

Uzbekistan

by Sarah Kendzior

Capital: Tashkent
Population: 30.7 million
GNI/capita, PPP: US\$5,840

Source: The data above are drawn from the World Bank's *World Development Indicators 2015*.

Nations in Transit Ratings and Averaged Scores

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Electoral Process	6.75	6.75	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00
Civil Society	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00
Independent Media	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00
National Democratic Governance	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00
Local Democratic Governance	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75
Judicial Framework and Independence	6.75	6.75	6.75	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00
Corruption	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75
Democracy Score	6.82	6.82	6.86	6.89	6.93	6.93	6.93	6.93	6.93	6.93

NOTE: The ratings reflect the consensus of Freedom House, its academic advisers, and the author(s) of this report. The opinions expressed in this report are those of the author(s). The ratings are based on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 representing the highest level of democratic progress and 7 the lowest. The Democracy Score is an average of ratings for the categories tracked in a given year.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since 1991, Uzbekistan has been ruled by Islam Karimov, a communist apparatchik turned nationalist dictator who has retained the most pernicious aspects of Soviet rule. Karimov was appointed first secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Uzbekistan in 1989 and maintained his hold on the country during the Soviet transition period. Obsessed with threats to his power, Karimov employs a massive security apparatus to monitor the activities of real and perceived opponents and to scan the Uzbek population for signs of dissent. His regime has banned opposition groups, persecuted civil society activists, and nearly eradicated independent media. Citizens are arrested on arbitrary charges, denied due process, and tortured during interrogation and in prison. Since the events in Andijon in May 2005, when government forces opened fire on a crowd of protesters, including women and children, Uzbekistan's regime has become increasingly insular, opposing foreign efforts to monitor or intervene in domestic political affairs and rejecting cooperation with most¹ international organizations.

In 2014, Uzbekistan faced crises at home and abroad. Russia's annexation of Crimea alarmed state officials concerned about territorial sovereignty, while Russian laws curbing Uzbek migrant labor augured serious consequences for Uzbekistan's remittance-based economy. Corruption and censorship were pervasive throughout 2014, with new laws on blogging prohibiting the publication of content deemed by state officials to be untrue. State officials also passed the Law on Prevention of Violations of the Law, under which citizens may be prosecuted for crimes they have yet to attempt. In March, it was revealed that Karimov's daughter Gulnara was under house arrest. Karimova was the subject of several domestic and international criminal investigations at year's end.

National Democratic Governance. The Karimov regime offers citizens no opportunity to meaningfully participate in the country's political system. Only four political parties, all progovernment, are currently registered, and no genuine opposition parties operate legally. Russia-Uzbekistan relations, already strained by the annexation of Crimea, deteriorated further as new Russian legislation curbed the influx of migrant labor, affecting millions of Uzbeks who seek work abroad because of high unemployment in Uzbekistan. Gulnara Karimova was placed under house arrest and is now the subject of multiple investigations for fraud, money-laundering, and extortion. *Uzbekistan's rating for national democratic governance remains unchanged at 7.00.*

Electoral Process. Elections in Uzbekistan are preordained affairs, orchestrated to justify the ongoing rule of Karimov and his allies. Only parties that supported

the government were permitted to participate in the December 2014 parliamentary elections. A new constitutional amendment created a Central Electoral Commission (CEC) made up of parliamentary deputies and elected by them. *Uzbekistan's rating for electoral process remains unchanged at 7.00.*

Civil Society. Human rights activists, regime critics, and devout Muslims continued to be the targets of brutal attacks, bogus legal charges, and other punitive measures. State agents harassed dissidents and their family members, including relatives of dissidents living abroad, as exemplified in the persecution of relatives of the leader of the U.S.–based Birdamlik People's Movement. Surveillance and intimidation by the national security services remains rampant, and contact with exiled political groups is forbidden. In 2014, one citizen was arrested for attempting to Skype with members of the People's Movement of Uzbekistan in Norway. *Uzbekistan's rating for civil society remains unchanged at 7.00.*

