

Title	Freedom in the World 2009 - Uzbekistan
Publisher	Freedom House
Country	Uzbekistan
Publication Date	16 July 2009
Cite as	Freedom House, <i>Freedom in the World 2009 - Uzbekistan</i> , 16 July 2009, available at: http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4a645273c.html [accessed 20 October 2009]

Freedom in the World 2009 - Uzbekistan

Capital: Tashkent

Population: 27,200,000

Political Rights Score: 7

Civil Liberties Score: 7

Status: Not Free

Overview

In 2008, the United States and the European Union reengaged with Uzbekistan after a period of very strained relations following a violent government crackdown in the city of Andijon in 2005. On the domestic front, no notable changes occurred during the year, as Uzbekistan remained marked by repressive state controls and the denial of basic human rights and freedoms.

Uzbekistan gained independence from the Soviet Union through a December 1991 referendum. In a parallel vote, Islam Karimov, former Communist Party leader and chairman of the People's Democratic Party (PDP), the successor to the Communist Party, was elected president with a reported 88 percent of the ballots. The only independent candidate, Erk (Freedom) Party leader Mohammed Solih, claimed election fraud. 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 to extend Karimov's first five-year term in office until 2000 was allegedly approved by 99 percent of the country's voters.

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 (IMU), 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 register genuine opposition parties or permit their members to stand as candidates. A January 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, prompting speculation that the bombings were carried out by vengeful relatives of those imprisoned for alleged religious extremism. The authorities blamed radical international Islamist groups – particularly the Al-Qaeda-linked IMU and the banned Hizb ut-Tahrir (Party of Liberation) – and denied any connection to the government's repressive political and economic policies. 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, propresidential parties allowed to participate.

The city of Andijon in the Ferghana Valley witnessed a popular uprising and violent security crackdown in May 2005. On May 10 and 11, 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 when armed supporters stormed a prison, freed the 23 businessmen and other inmates, and captured the local government administration building. Thousands of local residents subsequently gathered in the city center, where people began to speak out on political and economic issues, often making antigovernment statements.

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

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

The Uzbek authorities instituted 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. This policy continued in 2006 and 2007.

Karimov's seven-year term ended in January 2007, and the constitution barred him from running for reelection. While opposition parties abroad raised questions about Karimov's legitimacy after January, Uzbek officialdom was silent. Karimov won reelection in December 2007 with an official 88 percent of the vote. His daughter, Gulnara, who has extensive business interests in Uzbekistan and abroad, became Uzbekistan's Ambassador to the United Nations in Geneva in 2008, fueling speculation about a possible dynastic succession.

In 2008, Uzbekistan extended moves it had begun in 2007 to normalize relations with the United States and the EU. In April, Karimov attended a NATO summit in Romania and approved overland NATO transports to Afghanistan. A number of U.S. officials visited Uzbekistan in 2008, and the EU also pursued engagement, lifting an Andijon-related travel ban on eight Uzbek officials in October despite the objections of human rights groups. Uzbekistan's strong ties with Russia cooled somewhat, and Tashkent withdrew from the Russian-dominated Eurasian Economic Community in November.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Uzbekistan is not an electoral democracy. President Islam Karimov and the executive

branch dominate the legislature and judiciary, and the government severely represses all political opposition. According to current constitutional rules, the president is limited to two seven-year terms, but Karimov was nevertheless reelected in December 2007. A dubious referendum in 2002 replaced the country's single-chamber legislature with a bicameral parliament consisting of a 120-seat lower house (with members elected by popular vote for five-year terms) and a 100-member upper house, or Senate (with 84 members elected by regional councils and 16 appointed by the president).

Only five political parties, all progovernment, are registered, and no genuine opposition parties function legally. A March 2007 law intended to expand the role of registered parties had no real effect on the moribund political arena. Members of unregistered secular opposition groups, including Birlík and Erk, are subject to discrimination, and many live in exile abroad. The Sunshine Uzbekistan opposition movement was effectively smashed in 2006 with the conviction and imprisonment of its leader, businessman Sanjar Umarov, on a variety of economic charges.

Corruption is widespread, ranging from murky business deals involving members of the president's family to the reportedly pervasive harassment of small merchants and cross-border traders. Uzbekistan was ranked 166 out of 180 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2008 Corruption Perceptions Index.

