Uzbekistan

by Sarah Kendzior

Capital: Tashkent
Population: 29.3 million
GNI/capita, PPP: US$3,420

Source: The data above are drawn from the World Bank’s World Development Indicators 2013.

Nations in Transit Ratings and Averaged Scores

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* Starting with the 2005 edition, Freedom House introduced separate analysis and ratings for national democratic governance and local democratic governance to provide readers with more detailed and nuanced analysis of these two important subjects.

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. 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 international organizations.

Corruption remains pervasive. In 2012, a shakedown of Uzbekistan’s leading telecommunications provider, a subsidiary of Russia-based Mobile TeleSystems (MTS), provided new evidence of expropriation and intimidation in Uzbekistan’s government and financial sectors. Other corporate scandals, including bribery and money-laundering cases in Switzerland and Sweden, were linked to Karimov’s daughter, Gulnara Karimova, a possible presidential successor who has been described as a “robber baron.”

National Democratic Governance. The Karimov regime offers citizens no opportunities to meaningfully participate in the country’s political system. Rampant surveillance and intimidation by the state’s security apparatus persisted in 2012. Widespread poverty was exacerbated by an energy crisis apparently caused by the government’s hoarding of natural gas reserves. Uzbekistan rejected cooperation with many international organizations and its Central Asian neighbors, while maintaining strained but functional relations with NATO and the United States. Uzbekistan’s rating for national democratic governance remains unchanged at 7.00.

Electoral Process. Elections in Uzbekistan are preordained affairs, orchestrated to maintain the power of Karimov’s allies. All opposition parties are banned. Despite the existence of a constitutional term limit, Karimov has been in office for more than 20 years. In 2012, the upcoming presidential election was pushed back from 2014 to 2015. Uzbekistan’s rating for electoral process remains unchanged at 7.00.

Civil Society. Human rights activists, Karimov 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, suppressed protest actions, and drove one of the country’s few remaining political opponents,
Nigora Hidoyatova of the unregistered party Ozod Dehqonlar (Free Peasants), into exile. Surveillance and intimidation by the national security services is rampant and now extends beyond the country’s borders, as exemplified by the shooting (reportedly by Uzbek agents) of Imam Obidkhon Qori Nazarov in Sweden, where he has political asylum. Uzbekistan’s rating for civil society remains unchanged at 7.00.

**Independent Media.** The Karimov regime has all but eradicated free media in Uzbekistan. The few independent journalists who remain are subjected to harassment and detention. In 2012, the government made an example of several independent journalists, convicting them on the basis of articles they had not actually written. As most of the country’s independent journalists have fled the country, foreign-based Uzbek websites and their contributors are now the primary targets of government censorship. The regime continued to restrict access to both domestic and foreign websites, issuing new censorship directives, attacking proxy servers, and blocking several popular news sources. 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. Attempts to reform local governance through official legal channels can lead to punishment, as evidenced by the arrest of two citizens, one a human rights activist, who filed complaints against local officials in 2012. 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. 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 recent years, authorities have disbarred lawyers for their political views and abolished independent bar associations. In 2012, a letter allegedly smuggled out of Uzbekistan that documents abuses in one of the country’s most notorious prisons was published online, offering a glimpse of the harsh conditions endured by Uzbek detainees. Uzbekistan’s rating for judicial framework and independence remains unchanged at 7.00.

**Corruption.** In 2012, several scandals revealed the extent to which Uzbekistan’s government practices bribery and intimidation in order to advance elite business interests. Over the summer, authorities launched a mass expropriation of the Uzbek subsidiary of the Russian telecom company MTS, costing the business vast assets. Employees were arrested, threatened, and forced to sign false confessions, while nearly 40 percent of the Uzbek population lost mobile phone service. The MTS
expropriation compromised Uzbekistan's already fragile standing among foreign investors. A series of telecom industry money-laundering and bribery scandals in Europe have also been linked to President Karimov’s daughter, Gulnara Karimova. Uzbekistan’s corruption rating remains unchanged at 6.75.