Independent Media. The Karimov regime has all but eradicated free media in Uzbekistan. Most of the country's independent journalists have fled the country, and those who remain are subject to surveillance, harassment, and detention. Foreign-based Uzbek websites and their contributors are now the primary targets of government censorship. In September, the government passed new laws restricting the content of blogs and requiring internet cafés to videotape customers and record their user activity. *Uzbekistan's rating for independent media remains unchanged at 7.00.*

Local Democratic Governance. Most local and regional officials are chosen by the state, without input from Uzbek citizens. *Mahallas*, or neighborhood councils, serve as the eyes and ears of the central government, reporting suspicious activities to higher authorities and working to preempt manifestations of antigovernment sentiment. In line with regime directives, local authorities continued to abuse their power by forcing citizens to work in cotton fields, at the expense of educational and professional activities. Although an international labor group was permitted to monitor harvest conditions in fall 2014, state officials directed citizens to lie to investigators about forced and child labor. *Uzbekistan's rating for local democratic governance remains unchanged at 6.75.*

Judicial Framework and Independence. The Karimov regime maintains strict control over the judicial system, routinely violating citizens' fundamental legal rights. Citizens are arrested on arbitrary charges, denied due process, given lengthy prison terms, and even tortured. In August 2014, the government passed a new law subjecting citizens with prior violations to "preventative measures" by police and requiring *mahalla* watch committees to monitor local residents' speech. *Uzbekistan's rating for judicial framework and independence remains unchanged at 7.00.*

Corruption. Numerous officials from Uzbekistan's customs department, including the chief of the Tashkent Customs Committee, were arrested on charges of

corruption, extortion, and malfeasance in 2014. Widespread extortion and the fallout from multiple telecommunications industry corruption scandals being prosecuted abroad have deterred some foreign investment. *Uzbekistan's corruption rating remains unchanged at 6.75.*

Outlook for 2015. Presidential elections will be held in 2015 and Karimov will likely secure a fourth successive term. The criminal investigation of Gulnara Karimova will continue throughout the year. May 2015 will mark the tenth anniversary of the 2005 shooting of hundreds of citizens in Andijon, Uzbekistan. The anniversary will be commemorated by exiles abroad and the regime may step up security as the date approaches. With unemployment high, reduced opportunities for Uzbeks to perform migrant labor in Russia may have a destabilizing effect.

MAIN REPORT

National Democratic Governance

2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00

National elites in Uzbekistan spent 2014 occupied with two crises: Russia's occupation of Crimea, which stoked fears of a similar incursion in Central Asia; and the alleged criminal activity and subsequent house arrest of presidential daughter Gulnara Karimova.

In a referendum monitored by armed Russian soldiers and boycotted by a large part of Ukraine's population, residents of Crimea voted to become part of Russia in March. The Crimea annexation left Uzbekistan—which depends heavily on migrant remittances from Russia and also shares many of Russia's authoritarian tactics—in an uncomfortable position. Like the four other formerly Soviet Central Asian countries, Uzbekistan declined to participate in the United Nations (UN) General Assembly vote affirming the territorial integrity of Ukraine. A UN official told Reuters that Russia had threatened several Central Asian states with retaliation if they voted in favor of the resolution.²

On 4 March, Uzbekistan's foreign ministry released the following statement: “The events in Ukraine, which caused serious complications of the situation and confrontation that can lead to an even greater escalation of tension and consequences that are difficult to predict, create real threats to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country, cannot but cause deep anxiety and concern in Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan hopes that maximum restraint and prudence will be displayed for reaching an agreement between the parties involved in the conflict process in Ukraine soon.”³ The Uzbek ministry's statement avoided any direct mention of Russia, thus making a case for territorial sovereignty on principle without antagonizing a key economic partner.

