

## Uzbekistan

**Country:**

[Uzbekistan](#)

**Year:**

2016

**Freedom Status:**

Not Free

**Political Rights:**

7

**Civil Liberties:**

7

**Aggregate Score:**

3

**Freedom Rating:**

7.0

**Overview:**

In March 2015, President Islam Karimov was reelected to a fourth term with a reported 90 percent of the vote despite a constitutional limit of two consecutive terms. The government continued to suppress all political opposition during the year. The few remaining civic activists and critical journalists in the country faced physical violence, prosecution, hefty fines, involuntary hospitalization, and arbitrary detention. In an exceptional case in February, authorities released popular journalist and religious figure Hayrullo Hamidov, who served five years of a six-year sentence on religious extremism charges.

Gulnara Karimova, the president's elder daughter, remained under house arrest in 2015 amid persisting allegations of corruption and links to organized crime. Several high-ranking officials who played a role in the case against Karimova and her associates were dismissed, signaling what many analysts believe are ongoing shifts in internal competition for power and resources.

**Political Rights and Civil Liberties:**

**Political Rights: 0 / 40 [Key]**

**A. Electoral Process: 0 / 12**

After Uzbekistan gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Karimov, the incumbent Communist Party leader, was elected president. He has been reelected three times since then despite a clear constitutional limit of two consecutive terms. In the most recent presidential election, held in March 2015, Karimov won a fourth term with 90 percent of the vote amid a 91 percent turnout, according to official state data. Monitors from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) raised serious doubts about the independence of the electoral

commission and noted a lack of competition and alternatives. The other presidential candidates praised Karimov in their campaigns, and were not perceived as true challengers.

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.

Parliamentary elections held in December 2014 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.

## **B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 0 / 16**

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. All are progovernment, and no genuine opposition parties operate legally. The four parties indulge in mild criticism of one another and occasionally of government ministers below the president. Unregistered opposition groups function primarily in exile, and domestic supporters or family members of exiled opposition figures are frequently persecuted. In March 2015, UzLiDeP and Milliy Tiklanish announced that they had formed a parliamentary alliance, christening themselves the “Bloc of Democratic Forces.” Shortly thereafter, the PDP and Adolat announced that they had also formed an alliance, ostensibly in opposition. At year’s end, there were no indications that these actions had led to any change in party politics or parliamentary decision making, which remained firmly in line with executive policy.

No registered party represents the specific interests of minority ethnic or religious groups.

## **C. Functioning of Government: 0 / 12**

The legislature serves as a rubber stamp for the executive branch. Police, security services, and judges interpret the laws as they choose or according to political dictates, leaving little recourse to appeal.

Corruption is pervasive. Uzbekistan was ranked 153 out of 168 countries and territories surveyed in Transparency International’s 2015 Corruption Perceptions Index. Graft and bribery among low- and mid-level officials are common and at times even transparent. Social-media platforms have given space to new public discourse on corruption, allowing citizens to self-document bribery and other malfeasance. Citizens have made efforts to gather and publicize evidence of abuse of office in some sectors, but such attempts have not been successful in compelling the government to change Uzbekistan’s entrenched culture of corruption.

In January 2015, authorities unrolled a new wave of fraud and embezzlement charges against businesses associated with Karimova, leading to the prosecution of dozens of lower-level employees. In March, the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) published a report suggesting that between 2002 and 2011 alone, Karimova received payments and shares

from international telecommunications companies totaling \$1 billion. The report detailed a series of extortive maneuvers and schemes that Karimova used to control the access of foreign firms to licenses, contracts, and other aspects of Uzbekistan's telecommunications market. Although the allegations and charges against Karimova and her associates were ostensibly about governmental corruption, many analysts have suggested that the case points to an internal power struggle. Beginning in April, prominent officials who had played a role in investigating, charging, and confiscating assets from Karimova faced dismissal, arrest, and prosecution. Among them were Rashid Qodirov, Uzbekistan's longtime prosecutor general, and members of the influential Sharifhojaev family, including the first deputy head of the National Security Services.

## **Civil Liberties: 3 / 60 (-1)**

### **D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 0 / 16 (-1)**

Despite constitutional guarantees, freedoms of speech and the press are severely restricted. The state controls major media outlets and related facilities, and state-run television has aired "documentaries" that smear perceived opponents of the government. Although official censorship was abolished in 2002, it has continued through semiofficial mechanisms that strongly encourage self-censorship. Foreign reporters are generally excluded from the country. Even recording artists must obtain special licenses from a government authority to perform in public; licenses can be revoked if performance content is deemed to be "meaningless" or insufficiently patriotic and edifying.

The government has shuttered several independent outlets in recent years, leaving few reliable sources available domestically. In May 2015, a Tashkent court ordered the closure of the *Noviy Vek* newspaper after the state Agency for Press and Information filed a complaint over the paper's publication of "inappropriate" jokes. The outlet, which upon registration in 1992 became Uzbekistan's first privately owned newspaper since independence, covered domestic society and politics.

The government systematically blocks websites that contain content critical of the regime. Mainstream news, information, and social-media websites based outside the country are sometimes blocked as well. Authorities maintain and frequently update a list of banned proxy sites that would allow users to access blocked content anonymously. In February, under the auspices of morality and family values, legislators passed measures requiring that internet cafes close by 9 p.m. and prohibiting minors from using them during school hours.

