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Freedom in the World 2011 - Uzbekistan

Capital: Tashkent
Population: 27,562,000

Political Rights Score: 7 *
Civil Liberties Score: 7 *
Status: Not Free

Overview

Uzbekistan's government continued to suppress all political opposition and restrict independent business activity in 2010, and the few remaining civic activists and critical journalists in the country faced prosecution, fines, and lengthy prison terms. Nevertheless, the regime maintained relatively good relations with the United States and Europe as it provided logistical support for NATO operations in Afghanistan.

Uzbekistan gained independence from the Soviet Union through a December 1991 referendum. In a parallel vote, Islam Karimov, the former Communist Party leader and chairman of the People's Democratic Party (PDP), the successor to the Communist Party, was elected president amid fraud claims by rival candidate Mohammed Solih of the Erk (Freedom) Party. Solih fled the country two years later, and his party was forced underground. Only progovernment parties were allowed to compete in elections to the first post-Soviet legislature in December 1994 and January 1995. A February 1995 referendum extended Karimov's first five-year term until 2000, allegedly with 99 percent voter support.

All of the five parties that competed in the December 1999 parliamentary elections, which were strongly criticized by international monitors, supported the president. In the January 2000 presidential poll, Karimov defeated his only opponent, allegedly winning 92 percent of the vote. The government refused to allow the participation of genuine opposition parties. A 2002 referendum extended presidential terms from five to seven years.

A series of suicide bomb attacks and related violent clashes in late March and early April 2004 killed some 50 people. Police appeared to be the main targets. The authorities blamed radical international Islamist groups – particularly the Qaeda-linked Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and the banned Hizb ut-Tahrir (Party of Liberation).

Suicide bombers killed several people outside the U.S. and Israeli embassies in July 2004 amid conflicting claims of responsibility. In December, elections for the lower house of a new bicameral parliament were held, with only the five legal, pro-presidential parties allowed to participate.

In May 2005, a popular uprising in the Ferghana Valley city of Andijon triggered a violent government crackdown. The incident began on May 10 and 11, when family members and supporters of 23 local businessmen charged with involvement in a banned Islamic group staged a peaceful demonstration in anticipation of the trial verdict. The situation turned violent on the night of May 12, when armed men stormed a prison, freed the 23 businessmen and other inmates, and captured the local government administration building. Thousands of local residents subsequently gathered in the city center, where people began to speak out on political and economic issues, often making antigovernment statements.

Security forces responded by opening fire on the crowd, which included many women and children. Although the authorities maintained that the protesters were the first to open fire, eyewitnesses reported that the security forces began shooting indiscriminately. Official figures put the death toll at 187, but unofficial sources estimated the dead at nearly 800, most of them unarmed civilians. The government accused Islamic extremists of orchestrating the demonstrations, though most of the participants appeared to have been motivated by economic and social grievances, and many of those present had come to witness the events rather than join protests.

Karimov repeatedly rejected calls from the European Union (EU), the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and the United States for an independent international inquiry into the violence. In July 2005, Uzbekistan gave the United States six months to leave its military base at Karshi-Khanabad, which it had been allowed to use to support operations in Afghanistan since late 2001. Russia and China endorsed the official Uzbek account of the violence.

The Uzbek authorities pursued a wide-ranging crackdown after the Andijon incident, targeting nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) with foreign funding, potential political opposition figures, human rights defenders, and even former officials.

Karimov's seven-year term ended in January 2007, and the constitution barred him from running for reelection. Nevertheless, he won a new term in December 2007 with an official 88 percent of the vote. Parliamentary elections in December 2009 offered voters no meaningful choice, though the four legal political parties, all of which supported the government, indulged in mild criticism of one another.

In June 2010, Uzbekistan briefly took in over 100,000 ethnic Uzbek refugees fleeing ethnic violence in neighboring Kyrgyzstan, and housed them in well-organized camps. However, Uzbek authorities quickly returned the refugees to Kyrgyzstan amid some reports of coercion.

Uzbekistan has largely repaired relations with the EU and United States in recent years, in part by agreeing to the overland transportation of nonmilitary supplies to support NATO operations in Afghanistan.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Uzbekistan is not an electoral democracy. President Islam Karimov uses the dominant executive branch to suppress all political opposition, and his December 2007 reelection appeared to flout constitutional rules on term limits. A dubious referendum in 2002 replaced the country's single-chamber legislature with a bicameral parliament consisting of a 120-seat lower house (with members elected by popular vote for five-year terms) and a 100-member upper house, or Senate (with 84 members elected by regional councils and 16 appointed by the president).

Only four political parties, all progovernment, are currently registered, and no genuine opposition parties function legally. A 2007 law intended to expand the role of registered parties had no real effect on the moribund political arena. Unregistered opposition groups like Birlík and Erk function primarily in exile. In December 2010, police detained and questioned 15 people who met to try to establish a new political party.