Russia and Uzbekistan retained political and economic ties throughout 2014, but relations were strained, particularly on the issue of migrant labor. Uzbekistan's economy depends heavily on remittances from migrant laborers in Russia, an issue the Uzbek government refuses to address for fear of highlighting domestic unemployment. Russia, meanwhile, openly treats the influx of Central Asian laborers as a problem, and over the year adopted a series of legislative measures designed to reduce their number. The laws included restrictions on internal passports; increased costs for work permits; health tests; and tests on cultural and language competency.⁴ In July, Russia announced that the new laws had reduced the number of Uzbek migrants by 30 percent since the beginning of 2014.⁵ By year's end, the number of migrant laborers in Russia had dropped by 70 percent since 2013. By this time, the ruble had dropped 40 percent against the dollar, meaning that migrant laborers working in Russia were earning less, as well.⁶

The 2014 drawdown of United States and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) troops from Afghanistan left Uzbekistan with an uncertain role in world affairs. Though largely retaining its insular stance, Uzbekistan's government extended strategic partnerships with both east and west. In May, NATO opened a regional office in Tashkent, marking a mild improvement in relations that had soured since international criticism of the government's actions in Andijon in 2005.⁷ Uzbekistan also strengthened ties with China: Uzbek president Islam Karimov visited Beijing in May and August, and the two countries extended their cooperation on a natural gas pipeline.

Meanwhile, on the domestic front, ongoing criminal allegations against first daughter Gulnara Karimova proved a serious problem for her father's administration. Formerly posited as a potential successor to Karimov, the self-defined popstar-businesswoman-philanthropist fell from grace in late 2012 after revelations of her corrupt business dealings came to light in the context of a case involving Swedish telecom company Teliasonera.⁸ Her bank accounts were frozen and her charitable organizations were put under investigation. In 2014, Karimova's downfall continued, as investigations into her corrupt financial dealings expanded from Sweden and Switzerland to France, the Netherlands, and Norway.⁹ In February, she vanished from the microblogging site Twitter, where she had spent months claiming the existence of a conspiracy among government elites to silence or even kill her. By March, word had emerged that Karimova was under house arrest with her teenage daughter in a luxury apartment in Tashkent. In August, authenticated audio recordings were smuggled out of Uzbekistan to the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). In the recordings, Karimova claims that she and her daughter are being held hostage by the administration and are in urgent need of medical help.¹⁰ In his first media interview, Karimova's son, Islam Karimov Jr., told the *Guardian*, "It's very difficult for me to even say this, but sadly, even if something happened to them or their lives were at extreme risk, I would not know about it and there is no way for me to find out about it."¹¹

Pictures released to the media in September showed a thin Karimova without makeup and with several months of dark roots in her blonde hair.¹² A hired British PR agent, Locksley Ryan, told the press that "those keeping her and her daughter prisoner have decided to inflict a program of systematic starvation, preventing any food from reaching them."¹³ While this claim has not been independently validated, it is clear that for Karimova—surrounded in the photos by security officers in camouflage—the glamorous life is over.

On 22 September, Uzbekistan's prosecutor general released a statement acknowledging that Karimova was the subject of a criminal investigation in Uzbekistan. Several of Karimova's business associates were arrested or sentenced during the year, including a filmmaker friend of her ex-boyfriend,¹⁴ who was kidnapped in Moscow and tried for extremism; and Rustam Madumarov and Gayane Avakian, business partners who were sentenced in May to 10 and 9 years in prison, respectively, for fraud and illegal transactions.¹⁵ Karimova is no longer considered a plausible candidate to replace her father. Throughout 2014 she

attempted, in her limited public correspondence, to reposition herself as a human rights activist, a claim viewed with skepticism by Western activists who noted Karimova has only advocated for herself.¹⁶

Electoral Process

2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
6.75	6.75	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00

Since Uzbekistan gained independence in late 1991, no elections held there have been judged free or fair by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). The OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) sent only a limited election monitoring team to the December 2014 parliamentary elections, which it assessed as "lack[ing] genuine competition and debate."¹⁷

Popular elections are only held for the office of the president and the lower house of parliament (*Oliy Majlis*). Only four registered parties—the Democratic Party of Uzbekistan, the Adolat (Justice) Social Democratic Party, the Liberal Democratic Party, and Milliy Tiklanish (National Revival)—are allowed to nominate candidates and participate in elections. In the last presidential election (2007), all four parties proclaimed their loyalty to President Karimov. No opposition parties are allowed to register, and there is no way for an independent candidate or a candidate from a civic group to run. The next presidential election is set to be held in 2015.

