

# Uzbekistan

*Capital:* Tashkent  
*Population:* 31.8 million  
*GNI/capita, PPP:* \$6,600

Source: World Bank *World Development Indicators*.

Nations in Transit Ratings and Averaged Scores

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
National Democratic Governance	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00
Electoral Process	7.00	7.00	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	6.75
Independent Media	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	6.75
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	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00
Corruption	6.50	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	7.00	7.00
<b>Democracy Score</b>	<b>6.89</b>	<b>6.93</b>	<b>6.96</b>	<b>6.89</b>						

NOTE: The ratings reflect the consensus of Freedom House, its academic advisers, and the author(s) of this report. If consensus cannot be reached, Freedom House is responsible for the final ratings. 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. The opinions expressed in this report are those of the author(s).

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2017, the new government of Uzbekistan tried to distance itself from the regime of former president Islam Karimov by releasing some political prisoners, formulating a five-year development strategy, taking steps to liberalize the economy, and allowing the media to be more open and critical. Despite these positive changes, however, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's government remains authoritarian and rules the country with a centralized, top-down approach.

President Mirziyoyev assumed office following the death of Karimov in September 2016, although the constitution stipulated that the chair of the Senate rather than the prime minister should have acted as interim president. He was officially elected in December 2016 after running practically unopposed. Mirziyoyev began his term by publicly gathering ideas for Uzbekistan's five-year development strategy through online and offline forms, the first time the Uzbek government had consulted citizens on an important issue. The resulting strategy contains five priority areas: strengthening governance in both state and non-state institutions, rule of law and reform of the judicial system, development and liberalization of the economy, development of the social sphere, and support for security, international harmony, and religious tolerance.<sup>1</sup>

As part of signaling a break with the past, the Mirziyoyev government freed several human rights defenders and journalists imprisoned for long terms. They include the longest-held journalist in the world, Muhammad Bekjanov, who had served 18 years in the notorious Jasliq prison;<sup>2</sup> human rights defender Azamjon Farmonov,<sup>3</sup> who had served 11 years in Jasliq; journalist Solijon Abdurahmonov<sup>4</sup> from Shaikhali prison; and civil society leader Agzam Turgunov,<sup>5</sup> held for 9 years in colony number 49. Such releases alone do not indicate an improvement in the human rights situation in the country, however. Many believed these prisoners of conscience were released because they were seen as enemies by the previous regime but not necessarily by the new government. Freeing them also helped to improve the reputation of President Mirziyoyev among the international community. Many other political prisoners remain behind bars, and those that were released were not rehabilitated. Rather than a systematic change, the release of handpicked prisoners of conscience, or the return to public life of singers who were blacklisted under the old regime, appeared as signs that the new government was shedding some of the peculiarities resulting from Karimov's personality and grudges.

Harassment of human rights activists whom the government views as threats to its policies continued. In early March, for example, human rights defender Elena Urlaeva was illegally detained, beaten, and forcibly hospitalized in a psychiatric facility in Tashkent for 23 days, preventing her from attending a meeting with representatives of the World Bank to discuss the practice of forced labor in Uzbekistan.<sup>6</sup> In October, police detained Urlaeva, photojournalist Temur Karpov, and a reporter from the German magazine *Stern* while they were monitoring forced labor in Buka district of the Tashkent region.<sup>7</sup>

The liberalization efforts produced noticeable improvements in media freedom in 2017. Due to President Mirziyoyev's encouragement and diminished censorship, print and online media outlets, TV channels, and regular citizens began discussing genuine social problems. Live TV shows returned to the air, journalists started to express their opinions, and citizens began to recognize them as individual journalists instead of mouthpieces for official information. Additionally, a vibrant internet media generated interest in politics and social developments.

Yet, as with civil society, media liberalization occurred only up to a point. Censorship, threats, and harassment against independent thinkers and journalists continued, even if to a lesser extent compared with past years. For example, in August, Prime Minister Abdulla Aripov criticized the journalist Sherzod Qudrathojaev of the International Press Club for "not knowing his limits" and allegedly insulted him during a meeting with the National Tele Radio Company of Uzbekistan (NTRCU) and its journalists.<sup>8</sup> At the same meeting, the prime minister ordered live TV shows taken off the air,<sup>9</sup> resulting in programs suspended for about a month.<sup>10</sup>

In September, independent journalist Bobomurod Abdullaev, who wrote about the internal politics and personal lives of the Uzbek elite on an opposition website under the pseudonym Usmon Haknazarov, was detained and placed under investigation.<sup>11</sup> The opposition leader Muhammad Solih, who disclosed Abdullaev's pseudonym after his arrest, interpreted the move as an attempt to prevent Solih from returning to the country.<sup>12</sup> In another incident, Nurullo Otakhonov, author of the book *These Days*, which harshly criticized the Karimov regime, was arrested on terrorism charges immediately upon his return from Turkey after living abroad for several years.<sup>13</sup> Lawyers refused to defend Otakhonov for fear of being persecuted.<sup>14</sup> Otakhonov was released from jail on 1 October, since terrorism charges were not proven, but he faces an ongoing investigation into charges of attacking the constitutional order and other offenses.<sup>15</sup> Finally, Narzullo Okhunjonov, a former political radio commentator at the state-run broadcaster UzMTRK who had left Uzbekistan for Turkey in 2013, was arrested in Ukraine while seeking asylum, apparently in response to an international arrest warrant issued from Uzbekistan.<sup>16</sup>

A number of judicial reforms began in 2017. Through constitutional and legislative amendments, the Supreme Judicial Council of Uzbekistan was established, the Supreme and Higher Economic Courts were merged, and administrative courts were created.<sup>17</sup> The terms for judges were changed to an initial five-year and then regular ten-year period, and for an indefinite number of terms.<sup>18</sup> The age limit of city, district, and regional judges was set at 65 years, and 70 years for Supreme Court justices. The amendments also transferred from prosecutors to judges the authority over rights to exhumation, monitoring mail and telegraph exchanges, and other similar areas that infringe upon fundamental rights.