Corruption is pervasive. Uzbekistan was ranked 172 out of 178 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2010 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Despite constitutional guarantees, freedoms of speech and the press are severely restricted. The state controls major media outlets and related facilities. Although official censorship was abolished in 2002, it has continued through semiofficial mechanisms that strongly encourage self-censorship. U.S.-funded Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty was forced out of Uzbekistan in December 2005. State-controlled television has aired "documentaries" that smear perceived opponents of the government, including a program in 2007 on journalist Alisher Saipov, who was subsequently murdered in Kyrgyzstan. Sports journalist and religious commentator Khairullo Hamidov received a six-year prison sentence in May 2010, and Voice of America correspondent Abdumalik Boboev was fined \$10,000 in October – both on dubious grounds. Separately, photographer Umida Ahmedova was convicted in February of "insulting the Uzbek people" through her photographs of daily life, though she was immediately amnestied after her conviction. The OpenNet Initiative has found that the government systematically blocks websites with content that is critical of the regime.

The government permits the existence of mainstream religions, including approved Muslim, Jewish, and Christian denominations, but treats unregistered religious activities as a criminal offense. The state exercises strict control over Islamic worship, including the content of sermons. Suspected members of banned Muslim organizations and their relatives have been subjected to arrest, interrogation, and torture.

The government reportedly limits academic freedom. Bribes are commonly required to gain entrance to exclusive universities and obtain good grades. Open and free private discussion is limited by the *mahalla* committees, traditional neighborhood organizations that the government has turned into an official system for public surveillance and control.

Despite constitutional provisions for freedom of assembly, the authorities severely restrict this right in practice, breaking up virtually all unsanctioned gatherings and detaining participants.

Freedom of association is tightly constrained, and unregistered NGOs face extreme difficulties and harassment. After the 2005 unrest in Andijon, the government shut down virtually all foreign-funded organizations in Uzbekistan. A local advocate in 2008 described membership in the government-controlled association for NGOs as "voluntary but compulsory." Anti-AIDS activist Maksim Popov was sentenced to a seven-year prison term in January 2010 for distributing informational materials that were deemed incompatible with local traditions. In September, activist Surat Ikromov, who leads one of the country's last surviving human rights organizations, was fined \$62 in a slander case that appeared to be designed to intimidate him.

The Council of the Federation of Trade Unions is dependent on the state, and no genuinely independent union structures exist. Organized strikes are extremely rare.

The judiciary is subservient to the president, who appoints all judges and can remove them at any time. The creation in 2008 of a Lawyers' Chamber with compulsory membership increased state control over the legal profession. Law enforcement authorities routinely justify the arrest of suspected Islamic extremists or political opponents by planting contraband or filing dubious charges of financial wrongdoing. In May 2010, the president signed amendments to the penal code that allow for a one-third reduction in prison time for inmates who repent.

Prisons suffer from severe overcrowding and shortages of food and medicine. As with detained suspects, prison inmates – particularly those sentenced for their religious beliefs – are often subjected to abuse or torture. In January 2010, prosecutors opened a case on the alleged 2009 gang rape of three sisters while they were in custody, but the resulting criminal charges against 12 policemen were dropped in April. Inmates at Jaslyk Prison held a hunger strike in October and November to protest poor treatment.

Although racial and ethnic discrimination is prohibited by law, the belief that senior positions in government and business are reserved for ethnic Uzbeks is widespread. Moreover, the government appears to be systematically closing schools for the Tajik-speaking minority.

Permission is required to move to a new city, and bribes are commonly paid to obtain the necessary registration documents. Restrictions on foreign travel include the use of exit visas, which are often issued selectively. In March 2010, the Health Ministry imposed restrictions on health workers traveling abroad to conferences. Despite such controls, millions of Uzbeks, primarily men of working age, seek employment abroad, particularly in Russia and Kazakhstan.

Widespread corruption and the government's tight control over the economy limit equality of opportunity. The country's agricultural sector has undergone few reforms since the Soviet period. A series of regulations and decrees have placed numerous restrictions on market traders. Small businesses are freer to develop than large enterprises, which are often enmeshed in high-level corruption schemes. An "anti-oligarch" campaign in 2010 featured the arrests of a number of high-profile businessmen, and some reportedly fled the country, but official media were silent on the issue and details were scarce.

Women's educational and professional prospects are limited by cultural and religious norms and by ongoing economic difficulties. Victims of domestic violence are discouraged from pressing charges against perpetrators, who rarely face prosecution. The trafficking of women abroad for prostitution remains a serious problem. The parliament passed legislation in November 2009 that imposed tougher penalties for child labor, but the practice reportedly remained widespread during subsequent cotton harvests.

** Countries are ranked on a scale of 1-7, with 1 representing the highest level of freedom and 7 representing the lowest level of freedom.*

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