

# 2024 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Uzbekistan

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There were no significant changes in the human rights situation in Uzbekistan during the year.

Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: arbitrary or unlawful killings; torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment; involuntary or coercive psychological practices; arbitrary arrest or detention; transnational repression against individuals in another country; serious restrictions on freedom of expression and media freedom, including violence or threats of violence against journalists, unjustified arrests or prosecutions of journalists, and censorship; and prohibiting independent trade unions or significant or systematic restrictions on workers' freedom of association.

Although the government took some credible steps to identify and punish officials who committed human rights abuses, weak rule of law and a lack of transparency allowed human rights abuses to continue.

Section 1.

## Life

### a. Extrajudicial Killings

There were several reports the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings during the year.

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) Human Rights Watch and Freedom for Eurasia alleged the government used excessive, lethal force in its response to the 2022 Karakalpakstan protests, up to and including extrajudicial killings. As of year's end, the government had not fully responded to these allegations, released the results of its own investigation into the protests, or held security forces accountable for excessive use of force or extrajudicial killings.

In June, Dilmurod Yusupaliyev, age 43, died in custody after allegedly being beaten and denied medical care at a police station. Media reported he was detained after protesting a court ruling. In December, authorities sentenced Interior Ministry employee Firdavs Muradullaev to nine months in prison for beating Yusupaliyev to death.

### b. Coercion in Population Control

There were no reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization on the part of government authorities.

Section 2.

# Liberty

## **a. Freedom of the Press**

The constitution provided for freedom of expression, including for members of the press and other media, but the government did not respect this right.

The government frequently used libel, slander, and morality laws to stifle freedom of expression. The government frequently used extortion charges to arrest bloggers and journalists who criticized the government and to intimidate other bloggers and journalists who would criticize the government. The government officially and unofficially restricted the ability of individuals to criticize the government or discuss matters of public interest, and made frequent use of laws criminalizing libel and slander as “hate speech.”

The law restricted criticism of the president, and publicly insulting the president was a crime punishable by up to five years’ imprisonment. The Supreme Court reported at least 10 persons were either fined or sent to prison for up to seven years for slandering the president on social media. In October, media reported blogger Shokhida Salomova remained in compulsory psychiatric care after questioning the source of funds used by President Mirziyoyev’s son-in-law. She was involuntarily committed for two years and received no specific date for her release.

## **Physical Attacks, Imprisonment, and Pressure**

Police and security services subjected print and broadcast journalists to arrest, harassment, and intimidation.

The government arrested or convicted at least five bloggers for extortion: the owner of the account Achchiq Haqiqat Ltd, Guli Mirzaeva, Murod Maksudov, Mustafa Tursinbaev, and Salamat Seytmuratov. Many domestic and international media outlets believed these actions were part of a campaign that began in 2023 to silence the most critical media despite official attempts to make the prosecutions and litigation appear to be in response to unethical journalistic practices.

## **Censorship by Governments, Military, Intelligence, or Police Forces, Criminal Groups, or Armed Extremist or Rebel Groups**

Accredited journalists widely reported practicing self-censorship as well as being directed to remove articles deemed too sensitive by the media agency, the Agency of Information and Mass Communications. Journalists reported intentionally not covering President Mirziyoyev and his family due to fear of reprisal.

The law imposed substantial fines for defamation, including libel and slander. The government used charges of libel, slander, and defamation to punish journalists, human rights activists, and others who criticized the president or the government.

A 2021 law established criminal liability for publicly insulting or defaming the president using social networks, the internet, or both. This was punishable by three years’ correctional labor, restriction of movement for two to five years, or up to five years’ imprisonment.

The government restricted or disrupted access to the internet and censored online content. Freedom House noted that although the country slightly improved, the government created an extremely negative environment for internet freedom. The government blocked select “sensitive” websites, such as human rights and news websites.

## **b. Worker Rights**

### **Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining**

The law allowed workers to form and join independent unions and bargain collectively, but no independent labor unions operated in the country. The state-controlled Federation of Trade Unions of Uzbekistan (FTUU) was the dominant operating labor union. Some civil society activists accused the FTUU of preventing workers from forming independent unions.

The law neither provided for nor prohibited the right to strike, but it prohibited antiunion discrimination. The law on trade unions stated workers could not be fired due to trade union membership, but it did not clearly state whether workers fired for union activity had to be reinstated. Volunteers in public works and workers employed by individuals without documented contracts did not have strong legal protections of their rights.

The law prohibited the interference of government bodies in trade union activities, but the state retained significant control. International and local activists criticized local and state government officials for failing to protect workers' rights and interests.

