INDEPENDENT NEWS WEB SITES' COVERAGE OF RELIGION IN CENTRAL ASIA

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The five Central Asian governments tightly control religious freedom and practices. Most mass media remains state-owned or tightly controlled, and journalists exercise self-censorship, with or without official censorship. One result is a dearth of reporting by domestic media about religious freedom issues, which are culturally and politically sensitive for these authoritarian regimes. Western-based Web news sites like those of the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (www.iwpr.net), Eurasianet (www.eurasianet.org), and IRIN News (www.irinnews.org) provide alternative venues for independent reporting on news about religion, but access to these sites is difficult or impossible for most people. Central Asian journalists who report for these sites confront challenges and risks.

The Religion Setting

Religion in Central Asia is inextricably interwoven with politics. All five governments are secular in orientation and practice, although some leaders wrap themselves in religious mantles for political purposes. These regimes worry not only about violent fundamentalism but also about the prospect of Islamist parties that may threaten the incumbents' hold on power. In the case of Kazakhstan, for example, "the extremist Islamist political organization Hizb ut-Tahrir is banned and its members are subject to arrest and imprisonment for subversion," according to the U.S. State Department.[1] One expert observed that national leaders have used campaigns against "radical Islam" as a pretext to oust local figures and centralize political control.[2] As one way to develop national identity in countries whose artificial borders were drawn 80 years earlier, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan adopted "a multiethnic and secular definition" of their new states, as Luong put it.[3] In Uzbekistan, that includes tight

[1] U.S. State Department, *International Religious Freedom Report*, 8 November, 2005.

[2] See: N. Melvin, "Patterns of Centre-Regional Relations in Central Asia: The Cases of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, and Uzbekistan," *Ethnicity and Territory in the Former Soviet Union: Regions in Conflict*, ed. by J. Hughes, G. Sasse, Frank Cass, London, 2002.

[3] P. Luong, *Institutional Change and Political Continuity in Post-Soviet Central Asia*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002.

governmental controls over Islam to diffuse it as a political force and to justify a campaign against so-called extremism.[4] Huskey wrote how then-Kyrgyz President Askar Akaev had to "maintain an official ecumenism in the face of a revival of religious expression in Kyrgyzstan, whether among newly-converted Christians or the more numerous Muslim population."[5] Cummings and Ochs described Turkmenistan as a "curious blend of resurgent Islam and secular dictatorship with (President Saparmurat Niyazov's) cult of personality;" where the people are "not primarily defined by religion... Niyazov has sought to gain recognition by playing up to Islam when necessary but in reality the record has been one of intensifying repression and control, rather than accommodation."[6]

Four of the five republics have overwhelmingly large Muslim-majority populations; the exception is Kazakhstan, where Muslims only slightly outnumber Russian Orthodox adherents (see Table 1). Throughout the region, the proportion of Russian Orthodox adherents has declined since independence in 1991 due to massive emigration to Russia and elsewhere. Between 1989 and 2001, Russia's Federal Service of State Statistics reported 2.3 million immigrants from Kazakhstan; 430,000 from Tajikistan; 431,000 from Kyrgyzstan; 210,000 from Uzbekistan; and 54,000 from Turkmenistan. The emigration of Central Asians of Russian or European descent has exacerbated governmental anti-religious activities, and minority religions—those other than Islam and Orthodox Christianity—face particular challenges. Some Christian sects now actively proselytize, as do some Baha'i and Hare Krishna adherents, prompting adverse reactions on the governmental and grassroots levels. Peyrouse wrote: "The Soviet pattern—that is, a faith fighting for its own existence in an atheist regime—has given way in the post-Soviet period to a Central Asian specificity: Christianity as a minority faith which appears as a symbol of European identity in a Muslim land... Minorities have expressed their fear evoked by the indigenization of power, and ethnic nationalism has become a key element in the religious revival. This "ethnic-religious" combination constitutes one of the responses to the Central Asian situation."[7]

Table 1

Religious Breakdown of the Population of the Five Republics (%)

Country	Muslim	Orthodox	Other
Kazakhstan	**47**	**44**	**9**
Kyrgyzstan	**75**	**20**	**5**
Tajikistan	**90**	**0**	**10**
Turkmenistan	**89**	**9**	**2**
Uzbekistan	**88**	**9**	**3**

Source: Freedom House (2005).

[4] See: A. Khalid, "A Secular Islam: Nation, State and Religion in Uzbekistan," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, No. 35, 2003.

