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Freedom House

Nations in Transit 2021 - Uzbekistan

CONSOLIDATED AUTHORITARIAN REGIME

4

/ 100

Democracy Percentage 4.17 / 100

Democracy Score 1.25 / 7

LAST YEAR'S DEMOCRACY PERCENTAGE & STATUS

2 / 100 Consolidated Authoritarian Regime

The ratings are based on a scale of 1 to 7, with 7 representing the highest level of democratic progress and 1 the lowest. The Democracy Score is an average of ratings for the categories tracked in a given year. The Democracy Percentage, introduced in 2020, is a translation of the Democracy Score to the 0-100 scale, where 0 equals least democratic and 100 equals most democratic.

Score changes in 2021

- Electoral Process rating improved from 1.00 to 1.25 due to increased toleration of independent voices, more acceptance of debate and free expression, and full access of international observers.
- Civil Society rating improved from 1.25 to 1.50 due to the increased role played by informal organizations in a largely unregulated digital space in response to crises during the year.
- Judicial Framework and Independence rating improved from 1.00 to 1.25 due to incremental improvements in judicial reform over the past several years, including blind case distribution legislation that strengthened judicial independence, an increasing acquittal rate, and further transparency on the number of prisoners.

As a result, Uzbekistan's Democracy Score improved from 1.14 to 1.25.

Executive Summary

By Anonymous

The fast pace of reforms in Uzbekistan that characterized President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's first three years in power slowed in 2020, as no important changes were introduced during the year and the government appeared to begin to lose momentum. Although the country did not experience reversals, there are warning signs that the reform agenda the president has charted could halt and even regress in the coming year. This is due in part to security services reasserting themselves through media pressure and episodic internet blocks as the country responded to the COVID-19 crisis.¹ For several years, the government has seemed to dampen its role in the public square, which has increased freedom of speech and other civil liberties. The gains made in the 2020 *Nations in Transit* scores, therefore, reflect progress that was built over previous years, especially in electoral institutions and judicial reforms.

The year showed increased government pressure on media and civil society in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. After instituting a harsh public lockdown in March with significant restrictions on the movement of citizens, President Mirziyoyev justified his approach by saying, "If we are not heavy-handed, the situation will worsen. . . . Japan prevented the rapid spread of the virus. Why? Because of strict orders."² A first lockdown of the capital Tashkent began on March 23 and ended nationally on June 1. The government instituted a second lockdown on July 10 that lasted until August 12.

Elections to the Oliy Majlis (Supreme Assembly) held in December 2019 (with runoff elections in January 2020) yielded a new, younger parliament. Although the electoral campaigns did not feature independent parties, there were more debates among candidates and substantive disagreements on policy issues. Independent journalists also had the opportunity to ask questions on live television, and the government allowed OSCE observers into the country. All of these moves generated expectations that the elections would be freer and yield a parliament that would be more active in drafting legislation and even challenging the executive. The results doubled the number of women and led to a slightly younger body. Members of parliament have been more active and engaged with constituents but have

not yet challenged the president collectively on any important issue. Although there were new dynamics in the elections, many of the staged elements stood in stark contrast to speeches by the president calling for more active members of parliament who will stand up and question the executive branch.

Uzbekistan faced a second public crisis with the collapse of the Sardoba reservoir dam in Sirdaryo region on May 1 after days of heavy wind and rains. The dam collapse killed six people and forced the evacuation of at least 100,000 on a territory spanning Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. President Mirziyoyev played an oversight role in the construction of the dam, which was designed when he served as Prime Minister under his predecessor, Islam Karimov. The government promised a swift response to the disaster, yet, even months later, many victims remained homeless and promises for aid had not been fulfilled.³

The media environment in Uzbekistan flourished in the years after Karimov’s death and has expanded every year since as local journalists have pushed the boundaries. However, the twin crises of COVID-19 and Sardoba put a halt to this progress. Several local journalists reported that censorship had increased and they were no longer able to publish their work in local outlets.

