



FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2025

Azerbaijan

NOT FREE

7
/100

<u>Political Rights</u>	0 /40
<u>Civil Liberties</u>	7 /60

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

7/100 Not Free

A country or territory's Freedom in the World status depends on its aggregate Political Rights score, on a scale of 0–40, and its aggregate Civil Liberties score, on a scale of 0–60. See the methodology.



Why Are There No Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh?

This special report documents how ethnic Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh were intentionally subjected to regular attacks, intimidation, deprivation of basic rights and adequate living conditions, and forced displacement by the Azerbaijani state.

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Note

Conditions in Nagorno-Karabakh were examined in a separate report through the **2024 edition** of *Freedom in the World*, in which the territory's status declined from Partly Free to Not Free due to an Azerbaijani blockade and military offensive that culminated in the dissolution of local political, legal, and civic institutions and the departure of nearly all of the civilian population. As of the 2025 edition, conditions in Nagorno-Karabakh are covered under the country report for Azerbaijan. *Freedom in the World* reports assess the level of political rights and civil liberties in a given geographical area, regardless of whether they are affected by the state, nonstate actors, or foreign powers. Related, disputed, or occupied territories are sometimes assessed separately from the relevant countries if they meet certain criteria, including distinct conditions for political rights and civil liberties and boundaries that are sufficiently stable to allow year-on-year comparisons. For more information, see the report **methodology** and **FAQ**.

Overview

Power in Azerbaijan's authoritarian regime remains heavily concentrated in the hands of Ilham Aliyev, who has served as president since 2003, and his extended family. Corruption is rampant, and the formal political opposition has been weakened by years of persecution. The authorities have intensified their

crackdown on civil liberties in recent years, adding to the ranks of political prisoners and leaving little room for independent expression or activism. In 2023, Azerbaijani forces seized control of Nagorno-Karabakh—an ethnic Armenian enclave that had enjoyed de facto independence since 1994—following a months-long blockade and a two-day military operation; the surrender of local political leaders and defense forces prompted nearly the entire ethnic Armenian population of the territory to flee to the Republic of Armenia.

Key Developments in 2024

- President Aliyev secured a fifth term in a February snap election, extending his presidency for another seven years. For the first time since their conquest by Azerbaijani forces in 2020 and 2023, balloting was conducted Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding territories, with Aliyev casting his vote in Khankendi (known in Armenian as Stepanakert).
- Russian troops tasked with a peacekeeping role in Nagorno-Karabakh withdrew ahead of schedule, with the decision announced in April and the full withdrawal completed by June, despite a cease-fire agreement that originally set a 2025 withdrawal date.
- Snap parliamentary elections were held in September with only two months of preparation, resulting in another majority for the ruling party.
- The government pursued a border delimitation process with Armenia during the year, and bilateral negotiations on a broader peace agreement were ongoing at year’s end.

Political Rights

A. Electoral Process

A1 0-4 pts

Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections?	0 / 4
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The president is directly elected for seven-year terms. There are no term limits. Since the early 1990s, elections have not been considered credible or competitive by international observers. President Ilham Aliyev—who succeeded his father, Heydar, in 2003—won a fifth term in a February 2024 snap election, taking more than 92 percent of the vote in official results. The remainder of the vote was divided among six minor candidates who tended to praise rather than criticize Aliyev. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) observer mission’s interim report noted a lack of genuine competition, official pressure on the media, and restrictions on election monitoring by civil society organizations. The two main opposition parties, the Azerbaijani Popular Front Party (APFP) and Musavat, boycotted the election, and evidence of electoral fraud was reported by independent media.

In 2017, President Aliyev had appointed his wife, Mehriban Aliyeva, as vice president. The post was created via constitutional changes that were pushed through in 2016 without meaningful parliamentary debate or public consultation. The prime minister and cabinet are appointed and dismissed by the president. Prime Minister Ali Asadov was appointed in 2019.