Although Uzbekistan's constitution states that the same person cannot be president for more than two consecutive terms, Karimov has served three since 1992.¹⁸ In 1995 and 2002, national referendums extended his term and postponed elections. In 2002, the parliament passed a law extending the presidential term from five to seven years—a change Karimov's supporters argued nullified his previous terms and justified his stay in power. In December 2011, the parliament cut the presidential term back to five years, creating a new loophole for his next reelection. The state press praised the shortening of term length as emblematic of Karimov's dedication to democratic reform.¹⁹

Speculation over Karimov's successor continued in 2014, but the 75-year-old leader gave no indication that he plans to relinquish power. "I am one of those who is criticized for staying too long," Karimov told diplomats and scholars at a conference in May. "I am criticized, but I stay. I am criticized, but I want to keep working. What's wrong with that?"²⁰ In April 2014, Article 117 of the Uzbek constitution was amended to create a Central Election Committee tasked with running the elections, formed from members of the *Oliy Majlis*.²¹ This move was criticized by Uzbek opposition activists as a superficial measure made to provide the illusion of democratization.²²

Amendments in September that increased criminal liability for violations associated with elections and referendums were viewed with similar suspicion by opposition party members, who are still banned from running for office.²³ When

one opposition activist, Abdullo Tojiboy-Ogli of the unregistered For Fair and Just Elections in Uzbekistan party, asked a court about reforming the election laws, he was placed under house arrest.²⁴

Only the four parties approved by Karimov—the Uzbekistan Liberal Democratic Party, the Uzbekistan National Revival Democratic Party, the People’s Democratic Party of Uzbekistan, and the Justice Social Democratic Party—were allowed to campaign ahead of the December 2014 parliamentary elections.²⁵ In September, Uzbekistan’s ambassador to the European Union (EU), Vladimir Norov, praised his country’s commitment to democratic elections in an open letter to the EU: “[Uzbekistan has] formed a modern electoral system that meets the highest democratic standards, an effective, relevant international electoral standards and principles of the legislative framework of elections, providing a guarantee of the free will of the citizens, [and] the right of everyone to freely elect and be elected to representative bodies of state power.”²⁶

The government claims that voter turnout in the first round of the elections was over 18 million people, or 88 percent of the population.²⁷ This statistic was disputed by local activists observing the elections. Citing members of his own family as examples, one activist monitoring a polling station in Tashkent alleged that many people marked down as having voted had never actually come to the polling station.²⁸

Of the 150 seats in the parliament, 135 are elected and 15 go automatically to the progovernment Ecological Movement. On 21 December, 113 seats were won; the remaining 22 seats will be filled in a run-off election on 4 January 2015.²⁹

Civil Society

2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00

Backed by a formidable Interior Ministry and security forces, Karimov has eliminated nearly all civil society groups that do not embrace state policies. Criticism of local officials, judges, and law enforcement representatives is rarely permitted. A few small independent rights organizations remain in Uzbekistan, including Ezgulik (Virtue), the Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan (HRSU), the Expert Working Group (composed of members of Ezgulik and the HRSU), and the Initiative Group of Independent Rights Defenders of Uzbekistan. Other organizations, like the Birdamlik (Solidarity) People’s Movement and Sunshine Uzbekistan, are run primarily by Uzbek exiles abroad but have members in Uzbekistan, all of whom face constant harassment by state officials.

One of the SNB’s most common tactics of intimidation has been to punish the family members and friends of dissidents in the hopes of curtailing their activity. In 2014, this tactic was once again applied to Uzbeks living outside the country.

