



FREEDOM ON THE NET 2024

Uzbekistan

NOT FREE

27
/100

A. <u>Obstacles to Access</u>	10 /25
B. <u>Limits on Content</u>	11 /35
C. <u>Violations of User Rights</u>	6 /40

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

25 /100 **Not Free**

Scores are based on a scale of 0 (least free) to 100 (most free). See the research methodology and report acknowledgements.

Key Developments, June 1, 2023 - May 31, 2024

Uzbekistan registered a slight improvement in internet freedom during the coverage period because the government did not shut down the internet, as it did during the previous coverage period, and internet penetration rates and speeds increased. However, Uzbekistan remains one of the world's worst environments for internet freedom due to arbitrary arrests of individuals who criticize the government online, routine website blocking, and excessive surveillance practices.

- Internet penetration rates and speeds increased, according to some measurement sources (see A1).
- The government did not shut down the internet during the coverage period, as it did in Karakalpakstan in the summer of 2022 when residents protested proposed constitutional changes that would have limited the region's autonomy (see A3 and B8).
- In August 2023, a Tashkent court sentenced blogger Abduqodir Muminov to over seven years in prison after he published an article critical of the business dealings of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's sons-in-law. He was charged with "privacy infringement, fraud, money extortion, bribery, and a violation of commercial rules" (see C3).
- In May 2024, the government reportedly arrested several individuals who had either posted speeches by Dauletmurat Tajimuratov—the alleged leader of the Karakalpakstan protests, who was sentenced to 16 years in prison in January 2023—or videos calling for his release to social media platforms, including TikTok (see C3).

Political Overview

While reforms adopted since President Shavkat Mirziyoyev took office in 2016 have led to improvements on some issues, Uzbekistan remains an authoritarian state with few signs of democratization. No opposition parties operate legally. The legislature and judiciary effectively serve as instruments of the executive branch, which initiates reforms by decree, and the media are still tightly controlled by the

authorities. Reports of torture and other ill-treatment persist, although highly publicized cases of abuse have resulted in dismissals and prosecutions for some officials, and small-scale corruption has been meaningfully reduced.

A. Obstacles to Access

A1 0-6 pts

Do infrastructural limitations restrict access to the internet or the speed and quality of internet connections?

5/6

Score Change: The score improved from 4 to 5 because internet penetration rates and speeds increased, according to some measurement sources.

Internet penetration rates and speeds have improved in Uzbekistan in recent years. Internet access is still based primarily on asymmetric digital subscriber line (ADSL) technology. According to 2023 data from the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), 96.2 percent of households have internet access. The ITU reports an overall internet penetration rate of 89 percent as of 2023. ¹ In 2023, the country's fixed-line internet subscription rate was 30.3 percent, while its active mobile broadband penetration rate was 107 percent. ²

Internet connection speeds remain relatively slow. Subscribers experience poor connection quality and frequent disconnections. According to Ookla's Speedtest Global Index, as of January 2024, the median fixed-line broadband download speed was 59.07 megabits per second (Mbps), while the median mobile broadband download speed was 26.97. ³ Uztelecom, the state-run telecommunications monopoly, upgraded the bandwidth of Uzbekistan's international internet channels to 3.2 terabits per second (Tbps) in 2022. ⁴ However, users regularly experience slower speeds than reported, or even disruptions. ⁵

Mobile service providers deliver second-generation (2G), third-generation (3G), and fourth-generation (4G) services, with most of the population covered by 2G (99 percent), 3G (90 percent), and 4G (66 percent) networks, as of 2022. ⁶ In April 2023, Uztelecom, the national service provider, launched fifth-generation (5G) service in Tashkent and provincial centers. ⁷

A2 0-3 pts

Is access to the internet prohibitively expensive or beyond the reach of certain segments of the population for geographical, social, or other reasons?

1/3

The cost of internet access relative to household income continues to decrease in Uzbekistan. However, there are significant geographic and gender divides.

In 2023, the ITU reported that a 5 gigabyte (GB) fixed-line broadband connection costs 4.19 percent of gross national income (GNI) per capita, while a 2 GB mobile broadband subscription costs 0.71 percent of GNI per capita. ⁸ According to the World Bank, Uzbekistan's GNI per capita was \$2,190 in 2022. ⁹

In November 2019, the government began to obligate consumers to pay a fee to register their mobile devices' international mobile equipment identity (IMEI) codes (see C4), introducing another cost to getting online. In December 2020, the government changed the IMEI registration procedure, obliging retail sellers to take responsibility for registering IMEI devices. ¹⁰

Internet penetration rates are significantly lower outside Tashkent. The capital has the highest rate of internet penetration and fiber-to-the-building (FTTB) broadband connectivity in Uzbekistan, significantly higher than the country's 12 administrative regions and the autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan. ¹¹ Furthermore, the information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure depends on a stable electricity supply, which is lacking in some rural areas. ¹²

A3 0-6 pts

Does the government exercise technical or legal control over internet infrastructure for the purposes of restricting connectivity?

3/6

The government continues to exercise significant control over ICT infrastructure, but it did not shut down the internet during the coverage period.

