

Uzbekistan

Political Rights:	7
Civil Liberties:	6
Status:	Not Free

Overview:

A series of suicide bombings and subsequent violent clashes in March and April and again in July 2004 underscored the tenuous nature of Uzbekistan's political stability, even as the government continued its repressive policies against perceived opponents of the regime. The authorities responded to the attacks with a wave of arrests and convictions, targeting suspected members of banned Islamic groups. Repression against media outlets and foreign-based nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) working in Uzbekistan intensified during the year, partly in an effort to stifle dissent in advance of the December parliamentary elections. Meanwhile, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and the U.S. government cut financial assistance to the Uzbek government as a result of the regime's failure to implement meaningful political and human rights reforms.

Located along the ancient trade route of the famous Silk Road, Uzbekistan was incorporated into Russia by the late 1800s. The Uzbekistan Soviet Socialist Republic was established in 1924, and its eastern region was detached and made the separate Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic five years later.

On December 29, 1991, more than 98 percent of the country's electorate approved a popular referendum on Uzbekistan's independence. In a parallel vote, Islam Karimov, former Communist Party leader and chairman of the People's Democratic Party (PDP), the successor to the Communist Party, was elected president with a reported 88 percent of the vote. The only independent candidate to challenge him, Erk (Freedom) Party leader Mohammed Solih, charged election fraud. Solih fled the country two years later, and his party was forced underground. The opposition group Birlik (Unity) was barred from contesting the election and was later refused legal registration as a political party, and the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) and other religious-based groups were banned entirely. Only pro-government parties were allowed to compete in elections to the first post-Soviet legislature in December 1994 and January 1995. A February 1995 national referendum to extend Karimov's first five-year term in office until the year 2000 was allegedly approved by 99 percent of the country's voters.

The government's repression of members of the political opposition and of Muslims not affiliated with state-sanctioned religious institutions intensified following a series of deadly bombings in Tashkent in February 1999. The authorities blamed the attacks, which they described as an assassination attempt against Karimov, on the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), an armed group seeking the overthrow of Uzbekistan's secular government and its replacement with an Islamic state. The state justified its increasing crackdowns on moderate secular and religious groups under the pretext of fighting violent Islamist organizations, including the IMU.

Of the five parties that competed in the December 1999 parliamentary election, which was strongly criticized by international election observers, all supported the president and differed little in their political platforms. In the January 2000 presidential poll, Karimov defeated his only opponent, Marxist history professor Abdulhasiz Dzhahalov, with 92 percent of the vote.

The government refused to register genuinely independent opposition parties or permit their members to stand as candidates. Meanwhile, in August 2000, the IMU engaged in armed clashes with government troops; the following month, the U.S. government placed the IMU on its list of international terrorist organizations for its ties to Osama bin Laden's terrorist network, al-Qaeda, and to the Taliban. As part of its declared effort to prevent renewed invasions by the IMU, Uzbekistan subsequently placed land mines along portions of its borders with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, leading to protests by both governments and reports of accidental deaths of civilians in the region.

After the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, Uzbekistan became a key strategic ally of the United States in its military operations in Afghanistan. Tashkent's decision to permit the deployment of U.S. troops on its territory for search-and-rescue and humanitarian operations was widely seen as an effort to obtain various concessions from the West, including economic assistance, security guarantees, and reduced criticism of its poor human rights record. In March 2002, the United States and Uzbekistan signed a Declaration on Strategic Partnership and Cooperation Framework, in which both countries agreed to cooperate on economic, legal, humanitarian, and nuclear proliferation matters. Uzbekistan's continued collaboration with the U.S.-led antiterrorism campaign led to American commitments of financial assistance in exchange for promises from Karimov of political reforms.

In March 2003, the EBRD set a one-year deadline for compliance with three broad benchmarks for reform in Uzbekistan: greater political openness and freedom of the media, free functioning of civil society groups, and implementation of the recommendations of the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture. The EBRD announced that it would limit investments in Uzbekistan if the benchmarks were not met. Two months later, the EBRD held its annual meeting in Tashkent, the first such large-scale function in Central Asia. In the weeks surrounding the meeting, police intensified harassment of human rights defenders and relatives of religious prisoners in an attempt to prevent them from staging public protests about government abuses.