**Outlook for 2013.** Survival, not politics, is likely to remain Uzbek citizens’ primary concern in 2013. Corruption is endemic, and the national security services wield enormous power over Uzbekistan’s civil affairs. The government’s hoarding of natural resources compounds the already dire consequences of widespread poverty. Uzbekistan’s firmly isolationist stance in international affairs indicates that the country will continue to ignore foreign pressure for political reform.

Despite rumors that Karimov is preparing a successor, there is no proof that the president intends to leave office at or before his next opportunity for reelection in 2015. Moreover, there is no reason to believe that a hand-picked successor would adopt a more humane approach to governing.
Main Report

National Democratic Governance

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According to a public opinion poll conducted by the government in August 2012, 95 percent of Uzbek citizens are happy to live in Uzbekistan. Such statistics belie the everyday economic hardships and absence of civil liberties under Islam Karimov’s rule, while at the same time demonstrating the degree of control his regime exercises over its citizens. Karimov’s policies violate Uzbekistan’s constitution—including guaranteed freedoms of speech, media, and religion—and deny citizens the ability to participate in political life. Throughout 2012, Uzbeks experienced tight restrictions on civic engagement and personal expression. The National Security Service (SNB), a massive surveillance force responsible for curtailing perceived threats to the regime, monitored and harassed citizens. In matters of foreign affairs, Uzbekistan eschewed connections with many international organizations and its Central Asian neighbors, while maintaining some cooperation with the United States and its allies over the war in Afghanistan.

The executive branch dominates Uzbekistan’s political and judicial systems. Only four political parties, all progovernment, are currently registered in the country. Unregistered opposition groups function primarily in exile. In 2011, the parliament gained the right to nominate the prime minister, who must then be approved by the president. The chairman of the senate was also named the president’s successor in case of death or incapacitation. These two reforms have served to minimize the power of the prime minister and strengthen the role of parliament. Analysts view the changes as either window-dressing or moves by Karimov to manipulate rival elites.

Despite government proclamations—bolstered by gross domestic product growth in 2011 and 2012—that Uzbekistan’s economy is thriving, poverty remains widespread. The low standard of living in the country was exacerbated in 2012 by the state’s apparent siphoning off of energy resources. Despite Uzbekistan’s rich natural gas reserves, many regions experienced a severe energy shortage in the winter. Households burned wood and dung for fuel, while businesses increasingly relied on coal. Makeshift heating devices caused several explosions, one of which killed two people and injured others. Reports showed that the government was meeting natural gas export commitments but reducing extraction, leading analysts to surmise that the state was leaving gas in the ground—and keeping it from the public—so that it could be used to negotiate additional export deals. The government claims the reason for the switch to coal and wood is increased public interest in “Uzbekistan’s traditional types of fuel,” despite the fact that much of Uzbekistan is a desert, with few trees and no tradition of coal mining.
There were also signs of the government’s financial insolvency in 2012. Among other problems, authorities were unable to pay many public servants in a timely manner. In Bukhara, teachers and doctors were paid a portion of their salaries in chickens imported from Serbia.6

Internationally, Uzbekistan’s primary concern remained protecting its sovereignty, which it perceives as being under constant threat. In June, Uzbekistan suspended its membership in the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which comprises a number of former Soviet republics.7 In August, the country’s parliament approved a new foreign policy strategy rejecting Tashkent’s membership in any military or political blocs.8 The government also moved to limit Uzbekistan’s interactions with neighboring Central Asian states. In June, authorities reintroduced exit-visa regimes for Uzbek nationals traveling to Tajikistan and Turkmenistan and blocked Kazakh troops from passing through its territory en route to Tajikistan to participate in military training with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, of which Uzbekistan is a member.9

Despite its isolationist stance, Uzbek authorities continued to host North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) supply routes to Afghanistan. In January 2012, the United States temporarily lifted a ban on military assistance to the country, enacted in 2003 over human rights concerns. The U.S. government agreed to provide Uzbekistan with non-weapons grade military equipment that will support its ability to secure routes to Afghanistan.10 High-level visits between U.S., European, and Uzbek officials continued throughout 2012.

