



The TUQAY

ESSAYS FROM BEYOND THE WELL-PROTECTED DOMAINS.

Working as a Journalist in a Repressive Political Regime

by Aida Eizeman - 07.01.2013

"I was always at risk of being arrested by secret service agents. They hated independent journalists," says Aida Eizeman, a former journalist from Uzbekistan. "There are eight journalists currently languishing in their dungeons. When they told me that they can easily imprison me, I left my homeland. I have lived as a refugee in Idaho. Now I reside in California." Her story exemplifies the work of journalists in a country where the media is controlled by security forces in one of the most repressive countries in the world:

I was born and raised in Tashkent, the capital of the Republic of Uzbekistan. When I finished middle school twelve years ago, I started to publish my articles in Uzbek newspapers. But because of the strong censorship, none of them really affected the serious political and economic issues, and, particularly, the human rights situation.

In 2007 I started freelance work with the opposition Web news agencies with editions based abroad. I covered violations by the Uzbek authorities, such as incidences of torture during investigations, the appalling conditions in prisons, fabrication of criminal cases against Muslims accused of religious extremism, repression against human rights defenders and journalists, the slave labor of children in the cotton fields, the problems of homeless people, and the like.

During preparation of the articles, I often used the information of Tashkent human rights groups. Most of them are unable to obtain state registration and are severely persecuted. They are beaten, placed in a psychiatric hospital and jailed on unproven charges. I traveled to the cotton fields to learn the truth, and to various court hearings and pickets. I met security officials and policemen everywhere. They tried to interfere with my work. Threats were common.

Needless to say, my articles were blocked by National Security Service (NSS), the secret service of the country. Few people in my country ever saw these articles.

In the fall 2008, I asked to be an observer in the criminal trial of four police officers accused of torture that caused the death of one man. The court case was open, so anyone had the right to attend. However, the judge only allowed lawyers and relatives of the accused and the victim. Several human rights defenders, who had remained with me on the street, picketed the court house. But security guards called up the police and the NSS. They came and forced everybody to leave.

Another time, policemen detained me outside the civil court building, where they were considering a little known case about an apartment. I went there with the famous Tashkent human rights activist Helena Urlaeva, from Human Rights Alliance of Uzbekistan. She had picketed the courthouse. Later, two policemen demanded to see our documents and asked us to go with them. But we cited the illegality of their actions and after much argument, they let us be.

One day I was detained merely for speaking on the sidewalk with a homeless person. Suddenly a police patrol car pulled up. Two officers demanded I show them my documents and then they confiscated them from me. They told me to get into their car and come with them to the District Department of the Interior. When I asked what the offense was for which they were arresting me, they did not answer. The policemen asked for what purpose I talked with the man. In Uzbekistan, the homeless are very rarely talked to. To a policeman, I looked suspicious. However, having driven about half a mile, the police suddenly stopped the car and let me go.

Another incident that put me in danger was in regards to child labor in the cotton fields. Each autumn, for about three months, more than two million Uzbek children are forcibly engaged by the authorities to pick the cotton harvest. Instead of their school, students are working from dawn to dusk seven days a week, helping adult collectors. The annual harvest of cotton is more than three million tons, and exports of cotton bring the country one billion dollars a year.

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In 2007, an international boycott was declared against Uzbek cotton. An official letter by retailers - the Wal-Mart Stores, Tesco, Marks & Spencer, Target and GAP - was addressed to the Government of the Republic of Uzbekistan. The American and British association of importers and traders of clothing (NRE, RILA, AAFA and AITA) banned their suppliers from procuring cotton in the country. This forced the Uzbek authorities to adopt some laws prohibiting the exploitation of children.

But in practice, these laws have not worked. In the fall 2008, a human rights defender and I saw many 10-12-year-old cotton pickers near the town of Naman-gan, 140 miles east of the capital. We communicated with and photographed them and their teachers. Leaving the field, we immediately heard from a local resident that policemen were looking for us. Fortunately, they did not find us. Otherwise we would have had to destroy the collected photos and audio. The Uzbek government is trying to hide from the world community that the situation with child slaves still remains the same.

Soon after that, the same human rights activist and I also went to the cotton fields, located very close to the capital. And there we met some working children. However, forewarned that they cannot communicate with journalists, they were in an aggressive mood, and began to throw lumps of clay at us. A farmer came running up to try to take away our cameras and threatened to call police.

My camera was almost taken from my hands several other times, including the summer of 2009 during a court hearing in the case of a prominent journalist, Dilmurad Sayyid. A group of angry individuals prevented me from photographing him. They made it impossible to even have a simple conversation with him, through a metal grill on which he sat in the courtroom. After that, the judge did not allow me to attend the sessions any more. I learned later that Dilmurad Sayyid was sentenced to 12.5 years in prison on charges of extortion and forgery.

In 2009 when I was nearly finished with my university studies, I spent three hours being questioned by the National Security Service (NSS) as a result of my activism. They knew absolutely everything about me and my relatives. The Uzbek security services routinely listen in on telephone calls and read e-mails of civil activists. The agent threatened me and my family, if I did not cease to cooperate with human rights defenders from the non-registered Human Rights Alliance of Uzbekistan. He said that my actions fell under an article of the Criminal Code of Uzbekistan, "Participation in illegal organizations." In other words, at any time I could be put in prison for this completely trumped-up charge. Also, the officer insisted that I become a freelance agent of the secret service. I flatly refused.

A couple months later, my home phone rang and an unknown man compulsively offered me a meeting of a sexual nature; he threatened me trouble if I refused. In addition, strangers several times unceremoniously knocked at the gate of my private home, and under various pretexts, demanded to meet with me, I also declined. It was a very common way of Uzbek security services to exert pressure on journalists, to silence them.

In the summer 2009, not feeling safe, I decided to leave Uzbekistan and seek asylum in the office of the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in the nearby country of Kyrgyzstan. People there are much more liberated and free. I lived in Kyrgyzstan about one and half years and continued to write about human rights abuses in Uzbekistan. While I was there, the citizens held a celebration honoring their revolution of independence, which made a big impression on me.

Finally, in December 2010, the UNHCR in cooperation with the International Organization for Migration safely relocated me to Boise, Idaho. In March 2012, I moved to California. I am very grateful to the U.S. Government for allowing me this relocation. ❀