Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2015 - Uzbekistan

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Uzbekistan is an authoritarian state with a constitution that provides for a presidential system with separation of powers among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. The executive branch under President Islam Karimov dominated political life and exercised nearly complete control over the other branches of government. On March 29, voters elected President Karimov to a fourth term in office in polling that, according to the limited observer mission from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), deprived voters of a genuine choice due to "the lack of a political alternative to the incumbent president." This was also in direct contravention to the country's constitutionally mandated presidential two-term limit. Parliamentary elections took place in December 2014. According to the OSCE's observer mission, the elections "were competently administered but lacked genuine electoral competition and debate." Civilian authorities generally maintained effective control over the security forces, but security services permeated civilian structures, and their interaction is opaque, which makes it difficult to define the scope and limits of civilian authority.

The most significant human rights problems included: torture and abuse of detainees by security forces; denial of due process and fair trial; disregard for the rule of law; and an inability to change the government through elections.

Other continuing human rights problems included: incommunicado and prolonged detention; harsh and sometimes life-threatening prison conditions; arbitrary arrest and detention; widespread restrictions on religious freedom, including harassment of religious minority group members and continued imprisonment of believers of all faiths; restrictions on freedom of speech, press, assembly, and association; restrictions on civil society; restrictions on freedom of movement; violence against women; the inability of citizens to obtain basic social services, or find redress for such problems; and government-organized forced labor. Authorities subjected human rights activists, journalists, and others who criticized the government, as well as their family members, to harassment, arbitrary arrest, severe physical abuse, and politically motivated prosecution and detention.

Government prosecutions of officials were rare and selective, and officials frequently engaged in corrupt practices with impunity.

Section 1. Respect for the Integrity of the Person, Including Freedom from:

a. Arbitrary or Unlawful Deprivation of Life

There were reports that the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings, including by torture.

On April 7, authorities summoned Kamoliddin Kuziev from Bekabad, Tashkent Region, to the local police department, where he was detained, allegedly on suspicion of hooliganism. His family informed the Human Rights Alliance of Uzbekistan that authorities returned the body on April 9, demanded an immediate burial, and claimed that Kuziev hanged himself in detention. The family claimed Kuziev's body showed numerous signs of torture. The government disputed Kuziev's death resulted from mistreatment but noted that the two guards on duty at the time of his death had been found guilty of dereliction of duty and sentenced to three years hard labor each.

In June, Ozodlik Radio, the Uzbek Service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, reported that the death of Usman Akhmedov, Pakhtakor District, Jizzakh Region while in detention at the Samarkand Regional National Security Service (NSS) Directorate on charges of extremism, resulted from torture, according to relatives. Although officials labelled his death a suicide, they did not issue an official forensic medical examination of the detainee's death to the family, according to official sources. The government stated the cause of death was suicide resulting from a "cut to the neck by a sharp object, damage to the trachea, blood vessels, and muscles," which led to Akhmedov suffocating on his own blood. According to the government, the autopsy report "does not rule out the possibility by U. Akhmedov of a ballpoint pen shard as a tool in his suicide."

There was no change in the government's rejection of an independent international investigation into the reported 2005 killings by government forces of at least 187 unarmed civilians, possibly many more, in Andijon. As in the past 10 years, the government had taken no action against suspected perpetrators by year's end. During its 2013 Universal Periodic Review before the UN Human Rights Council and thereafter, the government reiterated that it considered the Andijon matter "closed."

b. Disappearance

There were no reports of politically motivated disappearances, although some prisoners' family members reported being unable to locate their relatives when attempting to visit them in penitentiary systems.

In its 2015 annual report, the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances noted it had seven outstanding cases from previous years. The government did not respond to the working group's requests to visit.

There were reports that persons sought by the country's law enforcement bodies were abducted abroad by the country's secret services, with the acquiescence or direct cooperation of national and

multilateral security structures abroad, even when granted asylum status, and were forcibly returned to the country to stand trial.

Lawyers for Abdulla Rabiev, who had been appealing for refugee status in Russia to prevent extradition to Uzbekistan, reported he was kidnapped on January 28 in Moscow and forcibly transferred to Uzbekistan by its secret services, reportedly with the acquiescence of Russian authorities. On April 25, Rabiev's relatives informed lawyers of the Russia-based Memorial human rights organization that he was returned to Uzbekistan and put in a pretrial detention facility, where he confessed under torture to association with the banned religious organization Hizb-ut-Tahrir. In response to questions regarding the case, the government neither confirmed nor denied this account but stated that Rabiev "was detained as the result of an operative search" on the basis of a court warrant and was sentenced to three years of hard labor, in part on the basis of his own confession.

According to 2014 news reports, the country's secret services forcibly returned Mirsobir Hamidkariev to Uzbekistan, with the acquiescence of Russian authorities, following a Russian court's decision to grant him asylum. Authorities reportedly convicted him for organizing and participating in the banned religious extremist organization "Islom jihochilari," and sentenced him in November 2014 to eight years in prison. Although the government claimed the following month that Hamidkariev's case was still with the court awaiting disposition, it admitted in November 2015 that he had been tried and convicted the previous year.

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

While the constitution and law prohibit such practices, law enforcement and security officers routinely beat and otherwise mistreated detainees to obtain confessions, incriminating information, or for corrupt financial gain. Sources reported torture and abuse were common in prisons, pretrial facilities, and local police and security service precincts. Reported methods of torture included severe beatings, denial of food, sexual abuse, simulated asphyxiation, tying and hanging by the hands, and electric shock. There also were continued reports that authorities exerted psychological pressure on inmates and detainees, including through threats against family members and blackmail.

In 2010 the UN Human Rights Committee expressed concern that the definition of torture in the criminal code did not conform to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, to which the country is a party. The most recent country assessment by the UN special rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment was in 2003, as the country has not responded to subsequent requests for this or any other UN special rapporteur to visit since 2002.

In February the Human Rights Alliance of Uzbekistan reported that authorities tortured Vitaliy Belonogov to extract a false confession at the Yangiyul District (Tashkent Region) Police Department. According to Belonogov's family, authorities beat him up and put a gas mask over his head. In July a court sentenced Belonogov to 15 years in prison on sexual assault charges.

In August the Initiative Group of Independent Human Rights Defenders of Uzbekistan (IGIHRDU) reported that authorities detained Saidislom Yusupov at the Tashkent Regional Police Department

for 62 days. Police reportedly beat him and demanded he confess to being an extremist. Authorities released him on condition that he testify as a witness in another criminal case.

Fergana News reported that in Tashkent, on the eve of the March presidential elections, Yakkasaray District Police Department officers kidnapped Jizzakh farmer and human rights activist Alikul Sarymsakov and forced him into psychiatric hospitalization for one month. Authorities also subjected Sarymsakov to forced psychiatric hospitalization in 2013 in retaliation for his activism.

Authorities reportedly increased the severity of punishments for individuals suspected of Islamist extremism. Local human rights workers reported that authorities often offered inducements--such as bribes or prison privileges--to inmates who agreed to beat other inmates suspected of religious extremism.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Prison conditions were in some circumstances harsh and life threatening.

Physical Conditions: There were reports that, in some facilities, inmates convicted of attempting to overturn the constitutional order were held separately, and that prison officials did not allow inmates convicted under religious extremism charges to interact with other inmates.

Reports of overcrowding, severe abuse, and shortages of medicine were common. Inmates generally had access to potable water and food, but both reportedly were of poor quality. Relatives of prisoners sometimes complained that prison diets did not include sufficient meat. There were reports of political prisoners held in cells without proper ventilation and subjected to temperatures below freezing in winter and over 120 degrees in summer; detention facilities commonly lacked heat or air conditioning. Family members also reported that officials frequently withheld or delayed delivery of food and medicine intended for prisoners. Unlike in past years, family members of inmates did not report any incidents of sexual abuse.

Prison administration officials reported an active World Health Organization tuberculosis program in the prisons and an HIV/AIDS treatment and prevention program. Officials reported hepatitis was not present in high numbers and that hepatitis patients received treatment in existing medical facilities and programs. However, access to such treatment was frequently denied. In August relatives of imprisoned Jizzakh journalist and human rights activist Dilmurod Saidov reported that prison authorities ignored all his requests for medical treatment despite an acute tuberculosis infection.