### Electoral Process

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Since Uzbekistan gained independence in late 1991, no elections held there have been judged free and fair by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). The OSCE’s Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) declined to send a full election monitoring team to the last parliamentary elections in 2009 because the system in Uzbekistan does not meet minimal standards for democratic elections by “offer[ing] the electorate a genuine choice.”11

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, in 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 candidate from a civic group to run.

Though Uzbekistan’s constitution states that the same person cannot be president for more than two consecutive terms, Karimov has already served
three since 1992. In 1995 and 2000, national referendums extended his term and postponed elections. In 2002, the parliament passed a law lengthening the presidential term from five to seven years. Karimov’s supporters argued that the change nullified his previous terms and justified his stay in power. In December 2011, the parliament cut the presidential term back to five years, a move that potentially creates a new loophole for his next reelection. The state press has praised the shortening of term length as emblematic of Karimov’s tradition of democratic reform.

In March 2012, the Oliy Majlis passed a law postponing the next presidential election—originally scheduled to coincide with the December 2014 parliamentary vote—until 90 days after the results of the parliamentary elections are made public, which will be sometime in spring 2015. This has generated speculation that Karimov, who turns 75 in January 2013, is buying time to prepare a successor in case health issues prevent him from running again. In recent years, rumored candidates to succeed Karimov have included First Deputy Prime Minister Rustam Azimov; the chairman of Uzbekistan’s SNB, Rustam Inoyatov; Prime Minister Shavkat Mirziyayev; and Karimov’s own daughter, Gulnara Karimova.

### Civil Society

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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.

Throughout 2012, the SNB and other law enforcement officials worked to stifle voices of dissent within Uzbekistan. One common tactic of intimidation has been to punish the family members and friends of dissidents in the hopes of curtailing their activity. In January, police took away the seven-year-old son of longtime activist Elena Urlaeva, threatening to send him to an orphanage if she did not cease her political activity. This was the second time police had tried to remove the child, who sustained a concussion from the beating he received last time police attempted to remove him, in 2009. The daughter of human rights activist Adelaide Kim had her Russian passport seized by Uzbek officials in 2012. Kim protested, and eventually the Russian embassy demanded the return of her passport. In response, the Uzbek government attempted to deport Kim’s daughter to Kazakhstan.
Both Urlaeva and Kim took part in a Human Rights Defenders’ Alliance picket in front of the state prosecutor’s office to protest his refusal to meet with them in March 202. The group also attempted to organize a march to the presidential residence later that month. Both protest actions were quickly suppressed by Tashkent police.19

The Birdamlik movement, a prodemocracy movement that tries to promote tactics of civil disobedience to Uzbeks, continued to be targeted by state officials throughout 2012. One of their members, activist Gulshan Karayeva, was the target of multiple attacks that exemplify the tactics Uzbek state officials use to control dissidents. In May, Karayeva was recruited into the SNB but refused to join them. Two weeks later, she was beaten by strangers in a shop and her house was covered in obscene graffiti. In September, Karayeva was charged with “slander” and “insult” against two women said to have attacked members of Karayeva’s family in July.20 Karayeva denied the charges and pleaded not guilty during her December trial. She was convicted of slander and insult but pardoned four hours later. The move came in conjunction with other amnesties granted as part of the celebration of the twentieth anniversary of Uzbekistan’s constitution.21

In July 2012, Nigora Hidoyatova, leader of the unregistered party Ozod Dehqonlar (Free Peasants) and one of the country’s most outspoken government critics, fled Uzbekistan after weeks of threats from the SNB. Hidoyatova told Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty that she left when she realized she was about to be charged with intent to overthrow the government: “I was recently summoned for interrogation 15 times as a witness. But on the 16th time I was summoned as a defendant. It meant I was going to be charged. The person who brought the summons told me to come with a defense lawyer.”22 Hidoyatova did not disclose the location of her self-imposed exile, citing personal safety concerns.