A2 0-4 pts

Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections?

0 / 4

The 125 seats in Azerbaijan’s unicameral Milli Mejlis, or National Assembly, are filled through elections in single-member districts, with members serving five-year terms.

Aliyev dissolved the assembly in June 2024, and snap elections were held in September. The ruling New Azerbaijan Party (YAP) won 68 parliamentary seats, while independents won 44 and the remainder went to smaller parties. Turnout stood at 37 percent. A major opposition alliance, the National Council of Democratic Forces, boycotted the elections and stated that even the independent members of the new parliament were aligned with the YAP.

OSCE monitors noted that the inconsistent enforcement of restrictive registration rules, along with alleged intimidation, further reduced participation

and pluralism. Out of 1,508 initial applicants, only 998 candidates were ultimately registered for the elections. Local election monitors from civil society organizations or independent campaigns faced obstruction, harassment, or arrest, preventing them from observing the voting process.

A3 0-4 pts

Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies?

0 / 4

The electoral laws and framework fall short of international standards and do not ensure free and fair elections. The nomination process for members of electoral commissions places the bodies under the influence of the ruling party. Commission members have been known to unlawfully interfere with the election process and obstruct the activities of observers. Complaints of electoral violations do not receive adequate or impartial treatment.

Election observers have repeatedly condemned restrictions on freedom of assembly, the inability of candidates to obtain permission to hold rallies or appear on television, political interference with courts investigating electoral violations, and noncompliance with past European Court of Human Rights decisions on election issues.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation

B1 0-4 pts

Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings?

1 / 4

The political environment in Azerbaijan is neither pluralistic nor competitive. The ability of opposition parties to operate and engage with the public is limited by the dominance of the YAP. A number of laws restrict candidates' efforts to

organize and hold rallies, and the opposition has virtually no access to coverage on television. The regime has cracked down violently on any Islamic political movement that reaches national prominence.

A controversial law on political parties that was adopted in late 2022 imposed strict conditions for party registration, including a new requirement that parties have at least 5,000 enrolled members, up from 1,000 previously. The legislation also mandated the reregistration of existing parties, and implemented new penalties for activity by unregistered parties. The APFP, Musavat, and the Republican Alternative (REAL) party were denied registration in July 2023. In September, however, the Ministry of Justice reversed its decision without explanation, granting registration to all three parties.

B2 0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections?

O / 4

The Aliyev family has held the presidency since 1993. The biased electoral framework and repressive media and political environment effectively make it impossible for opposition parties to gain power through elections. The main opposition parties boycotted the most recent parliamentary, presidential, and municipal elections rather than take part in an unfair process.

New and emerging opposition groups have been hobbled by trumped-up criminal charges against their leaders. In July 2023, Gubad Ibadoglu, leader of the Azerbaijan Democracy and Prosperity Movement, was arrested on charges of involvement in a counterfeiting operation; he was also accused of religious extremism over alleged links to the movement of Turkish religious leader Fethullah Gülen. His lawyers called the charges politically motivated. Ibadoglu was released to house arrest in April 2024, and in May he announced the suspension of his movement's activities on the grounds that it had been unable to secure registration and operate legally as a political party.

Some of the founders of the political movement Platform III Republic, which was created in December 2023 to advocate for democratic constitutional reforms, were detained in March 2024 as part of a crackdown on the independent internet-based television channel Toplum TV. The case, which involved charges of

smuggling related to the acceptance of foreign funding, remained ongoing at year's end.

B3 0-4 pts

Are the people's political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the political sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means?

1 / 4

The authoritarian system in Azerbaijan excludes the public from any genuine and autonomous political participation. The regime relies on abuse of state resources, corrupt patronage networks, and control over the security forces and criminal justice system to maintain its political dominance.

B4 0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, religious, gender, LGBT+, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities?

