selecting a topic for an article, journalists usually bypass these areas because they know in advance that obtaining the data will take a long time or will even prove impossible. Nigorah Bukharizade, correspondent with Asia Plus news agency, says, "Many of our journalists use their

personal ties to obtain information as it is hardly obtainable otherwise. Tajikistan has a range of Ministries that for some obscure reasons do not want to co-operate with journalists." According to Anorah Sarkorova, correspondent with the *Mir* interstate TV company; Tajik office, "in Tajikistan journalists - both local and foreign - sometimes have to work under inhuman conditions. They have virtually no access to information. Sometimes even the most insignificant data of no risk at all to state secrets are concealed from journalists. This issue can only be settled at governmental level because all reporting bans come down from the top. Although the republic has rather good media law, in reality it is virtually ineffective."

Pending Free Press Day, celebrated worldwide on May 3, independent Asia Plus weekly (No. 18 of May 2, 2002) published its own rating of the most transparent and the most opaque public agencies in Tajikistan. Asia Plus believes the presidential press service to be the most accessible. The journalists hold up presidential press secretary Zafar Saidov as an example for all his colleagues. "Unlike the majority of public officers, he is not afraid of assuming responsibility, and at any time of the day he is ready to give a competent answer to any 'provocative' question from

a journalist", the newspaper reads. In addition, Asia Plus lists the Foreign Ministry information department; the press services of the Ministries of Transport and Energy, and the Tajik Parliament as the other most accessible agencies. "Not only the press service directed by Makhmadato Sultanov alone, but virtually all the deputies and committee leaders are active in cooperating with representatives of the press," the paper emphasizes.

The Asia Plus list of inaccessible agencies includes the National Bank, the Health Ministry, the Ministries of Finance, Economy, Education, Employment and others. The newspaper also regards as opaque, foreign embassies and some international organizations accredited in Tajikistan. "It is a rueful fact that, notwithstanding the numerous press releases some diplomatic missions disseminate intensively, it is extremely difficult to obtain a relevant comment on an urgent issue. Some international organizations are calling Tajikistan to reform its economy and develop democracy when they themselves demonstrate models of heavy bureaucracy and opacity."

MYTHS AND SPIES

Local journalists support a popular myth that functionaries are more disposed to speak with foreign journalists - as they regard them as more respectable than their own Tajik reporters. Therefore foreign journalists are said to be more informed. However, the foreign journalists have different

opinions. They believe it is more difficult for them to work and obtain information because every now and then they are taken as spies. "This myth is groundless. Despite the fact that the Soviet Empire collapsed ten years ago, the western media representatives thus far remain spies and carriers of western ideology in the eyes of Tajik functionaries," says Isqandar Firouz, correspondent of the country's BBC Persian Service. "Some still feel dislike towards them." In his opinion, the new generation of politicians is friendlier towards foreign journalists.

The key matter is that regardless of all obstacles, foreign journalists take up the themes little discussed in the Tajik press such as

political processes, corruption and economic reform progress. According to another foreign journalist, who wished to remain nameless, many functionaries are reluctant to talk with foreign journalists; and contrary to what the local journalists may think, this class of journalist is the most disregarded. "There are cases where our correspondents approach a functionary for information but when our office is named he just rings off or asks us to never trouble him again," he said. "I believe that one of the reasons why they treat journalists in this way is the fact that Tajik functionaries do not want to have their activities considered through the prism of critical analysis."

Although Tajik journalists are sounding the alarm, the information access issue remains in abeyance. Information access is becoming more and more restricted because some functionaries either 'forget' or do not know the Law and establish their own rules in their own domains. According to Marat Mamadshoev, Asia Plus Deputy Editor-in-Chief, "information access remains an acute issue for Tajik journalists. Information is still almost completely unobtainable in most of the governmental structures. This is caused by two factors: the lack of press services in these structures and the low competence levels of staff. Until this situation changes, Tajik society will not develop steadily."