The law provided penalties for violating freedom of association laws. Penalties were not commensurate with those for other laws involving denials of civil rights, such as discrimination and were rarely applied against violators. FTUU unions were centralized, controlled by, and dependent on the government. Regional and industrial trade unions were managed by the state. Workers believed attempts to create independent alternative unions would be repressed. Some civil society experts noted a lack of freedom of association for independent monitoring and reporting of labor rights violations.

### **Forced or Compulsory Labor**

See the Department of State's annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

### **Acceptable Work Conditions**

#### **Wage and Hour Laws**

The law provided for a national minimum wage, which was an estimated double the official minimum consumption expenditure. The law established a standard workweek of 40 hours and required a 24-hour rest period. The law provided for paid annual holidays. The law provided overtime compensation as specified in employment contracts or as agreed with an employee's trade union. Such compensation could be provided in the form of additional pay or leave. The law stated overtime compensation should not be less than 200 percent of the employee's average monthly salary rate. Additional leave time should not be less than the length of actual overtime work. An employee could not work more than 120 hours of overtime per year, but this limitation was not generally observed, particularly in the public sector. The law prohibited compulsory overtime. There were reports the government did not effectively enforce these laws in the formal economy. Penalties for violations of wage and overtime laws were not commensurate with those for similar crimes, such as fraud. No data were available on enforcement of these laws in the informal economy.

#### **Occupational Safety and Health**

The Ministry of Employment and Labor Relations established and enforced occupational safety and health (OSH) standards in consultation with unions. The standards were not generally appropriate for the main industries in the country. According to the law, health and safety standards should be applied in all sectors. State labor inspectors regularly conducted workplace safety inspections, actively identified OSH violations, and could levy administrative penalties in the form of fines. The government maintained a hotline to respond to citizen complaints regarding labor violations. The law did not provide for inspections by independent labor monitors.

The law provided that workers could legally remove themselves from hazardous work if an employer failed to provide adequate safety measures for the job, and the employer was required to pay the employee during the time of the work stoppage or provide severance pay if the employee chose to terminate employment. The law required employers to protect against civil liability for damage caused to the life or health of an employee in connection with a work injury, occupational disease, or other injury to health caused by the employee's performance on the job. In addition, a company's employees had the right to demand, and the administration was obliged to provide them with, information on the state of working conditions and safety at work, available personal protection means, benefits, and compensations.

### **Wage, Hour, and OSH Enforcement**

The government effectively enforced wage, hour, and OSH laws in the formal economy. No data were available on enforcement of these laws in the informal economy. Penalties for violations of OSH laws were administrative in nature; state labor inspectors could levy only administrative penalties (such as fines). The Ministry of Employment and Labor Relations maintained protocols requiring investigation into labor complaints within five business days. The ministry or a local governor's office could initiate a selective inspection of a business, and special inspections were conducted in response to accidents or complaints. Inspectors had the authority to make unannounced inspections and initiate sanctions. The number of labor inspectors was not sufficient to enforce compliance.

The most common violations committed by private-sector employers were violations of wage, overtime, and OSH standards. Although regulations provided standards for workplace safety, workers reportedly worked without necessary protective clothing and equipment at some hazardous job sites.

As of July 1, the Employment Ministry and Labor Relations reported 5.5 million persons, or 38.8 percent of the workforce, were employed in the informal sector. Labor protections were rarely extended to workers in the informal labor sector.

## **c. Disappearance and Abduction**

### **Disappearance**

There were no reports of enforced disappearances by or on behalf of government authorities.

### **Prolonged Detention without Charges**

The constitution and law prohibited arbitrary arrest and detention and provided for the right of any person to challenge the lawfulness of their arrest or detention in court. The government did not always observe these requirements.

Once authorities filed charges, suspects could be held in pretrial detention for up to three months while investigations proceeded. The law permitted an extension of the investigation period for as

many as seven months. According to human rights advocates, authorities typically held suspects longer than the allowable period of detention.

Authorities did not provide access to a court for detainees to challenge the length or validity of pretrial detention, despite the law granting detainees the right to do so. Even when authorities did not file charges, police and prosecutors frequently sought to evade restrictions on the length of time persons could be held without charges. No data were available on the approximate percentage of the prison and detainee population in pretrial detention, the average length of time held, or whether the length of pretrial detention frequently equaled or exceeded the possible maximum sentence.

#### **d. Violations in Religious Freedom**

See the Department of State's annual *International Religious Freedom Report* at [www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/](http://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/).

#### **e. Trafficking in Persons**

See the Department of State's annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

Section 3.

### **Security of the Person**

#### **a. Torture and Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment**

The constitution and law prohibited torture, but there were credible reports government officials employed the practice. The law banned the use of evidence obtained by torture in court proceedings. The law included liability for the use of torture and other inhuman or degrading treatment.