0 / 4

The political system does not allow women or members of minority groups to organize independently or advocate for their respective interests. There are no meaningful mechanisms to promote increased representation of women and ethnic or religious minorities. The government has worked to stifle public expressions of ethnic Talysh and Lezgin identity, among other targeted groups.

Internally displaced persons (IDPs) who left Nagorno-Karabakh and settled in other parts of Azerbaijan after the 1994 cease-fire have been unable to participate in municipal elections where they subsequently settled, and are instead directed to vote for their former districts.

C. Functioning of Government

C1 0-4 pts

Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government?

0 / 4

Neither the president nor members of parliament are freely or fairly elected, and the parliament is unable to serve as a meaningful check on the powerful presidency. Lawmakers and lower-level elected officials essentially carry out the instructions of the ruling party.

C2 0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective?

0/4

Corruption is pervasive. In the absence of a free press and independent judiciary, officials are held accountable for corrupt behavior only when it suits the needs of a more powerful or well-connected figure. Investigative reports published by foreign media in recent years have revealed evidence that members of the Aliyev family have used their positions to amass large private fortunes.

C3 0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency?

0/4

Government operations are opaque. Although public officials are nominally required to submit financial disclosure reports, procedures and compliance remain unclear, and the reports are not publicly accessible. There are legal guarantees for citizens' access to information, but also broad exceptions to this right, and authorities at all levels systematically refuse to respond to information requests.

Add Q

Is the government or occupying power deliberately changing the ethnic composition of a country or territory so as to destroy a culture or tip the political balance in favor of another group?

-2

The government has cultivated a policy of extreme hostility toward ethnic Armenians—with educational, cultural, political, and military components—in

connection with its efforts to secure control over Nagorno-Karabakh since 1994. In December 2022, these efforts led to a blockade of the Lachin corridor, the only remaining road that connected Nagorno-Karabakh with Armenia and the rest of the world. The blockade was initiated by Azerbaijanis purporting to be environmental activists, but they were widely believed to have links to the Azerbaijani government. It resulted in a humanitarian crisis in Nagorno-Karabakh, with the ethnic Armenian population facing severe shortages of food and medicine as well as restrictions on their movement out of the territory.

Azerbaijani forces launched a military operation against Nagorno-Karabakh on September 19, 2023, aiming to dismantle the territory's de facto government and disarm its military. Vastly outnumbered, ethnic Armenian forces in Nagorno-Karabakh agreed to a Russian-proposed cease-fire the following day, under which they would disband and the area would be handed over to Baku. Days later, the territory's de facto president signed a decree that would dissolve all state institutions by January 1, 2024. These developments prompted almost the entire ethnic Armenian population to flee to Armenia through the newly reopened Lachin corridor in late September, leaving the territory nearly empty at the end of 2023. In June 2024, Russian troops tasked with peacekeeping duties under a 2020 cease-fire agreement completed their withdrawal from Nagorno-Karabakh.

Government-sponsored resettlement of ethnic Azerbaijanis in Nagorno-Karabakh proceeded throughout 2024. The program was reportedly limited to families that had been displaced from the territory since 1994, and returnees were required to resettle in their original home districts, though more open settlement was expected in the future as reconstruction advanced and security threats such as land mines were mitigated.

Civil Liberties

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media?	0/4
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Constitutional guarantees for press freedom are routinely and systematically violated, as the government works to maintain a tight grip on the information landscape. Defamation remains a criminal offense. Legal amendments passed in 2017 extended government control over online media, allowing blocking of websites without a court order if they are deemed to contain content that poses a danger to the state or society. Independent news sites are regularly blocked or struck with cyberattacks.

