

Uzbekistan

NOT FREE

11
/100

<u>Political Rights</u>	2 /40
<u>Civil Liberties</u>	9 /60

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS**10 /100 Not Free**

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. See the methodology.



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.

Key Developments in 2020

- Reacting to the first wave of COVID-19 infections in March, the government imposed a lockdown that lasted some two months and offered the public detailed health information. A more serious second wave that began in July temporarily overwhelmed the health care system, however, and official reporting diverged from observable reality. By year's end, public health measures had helped to suppress the surge. A total of about 77,000 cases and 614 deaths were reported for the year.
- In June, the death of a businessman who was severely beaten while in police detention sparked public outrage after three years of official pledges regarding reform of the security sector. In response, the prosecutor general's office swiftly brought charges against the officers implicated in the case and publicized data on torture investigations for the first time.
- Despite new openness from within government agencies about corruption and abuse of power, critical journalists and social media activists continued to face dismissal or police interrogation during the year. In August, independent journalist Bobomurod Abdullaev, who had been accused of operating a popular anonymous social media account that made corruption allegations, was extradited from Kyrgyzstan to face charges in Uzbekistan, though the case was eventually dropped.

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

The president, who holds most executive power, is directly elected for up to two five-year terms. Longtime prime minister Shavkat Mirziyoyev was named acting president through an irregular parliamentary process in 2016, after Islam Karimov, who had held the presidency since Uzbekistan's independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, suffered a stroke and died. The constitution called for the Senate chairman to serve as acting president, but the chairman declined the post. Mirziyoyev won a special presidential election at the end of 2016, taking a reported 88.6 percent of the vote and defeating nominal challengers whose parties in some cases openly campaigned for the incumbent. Election monitors from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) concluded that "the dominant position of state actors and limits on fundamental freedoms undermine political pluralism and led to a campaign devoid of genuine competition."

A2 0-4 pts

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

0 / 4

Uzbekistan has a bicameral legislature. The lower house is composed of 150 seats, with members directly elected in individual constituencies. The 100-member upper house, or Senate, includes 84 members who are elected by regional councils and 16 who are appointed by the president. All members of the parliament serve five-year terms.

The December 2019 lower house elections again offered voters no meaningful choice, as all participating parties supported the government. The final results that followed January 2020 runoffs in 25 districts closely mirrored those from the previous lower house elections. The president's party, the Liberal Democratic Party of Uzbekistan (O'zLiDeP), maintained the largest share with 53 of 150 seats. Milliy Tiklanish (National Revival) won 36, the Adolat (Justice) Social Democratic Party won 24, and the People's Democratic Party (XDP) won 22. The Ecological Party of Uzbekistan, which directly competed for the first time after previously having its seats automatically allocated, won the same total of 15 delegates that it had been granted in the previous

parliament. OSCE election monitors noted numerous irregularities, including procedural violations, the use of multiple ballots by voters, and ballot-box stuffing.

A3 0-4 pts

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

1 / 4

The electoral laws and framework are implemented in ways that offer no opportunities for independent political actors or parties to participate in elections at any level. Election management bodies are closely controlled by the government.

Mirziyoyev has presided over some electoral reforms during his tenure. A 2017 law allowed the election of 11 district councils within Tashkent, in addition to the existing council for the city as a whole; Tashkent has the status of a region, and districts in the country's other regions already had elected councils. Another set of reforms enacted in 2019 ended indirect representation for the Ecological Party, removed voting restrictions on those with past criminal convictions, and allowed voters to add their names to more than one party roll; these lists are required for political parties to participate in elections.

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?

0 / 4

Only five political parties are registered—O'zLiDep, the XDP, Adolat, Milliy Tiklanish, and the Ecological Party. They engage in mild criticism of one another and occasionally of government ministers, but all are effectively progovernment.

B2 0-4 pts

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

0/4

No genuine opposition parties operate legally. Unregistered opposition groups function primarily in exile. Domestic supporters or family members of exiled opposition figures have been persecuted, and they are barred from participating in elections.

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?

0/4

Regional alliances of political elites hold the levers of government at all levels, creating economic oligarchies and patronage networks that stifle political competition. There is some intra-elite competition, but without the patronage of the established networks, political and economic advancement is all but impossible.

