

Nations in Transit 2014 - Uzbekistan

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Capital: Tashkent

Population: 29.8 million

GNI/capita, PPP: US\$4,970

Source: The data above are drawn from The World Bank, *World Development Indicators 2014*.

2014 Scores

Democracy Score (1 = best, 7 = worst): 6.93

Regime Classification: Consolidated Authoritarian Regime

National Democratic Governance (1 = best, 7 = worst): 7.00

Electoral Process (1 = best, 7 = worst): 7.00

Civil Society (1 = best, 7 = worst): 7.00

Independent Media (1 = best, 7 = worst): 7.00

Local Democratic Governance (1 = best, 7 = worst): 6.75

Judicial Framework and Independence (1 = best, 7 = worst): 7.00

Corruption (1 = best, 7 = worst): 6.75

NOTE: The ratings reflect the consensus of Freedom House, its academic advisers, and the author(s) of this report. The opinions expressed in this report are those of the author(s). The ratings are based on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 representing the highest level of democratic progress and 7 the lowest. The Democracy Score is an average of ratings for the categories tracked in a given year.

Executive Summary:

Since 1991, Uzbekistan has been ruled by Islam Karimov, a communist apparatchik turned nationalist dictator who has retained the most pernicious aspects of Soviet rule. Karimov was appointed first secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Uzbekistan in 1989 and maintained his hold on the country during the Soviet transition period. Obsessed with threats to his power, Karimov employs a massive security apparatus to monitor the activities of real and perceived opponents and to scan the Uzbek population for signs of dissent. His regime has banned opposition groups, persecuted civil society activists, and nearly eradicated independent media. Citizens are arrested on arbitrary charges, denied due process, and tortured during interrogation and in prison. Since the events in Andijon in May 2005, when government forces

opened fire on a crowd of protesters, including women and children, Uzbekistan's regime has become increasingly insular, opposing foreign efforts to monitor or intervene in domestic political affairs and rejecting cooperation with international organizations.

In 2013, Uzbekistan was subject to international condemnation that did little to curb repressive policies. Forced labor, child labor, and human trafficking continued, despite monitoring efforts from international groups. Uzbekistan cooperated with other authoritarian former Soviet republics in the extradition of refugees, who face torture and prison at home. Corruption remained pervasive while fallout from the 2012 international money-laundering and bribery scandals hurt the finances and reputation of the presidential family.

National Democratic Governance. The Karimov regime offers citizens no opportunities to meaningfully participate in the country's political system. Pervasive surveillance and intimidation by the state's security apparatus persisted in 2013. Unemployment remained high, prompting millions of citizens to work abroad as migrant laborers, which the government mocked and condemned. Clashes over resources and territory soured relations between Uzbekistan and neighboring states. *Uzbekistan's rating for national democratic governance remains unchanged at 7.00.*

Electoral Process. Elections in Uzbekistan are preordained affairs, orchestrated to maintain the power of Karimov's allies. All opposition parties are denied registration. Despite the existence of a constitutional term limit, Karimov has been in office for more than 20 years. In 2013, rumors of a presidential successor swirled as foreign media reported plots against first daughter Gulnara Karimova from members of the Karimov administration. *Uzbekistan's rating for electoral process remains unchanged at 7.00.*

Civil Society. Human rights activists, Karimov critics, and devout Muslims continued to be the targets of brutal attacks, bogus legal charges, and other punitive measures. State agents harassed dissidents and their family members, including relatives of dissidents living abroad, as exemplified in the arrest of the Uzbekistan-based father of the leader of the US-based Birdamlik People's Movement. Surveillance and intimidation by the national security services is rampant. In 2013, several elderly dissidents were arrested on what appear to be fabricated charges, with rape accusations used to justify unlawful detention. *Uzbekistan's rating for civil society remains unchanged at 7.00.*

Independent Media. The Karimov regime has all but eradicated free media in Uzbekistan. The few independent journalists who remain are subjected to harassment and detention. As most of the country's independent journalists have fled the country, foreign-based Uzbek websites and their contributors are now the primary targets of government censorship. The regime continued to restrict access to both domestic and foreign websites, issuing new censorship directives, attacking proxy servers, and blocking several popular news sources. They also cracked down on popular music deemed insufficiently loyal to national objectives and stripped musicians of their performing licenses. *Uzbekistan's rating for independent media remains unchanged at 7.00.*

Local Democratic Governance. Most local and regional officials are chosen by the state, without input from Uzbek citizens. *Mahallas*, or neighborhood councils, serve as the eyes and ears of the central government, reporting suspicious activities to higher authorities and working to preempt manifestations of antigovernment sentiment. In line with regime directives, local authorities

continued to abuse their power by forcing citizens to work in cotton fields, at the expense of educational and professional activities.