Exiled dissidents and activists had reason to be fearful in 2012, as the regime’s security apparatus continued to target them in their new countries. In July, Sweden’s prosecutor general accused Uzbekistan’s secret services of orchestrating the February shooting of exiled Uzbek imam Obidxon qori Nazarov outside his home in Stromsund.23 Nazarov was a popular imam in Uzbekistan before seeking political asylum in Sweden in 2006. While in exile, he worked with Uzbek opposition groups, including the People’s Movement of Uzbekistan, led by exiled Erk party founder Muhammad Salih, and Tayanch, an Islamic organization led by Muhammadsalih Abutov, another refugee in Sweden who was denounced in a television special that aired on Uzbek state television in May.24 Nazarov remained a regular target of harsh criticism in the Uzbek state press right up until the shooting.25 He survived the attack but was still in a coma at year’s end. Two Uzbeks living in Sweden initially charged with assisting a hit man with the shooting were acquitted.26

The attack on Nazarov follows other attacks on Uzbek exiles allegedly orchestrated by the Uzbek government and carried out by agents of the SNB, including the murder of the ethnic Uzbek journalist Alisher Saipov in his native country of Kyrgyzstan in 2007 and the murder of imam and People’s Movement of Uzbekistan activist Fuad Rustamkhojaev in Russia in 2011.27
Uzbekistan’s national and local media outlets parrot state 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.28 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. In 2012, a number of reporters found themselves prosecuted for articles they had not even written. In March, journalist Elena Bondar was summoned to a Tashkent police station and accused of “inciting national, racial, ethnic or religious hatred” and of intent to publish an interview “defaming the people of Uzbekistan.” Bondar, a contributor to the news site Fergananews.com, had been accused of sending letters to media outlets about alleged Uzbek government harassment of a local branch of Russia’s Tyumen University. During her interrogation, Bondar explained that she was the recipient of one of the letters and had begun to investigate its claims, but had dropped the story after determining the information was fabricated. Nevertheless, Bondar was found guilty by a Tashkent court on 6 April and fined approximately $3,700.29 Bondar had previously been harassed after attending an OSCE journalism seminar in Kyrgyzstan in 2011.

In August 2012, the Uzbek Supreme Court upheld the sentence of Viktor Krymzalov, a journalist convicted of writing a defamatory article on the website Centrasia.ru, even though it did not have his byline. The article concerned legal battles among the family members of Viktor Kirnos, a Tashkent pensioner. Krymzalov had been sentenced on 26 March after Kirnos’ relatives abroad filed a suit against him. Although no proof was produced at Krymzalov’s hearings that he had written the article, he was fined $1,350.30 Krymzalov believes he was targeted for criticizing government corruption and incompetence in other articles earlier in his career. He noted that the prosecution called on the judiciary “to make the case public so that others would be deterred from criticizing the judicial system in Uzbekistan.”31 A planned rally in defense of Krymzalov was canceled after state officials denied human rights activists permission to hold the gathering.

In July, journalists Sid Yanyshiev and Pavel Kravets were photographing the Axia store in Tashkent when they were arrested and accused of “pursuing a strategic goal.”32 Officials never explained what the purported “goal” was or how Yanyshiev and Kravets had violated the law. After an interrogation in which the reporters were
asked to explain who commissioned their work and how they chose their subjects, they were released.

The arrest of journalists working for websites like Fergananews.com and Centrasia.ru reflects the Karimov government’s growing preoccupation with the content of electronic media hosted outside Uzbekistan’s borders. In September, the information and analysis department of the Cabinet of Ministers rewrote a statute in order to grant itself the broad power to “preserve the integrity of the national information space,” which it proceeded to do through censorship, surveillance, and intimidation. Throughout 2012, Uzbekistan continued to block access to foreign websites covering politics in Central Asia, including RFE/RL, Uznews.net, Eurasianet.org, and Registan.net, and blogging sites like LiveJournal. Authorities also cracked down on the proxy servers many Uzbeks use to access prohibited websites.34

