



Freedom in the World 2015 - Uzbekistan

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2015 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

Uzbekistan's government continued to suppress all political opposition in 2014. The few remaining civic activists and critical journalists in the country faced physical violence, prosecution, hefty fines, involuntary hospitalization, and arbitrary detention.

Gulnora Karimova, President Islam Karimov's elder daughter with whom he had been feuding publicly, remained under house arrest for much of 2014 after the government accused her of having links to organized crime. Many of her properties and assets, as well as those of close associates, were seized throughout the year, and many of her associates were prosecuted in proceedings hidden from the public.

That month, the government created a new legal framework allowing house arrest, heralded by some human rights activists as a potentially humane reform but dismissed by many others as a symbolic gesture to legalize the measures taken against Karimova. Though the charges against Karimova and her associates acknowledge the problem of corruption at the highest levels, many believe the case reflects a shift in internal competition for power and resources, rather than substantial changes in the culture of corruption.

POLITICAL RIGHTS AND CIVIL LIBERTIES

Political Rights: 0 / 40

A. Electoral Process: 0 / 12

After Uzbekistan gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Islam Karimov, the incumbent Communist Party leader, was elected president. 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 2007, officially with 88 percent of the vote. The legislature quietly altered the constitution in 2011 to reduce future

presidential terms from seven to five years. The 75-year-old Karimov has given no indication that he intends to step down from power and appears slated to run in the 2015 presidential elections.

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.

Parliamentary elections held in December 2014 offered voters no meaningful choice, as all participating parties supported the government; observers from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) noted the elections "lacked genuine competition and debate." Local human rights activists alleged serious disparities between reported turnout, which the government claimed was more than 88 percent, and the number of actual votes cast.

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.

Authorities targeted the Birdamlik (Solidarity) movement in 2014; this came after Birdamlik's U.S.-based leader, Bahodir Choriyeu, had announced in 2013 that he would run in the next presidential election. In March 2014, Choriyeu's father, who had been jailed in 2013 after Choriyeu announced his presidential run, died less than a month after being released from prison. Activists and family members had expressed fears that the elder Choriyeu had not received proper medical care in prison. Also in March, several members of the movement reported their passports were confiscated and that authorities refused to issue passport renewals to prevent Uzbekistan-based members from participating in the movement's April congress in the United States. In September, Bahodir Choriyeu's wife and son were forcibly deported from Uzbekistan and their citizenship revoked; two other family members were notified their citizenship was similarly annulled.

No registered party represents the specific interests of minority ethnic or religious groups.

C. Functioning of Government: 0 / 12

The legislature 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 166 out of 175 countries and territories surveyed in Transparency International's 2014 Corruption Perceptions Index. Graft and bribery among low- and mid-level officials are common and at times even transparent.

In May 2014, two of Karimova's business partners were found guilty of corruption charges; in September, the government announced charges against another of her partners, as well as against

Karimova herself. Although the charges against Karimova and her associates were ostensibly about governmental corruption, many believe the case reflects an internal power struggle.

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. Even recording artists must obtain special licenses from a government authority to perform in public; licenses can be revoked if performance content is deemed to be "meaningless" or insufficiently patriotic and edifying. In June 2014, film producer Mirsobir Hamidkariev was apprehended in Moscow and extradited to Uzbekistan, where he was charged with organizing illegal public gatherings and distributing materials that threaten public safety. Hamidkariev had spoken out against the government's treatment of Muslims. He was reportedly tortured while in custody.

The government systematically blocks websites that contain content 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 would allow users to access blocked content anonymously. Citing dangers to reporters operating in Uzbekistan, the Germany-based Uznews.net ceased operations in December 2014.

In January 2014, the Namangan City Court sentenced local resident Kudratbek Rasulov to eight years in prison on charges of "attempting to overthrow the constitutional order" for contacting the united opposition group the People's Movement of Uzbekistan through social media networks and on Skype. In August, the government announced new restrictions on bloggers, expanding the list of topics they are prohibited from discussing. The sweeping language of the restrictions led observers, including the OSCE, to express concerns that they will provide a legal framework to further impede freedom of expression online.

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 of the existence of such organizations is presented at the closed trials. Members of other religions are regularly arrested and fined. Throughout 2014, Christian groups continued to face harsh fines following raids of churches and private homes in which religious literature, including bibles, was seized.

In January, the government issued a new decree banning any literature or media intended to "change" or "distort" a person's beliefs; both definitions are determined by the state on a case by case basis. The decree led to an increase in the seizure of religious literature by customs officials, including electronic media found in searches of personal electronic devices such as mobile phones and laptops.

The government reportedly limits academic freedom. Bribes are commonly required to gain entrance to exclusive universities and obtain good grades. Private discussion is limited by *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 April 2014, 28 activists scheduled to travel to Birdamlik's office in Tashkent to participate in the movement's first world congress via Skype were reportedly detained in their homes by local authorities, stopped on the road, or temporarily arrested.

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. Throughout 2014, human rights activists continued to face harassment, prosecution, travel restrictions, and violence. In March, activists Nuriddin Jumaniyazov and Fakhriddin Tillaev, who organized and assisted migrant workers, were sentenced to between six and eight years each for human trafficking; the sentences were upheld on appeal in April.

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 2008 creation 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, filing dubious charges of financial wrongdoing, or inventing witness testimony. During a trial in February and March 2014, the Ferghana provincial court judge recorded testimony from a witness who had died more than a year before the trial began, casting further doubt upon the procedural integrity in the judiciary.

In September, Human Rights Watch released a report detailing 34 cases of long-term political imprisonment in Uzbekistan, including two of the journalists imprisoned for the longest time in the world. 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 are 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 discussing 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; activists who attempt to help them form unions or organize for better labor conditions are routinely harassed and prosecuted.

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.

Widespread corruption and the government's tight control over the economy limit equality of opportunity. Multiple international monitors reported that forced adult labor had expanded to meet government quotas during the annual harvest campaign, which began in September 2014. Monitors also found that students older than 15 were forced into the fields on a less systematic but significant basis. While reports indicated that forced labor for children under 15 was less pervasive than in the past, multiple organizations confirmed the ongoing use of forced labor during the cotton harvest in 2014. A 2009 law imposed tougher penalties for child labor, and in 2012, Uzbekistan's prime minister pledged to end the practice completely. Self-reporting on social media sharply increased published accounts of people injured or killed during the harvest campaign due to unsafe labor conditions and use of people too young or infirm to withstand harsh conditions or operate machinery. Anecdotal reports allege 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.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

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