

# Reporters Without Borders

<http://www.rsf.org/tajikistan-elections-cannot-be-democratic-27-02-2015,47636.html>

---

Europe/Ex-USSR - Tajikistan

No suspense

## Elections cannot be democratic without freedom of information

27 February 2015

---

Tajikistan holds parliamentary elections on 1 March and Reporters Without Borders is concerned about the toxic climate in which news organizations are forced to work in the country, noting that democratic elections cannot take place unless there is freedom of information.

More than 4 million voters are called to the polls to choose 63 members from among 288 candidates. Although the vote has the appearances of democracy, the dire state of freedom of information surrounding the ballot is indicative of the draconian behaviour of President Emomali Rakhmon, who has been in office since 1992. Tajikistan is ranked 116th of 180 countries in the [2015 World Press Freedom Index](#) compiled by Reporters Without Borders.

*"There can be no democracy without media pluralism and without free access to news and information,"* Johann Bihl, the head of the Reporters Without Borders Eastern Europe and Central Asia desk, pointed out.

*"It should be noted that freedom of information continues to deteriorate in Tajikistan, to the point where it is a cause of considerable concern on the eve of the elections. We urge the authorities to ensure Tajik citizens have the right to report and receive news and information. We call on the international community to remind Dushanbe of its commitments and hold it to account for the large-scale violations of this basic democratic principle."*

## Campaign marked by bullying tactics

Several independent journalists have told Reporters Without Borders they have received threats from the intelligence services in the weeks leading up to the vote. They have been warned in emails and text messages to "stop writing critical stories" or face public exposure of their private lives. A smear tactic that points to the existence of a vast surveillance system in the country.

Other independent journalists have been the targets of campaigns to discredit them in the official media and on social networking sites, often also using elements from their private lives. In one recent instance, a report by the State TV station *TVT* [accused](#) some independent news organizations of supporting the mayor of Dushanbe in exchange for benefits in kind, such as apartments or land.

In a [joint statement](#) on 16 February, the National Association of Independent Mass Media in Tajikistan (NANSMIT), the Journalists' Union and the Media Council of Tajikistan called for an end to "attacks and moves aimed at intimidating and obstructing the professional activities of journalists", the manipulation of the media for political ends and repeated intrusions into the private lives of independent journalists.

## Media pluralism undermined

Given the lack of media pluralism, the election campaign was bound to be dull and political competition one-sided. The authorities control almost all broadcasting outlets. Three campaign spots by the opposition party Islamic Renaissance of Tajikistan were [barred](#) from the airwaves on the grounds that they were not made in one of the few officially authorised studios.

The appeal by convicted businessman Zayd Saidov, arrested and tried soon after he set up an

opposition party in 2013, is [being held in camera](#). Saidov, a former industry minister, was [sentenced](#) to 26 years' imprisonment after being found guilty of sexual offences, polygamy, and fraud and corruption.

The *Asia Plus* media group, which has a weekly, a news agency, a [radio station](#), a television studio and a [news website](#) of record, is one of the few sources of independent news in Tajikistan. Access to its website has been regularly blocked inside the country in recent years. In spring last year, the weekly and its editor **Olga Tutubalina** were [found guilty](#) of insulting the country's intellectuals in a farcical trial and ordered to pay the three plaintiffs 30,000 somoni (4,500 euros). The number of trials of independent journalists [has risen](#) in the run-up to the parliamentary elections

## **Freedom of information targeted by paranoid authorities**

The temporary blocking of access to social networks and independent news sites has been a frequent occurrence [since 2012](#), yet in October 2014 access to [more than 200 websites](#) was cut off for two weeks, including Facebook, Vkontakte and YouTube, as well as the main Tajik, Russian and Central Asian news sites.

Access was blocked soon after the opposition movement Group 24 announced it would hold an anti-government demonstration. It was restored a day after the event, which did not take place.

This unprecedented blackout was accompanied by drastic restrictions on telecoms networks. Text messaging [was suspended](#) for several days and Internet access was cut off completely in the northern region of Sughd.

Such disproportionate and oppressive responses stem from the authorities' visceral fear of destabilisation, using the spectre of the civil war that tore the country apart between 1992 and 1997 to justify their fear of the opposition.

**Aleksandr Sodiqov**, an academic and specialist in conflict prevention [arrested](#) in June last year, has paid the price for the authorities' paranoia. The netizen's only offence was to have interviewed an opposition leader in the autonomous south-eastern province of Gorno-Badakhshan as part of his research. The province was the scene of violent clashes in 2012, which were [shrouded in secrecy](#). Accused of spying, he was held in custody for a month and was [released](#) only after a massive international campaign.

NANSMIT, a partner organization of Reporters Without Borders, has published [recommendations for journalists](#) aimed at ensuring impartial and objective coverage of the elections.

*(Photo: AFP Photo / STR)*

---