Journalists face detention or imprisonment on false charges, along with travel bans and extensive surveillance. In November 2023, authorities launched an intense crackdown on remaining independent media. Several journalists and media leaders—including directors, editorial teams, and reporters from Abzas Media, Kanal 13, Toplum TV, and Meydan TV—were placed in pretrial detention on charges such as smuggling, illegal construction, and resisting police. In July 2024, the director of Abzas Media, Ulvi Hasanli, reported witnessing routine torture in his pretrial detention facility. Many of those detained remained behind bars at the end of 2024, and some had received prison sentences. Teymur Karimov, head of the online television outlet Kanal 11, was sentenced in December to eight years in prison on extortion charges, which he said were fabricated. He also reported experiencing beatings and other mistreatment in custody.

A 2021 presidential decree called for “media reforms” and created a new regulator, the Media Development Agency, while a 2022 law required journalists to register with the authorities and media owners to reside in Azerbaijan. In 2024, the Media Development Agency sought court orders to terminate the operations of several media organizations for failing to secure registrations.

D2 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private?	0/4
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The regime exercises control over religion through state-affiliated entities such as the Caucasus Muslim Board. Religious communities that attempt to operate

independently face burdensome registration requirements, interference with the importation and distribution of printed religious materials, and arrest and harassment of religious leaders who have international ties or a significant following. For example, members of the Muslim Unity Movement, a nonviolent conservative Shiite group, have been subjected to mass arrests, torture, and imprisonment as part of a crackdown that began in 2015. In 2023, Azerbaijani authorities arrested hundreds of religious Shiite Muslims, with progovernment media labeling some as spies working for Iran even as most were arrested on drug-related charges. Rights activists claimed that over 500 religious Shiites were arrested, and some reported torture in custody.

A number of mosques have been closed in recent years, ostensibly for registration or safety violations. Jehovah's Witnesses face harassment as well as prosecution for refusing military service.

D3 0-4 pts

Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination?

1/4

The ruling party has embedded itself in educational institutions and exerted political influence over educational content, which tends to glorify President Aliyev's military leadership and includes negative and discriminatory references to Armenians.

Academic freedom is severely restricted, with reports of educators being dismissed or arrested on fabricated charges in reprisal for perceived political dissent. Student associations are similarly controlled, with automatic membership sign-ups and the presence of informants who report politically active students. Educational funding is not free from political manipulation, and school employees allegedly play a role in ballot stuffing and other election-related corruption.

D4 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution?

1/4

Law enforcement bodies monitor private telephone and online communications—particularly of activists, political figures, and foreign nationals—without judicial oversight. The escalation of government persecution of critics and their families has undermined the assumption of privacy among ordinary residents and eroded the openness of private discussion. Even state officials have been punished for their and their family members’ social media activity, and activists have been imprisoned on unrelated, fabricated charges in reprisal for critical social media posts.

In recent years, civic activists have been targeted by spear-phishing campaigns designed to install malicious software on their computers or steal personal information. They report that harassment on social media, often highly sexualized for women activists, is commonplace. Antiwar activists and social media users have also face harassment and arrest on charges such as disobeying police, and progovernment media have smeared them as “traitors” and connected them to “foreign interests,” particularly the promotion of LGBT+ people’s rights, feminism, and “antinational” ideas.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly?

0 / 4

The law imposes tight restrictions on freedom of assembly, which is contingent on the protection of “public order and morals.” Activists have complained that in practice, the obstacles to public gatherings include additional, extralegal measures. Unsanctioned assemblies can draw a harsh police response and fines for participants, and the government largely stopped issuing permits for rallies in Baku in 2019. Even when permits are issued, the government typically confines demonstrations to relatively isolated locations, where it can track attendees through facial-recognition technology and mobile-phone data.

For the second consecutive year, police did not prevent a rally held by women's rights activists on International Women's Day in March 2024. Also during 2024, the Gabaday District village of Soyudlu remained under a police lockdown following a 2023 environmental protest that was dispersed with rubber bullets and tear gas. In August 2024, a man involved in making posters for the protest was sentenced to three years in prison on drug charges.

E2 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights– and governance-related work?