[5] E. Huskey, "An Economy of Authoritarianism? Askar Akaev and Presidential Leadership in Kyrgyzstan," in: *Power and Change in Central Asia*, ed. by S. Cummings, Rutledge, London, 2002, pp. 79-80.

[6] S. Cummings, M. Ochs, "Turkmenistan: Saparmurat Niyazov's Inglorious Isolation," in: *Power and Change in Central Asia*, p. 123.

[7] S. Peyrouse, "Towards a Connection between Religion and Nationality in Central Asia," *Central Eurasian Studies Review*, No. 3 (1), 2004, p. 14.

All five constitutions contain broad language protecting freedom of religion, such as that of Tajikistan, which states in Art 26: "Each person has the right independently to determine her or his religious preference, to practice any religion alone or in association with others or to practice no religion, and to participate in the performance of religious cults, rituals, and ceremonies." In reality, however, changes through legislation and executive decrees that affect religious freedom and practices are frequent. In addition, unofficial policies, practices, and interpretations reduce or eliminate officially promised rights, as in Turkmenistan where "governmental entities at all levels, including the courts, have interpreted the laws in such a way as to discriminate against those practicing any faith other than Sunni Islam or Russian Orthodox Christianity."[8]

Overall, religious freedom is restricted throughout the region, according to assessments by foreign governmental agencies such as the U.S. Department of State; by multinational organizations such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE); and by human rights nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) such as the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights. For example, all five countries require religious organizations to register but sometimes reject their applications. Depending on the country, unregistered groups may be prohibited from meeting, acquiring property, hiring employees, establishing bank accounts, and distributing religious material. Articles posted on the three Web sites studied and articles from other Internet, print, and broadcast news media report on a variety of abuses of religious rights.

The Mass Media Setting

Juraev classified the five press systems into three models: "authoritarian-democratic" in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan; "post-conflict" in Tajikistan; and "total control" in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.[9] Whether such precise categorization is possible, similarities among them outweigh differences when evaluated by press rights and human rights advocates. On paper, the five constitutions guarantee press freedom. Uzbekistan's Art 29, for instance, provides: "Each person has the right of freedom of thought, speech, and belief. Each person has the right to seek, receive, and disseminate any information, with the exception of information directed against the existing constitutional order and other limitations established by law. Freedom of opinion and the expression of opinion may be limited by law for reasons of state or other secret." Yet the regimes regard a free press as a threat and believe a controlled press can be a potent tool to retain power. As a result, the mass media retain much of their pre-1991 psyche. They depend on governmental approval and subsidies for survival, are subject to arbitrary and often repressive regulations, and lack a market-based economic foundation. In Uzbekistan, Saipov wrote that the government is "trapped between two fires: Western pressure and the people's pressure. On the one hand, the government desperately wants direct foreign investments; on the other hand, it does not want domestic upheavals created by a free press."[10]

With most print and broadcast media either owned by or tightly controlled by government, journalists exercise self-censorship with or without official censorship. Incidents of repression encourage further self-censorship, as occurred in Kazakhstan in 2003 after opposition journalist Sergei Duvanov

[8] A. Sultangalieva, *Legislature on Religion in Central Asian States as a Reflection of Relation between Religion and Politics: Changes and Perspectives*, Paper delivered to the Central Eurasian Studies Society, 2000.

[9] See: A. Juraev, "The Uzbek Mass Media Model: Analysis, Opinions, Problems," *Central Asia and the Caucasus,* No. 1 (13), 2002.

[10] Z. Saipov, *Uzbek Sense of Censorship: Source of Stability or Instability?* Paper delivered to the Central Eurasian Studies Society, 2003.

was imprisoned on what press rights advocates contend was a trumped-up rape charge.[11] Journalists who incur the anger of powerful interests may face jail, physical attacks, harassment, loss of jobs and licenses, tax audits, destruction of property, and expensive criminal and civil libel litigation. Some have been forced into exile, and some have been murdered.[12] One study examined the retaliatory consequences for independent television journalists who reported about homelessness, hazing in the military, governmental closure of a television station, and pension fund abuse; it concluded, "Common to these stories is the attempt of Central Asian governments to maintain official national narratives by silencing alternative perspectives."[13]

Criticism from foreign governments, press rights advocates, and human rights groups appears to have had little impact on anti-press policies, and Western institutions have been reluctant to apply strong pressure. However, in April 2004, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development suspended most of its public loans in Uzbekistan, citing "very limited progress" in achieving promised human rights and press freedom benchmarks. And in July 2004, the U.S. State Department decided not to certify Uzbekistan for up to $18 million U.S. in foreign aid, citing lack of progress on democratic reforms. That was a turnaround from previous U.S. policy; as late as January 2004, the Bush administration cited national security as its rationale for why Uzbekistan could remain in a cooperative threat reduction program despite a substandard human rights record.

