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CENTRAL ASIA: Only limited censorship of religious websites

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Despite authoritarian rule, high levels of censorship of the local media and periodic barring of access to foreign-based political opposition websites, Central Asia's governments have so far only enacted limited censorship over access to religious websites based outside the region, a Forum 18 News Service investigation has found. Uzbekistan permanently bars access to the London-based website of Islamist party Hizb ut-Tahrir, though not to its Pakistan-related site. In several Uzbek Internet cafes, Forum 18 even came across the notice: "Viewing of religious and pornographic sites is forbidden". But with low Internet use in Central Asia and a population too poor to be able to afford access, Central Asia's governments – which to a greater or lesser extent try to control all religious activity – may believe they do not need to impose religious censorship on the Internet.

Despite authoritarian rule, high levels of censorship of the local media and periodic barring of access to foreign-based political opposition websites, Central Asia's governments have so far only enacted sporadic and limited censorship over access to religious websites based outside the region, a Forum 18 News Service investigation has found. Local governments appear to be aware that the Internet has yet to make a significant impact in the region, with local people too poor to afford access. Outside Kazakhstan, few religious communities in Central Asia maintain websites of their own.

Some local analysts paint a dark picture of government censorship. "The Central Asian authorities are trying to restrict access by the population to websites that are independent of the republics' governments," the Executive Director of the Association of the Independent Electronic Mass Media in Central Asia, Leonid Rempel, told Forum 18 from the Kyrgyz capital Bishkek on 17 April. He added that he had no information about the authorities blocking access to religious websites, but said he believed the Central Asian authorities were trying to restrict access by the population to any sources of information which expressed a view that differed from that of the authorities.

Moreover, the means used in the authorities' battle with websites outside state control differed in the various Central Asian states. According to Rempel, the authorities of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan exert the most extensive control over the Internet. He maintained that residents of these republics are being virtually deprived of access to websites that express a view conflicting with that of the authorities. In Kazakhstan, Rempel reports, access is blocked only to those websites that offer a harsh critique of the president, Nursultan Nazarbayev. The mildest control is in Kyrgyzstan where, according to Rempel, if someone looks at a site that opposes the government "his telephone link may unexpectedly be interrupted".

A 15 April article by the Paris-based press freedom group Reporters Without Borders (RSF) compared censorship by the authorities in different countries of the world. Among the Central Asian states, it was most critical of Kazakhstan (http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=6122). "The near-monopoly of the state-owned Kazakhtelecom as an Internet service provider (ISP) must not be used to block independent and diverse news," RSF secretary-general Robert Menard wrote to Kazakhstan's culture and information minister Mukhtar Kul-Mukhamed. "We ask you to make every effort to ensure the free flow of online news and to end all censorship of news websites whatever their editorial line."

RSF reported that Yuri Mizinov, editor of the news site Navigator (www.navigator.kz), called in experts who told him all Kazakhtelecom customers had been prevented from accessing the site. Other Kazakh-related political news sites, such as www.eurasia.org.ru, www.kub.kz, the websites of opposition figures Mukhtar Ablyazov (www.ablyazov.info), Galymzhan Zhakiyanov (www.zhakiyanov.info) and Akezhan Kazhegeldyn (www.kazhegeldin.addr.com), as well as opposition media sites such as Vesti Pavlodara (www.vestipavl.com), Assandi Times and www.respublika.kz have also been blocked. "The only way to access them is through foreign-based ISPs, which involves delays of up to half an hour," RSF reported. (Forum 18 believes that Kazakhstan may block more opposition sites than other Central Asian governments simply because the Internet is more widely used there and that such sites have a greater impact on political life.)

"It is true that all these sites express strong criticism of President Nazarbayev and give virtually no information on the subject of religion," the head of the Almaty Helsinki Committee Ninel Fokina told Forum 18. "There is no block on religious websites in Kazakhstan. I have heard nothing about problems with access to such sites. Periodically, the authorities prevent access to websites that oppose Nazarbayev, but such actions are of a more sporadic nature."