In June and July 2022, during the previous coverage period, the government restricted internet access ahead of and during protests in Karakalpakstan, claiming

it would prevent the spread of “fake news.” ¹³ The protests, which started in the regional capital of Nukus at the beginning of July, concerned a constitutional change that would prevent the autonomous region from seceding from Uzbekistan. On June 26, ahead of the protests, the government began limiting mobile internet access. Authorities reportedly later restricted fixed-line access, which persisted into late July. ¹⁴ President Mirziyoyev announced that he would withdraw the proposed constitutional changes on July 2. ¹⁵

In July 2021, the State Inspectorate for Control in the Sphere of Informatization and Telecommunications in Uzbekistan (Uzkomnazorat) restricted access to Skype, Twitter, TikTok, VKontakte, and WeChat for violating amendments to the personal data law (see B1 and C6). ¹⁶ On November 3, 2021, additional social media platforms and messaging applications including Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Odnoklassniki, Telegram, and YouTube were blocked, though access was restored on the same day (see B1). In August 2022, the Information and Mass Media Agency (AIMK) announced that Twitter, VKontakte, and WeChat were unblocked and the government was in ongoing discussions with TikTok about unblocking the application. ¹⁷ Though TikTok has remained blocked since 2021, users have been able to briefly access the application at various times since the initial blocking order. ¹⁸

The Open Observatory on Network Interference (OONI) reported that Signal, a popular encrypted and open-source messaging application, was blocked in Uzbekistan between April and September 2021 (see B1). ¹⁹

Uztelecom runs the International Packet Switching Center, which aggregates international internet traffic at a single point within its infrastructure. By centralizing international connections into one “choke point” (and concentrating the ICT sector in a state-owned company), the government can more easily restrict internet access and engage in surveillance. Uztelecom also functions as an upstream internet service provider (ISP), selling internet traffic to domestic ISPs at wholesale prices. Private ISPs are prohibited by law from bypassing Uztelecom’s infrastructure to connect to the international internet, and from installing and maintaining their own satellite stations to establish internet connectivity. In June 2024, after the coverage period, President Mirziyoyev issued an order allowing ISPs and mobile operators to directly connect to the international internet in full compliance with the security and cybersecurity requirements, which facilitate

state surveillance, starting in January 2025 (see C6). UZA, the state news agency, had previously reported on the Ministry of Digital Development's work in drafting a legal act to regulate this access. **20**

The TAS-IX peering center and content delivery network, established in 2004, interconnects the networks of private ISPs to enable traffic conveyance and exchange at no mutual charge, and without the need to establish international internet connections via Uztelecom. **21** Private ISPs provide no traffic limitations to websites hosted within the TAS-IX networks, but filter and block other websites to the same extent as Uztelecom. **22**

The authorities also have ordered mobile service providers to halt internet and text message services around educational institutions in some provinces to prevent cheating during university entrance exams held every August. **23**

Certain services are sometimes unavailable via fixed-line or mobile internet connections. **24** The web browser Opera has been persistently blocked, **25** although Uztelecom insists that there are "no restrictions on equipment to which the company's specialists have access." **26**

A4 0-6 pts

Are there legal, regulatory, or economic obstacles that restrict the diversity of service providers?	1/6
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There are numerous legal, regulatory, and economic obstacles that restrict the diversity of Uzbekistan's ICT sector. Officially, hundreds of companies provide telecommunications services. **27**

However, the state dominates the ICT sector. State-owned Uztelecom is the only fixed-line broadband provider that is allowed to connect to the international internet (see A3). According to December 2023 data from Uztelecom, it leads the fixed-broadband market with 83 percent of the market share, followed by Asia Wireless at 3 percent, and Sarkor and Turon at 2 percent each. Other ISPs hold a combined 10 percent of the market. **28**

Six mobile service providers operate in the mobile market, including three state-owned firms: Ucell, Mobiuz, and UzMobile, as well as privately owned operators

HUMANS, Perfectum Mobile (owned by Uzbek company Rubicon Wireless Communication), and Beeline (Unitel), which is owned by Netherlands-based VEON. According to December 2023 data from Uztelecom, Beeline and Ucell lead the market at 25 percent, followed by Uztelecom at 23 percent, Mobiuз at 22 percent, HUMANS at 4 percent, and Perfectum at 1 percent. **29**

A5 0-4 pts

Do national regulatory bodies that oversee service providers and digital technology fail to operate in a free, fair, and independent manner?

0 / 4

The Ministry for Development of Information Technologies and Communications (MiTC) regulates telecommunications services related to the internet, while Uzkomnazorat monitors compliance with ICT-related legislation. The MiTC takes on the role of policymaker, regulator, and content provider, and thus is responsible for, inter alia, licensing ISPs and mobile service providers (see A4), promoting technical standards for telecommunications technologies, and providing e-governance services. The MiTC is not independent and operates opaquely.

The state-owned Uzinfocom administers the “.uz” top-level domain. As of March 2023, 19 ISPs and 8 private companies were authorized to provide registry services in the “.uz” domain zone. **30**

In November 2018, the president signed a decree reorganizing the country’s internet governance apparatus, creating Uzkomnazorat to oversee compliance with ICT-related legislation; the Technical Assistance Center to collect, retain, and analyze data from ISPs and law enforcement bodies on “threats to information security”; and a third entity to help implement the government’s Safe City surveillance system (see C5). **31**

In February 2024, the government announced a plan to establish an independent telecommunications regulator by September 2024, but it did not provide further details. **32**

B. Limits on Content

Does the state block or filter, or compel service providers to block or filter, internet content, particularly material that is protected by international human rights standards?

3/6

Significant blocking and filtering limit access to online content related to political and social topics, particularly to sites and platforms that discuss human rights abuses in Uzbekistan. The Supreme Court also releases its list of banned websites, social media pages, and channels in messaging applications (i.e. Telegram) that allegedly promote extremism and terrorism. **33** Courts also routinely order the blocking of all websites and social media pages affiliated with journalists and bloggers who are imprisoned, though the government is not able to enforce the blocking of specific social media pages.

In December 2023, the Fergana district court ordered the blocking of websites and social media channels affiliated with blogger Olimjon Khaydarov, when he was sentenced to eight years in prison on charges of extortion, slander, and insult for publishing an article critical of prominent government officials (see C3). **34**

In August 2022, the government restored access to Twitter, VKontakte, Skype, and WeChat, **35** which had initially been blocked in July 2021 for failing to store data on local servers in violation of the April 2021 Law on Personal Data (see A3 and C6). **36** TikTok, which was blocked for the same reason in July 2021, remained inaccessible through the end of the coverage period. **37** In November 2021, Uzkomnazorat briefly restricted access to Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Odnoklassniki, Telegram, and YouTube for the same reason. Later the same day, the president fired Golubsher Ziyayev, the head of Uzkomnazorat, and reinstated access to these networks.