Foreign entities such as OSCE, Internews, International Center for Journalists, British Broadcasting Corporation, Open Society Institute, and Freedom House have offered training to professional journalists, although authorities have suspended some of their operations. Still, the prospects for wide-scale improvement in professional standards, ethics, and skills is impeded by: scarce resources; low salaries for journalists and journalism educators; lack of media independence; low trust in the integrity of the media; lack of societal expectations of fairness, accuracy, and balance; and inadequate training.

There is a widespread belief that the mass media should serve as an agent of state-building and nationalism, and that the press owes its principal duty to the state and the government, not to the public. Muminova described journalism as "a weapon of mass ideological contamination. In this respect any press, either truthful or lying, is a very efficient method of creating identities."[14] One ramification, as Khamagaev observed, is that "investigative reporting in the true sense of the word is a rarity in Central Asian countries. Political partiality, pressures from authorities and criminal groups, and meager wages are major factors hampering progress in this sphere."[15]

Convergence of the Religion and Mass Media Settings

In the United States, religion was traditionally regarded as a "soft news" or feature beat, punctuated by coverage of occasional hard news events such as a pontifical visit, the prosecution of corrupt

[11] See: V. Abisheva, "Self-censorship Rife in Kazak Media," *Institute for War and Peace Reporting*, RCA 207, 27 May, 2003.

[12] See: R. Shafer, E. Freedman, "Obstacles to the Professionalization of Mass Media in Post-Soviet Central Asia: A Case Study of Uzbekistan," *Journalism Studies*, No. 4 (1), 2003.

[13] I. Sigal, J. Machleder, *Independent Media and Alternative Narratives in Central Asia*, Paper delivered to the Central Eurasian Studies Society, 2003.

[14] F. Muminova, "National Identity, National Mentality, and the Media," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 5 (17), 2002, p. 135.

[15] A. Khamagaev, "Investigative Reporting in Central Asian Countries," *Media Insight Central Asia*, No. 30-31, 2002, p. 1.

clergy, or a controversy over ordination of women and homosexuals.[16] There were occasional religion-related hard-news mega-events involving what the press disdainfully labels "cults" or "sects," such as the 1978 mass suicides-murders of 914 members of the People's Temple in Jonestown, Guyana, and the 1993 siege and attack by law enforcement agents on the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas. That attitude within U.S. journalism is changing—fueled in part by exposure of widespread sexual abuses by Roman Catholic priests, political activism by some religious organizations, and criminal misuse of funds by some religious leaders. As a result, some news organizations now put more resources into covering religion as hard news.

By contrast, a major product of Central Asia's tightly restricted media systems is the absence of frequent, substantive press coverage about religious freedom and practices. That includes investigative and analytical reporting by domestic newspapers, magazines, and television and radio news broadcasts. Joshua Machleder, then of the media support NGO Internews, explained to the lead author, "Religious freedom and restraint issues are controversial for reporting as they come into conflict with unofficial government campaigns against pious Muslims."

In an examination of religious coverage in Uzbek language newspapers, Tokhtakhojaeva concluded that both state-owned and private media in Uzbekistan "are preoccupied by disseminating propaganda—a propaganda meant to imprint religious tenets disguised as national traditions, instead of promoting the principles of democracy and the rule of law." That analysis cited the absence of coverage of Hizb ut-Tahrir, of the trials of party members, and of protests by wives and mothers of arrested religious activists. The domestic media also fails to provide "insight into real reasons why religious extremism gains momentum across the world, including in Uzbekistan... Hence, the uncritical news media proves inefficient in cracking down on outdated religious rules that throw society back and flings believers into the hands of religious extremism."[17] Not all anti-press activity comes directly from governments. Kyrgyzstan experienced protests in front of its State National Broadcast Corporation headquarters after a TV journalist made comments that critics said linked Hajj pilgrims to Mecca with prostitution by Kyrgyz women and girls in the Middle East.[18]

As a result, much of the in-depth reporting about religious issues in Central Asia appears instead in foreign media outlets such as the BBC or Russia-based news organizations, both traditional and on the Internet. For independent Central Asian journalists, Western-based Web sites that cover a broad range of news, such as IRIN News, Eurasianet, and IWPR, offer forums for reporting about religion news.