Although the Uzbek government allowed an international labor group to monitor harvest conditions, state officials directed citizens to lie to investigators about forced and child labor. *Uzbekistan's rating for local democratic governance remains unchanged at 6.75.*

Judicial Framework and Independence. The Karimov regime maintains strict control over the judicial system, routinely violating citizens' fundamental legal rights. Citizens are arrested on arbitrary charges, denied due process, given lengthy prison terms, and even tortured. Uzbekistan cooperated with Russia and other authoritarian states on the extradition of refugees and other targeted citizens. In 2013, the International Committee of the Red Cross halted prison visits due to the "unconstructive attitude" of Uzbek officials. *Uzbekistan's rating for judicial framework and independence remains unchanged at 7.00.*

Corruption. In 2013, a series of telecom industry money-laundering and bribery scandals in Europe were linked to President Karimov's daughter, Gulnara Karimova, resulting in friction within the ruling family. Hundreds of millions of dollars in accounts belonging to Karimov family associates were frozen. In June, the US State Department dropped Uzbekistan from Tier 2 to Tier 3 on its annual Trafficking in Persons report, citing forced labor, child labor, sex trafficking, bribery, and the arrest of forced sex laborers as prostitutes. *Uzbekistan's corruption rating remains unchanged at 6.75.*

Outlook for 2014. Survival, not politics, is likely to remain Uzbeks' primary concern in 2013. Corruption is endemic, and the national security services wield enormous power over Uzbekistan's civil affairs. Though Uzbek government officials pay lip service to international monitoring efforts, it is unlikely they will reform their forced labor practices in a significant way. Migrant labor will increase and the status of migrants will continue to be a contentious issue for Uzbeks in Uzbekistan and abroad. Despite rumors that Karimov is preparing a successor, there is no proof that the president intends to leave office at or before his next opportunity for reelection in 2015. Moreover, there is no reason to believe that a hand-picked successor would adopt a more humane approach to governing.

National Democratic Governance:

Meeting with local farmers and officials in Uzbekistan's Jizzakh and Sirdaryo regions in June 2013, President Islam Karimov proclaimed that Uzbekistan's "lazy" people had mostly left the country. "I describe as lazy," the president explained, "those who go to Moscow and sweep its streets and squares. One feels disgusted with Uzbeks going there for a slice of bread." He added that Uzbekistan was free of beggars because "people's dignity does not allow them to do that."^[1]

The statement, which was broadcast on national television, elicited outrage from the only Uzbek citizens who could safely express it – namely, those living outside of the country, including in Moscow, where migrant laborers remit earnings that constitute 16.3 percent of Uzbekistan's economy.^[2] By lashing out at migrant workers – whose number is estimated at three to five million – Uzbekistan's leader of more than two decades demonstrated one of the many ways in which his administration is oblivious (or impervious) to the hardships faced by its citizens.^[3] Earlier in the

year, Karimov called those who could not find jobs in Uzbekistan's economy a "shame on the nation."^[4]

Mass outmigration challenges the carefully crafted fiction – bolstered by gross domestic product growth in 2011 and 2012 – that Uzbekistan's economy is thriving. In reality, poverty is widespread in the country, and the World Bank estimates that 20 to 30 percent of the population is unemployed.^[5] Heritage Foundation data puts inflation at 12.8 percent for 2013.^[6] In January, the government also banned the sale of foreign banknotes to citizens, causing the value of Uzbekistan's national currency to drop dramatically on the country's black market.^[7]

Within Uzbekistan, criticism of government policies, economic and otherwise, is dangerous. In violation of the constitution, which guarantees freedoms of speech, media, and religion, the Karimov regime uses legal and extralegal mechanisms to deny citizens any participation in political life. Throughout 2013, Uzbeks experienced tight restrictions on civic engagement and personal expression, while the National Security Service (SNB), a massive surveillance force responsible for curtailing perceived threats to the regime, monitored and harassed citizens.

