

Freedom in the World 2013 - Uzbekistan

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2013 Scores

Status: Not Free
Freedom Rating: 7.0
Civil Liberties: 7
Political Rights: 7

Overview

As in previous years, Uzbekistan's government suppressed all political opposition in 2012. The few remaining civic activists and critical journalists in the country faced physical violence, prosecution, hefty fines, and arbitrary detention. Nevertheless, the regime further improved relations with the United States and Europe as it provided logistical support for NATO operations in Afghanistan.

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

The government's repression of the political opposition and of Muslims not affiliated with state-sanctioned religious institutions intensified after a series of deadly bombings in Tashkent in February 1999. The authorities blamed the attacks on the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, an armed group seeking to overthrow the secular government and establish an Islamic state.

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

A series of suicide bomb attacks and related violent clashes in late March and early April 2004 killed some 50 people. Police appeared to be the main targets. Suicide bombers killed several people outside the U.S. and Israeli embassies in July 2004 amid conflicting claims of responsibility. In December, elections for the lower house of a new bicameral parliament were held, with only the five legal, pro-presidential parties allowed to participate.

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

Security forces responded by opening fire on the crowd, which included many women and children. Although the authorities maintained that the protesters were the first to open fire, eyewitnesses reported that the security forces began shooting indiscriminately. Official figures put the death toll at 187, but unofficial sources estimated the dead at nearly 800, most of them unarmed civilians.

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

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

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

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

The legislature quietly altered the constitution in December 2011 to reduce future presidential terms to five years. In March 2012, another amendment moved up the next presidential election to early 2015, closing a loophole that would have added nearly a year to Karimov's current seven-year term.

Uzbekistan has largely repaired relations with the EU and United States in recent years, in part by agreeing to the overland transportation of NATO supplies to, and increasingly from, Afghanistan. The rapprochement continued in 2012, as the United States again approved waivers for Uzbekistan on some human rights-related sanctions, and high-level visits between U.S., European, and Uzbek officials increased. Nevertheless, Tashkent continued to resist public diplomacy efforts and educational exchanges, and to carefully restrict Uzbeks' access to the outside world.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Uzbekistan is not an electoral democracy. President Islam Karimov uses the dominant executive branch to suppress all political opposition, and his December 2007 reelection appeared to flout constitutional rules on term limits. Under electoral legislation adopted in 2008, the bicameral parliament's lower house now has 150 seats, with 135 members directly elected in single-member constituencies and 15 representing the newly formed Ecological Movement of Uzbekistan, which holds separate indirect elections. The 100-member upper house, or Senate, has 84 members elected by regional councils and 16 appointed by the president. All members of the parliament serve five-year terms.

Only four political parties, all progovernment, are currently registered, and no genuine opposition parties operate legally. Unregistered opposition groups function primarily in exile. In February 2012, exiled imam Obidkhon Nazarov, a prominent opposition supporter, was shot and seriously wounded outside his home in Sweden; Swedish prosecutors raised the possibility that Uzbek government agents were involved in the attack. In July, Free Farmers (Ozod Dehqonlar) party leader Nigora Hidoyateva fled the country after weeks of harassment and threats from the security services. Relatives of exiled opposition figures face persecution in Uzbekistan. In November, the 70-year-old father of Bahodir Choriyev, the U.S.-based leader of the opposition Birdamlik movement, was fined \$11,000 for supposedly slandering local authorities whom he accused of abuses.

Corruption is pervasive. Uzbekistan was ranked 170 out of 176 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2012 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Despite constitutional guarantees, freedoms of speech and the press are severely restricted. The state controls major media outlets and related facilities, and state-run television has aired "documentaries" that smear perceived opponents of the government. Although official censorship was abolished in 2002, it has continued through semiofficial mechanisms that strongly encourage self-censorship. Foreign reporters are generally excluded from the country. In March 2012, independent journalist Viktor Krymzalov was convicted of slander for an anonymous article, despite a lack of evidence that he was the author. In April, independent journalist Elena Bondar was convicted and fined for "inciting ethnic, religious, or national hatred," similarly without evidence that she had written the articles in question. Under pressure from authorities, Bondar subsequently fled the country.

The government systematically blocks websites with content that is critical of the regime. Mainstream news, information, and social-media sites based outside the country are sometimes blocked as well. During 2012, for example, the government blocked access to the Russia-based blogging platform LiveJournal several times. In October, authorities expanded the list of banned proxy sites that allow users to access blocked content anonymously.