Administration: There was no information available whether recordkeeping on prisoners was adequate. Authorities in limited cases used administrative measures as alternatives to criminal sentences for nonviolent offenders. In addition the criminal code mandates instances in which courts cannot sentence individuals to prison if full restitution has been made.

The Human Rights Ombudsman's Office and the Prosecutor General's Office may investigate complaints from detainees. The Ombudsman's Office may make recommendations on behalf of specific prisoners, including changes to the sentences of nonviolent offenders to make them more appropriate to the offense. The Ombudsman's Office noted, however, that it rarely received

complaints from prisoners regarding detention conditions since complaints rarely resulted in redress and could lead to reprisals by authorities.

Prison officials generally allowed family members to visit prisoners for up to four hours two to four times per year. There were, however, reports that relatives of prisoners held on religious or extremism charges were denied visitation rights. Officials also permitted visits of one to three days two to four times per year, depending on the type of prison facility. Family members of political prisoners reported that officials frequently delayed or severely shortened visits arbitrarily. Family members of other prisoners mentioned that visits were often conditional on payment of a bribe to officials.

The government stated that prisoners have the right to practice any religion or no religion, but prisoners frequently complained to family members they were not able to observe religious rituals that conflicted with prison scheduling. Such rituals included traditional Islamic morning prayers. Although some prison libraries had copies of the Quran and the Bible, family members continued to complain that authorities did not allow prisoners access to religious materials.

According to official government procedures, prisoners have the right to "participate in religious worship and family relations, such as marriage." "Close relatives" also have the right to receive oral and written information from prison officials about the health and disciplinary records of their family members. Nonetheless, families continued to report a lack of communication and information concerning their imprisoned relatives, and stated that the government continued to withhold information contained in health and prison records.

According to family members and some nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), authorities at times failed to release prisoners, especially those convicted of religious extremism, at the end of their terms. Prison authorities often extended inmates' terms by accusing them of additional crimes or of violating vague or internal prison rules or claiming the prisoners represented a continuing danger to society.

Authorities extended the sentence of human rights activist Azam Farmonov by an additional five years and three months in April, ostensibly for violations of internal prison rules.

Independent Monitoring: Independent observers from the international community had limited access to some parts of the penitentiary system, including pretrial detention facilities, juvenile and women's prisons, and prison settlements. Authorities granted access to selected observers, mostly from the diplomatic corps, but only to certain prisons and to limited areas within them. On November 10, just prior to his release, authorities allowed local human rights activists from Ezgulik to visit Murod Juraev. No UN rapporteurs were allowed to visit prisons during the year.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The constitution and the law prohibit arbitrary arrest and detention, but authorities continued to engage in such practices.

Role of the Police and Security Apparatus

The government authorizes three different entities to investigate criminal activity. The Ministry of Interior controls the police, who are responsible for law enforcement, maintenance of order, and the investigation of general crime. The NSS, headed by a chairman who reports directly to the president, deals with national security and intelligence problems, including terrorism, corruption, organized crime, border control, and narcotics. When jurisdictions overlap, the agencies determine among themselves which one takes the lead.

Impunity was a problem. The Ministry of the Interior investigated abuses and disciplined officers accused of human rights violations, but the government rarely punished officials who committed human rights abuses. A human rights and legal education department within the ministry investigated some police brutality cases. The Human Rights Ombudsman's Office, affiliated with parliament, also has the power to investigate cases, although its decisions on such investigations have no binding authority.

Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees

By law a judge must review any decision to arrest accused individuals or suspects. Judges granted arrest warrants in most cases. Defendants have the right to legal counsel from the time of arrest. State-appointed attorneys are available for those who do not hire private counsel. Officials did not always respect the right to counsel and occasionally forced defendants to sign written statements declining the right. Authorities' selective intimidation and disbarment of defense lawyers produced a chilling effect that also compromised political detainees' access to legal counsel. A September 2014 law authorizes the use of house arrest as a form of pretrial detention.

Detainees have the right to request hearings before a judge to determine whether they remain incarcerated or are released before trial. The arresting authority is required to notify a relative of a detainee about the detention and to question the detainee within 24 hours of arrest. There were complaints that authorities tortured suspects, before notifying either family members or attorneys of their arrest, to gain confessions that could be used as the basis for convictions.

Suspects have the right to remain silent and must be informed of the right to counsel. Detention without formal charges is limited to 72 hours, although a prosecutor can request an additional 48 hours, after which time the person must be charged or released. Authorities held suspects after the allowable period of detention. The judge conducting the arrest hearing is allowed to sit on the panel of judges during the individual's trial.

The law requires authorities at pretrial detention facilities to arrange a meeting between a detainee and a representative from the Human Rights Ombudsman's Office upon the detainee's request. Officials allowed detainees in prison facilities to submit confidential complaints to the Ombudsman's Office and the Prosecutor General's Office.

Once authorities file charges, suspects can be held in pretrial detention for up to three months while investigations proceed. The law permits an extension of the investigation period for as much as one year at the discretion of the appropriate court upon a motion by the relevant prosecutor, who may also release a prisoner on bond pending trial. Authorities frequently ignored these legal protections. Those arrested and charged with a crime may be released without bail until trial on the condition they provide assurance of "proper behavior" and that they will appear at trial.

A decree requires that all defense attorneys pass a comprehensive relicensing examination. Several experienced and knowledgeable defense lawyers who had represented human rights activists and independent journalists lost their licenses after taking the relicensing examination or because of letters from the bar association under the control of the Ministry of Justice claiming that they violated professional ethical norms. As a result several activists and defendants faced difficulties in finding legal representation. Although unlicensed advocates cannot represent individuals in criminal and civil hearings, courts have the discretion to allow such an advocate if he or she belongs to a registered organization whose members are on trial.

Arbitrary Arrest: Authorities continued to arrest or detain persons arbitrarily on charges of extremist sentiments or activities and association with banned religious groups. Local human rights activists reported that police and security service officers, acting under pressure to break up extremist cells, frequently detained and mistreated family members and close associates of suspected members of religious extremist groups. Coerced confessions and testimony in such cases were commonplace. According to the religious freedom organization Forum18, in August antiterrorism police carried out repeated raids on families conducting in-home worship in the Tashkent Region, held some of the detainees for up to two months without criminal charges, and beat them to force confessions of extremism. Authorities reportedly subjected other individuals to similarly long periods of detention and abuse to extract information about family members living abroad who were accused of religious extremism. Local activists also reported that police increasingly detained returning labor migrants to extort their savings under threat of criminal charges.

In May police in Chinaz District, Tashkent Region, detained Elena Urlaeva, chairperson of the Human Rights Alliance, while she was attempting to gather information on state workers forced to prepare cotton fields for harvest. Officers questioned her about photographs she had taken. A police officer struck her on the head while other officers searched her for a flash drive. Urlaeva reported that paramedics called to the station stripped her and forcibly subjected her to a degrading vaginal cavity search in front of male police officers, who reportedly took nude photos of her during the search and threatened to publish them online if Urlaeva continued her monitoring activities. Following her detention, authorities released a propaganda video of Urlaeva "confessing" to being on the payroll of foreign powers. In response to questions, the government acknowledged Urlaeva's May 31 detention but maintained it was limited to "prophylactic measures" and denied any illegal activity by law enforcement. The government also claimed Urlaeva was diagnosed with "continuous paranoid schizophrenia" in what observers claimed was a politically motivated attempt to discredit her.

In August police again detained and assaulted Urlaeva while she was attempting to urge medical care for fellow activist Malokhat Eshonkulova; Urlaeva's leg was severely injured as a result of the police assault. In September authorities again detained Urlaeva and Eshonkulova while they were attempting to assess student worker living conditions in Khozarasp District, Khorezm. Authorities beat Eshonkulova about the head and subjected both Urlaeva and Eshonkulova to cavity searches.

On November 16, authorities arrested activist Uktam Pardaev following a search of his house. At year's end Pardaev faced criminal charges, including conspiracy to swindle and offer bribes, which carried maximum penalties of up to 10 years' imprisonment.