In August, prominent journalist Bobomurod Abdullaev was detained in Kyrgyzstan without government explanation and, two weeks later, extradited to Uzbekistan. When he returned to Tashkent in August, he was released but barred from traveling outside the country. In October, the government absolved him of all charges, again without explanation, and gave him an apartment in Tashkent.⁴ In November, he fled to Turkey for fear of being targeted by those opposing President Mirziyoyev’s reform agenda.⁵

Uzbekistan’s civic sector is growing despite government regulations that make it almost impossible for nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to register. Still, the presence of civil society is increasing on social media, making it the most independent at any point since the country’s independence. Although NGOs could more easily register in the 1990s, they did not engage in the kind of advocacy and pressure on officials witnessed in the past two years. Despite pressure, an indigenous Uzbekistani civic sector mobilized in ways previously unseen in response to both the COVID-19 pandemic and the Sardoba dam collapse. Spontaneously emergent organizations responded to these twin crises through the provision of charity and helping individuals access medical care.⁶ Individuals and groups mobilized on social media to provide aid and assistance targeting those most affected by the disasters, and the outpouring of charity on such a large scale, independent of the state, was something new to Uzbekistan. There were also protests against energy shortages around the country. In addition, a nascent women’s movement began to emerge.

International financial institutions provided Uzbekistan more than \$1 billion in credit to fight COVID-19. This influx of funds raised debates in society on the proper use and oversight of credit. Uzbekistan has had little experience with this, as the country, under former president Karimov, sought to isolate from financial markets and not take on foreign debt. Although the debt to GDP ratio remains quite low, there is also public hesitation to take on such debt, and bloggers and local media have raised questions about how such funds are used. One blogger who questioned the use of loans from the International Monetary Fund and Asian Development Bank was called in for questioning by authorities. In July, the Ministry of Finance held an unprecedented public roundtable organized by the independent media outlet Kun.uz to entertain questions from journalists, bloggers, and the international community on how it is managing these funds.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) noted positive trends in Uzbekistan, reporting that “the government took notable steps to address long-standing and significant religious freedom concerns.”⁷ The country still has thousands of religious prisoners, especially devout Muslims, who are accused of affiliating with banned religious groups.

Although an increasing number of Christian groups have been able to register, there are still significant causes for concern. According to media reports, the Committee on Religious Affairs under the Cabinet of Ministers updated a list of banned and prohibited religious content in the country, including banned sermons and materials from Islamic groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir, Jabhat al-Nusra, Tablighi Jamaat, and others.⁸

In a speech to the parliament on January 24, President Mirziyoyev announced a major reform of the *propiska*, a Soviet-era system of residency registration that limits the movement of citizens around the country.⁹ Although there were hopes that this reform would lead to significant changes, the draft law introduced by the Ministry of Interior altered few provisions of the old system. Rather than eliminating the registration system, the proposed changes require temporary residents to register with the police. Citizens are eligible to reregister multiple times to stay for longer periods, but this does not eliminate the registration requirement itself.¹⁰ Rather, it makes citizens who want to register dependent upon the whims of local officials.

Judicial reform has been one of Mirziyoyev’s top priorities since coming to power in 2016. After several years of discussion, the government introduced plea bargains into the justice system in 2020. A presidential decree issued in August said that plea bargains would be available as an option for some crimes when the defendant concedes guilt. According to the decree, plea bargains can yield more “humane” treatment of the accused but may only be carried out in the presence of a defense attorney.¹¹ Prosecutors had very little leeway prior to this. Thus, defense attorneys had little incentive to discuss mitigating circumstances or ask for reduced sentences.¹² The primary advocates association remains dependent upon the Ministry of Justice.

In January, Mirziyoyev announced the creation of a new Anti-Corruption Agency. Akmal Burhanov, a member of parliament from the city of Namangan and former leader of the government-organized NGO Yuksalish, was appointed head of this new agency. Burhanov has been a strong advocate for civil society.

Although Uzbekistan was hit hard by COVID-19, the World Bank reported that it still expected GDP growth in 2020 albeit at a paltry 1.6 percent rate, down from the 5.7 percent rate predicted earlier in the year. While this economic news is disappointing, Uzbekistan is the only country in the region that was predicted to experience any economic growth in 2020.

After several years of fast-paced reforms, Uzbekistan sits at a precipice. It made significant openings that unleashed a creative civil society and market dynamics. Although the reforms have slowed, President Mirziyoyev continues to call for democratization, decentralization, and speaks regularly about the need to protect freedom of speech and end abuse by officials. This raises the expectations of citizens that freedoms will be expanded, but whether the president and public officials can live up to the expectations they have created remains to be seen.