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

No registered party represents the specific interests of ethnic or religious minority groups, and no other parties or actors have the opportunity to achieve political representation. Women formally enjoy equal political rights, but they are unable to organize independently to advance their political interests in practice, and they remain underrepresented in leadership positions.

A component of the electoral reform package enacted in 2019 required 30 percent of legislative candidates to be women. Women now hold 33 percent of the seats in the lower house and 23 percent of the seats in the Senate. No women ran for president in 2016.

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

The country's leadership is not freely elected, and the legislature serves as a rubber stamp for the executive branch.

C2 0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective?

0/4

Corruption is pervasive. Graft and bribery among low- and mid-level officials remain common and are at times conducted overtly and without subterfuge. However, petty corruption among traffic police and officials granting identification documents and registrations has been notably reduced in recent years by pilot programs that introduced video surveillance and traffic cameras.

President Mirziyoyev has overseen an ongoing purge of the notoriously corrupt security and law enforcement services. In February 2020, former prosecutor general Otabek Murodov was convicted on graft charges, becoming the third prosecutor general to be prosecuted in two years. Analysts contend that the purge is largely meant to neutralize security officials from the Karimov era and shift power to the president's personal security service and the reformed National Guard, both of which are overseen by Mirziyoyev's family members.

Media discussion of corrupt practices has cautiously expanded since Karimov's death, but in some cases the journalists and commentators involved have come under pressure. In August 2020, the Senate admitted that public health officials in five different regions may have embezzled COVID-19 emergency funds. A few weeks earlier, in July, a Tashkent-based blogger had been summoned for questioning by the security services after he made similar allegations on social media and called on Uzbekistan's international creditors to investigate.

C3 0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency?

1/4

Government operations remain mostly opaque, but one of Mirziyoyev's first acts as president in late 2016 was the creation of new online mechanisms that offered citizens the opportunity to file complaints, report problems, and request services. The initial program was overwhelmingly popular and was quickly expanded to all ministries and local government offices, requiring local officials to interact with citizens and demonstrate responsiveness. The innovations contributed to a cultural change in governance, though they frequently encountered resistance at the local level.

While the government was considered to have communicated well with the public during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, dubious official statements and statistics during a second wave in the summer conflicted with direct evidence of a more severe crisis that temporarily overwhelmed the health care system.

Civil Liberties

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media?

1/4

Despite constitutional guarantees, press freedom remains severely restricted. The state controls major media outlets and related facilities, and independent outlets were mostly shuttered or blocked under Karimov. However, domestic media, including news websites and live television programs, now cautiously discuss social problems and criticize local officials, reflecting a slight reduction in media repression since Mirziyoyev took power. Some independent news sources have emerged and are not

subject to overt censorship, though most outlets still avoid openly criticizing Mirziyoyev and the government.

The presence of independent international outlets is limited; several foreign reporters have been granted press passes since 2017, although other journalists working for outlets like Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) have been denied entry. Access to news and information via popular social media sites like YouTube and Facebook became more reliable after the government stopped blocking those sites at the end of 2018, and social media platforms have become lively forums for political discussion.

Journalists continue to face criminal penalties for a variety of possible offenses related to their work. In December 2020, the president signed legal amendments that eliminated prison terms for libel and insult, but compulsory labor and other penalties remained in place, and dissemination of false information was added to the criminal and administrative codes. An earlier law adopted in March had criminalized dissemination of false information related to COVID-19.

Under Mirziyoyev, a number of journalists have been released from prison, and 2018 marked the first year in two decades that no journalists were imprisoned, but the government handed down a jail sentence to a blogger in 2019. The state also used the Soviet-era practice of forced psychiatric hospitalization against journalist Nafosat Olloshukurova during 2019, and she fled the country in January 2020 after being threatened with further confinement. In August, authorities in Kyrgyzstan detained and extradited journalist Bobomurod Abdullaev at the request of Uzbek authorities, who reportedly accused him of operating an anonymous social media account that made allegations of corruption. The US State Department and human rights organizations objected to the move, citing his past persecution in Uzbekistan. After a brief detention in Tashkent, Abdullaev was released, and the case against him was eventually dropped.

Score Change: The score improved from 0 to 1 because some independent media sources have emerged in recent years and avoided overt censorship, though journalists still face intimidation by authorities, and self-censorship remains common.

