Uzbekistan's government continued to show a blatant disregard for constitutional provisions during 2015, leaving freedom of expression and freedom of the press virtually nonexistent in the country. While some journalists and activists were released from prison, others were detained and beaten for documenting taboo subjects. Social media remain a viable outlet for public dissent, but the security apparatus is becoming savvier at blocking proxy servers and other tools used to access banned websites and mobile applications.

Key Developments

- At least three prominent human rights activists were detained and in two cases physically abused for attempting to photograph or otherwise document the country’s cotton harvest, in which the state compels citizens to engage in forced labor each year.
- In May, a court revoked the license of Noviy Vek, one of Uzbekistan’s oldest privately owned newspapers, due to alleged content violations.
Legal Environment: 30 / 30

While the constitution provides for freedoms of expression and the press, the government shows little respect for the rule of law in practice, as demonstrated by President Islam Karimov’s lopsided reelection in March 2015. He secured a fourth term in office with a reported 90 percent of the vote despite a two-term limit in the constitution, and the state-dominated media largely ignored rules guaranteeing equal access to all candidates, though Karimov’s nominal opponents effectively endorsed him as well.

Convictions for libel and defamation can result in fines and jail time, and publicly insulting the president is punishable by up to five years in prison. Journalists can also face legal penalties for “interference in internal affairs” and “insulting the dignity of citizens.”

Amendments to the Law on Informatization enacted in September 2014 extended media content restrictions to blogs and other online information sources, holding bloggers liable for any content deemed extremist, inaccurate, separatist, or pornographic, among other restricted categories. Several important provisions of the law are loosely worded, allowing for broad and arbitrary interpretations.

Although a law granting public access to government information exists, it is not enforced. Journalists working for unaccredited foreign outlets or unregistered domestic outlets are not legally recognized as journalists and risk persecution by the government.

All media outlets are required to register with government agencies and obtain licenses, which can be denied or revoked with little explanation. Corruption reportedly plays a key role in the registration and licensing process.

Political Environment: 37 / 40

Virtually all Uzbek media outlets are linked directly or indirectly to the state, and the National Security Service actively manipulates press reports to present a carefully constructed image of the country, occasionally allowing limited criticism of local corruption. Widespread self-censorship is a serious problem, as investigative journalists fear reprisals in the form of harassment, loss of employment, beatings, or jail time.

The government continues to censor or close media outlets that produce content it considers objectionable. In May 2015, a court in Tashkent revoked the license of Noviy Vek, independent Uzbekistan’s first privately owned weekly, at the request of the Agency for Press and Information, which accused of it publishing morally harmful material that included inappropriate jokes. The paper did not openly criticize the country’s leadership, but had addressed sensitive topics such as official graft and a recent drunk-driving case involving a police officer.

State-owned telecommunications carrier Uztelecom maintains control over internet services in Uzbekistan, blocking access to the websites of foreign news organizations, human rights groups, and exile publications.

The few remaining independent journalists in Uzbekistan—most of whom contribute to foreign media outlets due to the absence of local independent media—continue to face
pressure from the regime, including harassment, intimidation, assault, and detention. Throughout 2015, the government targeted journalists and activists who covered or brought attention to taboo subjects. Among other such incidents during the year, human rights activists Yelena Uralayeva and Dmitriy Tikhonov were separately detained in September as they attempted to document the cotton harvest, which is notorious for its use of forced labor. Tikhonov was reportedly beaten while in police custody, and his home office was destroyed by fire in October; Uralayeva was abused and subjected to invasive body cavity searches during that and an earlier detention in May. Uktam Pardayev, also known for his attempts to document forced labor during the harvest, was arrested in November on spurious charges of fraud and bribery, which carry a maximum sentence of 10 years in prison.

Uzbekistan remains among the world’s most notorious jailers of journalists and free expression activists. According to Human Rights Watch, dozens of journalists, activists, writers, and intellectuals are being held in Uzbek jails and penal colonies as a result of their work. The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) reported that four professional journalists were behind bars in the country as of December 2015, including Muhammad Bekjanov and Yusuf Ruzimuradov of the opposition newspaper Erk, who have been imprisoned since March 1999, making them the longest-incarcerated reporters in the world. In a positive development, a few political prisoners were released in 2015, most notably political activist Murod Jurayev, who served 21 years behind bars, and journalist Hayrullo Hamidov, who served 5 years.

**Economic Environment: 28 / 30**

The state dominates the media industry. Most broadcasting comes from four state-run television channels. Ownership of nonstate media outlets is opaque, though journalists report that there is low public demand to make ownership structures transparent, as such outlets generally report the same version of the news. The government controls most publishing houses and printing presses. A number of regional and local television and radio stations are privately owned, and a few private printing presses produce independent publications that avoid politically sensitive topics and have limited circulation. Low pay within Uzbekistan’s media industry encourages journalists to accept bribes.

Approximately 43 percent of the population used the internet in 2015. The small minority of citizens who access foreign news sites circumvent state restrictions by using proxy servers. Social media and blogs have increasingly facilitated critical discussions on public service delivery and dissemination of independent reporting. In the mobile telecommunications sphere, Russian operator MTS reentered the Uzbekistan market in December 2014 after forming a joint venture with a state enterprise. The firm’s wholly owned subsidiary had been driven out of business in the country in 2013 due to an investigation into alleged illegal financial activities. Meanwhile, TeliaSonara, the Swedish telecom giant that had been implicated in corrupt ties to Karimov’s elder daughter, announced in September 2015 that it would exit the Uzbekistan market, citing lack of transparency in the business environment.

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