In a study conducted from April to September 2021, OONI found signs that access to the Signal app was blocked in Uzbekistan (See A3). **38** Additionally, between June and August 2020, users had trouble accessing Meta products, **39** including Messenger **40** and Instagram. **41**

In July 2020, the MiTC blocked the satirical website Durakchi (“Fool”), **42** run by journalist Vasily Markov, because it allegedly violated Resolution No. 707 (see B3).

In September 2019, users complained that several virtual private network (VPN) services, including CyberGhost VPN, Express VPN, and NordVPN, were blocked by Uztelecom. **44** Similarly, the Opera web browser reportedly remained blocked (see A3) as of October 2021 because it features a built-in proxy service. **45**

Other websites hosting political, social, and religious content, including the Uzbek news service Eltuz; **46** the religious freedom organization Forum 18; **47** Radio Ozodlik, the Uzbek-language service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL); the Open Society Foundations; and public opinion platforms Avaaz and Change.org, **48** remained inaccessible during the coverage period.” **49**

B2 0-4 pts

Do state or nonstate actors employ legal, administrative, or other means to force publishers, content hosts, or digital platforms to delete content, particularly material that is protected by international human rights standards?

1 / 4

There is extensive nontechnical censorship of online content in Uzbekistan, including among the country’s most popular news sites, although it is not always widely reported. In a July 2023 report from the International Press Institute, journalist Joanna Lillis stated that the security services routinely ask journalists to remove articles published online. **50**

In March 2024, blogger Rinat Sagitov deleted a Telegram post about a statement from Sherzod Kudratkhodja, a rector of the University of Journalism and Mass Communications, that disparaged residents of Uzbekistan who do not speak Uzbek. Sagitov deleted the post after a police officer showed up at his residence and invited him to a “preventive talk” at the Shaykhontohur District Department of Internal Affairs in Tashkent in February 2024. **51**

In June 2022, during the protests in Karakalpakstan, news site Gazeta.uz removed an article detailing the change in the status of the autonomous republic and other proposed amendments to the constitution. The article now is available only in the internet cache. **52**

After the Russian military invaded Ukraine in February 2022, Tashkent issued directives to media outlets requesting that they cover the invasion in a “neutral” fashion (see B4 and B5). In some cases, outlets deleted articles covering the conflict. **53**

In 2023, Meta, the parent company of Facebook and Instagram, did not remove any content based on requests from the government. **54** X did not produce a transparency report covering the reporting period. **55** Between January and June 2023, Google did not remove any content based on removal requests from the government of Uzbekistan. The five content removal requests made by the government during that period covered 39 items related to content on YouTube and were made for alleged defamation, electoral law, national security, and privacy and security reasons. Between July and December 2023, Google removed 105 items based on 47 requests by the government covering 710 items. During this period, the company reported that it received a request to remove a YouTube video that was critical of Mirziyoyev; the request was based on a copyright infringement claim by the National Television and Radio Company of Uzbekistan. Google ultimately did not remove the video. **56**

B3 0-4 pts

Do restrictions on the internet and digital content lack transparency, proportionality to the stated aims, or an independent appeals process?

0 / 4

The AIMK and the MiTC are responsible for regulating online content, particularly content deemed harmful to the government. Decisions to block or remove content are nontransparent.

In December 2022, the AIMK released a draft Information Code, which poses threats to freedom of expression. **57** The draft code aims to amend eight existing pieces of legislation covering the media and the online environment, criminalizes “insulting” content, and holds bloggers liable for posting “unverified information.” **58** The draft law remained a proposal as of the end of the coverage period.

In April 2021, the government amended the Law on Personal Data to require website owners to store their data in Uzbekistan and ensure that their servers are registered with Uzkomnazorat (see C6). The law gives the regulator the authority

to block websites that do not comply with the amendments, which it employed in July and November 2021 (see A3 and B1). **59**

In December 2020, the government amended Resolution No. 707 on “measures to improve information security in the global information network,” which was originally passed in 2018. The new amendment gives AIMK’s Center of Mass Communications the authority to order bloggers, website owners, social media companies, and messaging applications to remove “prohibited” content within 24 hours. If the prohibited content—which can include comments on social media posts—is not removed, the Center of Mass Communications can take the website owner or company to court. **60**

In September 2019, Mirziyoyev signed a decree requiring the Ministry of Justice and the Supreme Court to publish an up-to-date list of “organizations, websites, social networks and mobile messengers recognized... as extremist or terrorist and banned in the territory of the Republic of Uzbekistan” (see B1). **61**

In September 2018, the government introduced guidelines on blocking websites. These guidelines marked the government’s first attempt to legitimize blocking, a practice it had long engaged in informally. According to the guidelines, the Center for Mass Communications now tracks the publication of illegal information online, forwarding any illegal content to two state bodies, the Public Monitoring Center and the Expert Commission on Information and Mass Communications. These two administrative bodies then place any flagged content on a confidential blacklist that the MiTC uses as the basis for imposing restrictions. **62** The expansive category of “prohibited” information, which is defined under the Law on Informatization, includes “calls for a forced change of the existing constitutional order” and material that threatens the territorial integrity of Uzbekistan; “propaganda of war, violence, and terrorism,” as well as sites that promote religious extremism, separatism, and fundamentalism; state secrets; incitement to “national, racial, ethnic, or religious hatred”; defamation; material that violates the right to privacy; content pertaining to illegal drugs; and pornography. **63**

Under these guidelines, owners of blocked websites have the right to issue a complaint in court. Further, the authorities have pledged to unblock any blocked sites that voluntarily remove illegal content. **64**

Amendments from 2014 to the Law on Informatization brought bloggers and other online news providers, including citizen journalists, under state regulation and subjected them to content removal requirements. The law's broad definition could qualify any person who disseminated information "of sociopolitical, socioeconomic, and other character" to the public through a website as a blogger.