This article examines the types of coverage of religious freedom, practices, events, and constraints that appear on these sites. These three sites were studied because they are nongovernmental and provide a significant amount of English-language coverage about public affairs, including human rights, in all five countries. Most of their stories are original, unlike Web sites that primarily repost articles generated by other news organizations.

- IRIN News is run by the Integrated Regional Information Networks, a unit of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. Coverage includes the five former Soviet republics. Regular topics include environment, the economy, food security, refugees, health, gender issues, democracy, and natural disasters as well as religious and human rights. It posts in English but not Russian.

[16] See: B. Brooks, G. Kennedy, D. Moen, D. Ranly, *News Reporting and Writing*, 6th Edition, Bedford/St. Martin's, Boston, 1999; S. Willey, *Pictures inside our Heads: Reporters' and Sources' Views of a Series of Religion News Stories*, Paper delivered to the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, 1998.

[17] M. Tokhtakhojaeva, "A Review of Islam and the Media in Uzbekistan," *Media Insight Central Asia*, No. 22, 2002, pp. 1, 3.

[18] See: K. Chekirov, S. Jumagulov, "TV Show Offends Muslims," *Institute for War and Peace Reporting*, RCA 258, 21 January, 2004.

- Eurasianet is operated by the Open Society Institute's Central Eurasia Project and provides news and analysis about the five republics. Its coverage includes human rights as well as environment, economics, and culture. Some articles are posted in Russian as well as English.
- IWPR is an international media development NGO based in London. Its reports on events in Central Asia include human rights and social and political issues, and appear in English and Russian.

Language is an important consideration in evaluating the potential influence of these Web sites. Most Central Asians do not read English, and many do not read Russian. These sites do not post stories in ethnic languages. Limited availability of the Internet, relatively high expense, and lack of familiarity with computer technology among the vast majority of Central Asians mean few can read them directly. Most readers are believed to live outside the region.

Limitations on Internet Access

Internet access remains difficult. There is little training available to develop Internet skills. Personal computer ownership and even cybercafes are unaffordable for most Central Asians; fewer than 1 percent of Uzbekistan's population uses the Internet.[19] One study found the Internet to be the least-used source of information about elected officials and health issues in Uzbekistan, ranking behind family, friends, neighborhood, television, radio, newspapers and posters.[20] Foreign NGOs provide free access and training centers for journalists, community NGO leaders, human rights activists, and other individuals. Interestingly, some Muslim leaders in Kyrgyzstan, worried about the impact of Protestant missionary efforts, have suggested using the Internet to "interest the young people with Islamic norms by chatting with Arab youngsters."[21]

Even for journalists, the Internet is not a routine work tool. In January 2004, Freedom House sponsored training sessions for about sixty professional journalists in Uzbekistan. A survey of participants by the lead author found that 41 percent of respondents use the Internet less than once a week or never in their reporting and research; 54 percent reported no Internet access at their newspaper, television, or radio station.

Also, governments have blocked Web sites. For instance, some foreign sites were blocked in Uzbekistan for posting articles about purported official corruption, and sites in Kazakhstan also were blocked. The Web study found that 42 percent of respondents reportedly believed that Uzbekistan's government monitors Internet activity, and 46 percent said that users cannot access some sites because of government policies. Overall, however, there has been only limited and sporadic censorship of religious Web sites, with the most extensive controls imposed in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan; Uzbekistan has blocked foreign-based sites that carry news about religious developments.[22] Some authorities worry about Internet coverage of religion-related news. An Uzbek National Security Service

[19] See: B. Pannier, "Uzbekistan: Internet Usage up, but Controversial Websites Blocked," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 21 January, 2003.

[20] See: C. Wei, B. Kolko, J. Spyridakis, *The Effect of the Internet on Society in Uzbekistan*, Paper delivered to the Association of Internet Researchers, 2003.

[21] A. Ismanov, "Protestants in Kyrgyzstan Face Hostile Reception," *Eurasianet*, 8 December, 2003.

