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## Uzbekistan

**Country:**

[Uzbekistan](#)

**Year:**

2018

**Freedom Status:**

Not Free

**Political Rights:**

7

**Civil Liberties:**

7

**Aggregate Score:**

7

**Freedom Rating:**

7.0

**Overview:**

Ongoing reforms under a new president, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, have led to improvements on some issues, but Uzbekistan remains a consolidated authoritarian regime. No genuine opposition parties operate legally, and domestic supporters of exiled opposition figures are persecuted. The legislature and judiciary effectively serve as instruments of the executive branch, and the media remain tightly controlled by the state. There is little accountability for endemic corruption or torture of detainees; despite some high-profile releases, the government still holds numerous prisoners on political or religious grounds.

**Political Rights and Civil Liberties:**

### **POLITICAL RIGHTS: 1 / 40 (+1)**

#### **A. ELECTORAL PROCESS: 0 / 12**

**A1. Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections? 0 / 4**

The president, who holds most executive power, is directly elected for up to two five-year terms. Longtime prime minister Shavkat Mirziyoyev was named acting president through

an irregular parliamentary process in September 2016, after Karimov, who had held the presidency since Uzbekistan's independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, suffered a stroke and died. The constitution called for the Senate chairman to serve as acting president. Mirziyoyev won a special presidential election in December, taking a reported 88.6 percent of the vote and defeating nominal challengers whose parties in some cases openly campaigned for the incumbent. Election monitors from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) concluded that "the dominant position of state actors and limits on fundamental freedoms undermine political pluralism and led to a campaign devoid of genuine competition."

**A2. Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections? 0 / 4**

Uzbekistan has a bicameral legislature. The lower house is composed of 150 seats, with 135 members directly elected in single-member constituencies and 15 representing the Ecological Movement of Uzbekistan, which holds separate indirect elections. The 100-member upper house, or Senate, has 84 members elected by regional councils and 16 appointed by the president. All members of the parliament serve five-year terms.

The 2014 lower house elections offered voters no meaningful choice, as all participating parties supported the government; observers from the OSCE reported that the elections "lacked genuine competition and debate." Karimov's Movement of Entrepreneurs and Businesspeople—Liberal Democratic Party (UzLiDeP) won the most votes and took 52 seats, while three loyalist parties split the remainder. Local human rights activists alleged serious disparities between reported turnout, which the government claimed was more than 88 percent, and the number of actual votes cast.

**A3. Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies? 0 / 4**

The electoral laws and framework are implemented in ways that offer no opportunities for independent political actors or parties to participate in elections at any level. Election management bodies are closely controlled by the government and have not been reformed since Karimov's death, though Mirziyoyev has indicated that he plans to implement electoral reforms at the local and regional level, including the introduction of direct elections for local and regional executives. In August 2017, he signed legislation allowing the election of 11 district councils within Tashkent, in addition to the existing council for the city as a whole; Tashkent has the status of a region, and districts in the country's other regions already had elected councils. The elections, which featured the debut of a single electronic voter list, were held in late December, though no new parties participated.

**B. POLITICAL PLURALISM AND PARTICIPATION: 0 / 16**

**B1. Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings? 0 / 4**

Only four political parties are currently registered—UzLiDeP, the People's Democratic Party (PDP), the Adolat (Justice) Social Democratic Party, and the Milliy Tiklanish

(National Revival) Democratic Party. They indulge in mild criticism of one another and occasionally of government ministers, but all are effectively progovernment.

**B2. Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections? 0 / 4**

No genuine opposition parties operate legally. Unregistered opposition groups function primarily in exile. Domestic supporters or family members of exiled opposition figures have been persecuted, and they are barred from participating in elections.

**B3. Are the people's political choices free from domination by the military, foreign powers, religious hierarchies, economic oligarchies, or any other powerful group that is not democratically accountable? 0 / 4**

Regional alliances of political elites hold the levers of government at all levels, creating economic oligarchies and patronage networks that stifle political competition. There is some intra-elite competition, but without the patronage of the established networks, political and economic advancement is all but impossible.

**B4. Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, religious, gender, LGBT, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities? 0 / 4**

No registered party represents the specific interests of ethnic or religious minority groups, and no other parties or actors have the opportunity to achieve political representation. Women formally enjoy equal political rights, but they are unable to organize independently to advance their political interests in practice, and they remain underrepresented in leadership positions. Women hold 16 percent of the seats in the parliament's lower house and 17 percent of the seats in the Senate. No women ran for president in 2016.