There were reports that police detained persons on false charges of extortion, drug possession, tax evasion, or extremism as an intimidation tactic to prevent them or their family members from exposing corruption or interfering in local criminal activities.

Pretrial Detention: Prosecutors generally exercised discretion over most aspects of criminal procedures, including pretrial detention. Detainees had no access to a court to challenge the length or validity of pretrial detention. Even when authorities did not file charges, police and prosecutors frequently sought to evade restrictions on the length of time persons could be held without charges by holding them as witnesses rather than as suspects. Pretrial detention ranged from one to three months. The government did not provide information regarding the number of persons held in pretrial detention centers.

There were no confirmed reports on the alleged house arrest of Gulnara Karimova, daughter of President Karimov.

Amnesty: In November 2014 the Senate approved the annual prisoner amnesty. According to its terms, women, underage offenders, men over 60, foreign citizens, and persons with disabilities or documented serious illnesses are eligible for amnesty. The bill also renders eligible first-time offenders convicted of participation in banned organizations and the commission of crimes against peace or public security who "have firmly stood on the path to recovery." With some exceptions, the amnesty reduces sentences by one-third for all convicts sentenced to up to 10 years' imprisonment and by one-fourth for those sentenced to more than 10 years. The amnesty excludes persons sentenced to life and "lengthy" terms in prison, repeat offenders, and those who "systemically have violated the terms of incarceration." Amnesty options include release from prison and transfer to a work camp. Courts were also permitted to dismiss criminal cases at the pretrial or trial stage.

Officials granted amnesty for eligible individuals in the year following the Senate's approval, subject to a case-by-case review. Local prison authorities had considerable discretion in determining who qualified for release, as they determined whether a prisoner was "following the way of correction" or "systematically violating" the terms of incarceration. Officials often cited vague "violation of internal prison rules" as a reason for denying amnesty and for extending sentences.

Unlike in prior years, immediately preceding the March presidential elections, authorities released some individuals imprisoned for religious extremism or political grounds under the amnesty. The government did not provide numbers on such releases.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

Although the constitution provides for an independent judiciary, members of the judiciary reportedly rendered verdicts desired by the Prosecutor General's Office or other law enforcement bodies.

The president appoints all judges for renewable five-year terms. Removal of Supreme Court judges must be confirmed by parliament, which generally complied with the president's wishes.

Trial Procedures

The criminal code specifies a presumption of innocence. There were no jury trials. Most trials were officially open to the public, although access was sometimes restricted. Judges may close trials in exceptional cases, such as those involving state secrets, or to protect victims and witnesses. Judges generally permitted international observers at proceedings without requiring written permission from the Supreme Court or court chairman, but judges or other officials arbitrarily closed some proceedings to observers, even in civil cases. Authorities generally announced trials only one or two days before they began, and hearings were frequently postponed.

A panel of one professional judge and two lay assessors, selected by committees of worker collectives or neighborhood committees, generally presided over trials. The lay judges rarely spoke, and the professional judge usually accepted prosecutors' recommendations on procedural rulings and sentencing.

Defendants have the right to attend court proceedings, confront witnesses, and present evidence, but judges declined defense motions to summon additional witnesses or to enter evidence supporting the defendant into the record. In the vast majority of criminal cases brought to trial, the verdict was guilty. Defendants have the right to hire an attorney, and the system worked reasonably well, although some human rights activists encountered difficulties finding legal representation. The government provided legal counsel without charge when necessary. According to credible reports, state-appointed defense attorneys routinely acted in the interest of the government rather than of their clients because of their reliance on the state for a livelihood.

By law a prosecutor must request an arrest order from a court; it was rare for a court to deny such a request. Prosecutors have considerable power after obtaining an arrest order: They direct investigations, prepare criminal cases, recommend sentences to judges, and may appeal court decisions, including the sentence. After formal charges are filed, the prosecutor decides whether a suspect is released on bail, stays in pretrial detention, or is kept under house arrest. Although the criminal code specifies a presumption of innocence, a prosecutor's recommendations generally prevailed. If a judge's sentence does not correspond with the prosecutor's recommendation, the prosecutor may appeal the sentence to a higher court. Judges often based their verdicts solely on confessions and witness testimony, which authorities were known to extract through abuse, threats to family members, or other means of coercion. This was especially common in religious extremism cases. Lawyers may, and occasionally did, call on judges to reject confessions and investigate claims of torture. Judges often did not respond to such claims or dismissed them as groundless. Courts failed to investigate properly allegations of torture. Judicial verdicts frequently alleged that defendants claimed torture to avoid criminal responsibility.

Legal protections against double jeopardy were not applied.

The law provides a right of appeal to defendants, but appeals rarely resulted in reversals of convictions. In some cases, however, appeals resulted in reduced or suspended sentences.

In June authorities detained Tashkent-based human rights activist Shukhrat Rustamov in connection with his efforts to collect information on government human rights violations and sought to force him to submit to a psychiatric evaluation ostensibly requested by the Shaykhontokhur chapter of the charitable organization "Mahalla Fund," which is responsible for supporting local neighborhood

(mahalla) committees. As the Shaykhontokhur chapter was not legally empowered to request such an evaluation, according to government response to questions on this case, the court changed the requester to Rustamov's own neighborhood committee, the Eshonguzar mahalla. Rustamov contested the court decision and refused the evaluation. In July the Shaykhontokhur District Court found Rustamov "mentally incompetent." Rustamov further disputed this ruling to the Tashkent Municipal Civic Court, which in August declined his appeal despite his documentation of multiple due procedural violations. Foreign observers were not allowed to attend Rustamov's court sessions, although officials on site said the hearing was "open."

Defense attorneys may access government-held evidence relevant to their clients' cases after the initial investigation is completed, the prosecutor files formal charges, and the case is passed to the criminal court, except when the release of certain evidence could pose a threat to state security. In the past courts invoked the state security exception, leading to complaints that its primary purpose was to allow prosecutors to avoid sharing evidence with defense attorneys. In many cases prosecution was based solely upon defendants' confessions or incriminating testimony from state witnesses, particularly in cases involving alleged religious extremism.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

Most international and domestic human rights organizations estimated that authorities held hundreds of prisoners on political grounds, but some groups asserted the number was in the thousands. The government denied it held political prisoners and maintained that these individuals were convicted of violating the law. Officials released two high-profile prisoners, Khayrullo Khamidov and Murod Juraev, in February and November, respectively. Family members of several political prisoners, including Azam Farmonov, reported abuse in prison and deterioration of the prisoners' health.

Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies

Citizens may file suit in civil courts for alleged human rights violations by officials, excluding investigators, prosecutors, and judges. There were reports that bribes to judges influenced civil court decisions.

f. Arbitrary Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

Although the constitution and law forbid such actions, authorities did not respect these prohibitions. The law requires that prosecutors approve requests for search warrants for electronic surveillance, but there is no provision for judicial review of such warrants.

There were reports that police and other security forces entered the homes of human rights activists and members of religious groups without a warrant. Members of Protestant and other minority churches who held worship services in private homes reported that armed security officers raided services and detained and fined church members for religious activity deemed illegal. Among such incidents were raids in Tashkent in February and Navoi in March.

Human rights activists and political opposition figures generally assumed that security agencies covertly monitored their telephone calls and activities.

The government continued to use an estimated 12,000 mahallas as a source of information on potential extremists. The committees provided various social support functions, but they also functioned as an informational link from local society to government and law enforcement. Mahallas in rural areas tended to be more influential than those in cities.

There continued to be credible reports that police, employers, and mahalla committees harassed family members of human rights activists, such as Uktam Pardaev and Gulshan Karaeva. In October unknown persons set fire to the home office of human rights activist and cotton harvest monitor Dmitriy Tikhonov. Tikhonov noted that several fireproof items related to his human rights work also were missing from the house after the fire, leading many to suspect that the burning of his home was related to his human rights activities.

Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Speech and Press

The constitution and law provide for freedom of speech and press, but the government did not respect these rights and severely limited freedom of expression.

Freedom of Speech and Expression: The law restricts criticism of the president, and publicly insulting the president is a crime punishable by up to five years in prison. The law specifically prohibits publication of articles that incite religious confrontation and ethnic discord or that advocate subverting or overthrowing the constitutional order.