Many foreign experts do not dramatise the censorship of the Internet in Central Asia. "Although we hear from time to time about blocking or filtering or mirror sites, there is actually not very much of it," Eric Johnson, executive director of Internews International, declared in a 13 April article on eurasianet.org. "And it's relatively easy to get around. It's nothing compared to many other countries in the world. Saudi Arabia blocks a lot. Iraq blocks a lot. Iran blocks a lot. China works very hard to block a lot, whereas in Central Asia there is very little of that."

But Johnson noted that Central Asian governments are effectively reducing Internet usage by maintaining high connection costs. The local costs for connection - around one US dollar per hour - are expensive compared to average salaries. In comparison, a one-hour connection to the Internet costs just 10 US cents in India.

Johnson's view coincides with the experience of Forum 18, which has made frequent use of the Internet in all the Central Asian republics apart from Turkmenistan. Forum 18 has found only limited censorship of religious websites by Central Asian governments. In Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan there is no censorship and in these republics one may obtain any information on religion from the Internet.

In Uzbekistan just one religious website is permanently blocked – hizb-ut-tahrir.org, a British-based site of the radical Islamist party Hizb ut-Tahrir, which is banned in Uzbekistan. Moreover, one can obtain almost any information on the subject of religion, including news about persecution of believers, by using other websites. For example, although Forum 18 could not open Hizb ut-Tahrir's London website, it was easy to open that organisation's site for Pakistan (khilafah.com.pk, which is also hosted in Britain) as well as the site muslimuzbekistan.com, a site hosted in the United States in which Uzbek president Islam Karimov is called "the enemy of Muslims". One explanation for such weak censorship is the fact that the overwhelming majority of local believers simply do not know how to use the Internet, and that therefore the Uzbek authorities have no need to fear propaganda on the web.

On 16 April the Uzbek government's Agency for Communication and Information told Forum 18 that the number of Internet users in the country in the first quarter of 2003 was just 310,000 (around one per cent of the population). The number of people who have a home computer with a connection to the web is significantly lower. Only a narrow section of the westernised (and generally secularised) intelligentsia uses the Internet in everyday life. In such a situation the Uzbek government has simply no urgent need to exert strict control over religious websites.

Given the negligible percentage of Uzbeks using the Internet in their homes, it is quite sufficient for the government to control access to the web in Internet cafes. For example, in several Internet cafes, Forum 18 even came across the notice: "Viewing of religious and pornographic sites is forbidden". The owners of these establishments explained to Forum 18 that they had put up these announcements on their own initiative to protect themselves against possible difficulties with the authorities.

One Internet cafe employee told Forum 18 that an individual who had been gathering information about Hizb ut-Tahrir in an Internet cafe had been arrested by members of the National Security Service (the former KGB). However, international human rights organisations have not recorded cases of arrests of Internet café users. It is fairly certain that if there have been such arrests, they have been rare.

By way of an experiment, Forum 18 visited four Internet cafes in the Uzbek capital Tashkent on 17 April and attempted in each one to open the Hizb ut-Tahrir site and also looked at other religious websites (for example www.muslimuzbekistan.com) that contain strong criticism of President Karimov. However, no-one showed any interest in this activity. One may, with a high degree of certainty, maintain that in Tashkent at least, it is not dangerous to gather material over the Internet in domestic surroundings (Forum 18 regularly looks at a wide variety of sites and has had no trouble with the National Security Service because of that).

In private conversations with Internet cafe staff, Forum 18 has learnt that instructions from the authorities oblige them only to ensure that their clients do not look at pornographic websites. However, as one source remarked to Forum 18, "not many people decide to look at material on banned Islamic organisations when they know that Internet cafe staff control precisely what their clients look at".

The strictest control over the Internet is exerted by the Turkmen authorities. While the other Central Asian republics, including Uzbekistan, have several dozen providers, most of which (at least formally) are private, Turkmenistan has just one Internet provider, the state-run Turkmentelekom.

Forum 18 has learnt that, in the crackdown that followed the apparent assassination attempt on the president Saparmurad Niyazov last November, all Internet cafes were closed down. Not only have virtually all Turkmen websites been closed down in the republic, but also, using special computer programs that seek out "code words", the authorities are successfully controlling private correspondence over the Internet. For example, a letter where religious terms are used will most probably not reach the addressee.

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