Seventy-two-year-old Hasan Choriyev, father of exiled Birdamlik (Solidarity) People’s Movement leader Bahodir Choriyev, died in Tashkent in March 2014, about

two months after being released from prison under amnesty.³⁰ The elder Choriyev was arrested in June 2013, not long after his son—who has been living in St. Louis, Missouri, since 2004—announced his intention to run for president. The Choriyev family believes Hasan died as a result of mistreatment in Uzbekistan’s prison system. The U.S.–based Choriyevs were denied visas to return for their father’s funeral.

In April, Birdamlik held its first international conference (*qurultoy*) out of a Marriot hotel in suburban St. Louis. Dozens of Uzbeks from around the world attended, but those in Uzbekistan reported that officials had confiscated their passports or refused to renew them, leaving them unable to attend.³¹ One Birdamlik activist, Malohat Eshonqulova, claimed she had been poisoned by Uzbek government officials while under interrogation after being arrested in December 2013. Unable to travel, she invited 30 Uzbeks to her home to address the *qurultoy* over Skype. Uzbekistan’s state security officials discovered her plan and barred them all from speaking.³² Eshonqulova attempted to Skype into the meeting, but the connection failed.

Attacks on Birdamlik members continued throughout the year both in Uzbekistan and abroad. In September, Bahodir Choriyev’s wife and son were forcibly deported from Uzbekistan and their citizenship was revoked. Two other family members were later notified their citizenship had also been annulled.³³

As in previous years, the few human rights activists left in Uzbekistan faced harassment, prosecution, and violence throughout 2014. In January, the Namangan City Court sentenced local resident Kudratbek Rasulov to eight years in prison on charges of “attempting to overthrow the constitutional order” for contacting the People’s Movement of Uzbekistan through social media and on Skype.³⁴ Also in January, photographer Umida Akhmedova, her son, and several others held a prodemocracy demonstration outside the Ukrainian Embassy and were summarily detained.³⁵ In March, Nuritdin Jumaniyazov and Fakhridin Tillyaev, long-time activists of the Erk party who organized and assisted migrant workers, were sentenced to eight years each for human trafficking. The sentence was upheld on appeal in April.³⁶

Independent Media

2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00

Uzbekistan’s national and local media outlets parrot regime rhetoric, while independent media have been almost eradicated through decades of government intimidation and censorship. The 2005 Andijon events marked a turning point for Uzbek media, as state authorities sought to control coverage of the violence and its aftermath by expelling foreign journalists from Uzbekistan; most are still denied entry today. The majority of independent Uzbek journalists have fled the country, and many now run websites that report on and critique state politics. As a result, foreign-based independent Uzbek websites and their contributors are now the

primary focus of government censorship efforts. The few remaining independent journalists in Uzbekistan are routinely harassed and imprisoned on charges ranging from defamation to extortion, forgery to smuggling.

Reporters Without Borders and Freedom House's press freedom survey rank Uzbekistan lower than Saudi Arabia, Myanmar, and Belarus.³⁷ Relatively few journalists were arrested in Uzbekistan in 2014, but that is only because there are very few independent journalists left. Many Uzbek journalists have been in prison for years. In May 2014, journalist Salijon Abdurakhmanov, from the autonomous region of Karakalpakstan, marked his sixth year behind bars in 2014.³⁸ Muhammad Bekjonov, a relative of Erk opposition party leader Muhammad Salih and the former editor of Erk's now-banned newspaper, has been in prison for 15 years, one of the longest sentences for any journalist worldwide.³⁹ In a September interview, Bekjonov's daughter said he resembled "a person in a concentration camp."⁴⁰ In May, the sentence against journalist Yusuf Ruzimurodov, imprisoned since 1999, was extended by three more years due to "violation of the internal prison rules."⁴¹