Press and Media Freedoms: All media entities, foreign and domestic, must register with authorities and provide the names of their founder, chief editor, and staff members. Print media must also provide hard copies of publications to the government. The law holds all foreign and domestic media organizations accountable for the accuracy of their reporting, prohibits foreign journalists from working in the country without official accreditation, and subjects foreign media outlets to domestic mass media laws. The government used accreditation rules to deny foreign journalists and media outlets the opportunity to work in the country.

Amendments to the Law on Information Technologies, signed in September, hold bloggers legally accountable for the accuracy of what they post and prohibit posts potentially perceived as defaming an individual's "honor and dignity." Limitations also preclude perceived calls for public disorder, encroachment on constitutional order, posting pornography or state secrets, issuing "threats to the state," and "other activities which are subject to criminal and other types of responsibilities according to legislation."

The government prohibited the promotion of religious extremism, separatism, and fundamentalism as well as the instigation of ethnic and religious hatred. It prohibited legal entities with more than 30 percent foreign ownership from establishing media outlets in the country.

Articles in state-controlled newspapers reflected the government's viewpoint. The main government newspapers published selected international wire stories. The government allowed publication of a few private newspapers with limited circulation containing advertising, horoscopes, and some substantive local news, including infrequent stories critical of government socioeconomic policies.

The government used large-circulation tabloids, such as *Darakchi* and *Bekajon*, as platforms to publish articles that criticized lower-level government officials or discredited "Western" ideas, such as pop-culture and globalization.

The government published news stories on the official internet sites of various ministries. A few purportedly independent websites consistently reported the government's viewpoint. Government-owned media, such as the UzA and Jahon Information Agencies, frequently carried reports about reforms or visits to the country in which foreign experts' comments were misquoted or embellished.

Violence and Harassment: Police and security services subjected print and broadcast journalists to arrest, harassment, intimidation, and violence, as well as to bureaucratic restrictions on their activity.

As in past years, the government harassed journalists from state-run and independent media outlets in retaliation for contacts with foreign diplomats, specifically questioning journalists about such contact. Some journalists refused to meet with foreign diplomats face-to-face because doing so in the past resulted in harassment and questioning by the NSS.

In May the Tashkent Municipal Economic Court terminated the license of private weekly *Noviy Vek* (*New Century*) following a complaint by the Uzbek Agency for Press and Information, which claimed the weekly published materials "that contradict moral upbringing standards, give false understanding of socio-political situation in the country and inflict harm on traditional values" and are therefore incompatible with adopted legislation.

In June authorities detained Barnokhon Khudoyarova, editor in chief of *Huquq Dunyosi* (*World of Law*) newspaper, for an allegedly critical article on the Narin District Prosecutor's Office and State Tax Committee. Authorities accused her of embezzlement, and she now faces up to 10 years in prison if found guilty.

Censorship or Content Restrictions: Journalists and senior editorial staff in state media organizations reported that some officials' responsibilities included censorship. In many cases the government placed individuals as editors in chief with the expressed intent that they serve as the main censor for a particular media outlet. There continued to be reports that government officials and employers provided verbal directives to journalists to refrain from covering certain events sponsored by foreign embassies, and in some cases threatened termination for noncompliance. As in past years, regional television outlets broadcast some moderately critical stories on local issues, such as water, electricity, and gas shortages, as well as corruption and pollution.

The government continued to refuse Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Voice of America, and the BBC World Service permission to broadcast from within the country, although the websites of Voice of America and the BBC were periodically accessible.

Government security services and other offices regularly directed publishers to print articles and letters under fictitious bylines and gave explicit instructions about the types of stories permitted for publication. There was often little distinction between the editorial content of a government and a privately owned newspaper. Journalists engaged in little investigative reporting. Widely read tabloids occasionally published articles that presented mild criticism of government policies or discussed some problems that the government considered sensitive, such as trafficking in persons.

The government reportedly prohibited official journalists from traveling abroad, attending events at foreign embassies, or interacting with foreigners without official permission.

Libel/Slander Laws: The criminal and administrative codes impose significant fines for libel and defamation. The government used charges of libel, slander, and defamation to punish journalists, human rights activists, and others who criticized the president or the government.

Internet Freedom

The government generally allowed access to the internet, including social media sites. Internet service providers, allegedly at the government's request, routinely blocked access to websites or certain pages of websites that the government considered objectionable. The government blocked several domestic and international news websites and those operated by opposition political parties.

The media law defines websites as media outlets, requiring them to register with authorities and provide the names of their founder, chief editor, and staff members. Websites were not required to submit hard copies of publications to the government.

According to government statistics, approximately 39 percent of individuals in the country used the internet. Unofficial estimates, especially of internet access through mobile communications devices, were higher. Several active online forums allowed registered users to post comments and read discussions on a range of social problems. To become a registered user in these forums, individuals must provide personally identifiable information. It was not clear whether the government attempted to collect this information, although new provisions of the Law on Information Technologies require internet café proprietors to log customers' browser history.

A decree requires all websites seeking the ".uz" domain to register with the government's Agency for Press and Information. The decree generally affected only government-owned or government-controlled websites. Opposition websites and those operated by international NGOs or media outlets tended to have domain names registered outside the country.

The government restricted access to several internet messenger services, sometimes for several months, requiring a proxy server to access services such as Skype, Viber, and Telegram.

Academic Freedom and Cultural Events

The government continued to limit academic freedom and cultural events. Authorities occasionally required department-head approval for university lectures, and university professors generally practiced self-censorship.

Although a decree prohibits cooperation between higher educational institutions and foreign entities without the explicit approval of the government, foreign institutions often were able to obtain such approval through the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, especially for foreign-language projects. Some school and university administrations, however, continued to pressure teachers and students to refrain from participating in conferences sponsored by diplomatic missions.

b. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association

Freedom of Assembly

The constitution and law provide for freedom of assembly, but the government often restricted this right. Authorities have the right to suspend or prohibit rallies, meetings, and demonstrations for security reasons. The government often did not grant the permits required for demonstrations. Authorities subjected citizens to large fines, threats, arbitrary detention, and abuse for violating procedures for organizing meetings, rallies, and demonstrations or for facilitating unsanctioned events by providing space, other facilities, or materials. Organizers of "mass events" with the potential for more than 100 participants must sign agreements with the Ministry of Interior for the provision of security prior to advertising or holding such an event. This regulation was broadly applied, even to private corporate functions.

Authorities dispersed and occasionally detained persons involved in peaceful protests and sometimes pressed administrative charges following protest actions. Authorities repeatedly detained such activists as Elena Urlaeva, Malokhat Eshonkulova, and Shukhrat Rustamov for attempting to protest outside government buildings for fair elections and government action to redress citizen grievances (see section 1.d.).

Freedom of Association

While the law provides for freedom of association, the government continued to restrict this right. The government sought to control NGO activity and expressed concerns about internationally funded NGOs and unregulated Islamic and minority religious groups. The operating environment for independent civil society, in particular human right defenders, remained restrictive. Activists reported increased government control and harassment.

In June the Ministry of Justice, which oversees the registration of NGOs, issued new regulations requiring NGOs to obtain the ministry's approval to hold meetings with nonmembers, including foreigners; to seek the ministry's clearance on any event materials to be distributed; and to notify the ministry in writing of the content and scope of the events in question.

There are legal restrictions on the types of groups that may be formed, and the law requires that all organizations be registered formally with the government. Authorities used registration requirements to bar foreign NGOs from the country. The law allows for a six-month grace period for new organizations to operate while awaiting registration from the Ministry of Justice, during which time the government officially classifies them as "initiative groups." Several NGOs continued to function as initiative groups for periods longer than six months.

NGOs intending to address sensitive issues, such as HIV/AIDS or refugee problems, often faced increased difficulties in obtaining registration. The government allowed nonpolitical associations and social organizations to register, but complicated rules and a cumbersome bureaucracy further complicated the process and created opportunities for government obstruction. The government compelled most local NGOs to join a government-controlled NGO association that allowed the government considerable oversight over their funding and activities. The government required NGOs to coordinate their training sessions or seminars with government authorities. NGO managers believed this stipulation created a way for the government to require prior official permission for all NGO program activities. The government claimed these regulations were intended to simplify registration requirements and lower registration fees, but independent civil society groups reported these requirements had not simplified registration procedures.