For the January 2004 local elections, all candidates were vetted in advance by Karimov's administration. The government claimed a voter turnout of 97 percent. The elections were for local neighborhood committees (*mahallahs*), which the government uses to observe and control the general population.

The fragile state of Uzbekistan's political stability was highlighted by a series of suicide bomb attacks and related violent clashes in late March and early April in Bukhara and Tashkent, in which some 50 people lost their lives. Most media outlets provided limited coverage of the events and focused almost exclusively on official government accounts, which led to widespread rumors about the identities and motives of the attackers. The fact that police appeared to be the main targets of the violence prompted speculation that the bombings were acts of revenge carried out by relatives of those imprisoned for alleged religious extremism. The authorities maintained that the bombings were the work of radical international Islamist groups—singling out the banned Hizb-ut-Tahrir group and the IMU—and dismissed charges of any links between the violence and the government's repressive political and economic policies. Meanwhile, a previously unknown Islamist group called Jamoat, a successor to the IMU, claimed responsibility.

In the days following the attacks, law enforcement agencies detained and arrested hundreds of alleged suspects and increased security measures in the capital and other large cities. According to Human Rights Watch, they targeted Muslims practicing outside of state-controlled mosques, including women. Dozens of defendants were convicted in the second half of the year

for their alleged roles in the attacks, and all received lengthy prison sentences in trials that did not meet basic standards of due process. On July 30, several people were killed when suicide bombers struck again, in coordinated attacks on the U.S. and Israeli Embassies and the office of Uzbekistan's prosecutor-general. Several Islamic groups, including the IMU and Jamoat, claimed responsibility.

In April, the EBRD announced its decision to limit investment in Uzbekistan, citing the government's lack of progress on democratic and economic reform benchmarks established one year earlier. Similarly, in July, the United States suspended \$18 million of the \$55 million originally earmarked for Uzbekistan in 2004; U.S. aid had peaked at \$220 million in 2002. The decision was based on the 2002 Strategic Partnership and Cooperation Framework, which makes U.S. assistance to the Uzbek government conditional on Tashkent's introduction of meaningful political reforms and curbs in human rights abuses.

In the run-up to the December 26, 2004, elections for the lower house of the new bicameral parliament, only the country's five legal parties, all of which are considered to be pro-presidential, were granted registration to participate in the elections. Several opposition groups, including Erk and Birlik, announced in November that they will boycott the vote after being unable to register candidates. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) announced that it will send a limited observer mission to monitor the vote.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

Citizens of Uzbekistan cannot change their government democratically. President Islam Karimov and the executive branch dominate the legislature and judiciary, and the government severely represses all political opposition. The national legislature largely confirms decisions made by the executive branch. The 1994-1995 and 1999 parliamentary elections and the 2000 presidential poll, in which only pro-government candidates could participate, were neither free nor fair. In a January 2002 nationwide referendum, 91 percent of voters allegedly approved amending the country's constitution to extend the presidential term from five to seven years. Karimov's current term in office will therefore end in 2007, rather than in 2005. In a parallel vote, 93 percent of voters officially supported replacing the country's 250-member single-chamber legislature with a bicameral parliament consisting of a 120-seat lower house and a 100-member upper house (Senate). Independent observers raised serious doubts about the validity of the referendum, citing the presence of police in polling stations and the fact that some people had been able to vote on behalf of several individuals. In April 2003, parliament adopted legislation providing former presidents immunity from prosecution and lifelong state-funded security for them and their immediate family.

A 1997 law prohibits parties based on ethnic or religious affiliations and those advocating subversion of the constitutional order. Only five parties, all pro-government, have been registered, and no genuine political opposition groups function legally or participate in the government. Members of unregistered secular opposition groups, including Birlik and Erk, are subject to discrimination, and many are in exile abroad. Although the authorities allowed both Erk and Birlik to hold open meetings in Tashkent in 2003, neither group was allowed to register officially as a political party. In May 2004, several members of Erk and at least one member of Birlik were arrested or threatened with arrest in a move denounced by the opposition as politically motivated.