With press freedom within Uzbekistan already in check, Uzbek officials focused their efforts on controlling the flow of information outside Uzbekistan's borders. In October, activist Dmitry Tikhonov claimed that following his detainment in September, his new passport contained "hidden information" instructing border control to contact the SNB each time he crosses state lines. The passport changes were discovered when he attempted to enter Kazakhstan. Tikhonov said that other Uzbek journalists had encountered similar difficulties.⁴²

Throughout 2014, Uzbekistan continued to block access to foreign websites covering politics in Central Asia, including RFE/RL, UzNews.net, Ferghana.ru, and Registan.net. Authorities also cracked down on the proxy servers many Uzbeks use to access prohibited websites. In March, Internet cafes became legally obligated to install video cameras and keep log files of visitors for three months. Having an internet café in a basement or non-visible space was also banned.⁴³

Passed in September, a new law "On Informization" limits the types of content bloggers may post. The law outlaws blogs that advocate or display, among other things, "a violent change of the constitutional order and territorial integrity of the Republic of Uzbekistan;" "war, violence, terrorism, and religious extremism;" "information inciting national, racial, ethnic or religious hatred and defaming the honor and dignity or business reputation of citizens;" and pornography.⁴⁴ The law also bans "untrue posts and reposts" and obligates citizens to remove "untrue posts" on state demand.⁴⁵

The description of the prohibited categories is vague enough that Uzbek state officials can declare most content they find objectionable to be illegal. The law was condemned by OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media Dunja Mijatović, who noted that the restrictions go far beyond the admissible limits of free speech expressed in international standards.⁴⁶ However, the law is unlikely to have significant effect on political blogging in Uzbekistan as most citizens already self-censor online.

In February, Gulnara Karimova's Twitter account became inactive. Throughout

late 2013 and early 2014, Karimova had tweeted a number of accusations against her father's government, including that the SNB was plotting to kill her and that SNB chief Rustam Innoyatov planned to oust her father. Examination of Karimova's Twitter account shows that it was not deleted, but suspended, which means that she did not voluntarily leave the service but someone at Twitter closed it. Twitter has not commented on the closure, which seems to have occurred between March and April. In February, Uzbek developers launched Bamboo.uz, a social media network that is a thinly veiled clone of Twitter. The network did not appear to gain traction in Uzbekistan in 2014.⁴⁷

In the summer, Uzbek activists in Uzbekistan and around the world began posting pictures of themselves holding signs reading, in Uzbek, "I am not afraid" to the Facebook group *Qo'rqmaymiz* ("We are not afraid").⁴⁸ In October 2014, the group had over 9000 members. Among the activists who posted pictures of themselves was a man claiming to be Jamshid Karimov, a journalist and nephew of President Karimov who was arrested and forced into a psychiatric institution in 2006. (There is no confirmation that this is, indeed, Karimov, who has been missing and rumored to be in exile since 2012.) The *Qo'rqmaymiz* group features contributions from activists of numerous political parties as well as ordinary citizens. *Qo'rqmaymiz* is arguably the largest and most politically unified online effort since the popular group blogs created by Uzbek activists in the aftermath of the Andijon massacre.⁴⁹ Facebook remains accessible in Uzbekistan.

Local Democratic Governance

2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75

In Uzbekistan, the state appoints key local officials based on their loyalty and ability to fulfill demands from Tashkent. Provincial governors are usually rotated every few years, apparently in order to prevent any single official from gaining significant power. *Mahallas*, or neighborhood councils, the most localized level of governance, are expected to report suspicious activities to higher authorities in order to eliminate antigovernment sentiment. Local officials also continue to follow national directives that force Uzbek citizens, including children, to work in the country's cotton fields.