[22] See: I. Rotar, "Central Asia: Only Limited Censorship of Religious Websites," *Forum 18 News Service*, 22 April, 2003.

officer reportedly told a member of a Protestant church after a four-hour interrogation, "Just don't publish an article about our conversation on the Internet." [23]

Although articles may be posted in Russian on Eurasianet and IWPR, and although some stories are reposted in Russian on Ferghana.ru, that does not ensure widespread availability. Even so, the articles on these three sites may have a potential or actual impact or influence within the five countries. Central Asians who read them are apt to be better educated, more influential and, perhaps, leaders or potential leaders in government, business, academia, mass media, or NGOs. As Bukharbaeva and Samari observed, "With the arrival of the Internet, information has become accessible to more people—certainly the elite—and officials are more likely to be forced to react to controversial reporting that digs up facts they would prefer to bury."[24]

Domestic journalists who see these stories may sometimes follow up with their own reporting for their own media organizations. Stories may be picked up by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty for translation and broadcast in Russian or ethnic languages. IWPR program manager Saule Mukhametrakhimova told the lead author, "If you want to reach a wide audience in Central Asia, you rely on republication in the local press" in ethnic languages such as Tajik and Kyrgyz.

Religion Issues Covered

This study used a content analysis of news stories in which religion in the five republics was the dominant topic and which were posted on the three Web sites in 2003. It excluded stories in which religion was secondary or tangential, such as those about human rights in general. Only articles original to the sites were included; articles reposted from other sources such as Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, were excluded. The study also excluded editorials, opinion columns, question-&-answer articles, and stories labeled "commentary." There were twenty-three relevant articles: seven on Eurasianet, fourteen on IWPR, and two on IRIN News.

Table 2

Primary Story Topics

	IRIN	Eurasianet	IWPR	All (%)
Religion-related laws, policies, & activities	1	3	9	56.5
Religion & terrorism	0	2	2	17.4
Proselytizing & conversion	0	0	1	4.3
Other	1	2	2	21.7
Total N=23	2	7	14	

[23] I. Rotar, "Uzbekistan: 'Don't Report Interrogation on the Internet,' Ex-KGB Tells Protestant," *Forum 18 News Service*, 15 July, 2003.

[24] G. Bukharbaeva, A. Samari, "Ask No Questions, Uzbek Media Told," *Institute for War and Peace Reporting*, RCA 202, 2 May, 2003.

Religion-related laws, policies, and governmental activities accounted for more than half the stories. They included news about legislation, decrees, statutes, and official or unofficial policies under which local, regional, or national governments restrict, regulate, or protect freedom of religion. Anti-religion activities by government included harassment, prosecution, seizure of religious materials, and closure of mosques, churches and other religious facilities.

Stories about religion and terrorism—particularly what the governments characterized as radical Islamist political movements—accounted for less than one-fifth of the total. Such stories included a direct link between religious believers or beliefs and acts of violence, warfare, and terror. There was only one story about proselytizing and conversion efforts by either Christian denominations or Muslim activists. About one-fifth of the stories fell outside those three categories (see Table 2).

Selection of News Sources

Basic Western journalism values such as accuracy, fairness, and balance partly depend on the type of sources cited in news stories, and the credibility of those sources relates directly to public trust and confidence in a news organization. Western journalists are trained to seek multiple viewpoints and a variety of sources in covering conflicts and controversies. Reporters may interview stakeholders affected by an event, including partisans, independent experts, and independent observers; they also may use documents such as reports, studies, legal papers, press statements, and governmental records.

Options are more limited for Central Asian journalists who depend extensively on governmental representatives who are authorized and on official pronouncements. They quote comparatively few "ordinary" people, NGO representatives, and independent experts.

The study looked at elite sources—people affiliated with higher education institutions, government, religious leaders, leaders of religious political groups, NGO representatives, and other experts. It also looked at two types of non-elite sources: religious practitioners who were not leaders, and "ordinary" sources, who were described with such labels as "disabled mother" or "12-year-old boy from Khakan."

Central Asian governmental officials and other experts accounted for 70 percent of named elite sources. NGO, international agency, and foreign government representatives accounted for about 16 percent of elite sources (see Table 3).

Table 3

Named Elite Sources

Academic	**2**
Government or other expert	**43**
Religious leader	**5**
Foreign NGO, government, international agency	**6**
Domestic NGO	**4**
Leader of religious political group	**1**
Total	**61**

Overall, half the stories cited at least one unnamed source—a person to whom information was attributed with less than a full name, with a pseudonym, or with no name. As examples, stories may have described them only as "a member of the Kyrgyz secret service who asked to remain anonymous," "one protester," or "Anvar, a university student in Shymkent." Religious practitioners and "ordinary" people accounted for almost half the total unnamed sources used; perhaps they requested anonymity because they feared retribution or sanctions if they were quoted by name. The remaining unnamed sources were governmental, religious or religious political leaders, or other experts (see Table 4).