The degree to which NGOs were able to operate varied by region because some local officials were more tolerant of NGO activities, particularly when coordinated with government agencies. Civil society activists in some regions continued to report local officials were more willing to cooperate following a 2010 speech by the president on the need to expand democratization and strengthen civil society. Civil society groups reported that authorities imposed restrictions after groups had registered, such as requiring advance permission from the Justice Ministry for many public activities.

The administrative liability code imposes large fines for violations of procedures governing NGO activity as well as for "involving others" in "illegal NGOs"; the law does not specify whether the term refers to NGOs suspended or closed by the government or merely NGOs not officially registered. The administrative code also imposes penalties against international NGOs for engaging in political activities, activities inconsistent with their charters, or activities the government did not approve in advance.

The government continued to enforce the 2004 banking decree, ostensibly designed to combat money laundering, which complicated efforts by registered and unregistered NGOs to receive outside funding. At the same time, government interlocutors denied the existence of the committee that was created in the decree to regulate money laundering. The Finance Ministry required humanitarian aid and technical assistance recipients to submit information about their bank transactions. The Ministry of Justice required NGOs to submit detailed reports every six months on any grant funding received, events conducted, and events planned for the next six months. NGO leaders may be fined for conducting events without explicit permission from the ministry, and the fine was several times higher than for some criminal offenses.

Parliament's Public Fund for the Support of Nongovernmental, Noncommercial Organizations, and Other Civil Society Institutions continued to conduct grant competitions to implement primarily socioeconomic projects. Some civil society organizations criticized the fund for primarily supporting government-organized NGOs. The law criminalizes membership in organizations the government broadly deemed "extremist."

c. Freedom of Religion

See the Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report* at www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/.

d. Freedom of Movement, Internally Displaced Persons, Protection of Refugees, and Stateless Persons

The constitution and laws provide for freedom of internal movement, foreign travel, emigration, and repatriation, but the government limited these rights, in particular through the continued requirement for citizens to receive an exit visa for travel outside the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

In-country Movement: Citizens were required to have a domicile registration stamp in their passport before traveling domestically or leaving the country, and the government at times delayed domestic and foreign travel and emigration during the visa application process. Permission from local authorities was required to move to Tashkent City or the Tashkent Region; authorities rarely granted such permission without the payment of bribes.

The government required hotels to register foreign visitors with the government on a daily basis. Foreigners who stay in private homes were required to register their location within three days of arrival. Government officials closely monitored foreigners in border areas, but foreigners generally could move within the country without restriction.

Foreign Travel: The government occasionally closed borders around national holidays due to security concerns. The government generally granted the requisite exit visas for citizens and foreign permanent residents to travel or emigrate outside the CIS. Exit visa procedures, however, allow authorities to deny travel based on "information demonstrating the inexpedience of the travel." According to civil society activists, these provisions were poorly defined and denials could not be appealed. Authorities sometimes interfered in foreign travel if the purpose of the trip was expressly religious in nature. There were reports of significant delays in the issuance of new passports, which reportedly could be reduced by bribes.

Ostensibly to combat trafficking in persons, government regulations require male relatives of women between ages 18 and 35 to submit a statement pledging that the women would not engage in illegal behavior, including prostitution, while abroad. Observers noted, however, that the majority of Uzbekistani trafficking victims abroad were male victims of labor trafficking.

Although the law requires authorities to reach decision on issuing exit visas within 15 days, the government reportedly delayed exit visas for human rights activists and independent journalists to prevent their travel. Authorities continued to deny exit visas to human rights activists Shukhrat Rustamov, Dmitriy Tikhonov, Uktam Pardaev, Elena Urlaeva, Khaitboy Yakubov, and others. Violating rules for exiting or entering the country is punishable by imprisonment of five to 10 years.

While citizens generally could travel to neighboring states, land travel to Afghanistan remained difficult because citizens needed permission from the NSS.

Emigration and Repatriation: The law does not provide for dual citizenship and requires returning citizens to be able to prove that they did not acquire foreign citizenship while abroad or face loss of citizenship. Citizens possessing dual citizenship did not have recourse to benefits granted by foreign citizenship while in Uzbekistan but generally traveled without impediment if they followed Uzbek law.

The government noted that citizens residing outside the country for more than six months could voluntarily register with Uzbekistan's consulates.

Protection of Refugees

Access to Asylum: The laws do not provide for the granting of asylum or refugee status, and the government has not established a system for providing protection to refugees.

Refoulement: The government provided some protection against the expulsion or return of refugees to countries where their lives or freedom would be threatened due to their race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.

In the absence of a resident Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the UN Development Program (UNDP) continued to assist with monitoring and resettlement processing of 71 pending (predominantly Afghan) refugee cases involving 118 individuals; such cases predated the closure of the local UNHCR office in 2006. During the year the UNDP and temporary duty UNHCR staff processed five cases involving seven persons. Because the UNDP does not process new claims or make refugee status determinations, it referred potential applicants to UNHCR offices in neighboring countries.

The government did not accept UNHCR mandate certificates as a basis for extended legal residence; persons carrying such certificates must apply for either tourist visas or residence permits or face possible deportation. Residence permits were difficult to obtain. The government considered UNHCR mandate refugees from Afghanistan and Tajikistan to be economic migrants, and officials occasionally subjected them to harassment and demands for bribes. Most refugees from Tajikistan were ethnic Uzbeks. Unlike refugees from Afghanistan, those from Tajikistan were able to integrate into the local communities, and the local population supported them.

Stateless Persons

Some refugees from Tajikistan were officially stateless or faced the possibility of becoming officially stateless, as many carried only old Soviet passports rather than Tajik or Uzbek passports. Children born to two stateless parents could receive Uzbek citizenship only if both parents had a residence permit.

Although official data on the number of stateless persons were not available, authoritative human rights activists estimated there were 3,000 stateless persons in Khorezm Province and the autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan. Most of these individuals reportedly were women who had married and lived in neighboring Turkmenistan prior to the country's independence in 1991. There also were reports of stateless populations in Sirdaryo and Qashkadaryo Provinces. There were reports of authorities revoking citizenship for ethnic Tajiks on allegations of fraud, even in cases where Uzbek passports had been issued more than a decade ago, rendering such citizens stateless.

Section 3. Freedom to Participate in the Political Process

While the constitution and law provide citizens the ability to change their government through free and fair elections, the government did not conduct free and fair elections, severely restricted freedom of expression, and suppressed political opposition. The president oversaw a highly centralized government through sweeping decree powers, primary authority for drafting legislation, and control over government appointments, most of the economy, and the security forces.

Elections and Political Participation

Recent Elections: Following elections on March 29, President Karimov began a fourth term, despite a constitutional prohibition on more than two consecutive terms. The OSCE's limited election observation mission noted that the "electoral legal framework does not provide for the conduct of democratic elections" because all candidates publicly endorsed President Karimov's policies, proxy voting was rampant, and there were procedural problems and irregularities in vote tabulation.

Political Parties and Political Participation: The law allows independent political parties, but the Ministry of Justice has broad powers to oversee parties and to withhold financial and legal support to those they judge to be opposed to the government. The preliminary report of the OSCE's limited observer mission to parliamentary elections in December 2014 concluded the elections "were competently administered but lacked genuine electoral competition and debate." The report further noted the elections did not "address main concerns with regard to fundamental freedoms that are critical for elections to fully meet international commitments and standards." The government limited participation in the December 2014 parliamentary elections solely to candidates nominated by the four registered pro-presidential parties and maintained control of the media and electoral financing. The OSCE preliminary report also underlined that proxy voting was widespread and "may have influenced the turnout," claimed by the Central Election Commission to be 89 percent of registered voters. Several human rights activists claimed that, without proxy voting in the presidential and parliamentary elections, turnout would not have been sufficient for the elections to meet the legal minimum participation threshold.

The law makes it difficult for genuinely independent political parties to organize, nominate candidates, and campaign. A new party must have the signatures of 20,000 individuals living in at least eight of the country's provinces to register. The procedures to register a candidate are burdensome. The law allows the Ministry of Justice to suspend parties for as long as six months without a court order. The government also exercised control over established parties by controlling their financing and media exposure.