65 The law requires bloggers to substantiate the credibility of "generally accessible information" prior to publishing or even reposting content and obliges them to "immediately remove" information if it is not considered credible.

This law entitles the Center for Mass Communications to limit access to websites that do not comply with its provisions. It also bans, among other things, "information inciting national, racial, ethnic, or religious hatred, as well as denigrating the honor and dignity of citizens." **66**

Intermediaries can be held liable for third-party content hosted on their platforms and can be forced to remove such content. Under the 1999 Law on Telecommunications and several subsequent government resolutions, the licenses of downstream ISPs may be withheld or denied for failing to take measures to prevent their computer networks from being used to exchange information deemed to violate national laws. Under Order No. 216 passed in 2004, ISPs and operators "cannot disseminate information that, inter alia, calls for the violent overthrow of the constitutional order of Uzbekistan, instigates war and violence, contains pornography, or degrades and defames human dignity." **67**

B4 0-4 pts

Do online journalists, commentators, and ordinary users practice self-censorship?	1 / 4
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Self-censorship remains pervasive given the government's tight control over the media (particularly state media). **68** Those commenting or reporting on topics deemed taboo, including criticism of the president or revelations about corruption, can still face harsh punishment (see C3). As a result of the government's history of harassing journalists as well as their families, many online writers are cautious about what they post. **69** Although some domestic news outlets continue to shine a light on abuses of power, other outlets refrain from tackling sensitive issues or are forced to remove content (see B2). **70**

In June 2023, several news-oriented blogs and Telegram channels, including Captain Karimov, Nasafnews, and KeshNews, which are popular in the Kashkadarya region, announced that they were shutting down after Umid Karimov, founder of Nasafnews and administrator of the Captain Karimov Telegram channel, and Maksud Muzaffarov were arrested for allegedly harassing police who had tried to search his car (see C3). **71**

In March 2023, 41 bloggers and journalists appealed to the president through Telegram, asking him to eliminate the practice of censorship, which the group claimed has forced journalists, bloggers, and activists to change “the essence of information.” **72**

A June 2022 investigation in The Diplomat outlined the pervasive role of the State Security Service (DXX) in fostering self-censorship. Journalists and bloggers detailed incidents where they were propositioned with bribes, were threatened, or were forced to delete content. In one instance, a Kun.uz journalist left his job after his editor prohibited him from covering a construction project that involved a deputy minister’s brother. In another case, a journalist reported moving to Tashkent after facing police surveillance in his hometown of Samarkand. **73** The Diplomat also noted that the January 2022 protests in Kazakhstan and the Russian military’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 led to an increase in self-censorship. **74**

Officials at varying levels of government have also relied on other tactics to foster self-censorship, including “informal” conversations, **75** threats of prosecution, and, in some cases, physical threats. **76**

B5 o-4 pts

Are online sources of information controlled or manipulated by the government or other powerful actors to advance a particular political interest?	2/4
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The editorial direction of online versions of state-run news outlets is determined by both official and unofficial directives. This has remained the case under Mirziyoyev. IREX’s 2023 *Vibrant Information Barometer (VIBE)* report notes “there is little distinction between state and private media, with the second being critical of midlevel officials.” **77**

After the Russian military launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Tashkent declared its neutral position. The DXX summoned several journalists, including journalists from Kun.uz, ⁷⁸ instructing them to report events “neutrally” (see B4). ⁷⁹

The Union of Youth of Uzbekistan (OYI), a government-affiliated youth organization, has recruited social media trolls from its ranks. These trolls smear government critics and spread disinformation, including false claims about the illegality of VPN usage in Uzbekistan. According to Hook.report, OYI members have been encouraged to create five Facebook profiles per person. ⁸⁰ According to researchers at Oxford University, progovernment commentators are also active on X. ⁸¹ In April 2020, the Ministry of Internal Affairs (IIV) proposed the creation of a group of bloggers comprised of OYI members, students at the Tashkent University of Information Technologies, and volunteer youth who would counter negative opinions on social media. ⁸²

B6 0-3 pts

Are there economic or regulatory constraints that negatively affect users’ ability to publish content online?

0 / 3

The economic and regulatory environment for online publishers is heavily constrained. The financial sustainability of independent online media outlets largely depends on foreign funding that remains subject to vigorous state control. The parliamentary Public Fund for Support and Development of Independent Print Media and News Agencies of Uzbekistan allocates state subsidies, ⁸³ which are primarily granted to state-owned and progovernment outlets.

Under 2007 amendments to the Law on Mass Media, ⁸⁴ any website engaged in the dissemination of information at least once every six months is considered “mass media” and is subject to official press registration. ⁸⁵ This registration process can be arbitrary, inhibiting journalists and readers from exercising their rights to free expression and access to information. A December 2019 regulation requires new mass media, including mass media whose work is distributed online, to register—for a fee—with the AIMK. ⁸⁶ The regulation simplifies the registration process, allowing it to be done online and reducing the time by half.

⁸⁷ The draft information code, introduced by the AIMK in December 2022,

includes new regulations for bloggers (see B3). However, the code had not passed through the parliament as of the end of the coverage period. **88**

According to remarks made by Mirziyoyev in June 2022, there were 1,962 mass media outlets, including 677 online outlets, in Uzbekistan. **89** Journalists who work online are subject to extensive regulation (see B3). **90**

B7 0-4 pts

Does the online information landscape lack diversity and reliability?

2 / 4

The online media environment in Uzbekistan has remained severely restricted under Mirziyoyev.