Table 4

Unnamed Elite and Non-elite Sources

Elite	
Government	**2**
Religious leader	**1**
Leader of religious political group	**1**
Other expert	**3**
Non-elite	
Religion adherent	**2**
"Ordinary"	**4**
Total	**13**

Anonymity of Journalists

Journalists rarely use pseudonyms in Western media. Bylines signal professional accomplishment, especially on investigative or otherwise hard-hitting or analytical stories. Readers and opinion-makers may contact reporters to offer news tips and ideas for future stories. If a story triggers future developments, such as criminal charges, remedial legislation, correcting an injustice or political reforms, the reporter may receive accolades and professional rewards such as prizes or promotions.

Religious issues in Central Asia are politically sensitive—authorities often feel that "negative" reporting, even if accurate, makes them seem incompetent, insensitive, corrupt, uninformed, or lacking in leadership. Given potential adverse governmental reaction, it is not surprising that some Central Asian journalists find it wise to shield their identities in published reports. In addition, salaried journalists for state-owned or state-controlled news organizations may want to keep secret the fact that they freelance for independent news Web sites lest they lose their jobs; also, they may not want tax authorities to discover their extra income. The lead author's survey of Uzbekistani journalists at professional training workshops sponsored by Freedom House in 2004 found that half the respondents sometimes report under a pseudonym.

Machleder of Internews explained to the lead author that use of a pseudonym is no guarantee against retaliation: "I think it's almost like a whole series of rules that journalists who work in the region have and break in order to continue their work here. It is also because of the anonymity that

publication on the Web affords them, though within Central Asia the authorities can figure out who the journalists are. In the end, it's not really so hard. The authorities could follow the money (how payments are made to journalists); they could follow the representations of the news organizations; they can interrogate the people who are cited in interviews or subjects of the reports to track down who they are."

Each Web site has its own policy about using bylines that identify reporters, the lead author was told. Editors at IWPR headquarters in London decide whether to allow a pseudonym, in consultation with IWPR country editors within Central Asia and their correspondents. According to program manager Mukhametrakhimova, "We tend to go down the way of using pseudonyms rather than exposing our reporters to the unnecessary threat of danger. It's a hard choice, either a pseudonym or no story. They choose to have a story." Eurasianet writers can choose to use a pseudonym, according to editor Justin Burke, "although in one instance I wouldn't allow an Uzbek writer to use his own name, as I thought it foolhardy." Several Eurasianet writers were officially questioned after their stories appeared; "this is especially the case in Tajikistan where, at first, writers were less afraid to use their own names. That has changed over time, and now many are reluctant to use their real names." Unlike the other two sites, IRIN News does not use bylines.

After excluding IRIN News stories because they do not carry bylines, one-fifth of the remaining stories appeared with pseudonyms rather than with the reporters' true names.

Implications

These three Western news Web sites are doing the type of reporting about important and controversial religion-related issues that domestic Central Asian media are unable to do because of governmental, cultural, and self-imposed restraints, and because of sparse resources. Certainly the Central Asian journalists who write for these sites have the professional skills to report about such issues with a multiplicity of views and with factual accuracy. For doing their job in a professional manner, however, they face risks at home while writing principally for readers abroad.

But why should the governments worry when most of the readership apparently lives outside Central Asia? For several reasons, among them the fact that many readers abroad are involved in economic, diplomatic, human rights, academic and other endeavors that may directly affect Central Asia. Also, immigrants from Central Asia, including political refugees and exiled religious and political activists, may use these Web sites for information about events at home. Meanwhile, as the Internet becomes more widely accessible and affordable, the potential domestic audience for such sites will expand, particularly if those sites make all stories available in Russian and ethnic languages or if they are republished by ethnic language media.

The findings underscore the reality that journalists reporting on controversial issues in the region—even journalists for foreign news organizations like IWPR, Eurasianet, and IRIN News—operate under rigid legal, political, and extra-legal constraints. That is evidenced by their use of pseudonyms and by the difficulty they have in persuading sources to allow their real names to be used in stories. As long as religion remains an explosive political factor in the region, any change in these patterns is likely to be slow in arrival. In the meantime, practicalities and caution are likely to continue discouraging or preventing journalists from freely practicing their profession for domestic media outlets.