0 / 4

Repressive laws on nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have been used to pressure both local and foreign organizations, many of which have suspended operations when their bank accounts were frozen or their offices raided. Nearly all organizations or networks that work on human rights are forced by the state to operate in a legal gray zone. The government has refused to permit the European Union to provide grant support for local civil society groups. Civic activists are routinely subjected to harassment, intimidation, detention, and abuse by police. Activists also risk surveillance, including with commercial spyware products.

In December 2024, prosecutors requested an 11-year prison sentence and asset confiscation for human rights activist Baxtiyar Hacıyev, who had been in detention for over a year on charges including hooliganism, money laundering, and document forgery; he claimed that the case was fabricated in retaliation for his criticism of the internal affairs minister.

Separately in 2024, state-backed media began to accuse even government-organized NGOs (GONGOs) and moderate, government-aligned groups of being tools of Western influence due to their engagement with international donors. Such entities also reportedly faced official investigations or pressure during the year, signaling greater regime intolerance toward any civil society activity with foreign connections or a degree of independence from the central government.

E3 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations?

1 / 4

Although the law permits the formation of trade unions and the right to strike, the majority of unions remain closely affiliated with the government, and many categories of workers are prohibited from striking. Most major industries are dominated by state-owned enterprises, in which the government controls wages and working conditions.

Union activists are subject to arrest on fabricated charges. In August and September 2023, Afieddin Mammadov, the chairman of an independent trade union confederation, and at least two other members of the group were detained on charges such as assault and drug trafficking. All worked as couriers for Wolt Azerbaijan, and their union had held an event to protest new rules for motorcycle licenses. Court proceedings in the case were ongoing at the end of 2024.

F. Rule of Law

F1 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary?	0 / 4
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The judiciary is corrupt and subservient to the executive. Judges are appointed by the parliament on the proposal of the president. The courts' lack of political independence is especially evident in the many trumped-up or otherwise flawed cases brought against opposition figures, activists, and critical journalists.

F2 0-4 pts

Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters?	0 / 4
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Constitutional guarantees of due process are not upheld. Arbitrary arrest and detention are common, and detainees are often held for long periods before trial. Political detainees have reported restricted access to legal counsel, fabrication and withholding of evidence, and physical abuse to extract confessions.

Although nominally independent, the Azerbaijani Bar Association (AVK) acts on the orders of the Ministry of Justice and is complicit in the harassment of human

rights lawyers. Legal amendments that took effect in 2018 stipulated that only AVK members could represent clients in court. Since then, the association has disbarred, suspended, or threatened most of the country's active human rights lawyers for speaking to the media about violations of their clients' rights. In nearly all disciplinary cases, the courts have upheld AVK decisions without a thorough assessment or public justification.

F3 0-4 pts

Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies?

0 / 4

International observers have consistently concluded that both torture and impunity for the perpetrators of such abuse are endemic in the Azerbaijani criminal justice system. Police regularly beat suspects during arrest or while breaking up protests. Prison conditions are substandard. Medical care is generally inadequate, and overcrowding is common.

Azerbaijanis have been affected by armed conflict over control of Nagorno-Karabakh and parts of Armenia, with more than 3,000 soldiers and a number of civilians killed in cross-border shelling and other fighting since 2020. Nearly 200 Azerbaijani soldiers were killed during the military offensive in September 2023. While security conditions along the border with Armenia were comparatively stable during 2024 as the two governments proceeded with border delimitation efforts, negotiations on a broader peace settlement remained incomplete at year's end.

F4 0-4 pts

Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population?

0 / 4

Members of ethnic minority groups have complained of discrimination in areas including education, employment, and housing. Women are subject to discrimination in employment, including both de facto bias and formal exclusion from certain types of work under the labor code.

While Azerbaijani IDPs from the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict that ended in 1994 are entitled to special assistance, they face severe infringements on their economic and social rights and freedom of movement. Many are housed in dormitories or substandard housing and are unable to change their place of residence, which is often located out of range of sources of employment or adequate medical care. IDP women cannot transfer their status to their children, but children of IDP men inherit the status at birth.