According to a May 2023 survey released by the European Neighbourhood Council and conducted by Internews, 38 percent of respondents say social media is their main source for “domestic news,” while 24 percent rely on messaging applications for the same purpose. **91** A survey conducted by Internews biannually between 2019 and 2023 found that 47 percent of people surveyed reported that social media was a main source of national news, an increase from 34 percent in 2021. **92**

B8 0-6 pts

Do conditions impede users’ ability to mobilize, form communities, and campaign, particularly on political and social issues?

2 / 6

The government’s stringent policies regarding use of the internet and social media, by youth in particular, discourage online mobilization as a significant form of political engagement, as do technical restrictions on communications platforms and petition websites (see A3 and B1). Political activists and regime critics actively use social media to reach supporters both in and outside of Uzbekistan. **93**

Facebook and Telegram users can follow daily discussions about political, economic, and social issues in groups like “Reforms in the Republic of Uzbekistan: Problems with No Solutions.” **94** In limited cases, online activism can lead to real-world change. **95**

Citizens continue to use the government’s “virtual office” initiative to speak directly with government representatives, as well as Mening Fikrim (My Opinion), the government’s official petition platform.

During the previous coverage period, the government shut down the internet during protests in Karakalpakstan, which were organized online and via messaging applications in the summer of 2022 (see A3). ⁹⁶ Journalists covering the protests in Nukus, the capital of Karakalpakstan and the epicenter of the protests, disseminated information about the protests on Telegram. ⁹⁷ At least 61 individuals were charged and convicted by courts in the wake of the protests for both online and offline activities (see C3). While several participants were sentenced to shorter terms, activist Dauletmurat Tajimuratov, who was accused of instigating the protests, was sentenced to 16 years. Journalist Lolagul Kallikhanova was sentenced to eight years of suspended imprisonment. ⁹⁸ Additionally, in March 2023, a court in Karakalpakstan charged Amanbay Sagidullayev and Nietbay Urazbayev, activists who posted in support of the protests in Karakalpakstan from abroad, with “attempts to overthrow the constitutional regime” in absentia. ⁹⁹

C. Violations of User Rights

C1 0-6 pts

Do the constitution or other laws fail to protect rights such as freedom of expression, access to information, and press freedom, including on the internet, and are they enforced by a judiciary that lacks independence?

0 / 6

Uzbekistan’s constitution protects expression and mass-media rights and prohibits censorship. Article 29 of the constitution guarantees the right to gather and disseminate information. ¹⁰⁰ However, in practice, these rights are not respected, as evidenced by blocking of websites critical of the government and the subjection of media workers to political persecution. Courts in Uzbekistan are not independent and have largely failed to protect individuals, including journalists, against government retaliation for exercising freedom of expression. Courts also operate without transparency, depriving the public of access to legal decisions, although recent changes have clarified the media’s right to attend and report on legal proceedings. ¹⁰¹ Rampant corruption, particularly within law enforcement

agencies, as well as weak legislative and judicial bodies, continue to have a deleterious impact on these rights, online and offline.

Media workers are nominally provided strong protections under the Law on the Protection of Professional Activity of Journalists. However, these protections are not fully respected in practice. **102**

C2 0-4 pts

Are there laws that assign criminal penalties or civil liability for online activities, particularly those that are protected under international human rights standards?

1 / 4

The criminal code contains several provisions that have been used extensively to prosecute reporters and ordinary internet users, including prohibitions on threatening the constitutional order (Article 159); inciting ethnic, national, racial, or religious hatred (Article 156); producing and disseminating materials that contain threats to public security and order (Article 244.1); slander (Article 139); insult (Article 140); and insult of the president (Article 158). **103** These offenses are variously punishable by fines, community service, and imprisonment. Further prohibitions typically placed on both journalists who work online and ordinary internet users are based on vague information security rules. **104**

In late 2020 and early 2021, the government enacted amendments to the administrative and criminal codes that enforce harsh penalties for online speech, including up to five years' imprisonment for insulting the president. In December 2020, amendments to both codes introduced fines and prison time for a range of offenses. Publishing information that contains allegations deemed false or that threatens public order or security is now punishable with two years' imprisonment in ordinary cases. Violators can face up to three years' imprisonment in cases where the offense is "repeated," "causes major damage," occurs "during mass events or in case of emergency," inflicts "especially large damage," or results "in other grave consequences." Violators can also face up to three years' imprisonment if the offense is committed by "an organized group or in its interests." **105**

The March 2021 amendments to the administrative and criminal codes stipulate that insulting or slandering the president online or in the press is punishable with

up to five years' imprisonment. ¹⁰⁶ Additionally, "public calls for riots and violence against citizens" are punishable by five years' imprisonment, or up to 10 years in cases where the offense is made online or as part of a conspiracy with a large group. ¹⁰⁷

While the December 2020 amendments included harsh penalties for insult and slander in certain instances, they also reduced the penalties for defamation and insult generally. In December 2020, the government amended Articles 139 and 140 of the criminal code, which still criminalize defamation and insult, but with reduced maximum penalties. In defamation cases, violators now face up to three years of "restrained liberty," which could include house arrest, or two to three years of correctional labor, instead of a three-year prison term. Likewise, those who are guilty of insult now face up to one year of probation, two to three years of correctional labor, or one year of "restrained liberty." ¹⁰⁸

In March 2020, ¹⁰⁹ Mirziyoyev enacted amendments to Article 244.5 of the criminal code which penalize the dissemination of "false information" regarding the spread of infectious diseases or quarantine via mass media or the internet with up to three years' imprisonment. ¹¹⁰

In 2016, amendments to the criminal code increased the penalty (under Article 244.1) for the dissemination through "mass media or telecommunications networks" of "information or materials" that threaten public security and order (including by containing "ideas of religious extremism, separatism, or fundamentalism") to up to eight years' imprisonment. ¹¹¹

C3 0-6 pts

Are individuals penalized for online activities, particularly those that are protected under international human rights standards?	1 / 6
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Despite Mirziyoyev's public statements about liberal reform, the government remains hostile toward its critics, including journalists who work online, human rights activists, and ordinary internet users. ¹¹² Numerous individuals have been arrested and convicted for their online activities, including in relation for the protests in Karakalpakstan in the summer of 2022. During these arrests, authorities often violate detainees' fundamental rights, including by searching

their phones without permission, accusing them of crimes they have not been charged of, and denying them access to legal assistance.