The use of forced and child labor in Uzbekistan's cotton industry has long been the target of domestic and international human rights campaigns. Local officials in Uzbekistan are tasked with ensuring that enough residents work in cotton fields to meet government-set production targets. Children and teenagers are forced to pick cotton and told it is their patriotic duty. In October 2014, Prime Minister Shavkat Mirziyayev boasted that Uzbekistan expected to earn \$1.2 billion from exporting cotton and textiles that year.⁵⁰

Following years of international criticism, the Uzbek government finally let the International Labor Organization (ILO) deploy teams to Uzbekistan to monitor the cotton harvest in 2013.⁵¹ Their report on the use of forced child and adult labor

prompted the United States Department of Labor to condemn the practice in fall 2014. On 18 September, the ILO resumed its monitoring for the fall 2014 harvest season, along with representatives of the World Bank.⁵²

Despite the presence of monitors, the cotton harvest continued to structure the lives of ordinary Uzbeks in the same detrimental ways it has in the past. In August, officials banned citizens in Jizzakh province from marrying during the harvest, and forced citizens throughout the country to register as “volunteer” pickers.⁵³ In September 2014, the Cotton Campaign, a global coalition to end forced labor in Uzbekistan, reported that “officials again imposed production quotas on farmers, forced citizens to weed and prepare the cotton fields, ordered teachers to sign up to work the harvest or resign, and required parents to sign statements that their children would pick cotton or be expelled from high school.”⁵⁴

By mid-October, Ezgulik, an Uzbek human rights organization, had reported fifteen deaths related to cotton picking—mechanical accidents, heart attacks due to strenuous labor, children dying in a fire while left unsupervised by their parents who were forced to work in the fields, and suicides.⁵⁵ On social media, Uzbeks reported on fellow citizens injured or killed during the harvest due to unsafe labor conditions and the use of citizens too young or infirm to withstand the harsh labor conditions.⁵⁶

The state cotton industry exploits local officials’ fears of disobeying state laws and citizens’ fears of government retribution. At the same time, some local officials take advantage of the harvest to further their personal ambitions. In May, Uzbek senator (*hokim*) Saifiddin Sheraliev was arrested for embezzlement and forcing cotton workers to build him a “presidential cottage” while using a deed in his wife’s name.⁵⁷

Disputes between local officials and residents continued outside the cotton industry as well. In Jizzah, a farmer who had a dispute with a local official over a construction project was forcibly admitted to a psychiatric hospital in June. The farmer believes that the local *hokim* persecuted him on the orders of Prime Minister Shavkat Mirziyev, and pointed to coercion of local officials by national forces.⁵⁸ In August, Jizzakh resident Ruhia Bajitova was beaten after complaining to local police about shortages in her residential water supply.⁵⁹ Later in the month, she discovered a court case had been started against her for an unspecified crime. She found out about her trial the day before it was held.⁶⁰ In September, the court ruled that Bajitova must pay the equivalent of two months salary in fines for “slander” and “affronting the state.”⁶¹

Judicial Framework and Independence

2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
6.75	6.75	6.75	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00

Uzbekistan’s judiciary functions as a tool of the executive branch, serving the president’s interests. Judges are appointed, which compromises their independence. The presumption of innocence and right to an attorney are guaranteed by Uzbekistan’s

constitution but routinely overlooked in detention facilities and courtrooms. While the right to appeal exists, lower court rulings are rarely overturned by higher courts; at best, the appeals process provides an opportunity to reduce one's sentence.

In August 2014, Uzbekistan passed the Law on Prevention of Violations of the Law. The new legislation automatically places people with prior convictions on a prevention register, subjecting them to a variety of police "preventative measures" for one year or more. It gives greater prosecutorial power to *maballas* and requires *mahalla* officials to inform on citizens' religious and personal beliefs, enforcing a local ban on expression of religion or belief without state permission. *Maballas* have been doing this for years, but the Law on Prevention of Violations of the Law has made it an explicit requirement.⁶²

Court cases remained tainted by corruption. In the February court case against Rakhbarkhon Adylova and her daughter, both of Ferghana, the court of appeals heard recorded testimony from witnesses Akhat Abdurakhmanov, who is dead, and Husan Yuldashev, who is in prison and could not have been physically present. The elder Adylova had been sent to prison for writing complaints about criminal violations at a meat-processing plant.⁶³