Only four political parties, all progovernment, are currently registered in the country. Unregistered opposition groups function primarily in exile. In 2011, the parliament gained the right to nominate the prime minister, who must then be approved by the president. The chairman of the senate was also named the president's successor in case of death or incapacitation. These two reforms have served to minimize the power of the prime minister and strengthen the role of parliament. Analysts view the changes as either window-dressing or moves by Karimov to manipulate rival elites.

Vigilant against challenges to Uzbekistan's internal stability, the Karimov regime is equally convinced that the country's sovereignty is in danger from abroad. Throughout 2013, the Uzbek government engaged in contentious negotiations with neighboring states over resources and territory. The year opened with clashes in Sokh, an island of territory controlled by Uzbekistan, entirely surrounded by Kyrgyzstan's Batken province, and populated mainly by ethnic Tajiks. Residents of Sokh seized roughly 30 residents of a Kyrgyz village after an alleged conflict with Kyrgyz border-guards. Though the hostages were freed within days, tensions in the region remained high.^[8] Border checkpoints were closed, making it impossible for residents to obtain food and gasoline until they reopened two weeks later. Talks between Uzbek and Kyrgyz state officials in March led to no firm resolution.^[9] Relations with Tajikistan were also strained after Uzbekistan banned the road transportation of liquefied natural gas, cutting off Tajikistan's gas supply at the height of winter.^[10]

High-level visits between U.S., European, and Uzbek officials continued throughout 2013, even after neighboring Kyrgyzstan decided not to renew the U.S.'s lease of the Manas military airbase, reducing America's presence in the region.^[11] Uzbekistan continued to cooperate with Russia on security issues – in particular, the extradition of migrants and refugees – but maintained a fiercely independent, isolationist public profile.

Electoral Process:

Since Uzbekistan gained independence in late 1991, no elections held there have been judged free or fair by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). The OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) declined to send a full election monitoring

team to the last parliamentary elections in 2009 because the system in Uzbekistan does not meet minimal standards for democratic elections by "offer[ing] the electorate a genuine choice."^[12]

Popular elections are only held for the office of the president and the lower house of parliament (*Oliy Majlis*). Only four registered parties – the Democratic Party of Uzbekistan, the Adolat (Justice) Social Democratic Party, the Liberal Democratic Party, and Milliy Tiklanish (National Revival) – are allowed to nominate candidates and participate in elections. In the last presidential election, in 2007, all four parties proclaimed their loyalty to President Karimov. No opposition parties are allowed to register, and there is no way for an independent candidate or a candidate from a civic group to run. The next presidential election is set to be held in 2015.

Though Uzbekistan's constitution states that the same person cannot be president for more than two consecutive terms, Karimov has served three since 1992.^[13] In 1995 and 2002, national referendums extended his term and postponed elections. In 2002, the parliament passed a law lengthening the presidential term from five to seven years. Karimov's supporters argued that the change nullified his previous terms and justified his stay in power. In December 2011, the parliament cut the presidential term back to five years, a move that potentially creates a new loophole for his next reelection. The state press praised the shortening of term length as emblematic of Karimov's tradition of democratic reform.^[14]

In 2013, unsubstantiated rumors spread online that 75-year-old Karimov was in poor health, and choosing a successor. Rumored candidates included first deputy prime minister Rustam Azimov; the chairman of Uzbekistan's National Security Service, Rustam Inoyatov; Prime Minister Shavkat Mirziyayev; and Karimov's billionaire daughter, Gulnara Karimova, who works as a fashion designer, philanthropist, and aspiring pop star.^[15]

Karimova, who returned to Uzbekistan in 2013 after being investigated for money laundering in Switzerland, France, and Sweden,^[16] appears more eager for contact with the outside world than her father. Her use of Twitter to engage followers and spar with Western critics was initially viewed as a state-sanctioned effort to boost her popularity. But by year's end, few considered Karimova a likely candidate to replace Karimov, who is rumored to view his daughter's financial scandals abroad as a vulnerability.^[17] In September, Karimova's younger sister, Lola, told BBC Uzbek that Gulnara would never succeed their father and emphasized their estrangement.^[18] Karimova responded by saying that her sister "practiced witchcraft"^[19] and by comparing her plight to that of the doomed sons of Joseph Stalin.^[20] She later accused other officials in the administration of trying to poison her.^[21]

Though Karimova's proclamations shed some light on Uzbekistan's dynastic politics, the electoral process itself remained unchanged: a matter of elite machinations divorced from civic engagement and removed from public view.