In February 2024, police in the Kashkadarya region arrested blogger Gulnoz Mirzayeva, known as Guli, charging her with “extortion” after she criticized corruption in the Mubarek gas processing factory in a video she posted on YouTube. ¹¹³ Previously, Mirzayeva had criticized President Mirziyoyev’s policies in her social media posts. ¹¹⁴ She had not been sentenced as of the end of the coverage period.

In January 2024, police officers in the Uchtepa district of Tashkent briefly detained Mikhail Dovlatov, a journalist for the online news outlet Nuz.uz. He was accused of failing to comply with police demands during a journalistic investigation and smoking in a public place. ¹¹⁵ After the Information and Mass Communications Agency requested details from the prosecutor general’s office, the Tashkent district court of Uchtepa dismissed the charges of “failure to comply with police demands.” ¹¹⁶

The Zangiota district court of Tashkent sentenced Lemara Mirzaahmedova, who writes under the pseudonym Emine Karamanova and covers local corruption, ¹¹⁷ to seven years and six months in prison for defamation, insult, and extortion in October 2023. ¹¹⁸ She was initially arrested in Tashkent in March 2023 because the police claimed she committed “fraud” and “public money embezzlement” related to her company Tex Kredo. The Tashkent Province Court upheld the verdict in December 2023. ¹¹⁹

In September 2023, the Khorezm district court of Khanka sentenced blogger Shabnam Ollashukurova, also known as Nafosat, to three years of limited freedom, which is akin to house arrest, on charges of “slander” and “insult” after she accused a family of beating their child and the State Security Service of killing blogger Asal Khodzhaeva in 2022. The sentence also prevents her from using the internet. ¹²⁰ Ollashukurova was previously detained in a mental health facility after the Urganch court sentenced her to 10 days of administrative arrest and hospitalization when she broadcasted a protest in 2019. ¹²¹

In August 2023, the Tashkent district court of Mirabad sentenced blogger Abduqodir Muminov to seven years and two months in prison under Articles 165

and 168 of the criminal code concerning “privacy infringement, fraud, money extortion, bribery, and a violation of commercial rules.” He was also ordered to pay \$77,000 in damages to 14 victims and banned from journalism for 3 years. ¹²² He was originally charged while investigating the business affairs of President Mirziyoyev’s sons-in-law. After his initial detention, he reported that he had been tortured by law enforcement at the Main Department of Internal Affairs in Tashkent. He had also been physically attacked in December 2022 (see C7).

In December 2023, the Fergana district court sentenced blogger Olimjon Khaydarov to eight years in prison on charges of extortion, slander, and insult for publishing an article critical of Marufjon Usmonov, the head of the municipality of Kokand and former deputy adviser to the president; Nurillokhon Teshaboev, deputy head of the Department of Internal Affairs; Vokhidjon Sodiqov, an employee of the Department of Internal Affairs; Fakhritddin Abduvahobov; and Olim Khasanov. The court also ordered the blocking of all his blogs on social media channels (see B1). Khaydarov was initially arrested in July 2023 based on spurious allegations that he attempted to extort the management of a mall by refraining from publishing a critical article in exchange for \$10,000. ¹²³

In May 2023, a district court in the Kashkadarya region sentenced blogger Elmurod Odilov to 15 days of administrative detention for recording a meeting between the head of the local municipality and farmers during which the municipal official allegedly intimidated the farmers into recruiting people for military service. ¹²⁴ He claimed that he was beaten by police after he was caught filming the interaction (see C7). ¹²⁵

In May 2023, police arbitrarily detained three bloggers, Maksud Muzaffarov, A. Abdullayev, and Umid Karimov, for alleged issues with their car and subsequently harassing the police. A local court ordered them to be detained for five days and charged them with violations of car maintenance regulations, obstruction of police, and antisocial behavior. ¹²⁶ In June 2023, the bloggers announced that they would stop reporting (see B4).

In February 2023, the Tashkent Mirabad district criminal court declared that blogger Shohida Salomova had mental health issues and detained her at a psychiatric facility. ¹²⁷ Salomova was arrested in December 2022 after she publicly criticized Mirziyoyev and his family, accusing them of nepotism. Shortly after her

arrest, her Telegram channel and its archive were deleted; her house was also searched. ¹²⁸ In January 2024, the Tashkent district court of Mirabad ordered Salomova to be transferred to another mental health facility for treatment with “intensive observation” after she repeatedly refused to take “prescribed medication.” ¹²⁹

In December 2022, Uzbekistan’s Supreme Court ordered a retrial for Hayot Norboev, a blogger who was handed a seven-year sentence by a lower court in Samarkand in July 2022. Norboev was initially convicted on charges of extorting local authorities. The case remained ongoing as of the end of the coverage period. ¹³⁰

Courts across the country continue to charge people who shared information about or played a role in the protests in Karakalpakstan in the summer of 2022. In January 2023, a Karakalpakstan court convicted 22 people who were arrested in connection with protests, including for online activities. Seventeen of them were sentenced to prison and five were released or placed under house arrest. Most of the sentences ranged from three-and-a-half to eight years, except for activist Dauletmurat Tajimuratov, who was sentenced to 16 years for allegedly attempting to seize power, embezzlement, and organizing mass riots. Of the five journalists who were released, two had initially been handed suspended sentences. ¹³¹ Among these was journalist Lolagul Kallikhanova, who was sentenced to eight years of suspended imprisonment with three years of probation under Articles 159 (“conspiracy against the constitutional regime”) and 244 (“organization of mass riots” and “dissemination of materials threatening the public security”) of the criminal code (see B8). ¹³² Following her release, she expressed remorse about her political activism during the protests in Karakalpakstan on her Telegram channel, which has 60,000 readers. ¹³³ Kallikhanova was initially detained for several days during the protest. ¹³⁴