Corruption is reportedly widespread throughout various levels of government, with bribery a common practice to obtain lucrative positions. Uzbekistan was ranked 114 out of 146 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2004 Corruption Perceptions Index.

The state imposes strict limits on freedom of speech and the press, particularly with regard to reports on the government and Karimov. The government controls major media outlets and newspaper printing and distribution facilities. The country's private broadcast and print media outlets generally avoid political issues, are largely regional in scope, and suffer from administrative and financial constraints. Although official censorship was abolished in May 2002, the responsibility for censoring material was transferred to newspaper editors, who were warned by the State Press Committee that they would be held personally accountable for what they publish. Self-censorship is widespread, while the few journalists who dare to produce probing or critical reports of the authorities face harassment, physical violence, and closure of their media outlets. The government has blocked a number of non-Uzbek news Web sites, and access to controversial information on the Internet remains extremely difficult.

Most Uzbek media were slow to report the March and April 2004 bomb attacks, and coverage of both those and the July bombings was limited largely to official government statements. In September, the authorities ordered the international media training and support organization Internews-Uzbekistan to be shut down for six months for alleged technical violations. According to media watchdog groups, the closure represented an attempt by the authorities to stifle criticism in advance of the December parliamentary elections. The previous month, five independent television channels linked to Internews were stripped of their broadcasting licenses.

In a case that attracted international attention, independent journalist and human rights activist Ruslan Sharipov, who had written widely on government corruption, was sentenced in August 2003 to five and a half years in prison on charges of homosexuality—which is a criminal offense in Uzbekistan—and of having sexual relations with a minor. Sharipov reportedly confessed to the charges under duress and was tortured while in custody. In September, an appeals court reduced his sentence to four years, and in March 2004, he was transferred from prison to house arrest. Following continuing international pressure, Sharipov's prison term was replaced in June 2004 with two years of community service in his hometown of Bukhara. In September, he was granted asylum in the United States.

The government exercises strict control over Islamic worship, including the content of imams' sermons, and is suspicious and intolerant of followers of Muslim organizations not sanctioned by the state. Many members of such groups have been arrested or imprisoned on charges of anti-constitutional activities, often under the pretext of the government's fight against militant Islamists. Muslim prisoners are frequently tortured for their religious convictions or to compel them to renounce their beliefs. Authorities have targeted members of the banned Hizb-ut-Tahrir (Islamic Party of Liberation), an international movement calling for the creation of an Islamic caliphate throughout the Muslim world. Suspected members have been forced to give confessions under torture, and their family members have been subjected to interrogation, arrest, and extortion. According to Forum 18, the authorities followed the wave of 2004 suicide bomb attacks with a new crackdown against religious Muslims, as well as believers of other faiths, including Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses.

The government permits the existence of certain mainstream religions, including approved Muslim and Jewish communities, as well as the Russian Orthodox Church and some other Christian denominations. As of January 2004, the authorities had registered some 2,100

religious congregations and organizations. However, the activities of other congregations are restricted through legislation that requires all religious groups to comply with burdensome state registration criteria. Involvement in religious activities carried out by unregistered groups is punishable by fines or imprisonment, and meetings held by such groups have been raided and participants interrogated and arrested. The 1998 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations prohibits activities including proselytizing and private religious instruction, and requires groups to obtain a license to publish or distribute materials.

The government limits academic freedom, according to the 2003 U.S. State Department Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, published in 2004. While professors generally are required to have their lectures pre-approved, implementation of this restriction varies, the report stated, and university professors reportedly practice self-censorship. Corruption is widespread throughout the educational system, with bribes commonly required to gain entrance into exclusive universities and to obtain good grades.

Open and free private discussion is limited by the mahalla committees, a traditional neighborhood organization that the government has turned into an official system for public surveillance and control. According to a 2003 Human Rights Watch report, the mahalla committees maintain files on those considered to be overly pious in their religious expression and alert the police of so-called suspicious religious and other activities.