Civil Society:

Backed by a formidable Interior Ministry and security forces, Karimov has eliminated nearly all civil society groups that do not embrace state policies. Criticism of local officials, judges, and law enforcement representatives is rarely permitted. A few small independent rights organizations remain in Uzbekistan, including Ezgulik (Virtue), the Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan (HRSU), the Expert Working Group (composed of members of Ezgulik and the HRSU), and the

Initiative Group of Independent Rights Defenders of Uzbekistan. Other organizations, like the Birdamlik (Solidarity) People's Movement and Sunshine Uzbekistan, are run primarily by Uzbek exiles abroad but have members in Uzbekistan, all of whom face constant harassment by state officials.

One of the SNB's most common tactics of intimidation has been to punish the family members and friends of dissidents in the hopes of curtailing their activity. In 2013, this tactic was applied to Uzbeks living outside the country. The most prominent example was the detention of Hasan Choriyev, the 71-year-old father of Birdamlik leader Bahodir Choriyev.^[22] In June, the elder Choriyev was taken away by police in his hometown of Shahrissabz to an undisclosed location.^[23] He was later charged with raping a 19-year-old woman, despite the fact that the ailing Choriyev, who has had his prostate removed, is physically incapable of forced sexual intercourse.^[24] (Rape accusations are a common pretext for detention in Uzbekistan. In August, another activist, Fakhriddin Tillaev, was accused of rape and then beaten by a crowd; Tillaev denied the allegation and was never charged.^[25])

A few weeks before his father's arrest, Bahodir Choriyev had announced his ambition to run for president on a popular diaspora website.^[26] The Choriyev family believes that this declaration, as well as their near-decade of political activity, prompted their father's arrest. Seven of the ten Choriyev siblings live in St. Louis, Missouri, where they operate a trucking business. One told Al Jazeera English that the arrest would not deter Birdamlik's political aims: "We love our father. But we're not changing our fight. Because there are thousands of people like him, thousands of people in jail for no reason."^[27] On 28 June, the brothers covered their semi-trucks in Birdamlik banners and drove to Washington, DC, for a protest against the Karimov regime.^[28] The demonstration shut down Massachusetts Avenue.

On 3 July, Birdamlik activists in Uzbekistan went to the prosecutor's office to protest Hasan Choriyev's detention. As soon as they arrived, they were beaten by a group of about 20 people and each charged a \$2,200 fine for holding an unsanctioned demonstration.^[29] In August, Hasan Choriyev was sentenced to five and a half years in prison.^[30]

The arrest of Choriyev is part of a broader strategy to curtail Uzbek dissident activity abroad. It follows attacks on Uzbek exiles allegedly orchestrated by the Uzbek government and carried out by agents of the SNB, including the shooting of outspoken imam Obidxon Qori Nazarov in Sweden in 2012, the murder of imam and People's Movement of Uzbekistan activist Fuad Rustamkhojaev in Russia in 2011, and the murder of the ethnic Uzbek journalist Alisher Saipov in his native country of Kyrgyzstan in 20.^[31]

Other politically active Uzbek exiles faced difficulty abroad. In June, former British embassy official Kayum Ortikov revealed that he had been tortured by Uzbek authorities after being accused of being a spy.^[32] The Ortikov family, living as refugees in Ukraine, asked for asylum in Britain, but their requests were ignored.^[33] At the end of the year, the Ortikovs were given asylum in the United States.^[34]

Activists aiding Uzbeks with their struggle were also threatened. In January, Vitalii Ponomarev, the lead Central Asia expert with Memorial Human Rights Center in Moscow, received three threatening emails all stemming from an IP address in Tashkent. Ponomarev believes they were from the SNB. The anonymous authors threatened to kill Ponomarev, or Ponomarev and his family,

if he continued to go to southern Kyrgyzstan. Ponomarev had previously documented the 2010 ethnic violence in southern Kyrgyzstan as well as SNB activity in Russia.^[35]

In 2013, the Uzbek government continued to pay lip service to improving civil society. In January, in a self-declared "act of humanism" commemorating the country's 20th anniversary, the government amnestied 840 inmates, with no political prisoners among them.^[36] In April, they released activist Mamadali Mahmudov, imprisoned since 1999, a week before U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Robert Blake visited Tashkent. Since his release, Mahmudov, 72, has remained silent on political matters in Uzbekistan.

