



FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2024

Uzbekistan

NOT FREE

12
/100

<u>Political Rights</u>	2 /40
<u>Civil Liberties</u>	10 /60

LAST YEAR’S SCORE & STATUS

12 /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.

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 2023

- Numerous constitutional amendments, which had been delayed after the violent Karakalpakstan protests in 2022, were passed with a reported 90.2 percent of the vote in an April referendum marked by serious flaws. The reforms extended presidential terms from five to seven years, among other reforms that could allow incumbent president Mirziyoyev to circumvent term limits.
- In May, President Mirziyoyev called a snap presidential election to be held in July under the new constitutional reforms. Mirziyoyev was reelected for a seven-year term with 87 percent of the vote in the July polls, which independent observers reported were not competitive, free, or fair.
- Despite a prior loosening of restrictions on religious speech and practice, in September, both chambers of the parliament passed legislative amendments increasing penalties for various activities related to exercising freedom of religion or belief.

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 seven-year terms following constitutional reforms passed in April 2023. 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. 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.

Mirziyoyev was reelected in the 2021 presidential elections with 80.1 percent of the vote. The election was not competitive, and candidates avoided challenging or criticizing Mirziyoyev.

Constitutional reforms, including many that strengthen the powers of the president, were approved in an April 2023 referendum with a reported 90.2 percent of the vote. The polls were marked by "serious violations" during voting and counting, and media coverage leading up to the referendum was neither impartial nor balanced, according to Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) observers. The reforms returned presidential terms from five to seven years and the referendum "reset" the existing two-term limit, allowing incumbent president Mirziyoyev to circumvent term limits as his predecessor Karimov did.

In May, Mirziyoyev announced a snap presidential election for July under the constitutional reforms that could extend his time in office, which had been due to expire in 2026, through 2037. Mirziyoyev was reelected for a seven-year term in July with 87 percent of the vote. Like the 2021 election, the July 2023 election was not competitive. The OSCE election observation mission again found that despite some reforms to increase transparency, the elections were neither fair nor free, noting a lack of meaningful engagement among candidates and that all registered parties and their candidates endorsed the incumbent president's policies. OSCE observers also reported significant irregularities during the campaign and on election day, including ballot box stuffing in many polling stations, among other things.

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 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. One 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.

In 2022, the government proposed numerous constitutional reforms, including amendments that would drastically alter the existing legal and political status of Karakalpakstan, an autonomous republic within Uzbekistan. The draft amendments included provisions that would downgrade Karakalpakstan’s autonomous status, eliminating language identifying the republic as “sovereign” and removing its right to secede on the basis of a referendum. Mirziyoyev promised to withdraw the amendments that would have changed Karakalpakstan’s status that July following mass protests in the region that turned violent.

In April 2023, a raft of constitutional amendments, which had been delayed after the 2022 Karakalpakstan protests, were adopted via referendum. The amendments were passed with a reported 90.2 percent of the vote following a long campaign that enlisted popular celebrities, musicians, and athletes to encourage public support. According to independent observers, the April referendum featured serious flaws, including widespread government misuse of resources and media bias that favored the government in the run-up to the vote.

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
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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. Two opposition parties, the Erk Democratic Party and the Truth and Development Party, operate unofficially, having been repeatedly denied registration.

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 are unable to organize independently to advance their political interests in practice, and 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 approximately 35 percent of the seats in the lower house and 24 percent of the seats in the Senate.

In the July 2023 snap presidential elections, Adolat put forward one female candidate, Robakhon Makhmudova, who received 4.4 percent of the vote.

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. 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.

In recent years, the government has pursued a broad program of privatization of state assets. According to a 2021 report by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), a number of formerly state-owned assets have been sold to the family members of high-ranking government officials, sometimes at suspiciously low prices, leading to accusations of nepotism and corruption.

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 or faced prosecution on seemingly unrelated charges.

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 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.

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. Access to news and information via popular social media sites like YouTube and Facebook has become more reliable in recent years despite the authorities' sporadic blocking of such platforms.

Independent journalists are frequently harassed or interrogated by the security services for their coverage of topics that are deemed to be sensitive by the authorities. In 2022, numerous journalists reporting on the Russian military invasion of Ukraine were warned by the state security services to "exercise restraint" in their coverage of the war, and some were reportedly ordered to delete their work.

In 2022, during the public hearing period on the proposed constitutional amendments on Karakalpakstan and the protests that followed, prominent ethnic Karakalpak bloggers and journalists who published criticism of the proposed amendments were arrested by local authorities; at least one was reportedly tortured while in custody.

Journalists continue to face criminal penalties for a variety of possible offenses related to their work. In 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. In October 2023, a 19-year-old Uzbekistan resident who had been working in Russia was sentenced to two and a half years in prison for purportedly insulting President Mirziyoyev on his personal social media, despite deleting the post and voluntarily returning to Uzbekistan when he learned he was under investigation.

In August and December, citizen journalists and anticorruption activists Abduqodir Muminov and Olimjon Khaydarov were sentenced to seven- and eight-year terms in prison, respectively, on similar charges centered on alleged extortion and slander. Civic activists called the journalists' long sentences a warning to the public about the parameters of free speech in practice.

The state has also continued to occasionally use the Soviet-era practice of forced psychiatric hospitalization against journalists.

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. Government regulations curtailing religious freedom initially lessened after Mirziyoyev became president in 2016, though significant restrictions remain in place.