While the constitution guarantees the right to free speech, freedoms of speech and the press, particularly with regard to reports on the government and Karimov, are restricted in practice. The state controls major media outlets as well as newspaper printing and distribution facilities. Although official censorship was abolished in 2002, it has continued through semiofficial mechanisms that strongly encourage self-censorship. The authorities cracked down on independent and foreign media outlets after the violence in Andijon; Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) was forced out of Uzbekistan in December 2005. The OpenNet Initiative has found that the government systematically blocks websites with content that is critical of the regime. State-controlled television has aired "documentaries" smearing perceived opponents, including a program in 2007 on journalist Alisher Saipov – who was subsequently murdered in Kyrgyzstan – and broadcasts in 2008 that revealed personal information about RFE/RL journalists and incited hostility against religious minorities.

The government permits the existence of mainstream religions, including approved Muslim, Jewish, and Christian denominations (primarily Protestants), but treats unregistered activities as a criminal offense. Christian minorities suffered greater harassment in 2008. The state also 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, torture, and extortion. Starting in November 2006, the U.S. State Department has repeatedly named Uzbekistan as a country of "particular concern" for violations of religious freedom.

The government limits academic freedom, according to the U.S. State Department's 2008 human rights report. While professors generally are required to have their lectures preapproved, enforcement varies. Bribes are commonly required to gain entrance to exclusive universities and to 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. Law enforcement officials have used force to prevent demonstrations against human rights abuses, and participants have been harassed, arrested, and jailed.

Freedom of association is severely restricted, and unregistered NGOs face extreme difficulties and harassment. After the unrest in Andijon, the government intensified persecution of human rights activists and NGOs, particularly those that receive funding

or other support from the United States and the EU. In 2005-06, court decisions led to the temporary or permanent closure of virtually all foreign-funded organizations in Uzbekistan. Human Rights Watch representative Igor Vorontsov was expelled from the country in July 2008. Throughout the year, nonpolitical local NGOs faced continued pressure and occasional forced closures from the authorities. Membership in the government-controlled National Association of Non-Government and Non-Commercial Organizations was described by one local advocate as "voluntary but compulsory." 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. Police routinely abuse and torture suspects to extract confessions, which are accepted by judges as evidence and often serve as the basis for convictions. A 2007 report by Human Rights Watch described torture as "endemic" to the criminal justice system. Law enforcement authorities routinely justify the arrest of suspected Islamic extremists or political opponents with planted contraband or dubious charges of financial machinations. In October 2008, rights activist Akzam Turgunov was sentenced to a 10-year prison term for extortion, and RFE/RL correspondent Solijon Abdurahmonov received an identical sentence that month on drug charges. A number of political prisoners were released in 2008, but others remained jailed, and the poet Yusuf Juma received a five-year prison sentence after calling for President Karimov's resignation in 2007. In a positive move, the government in 2008 released five prominent human rights defenders from prison, banned the death penalty, and introduced the right of habeas corpus. However, it was unclear whether the latter innovation had any real effect.

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, and Human Rights Watch has documented a number of torture-related deaths in custody during the last few years. Mutabar Tojiboyeva, a rights activist released in 2008 after several years behind bars, described prisons as "islands of 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.

Permission is required to move to a new city, and the authorities rarely grant permission to move to Tashkent. Bribes are commonly paid to obtain the necessary registration documents. Restrictions on foreign travel include the use of exit visas, which are often issued selectively. Nevertheless, millions of Uzbeks, primarily men of working age, seek employment abroad, particularly in Russia and Kazakhstan. There were reports in 2008 of evictions in Tashkent without due process or compensation to make way for new housing developments.

Widespread corruption and the government's tight control over the economy limit equality of opportunity. There has been little reform in the country's agricultural sector, in which the state sets high production quotas and low purchase prices for farmers. In a move reminiscent of Soviet-era collectivization, an October 2008 presidential decree ordering small, independent farmers to join larger agricultural associations resulted in smaller farm lands being arbitrarily confiscated and given to larger, mostly government-affiliated farmers. A series of regulations and decrees over the last few years have placed increasing restrictions on market traders.

Women's educational and professional prospects are limited by cultural and religious norms and by ongoing economic difficulties. Victims of domestic violence are discouraged from pressing charges against perpetrators, who rarely face prosecution. The trafficking of women abroad for prostitution remains a serious problem. The prime minister signed a decree in September 2008 to implement International Labor Organization accords on child labor, but reports indicated that the use of child labor remained widespread during the year's cotton harvest.

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