Many dissidents arrested in Uzbekistan in 2013 were among the older generation who were active in the late Soviet transition period when Karimov took power. In August, 75-year-old activist Turaboi Juraboev was sentenced to five years in prison for extortion,^[37] and in September, Bobomurod Razzakov, the 61-year-old leader of the Ezgulik movement, was sentenced to four years for involvement in human trafficking.^[38] Both Juraboev and Razzakov were outspoken critics of the Karimov regime and had condemned its use of forced labor in the cotton industry.^[39]

Independent Media:

Uzbekistan's national and local media outlets parrot state rhetoric, while independent media have been almost eradicated through decades of government intimidation and censorship. The 2005 Andijon events marked a turning point for Uzbek media, as state authorities sought to control coverage of the violence and its aftermath by expelling foreign journalists from Uzbekistan; most are still denied entry today. The majority of independent Uzbek journalists have fled the country, and many now run websites that report on and critique state politics. As a result, foreign-based independent Uzbek websites and their contributors are now the primary focus of government censorship efforts. The few remaining independent journalists in Uzbekistan are routinely harassed and imprisoned on charges ranging from defamation to extortion, forgery to smuggling.

Compared to previous years, fewer journalists were arrested in Uzbekistan in 2013. There are few independent journalists left to arrest. In July, the Tashkent-based website Uzmehornom briefly shut down after a military prosecutor threatened the site's owner for covering a shooting on the Uzbek-Kyrgyz border.^[40] The website, known for conspiratorial and controversial reports on Uzbekistan's political affairs, reopened a few days later. In September, journalist Sergei Naumov was arrested after going missing and sentenced to 12 days in jail for assaulting a woman. Naumov, a well-known critic of forced labor in the cotton fields, denies the charges and says they are politically motivated.^[41]

In June, the Uzbek government moved to develop a bylaw to regulate bloggers, deeming them equivalent to mainstream media and requiring citizens get a license to blog.^[42] Political blogging is rare in Uzbekistan since most citizens self-censor online. The bylaw, if passed, would make what is already tacitly forbidden fully illegal and would prevent critics from writing under pseudonyms.^[43]

Throughout 2013, Uzbekistan continued to block access to foreign websites covering politics in Central Asia, including RFE/RL, Uznews.net, Ferghana.ru, and Registan.net. Authorities also cracked down on the proxy servers many Uzbeks use to access prohibited websites. In October, Ferghana.ru reported that some websites had become temporarily unblocked, but they were blocked again days later.^[44] While blocking foreign websites, the government also developed websites that

covered topics like religion and politics, such as Olam.uz, Mezon.uz, Ladoshki.uz, and Islom.uz. State-sanctioned religious figures are sometimes given slightly more leeway to comment on current affairs so long as they do not directly criticize the Uzbek government.^[45]

In 2013, the government cracked down on pop culture both in Uzbekistan and beyond. In June, the Uzbekistan's Culture and Sports Ministry announced a ban on "meaningless" songs that fail to "praise the motherland."^[46] They singled out the pop groups Mango and Ummon and singers Dilduza Rahimova, Otabek Mutalhojaev, and Dilshod Rakhmonov for being "meaningless from musical and lyrical standpoints" and stripped them of the licenses that had allowed them to perform in public.^[47] Other pop stars were given a deadline of 1 July to reform. In October, Jasur Umerov, a popular Uzbek singer, was stripped of his performing license after he failed to take part in mandatory cotton harvesting.^[48] Foreign pop culture was also decried: in April, Uzbek cultural officials declared the popular "Harlem Shake" dance a "vortex full of meaninglessness and shamelessness."^[49]

Local Democratic Governance:

In Uzbekistan, the state appoints key local officials based on their loyalty and ability to fulfill demands from Tashkent. Provincial governors are usually rotated every few years, apparently in order to prevent any single official from gaining significant power. *Mahallas*, or neighborhood councils, the most localized level of governance, are expected to report suspicious activities to higher authorities in order to eliminate antigovernment sentiment. Local officials also continue to follow national directives that force Uzbek citizens, including children, to work in the country's cotton fields.

The use of forced and child labor in Uzbekistan's cotton industry has long been the target of domestic and international human rights campaigns. Local officials in Uzbekistan are tasked with ensuring that enough residents work in cotton fields to meet government-set production targets. Children and teenagers are forced to pick cotton and are told it is their patriotic duty.