D2 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private?

0/4

The government permits the existence of approved Muslim, Jewish, and Christian denominations, but treats unregistered religious activity as a criminal offense. Suspected members of banned Muslim organizations and their relatives have faced arrest, interrogation, and torture. Arrested believers are frequently accused of founding previously unknown religious organizations, a charge that carries high penalties. In most cases, little evidence of the existence of such organizations is presented at the closed trials. In 2017, Mirziyoyev announced that some 16,000 individuals had been removed from an official list of roughly 17,000 people who had been suspected or previously convicted of religious extremism. Individuals on the list were kept under close surveillance or on probation. In May 2020, the Interior Ministry announced that some previously released prisoners who had been members of the Islamist group Hizb ut-Tahrir were being rearrested on allegations of continuing to proselytize for the group or possessing its literature.

Since 2019, Islamic activists and bloggers not affiliated or accused of affiliation with Hizb ut-Tahrir have faced fewer arrests; many of the country's most prominent activists were already arrested or jailed on administrative charges in 2018 after criticizing a state decision to effectively ban the hijab in schools and universities.

In August 2020, the Interior Ministry announced that minors would again be allowed to attend prayers in public mosques, reversing a Karimov-era ban. In September, the parliament introduced new proposed amendments that would potentially loosen or reverse the controversial prohibition on wearing religious clothing in state and educational institutions, as well as somewhat simplify the requirements for religious organizations to register. The legislation had not been passed as of year's end. Human rights activists and international monitors noted that the proposals would not fundamentally change the state's authority to license religious organizations, censor religious literature, and prosecute anyone participating in religious activities or teaching outside state-approved forums.

D3 0-4 pts

Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination?	1/4
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The government has long limited academic freedom, in part by controlling contacts between universities or scholars and foreign entities. Universities in Uzbekistan have slowly expanded their cooperation with foreign counterparts since 2016.

Texts that glorify former president Karimov are no longer required reading at universities.

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

The freedoms of personal expression and private discussion have long been limited by *mahalla* committees—traditional neighborhood organizations that the government transformed into an official system for public surveillance and control. The government also engages in extensive surveillance of electronic communications.

Through its various reforms since 2016, the Mirziyoyev administration has signaled a greater tolerance for public criticism, modestly improving the climate for expression of personal views on sensitive topics. However, the 2020 legal amendments that criminalized dissemination of false information, including about COVID-19, indicated ongoing pressure to set limits on public debate.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly?

0 / 4

Despite constitutional provisions for freedom of assembly, authorities severely restrict this right in practice, breaking up virtually all unsanctioned gatherings and detaining participants. In August 2020, officials published draft legislation proposed by the Interior Ministry that would permit and set rules for public assemblies, but would allow them only on weekdays at specific times, limit their duration to two hours, and

require preapproval of applications submitted at least 15 days in advance, among other restrictions.

E2 0-4 pts

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

1/4

Unregistered nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have faced severe repression and harassment. A new organization designed to oversee the activities of registered NGOs, the Center for the Development of Civil Society (CDCS), was formed in 2019, but new legislation governing NGO registration had yet to be adopted as of 2020.

The government remained unwilling to register local or international NGOs that address human rights issues during the year. A special commission set up to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic created new formal restrictions on distribution of pandemic and natural disaster aid by charity organizations, effectively banning many local and independently organized efforts to fill gaps during times of crisis, though these rules largely went unenforced in practice.

E3 0-4 pts

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

0/4

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

F. Rule of Law

F1 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary?

0/4

The judiciary remains subservient to the president. In 2017, however, a number of judicial reforms were enacted through constitutional and legislative amendments,

establishing specific terms in office for judges and creating a Supreme Judicial Council (OSK) to oversee appointments and disciplinary action, among other changes. The council, whose chairperson is approved by the Senate on the president's recommendation, replaced a commission that was directly subordinate to the president.

F2 0-4 pts

Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters?