Arbuz.com, an Uzbek discussion forum that had been around since the late 1990s, finally closed down in December 2011. Though mostly devoted to non-political topics, Arbuz had become a key venue for people to discuss events like the 2005 Andijon violence and 2010 Uzbek-Kyrgyz ethnic violence in southern Kyrgyzstan, and an important way for Uzbeks to exchange information across state lines. This displeased Uzbekistani officials, but because Arbuz was hosted abroad, they could not arrest its owner. Instead, they arrested a number of Arbuz users in Uzbekistan. The owner responded at first by removing political content, including the threads about Andijon and Osh, but ultimately he shut down Arbuz permanently out of concern for users’ safety.35

The government and its supporters have introduced websites replicating those from which Uzbek citizens are routinely denied access. Launched in 2012, YouFace.uz is the latest attempt of progovernment Uzbeks to offer a state-sanctioned social media website.36 The Uzbek-language site resembles Facebook except for the addition of a quote from Karimov on its main page. In 2011, the government launched Muloqot.uz, a social network that requires users to register with an Uzbekistan cell phone number, preventing people outside state borders from accessing the site.

In February, the government added the Uzbek-language version of Wikipedia to its blocked list but left versions of the website in other languages open, even though the Uzbek-language version contained far less inflammatory political content. This puzzling move can be seen as an attempt to mandate state control over the production and dissemination of Uzbek-language content.37

The Uzbek government has also attempted to physically impede access to online information. In 2011, a law was passed banning young people from visiting internet cafes between 8:30 am and 7:00 pm. In 2012, teachers were ordered to monitor internet cafes and expel high school and college students who used them.38 The ban on internet cafes is likely to be somewhat ineffective as the majority of young Uzbeks get internet access through mobile devices.
Local Democratic Governance

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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.

Legally, Uzbek citizens have the right to file complaints when they believe their rights are violated, but in practice these complaints are viewed as acts of insubordination against local officials and are punished. In July 2012, libel charges were brought against human rights activist Shuhrat Rustamov of the HRAU by the chairman of the Shonguzar neighborhood in Tashkent’s Shayhantahur district. Rustamov had already faced libel fines in January after criticizing irregularities in the previous year’s mahalla elections, and believes that his latest arrest was a pretext to deter his investigations of local government corruption. In August, Rustamov was acquitted in a surprise decision by judge Hamro Berdiklichev, who was praised by activists for his leniency. Around the same time Rustamov was acquitted, 73-year-old activist Ergash Bobojonov was charged with libel and insult after filing a complaint against police in Fergana province. Among other alleged offenses, Bobojonov was charged with violating his mahalla’s rule against filing official complaints.

A major source of corruption and mismanagement in local governance is Uzbekistan’s national cotton industry. 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 are told it is their patriotic duty. In September 2012, a 17-year-old boy from Jizzakh who declined to “volunteer” to pick cotton this year was reportedly told by a local official, “If you don’t want to pick cotton, get the f*** out of Uzbekistan!” The official then harassed and interrogated the boy and his father. In October, a teenage boy, Navruz Muysinov, died from injuries allegedly sustained when he was beaten by police after leaving the cotton field early.

The use of child labor in Uzbekistan’s cotton industry has long been the target of domestic and international human rights campaigns. In 2012, numerous reports emerged that the number of children laborers had decreased. Cotton Campaign, an organization that tracks the Uzbek cotton industry, noted that “for the first time, children under the age of 16 were not massively mobilized to pick cotton.” However, adult labor was increased to compensate for the lack of child workers. In September, a 55-year-old man died while laboring in the cotton fields after local officials failed to run an advance medical check. The increased use of adult...
labor also led to a shortage of teachers, doctors, and nurses in villages, as these professionals placed in fields were unable to do their usual jobs. Uzbekistan’s national cotton industry continues to exploit local officials’ fears of disobeying state laws and citizens’ fears of government punishment. There is little indication that the industry will be reformed in the foreseeable future.