In June 2023, the Supreme Court issued a ruling after 16 defendants who were convicted in January 2023 in relation to the Karakalpakstan protests appealed their sentences. The court reduced the sentences of six people and converted an additional eight sentences to house arrest. However, the court did not shorten Tajimuratov’s 16-year sentence. ¹³⁵

In another trial related to the protests in March 2023, a Bukhara court found 39 people guilty for both online and offline activities. Sentences ranged from probation to 11 years in prison, with 7 people charged with “distributing materials inciting social discord.” ¹³⁶ The court sentenced Oralbay Dosnazarov, a Nukus-based lawyer, to 11 years in prison for allegedly organizing meetings with other lawyers, inciting the protests, and sharing videos about the protests. ¹³⁷

In May 2024, the blog AsiaTerra reported that Mustafa Tursynbayev, whose Nukus Online YouTube channel has over 150,000 subscribers, had been arrested in Nukus on an unspecified date earlier in the year. He had previously worked at a newspaper with Tajimuratov. Additionally, a Karakalpakstan-based blogger who goes by the pseudonym Salamat and runs the People’s TV YouTube channel was also arrested. They are both reportedly being held at a State Security Service detention facility in Nukus. ¹³⁸

The same month, five individuals in the districts of Karauzyak, Kungrad, and Khodjeyli, were reportedly charged with “distributing materials threatening public safety,” “encroaching on the constitutional order,” insulting the president, and other political crimes for posting or possessing videos of Dauletmurat Tajimuratov and other Karakalpak activists. In some cases, the individuals also shared speeches that demanded the release of Tajimuratov. In Khodjeyli, Berdimurat Bekmuratov was sentenced to three years of house arrest for posting speeches of Tajimuratov and other activists on his TikTok profile. He was also banned from using the internet and exiting Karakalpakstan. ¹³⁹

C4 0-4 pts

Does the government place restrictions on anonymous communication or encryption?

1 / 4

There is limited space for anonymous digital communication, and the government strictly regulates the use of encryption. ¹⁴⁰ Proxy servers and anonymizers are important tools for protecting privacy and accessing blocked content.

There are few options for posting anonymous comments online. Individuals are increasingly encouraged to register with their real names to participate in discussion forums such as the state-run Uforum. ¹⁴¹ Individuals must also provide their internal passport information to buy a SIM card. ¹⁴² In addition, as of

September 2019, individuals must register their mobile devices' IMEI codes with the state. **143** Service providers must block unregistered devices.

Additionally, certain VPN services have apparently been blocked (see B1).

C5 0-6 pts

Does state surveillance of internet activities infringe on users' right to privacy?	1/6
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Government surveillance of ICTs is extensive. Although Article 27 of the constitution guarantees the privacy of “written communications and telephone conversations,” there is no data protection legislation in Uzbekistan. **144** Article 27 also guarantees respect for human rights and the rule of law, though these rights are frequently violated during surveillance operations.

In November 2020, Mirziyoyev signed amendments to the Law on Guarantees for Legal Advocacy and Social Protection of Lawyers, the Law on Operational-Search Activities, and the criminal code. **145** The changes expand law enforcement agencies' ability to wiretap lawyers and enhance the surveillance powers of the National Guard. **146**

In July 2019, Mirziyoyev enacted the Law on Personal Data, **147** unifying several regulations concerning the collection and processing of personal data, including by ISPs and mobile service providers. The law enumerates several privacy rights but carves out several exceptions “in order to ensure state security” and does not apply to personal data obtained by law enforcement authorities. **148**

Police frequently confiscate computers, phones, and other internet-enabled devices when conducting arrests (see C3). **149**

Since 2006, the National Security Service (MXX) has conducted electronic surveillance of the national telecommunications network by employing the Russian-designed System for Operational Investigative Measures (SORM), ostensibly to prevent terrorism and extremism. **150**

In April 2023, the University of Toronto's Citizen Lab and Microsoft reported that QuaDream, an Israeli spyware company, had servers operating in Uzbekistan. The company developed spyware that used a zero-click exploit in Apple's iOS 14

operating system, which sent victims “invisible iCloud calendar invitations,” enabling operators to remotely take advantage of targets’ devices. ¹⁵¹

The Israeli branch of US company Verint and the Israeli company NICE both supply Uzbekistan’s security services with monitoring centers, allowing them direct access to residents’ telephone calls and internet activity, according to UK-based Privacy International. ¹⁵² Researchers from Kaspersky, a Russian-based cybersecurity firm, claimed that the security services have used software from the German company FinFisher, which has exported spyware to authoritarian countries around the world. ¹⁵³

In addition to purchasing spyware from foreign technology companies, the government has developed its own interception tools. Kaspersky identified one protocol for phone and computer hacking, called “Sharpa,” in October 2018. ¹⁵⁴ The protocol was reportedly created by an MXX-linked entity known as “Military Unit 02616.”

C6 0-6 pts

Does monitoring and collection of user data by service providers and other technology companies infringe on users’ right to privacy?

