



Freedom in the World - Uzbekistan (2010)

Capital:
Tashkent

Population:
27,562,000

Political Rights Score: 7 *

Civil Liberties Score: 7 *

Status: Not Free

[Overview](#)

Uzbekistan continued to rebuild relations with the United States and the European Union in 2009 amid growing cooperation on logistical support for NATO operations in Afghanistan. At the same time, the government of President Islam Karimov maintained repressive state controls at home, denying citizens their basic human rights.

Uzbekistan gained independence from the Soviet Union through a December 1991 referendum. In a parallel vote, Islam Karimov, the former Communist Party leader and chairman of the People's Democratic Party (PDP), the successor to the Communist Party, was elected president amid fraud claims by rival candidate Mohammed Solih, leader of the Erk (Freedom) Party. Solih fled the country two years later, and his party was forced underground. Only progovernment parties were allowed to compete in elections to the first post-Soviet legislature in December 1994 and January 1995. A February 1995 referendum to extend Karimov's first five-year term in office until 2000 was allegedly approved with 99 percent support.

All of the five parties that competed in the December 1999 parliamentary elections, which were strongly criticized by international monitors, supported the president. In the January 2000 presidential poll, Karimov defeated his only opponent, allegedly winning 92 percent of the vote. The government refused to allow the participation of genuine opposition parties. A 2002 referendum extended presidential terms from five to seven years.

A series of suicide bomb attacks and related violent clashes in late March and early April 2004 killed some 50 people. Police appeared to be the main targets. The authorities blamed radical international Islamist groups—particularly the Qaeda-linked Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and the banned Hizb ut-Tahrir (Party of Liberation). Suicide bombers killed several people outside the U.S. and Israeli embassies in July 2004 amid conflicting claims of responsibility. In December, elections for the lower house of a new bicameral parliament were held, with only the five legal, propresidential parties allowed to participate.

The city of Andijon in the Ferghana Valley witnessed a popular uprising and violent

security crackdown in May 2005. On May 10 and 11, family members and supporters of 23 local businessmen charged with involvement in a banned Islamic group staged a peaceful demonstration in anticipation of the trial verdict. The situation turned violent on the night of May 12, when armed men stormed a prison, freed the 23 businessmen and other inmates, and captured the local government administration building. Thousands of local residents subsequently gathered in the city center, where people began to speak out on political and economic issues, often making antigovernment statements.

Security forces responded by opening fire on the crowd, which included many women and children. Although the authorities maintained that the protesters were the first to open fire, eyewitnesses reported that the security forces began shooting indiscriminately. Official figures put the death toll at 187, but unofficial sources estimated the dead at nearly 800, most of them unarmed civilians. The government accused Islamic extremists of orchestrating the demonstrations, though most of the demonstrators appeared to have been motivated by economic and social grievances, and many of those present had come to witness the events rather than participate in protests.

Karimov repeatedly rejected calls from the European Union (EU), the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and the United States for an independent international inquiry into the violence. In July 2005, Uzbekistan gave the United States six months to leave its military base at Karshi-Khanabad, which it had been allowed to use to support operations in Afghanistan since late 2001. Russia and China endorsed the official account of the violence.

The Uzbek authorities instituted a wide-ranging crackdown after the Andijon incident, targeting nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) with foreign funding, potential political opposition figures, human rights defenders, and even former officials.

Karimov's seven-year term ended in January 2007, and the constitution barred him from running for reelection. Nevertheless, he won a new term in December 2007 with an official 88 percent of the vote.

Uzbekistan began repairing relations with the EU and United States in 2007, eventually agreeing to the overland transportation of nonmilitary supplies to support NATO operations in Afghanistan. In 2009, the EU lifted the last of the sanctions it had imposed after Andijon. Ties with Russia were mixed during the year, with significant Russian involvement in Uzbekistan's energy sector and strenuous Uzbek objections to Russian plans for a new military base in neighboring Kyrgyzstan.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Uzbekistan is not an electoral democracy. President Islam Karimov uses the dominant executive branch to repress all political opposition. His December 2007

reelection appeared to flout constitutional rules on term limits. A dubious referendum in 2002 replaced the country's single-chamber legislature with a bicameral parliament consisting of a 120-seat lower house (with members elected by popular vote for five-year terms) and a 100-member upper house, or Senate (with 84 members elected by regional councils and 16 appointed by the president).

Only four political parties, all progovernment, are currently registered, and no genuine opposition parties function legally. A 2007 law intended to expand the role of registered parties had no real effect on the moribund political arena. Unregistered opposition groups like Birlik and Erk function primarily in exile. Exiled opposition activist Bahodir Choriyev returned to Uzbekistan in 2009, but the authorities limited his movements and harassed activists who tried to meet with him. December 2009 parliamentary elections offered voters no meaningful choice, although the four progovernment parties indulged in mild criticism of each other.