**C. FUNCTIONING OF GOVERNMENT: 1 / 12 (+1)**

**C1. Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government? 0 / 4**

The country's leadership is not freely elected, and the legislature serves as a rubber stamp for the executive branch.

**C2. Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective? 0 / 4**

Corruption is pervasive. Graft and bribery among low- and mid-level officials are common and at times even transparent. Media discussion of corrupt practices has cautiously expanded since Karimov's death, but in some cases the journalists and commentators involved—rather than the corrupt officials—have come under pressure.

**C3. Does the government operate with openness and transparency? 1 / 4 (+1)**

Government operations remain mostly opaque, but one of Mirziyoyev's first acts as president in late 2016 was the creation of new online mechanisms that offered citizens the opportunity to file complaints, report problems, and request services. The initial program

was overwhelmingly popular and was quickly expanded to all ministries and local government offices, requiring local officials to interact with citizens and demonstrate responsiveness. The innovations contributed to a cultural change in governance, though they frequently encountered resistance at the local level.

**Score Change: The score improved from 0 to 1 due to new complaint and petitioning mechanisms that have increased the accountability of government agencies and officials to citizens.**

## **CIVIL LIBERTIES: 6 / 60 (+3)**

### **D. FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND BELIEF: 1 / 16 (+1)**

#### **D1. Are there free and independent media? 0 / 4**

Despite constitutional guarantees, freedoms of speech and the press remain severely restricted. The state controls major media outlets and related facilities, and independent outlets were mostly shuttered or blocked under Karimov. Several foreign reporters were granted press passes in 2017, and the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) announced plans to base a correspondent in Tashkent, but the presence of independent international outlets remained very limited. Domestic media, including news websites and new live television programs, began cautiously discussing social problems and criticizing local officials in 2017, though they continued to avoid openly criticizing the government.

The prisoners of conscience released during the year included journalists Muhammad Bekjon and Solijon Abdurahmonov, who had spent 18 and 9 years in prison, respectively. However, harassment and arrests of journalists continued. Freelance journalist Bobomurad Abdullayev was arrested in September and accused of attempting to overthrow the constitutional order after it was revealed that he had written sharply critical and sometimes satirical political articles for years under the pseudonym Usman Haqnazarov. In October, authorities detained another freelancer, Hayot Nasriddinov, on extremism charges.

#### **D2. Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private? 0 / 4**

The government permits the existence of approved Muslim, Jewish, and Christian denominations but treats unregistered religious activity as a criminal offense. Suspected members of banned Muslim organizations and their relatives have faced arrest, interrogation, and torture. Arrested believers are frequently accused of founding previously unknown religious organizations, a charge that carries high penalties. In most cases, little evidence of the existence of such organizations is presented at the closed trials.

In a major reform in September 2017, Mirziyoyev announced that some 16,000 individuals had been removed from a blacklist of roughly 17,000 people who had been suspected or previously convicted of religious extremism and were kept under close surveillance or on probation. He said many of those removed had already been provided with jobs to help them reintegrate with society.

**D3. Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination? 0 / 4**

The government limits academic freedom, in part by controlling contacts between universities or scholars and foreign entities. Professors reportedly practice self-censorship to avoid punishment by superiors or the authorities.

**D4. Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution? 1 / 4 (+1)**

The freedom of private discussion has long been limited by *mahalla* committees, traditional neighborhood organizations that the government has transformed into an official system for public surveillance and control. The government also engages in extensive surveillance of electronic communications. However, through its various reforms since 2016, the Mirziyoyev administration has signaled a greater tolerance for public criticism, modestly improving the climate for expression of personal views on sensitive topics.

**Score Change: The score improved from 0 to 1 due to greater tolerance for the expression of critical views under the new administration.**

**E. ASSOCIATIONAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL RIGHTS: 1 / 12 (+1)**

**E1. Is there freedom of assembly? 0 / 4**

Despite constitutional provisions for freedom of assembly, authorities severely restrict this right in practice, breaking up virtually all unsanctioned gatherings and detaining participants.

**E2. Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights– and governance-related work? 1 / 4 (+1)**

Freedom of association is tightly constrained, and unregistered nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) face extreme difficulties and harassment. Yelena Urayeva, a veteran activist against forced labor in the cotton industry, was forcibly detained in March 2017 and confined to a psychiatric hospital ahead of planned meetings with a World Bank delegation. She was repeatedly detained later in the year, and in one case in October she was held along with photojournalist Temur Karpov and a correspondent from the German magazine *Stern* as they attempted to document forced labor.