Although same-sex sexual activity is legal, LGBT+ people experience societal discrimination and violence, and they are at risk of harassment by police.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

G1 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education?

1 / 4

The government restricts freedom of movement, particularly foreign travel, for opposition politicians, journalists, and civil society activists. In August 2024, for example, journalist and researcher Javid Agha was placed under a travel ban, preventing him from pursuing academic studies abroad.

All of Azerbaijan's land borders remained closed in 2024, having first been shuttered for health reasons during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. The latest extensions of the closure were ordered for unspecified security reasons.

Azerbaijani IDPs from the first Nagorno-Karabakh conflict enjoy freedom of movement in law, but not in practice. IDPs are legally registered at their place of initial temporary resettlement, which are sometimes in rural areas and far from any source of employment. The process of changing registration is difficult, and IDPs who change their place of registration risk losing their status and accompanying state assistance. As a result, many families are separated, with usually male wage-earners relocating to urban centers for work while their families remain at their place of registration. During 2024, IDP families continued

to participate in government-sponsored resettlement programs designed to return them to their pre-1994 places of residence on land captured by Baku following the 2020 and 2023 Nagorno-Karabakh conflicts. However, they reportedly remained subject to restrictions on movement and could not freely relocate even within the Nagorno-Karabakh area.

People with disabilities and psychiatric patients are routinely institutionalized; there is no clear procedure for reviewing their confinement.

G2 0-4 pts

Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors?

1/4

While individuals are legally permitted to buy and sell property, ownership and documentation processes are seriously compromised by corruption. Many struggle to obtain proper legal titles for land purchased from municipalities. Forced evictions, especially in the context of state and private development projects, are common, as is inconsistent or inadequate compensation. Women face significant discrimination in property and inheritance rights, with cultural norms favoring male heirs.

The business environment is heavily skewed by political favoritism, with major industries controlled by the ruling family and their associates. Independent businesses face burdensome bribery and extortion from officials and criminal groups.

G3 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance?

1/4

The law generally grants women and men the same rights on personal status matters such as marriage, divorce, and child custody, but there are a number of restrictions on such rights. Same-sex marriage is not allowed. A law that took effect in 2021 imposed mandatory mediation on those seeking to divorce. The law

introduced a number of obstacles for people living outside of large cities who may not have access to official mediation services, as well as those who cannot secure legal representation or who are otherwise vulnerable, such as survivors of domestic abuse attempting to divorce their abuser. Separately, in July 2024 the president signed legislation that tightened a ban on marriages before age 18 and prohibited marriages between cousins and other close biological relatives; the measure was aimed at ensuring marriages between consenting adults and reducing the risk of genetic ailments.

Domestic violence is a notable problem, and related legal protections are inadequate. Conservative social norms contribute to the widespread view that domestic violence is a private matter, which discourages victims from reporting perpetrators to the police. However, the growth of social media and the movement of rural populations to Baku in recent years have spurred public discussion of the issue. Sexual violence is also a persistent problem. Assaults frequently go unreported, and those that are reported often are not prosecuted.

G4 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation?	1 / 4
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Legal safeguards against exploitative working conditions are poorly enforced, and many employers reportedly ignore them without penalty. Children are vulnerable to sexual exploitation and forced labor. The government has taken some steps to combat forced labor and sex trafficking, including by prosecuting traffickers and providing services to victims, but the problem persists, notably among Romany children and foreign household workers. In early 2023, the authorities extended a preexisting moratorium on labor inspections through the end of 2024.

As a result of corruption and a lack of public accountability for the allocation of resources, the state's oil and gas revenues tend to benefit privileged elites rather than the general population, narrowing access to economic opportunity.



On Azerbaijan

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Country Facts

Population

10,140,000

Global Freedom Score

7/100 **Not Free**

Internet Freedom Score

34/100 **Not Free**

Other Years

2024

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