The law prohibits judges, public prosecutors, NSS officials, members of the armed forces, foreign citizens, and stateless persons from joining political parties. The law prohibits parties that are based on religion or ethnicity; oppose the sovereignty, integrity, or security of the country, or the constitutional rights and freedoms of citizens; promote war or social, national, or religious hostility; or seek to overthrow the government. The law also prohibits the Islamist political organization Hizb-ut-Tahrir, stating it promotes hate and condones acts of terrorism. In October and November, authorities reportedly arrested more than 160 individuals in the Tashkent area under suspicion of Da'esh affiliation, though media reports claimed a majority of these detainees were actually peaceful Hizb-ut-Tahrir members.

The government banned or denied registration to several political parties following the 2005 Andijon violence. Former party leaders remained in exile, and their parties struggled to remain relevant without a strong domestic base.

Participation of Women and Minorities: During the December 2014 parliamentary elections, in accordance with the law, slightly more than 30 percent of candidates were women.

There were 11 members of ethnic minorities in the lower house of parliament and 11 members of ethnic minorities in the Senate.

Section 4. Corruption and Lack of Transparency in Government

The law provides criminal penalties for official corruption, but the government did not implement the law effectively. The Ministry of Interior's Department for Combating Corruption, Extortion, and Racketeering and the Office of the Prosecutor General's Department for Combating Economic Crimes and Corruption are responsible for preventing, investigating, and prosecuting corruption cases. Despite some high-level corruption-related arrests, corruption remained endemic, and officials frequently engaged in corrupt practices with impunity. According to local observers, prosecutions often targeted potential competitors for resources who had lost support among local and national elites, and such prosecutions were not the result of a concerted effort to stamp out corruption.

Corruption: In January the Uzmetronom website reported that Ibrohim Dehqonboyev, the former head of the NSS department in Qashqadaryo Region who was arrested in August 2014, received a 15-year prison term for abuse of official position. The government confirmed his arrest and conviction, and noted that based on the results of the annual amnesty, his sentence had been reduced to 11 years, three months, and 19 days.

In July Radio Ozodlik reported on the arrest of high-ranking NSS officials Djavdat Sharikhodjaev and Khayot Sharifkhojaev (the latter a deputy chairman) on corruption charges.

Financial Disclosure: Government officials are required to disclose only income from outside employment, and such disclosures were not publicly available.

Public Access to Information: The public did not generally have access to government information. The government seldom reported information normally considered in the public domain, although many government ministries and bodies had an internet presence that offered some information.

Section 5. Governmental Attitude Regarding International and Nongovernmental

Investigation of Alleged Violations of Human Rights

A number of domestic human rights groups operated in the country, although the government often hampered their activities in a variety of ways. The government frequently harassed, arrested, abused, and prosecuted human rights activists. There were continued reports that law enforcement officers strictly controlled activists around the September 1 Independence Day holiday, the December 8 Constitution Day holiday, and the May 13 anniversary of the Andijon events.

The government officially acknowledged two domestic human rights NGOs: Ezgulik and the Independent Human Rights Organization of Uzbekistan. Ezgulik representatives reported that the authorities' harassment, intimidation, and threats of judicial proceedings against members continued to hamper their activities throughout the country. Others were unable to register but continued to function at both the national and local levels.

Organizations that attempted to register in previous years and remained unregistered included the Humanitarian Legal Center, Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan, the Expert Working Group, and Mazlum (Oppressed). These organizations did not exist as legal entities but continued to function, despite difficulty renting offices and conducting financial transactions. They could not open bank accounts, making it virtually impossible for them to receive funds. Unregistered groups were vulnerable to government prosecution. In certain cases, however, government representatives participated with unregistered groups in events.

Government officials spoke informally with domestic human rights defenders, some of whom were able to resolve cases of human rights abuses through direct engagement with authorities if they did not publicize these abuses.

Occasional attacks against human rights activists continued. Human rights defenders repeatedly alleged they were subject to spurious criminal and administrative charges and other retribution in response to their activism.

The United Nations or Other International Bodies: With the exception of the International Labor Organization (ILO), the government continued to restrict the work of international bodies and severely criticized their human rights monitoring activities and policies.

The OSCE has been able to do limited work on human rights problems since 2006, and the government approved several proposed OSCE projects during the year, including in the "human dimension," the human rights component of the OSCE's work.

The government has not permitted UN representatives to monitor human rights problems in the country for more than 10 years, despite numerous requests. The government never responded to a 2006 request by the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, and 11 other human rights-related UN special mandate holders and working groups still had unanswered applications for entry at year's end.

Government Human Rights Bodies: The goals of the Human Rights Ombudsman's Office included promoting observance and public awareness of fundamental human rights, assisting in shaping legislation to bring it into accordance with international human rights norms, and resolving cases of alleged abuse. The Ombudsman's Office mediated disputes between citizens who contacted it and made recommendations to modify or uphold decisions of government agencies, but its recommendations were not binding. Families of prisoners of concern reported that the Ombudsman's Office declined to engage on politically sensitive cases. As of September the Ombudsman's Office had received 7,556 complaints.

The National Human Rights Center (NHRC) is a government agency responsible for educating the public and officials on the principles of human rights and democracy and for ensuring that the government complied with its international obligations to provide human rights information. Observers noted that the NHRC was largely ineffective in this role, however, and that it focused more on defending the government's record on human rights than on addressing human rights problems.

Section 6. Discrimination, Societal Abuses, and Trafficking in Persons

The law and constitution prohibit discrimination on the basis of race, gender, disability, language, and social status. Nonetheless, societal discrimination against women and persons with disabilities existed, and child abuse persisted.

Women

Rape and Domestic Violence: The law prohibits rape, including rape of a "close relative," but the criminal code does not specifically prohibit spousal rape, and the courts did not try any known cases. Cultural norms discouraged women and their families from speaking openly about rape, and the press rarely reported it.

The law does not specifically prohibit domestic violence, which remained common. While the law punishes physical assault, police often discouraged women from making complaints against abusive partners, and officials rarely removed abusers from their homes or took them into custody. Society considered the physical abuse of women to be a personal rather than criminal matter. Human rights contacts, however, reported greater willingness by local police and officials to address reports of domestic violence, including in Jizzakh Province and in the traditionally conservative Fergana Valley. Family members or elders usually handled such cases, and they rarely came to court. Local authorities emphasized reconciling husband and wife, rather than addressing the abuse.

There were no reported cases in which women attempted or committed suicide as a result of domestic violence, although those active in women's issues suggested that there could be unreported cases. According to observers, the usual reason for suicide was conflict with a husband or mother-in-law, who by tradition exercised complete control over a wife. There were no government-run shelters or hotlines for victims of domestic abuse, and very few NGOs focused on domestic violence.

Sexual Harassment: The law does not explicitly prohibit sexual harassment, but it is illegal for a man to coerce into a sexual relationship a woman who has a business or financial dependency. Social norms, lack of reporting, and lack of legal recourse made it difficult to assess the scope of the problem.

Reproductive Rights: Couples and individuals generally had the right to decide freely and responsibly the number, spacing, and timing of their children; to manage their reproductive health; and to have the information and means to do so, free from discrimination, coercion, and violence. There continued, however, to be periodic media reports that the government directed doctors to sterilize women without their informed consent, purportedly to control the birth rate and reduce infant and maternal mortality. Contacts in the human rights and health-care communities confirmed there was anecdotal evidence suggesting that sterilizations without informed consent occurred, although it was unclear whether the practice was widespread and whether senior government officials directed it.

Contraception generally was available to men and women. In most districts maternity clinics were available and staffed by fully trained doctors, who gave a wide range of prenatal and postpartum care. There were reports that more women in rural areas than in urban areas gave birth at home without the presence of skilled medical attendants.

Discrimination: Legal status and rights under family, labor, property, nationality, and inheritance laws are the same for men and women. The law prohibits discrimination based on gender, and the National Women's Committee promoted the legal rights of women. Women historically have held leadership positions across all sectors of society, although they were not as prevalent as men, and cultural and religious practices limited their effectiveness. The government provided little data that could be used to determine whether women experienced discrimination in access to employment or credit or were paid less for substantially similar work. The labor code prohibits women from working in many industries open to men.