0 / 4

Due process guarantees are extremely weak. Law enforcement authorities have routinely justified the arrest of suspected religious extremists or political opponents by planting contraband, filing dubious charges of financial wrongdoing, or inventing witness testimony. The Lawyers' Chamber, a regulatory body with compulsory membership, serves as a vehicle for state control over the legal profession. The judicial reforms adopted in 2017 gave judges rather than prosecutors the authority to approve certain investigative steps, such as exhumations and some forms of surveillance. In August 2020, a presidential decree introduced an option for defendants to enter plea bargains for a range of offenses and included provisions to improve detainees' access to lawyers.

F3 0-4 pts

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

1 / 4

A 2016 law on police prohibits torture, and a 2017 presidential decree that bars courts from using evidence obtained through torture took effect in 2018. Despite the reforms, reports of physical abuse against detainees continued to appear on social media in 2020.

In June, the family of Andijon businessman Alijon Abdukarimov, who had been detained the previous month by police investigating a theft, published videos on social media showing him in an intensive care unit as a result of severe torture during interrogation. Abdukarimov died from his injuries days later, sparking widespread public outrage. The prosecutor general's office brought charges against the officers

implicated in the case, and six officers received sentences ranging from one to 10 years in prison in November. Also in June, the prosecutor general’s office publicized data on torture investigations for the first time, admitting that of 757 cases investigated in three years, only 33 had led to prosecution. It promised additional reforms and a state commission to prevent police torture. The human rights ombudsman acknowledged the same month that torture remained a serious problem, and the Interior Ministry announced that video cameras would be installed in police interrogation facilities across the country.

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 torture and other ill-treatment. Jaslyk prison, a correctional facility where torture was especially widespread, was ordered closed by President Mirziyoyev in 2019.

F4 0-4 pts

Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population?	0 / 4
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Although racial and ethnic discrimination are prohibited by law, the belief that senior positions in government and business are reserved for ethnic Uzbeks is widespread. Women’s educational and professional prospects are limited by discriminatory cultural and religious norms. Women are also barred from certain jobs under the labor code.

Sex between men is punishable with up to three years in prison. The law does not protect LGBT+ people from discrimination, and social taboos deter the discussion of LGBT+ issues.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

G1 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change	
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their place of residence, employment, or education?	1/4
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Permission is required to move to a new city, and bribes are commonly paid to obtain the necessary documents. Bribes are also frequently required to gain entrance to and advance in exclusive universities. The government took steps to ease travel within the country and to neighboring states beginning in 2017, when it removed police checkpoints at internal borders, resumed direct flights to Tajikistan, and opened border crossings as part of an agreement with Kyrgyzstan. The Mirziyoyev administration abolished exit visas in 2019, ending a system that was used to proscribe travel beyond other member states of the Commonwealth of Independent States.

The government imposed tight restrictions on movement in March 2020 to prevent COVID-19 infections, easing the rules in May as cases declined. A second lockdown was imposed in July and lifted beginning in September. The moves were generally seen as legitimate public health measures.

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
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Widespread corruption and extensive state control over the economy limit private business opportunities and make property rights tenuous in practice.

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
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While the law generally grants men and women equal rights in matters such as marriage and divorce, women often face de facto disadvantages. Extralegal child marriage is reportedly practiced in some areas. Victims of domestic violence are discouraged from pressing charges against perpetrators, who rarely face prosecution.

Rape is also seldom reported or prosecuted, and spousal rape is not explicitly criminalized.

G4 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation?

1/4

Economic exploitation remains a serious domestic problem, as does the trafficking of men and women abroad for forced labor and sex work. A 2009 law imposed stronger penalties for child labor, and in 2012 Mirziyoyev, then the prime minister, pledged to end the practice completely. In 2017, the president issued a decree to formally ban forced agricultural labor by students, health workers, and teachers. During the subsequent cotton harvests, the government increased incentives for voluntary labor and granted access to international observers. In 2018, the International Labor Organization (ILO) noted that 93 percent of cotton workers were voluntarily employed for that year's harvest, while child labor was not an issue.

In March 2020, President Mirziyoyev signed a decree to fully end the state quota system for cotton that had motivated local officials to require forced labor. While some wheat quotas remained, these were also scheduled to be reduced beginning in 2021. In September, the Agriculture Ministry mandated higher pay rates for cotton harvesters. Despite these improvements, some evidence of forced labor has continued to be reported in recent years, and prosecutions of suspected traffickers remain rare.



On Uzbekistan

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11/100 Not Free

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28/100 Not Free

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