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The rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly remained tightly restricted. Major progress was reported in the eradication of forced labour in the cotton sector. Some safeguards against torture and other ill-treatment were introduced, although reports of such abuse continued. Over 2,000 people remained imprisoned for their peaceful religious beliefs. Violence against women remained widespread. Consensual sexual relations between men remained a criminal offence.

Background

Ongoing reforms slowed or were rolled back. Political and civil activists complained of harassment, surveillance and threats ahead of the presidential election, from which independent candidates were effectively barred. A new draft criminal code was published in February but not adopted before the end of the year.

Lack of transparency in the disbursement of the government's US\$1 billion fund designated to address the Covid-19 pandemic, a budget which increased several-fold within months, raised concerns over corruption. Vaccination was made mandatory for several categories of workers, military personnel and government officials, with employees threatened with suspension for refusing.

Other developments also took a further toll on the economy, including a drought.

The Taliban seizure of power in neighbouring Afghanistan reignited concerns about radical Islam.

Freedom of expression

Restrictions on the right to freedom of expression continued. The draft criminal code retained defamation and insult as crimes, as well as the broadly defined offences of production or dissemination of "materials containing ideas of religious extremism, separatism and fundamentalism". In March, insulting the president became a crime punishable by five years' imprisonment.

Media outlets exercised self-censorship and faced new legislative restrictions and other constraints, with official pre-approval reportedly expected before publication of sensitive material. Prosecution, fines and imprisonment of critical voices, typically bloggers, served to intimidate others.

In May, anti-corruption blogger Otabek Sattoriy was sentenced to six and a half years' imprisonment on questionable charges of slander and extortion. Following an argument with the judge over media coverage, three journalists and a businesswoman who published a video of the dispute, were themselves convicted in November of libel and insulting and disobeying the authorities. One journalist was sentenced to three years' imprisonment, the others received non-custodial sentences.

Blogger Valijon Kalonov was detained in August and charged with insulting the president, after he called for an election boycott; he remained in detention pending trial at the end of the year.

Forced labour

In January, the ILO reported "major progress" in the eradication of abusive practices in the 2020 cotton harvest. With only isolated instances of child labour reported, the number of people "subject to direct or perceived forms of coercion" declined by 33% compared to 2019, to 4% (of a total of 2 million cotton pickers, two-thirds of them women).

Torture and other ill-treatment

The draft criminal code aligned the definition of torture following UN bodies' recommendations, but left controversial provisions allowing for a statute of limitations, amnesties and victim-perpetrator "reconciliation". Additional safeguards against torture were introduced in June, including creating "public groups" under the Parliamentary Human Rights Ombudsman for independent monitoring of penitentiary and other closed institutions.

However, independent human rights experts remained concerned that institutional problems were unaddressed and torture in custody remained widespread, even if less often publicly reported. Of the reported deaths in custody, allegations of torture in two districts – from Nishan (May) and Takhiatash (July) – were "checked" internally by the Interior Ministry and dismissed as unfounded. A similar report from Denau district (July) resulted in the arrest of two police officers, but they were later cleared of charges. In December, two road traffic police officers from Samarkand region were each sentenced to two years and 10 months' imprisonment, for causing death by negligence and abuse of authority, following the death of a driver in their custody.

A human rights group reported in April that the infamous Jaslyk prison, officially closed in 2019, could still be holding up to 100 prisoners.

In May, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention concluded that imprisoned former diplomat Kadyr Yusupov had been arbitrarily deprived of his liberty and that his "credible allegations of torture and ill-treatment" had not been duly investigated. However, Uzbekistan ignored its call for his immediate release and compensation. The authorities failed to respond promptly to complaints by Kadyr Yusupov that he had been beaten by other prisoners in September and October.

International NGOs reported that men arrested for alleged consensual same-sex relationships were still being subjected to forced anal examinations.

Freedom of religion and belief

A new law On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations was enacted in July, without prior public consultation. It made some improvements, such as simplifying registration of religious organizations and removing the administrative penalty for wearing religious clothing in public. The same month, however, five UN Special Rapporteurs expressed concern at the continuing ban on missionary activities and non-state-approved religious education, and effective censorship of religious literature.

The production and distribution of religious materials was not included as a crime in the draft criminal code, but remained an administrative offence.

The US Commission on International Religious Freedom reported in October "that over 2,000 individuals remain[ed] imprisoned by the Uzbekistan government for peacefully practicing their religious beliefs".

Freedom of association and assembly

In the draft criminal code, violating the unduly restrictive rules on public assemblies and the "unlawful formation of a public association or religious organization" remained crimes punishable by imprisonment.

In March, two policy documents were approved committing the government to provide administrative and financial support to civil society organizations and to improve the legal framework for their operation. Obstacles to the registration of organizations remained.

NGOs and political parties in particular continued to face arbitrary denial of registration for minor or questionable technical infringements. In August, the Justice Ministry arbitrarily rejected the registration of Human Rights House, submitted by Agzam Turgunov and his colleagues for the eighth time since 2019. In September, the group appealed the decision in court and resubmitted the application.

Gender-based violence

Violence against women, including domestic violence, remained widespread, but no comprehensive statistics were available. In January, the Interior Ministry released information on the use of protective orders in 2020, the year they were first introduced. A total of 14,774 women had received such orders, 73% of which had been granted on account of physical and other domestic violence. However, in June the Ministry rejected a request by the NGO NeMolchi for information on prosecutions for violence against women, claiming it was "to no purpose".

LGBTI people's rights

“Sodomy” remained a crime, including in the draft criminal code. In response to a media query from Qalampir.uz, in April the Interior Ministry reported that 49 individuals were serving prison terms for this “crime” and receiving regular “psychological services” to prevent them committing this “offence” again. Forty-four individuals were convicted of “sodomy” between 2016 and 2020.

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