However, in a significant break with past policy, in September an official delegation from Human Rights Watch was allowed to conduct its first fieldwork assessment in Uzbekistan in seven years. A number of international human rights officials, including the UN high commissioner for human rights, were also allowed to visit the country, and the prisoners of conscience released during the year included human rights activists Azamjon Farmonov and Agzam Turgunov, who had served 11 and 9 years in prison, respectively.

**Score Change: The score improved from 0 to 1 due to greater access for international human rights monitors and the release of some jailed activists.**

**E3. Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations? 0 / 4**

The Federation of Trade Unions is controlled by the state, and no genuinely independent union structures exist. Organized strikes are extremely rare.

**F. RULE OF LAW: 0 / 16**

**F1. Is there an independent judiciary? 0 / 4**

The judiciary is subservient to the president. In 2017, however, a number of judicial reforms were enacted through constitutional and legislative amendments, establishing specific terms in office for judges and creating a Supreme Judicial Council to oversee appointments and disciplinary action, among other changes. The council, whose chairman would be approved by the Senate on the president's recommendation, replaced a commission that was directly subordinate to the president.

**F2. Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters? 0 / 4**

Due process guarantees remain extremely weak. Law enforcement authorities have routinely justified the arrest of suspected religious extremists or political opponents by planting contraband, filing dubious charges of financial wrongdoing, or inventing witness testimony. The Lawyers' Chamber, a regulatory body with compulsory membership, serves as a vehicle for state control over the legal profession. The judicial reforms adopted in 2017 gave judges rather than prosecutors the authority to approve certain investigative steps, such as exhumations and some forms of surveillance.

**F3. Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies? 0 / 4**

A 2016 law on police prohibits torture, and a November 2017 presidential decree bars courts from using evidence obtained through torture, but reports of such physical abuse against detainees remained common during the year. Prisons suffer from severe overcrowding and shortages of food and medicine. As with detained suspects, prison inmates—particularly those sentenced for their religious beliefs—are often subjected to torture and other ill-treatment.

**F4. Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population? 0 / 4**

Although racial and ethnic discrimination are prohibited by law, the belief that senior positions in government and business are reserved for ethnic Uzbeks is widespread. Women's educational and professional prospects are limited by discriminatory cultural and religious norms. Women are also barred from certain jobs under the labor code.

Sex between men is punishable with up to three years in prison. The law does not protect LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people from discrimination, and traditional social taboos deter the discussion of LGBT issues.

## **G. PERSONAL AUTONOMY AND INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS: 4 / 16 (+1)**

### **G1. Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education? 1 / 4**

Permission is required to move to a new city, and bribes are commonly paid to obtain the necessary documents. Bribes are also frequently required to gain entrance to and advance in exclusive universities. Restrictions on foreign travel continue to include the use of exit visas, though the Mirziyoyev administration has announced plans to abolish them in 2019. The government also took steps to ease travel within the country and to neighboring states in 2017, removing police checkpoints at internal borders, resuming direct flights to Tajikistan in April, and opening border crossings as part of an agreement with Kyrgyzstan in September.

### **G2. Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors? 1 / 4**

Widespread corruption and extensive state control over the economy limit private business opportunities and make property rights tenuous in practice.

### **G3. Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance? 1 / 4**

Victims of domestic violence are discouraged from pressing charges against perpetrators, who rarely face prosecution. Rape is also seldom reported or prosecuted, and spousal rape is not explicitly criminalized. Extralegal child marriage is reportedly practiced in some areas.

### **G4. Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation? 1 / 4 (+1)**

Beginning in September 2017, the government gradually eased restrictions on access to foreign currency and allowed the official exchange rate to move closer to the black-market rate. The changes would help level the economic playing field, as the existing rules had privileged certain entities and industries.

Economic exploitation remains a serious problem, as does the trafficking of women abroad for prostitution. A 2009 law imposed stronger penalties for child labor, and in 2012, Mirziyoyev, then the prime minister, pledged to end the practice completely. In August 2017, the president issued a decree to formally ban forced agricultural labor by students, health workers, and teachers. During the subsequent cotton harvest, the government increased incentives for voluntary labor and granted access to international observers. Nevertheless, local officials still faced pressure to meet government quotas, and evidence of forced adult labor continued to be reported.

**Score Change: The score improved from 0 to 1 due to a reduction in currency controls and efforts to decrease the use of forced labor in the cotton harvest.**

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