National Democratic Governance 1.00-7.00 pts

Considers the democratic character of the governmental system; and the independence, 1.00 / effectiveness, and accountability of the legislative and executive branches. 7.00

- A new parliament, the Oliy Majlis, was seated at the end of January 2020. Although the elections in late 2019 and runoffs in early 2020 were deemed neither free nor fair by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), there were still hopes that the new parliament would be more active than its predecessor. The number of women represented in the legislative chamber doubled from 16 percent in 2014 to 32 percent, and political parties were required by law to nominate women as 30 percent of candidates. The average age of members was slightly lower than the previous parliament, with 65 percent of new deputies under 50.^{[13](#)}
- Members of parliament (MPs) were more outspoken than those in the past but did not challenge the president on any significant issue. Individually, several MPs did press the government on important issues. In response to several deaths by torture in 2020, two legislators, Kadir Juraev and Rasul Kuserbaev, expressed deep dissatisfaction with the Ministry of Interior in June. Juraev called for a complete overhaul of the Ministry of Justice and the police. Kuserbaev went a step further and blamed the Interior Minister for the torture and murder under his watch.^{[14](#)}
- President Mirziyoyev called on members of the parliament to increase their role in governance, though many appear quite reticent to take on oversight roles. For example, in several speeches, he called for MPs to hold hearings for new ministers and call them to testify once per quarter to discuss their progress. This did not happen, as was apparent when Mirziyoyev appointed the Fergana governor Shuhrat Ganiev to be deputy prime minister overseeing the agricultural portfolio in September after his predecessor, Uktam Barnoev, died of COVID-19. The parliament held no hearings for Ganiev yet voted unanimously to appoint him despite his “accumulated record of nasty behavior and abusive language”^{[15](#)} towards journalists and those who were critical of him.^{[16](#)}
- One unexpected area where the parliament became involved was in foreign policy. During the 2019 election campaigns, most of the five officially sanctioned political parties expressed support to join the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), a Russia-dominated economic and trading bloc. Observers assumed this was because the government had supported joining the EAEU. In the spring, however, MPs began speaking out against their joining the union as full members, advocating instead to participate only as observers. These debates seemed to counter the government’s position on the issue.^{[17](#)}
- In March, Mirziyoyev signed a law making it easier to obtain citizenship, easing challenges for stateless persons. From 2007 to 2016, the country had not granted citizenship to any stateless persons. But since 2016, the president has signed a series of decrees that have given citizenship to more than 9,000 people.^{[18](#)}
- A presidential decree in April declared the establishment of a Public Chamber under the auspices of the president. Mirziyoyev first mentioned this in a speech to the parliament in January. According to the decree, this council should undertake public hearings, examinations, monitoring, and prepare annual reports about the state of Uzbekistani civil society. The primary goal is to create an effective dialogue between government bodies, civil society institutions, and citizens. The chamber is also tasked with helping further the Sustainable Development Goals as well as overseeing the *Mening Fikrim* website, which receives proposals from citizens on reforms.^{[19](#)}

Electoral Process 1.00-7.00 pts

Examines national executive and legislative elections, the electoral framework, the functioning of 1.25 / multiparty systems, and popular participation in the political process. 7.00

- On January 5, Uzbekistan held a second round of voting in the parliamentary elections. This runoff followed a first round held on December 22, 2019. These results solidified the composition of the 150-seat legislative chamber, or lower house, of the parliament. The OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report issued in May summarized the paradoxes of national democratic reform in Uzbekistan, stating, the elections “took place under improved legislation and with greater tolerance of independent voices but did not yet demonstrate genuine competition and full respect of election day procedures. [...] There is more acceptance of free expression, but few independent associations exist.”^{[20](#)}
- The election campaigns for the Oliy Majlis prior to the first round of voting were more vibrant than any held in the country’s history. Although none of the parliamentary candidates openly criticized the president or his

reforms, the campaigns did feature live debates and questions from independent journalists. While there was more pre-election campaigning and discussion of issues than ever before, none of the parties that won in the election were opposition parties.²¹ Still, citizens were more mobilized around the parliamentary elections and had greater information about candidates than in the past.