Children

Birth Registration: Citizenship is derived by birth within the country's territory or from one's parents. The government generally registered all births immediately.

Medical Care: While the government provided equal subsidized health care for boys and girls, those without an officially registered address, such as street children and children of migrant workers, did not have access to government health facilities.

Child Abuse: Society generally considered child abuse to be an internal family matter; little official information was available on the subject.

Early and Forced Marriage: The minimum legal age for marriage is 17 for women and 18 for men, although a district may lower the age by one year in exceptional cases. The Women's Committee and mahalla representatives conducted systematic campaigns to raise awareness of the dangers of child marriage and early births. The committee also held regular public meetings with community representatives and girls in schools to emphasize the importance of education, self-reliance, financial independence, and the right to free choice. In some rural areas, girls as young as 15 occasionally were married in religious ceremonies not officially recognized by the state.

Sexual Exploitation of Children: The law seeks to protect children from "all forms of exploitation." Involving a child in prostitution is punishable by a fine of 25 to 50 times the minimum monthly salary and imprisonment for up to five years.

The minimum age for consensual sex is 16. The punishment for statutory rape is 15 to 20 years' imprisonment. The production, exhibition, and/or distribution of child pornography (involving persons younger than age 21) is punishable by fine or by imprisonment for up to three years.

International Child Abductions: The country is a party to the 1980 Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction. For information see the Department of State's report on compliance at travel.state.gov/content/childabduction/en/legal/compliance.html and country-specific information at travel.state.gov/content/childabduction/en/country/uzbekistan.html.

Anti-Semitism

There were no reports of anti-Semitic acts or patterns of discrimination against Jews. The Jewish community was unable to meet the registration requirements necessary to have a centrally registered organization, but there were eight registered Jewish congregations. Observers estimated the Jewish population at 10,000, concentrated mostly in Tashkent, Samarkand, and Bukhara. Their numbers continued to decline due to emigration, largely for economic reasons.

Trafficking in Persons

See the Department of State's Trafficking in Persons Report at www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/.

Persons with Disabilities

The law prohibits discrimination against persons with disabilities, but societal discrimination on the basis of disability occurred.

The government continued efforts to confirm the disability levels of citizens who received government disability benefits, claiming it did so to ensure the legitimacy of disability payments. Unconfirmed reports suggested, however, that authorities unfairly reduced benefits to some individuals in the process.

The law allows for fines if buildings, including private shops and restaurants, are not accessible, and activists reported that authorities fined individuals or organizations in approximately 2,500 cases during the year. A 2013 law reduced the fine for failing to create the necessary conditions for persons with disabilities from 6.4 to 9.2 million soum ($2,415 to $3,470) to 2.2 million soum ($830). Disability activists reported that accessibility remained inadequate, noting, for example, that many of the high schools constructed in recent years had exterior ramps but no interior modifications to facilitate access by wheelchair users.

The Ministry of Health controlled access to health care for persons with disabilities, and the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection facilitated employment of persons with disabilities. No information was available regarding patterns of abuse in educational and mental health facilities.

The labor law states that all citizens enjoy equal employment rights, but disability rights activists reported that discrimination occurred (see section 7.d.) and estimated that 90 percent of persons with disabilities were unemployed. The government indicated 17,000 jobs were set aside for persons with disabilities. There were no government programs to ensure access to buildings, information, and communications, and activists reported particular difficulties with access. Activists also reported instances in which persons with disabilities were not provided sign language interpreters during police investigations and court hearings.

According to the government, of the children under 16 with disabilities in the country, 30,122 attended public schools, 6,225 attended specialized schools, and 9,499 were home schooled. Students studied braille books published during Soviet times. There were computers adapted for people with vision disabilities.

National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities

The country had significant Tajik (5 percent) and Russian (5.5 percent) minorities, as well as smaller Kazakh and Kyrgyz minorities. There was also a small Romani (locally known as Lyuli) population, estimated at fewer than 50,000 individuals. Complaints of societal violence or discrimination against members of these groups were rare.

Ethnic Russians and other minorities occasionally expressed concern about limited job opportunities (see section 7.d.). Officials reportedly reserved senior positions in the government bureaucracy and business for ethnic Uzbeks, although there were numerous exceptions.

The law does not require Uzbek language ability to obtain citizenship, but language often was a sensitive issue. Uzbek is the state language, and the constitution requires that the president speak it. The law also provides that Russian is “the language of interethnic communication.”

Acts of Violence, Discrimination, and Other Abuses Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Sexual relations between men are punishable by up to three years’ imprisonment. Although there have not been any known arrests or convictions under this provision since 2003, according to members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) community, police and other law enforcement personnel used the threat of arrest or prosecution to extract heavy bribes from gay men. In November, CA-News reported that police threatened to charge a young man who had complained about shortages of electricity with homosexual activity. The law does not criminalize same-sex sexual activity between women.

Same-sex sexual activity was generally a taboo subject in society, and there were no known LGBTI organizations. There were no reports of official or societal discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity in employment, housing, statelessness, or access to education or health care, but observers attributed the absence of such reports principally to the social taboo against discussing same-sex relationships.

HIV and AIDS Social Stigma

According to statistics provided to the press by the Republican Center for Combating AIDS, as of January 1, there were 30,315 HIV-positive individuals in the country. Persons known to be HIV positive reported social isolation and discrimination by public agency workers, health personnel, law enforcement officers, landlords, and employers after their HIV status became known. The military summarily expelled recruits in the armed services found to be HIV positive. The government's restrictions on local NGOs left only a handful of functioning NGOs to assist and protect the rights of persons with HIV/AIDS. No credible demographic or health survey data dealing with HIV/AIDS was publicly available.

Section 7. Worker Rights

a. Freedom of Association and the Right to Collective Bargaining

The law generally provides the right of workers to form and join independent unions and bargain collectively. The law does not make clear whether, in the absence of a trade union, other bodies elected by workers could be given the authority to bargain collectively. The law neither provides for nor prohibits the right to strike. The law prohibits antiunion discrimination. Volunteers in public works and workers employed by individuals without documented contracts do not have legal protection.

The government did not effectively enforce applicable laws, and there were no independent unions. Resources, inspections, and remediation were inadequate, and penalties for violations were insufficient to deter violations. Workers generally did not exercise their right to form and join unions due to fear that attempts to create alternative unions (see below) would be quickly repressed. Unions remained centralized and wholly dependent on the government.

The state-run Federation of Trade Unions of Uzbekistan incorporated more than 35,800 primary organizations and 14 regional trade unions; according to official reports, 60 percent of employees in the country participated in the federation. Leaders of the federation were appointed by the President's Office rather than elected by the union members or board. All regional and industrial trade unions at the local level were state managed.

Unions and their leaders were not free to conduct activities without interference from the employer or from government-controlled institutions. Unions were government-organized institutions with little bargaining power aside from some influence on health and work safety issues, and workers did not exercise collective bargaining rights. For example, the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection and the Ministry of Finance, in consultation with the Federation of Trade Unions, set wages for government employees. In the emerging private sector, management established wages or negotiated them individually with persons who contracted for employment. There was no state institution responsible for labor arbitration.

b. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The law prohibits all forms of forced or compulsory labor, except as legal punishment for such offenses as robbery, fraud, or tax evasion or as specified by law. The government did not effectively enforce these laws.

Government-compelled forced labor occurred during the cotton harvest. Local authorities striving to meet nationally set production quotas pressured heads of governmental organizations, private businesses, and educational institutions to mobilize third-course college and lyceum students (generally over age 18), teachers, medical workers, government personnel, military personnel, and nonworking segments of the population to pick cotton. Adults were expected to pick 120 to 154 pounds per day, with the resulting daily wage between 15,400 to 18,200 soum ($5.80 to $6.90) per day. While the earnings' dollar equivalents were offered at the official government rate, at the prevailing black market rate used in the country due to the difficulty with obtaining official conversion, dollar equivalent earnings are approximately half of those at the official rate. Working conditions varied greatly by region and farm. There continued to be scattered reports of inadequate food and lodging, and some students reportedly worked the harvest without access to clean drinking water.

