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# WITHOUT ANY DAILY NEWSPAPER, TAJIK PUBLIC DEPRIVED OF ESSENTIAL NEWS

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*By Turko Dikaev, independent journalist, Kulyab, Tajikistan*

**Without any private daily newspaper, the Tajik public can be kept ignorant of such events like the assassination of a minister for several days, even in the very town where the event took place.**

The minister of culture and information of the Republic of Tajikistan was assassinated on September 8th, 2001 one day prior to the celebration of the decade of Tajikistan's independence. The country learned about it from the mass media only on September 10th, however, when the news agency *Asia-Plus* distributed the sad news. As a result, only a limited number of subscribers, in fact, learned of this publicly important event. It would seem that the mass media had a magnificent possibility to inform readers and spectators of what had happened. In addition, on September 8th there was a meeting that many political leaders attended. President Emomali Rakhmonov delivered a long, fiery speech to the invited guests (among them were Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov, and the Minister of foreign affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran Mr. Kharrozi). The state electronic mass media broadcast this meeting and many watched it. At that time, people had heard already about the tragedy in the capital from rumours and gossip, and waited with concealed breath for the words of the President about the events. They waited in vain. For three days, from September 8th till September 10th, the Tajik TV broadcast the festivities devoted to the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of independence of the Republic of Tajikistan, but gave no news. In fact, they broadcast not only on the Tajik channel, but also on Russian TV channels. Thus the information on the minister's death was delivered to the public a few days later. The fact that it was the minister of information who was killed only adds irony to the egregious story.

## **WHY NEWSPAPERS KEPT SILENT?**

To an uninitiated person it is incomprehensible that from September 6<sup>th</sup> until September 13th all the Tajik newspapers were issued, yet a whole week passed with the news caught in an information vacuum. In Tajikistan there is not a single daily newspaper. The metropolitan newspapers are issued once a week, and the oblast papers, by a caprice of the local authorities who fund them, are issued usually once or twice a month. Andrei Raskin, a teacher of journalism at Moscow State University, considers this the main shortcoming of Tajik journalism. "Topical information becomes outdated, and newspapers must publish jokes, crossword puzzles, or fabricate various 'hot' stories, otherwise simply nobody will buy the newspapers," according to Mr. Raskin. The shift of the parliamentary newspaper *Sadoi mardum* ("The voice of the public") to issue twice a week may be called "revolutionary." However, there are serious problems posed by this change. The editor of the department of information, sports, letters and reception of citizens, Mr. Tillo Nekkadamov says, "There are situations when we want to talk to one of the ministers. But the process of co-ordination sometimes continues for two or three months. Either they are incompetent in their terms of reference, or they have reasons to be afraid of the press." Newspapers have difficulties obtaining information. "We would like our newspaper to shift to daily issues, but problems prevent it. I think we have to wait for some years until the economic situation in the country improves," Mr. Nekkadamov.

## **PROFESSIONALISM**

Umed Babakhanov, the founder of the Asia-Plus news agency, who also issues a newspaper of the same name, one of most popular newspapers in Tajikistan, says that his agency approached issuing a daily newspaper. However, there are a number of problems. "The most basic problem is the lack of professionally trained journalists capable to issue a daily newspaper at a worthy level." Babakhanov says. In the country there was a large group of well-qualified professionals, he says. "Today their number has thinned out dramatically, some of them were killed, some have left the country, and some of them gave up writing. Training in the local university is so unprofessional that it could not stand up to criticism." "I was surprised," says Andrei Raskin, "but all newspapers are the same type, and professionalism is at a student's level." In order to improve the level of professionalism among journalists, the Asia-Plus agency established a school of journalism. There are already graduates of this school, and many of them have published. "It is obvious, that the problem cannot be solved by this only," says Babakhanov. "But we are working for the future."

## **NO TOLERANCE TOWARDS CRITICISM**

"The lack of daily newspapers," says Orifdjon Azimov, the adviser of the Project *Legal Support of Independent Mass Media of Tajikistan*, "preserves journalists from many troubles. When a newspaper is issued once a week, the most severe self-censorship can so emasculate any information, that nobody would find fault with it." However, the authorities find ways to find fault with a journalist in any situation. Mr. Mukhtor Bokizoda, the Chairman of the Fund of Memory and Protection of the Rights of Journalists of Tajikistan, says that a journalist and teacher of journalism Mr. Khurshed Atovulloev from the *Djavononi Tochikiston* ("The Youth of Tajikistan") published an article on students' problems. Soon afterward he was refused a teaching position at the faculty of journalism of the metropolitan university. "The instruction was directed to the high school administration 'from above'," says Mr. Bokizoda.

## **WHO WILL THINK OF THE READERS?**

An inhabitant of a small city, Farkhor, situated in the south of Tajikistan, Mr. Abdullo Yusupov, however, cares little of the problems of professionalism and/or of self-censorship. "Until recently," he says, "I studied a few newspapers every day. Their absence I perceive as illness. I'm completely lost, and I constantly lack something. Having once a week "a portion" of information filtered in the press-centers and through the self-censorship of journalists—is it a significant victory of independence and freedom of speech? Provide me with information. Daily!" An old worshipper of newspapers, Abdullo Yusupov is not alone in his opinion on the necessity of daily papers of different orientations, independent and free ones included. In people's desire to live and to act in the world of comprehensive information lies the future of Tajik journalism.