- The election campaigns featured five political parties that were all organized by the government, and all parties supported the president. Although there were some disagreements among party members that became evident during debates, these issues were on the margins of Mirziyoyev's broader reform framework. Candidates were outspoken on issues related to human rights and even criticized the country's long history of corruption and torture of citizens.²²
- Individual candidates did run political campaigns on social media on specific issues, and some even created political advertisements for YouTube and other online platforms.²³ These ads did not seem to be created or crafted by the government but were made by individual candidates.

Civil Society 1.00-7.00 pts

Assesses the organizational capacity and financial sustainability of the civic sector; the legal and political environment in which it operates; the functioning of trade unions; interest group participation in the policy process; and the threat posed by antidemocratic extremist groups.

1.50 /
7.00

- Amid the COVID-19 pandemic and the Sardoba dam collapse, the evolution of a diverse, spontaneously emergent civil society responded to these twin crises in the country. Individuals and groups mobilized on social media to provide aid and assistance targeting those most affected. Although there remain heavy restrictions, the virtual civic square online is still largely unregulated in Uzbekistan and creates space for social assistance and increasing levels of activism.²⁴
- Despite challenges in the legal framework to registering nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), civil society initiated important conversations over the past year. There was a significant expansion of civic sector activity around women's rights. In March, a festival was held to commemorate victims of domestic violence. There were also several public events, in person and online, designed to destigmatize discrimination against women. For the first time, important public conversations were had about feminism and the role of women in public life. In July, a group of women led a flash mob protesting domestic violence and "traditional" values that marginalize women.²⁵
- During the year, citizens around the country led unprecedented protests against gas and electricity cuts. These included demonstrations in Qashqadaryo, Andijan, Namangan, and Fergana regions.²⁶ The Agency of Information and Mass Communications warned journalists to stop covering the protests, citing national security interests. Despite warnings, journalists continued to report on these issues, which were actively discussed on social media.²⁷
- On January 1, new regulations on civil society reduced state fees for registration²⁸ along with the creation of an online portal for NGO registration at the Ministry of Justice where materials can be submitted electronically.²⁹
- In March 2020, a local human rights group, Huquqi Tayanch ("Legal Support"), successfully registered, making it the first such group to officially register since 2003.³⁰
- The government is developing a new NGO code, but it had not been released by year's end. Despite promises to make this process easier, analysts report that it takes NGOs from seven to ten months to register, involving multiple refusals and demands for corrected documents.³¹
- In response to concerns about fraud in charitable donations, the government sought to centralize such giving under the new Ministry for Mahalla and Family Support. Although this was intended to eliminate fraud among faux charities, it also limits the work of civil society organizations seeking to fill gaps left by the state.³²
- A draft law on religion introduced new freedoms such as allowing people to wear religious clothing in educational establishments and government offices. It reduced the number of people required to register a religious organization.³³ But it continued to limit freedom of religion by banning certain religious groups and prohibiting religious instruction without government permission while also maintaining censorship of all printed and electronic materials about religion.³⁴
- The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) noted positive trends in Uzbekistan, stating that "the government took notable steps to address long-standing and significant religious freedom concerns."³⁵ The country still has thousands of religious prisoners, especially devout Muslims, who are accused of affiliating with banned religious groups.
- The Committee on Religious Affairs under the Cabinet of Ministers updated a list of banned and prohibited religious content in the country, including banned sermons and materials from Islamic groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir, Jabhat al-Nusra, Tablighi Jamaat, and others.³⁶ In May, the government announced it had detained members of Hizb ut-Tahrir in the Fergana Valley as well as Tashkent and Surxondaryo regions.³⁷

Independent Media 1.00-7.00 pts

Examines the current state of press freedom, including libel laws, harassment of journalists, and editorial independence; the operation of a financially viable and independent private press; and the functioning of the public media.

