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FREEDOM IN THE WORLD

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Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan | Freedom in the World 2012

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OVERVIEW:

As in previous years, Uzbekistan's government suppressed all political opposition and restricted independent business activity in 2011, and the few remaining civic activists and critical journalists in the country faced prosecution, hefty fines, and arbitrary detention. Nevertheless, the regime continued to improve relations with the United States and Europe as it provided logistical support for NATO operations in Afghanistan.

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 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 extended Karimov's first five-year term until 2000, allegedly with 99 percent voter support.

The government's repression of the political opposition and of Muslims not affiliated with state-sanctioned religious institutions intensified after a series of deadly bombings in Tashkent in February 1999. The authorities blamed the attacks on the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), an armed group seeking to overthrow the secular government and establish an Islamic state.

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 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, pro-presidential parties allowed to participate.

In May 2005, a popular uprising in the Ferghana Valley city of Andijon triggered a violent government crackdown. The incident began on May 10 and 11, when 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.

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 used to

2012 SCORES

STATUS

Not Free

FREEDOM RATING

7.0

CIVIL LIBERTIES

7

POLITICAL RIGHTS

7

support operations in Afghanistan since late 2001. Russia and China endorsed the official Uzbek account of the violence.

The Uzbek authorities pursued 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. Parliamentary elections in December 2009 offered voters no meaningful choice, though the four legal political parties, all of which supported the government, indulged in mild criticism of one another.

In June 2010, Uzbekistan briefly took in over 100,000 ethnic Uzbek refugees fleeing ethnic violence in neighboring Kyrgyzstan. However, the authorities quickly returned them to Kyrgyzstan amid some reports of coercion.

Uzbekistan has largely repaired relations with the EU and United States in recent years, in part by agreeing to the overland transportation of nonmilitary supplies to support NATO operations in Afghanistan. The rapprochement gained new momentum in 2011, as NATO increased transit traffic, the United States approved waivers for Uzbekistan on some human-rights related sanctions, and high-level visits between U.S., European, and Uzbek officials resumed.

POLITICAL RIGHTS AND CIVIL LIBERTIES:

Uzbekistan is not an electoral democracy. President Islam Karimov uses the dominant executive branch to suppress all political opposition, and his December 2007 reelection appeared to flout constitutional rules on term limits. Under electoral legislation adopted in 2008, the bicameral parliament's lower house now has 150 seats, with 135 members directly elected in single-member constituencies and 15 representing the newly formed 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.

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 function primarily in exile. In October 2011, the exiled opposition group Birdamlik attempted to hold a national event to bring complaints against local officials in several cities. Local activists faced harassment from the authorities, and leaders of the campaign reported that neighborhood committee (*mahalla*) officials threatened residents who wanted to participate.

Corruption is pervasive. Uzbekistan was ranked 177 out of 183 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2011 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. By 2010, Agence France-Presse was the only major international news agency with an accredited reporter in Uzbekistan. State-controlled television has aired "documentaries" that smear perceived opponents of the government, including a program in 2007 on journalist Alisher Saipov, who was subsequently murdered in Kyrgyzstan. In June and July 2011, two former journalists from Uzbekistan's *Yoshlar* television channel, Saodat Omonova and Malohat Eshonkulova, held a multiweek hunger strike after they were arrested and fined for protesting censorship.

The OpenNet Initiative has found that the government systematically blocks websites with content that is critical of the regime. For a period in August 2011, many mainstream news and information sites based outside the country, including approved domestic sites hosted on Russian domains, were suddenly blocked as well, without explanation. Also during the year, the government reportedly ordered mobile-telephone operators to monitor their networks for "suspicious" texting and internet activity, and national security officers began seizing laptops in airports to check travelers' browsing histories for visits to critical media websites.

The government permits the existence of mainstream religions, including approved Muslim, Jewish, and Christian denominations, but treats unregistered religious 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. In 2011, members of legally registered Christian organizations were frequently targeted in raids, with authorities seizing religious literature, and members were arrested for unauthorized private gatherings. In March, the last remaining bookstores legally permitted to sell approved religious literature in Tashkent were raided and closed.

The government reportedly limits academic freedom. 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, breaking up virtually all unsanctioned gatherings and detaining participants.

Freedom of association is tightly constrained, and unregistered NGOs face extreme difficulties and harassment. A local advocate in 2008 described membership in the government-controlled association for NGOs as “voluntary but compulsory.” After the 2005 unrest in Andijon, the government shut down virtually all foreign-funded organizations in Uzbekistan; Human Rights Watch, the last international monitoring group with a presence in the country, was forced to close its office in March 2011. Independent rights activist Abdullo Tojiboy Oglı was arrested and fined about \$2,100 in April 2011 for holding an “unsanctioned gathering” on labor and residency rights, and had received similar fines for the same offense on multiple occasions in the previous year. 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. 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 May 2011, the president amnestied political prisoner and critical poet Yusuf Juma, who had been sentenced to five years in prison in 2008, allegedly for injuring police during a demonstration. He left for the United States after his release.

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.

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. A committee was formed in 2011 to overhaul the residency permit system for Tashkent, resulting in reports of increasing denial of basic services to unregistered residents and their resettlement in less-developed provincial areas. Restrictions on foreign travel include the use of exit visas, which are often issued selectively. Despite such controls, 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 undergone few reforms since the Soviet period. A series of regulations and decrees 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. However, a campaign to “modernize” several cities ahead of the 20th anniversary of the country's independence justified the seizure and destruction, without compensation, of hundreds of privately owned shops in Tashkent and the Samarqand region.

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 subsequent cotton harvests.

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