

Tajikistan Initiates Crackdown on Internet Critics

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Tajikistan President Imomali Rakhmon, seen here in a 2009 meeting with then-President of Russia Dmitry Medvedev

DUSHANBE, Tajikistan — Tajikistan plans to create a volunteer-run body to monitor Internet usage and reprimand those who openly criticize President Emomali Rakhmon and his government, the head of the Central Asian country's state-run communications service said.

Beg Zukhurov said the organization, while awaiting official registration, had already taken several Internet users to task for publishing "insults" against "well-known personalities."

"Volunteers for this organization will track down and identify the authors of such comments," Zukhurov told reporters.

He did not elaborate on what might constitute critical comment.

Asked what would happen to anybody identified by the new organization, he replied: "I don't know. Probably, they will be shown the error of their ways."

Rakhmon has ruled Tajikistan for two decades. Though media operate with fewer restrictions than in neighboring Uzbekistan, journalists have been detained in recent months.

“There will be chaos,” said Parvina Ibodova, chairwoman of the Association of Internet Providers of Tajikistan. “The sacred principle of every journalist and every citizen, access to information, will be under threat.”

In a sign that authorities are already clamping down on public criticism, an 18-year-old student in Dushanbe said he had recently been detained overnight by the country’s security services after posting criticism of Rakhmon on his Facebook page.

The student, who was too afraid to be identified, said he had been lectured repeatedly on his conduct. He was not charged with any offense.

“It was scary,” he said. “After that, I deleted all my social networking accounts.”

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