1.25 /
7.00

- During the first pandemic lockdown in March, the government imposed strict rules on journalists that limited their ability to visit quarantine facilities and forbade doctors from speaking to the media without permission.³⁸
- In 2020, the government began censoring websites and blocking access to some social media platforms during the second quarantine in July. These limits were eventually lifted. In March, new legislation imposed a fine of over \$9,000 and a three-year sentence for those who manage or store materials intended to create panic among citizens. Those accused of disseminating false information about COVID-19 face two years in prison, and those accused of publishing "fake news" risk a three-year sentence.³⁹
- In August, Uzbek journalist Bobomurod Abdullaev was detained in Kyrgyzstan and, two weeks later, extradited to Uzbekistan. Abdullaev said he believed he was detained for authoring the Telegram channel Qora Mergan (Black Assassin), which published articles critical of the government.⁴⁰ He was extradited to Tashkent on August 22 and immediately released. In October, the government absolved him of all charges.⁴¹
- Journalists began to openly complain about censorship during the year. Alisher Ruziohunov (Kun.uz) wrote publicly about efforts to censor his work. Nikita Makarenko resigned from his position at Gazeta.uz, complaining that editors were no longer interested in publishing his critical work. He continues to publish independently on other platforms and his Telegram channel. Despite these challenges, domestic reporting has increased on the government's efforts to censor the media.⁴² The year featured several attacks on bloggers. In January, Nafosat Ollashukurova, a blogger from the city of Urganch, fled the country after being forced into a psychiatric institution for 10 days in September 2019. She was freed but continued to face harassment.⁴³
- Journalists covering the collapse of the Sardoba dam in May were harassed by officials, especially those who tried to report on government malfeasance. For example, two reporters from Human.uz were forced to remove footage from their cameras after interviewing displaced citizens. A reporter with the state news agency Uza.uz, Anora Sodykova, was fired from her position when she wrote a Facebook post describing the conditions among the displaced.⁴⁴ Two sports commentators, Bobur Akmalov and Jamollidin Bobojonov, were fired from Sport TV after making comments critical of the government.⁴⁵
- Three journalists in Karakalpakstan had their computers and phones confiscated and were detained by security services in July for reporting on the alleged death of Musa Yerniyazov, speaker of the parliament of this autonomous republic (the effective head of state). Prosecutors said they had been detained as "preventative measures."⁴⁶ Apparently, Yerniyazov died only days later on July 31.⁴⁷
- Journalists have successfully sued the government for mistreatment. In January, a court found an official in Andijan region guilty of libel after accusing journalist Xurshid Daliyev of being a member of a banned Islamic group in retaliation for his critical reporting. Jamshid Umarov, a blogger in Samarkand reporting on the parliamentary runoff elections, was beat up by a former local official and took the matter to court. The former official was forced to apologize.⁴⁸
- The country saw widespread but unprecedented localized protests against electricity and gas shortages during late November and December. Villagers across several regions blocked roads or protested in front of government offices to express their discontent with the interruption of energy supplies to their homes.⁴⁹
- In December, the Agency of Information and Mass Communications warned some of the country's top media outlets that it would take action against them for hurting the government's image, reporting inaccurate statistics, and increasing sentiment against the government.⁵⁰ Media outlets pushed back forcefully against these accusations, and none of the charges had come to fruition by year's end.

Local Democratic Governance 1.00-7.00 pts

Considers the decentralization of power; the responsibilities, election, and capacity of local governmental bodies; and the transparency and accountability of local authorities.

7.00

- In January, President Mirziyoyev announced the elimination of the *propiska*, a Soviet-era system of residency registration that limits citizens' freedom of movement.⁵¹ But the draft law introduced by the Ministry of Interior altered few provisions of the old system. Rather than eliminating the system, the proposed changes require temporary residents to register with the police. Citizens are eligible to reregister multiple times to stay for longer periods, but this does not eliminate the registration requirement.⁵²
- In a September speech to the country's governors, Mirziyoyev announced that the people would be responsible for electing regional (provincial) and district governors in the future. He first made this proposal in a speech in December 2016 and he repeated his intention in August 2017. To date, all governors and mayors at the subnational level are appointed by Tashkent. At the same speech, the president announced that governors would be evaluated by the central government according to a set of established criteria to help promote entrepreneurship in the regions. Those governors who serve the interests of entrepreneurs most effectively will receive a 30 percent salary increase, while underperformers will be penalized.⁵³
- In February, the president announced a new Ministry for Mahalla and Family Support.⁵⁴ According to the constitution, Mahallas are local self-governing bodies, but since the early 1990s, their work has been co-opted by the state. This move formalized the role of these bodies as firmly state-controlled bodies, recognizing their previously de facto status.
- Mahallas played an important role in the COVID-19 pandemic recovery. During the country's second lockdown in July, mahalla committee chairpersons distributed cash directly to the public. Their ability to distribute assistance funds came under heavy fire from citizens who felt these individuals were not only inefficient but also corrupt.⁵⁵

