



Freedom in the World 2014 - Uzbekistan

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2014 Scores

Status: Not Free

Freedom Rating (1 = best, 7 = worst): 7.0

Civil Liberties (1 = best, 7 = worst): 7

Political Rights (1 = best, 7 = worst): 7

OVERVIEW

As in previous years, Uzbekistan's government suppressed all political opposition in 2013. The few remaining civic activists and critical journalists in the country faced physical violence, prosecution, hefty fines, and arbitrary detention. In June, noting three consecutive years without significant improvements, the U.S. State Department downgraded Uzbekistan to Tier 3 in its annual *Trafficking in Persons Report*, finding that "Uzbekistan remains one of only a handful of governments around the world that subjects its citizens to forced labor through implementation of state policy."

In response, Uzbekistan met one of the report's recommendations and for the first time allowed representatives from the International Labor Organization to monitor the annual cotton harvest. However, minors who were forced to participate in the harvest wrote on social media that they were instructed to lie to the monitors. Although significant steps have been taken toward eliminating forced child labor, reports by multiple international monitors confirmed that people 15 years of age and older were still systematically forced to work in the fields to meet government quotas.

POLITICAL RIGHTS AND CIVIL LIBERTIES

Political Rights: 0 / 40

A. Electoral Process: 0 / 12

After Uzbekistan gained independence from the Soviet Union through a December 1991 referendum, Islam Karimov, the incumbent Communist Party leader, was elected president amid fraud claims by rivals. His first term was extended by means of a 1995 referendum, and he was reelected in 2000, with no genuine opposition candidate allowed to participate.

The constitution barred Karimov from running for reelection after his second legal term in office ended in January 2007. Nevertheless, despite the lack of any formal ruling on this legal obstacle, he won a new term in December 2007 with an official 88 percent of the vote. The legislature quietly altered the constitution in 2011 to reduce future presidential terms to five years, from seven. In 2013 the 75-year-old Karimov gave no indication that he intended to step down from power.

Uzbekistan has a bicameral parliament. The lower house has 150 seats, with 135 members directly elected in single-member constituencies and 15 representing the newly formed Ecological Movement of Uzbekistan, which holds separate indirect elections. The 100-member upper house, or Senate, has 84 members elected by regional councils and 16 appointed by the president. All members of the parliament serve five-year terms. The last parliamentary elections in 2009 offered voters no meaningful choice, as all participating parties supported the government.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 0 / 16

Only four political parties, all progovernment, are currently registered, and no genuine opposition parties operate legally. The legal parties indulge in mild criticism of one another and occasionally of government ministers below the president. Unregistered opposition groups function primarily in exile, and domestic supporters or family members of exiled opposition figures are frequently persecuted.

In June 2013, 71-year-old Hasan Choriyev – the infirm father of Bahodir Choriyev, leader of the U.S.-based Birdamlik (Solidarity) political action group – was taken by police from his home in rural Qashqadaryo province and, after almost two weeks of detention, charged with rape. According to Birdamlik and human rights investigators, on the morning of the alleged rape, Choriyev had been in the prosecutor's office. He had previously reported receiving threats from an official related to his son's political activity. In August, Hasan Choriyev was sentenced to five and a half years in prison in a closed trial. Activists and Choriyev family members noted that the arrest took place almost immediately after Bahodir Choriyev said in an interview that he would run for president in Uzbekistan's 2015 election.

Also in August, a member of the unregistered opposition Erk (Freedom) Party, Fakhridin Tillayev, and his wife were beaten by a mob after an incident in which, according to Tillayev, a woman appeared at their door nude and began screaming that Tillayev was raping her.

C. Functioning of Government: 0 / 12

There are no free elections in Uzbekistan, and the legislature does not meaningfully debate new laws or regulations; instead, it serves as a rubber stamp for the executive branch. Police, security services, and judges interpret the laws as they choose or according to political dictates, leaving little recourse to appeal.

Corruption is pervasive. Uzbekistan was ranked 168 out of 177 countries and territories surveyed in Transparency International's 2013 Corruption Perceptions Index. Graft and bribery among low and mid-level officials are part of everyday life and are sometimes even transparent. However, international investigations that were launched in 2012, after the local affiliate of Swedish telecommunications giant TeliaSonera was shut down by the state, appeared to reveal corruption within Karimov's family in unprecedented detail. In January 2013, new documents released as part of a Swedish criminal investigation showed that TeliaSonera had sought to negotiate directly with the president's daughter, Gulnara Karimova. The company was under investigation for allegedly paying more than \$300 million in bribes to an offshore shell company controlled by associates of the president's family.

In February, the chief executive of TeliaSonera was forced resign after an external review showed serious failures of due diligence. Swedish criminal proceedings were ongoing at year's end. In

May, documents leaked to the Swedish media appeared to show that Karimova had aggressively dictated the terms of the contract and threatened the company with obstruction from multiple government ministries if Teliasonera did not agree to payments. Related money-laundering investigations in Switzerland and Sweden continued throughout the year, with hundreds of millions of dollars frozen in accounts connected to the case.

Civil Liberties: 4 / 60

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 1 / 16

Despite constitutional guarantees, freedoms of speech and the press are severely restricted. The state controls major media outlets and related facilities, and state-run television has aired "documentaries" that smear perceived opponents of the government. Although official censorship was abolished in 2002, it has continued through semiofficial mechanisms that strongly encourage self-censorship. Foreign reporters are generally excluded from the country.

