

Radio Free Europe-Signs of Trouble

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There were signs of trouble for Freedom House -- which measures freedom in countries around the world -- at the end of May 2005, shortly after the massacre in the southern city of Andijon, where hundreds of protesters were killed by government troops during a demonstration.

Lisa Davis, Freedom House's deputy director of programs, says that while holding a training session in Samarkand on 29 May, Freedom House officials were confronted by some 15 people who forced their way into the seminar and accused Freedom House of being Wahhabists -- practitioners of a very rigid form of Islam -- and an enemy of the Uzbek state. "A lot of them actually lamented the expulsion of the base because they saw that as way to retain the connection between the U.S. and Uzbekistan and at least to keep the spotlight on Uzbekistan and keep American interests in Uzbekistan."

Employees Harrassed

According to Davis, it was a staged event. But even before the Andijon events, she tells RFE/RL, Freedom House employees in Uzbekistan had a tough time.

"Our local staff, nearly all of them have been interrogated and harassed, including one of our senior program managers, who is Uzbek," she said. "He was dismissed from the university."

Davis says that Freedom House's initial court proceedings in Tashkent lasted from the beginning of November 2005 until 11 January 2006, when the Justice Ministry decided to suspend the organization. She says that during the initial phase of the case the judge, a woman, acted professionally, even drilling officials from the ministry and allowing Freedom House to present eight witnesses, but ultimately ruled against them.

Jennifer Windsor, Freedom House's executive director, tells RFE/RL that while the organization will abide by the court decision and has suspended its activities in the country, they are going to keep its staff -- a Serbian, a Croatian, and an Azerbaijani -- on the payroll because it is a crucial time for human rights in Uzbekistan.

"We don't have any plans to release anyone because we think it is extremely important that Freedom House and the international community continue to provide support and be there for the human-rights defenders during a very, very difficult time for them," she said.

Questionable Allegations

Windsor says that while the rejection of the appeal was not entirely unexpected, the charges brought, she says, were spurious.

"We thought the allegations against us and some of the testimony was ridiculous, and it really shows badly on the Uzbek government's stated commitments to preserve their international obligations [with regard] to human rights," she said. "This is a regime that's

really trying to stifle and squash any kind of accurate information dissemination in the country to their own citizens."

Freedom House's "Freedom in the World" ratings, which have been published annually since 1972, are highly regarded as an accurate assessment on the state of freedom in countries. In the latest, [2006 rating](#), Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan share a dubious distinction: the lowest possible rating on political rights and civil liberties.

Only six other countries shared that status: North Korea, Libya, Cuba, Syria, Sudan, and Myanmar. Uzbekistan, however, went a notch lower in civil liberties compared to its previous rating. These two former Soviet states' ratings are in stark contrast with Freedom House's consistently higher ratings of the Soviet Union during the 1970s and 1980s.

"They're not quite at the bottom of the list yet, countries like North Korea are," Windsor said. "But I would say that given the steps that they are taking, they're going to try to work hard at downgrading [them] even further on this."

NGOs Under Fire

Approximately 200 domestic nonprofit organizations have been forced to close in Uzbekistan and a number of international NGO's had to leave the country as a result of the crackdown by President Islam Karimov's regime. Among them are Internews and the Open Society Institute. [International media including the BBC and RFE/RL](#) have also been compelled to leave in recent months.

Alexander Cooley, who is an assistant professor of political science at Columbia University and an expert on Central Asian affairs, tells RFE/RL that the expulsion of foreign NGOs has done a lot of damage because they were the only entities in Uzbekistan capable of maintaining dialogue between the West and Uzbek officials after the disengagement between Tashkent and Western powers following the bloodshed in Andijon. That included the Uzbek government telling United States forces to leave an air base in the south of the country.

"A lot of them actually lamented the expulsion of the base because they saw that as way to retain the connection between the U.S. and Uzbekistan and at least to keep the spotlight on Uzbekistan and keep American interests in Uzbekistan," Cooley said. "My sense is that a lot of these activities have become more difficult after that disengagement."

RFE/RL's repeated oral and written requests for comment from the Uzbek Embassy in Washington, D.C., went unanswered.