- The government said it would eliminate quotas for cotton and wheat in 2020. On March 6, Mirziyoyev signed a historic decree that abolished the state-order system of cotton. On January 28, the president signed a decree that would reduce and eventually eliminate orders for wheat through the state-order system.⁵⁶ Reducing the role of the state in cotton and wheat harvests and introducing market mechanisms decreases the leverage that provincial and district governors have over the local population. The quota system emerged under the Soviet regime and encouraged forced labor.
- There were continued local protests over land confiscations and home demolitions, but these demonstrations were fewer and less intense than in the previous year.⁵⁷ In Tashkent region, there was a large protest against local authorities in response to a redistricting plan. Protesters were upset that the changes would create new administrative barriers for employment, would require children to change schools, and would affect property values. After the protests, authorities eliminated the plan.⁵⁸

Judicial Framework and Independence 1.00-7.00 pts

Assesses constitutional and human rights protections, judicial independence, the status of ethnic minority rights, guarantees of equality before the law, treatment of suspects and prisoners, and compliance with judicial decisions. 1.25 / 7.00

- For the first time, the government moved to share more information about Uzbekistan's criminal justice system.⁵⁹ In 2020, Interior Minister Pulat Bobojonov began to make public the number of incarcerated as well as list their crimes. These statistics underscored public concerns about domestic violence in the country, as one third of all homicides occur within families. The government also released data on the number of women who have requested orders of protection.⁶⁰
- After several years of discussion, authorities began allowing plea bargains in judicial proceedings. A presidential decree issued in August stated that plea bargains would be available as an option for some crimes when the defendant concedes guilt. According to the decree, plea bargains can yield more "humane" treatment of the accused, but they may only be carried out in the presence of a defense attorney.⁶¹ In the past, defense attorneys had little incentive to discuss mitigating circumstances or ask for reduced sentences.⁶²
- A human rights activist successfully sued the government for wrongful detention. In October, a court in Qashqadaryo region ruled that the state should pay \$5,800 in compensation to Chuyan Mamatkulov, a human rights defender who was imprisoned for five years and eventually acquitted. Mamatkulov had asked for \$48,300 in damages.⁶³ Another human rights activist, Elyor Tursunov, whose case is pending, seeks damages of \$20,000. Both activists were held in the notorious Jaslyk prison, which was closed in 2019.⁶⁴
- The government continues to use secret trials that deprive prisoners of their rights. Several former intelligence officials were tried by military tribunals for espionage in secret. On January 9, Kadyr Yusupov, a retired diplomat, was sentenced to a five-and-a-half-year prison sentence. The government never made the charges public and held the trial in secret. Yusupov's family alleges that authorities denied him access to medication, tortured him, and denied access to a lawyer while in prison.⁶⁵ In March, a military court sentenced Vladimir Kaloshin, a retired army colonel and former correspondent for the Defense Ministry newspaper *Vatanparvar*, to 12 years in prison on treason charges.⁶⁶ Rafik Sayfullin, former director of Institute for Strategic and Regional Studies, was sentenced to 12 years in prison for espionage.
- In response to recommendations issued in a 2020 report by the UN Special Rapporteur on the Independence of Judges and Lawyers, Uzbekistan created an independent bar association, currently under the Ministry of Justice. Yet, a year after this visit, no actions have been taken to guarantee the independence of lawyers, thus placing severe limitations on access to justice.
- Despite President Mirziyoyev's call to end torture in Uzbekistan, it still occurs and news outlets increasingly report on such abuses. In January, Yusuf Abdurahmonov of Qashqadaryo was detained by police for allegedly stealing cattle. Local police tortured him to death.⁶⁷ Police officers were disciplined by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and given prison sentences ranging from four to nine years.⁶⁸ In May, Alijon Abudkarimov of Andijan died from injuries in detention. In response to these deaths, the parliamentary Commissioner for Human Rights said these incidents were a "shame" on the government and called for radical reform of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. He announced a State Committee on the Prevention of Torture.⁶⁹ Deputy Justice Minister Rustam Hatamov said the government would install video cameras in interrogation rooms—this despite President Mirziyoyev's decree in April 2017 requiring interrogation facilities to have such cameras by January 2018.⁷⁰