Judicial Framework and Independence

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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 December 2011, Human Rights Watch released a comprehensive report on the erosion of habeas corpus in Uzbekistan. Based on fieldwork conducted over three years, the report documents torture in Uzbekistan’s prisons and the destruction of the country’s legal field. According to the report, authorities have disbarred lawyers for their political views, abolished independent bar associations, and denied counsel to detainees.

In September 2012, a letter describing torture and abuse in Uzbekistan’s notorious Jaslyk prison was purportedly smuggled out and published on the internet by the Association for Human Rights in Central Asia (AHRCA), a human rights organization run by Uzbek citizens in exile. The letter describes how an inmate was beaten in December 2011 for not showing any interest in the mandatory one-hour reading of books written by President Karimov. Radio Free Europe had access to the original copy of the letter and claimed that it seemed genuine, although it is unknown how it reached AHRCA.

Judicial authorities frequently target Uzbekistan’s political activists without due process, often resulting in lengthy prison terms. Muhammad Bekjon, the brother of exiled People’s Movement of Uzbekistan leader Muhammad Salih, was scheduled to be released from prison in December 2011 after serving more than twelve years. In January 2012, his lawyer announced that Bekjon had been sentenced to five more years under Article 221, for “failure to obey prison rules.” No evidence was given to support the charge. In August, Birdamlik movement activist and website writer Gulhayo Bobojonova was detained for five days on charges that were never clarified. Some reports indicate she was accused of offending a police officer.

Devout Muslims are another common target of the legal system. Between May and July 2012, nine men from Tashkent were arrested by national security service agents on charges of “establishing, leading and participating in an illegal
extremist religious organization,” according to documents obtained by Forum 18, a religious rights organization. While the exact nature of their crime has not been established, sources close to the men say their activity consisted largely of reading the Koran together and attempting to independently educate themselves on the tenets of Islam.

Legal observers have questioned not only who gets arrested in Uzbekistan, but also who gets released. In December 2011, President Karimov granted amnesty to a large number of political prisoners to celebrate the nineteenth anniversary of Uzbekistan’s constitution. Among them was Rustem Ibragimov, a child rapist who had been sentenced to 17 years in prison that same month. He was released in January 2012.54

The internet is playing an increasingly important role in helping Uzbeks understand and document corruption in the legal system. The website Adolat.net was established in 2010 by a group of Uzbek lawyers living abroad to educate citizens back home about their legal rights and offer guidelines on how to file complaints and appeals in accordance with Uzbek law. After the site gained popularity, it was banned and blocked by the government.55

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Corruption is pervasive in Uzbekistan, which is ranked as the world’s 7th most corrupt country in Transparency International’s 2012 Corruption Perceptions Index.56 Uzbek citizens must routinely pay bribes to public officials and both public and private sector jobs can be purchased. In 2012, scandals in the telecommunications sector showcased government elites’ use of bribery, extortion, and intimidation. The shakedown of Uzbekistan’s leading telecommunications provider also resulted in mass interruptions in cellular phone service, directly affecting the lives of everyday citizens and limiting their access to information.

In mid-2012, Uzbek authorities began a rapid expropriation of Uzdunrobita, the Uzbek subsidiary of the Russian telecom giant Mobile TeleSystems (MTS). At the time, MTS was the largest cell phone provider in Uzbekistan and Central Asia. Uzdunrobita’s CEO, Behzod Ahmedov, fled the country in June. Not long after his abrupt departure, five members of Uzdunrobita’s management were jailed. One, a Russian citizen, was released under pressure from the Russian foreign ministry. The four Uzbek employees remained in custody while other company employees were brought in for questioning. One of the jailed employees was paraded in handcuffs in front of his colleagues in order to intimidate them into providing the “right” evidence.57 Witnesses were forced to sign false confessions that were submitted to the court with no discussion or questioning.