State restrictions on free expression continued during 2013. Even recording artists must obtain special licenses from a government authority to perform in public, and in June a number of them found that their licenses had been revoked on the grounds of "meaningless" content that was deemed insufficiently patriotic and edifying according to Uzbek national values. In July the Tashkent-based online outlet Uzmetornom was temporarily shut down after a military prosecutor threatened the site's owner for covering a deadly clash on the Uzbek-Kyrgyz border. In September, journalist Sergey Naumov, well regarded for his reporting on forced labor in the cotton harvest, disappeared from his home city of Urgench for several days. Friends and relatives later learned that he had been arrested, charged with sexual assault, and sentenced to 12 days in prison without a lawyer present.

The government systematically blocks websites with content that is critical of the regime. Mainstream news, information, and social-media sites based outside the country are sometimes blocked as well. Authorities maintain and frequently update a list of banned proxy sites that allow users to access blocked content anonymously.

The government permits the existence of approved Muslim, Jewish, and Christian denominations, but treats unregistered religious activity as a criminal offense. The state 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, and torture. Arrested believers are frequently accused of founding previously unknown religious organizations, a charge that carries high penalties. In most cases, little evidence that such organizations exist is presented at the closed trials. In February 2013, a group of 11 Namangani men were sentenced to terms of up to 12 years in prison for participating in a group allegedly called "Jihadism," and in July some 20 others were sentenced to lengthy terms for membership in another new group called "Hizb-ut Nusrat," though no evidence of the existence of either organization was available for independent analysis.

Members of other religions are regularly arrested and fined as well. Throughout the year, Christian groups faced increasingly harsh fines following raids of churches and private homes in which religious literature, including Bibles, was seized. In August, a group of nine Baptists in Qarshi was fined more than \$21,000 for possessing religious texts and holding private services.

The government reportedly limits academic freedom. Bribes are commonly required to gain entrance to exclusive universities and 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.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 0 / 12

Despite constitutional provisions for freedom of assembly, authorities severely restrict this right in practice, breaking up virtually all unsanctioned gatherings and detaining participants. In January 2013, Valeriy Nazarov, a Birdamlik activist who had planned to travel to Tashkent for a protest event, was reported missing for a month. He reappeared after fellow Birdamlik activists drew media attention to his case. According to his friends, he arrived home drugged and disoriented. Birdamlik members suspected that he had been held in the Urganch Psychiatric Hospital.

In July, a group of family members and activists from the Uzbekistan Human Rights Alliance and Birdamlik attempted a picket in front of the Qashadaryo regional prosecutor's office to protest the charges against Hasan Choriyev. They reported being attacked and severely beaten by a group of women who robbed them and ripped their clothes; after the violence, police, who had done nothing to intervene, arrested the demonstrators. The group was subsequently fined more than \$15,000 in total for holding an "illegal demonstration."

Freedom of association is tightly constrained, and unregistered nongovernmental organizations face extreme difficulties and harassment. After a major episode of unrest in the city of Andijon in 2005, the government shut down virtually all foreign-funded organizations in Uzbekistan; Human Rights Watch, the last international monitoring group with a presence in the country, was forced to close its office in 2011. Throughout 2013, human rights activists continued to face harassment, prosecution, travel restrictions, and violence. In August, 75-year-old activist Turaboy Juraboyev was sentenced to five years in prison for extortion and fraud; independent media connected his arrest to his investigation of the murder of a local man involved in a business deal with Jizzakh-area government officials.

In September, Bobomorod Rizzakov, the Bukharan regional head of Ezgulik, the only registered human rights organization permitted to operate in Uzbekistan, was sentenced to four years in prison on human trafficking charges after he criticized local government officials for corruption.

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.

F. Rule of Law: 0 / 16

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. Law enforcement authorities routinely justify the arrest of suspected Islamic extremists or political opponents by planting contraband or filing dubious charges of financial wrongdoing. In April 2013, the government released Mamadali Mahmudov, who had spent 14 years in a labor camp and had three more years added to his sentence days before his surprise release. At least 12 other high-profile political prisoners remain incarcerated indefinitely despite international pressure.

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.

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. Moreover, the government appears to be systematically closing schools for the Tajik-speaking minority.

Sex between men is illegal in Uzbekistan and punishable with up to three years in prison. The law does not protect LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people from discrimination, and traditional social taboos make even discussion of LGBT issues difficult.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 3 / 16

Permission is required to move to a new city, and bribes are commonly paid to obtain the necessary documents. Restrictions on foreign travel include the use of exit visas, which are often issued selectively. Despite such controls, millions of Uzbeks seek employment abroad, particularly in Russia and Kazakhstan.

Widespread corruption and the government's tight control over the economy limit equality of opportunity.

Women's educational and professional prospects are limited by cultural and religious norms and 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. A 2009 law imposed tougher penalties for child labor, and in August 2012 Uzbekistan's prime minister pledged to end the practice completely. However, while reports indicated that forced labor for children under 15 were less pervasive than in the past, multiple organizations confirmed the ongoing use of forced labor – especially of college and university students – during the cotton harvest in 2013. Anecdotal reports show that parents are required to sign a contract agreeing to compulsory unpaid cotton labor by their children before they can be admitted to vocational college at age 15. In at least one region, mothers were denied social welfare payments with the explanation that this was the price for excusing their minor children from labor in the cotton fields.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

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