Corruption 1.00-7.00 pts

Looks at public perceptions of corruption, the business interests of top policymakers, laws on financial disclosure and conflict of interest, and the efficacy of anticorruption initiatives. 1.25 / 7.00

- President Mirziyoyev announced the creation of a new Anti-Corruption Agency in January. Akmal Burhanov, an MP and former leader of Yuksalish, a government-organized NGO focused on building civil society, was appointed head of the new agency.⁷¹
- The chairperson of the Senate (the parliament's upper house), Tanzila Narbaeva, said that employees in the health ministry across several regions had allegedly embezzled more than 1 billion 750 million soms (around USD \$170,000) of funds intended to help citizens fight COVID-19. The recently established anticorruption agency was tasked with conducting research and analysis into this alleged malfeasance. In her statement, she noted that there was very little effective public oversight of government and that reforms in this area are needed.⁷² The government also charged a local charity, Mercy and Health Foundation, for embezzling \$273,000 in coronavirus assistance.⁷³ Leaders of the organization tried to sell drugs and equipment they had

received. The organization had been granted more than \$20 million from billionaire Alisher Usmanov to support pandemic recovery.⁷⁴

- Although there are widespread reports of corruption on social media, there is little systematic discussion of this issue among registered NGOs. It is difficult for civil society activists to speak about corruption. A local blogger, Miraziz Bazarov, posted a letter to the International Monetary Fund and Asian Development Bank on his Facebook page. He urged these bodies to exercise extreme caution in giving loans to the Uzbek government due to its lack of transparency.⁷⁵ On July 27, the State Security Service called him in for questioning.⁷⁶
- The first pandemic lockdown created increased public space for the Ministry of Interior, which was responsible for enforcing the measure. The government reinstated interregional policy posts, which had vanished in 2017 after President Mirziyoyev criticized them as a site of corruption. The efforts to enforce the quarantine meant that Ministry of Interior officials began interrogating citizens and asking them about their comings and goings on the street and could fine them for not wearing face masks. The reintroduction of so many officers with a broad writ to enforce violations led to an increase in opportunities for petty corruption.⁷⁷
- The year saw the prosecution of two former high-level officials for corruption charges. In February, a military court sentenced former General Prosecutor Otabek Muradov to a five-year prison sentence for corruption. In September, the Supreme Court issued an 18-year prison sentence to his predecessor, Ikhtiyor Abdullaev.⁷⁸ The proceedings for both cases occurred behind closed doors, making it difficult to learn the scope of their alleged corruption and charges.
- A court in Tashkent found Gulnara Karimova, daughter of former president Islam Karimov, guilty of several criminal charges including embezzlement and extortion. Her 13-year prison sentence will be served concurrently with previous sentences issued in December 2017 for tax evasion, corruption, and other charges. Authorities are searching for over \$1.5 billion in foreign assets held by Karimova as well as artwork worth over \$30 million.⁷⁹

Footnotes

- ¹Benjamin Godwin, “Uzbekistan’s COVID-19 Response Exposes Tashkent’s Reform Successes and Failures,” The Diplomat, September 25, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/09/uzbekistans-covid-19-response-exposes-t-...>
- ²Umida Hashimova, “Uzbekistan Adopts Strict Regulations to Fight COVID-19,” The Diplomat, April 6, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/uzbekistan-adopts-strict-regulations-to-...>
- ³Agnieszka Pikulicka-Wilczewska, “Uzbeks Search for Answers and Stability after Deadly Dam Collapse,” Aljazeera.com, September 23, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2020/9/23/uzbek-dam-collapse>
- ⁴“Uzbekistan Drops Controversial Case Against Journalist, Gifts Him An Apartment,” RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, October 24, 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/uzbekistan-drops-controversial-case-against-jou-...>
- ⁵Navbahor Imamova, Twitter, November 22, 2020, <https://twitter.com/navbahor/status/1330550079627939841>
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