Human rights NGOs reported that in all regions except Karakalpakstan, the practice of coordinated, top-down orders to torture specific detainees ceased during the year. They claimed, however, torture in pretrial detention occurred during the year. Most abuse reportedly occurred during interrogations, where police used physical abuse such as beatings and psychological coercion to gain confessions. Under the legal system, psychological pressure and threats were not considered abuse or mistreatment.

The government reported the Human Rights Ombudsperson's Office received 147 complaints of torture, leading to the initiation of one criminal case by the Prosecutor General's Office.

Human rights activists reported a prolonged campaign of suppression of political discourse by security service members in Karakalpakstan that included the use of torture and psychological pressure.

In July, lawyer Sergey Mayorov filed a complaint with the Supreme Court stating the alleged convicted ringleader of the 2022 Karakalpakstan protests, Dauletmurat Tadjimuratov, was subjected to physical and psychological torture, including beatings.

#### **b. Protection of Children**

## **Child Labor**

See the Department of Labor's *Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor* at <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/resources/reports/child-labor/findings/> .

## **Child Marriage**

The minimum legal age for marriage was 18. District authorities could lower the age by one year in exceptional cases. In some rural areas, girls age 15 or younger married men in religious ceremonies not officially recognized by the state. The government reported it took administrative action against 12 individuals for marrying underage persons.

In January, a video of an alleged wedding between two children, both age 13, in Andijan caused public outcry.

## **c. Protection to Refugees**

The government granted refugee status to five Afghan citizens determined by the Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to be eligible, but otherwise it did not cooperate with UNHCR or other humanitarian organizations in evaluating and providing protection and assistance to refugees, returning refugees, or asylum seekers, or other persons of concern.

### **Provision of First Asylum**

The government did not establish a national asylum system or apply interim measures to register and document persons seeking international protection as asylum seekers or grant refugee recognition, despite having a decree on political asylum. In the absence of a system, the 2017 Presidential Decree on Political Asylum provided the only avenue to seek asylum in the country.

According to the government, during the year there were only five asylum cases approved through this process, and there were reports individuals were not permitted to submit their applications. International observers reported the political asylum system was “nonexistent.” Prior to 2021, Afghan passport holders could enter the country on a tourist visa, but access was subsequently restricted to only those with academic, business, or diplomatic visas. Economic hardship, lack of access to legal employment and basic services also created pressure on Afghans. The visa renewal process was expensive and rife with corruption; some individuals who applied for renewal received “exit visas,” which they interpreted as requiring them to depart the country. The inability of many Afghans to secure legal residence further caused fear and uncertainty regarding their ability to remain in the country. Therefore, Afghans who did not successfully seek asylum in third countries or renew visas for Uzbekistan were often compelled to return to Afghanistan.

## **d. Acts of Antisemitism and Antisemitic Incitement**

Observers estimated the Jewish population at fewer than 10,000, concentrated mostly in Tashkent, Samarkand, the Fergana Valley, and Bukhara. Their numbers continued to decline due to emigration, largely for economic reasons.

## **e. Instances of Transnational Repression**

The government engaged in acts of transnational repression.

## **Extraterritorial Killing, Kidnapping, or Violence or Threats of Violence**

Rights groups documented at least seven instances of authorities sentencing Karakalpak activists in absentia and seeking their extradition from Kazakhstan: Koshkarbai Toremuratov, Tleubike Yuldasheva, Ziuar Mirmanbetova, Raisa Khudaibergenova, Djaksymbetov Jangeldi, and Aqylbek Muratbay (Muratov). Activist Neitbay Urazbayev died in Kazakhstan awaiting the outcome of his extradition request. Activists reported the extradition requests stemmed from alleged online activities during the July 2022 violent protests in Karakalpakstan, during which all the activists were in Kazakhstan. Rights groups stated their speech was peaceful. In October, Yuldasheva, Khudaibergenova, Mirmanbetova, and Zhaneldi Zhaksymbetov, the latter arrested at the behest of Uzbekistani authorities, received asylum in the United States after spending a year in detention in Kazakhstan. In December, Russian authorities detained ethnic Karakalpak Zhetkerbay Abdramanov due to an extradition request from the government of Uzbekistan. Abdramanov was wanted in Uzbekistan due to his online discussion of Karakalpakstan's independence, although activists claim Abdramanov was living in Kazakhstan during the July 2022 violent protests in Karakalpakstan. As of year's end, Abdramanov's whereabouts remained unknown.

### **Efforts to Control Mobility**

There were reports the government attempted to control mobility to exact reprisal against citizens abroad by revoking their identity documents to jeopardize their legal status, restrict their movement, or provoke their detention in the country where they were located.