Freedom of association is restricted. Although nonpolitical associations and social organizations are generally allowed to register, complicated regulations and governmental bureaucracy make the process difficult. Unregistered NGOs, including the Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan (HRSU), do not exist as legal entities and can face difficulties operating. Regulations require NGOs to confer with the Ministry of Justice about holding meetings and to allow ministry representatives to attend such gatherings. In December 2003, the government prevented a conference on the death penalty from being held in Tashkent just one day before it was scheduled to take place. The meeting was organized by a local group, Mothers against the Death Penalty and Torture, and supported by the OSCE, the British Embassy, and Freedom House. The authorities cancelled the conference on the grounds that the local group was not a legally registered organization. On February 16, 2004, police arrested Muidinjon Kurbanov, chairman of a regional branch of the HRSU, on weapons and narcotics charges. Civil society workers maintain that the evidence was planted and that Kurbanov's arrest was politically motivated.

In 2004, the government moved against foreign NGOs working in Uzbekistan by beginning enforcement of a 1999 order requiring all foreign NGOs to reregister with the Ministry of Justice. The government refused to allow the Open Society Institute, funded by businessman and philanthropist George Soros, to renew its registration. While authorities accused the institute of funding educational materials seeking to discredit government political and economic policies, critics of the move charged that it was part of a wider government attempt to control foreign NGO activities throughout the country. New banking restrictions requiring government oversight on foreign grant transactions has led to lengthy delays in grant payments to local recipients; Uzbek NGOs rely largely on international assistance to fund their operations.

Despite constitutional provisions for freedom of assembly, the authorities severely restrict this right in practice. Law enforcement officials have used force to prevent demonstrations against human rights abuses in the country, and participants have been harassed, detained, and arrested. In recent years, there have been some small protests by human rights activists and family members of people jailed for allegedly being members of violent Islamic

groups. In November, thousands of merchants rioted in the Fergana Valley region when police and tax officials began confiscating goods belonging to traders who were not complying with new controversial and onerous trade regulations. Demonstrators burned police cars and beat three tax inspectors and a police officer. 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 from office at any time. Police routinely physically abuse and torture suspects to extract confessions, which are accepted by judges as evidence and often serve as the basis for convictions. Law enforcement authorities reportedly often plant narcotics, weapons, and banned religious literature on suspected members of Islamic groups or political opponents to justify their arrest. Executions are regarded as state secrets, and relatives are sometimes not informed until months after the execution has occurred. The authorities conducted waves of arrests of alleged suspects following the suicide bomb attacks in March-April and July. According to Human Rights Watch, the police in many cases made arrests without warrants, conducted unsanctioned searches of people's homes, and planted evidence. Detainees experienced incommunicado detention, limited access to attorneys, and mistreatment during the investigative phases, and their trials failed to meet basic standards of due process, Human Rights Watch reported.

Prisons suffer from severe overcrowding and shortages of food and medicine. The Jaslyk prison camp is notorious for its extremely harsh conditions and ill-treatment of religious prisoners. Inmates, particularly those sentenced for their religious beliefs, are often subjected to ill-treatment or torture, and Human Rights Watch has documented a number of torture-related deaths in custody during the last few years. An estimated 5,000 to 6,000 political prisoners are being held in Uzbekistan's penal institutions.

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.

The government severely limits freedom of movement and residence within the country and across borders. There are restrictions on foreign travel, including the use of a system of exit visas, which are often issued selectively. Permission is required from local authorities to move to a new city, and the authorities rarely grant permission to those wishing to move to Tashkent. Bribes are often paid to obtain the necessary registration documents. In July, the mayor of Tashkent ordered residents of the capital without official residence permits to be expelled and dismissed from their jobs; he justified the move as necessary to guard against terrorist attacks by Islamist groups.

Widespread corruption, bureaucratic regulations, and the government's tight control over the economy limit most citizens' equality of opportunity. There has been little reform in the country's large and predominantly centrally planned agricultural sector, in which the state sets high production quotas and low purchase prices for farmers. A series of government regulations and decrees over the last few years have placed increasing restrictions on market traders and their ability to continue to operate.

Women's educational and professional prospects are restricted by traditional cultural and religious norms and by ongoing economic difficulties throughout the country. Victims of domestic violence are discouraged from pressing charges against their perpetrators, who rarely face criminal prosecution. The trafficking of women abroad for prostitution remains a serious problem. Local authorities frequently use schoolchildren as free or cheap labor to harvest cotton;

many children work long hours under unhealthy conditions, often receiving inadequate food and water.