Prison conditions in Uzbekistan remain dire. A March 2014 report by the U.S. State Department describes rampant torture in Uzbek prisons and notes that prison authorities often extend sentences before they can run out or if the inmate in question might otherwise qualify for amnesty.⁶⁴ In September, Human Rights Watch released a new and extensive study of prison abuse in Uzbekistan, claiming that prisoners have experienced "beatings with rubber truncheons or plastic bottles filled with water and tortured with electric shock, hanging by wrists and ankles, threats of rape and sexual humiliation, asphyxiation with plastic bags and gas masks, threats of physical harm to relatives, and denial of food or water."⁶⁵

The government created a new legal framework allowing house arrest in September. Some human rights activists heralded the move as a potentially humane reform to the justice system, while others dismissed it as an attempt to retroactively legalize the house arrest of Gulnara Karimova.⁶⁶

Devout Muslims have been a prime target of the legal system for decades. In March, twenty men labeled "jihadists" by the government were given sentences of three to thirteen years. According to a court statement, two of the men had become religious extremists "without realizing it."⁶⁷ Uzbek officials accused the men of belonging to a group called "Jihad" inspired by the teaching of Obidxon Qori Nazarov, an exiled imam who was shot in the head in Sweden in 2012, apparently by Uzbek SNB agents. There is little evidence that "Jihad" exists as an actual organization.

Christian groups are targeted, as well. In early 2014, Rozalina Abyazova filed a complaint to the Supreme Court after she was fined for allegedly involving her son in "illegal religious education" by allowing him to take art lessons with members of a Protestant congregation. In late 2013, three other Protestant women were taken to court by the SNB for "illegally teaching the Christian religion to each other" after being seen speaking to each other.⁶⁸

Corruption

2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
6.50	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75

Corruption is pervasive in Uzbekistan, which is ranked as the world's eighth most corrupt country in Transparency International's 2014 *Corruption Perceptions Index*.⁶⁹ Uzbek citizens must pay bribes to public officials, and both public and private sector jobs can be purchased. The arrest of high-profile officials and leaks to international media about their criminal activity shed new light on the pervasiveness of graft.

In September, SNB arrested five senior customs officers, including Sirojiddin Gulamov, Chief of the Customs Committee of Tashkent region, and his subordinates. All five men were accused of corruption, extortion, and malfeasance. On 20 October, five more customs officials were arrested.⁷⁰ In an October interview, Vyacheslav Khan, a political science professor in Uzbekistan, ascribed the unusual arrests—and the reporting about them in Russian-language media—to infighting among political elites: “Different clans often use journalists (and media organizations) close to them to publish compromising materials. Thus, this information (corruption allegations) is likely true. I do not think though that the purpose of these arrests is the anticorruption campaign of the government.”⁷¹

Mardonbek Babadjanov, a senior fellow at Uzbekistan's state-sanctioned Institute for Monitoring Current Legislation, reported in 2014 that although from 2009 to 2012 bankrupt companies owed the state budget about 3.5 trillion Uzbekistani som (or \$1.1 billion), the state budget could collect only 15.5 billion som (\$5 million) of that amount.⁷² The release of these numbers by 12 News, an Uzbekistan state information agency, is notable as concrete estimates of financial malfeasance are rarely discussed in Uzbekistan. Though small steps in derailing corruption in the financial sector are being made, it has little effect on the average Uzbek, who encounters bribery, extortion, and surveillance on a regular basis.

Foreign investors have taken note of the high-profile telecommunications scandals involving Uzbekistan in recent years, including the 2012 shakedown of MTS, which damaged relations with Russia, and the ongoing TeliaSonera scandal, which has resulted in Gulnara Karimova and her associates being investigated by Swiss, Dutch, Swedish, Norwegian, French and U.S. authorities.⁷³ In July, it was announced that MTS, formerly the largest mobile operator in Uzbekistan, would return after a two-year-absence, using the network equipment that had been seized by the state in 2012.⁷⁴ In June, Japan announced that it may suspend joint projects with Uzbekistan due to “fraud and corruption,” as well as kickbacks to state officials.⁷⁵

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