The scope of adult mobilizations differed significantly from region to region. For the second consecutive year, the government effectively forbade the systemic mobilization of children under age 18; although in the last weeks of the cotton harvest some local authorities mobilized 16- and 17-year-old students.

Despite official statements that the government would prohibit the mobilization of teachers and doctors in the 2015 harvest, such mobilizations continued. Credible reports suggested that the forced mobilization of adult state workers during the cotton harvest increased during the year to compensate for the loss of underage workers. Authorities continued to expect many teachers and school administrators to participate in the harvest, as either supervisors or cotton pickers. The majority of schools, colleges, and lyceums remained open with a reduced faculty, but there were reports of colleges being closed or cancelling classes in certain regions due to staffing shortages. Similar conditions prevailed in the medical sector, as hospitals and clinics were understaffed for the duration of the cotton season. The loss of public-sector workers during the cotton harvest adversely affected communities, as medical procedures often were deferred and essential public services delayed.

There were isolated reports the government forced teachers, students (including children), employees in private businesses, and others to work in construction, non-cotton agriculture, and cleaning streets and parks (see section 7.c.).

Also see the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/.

c. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

The law sets the minimum working age at 16 and provides that work must not interfere with the studies of those younger than 18. The law establishes a right to part-time light work beginning at age 15, and children with permission from their parents may work a maximum of 24 hours per week when school is not in session and 12 hours per week when school is in session. The law does not

allow children under age 15 to be involved with "light work," even if it does not interfere with education or hinder the health or development of the child, but this provision was not always observed. Children between ages 16 and 18 may work 36 hours per week while school is out of session and 18 hours per week while school is in session. Decrees stipulate a list of hazardous activities forbidden for children younger than age 18 and prohibit employers from using children to work under specified hazardous conditions, including underground, underwater, at dangerous heights, and with dangerous equipment in the manual harvesting of cotton. Children were employed in agriculture, in family businesses such as bakeries and convenience stores, and as street vendors.

During the year the government conducted its own monitoring for child labor in the cotton sector using ILO methodology in Navoi, Surkhandaryo, and Khorezm regions, and an ILO-led mission monitored the harvest in the remaining regions and the autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan. The ILO mission concluded that there was no systemic use of child labor in the harvest but found significant risks for forced labor.

The law does not explicitly provide authority for inspectors from the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection to enforce the child labor laws, which is a shared responsibility of the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection, the prosecutor general, the Ministry of the Interior, and the Ministry of the Interior's general criminal investigators. The Office of the Prime Minister took the lead role in coordinating enforcement of labor decrees to keep children out of cotton fields and in mobilizing health and education workers. Local officials often reportedly participated by forming monitoring groups to ensure that parents and schools did not allow their children to pick cotton. It was unclear whether the Ministry of the Interior conducted inspections in the agricultural sector. There were no known prosecutions for child labor during the year.

Although some children still worked in the cultivation and picking of cotton, unlike in previous years, their presence was the result of localized or individual occurrences rather than nationwide mobilization. During the fall harvest, some administrators reportedly closed colleges and universities. Officials at some universities sent students to pick cotton for as long as eight weeks, during which time they stayed in tented work camps or schools near the fields a long distance away from the university. Some activists attempting to monitor living conditions for student workers in these areas reported interference by law enforcement, including through physical abuse.

Some students as young as age 10 worked in the fields, although these cases appeared to be uncommon and largely did not appear to be cases of government labor mobilizations. Authorities generally took steps to address these reports, but there were isolated reports of several mobilizations of entire classrooms of children under age 15 on weekends and holidays. The government continued to mobilize third-course college and lyceum students, sometimes for weeks at a time, resulting in the disruption of classes. Most third-course students were generally age 18 or older. There were reports, however, that this practice resulted in the incidental mobilization of 17-year-old students in the same class. In the last weeks of the cotton harvest, some local authorities in Jizzakh reportedly mobilized 16- to 17-year-old students for up to two weeks in contravention of the national decree. As in past years, there were individual reports that educational institutions threatened to expel students who did not participate in the harvest or required students to sign statements indicating their "voluntary" participation in the harvest.

Also see the Department of Labor's Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor at www.dol.gov/ilab/reports/child-labor/findings/.

d. Discrimination with Respect to Employment or Occupation

The law and regulations prohibit discrimination with respect to employment and occupation based on race, gender, and language. The labor code states that differences in the treatment of individuals deserving of the state's protection or requiring special accommodation, including women, children, and the disabled, are not to be considered discriminatory. Laws do not prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity, age, political opinion, national origin or citizenship, or social origin. HIV-positive individuals are legally prohibited from being employed in certain occupations, including those in the medical field that require direct contact with patients or with blood or blood products, as well as in cosmetology or haircutting. The government generally did not effectively enforce these laws and regulations.

Foreign migrant workers enjoy the same legal protections as Uzbek workers as long as their employers follow all legal procedures for their employment. Enforcement of employment law was lax, primarily due to insufficient staffing of relevant entities and endemic corruption.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

The national minimum monthly wage, used primarily to calculate salaries in the public sector as well as various taxes and duties, was 118,400 soum ($ 44.67) per month between December 2014 and August 2015. On September 1, it increased 10 percent to 130, 240 soum ($49.14). (Due to the difficulty in obtaining official conversion, the real earning power of the minimum monthly wage was about half of that calculated at the official rate.) Officials defined the poverty level as consumption of fewer than 2,100 calories per day, but the government did not publish any income indicators of poverty. According to the government, 17 percent of the population lived below the poverty level, but some unofficial estimates using different indicators put the figure as high as 77 percent.

The law establishes a standard workweek of 40 hours and requires a 24-hour rest period. The law provides overtime compensation as specified in employment contracts or as agreed with an employee's trade union. Such compensation can be provided in the form of additional pay or leave. The law states that overtime compensation should not be less than 200 percent of the employee's average monthly salary rate. Additional leave time should not be less than the length of actual overtime work. An employee may not work more than 120 hours of overtime per year, but this limitation was not generally observed, particularly in the public sector. The law prohibits compulsory overtime.

The Ministry of Labor and Social Protection establishes and enforces occupational health and safety standards in consultation with unions. Reports suggested that enforcement was not effective. Although regulations provide for safeguards, workers in hazardous jobs often lacked protective clothing and equipment. Labor inspectors conducted routine inspections of small and medium-sized businesses once every four years and inspected larger enterprises once every three years. Additionally, the ministry or a local governor's office could initiate a selective inspection of a business, and special inspections were conducted in response to accidents or complaints.

Approximately five to eight labor inspectors staffed offices in each of the country's 14 administrative units, and there also were specialized offices for major industries, such as

construction, mining, and manufacturing. Labor inspectors usually focused on the private sector, while inspections of state-owned enterprises were considered pro forma. Penalties reportedly were often selective, and in many cases employers reportedly were able to mitigate penalties through informal agreements with inspectors. According to the law, health and safety standards should be applied in all sectors. The law remained unenforced in the informal economy, where employment was usually undocumented. During the year the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection, in cooperation with the tax authorities, inspected all private clinics to target the widespread practice of employing specialists without employment contracts.

The law provides that workers may legally remove themselves from hazardous work if an employer failed to provide adequate safety measures for the job. Workers generally did not exercise this right, as it was not effectively enforced, and employees feared retribution by employers. The law requires employers to insure against civil liability for damage caused to the life or health of an employee in connection with a work injury, occupational disease, or other injury to health caused by the employee's performance on the job. No cases were reported under the law.

According to official sources, approximately 360,000 full-time employees (out of 12 million) received the minimum salary. In 2013 the president signed an amendment to the labor code that raised the minimum monthly salary for full-time employees in the public sector to 230,000 soum ($86.79). There were no official statistics concerning the average monthly wage, but most experts estimated a figure of 780,000 soum ($295) before taxes. This level did not include wages in the agricultural sector. Reliable data or estimates on actual average household income were not available.

The government and official media did not publish data on the number of employees in the informal economy. Many such employees had official part-time or low-income jobs. There were no effective government programs to provide social protections to workers in the informal economy. Violations of wage, overtime, and occupational health and safety standards were most common in the public sector.