The government permits the existence of approved Muslim, Jewish, and Christian denominations but treats unregistered religious activity 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 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.

The government continued prosecuting religion-based offenses in 2015, and introduced some new restrictions as well. Authorities made regular use of a 2014 decree banning any literature or media intended to "change" or "distort" a person's beliefs, determining the definition of these terms on a case-by-case basis. The decree has led to an increase in the seizure of religious literature by customs officials, including electronic media found in searches of personal electronic devices such as mobile phones and laptops. During the year, Christian and Muslim groups reported torture and threats of rape following raids of churches and private homes in which religious literature was

seized. In February, authorities deported two Russian nationals who were convicted of smuggling religious material. The men, who were transporting fruit from Georgia into Uzbekistan, were arrested at a border crossing in the Karakalpakstan autonomous region in November 2014 for possessing two Islamic books and recordings of sermons on their mobile phones.

The government severely restricts travel to pilgrimage sites abroad, and requires citizens to undergo a lengthy application process to receive permission to exit the country for religious reasons. Applicants frequently complain about excessively long waiting lists for making the hajj to Saudi Arabia. In 2015, officials announced that they would permit approximately 5,200 individuals to exit Uzbekistan for the hajj—less than 20 percent of the quota allocated to Uzbekistan by Saudi Arabia. Separately, in September, the Education Ministry banned anyone under the age of 18 from attending any prayer services in mosques, introducing a fine of \$750 for parents who allow their children to attend. The legal basis for the ban as well as its consequences remained unclear at year's end.

The government reportedly limits academic freedom. Bribes are commonly required to gain entrance to exclusive universities and to obtain good grades. The freedom of private discussion is limited by *mahalla* committees, traditional neighborhood organizations that the government has transformed into an official system for public surveillance and control.

## **E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 0 / 12**

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

Freedom of association is tightly constrained, and unregistered nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) face extreme difficulties and harassment. After a major episode of unrest in the city of Andijon in 2005, the government shut down virtually all foreign-funded organizations in Uzbekistan. In 2015, the country's few remaining human rights activists continued to face harassment, prosecution, travel restrictions, and violence, particularly when attempting to document conditions for workers during the annual cotton harvest. In May, police detained Elena Urlaeva, head of the Human Rights Alliance (HRA), while she was interviewing workers who were part of the harvest in a town near Tashkent. Police sedated Urlaeva and subjected her to invasive searches and other medical procedures. In September, Urlaeva and Malohat Eshonqulova, head of the Birdamlik (Solidarity) movement, were arrested and subjected to body cavity searches by a medic in the presence of male police officers, who denied their requests for privacy. Also in September, police detained and reportedly beat HRA activist Dmitriy Tikhonov after he photographed teachers and students being transported to cotton fields. In October, officials summoned him to hear charges; upon returning to his residence, Tikhonov found his home office—where he kept records of his investigations into alleged abuse by local authorities—burned to the ground. Tikhonov reported other possessions to be missing—notably, a hard drive and a legal manual he had created to educate the public about labor laws.

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.

## **F. Rule of Law: 0 / 16**

The judiciary is subservient to the president, who appoints all judges and can remove them at any time. The Lawyers' Chamber, a regulatory body with compulsory membership, serves as a vehicle for state control over the legal profession. Law enforcement authorities routinely justify the arrest of

suspected Islamic extremists or political opponents by planting contraband, filing dubious charges of financial wrongdoing, or inventing witness testimony.

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. In September 2014, Human Rights Watch released a report detailing 34 cases of long-term political imprisonment in Uzbekistan. The individuals listed in the report remained behind bars in 2015 with the exception of Hamidov, who was released in February in a landmark decision by the government. Shortly after his release, he began working with one of the country's most influential pop-culture outlets to produce material criticizing the Islamic State (IS) militant group. This development signaled growing worries among officials about the group's reach in Uzbekistan, as the government has not been known to allow anyone imprisoned for religious extremism to access audiences through mass media.

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. Moreover, the government appears to be systematically closing schools for the Tajik-speaking minority.

Sex between men is illegal and 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 make discussing LGBT issues difficult.

## **G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 3 / 16**

Permission is required to move to a new city, and bribes are commonly paid to obtain the necessary documents. Restrictions on foreign travel include the use of exit visas, which are often issued selectively. Despite such controls, millions of Uzbeks seek employment abroad, particularly in Russia and Kazakhstan; activists who attempt to help them form unions or organize for better labor conditions are routinely harassed and prosecuted.

Women's educational and professional prospects are limited by cultural and religious norms and 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.

Widespread corruption and the government's tight control over the economy limit equality of opportunity, and economic exploitation remains a serious problem. A 2009 law imposed tougher penalties for child labor, and in 2012, Uzbekistan's prime minister pledged to end the practice completely. Reports continue to indicate that forced child labor is significantly less pervasive than in the past. However, international monitors noted that forced adult labor increased in 2015 to meet government quotas during the annual harvest campaign, which began in September. Self-reporting on social-media platforms sharply continued to increase public awareness of people injured or killed during the harvest campaign due to unsafe labor conditions. Some adults reported receiving threats and harassment if they refused to participate in the harvest.

### **Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)**

**X = Score Received**

**Y = Best Possible Score**

**Z = Change from Previous Year**

**Full Methodology**

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