Following years of international criticism, in 2013 the Uzbek government approved the International Labor Organization (ILO) to deploy teams to Uzbekistan to monitor the harvest.^[50] In preparation for the monitoring, the Uzbek government allegedly ordered citizens to hide the conditions of the harvest from the organization. "My brother told me that all students were ordered to write a statement that they have never picked cotton in their life – even their elder siblings have never been forced to pick cotton – and that only during the Soviet era had some of their relatives taken part in the cotton harvest," one source wrote in a message to Radio Free Europe's Uzbek-language Ozodlik service.^[51]

Ozodlik played an instrumental role in bringing evidence of cotton field conditions to the public. Uzbeks used cell phones to send testimonials, documents, and photos, which the service posted online.^[52] One student identifying as Shokhrukh, using the WhatsApp mobile-messaging application, wrote that students were given instructions on how to answer ILO questions: "We have to say we are picking cotton completely voluntarily to help our government, to relentlessly work to help improve our country's economy."^[53]

Despite the presence of ILO monitors, the cotton harvest continued to structure the lives of ordinary Uzbeks in the same detrimental ways it had in the past. Hospitals were short-staffed as doctors,

nurses, and surgeons were sent into the fields to pick cotton.^[54] Parents in Jizzakh were told by local officials that the social service benefits for their children were being withheld to pay for their "place" in the cotton field. They were also told they could pay \$55 to avoid the harvest.^[55] Parents of college students in Angren were told that if their teenagers did not pick cotton they would not be allowed to matriculate.^[56]

By September, several Uzbek citizens had died in the harvest, including a six-year-old who suffocated under a cotton load in a trailer, multiple stabbing victims in the mandatory cotton-picking site in Qashqadaryo province, and one victim of electrocution.^[57] There were also two suicides in the fields. On 17 October, a 38-year-old cotton farmer committed suicide on his own field after Uzbek officials berated him for not meeting his quota, telling him "You would be better off hanging yourself."^[58] On 22 September, a female college student committed suicide in a cotton field in Karakalpakstan after being insulted by teachers monitoring the harvesting process.^[59]

Uzbekistan's national cotton industry continues to exploit local officials' fears of disobeying state laws and citizens' fears of government punishment. There is little indication that the industry will be reformed in the foreseeable future.

Judicial Framework and Independence:

Uzbekistan's judiciary functions as a tool of the executive branch, serving the president's interests. Judges are appointed, which compromises their independence. The presumption of innocence and right to an attorney are guaranteed by Uzbekistan's constitution but routinely overlooked in detention facilities and courtrooms. While the right to appeal exists, lower court rulings are rarely overturned by higher courts; at best, the appeals process provides an opportunity to reduce one's sentence.

The judicial framework within Uzbekistan remained unchanged in 2013, but extradition and cross-border violence played a greater role. In February, Shukhrat Musin, an Andijon refugee whose return the Uzbek government had demanded, was reported missing in Kyrgyzstan.^[60] In March, Amnesty International reported that Azamat Ermakov, an Uzbek who had disappeared within hours of his release from prison in Nizhny Novgorod, Russia, had been abducted and sent back to Uzbekistan for trial.^[61] In November, the European Court for Human Rights found Russia responsible for the illegal extradition of Ermakov.^[62] In August, a Tajik citizen, Abdumavlon Abdurakhmonov, was allegedly detained by Uzbek security officials without explanation.^[63]

These judicial maneuverings are not unique to Uzbekistan but represent a broader network of cooperation between security forces in former Soviet authoritarian states.^[64] An official at Amnesty International noted in July that all Central Asian states collude in "the abduction, disappearance, unlawful transfer, and torture of wanted individuals" but that "requesting states are overwhelmingly Uzbekistan and Tajikistan" and "the offending torturers are Uzbekistan and Tajikistan."^[65]

Prison conditions in Uzbekistan remain dire. In June, Reporters Without Borders called for the release of imprisoned Karakalpakstan journalist Solidzhon Abdurakhmanov, whose health had deteriorated since his incarceration in 2008. In 2012, the International Committee of the Red Cross attempted to visit Abdurakhmanov but was denied.^[66] In 2013, the ICRC announced that it was stopping all prison visits in Uzbekistan due to the "unconstructive attitude" of Uzbek officials who refused to let them see prisoners in their everyday state.^[67] In July, former British Embassy worker

Kayum Ortikov described his own torture in an Uzbek prison and claimed that Uzbek guards beat him with an iron bar and lit his genitals on fire.^[68]