0 / 6

ISPs and mobile service providers must install SORM-compliant surveillance equipment on their networks to obtain an operating license. ¹⁵⁵

Telecommunications providers are prohibited by law from disclosing details on surveillance methods and face possible financial sanctions in addition to license revocation if they fail to design their networks to accommodate electronic interception. ¹⁵⁶

In April 2021, amendments to the Law on Personal Data requiring companies to store the personal data of Uzbek citizens on servers in Uzbekistan came into effect; these servers must also be registered with Uzkomnazorat. ¹⁵⁷ Violators can be fined and can receive up to three years’ imprisonment. The law also allows Uzkomnazorat to block access to websites that do not comply with the new regulations. ¹⁵⁸ In July and November 2021, the law was used as a justification to block several social media platforms, including Facebook, LinkedIn, Odnoklassniki, Skype, Telegram, TikTok, Twitter, VKontakte, WeChat, and YouTube. By August 2022, all platforms except TikTok were unblocked (see A3 and B1).

ISPs and mobile service providers are required to store user data for three months. ¹⁵⁹ Since 2004, operators of public internet access points have been required to monitor their users and cooperate with state bodies. Under regulatory amendments introduced in 2014, those operators must also install surveillance cameras on their premises to “ensure [the] safety of visitors.” Additionally, they are required to retain a “registry of internet web resources” used by customers for three months. ¹⁶⁰

The law requires a prosecutor’s warrant for the interception of internet traffic by law enforcement bodies. However, in cases deemed urgent, the authorities may initiate surveillance and subsequently inform the prosecutor’s office within 24 hours. ¹⁶¹

C7 0-5 pts

Are individuals subject to extralegal intimidation or physical violence by state authorities or any other actor in relation to their online activities?
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1/5

Activists, journalists, and ordinary internet users continued to face extralegal intimidation and violence in retribution for their online activities during the coverage period. Torture is routine in prisons and detention facilities across Uzbekistan.

In May 2024, blogger Umid Miraliev, who covers local issues in the Kashkadarya on YouTube and Telegram, was beaten by a group of men likely in retaliation for his reporting. ¹⁶²

Several bloggers and journalists reported that they were attacked by law enforcement during their arrests or tortured while in detention. For instance, blogger Abduqodir Muminov, who was sentenced to over seven years in prison in August 2023, reported that law enforcement tortured him at the Main Department of Internal Affairs in Tashkent during his detention (see C3). Previously, in December 2022, five unknown assailants attacked Muminov, injuring him and smashing his car windows. ¹⁶³ The police investigated the case, but did not apprehend a suspect. ¹⁶⁴

Elmurod Odilov, who was sentenced to 15 days of administrative detention in May 2023 (see C3), reported that he was beaten by police when he was caught filming

state officials attempt to recruit farmers to the military. **165**

In May 2023, a well-known online activist leading a feminist social media group called NeMolchi.uz stated that she was forced to temporarily leave Uzbekistan after receiving a death threat online; **166** she returned to the country a month later. **167**

In June 2022, Karakalpakstan-based blogger Rametov was allegedly tortured after he was detained for criticizing the constitutional amendments (see C3). After his detention, law enforcement allegedly left him without any clothes on a road in Nukus. **168** Other journalists in Karakalpakstan, including Bakhtiyar Kadirbergenov and Mustafa Tursinbaev (see C3), were reportedly beaten earlier in the month. Tursinbaev had a large following on Telegram. **169** Individuals who were convicted because of their actions during the summer 2022 protests in Karakalpakstan, including Tajimuratov, were also reportedly tortured. **170**

LGBT+ individuals who are active online brave hate speech, intimidation, and offline violence. **171**

C8 0-3 pts

Are websites, governmental and private entities, service providers, or individual users subject to widespread hacking and other forms of cyberattack?

1 / 3

Human rights defenders, bloggers, and online journalists regularly report attempts to compromise their online accounts.

In June 2023, after the blog AsiaTerra reported on the detention of several bloggers and the closure of Telegram channels, the online news outlet claimed it faced distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks. **172** AsiaTerra editor Aleksey Volosevich claimed that the mobile version of the news outlet came under DDoS attack because the outlet had criticized the government. **173** AsiaTerra previously faced DDoS attacks that temporarily left the website inaccessible in June 2022. The website's Facebook page was also compromised at that time. **174**

In November 2022, the Senate's website was hacked for a day, and it displayed a message reading, "Hello to the cybersecurity center." **175**

In April 2022, the parliament passed the Law on Cybersecurity, which came into effect in July of that year. The law requires operators of “critical facilities,” including in transportation, defense, law enforcement, public health, and other areas, to implement the government’s cybersecurity guidelines, retain data for at least three months, and give the DXX the right to access cybersecurity systems.

176

Footnotes

- 1 International Telecommunications Union, “Country ICT Data, Percent of individuals Using the Internet,” accessed August 2024, <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx>.
- 2 International Telecommunications Union, “Country ICT Data, Mobile Broadband Subscriptions,” “Fixed Broadband Subscriptions,” accessed August 2024, <https://datahub.itu.int/data/?e=UZB>.
- 3 “Global Speeds: January 2024,” accessed July 2024, Speedtest Global Index, <https://www.speedtest.net/global-index/uzbekistan#fixed>
- 4 Ministry for Development of Information Technologies and Communications, “На “Правительственном часе” проведенном в Законодательной палате Олий Мажлиса был заслушан отчет министра ИКТи даны ответы на вопросы депутатов” [“The Legislative Chamber of the Oliy Majlis heard the report of the Minister of ICT and answers to question of its members during the “Government Hour””],” December 14, 2022, <https://mitc.uz/ru/news/4248>.
- 5 “Цена, качество или скорость — в чем проблема интернета в Узбекистане? [Price, quality or speed - what is the problem of the Internet in Uzbekistan?],” Repost UZ, August 31, 2022, <https://repost.uz/tolko-ne-edge>.

More footnotes



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Country Facts

Population

35,650,000

Global Freedom Score

12/100 **Not Free**

Internet Freedom Score

27/100 **Not Free**

Freedom in the World Status

Not Free

Networks Restricted

No

Social Media Blocked

Yes

Websites Blocked

Yes

Pro-government Commentators

Yes

Users Arrested

Yes

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