In 2021, Mirziyoyev signed new amendments to the law on religious freedom, relaxing a controversial prohibition on wearing religious clothing in public, including in state and educational institutions, as well as simplifying the registration requirements for religious organizations. While mandatory dress codes that effectively prohibit the wearing of religious attire in public schools remain in place, these rules are reportedly being selectively enforced in practice.

However, human rights activists and international monitors continue to report that the reforms did not fundamentally change the state's authority to license religious organizations, censor religious literature, and prosecute anyone participating in religious activities or teaching outside of specific state-approved forums. In May 2023, Human Rights Watch reported that many religious communities, despite not being subject to any bans, have been unable to register and the vague wording of extremism statutes has led to arbitrary prosecutions of individuals for possessing or sharing ordinary religious content.

During 2023, reports emerged that authorities had issued warnings to women wearing hijabs and niqabs and had cracked down on religiously marketed businesses in August and September, despite the prior loosening of restrictions on religious speech and practice. Uzbekistani officials denied that any such actions had taken place. In September, both chambers of the parliament passed legislative amendments increasing penalties for various activities related to exercising freedom of religion or belief.

Security services continue to use broadly defined terrorism and slander legislation to target religious individuals and activists. In May 2023, 20-year-old student Jahongir Ulugmurodov was convicted of sharing “extremist material” and sentenced to three years in prison for sharing a link to an Islamic song online. His sentence was reduced to the “restriction of liberty” on appeal in July.

D3 0-4 pts

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

1 / 4

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 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.

Mass protests erupted in Karakalpakstan in 2022 after the government published draft constitutional amendments that would have, if adopted, downgraded the republic's autonomous status. In response to the protests, Uzbekistan's security forces launched an extremely violent crackdown, using lethal force against mostly peaceful protesters; the government also temporarily imposed a state of emergency, enacted martial law, and restricted mobile network coverage and internet access in the region. At least 21 people were killed and more than 270 were injured during the protests, including members of the security forces. More than 500 people, including journalists and opposition activists, were arrested during and after the protests.

A trial of more than 20 activists, journalists, and other protesters charged for their alleged participation in the demonstrations concluded in January 2023. Several of those tried received lengthy sentences, including Dauletmurat Tajimuratov, a lawyer and activist among those accused of leading the protests. Tajimuratov was sentenced to 16 years in prison on charges including "conspiracy to overthrow the constitutional order." While most other high-profile defendants pleaded guilty and requested clemency, Tajimuratov denied the charges against him; his lawyer said Tajimuratov had endured abuse, including torture, while in custody. The Supreme Court upheld his sentence in June following a curtailed appeals process.

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. Though the government claims that many NGOs operate in Uzbekistan, most are state-sponsored organizations; excessive registration requirements prevent independent NGOs from legally operating, and allow authorities to interfere in the work of human rights organizations.

A new organization designed to oversee the activities of registered NGOs, the Center for the Development of Civil Society (CDCS), was formed in 2019.

In 2021, Mirziyoyev issued a decree approving the Concept on Development of Civil Society in 2021–2025, a proposal introducing measures that would provide for partnerships between NGOs and the government. In June 2022, the Cabinet of Ministers issued a decree that increases state oversight of organizations that receive international funding, including by requiring government approval of such funds.

The government frequently and arbitrarily denies registration requests made by local and international NGOs that engage in human rights–related work.

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. Judicial reforms adopted in 2017 gave judges rather than prosecutors the authority to approve certain investigative steps, including some forms of surveillance. A 2020 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. In both 2020 and 2021, Mirziyoyev issued additional decrees introducing mechanisms to eliminate the use of torture against detainees. Despite the reforms, credible reports of physical abuse against detainees continued throughout 2023.

In 2020, Andijon businessman Alijon Abdukarimov died following severe torture during police interrogation, sparking widespread public outrage. Several officers

implicated in the case were charged, and six received sentences ranging from one to ten years in prison. The prosecutor general's office publicized data on torture investigations for the first time in June 2020, admitting that of 757 cases investigated in three years, only 33 had led to prosecution. The Interior Ministry also announced that video cameras would be installed in police interrogation facilities across the country.

Despite these promised changes, in June 2023, the ombudsman for human rights acknowledged that torture remains a “disease within the body of [Uzbek] society” after 10 police officers and 2 physicians who falsified medical reports were found guilty in the March 2022 death of Sanjarbek Mamajonov, who died following prolonged torture in custody and the denial of medical treatment.

International human rights organizations condemned the government's crackdown on protests in Karakalpakstan in July 2022—which saw security forces use extreme and sometimes lethal force to disperse mostly peaceful protesters—as excessive and unjustifiable. Though the government formed a commission to investigate human rights violations during the protests, little action had been taken against the security forces involved as of June 2023.

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.

F4 0-4 pts

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

0 / 4

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 their place of residence, employment, or education?

1 / 4

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 universities. 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.

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

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

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. In April 2023, President

Mirziyoyev enacted new legislation criminalizing domestic violence and introducing tougher penalties for crimes involving sexual violence.

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 2020, President Mirziyoyev signed a decree to fully end the state quota system for cotton that had motivated local officials to require forced labor. 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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Country Facts

Population

35,650,000

Global Freedom Score

12/100 **Not Free**

Internet Freedom Score

27/100 **Not Free**

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Other Years

2025

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