Besides real and perceived critics of the regime, devout Muslims are the most common target of the legal system. In February, 11 men were sentenced to terms of up to 12 years for founding a group allegedly called "Jihadism," and in July, 20 others were sentenced to lengthy terms for membership in another new group called "Hizb-ut Nusrat."^[69] No evidence of the existence of either group is available.^[70]

In Tashkent, a Muslim father and son who taught the Koran to school-aged children were charged under Criminal Code 229-2: "Teaching religious beliefs without specialized religious education and without permission from the central organ of a [registered] religious organization, as well as teaching religious beliefs privately."^[71] They face up to three years in prison. In November, Ravshan Gulyamov, the chairman of the Samarkand branch of the Uzbekistan-Iran Friendship Society, was sentenced to five years in jail for propagating Shi'ite Islam.^[72]

Christian groups are targeted as well. In August, a group of nine Baptists were fined more than \$21,000 for possessing religious texts and holding private services. Several devout Christians had their homes searched and religious literature, including the Bible, seized. Fines for possession of such materials grew increasingly harsh throughout the year.^[73]

In June, the U.S. State Department dropped Uzbekistan from Tier 2 to Tier 3 on its annual Trafficking in Persons report. Uzbekistan and Russia received the lowest rating in the world, beating out Afghanistan, Belarus, and Turkmenistan. The government report primarily cited forced labor in the cotton fields – including "verbal and physical abuse and lack of freedom of movement" – but also noted that Uzbek citizens were subjected to forced labor and sex trafficking around the world, with Uzbek orphans the most vulnerable. (In June, an Uzbek woman was convicted for trafficking women to the United Arab Emirates and Thailand for forced prostitution.)^[74] The report also cited bribery and human trafficking among border guards and that women forced to work as sex laborers were being prosecuted for prostitution.^[75]

Corruption:

Corruption is pervasive in Uzbekistan, which is ranked as the world's 8th most corrupt country in Transparency International's 2013 Corruption Perceptions Index. Uzbek citizens must pay bribes to public officials, and both public and private sector jobs can be purchased. In 2013, Uzbekistan contended with the fallout from the previous year's telecommunications scandals – particularly those that implicated first daughter Gulnara Karimova – as well as criticism of forced labor and human trafficking.

After Swedish telecom company Teliasonera's local affiliate was shut down by the state in 2012, revelations of corrupt business dealings among the presidential family came to light. In January, new documents revealed that Teliasonera sought to negotiate directly with Karimov's daughter Gulnara and allegedly paid more than \$300 million in bribes to an offshore shell company believed to be controlled by the Karimovs.^[76]

In February, the Chief Executive Officer of Teliasonera was forced to resign after an external review showed serious misconduct.^[77] In May, Swedish media reports revealed that Karimova had

dictated the terms of the contract and threatened the company with persecution from multiple government ministries if they refused to pay.^[78] Money laundering investigations in Switzerland and Sweden continued throughout 2013, and hundreds of millions of dollars in accounts belonging to Karimov family associates were frozen.^[79] In October, another Teliasonera executive resigned over allegations of corruption, and in November, four more executives were dismissed as the investigation continued.^[80]

By the end of the year, Karimova was rumored to be ostracized within the presidential family. Her TV and radio channels in Uzbekistan were cut off, her bodyguards fired, and her organizations – including Fund Forum, a powerful philanthropic and cultural organization popular among Uzbek youth – were put under investigation.^[81] In October, the bank accounts of Terra Group, a media holding company associated with Karimova, were frozen.^[82] Karimova later confirmed that the company was being investigated for taking bribes.^[83]

As Karimova complained that she was a target of state abuse and attempted to reposition herself as a human rights activist,^[84] Uzbek political exiles occupied her multimillion-dollar luxury villa in Switzerland. Activist Safar Bekjon, who says he was given the keys to the Geneva villa by an unidentified Karimova associate, posted photos of Karimova's possessions on his blog.^[85] Many were later identified as artwork and relics stolen from state museums in Uzbekistan.^[86]

Though it was the subject of avid media attention around the world, Karimova's downfall should not be taken as a sign that corruption is being seriously addressed by the administration. Instead, it shows that in Uzbekistan, no one – not even the president's daughter – is safe from the whims of the regime.

Author:

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Sarah Kendzior, PhD, is an analyst, researcher, and writer. She has published articles about Uzbekistan in a number of academic journals and mainstream news outlets.

Notes:

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