An Uzbek court ruled in July that MTS had violated contractual obligations and failed to respect national law, and Uzdunrobita’s license was subsequently
revoked in August. Some 40 percent of Uzbek mobile phone users were left without service. The four Uzbek employees were convicted of numerous offenses, including “pseudo-entrepreneurial activities,” and authorities ordered MTS to surrender some $700 million in company assets. Following a November appeal, official pressure from Russia, and the seizure of millions of dollars in real estate owned by Gulnara Karimova in Moscow, a Tashkent court reversed the asset seizure but instead demanded $600 million in fines on charges of tax evasion and embezzlement. Ultimately, the company was forced to write off more than $1 billion.

The MTS case has poisoned business relations between Tashkent and Moscow and has made foreign companies more wary of investment in Uzbekistan. Although numerous corporations—including Coca-Cola, Newmont Mining, and Oxus Gold PLC—have struggled with the Uzbek government over the past decade, the unprecedented amount of media attention given to MTS has solidified Uzbekistan’s reputation for predatory business dealings. Analysts have argued that the move against MTS, previously the largest foreign investor in Uzbekistan, shows a new audacity on the part of the government to exploit foreign investors.

Before it was sold to MTS in 2004, Uzdunrobita belonged to Gulnara Karimova. In 2012, Karimova herself was implicated in money-laundering investigations in Switzerland involving four Uzbek nationals, including Uzdunrobita’s Ahmedov. Another member of this group, Gayane Avakyan, was simultaneously linked to another telecom scandal in Sweden through her offshore-registered company, Takilant. Takilant executives were accused of accepting $320 million in bribes from the Sweden-based company TeliaSonera in exchange for 3G licenses and access to the Uzbek market. In December, Swedish investigative journalists broadcast interviews with TeliaSonera executives linking the transaction directly to Karimova. The executives said TeliaSonera knew Takilant was a shell company and that its negotiating partners were only acting as agents for Karimova.

Both Swiss and Swedish investigations have argued that there are financial connections between Karimova and the four Uzbek nationals. Avakyan—who is only in her twenties and has no prior business experience—is the director of Karimova’s Dom Stilya fashion house in Tashkent. In October, RFE/RL published signed business contracts proving Karimova’s ties to Alisher Ergashev, Avakyan’s partner at Takilant and an executive at Coca-Cola Uzbekistan, once owned by Karimova’s ex-husband.

Karimova, whose personal fortune is estimated at $500 million, has become a symbol of ostentatious wealth and nepotism in impoverished Uzbekistan. In 2012, she released her first English-language album as her pop star alter ego “Googoosha,” fabricating claims that it had climbed the Billboard charts. She also launched an international perfume line and starred in a music video with French actor turned Russian patriot Gerard Depardieu. In her spare time, Karimova has served as Uzbekistan’s ambassador to Spain and representative to the UN Council in Geneva. In a memo leaked in 2010, U.S. State Department officials described Karimova as a “robber baron” who has bullied her way into gaining a slice of virtually every lucrative business in Uzbekistan.
The 40-year-old Karimova is often named as a possible successor to her 75-year-old father. In contrast to Karimov, who largely ignores his international critics, Karimova addresses them directly. In late 2012, she engaged in a series of very public disputes on Twitter with several Western academics, NGO workers, and human rights activists. Karimova called the head of one international organization a “fat-ass,” but in later exchanges took a more conciliatory approach, promising Andrew Stroehlein of International Crisis Group that if he sent her proper documentation of specific human rights abuses in Uzbekistan, she would address them. She never did.

Author: Sarah Kendzior

Sarah Kendzior, PhD, is an analyst, researcher, and writer. She has published articles about Uzbekistan in a number of academic journals and mainstream news outlets.


Two high-profile 2012 cases of foreign journalists turned away at the border were Natalia Anteleva, a Georgian reporter, and Victoria Ivleva, a Russian reporter. Neither reporter was given an official explanation.


Ibid.


58 Ibid.


Tweet from @GulnaraKarimova to @jilliancyork on 29 November 2012, https://twitter.com/GulnaraKarimova/status/274149531791290369.