The government permits the existence of approved Muslim, Jewish, and Christian denominations, but treats unregistered religious activity as a criminal offense. The state exercises strict control over Islamic worship, including the content of sermons. Suspected members of banned Muslim organizations and their relatives have been subjected to arrest, interrogation, and torture. In February 2012, an ethnic Korean Protestant group was arrested for meeting in a home rather than in a church building. In June and August, several Orthodox Christian believers and a group of registered Protestants were arrested on charges of being Jehovah's Witnesses, who can meet legally only in one region of the country.

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

Despite constitutional provisions for freedom of assembly, the authorities severely restrict this right in practice, breaking up virtually all unsanctioned gatherings and detaining participants. In March 2012, activists from a newly formed youth organization, Cholpon, distributed leaflets supporting opposition groups, leading to several arrests. In June, three Birdamlik members were arrested and given heavy fines for attempting to protest in front of the Kyrgyzstan embassy in Tashkent. In December, Birdamlik attempted to hold a Constitution Day rally in Tashkent, but many activists were prevented from leaving their homes or arrested on their way to the event.

Freedom of association is tightly constrained, and unregistered NGOs face extreme difficulties and harassment. After the 2005 unrest in Andijon, the government shut down virtually all foreign-funded organizations in Uzbekistan; Human Rights Watch, the last international monitoring group with a presence in the country, was forced to close its office in 2011. Throughout 2012, human rights activists continued to face harassment, prosecution, and travel restrictions, in addition to deadly violence. Gulshan Karayeva, head of the Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan branch in Kashkadarya, reported in May that she had refused a demand to serve as an informant for the security services. She was subsequently subjected to repeated attacks and threats on the street. Akromhoja Mukhitdinov, a member of the Human Rights Alliance of Uzbekistan and the Birdamlik movement, was stabbed to death in July in a suspected contract killing.

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

The judiciary is subservient to the president, who appoints all judges and can remove them at any time. The creation in 2008 of a Lawyers' Chamber with compulsory membership increased state control over the legal profession. Law enforcement authorities routinely justify the arrest of suspected Islamic extremists or political opponents by planting contraband or filing dubious charges of financial wrongdoing. In 2012, the government released some high-profile political prisoners who had long been the subjects of human rights campaigns, including activist Alisher Karamatov,

who had spent six years in prison before his release in April. In January, however, the courts extended the sentence of Muhammad Bekjonov, a former editor of the opposition newspaper *Erk* who had been behind bars since 1999, adding five years for alleged violations of prison regulations only days before his scheduled release.

Prisons suffer from severe overcrowding and shortages of food and medicine. As with detained suspects, prison inmates – particularly those sentenced for their religious beliefs – are often subjected to abuse or torture.

Although racial and ethnic discrimination is prohibited by law, the belief that senior positions in government and business are reserved for ethnic Uzbeks is widespread. Moreover, the government appears to be systematically closing schools for the Tajik-speaking minority. Under the penal code, sexual activity between men is punishable by up to three years in prison.

Permission is required to move to a new city, and bribes are commonly paid to obtain the necessary documents. A 2011 overhaul of the residency permit system for Tashkent reportedly resulted in increased denial of services to unregistered residents and their resettlement in less-developed provincial areas. Restrictions on foreign travel include the use of exit visas, which are often issued selectively. Despite such controls, millions of Uzbeks seek employment abroad, particularly in Russia and Kazakhstan.

Widespread corruption and the government's tight control over the economy limit equality of opportunity. In 2012, the government seized a local affiliate of the Russia-based MTS telecommunications company, taking more than \$1 billion in assets and prosecuting several managers. TeliaSonera, a Sweden-based telecommunications firm, faced an inquiry by Swedish prosecutors over alleged bribery and money laundering linked to its 2007 purchase of an Uzbek operating license from a close associate of President Karimov's daughter.

Women's educational and professional prospects are limited by cultural and religious norms and by ongoing economic difficulties. Victims of domestic violence are discouraged from pressing charges against perpetrators, who rarely face prosecution. The trafficking of women abroad for prostitution remains a serious problem. A 2009 law imposed tougher penalties for child labor, and in August 2012 Uzbekistan's prime minister pledged to end the practice completely. However, while reports indicated that it may have been less pervasive than in the past, multiple organizations confirmed the ongoing use of child labor during the cotton harvest in 2012.

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