Corruption is pervasive. Uzbekistan was ranked 174 out of 180 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2009 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Despite constitutional guarantees, freedoms of speech and the press are severely restricted. The state controls major media outlets and related facilities. Although official censorship was abolished in 2002, it has continued through semiofficial mechanisms that strongly encourage self-censorship. U.S.-funded Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty was forced out of Uzbekistan in December 2005. State-controlled television has aired "documentaries" smearing perceived opponents, including a program in 2007 on journalist Alisher Saipov, who was subsequently murdered in Kyrgyzstan. The Committee to Protect Journalists charged in 2009 that at least seven journalists are behind bars in Uzbekistan, including activist Dilmurod Saidov, who received a 12.5-year sentence in February on dubious fraud charges. The OpenNet Initiative has found that the government systematically blocks websites with content that is critical of the regime.

The government permits the existence of mainstream religions, including approved Muslim, Jewish, and Christian denominations (primarily Protestant), but treats unregistered activities as a criminal offense. The state exercises strict control over Islamic worship, including the content of sermons. Suspected members of banned Muslim organizations and their relatives have been subjected to arrest, interrogation, and torture.

The government limits academic freedom, according to the U.S. State Department's 2009 human rights report. Bribes are commonly required to gain entrance to exclusive universities and obtain good grades.

Open and free private discussion is limited by the *mahalla* committees, traditional neighborhood organizations that the government has turned into an official system for public surveillance and control.

Despite constitutional provisions for freedom of assembly, the authorities severely restrict this right in practice. Law enforcement officials broke up a small rally of human rights activists in Tashkent in February 2009.

Freedom of association is tightly constrained, and unregistered NGOs face extreme difficulties and harassment. After the unrest in Andijon, the government shut down virtually all foreign-funded organizations in Uzbekistan. A local advocate in 2008 described membership in the government-controlled association for NGOs as “voluntary but compulsory.” In 2009, members of the Human Rights Alliance faced harassment and imprisonment.

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

The judiciary is subservient to the president, who appoints all judges and can remove them at any time. The creation in 2008 of a Lawyers’ Chamber with compulsory membership increased state control over the legal profession. A 2007 report by Human Rights Watch described torture as “endemic” in the criminal justice system. Law enforcement authorities routinely justify the arrest of suspected Islamic extremists or political opponents by planting contraband or filing dubious charges of financial wrongdoing. In October 2009, rights activist Farhod Mukhtarov received a five-year prison sentence for fraud. The next month, the authorities released Sanjar Umarov, the leader of the opposition Sunshine Coalition, who had been held since 2005.

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 abuse or torture. Human Rights Watch has documented a number of torture-related deaths in custody during the last few years. Reports in 2009 indicated that the poet Yusuf Juma, who received a five-year sentence after calling for Karimov’s resignation in 2007, was targeted for abuse in prison. Rights organizations also highlighted several credible allegations in 2009 that police raped detained prisoners during investigations.

Although racial and ethnic discrimination is prohibited by law, the belief that senior positions in government and business are reserved for ethnic Uzbeks is widespread. Moreover, the government appears to be systematically closing schools for the Tajik-speaking minority.

Permission is required to move to a new city, and bribes are commonly paid to obtain the necessary registration documents. Restrictions on foreign travel include the use of exit visas, which are often issued selectively. Nevertheless, millions of Uzbeks, primarily men of working age, seek employment abroad, particularly in Russia and Kazakhstan.

Widespread corruption and the government's tight control over the economy limit equality of opportunity. The country's agricultural sector has seen few reforms since the Soviet period. As part of the government's economic stimulus plan, small farmers in 2009 were required to hire new employees, whether or not they had the resources to do so. A series of regulations and decrees over the last few years have placed numerous restrictions on market traders. Small businesses are freer to develop than large enterprises, which are often enmeshed in high-level corruption schemes. New regulations in 2009 ended tax privileges for foreign investors.

Women's educational and professional prospects are limited by cultural and religious norms and by ongoing economic difficulties. Victims of domestic violence are discouraged from pressing charges against perpetrators, who rarely face prosecution. The trafficking of women abroad for prostitution remains a serious problem. The parliament passed legislation in November 2009 that imposed tougher penalties for child labor, but the practice reportedly remained widespread during the year's cotton harvest.

** Countries are ranked on a scale of 1-7, with 1 representing the highest level of freedom and 7 representing the lowest level of freedom. Click [here](#) for a full explanation of Freedom in the World methodology.*