In July, the Prosecutor General's office issued a statement about Gulnara Karimova, elder daughter of the former president, whose situation had remained a mystery since she fell out of favor in recent years. After rumors spread following her return to the country in 2013, the government claimed she was under house arrest. Ironically, at the time, Uzbek criminal law contained no such punishment, so the government introduced indefinite home detention later to accommodate her case in the legal system. In 2016, Karimova's son, also named Islam Karimov, said the National Security Service (NSS) was responsible for locking her up and refusing to provide access to or information about her.<sup>19</sup>

According to a statement from the Prosecutor General's office, Karimova had been convicted and sentenced to five years' imprisonment in 2015 for violating articles of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Uzbekistan. Additionally, it stated that an investigation was underway on an additional case against Karimova for allegedly assisting a criminal group.<sup>20</sup> Karimova was placed under U.S. sanctions for grave human rights abuses and grand corruption in the first announcement of the Global Magnitsky list on 21 December 2017.<sup>21</sup>

In the sphere of economic reforms, the Mirziyoyev government took steps to liberalize the national currency in 2017, which had been pegged to a fixed rate and was nonconvertible. Beginning on 5 September, banks started the free sale of *so'm* to citizens through conversion debit cards with a monthly limit, and for businesses and farmers in cash.<sup>22</sup> The free exchange of foreign currency to citizens for cash was supposed to start from 1 October, but for unexplained reasons did not begin on time.<sup>23</sup> Meanwhile, the NSS repeatedly raided illegal black market currency sellers, despite the fact that banks had not started currency exchange for cash to citizens.<sup>24</sup> The inflation rate was officially reported at 14 percent, with a predicted rise during the next year.<sup>25</sup>

President Mirziyoyev's speech at the UN General Assembly in September in New York showed the limits of his reforms thus far, as well as his emphasis on appearances over results. He tried to bring attention to the Aral Sea crisis, emphasized that the main causes of radicalization were ignorance and intolerance, and mostly bragged about the changes he had made, even though they had yet to be achieved. For example, he said he had taken measures to eradicate child and forced labor, although forced labor continued in the 2017 cotton harvest, while adolescent labor was mostly eradicated during the Karimov regime. He said he abolished the outdated exit visa system, but exit visas still exist, and the new law abolishing them will only enter into force in 2019. He said the government was establishing an open dialogue with national and international nongovernmental organizations on the protection of human rights, but the Uzbek government has only allowed a Human Rights Watch delegation to visit Uzbekistan. No international organizations were registered in Uzbekistan in 2017. Mirziyoyev said that Uzbekistan had

switched to a completely free currency exchange in September, but the switch was still not complete.<sup>26</sup> The gap between what Mirziyoyev has promised and what he has delivered demonstrates that the problems of the country are systemic, and there are many stakeholders whose interests depend upon the current unjust system.

By year's end, there were indications that Mirziyoyev might soon have a freer hand. After eliminating former finance minister Rustam Azimov from political competition during the year, Mirziyoyev also pointedly criticized the NSS, whose chairman Rustam Inoyatov was believed to be the president's last serious political rival.<sup>27</sup>

### **Score Changes:**

- **Civil Society rating improved from 7.00 to 6.75** due to limited steps taken to soften restrictions on the civil sector, a slight openness to engage with some international civil society organizations, and relaxation of some restrictions on freedom of religion.
- **Independent Media rating improved from 7.00 to 6.75** due to a slight opening in the media environment to express independent and critical opinion, conduct face-to-face interviews with state officials, and broadcast live TV shows.

**As a result, Uzbekistan's Democracy Score improved from 6.96 to 6.89.**

**Outlook for 2018:** There were noticeable steps in 2017 to relax Uzbekistan's tight-fisted governance and liberalize the economy. However, the changes made were not organic, and the freedoms allowed were limited. If the government keeps the same pace of change in 2018, more media freedom will allow citizens to speak out and take action on important matters. The switch to free currency exchange will most likely be completed in 2018, bringing with it a possible hike in prices. Forced labor is likely to continue in the cotton harvest due to the lack of a comprehensive plan to replace or eradicate it. The Mirziyoyev government is likely to release more selected prisoners of conscience, but rehabilitation or a wide-reaching amnesty seems unlikely in the coming year. With Rustam Azimov and Rustam Inoyatov marginalized, 2018 will be the first year for Mirziyoyev to rule alone. Many analysts had explained the slow pace of reform and continued violations of human rights and media freedom as "checks and balances" between at least Rustam Inoyatov and Mirziyoyev. With that obstacle now removed, 2018 will be truly Mirziyoyev's year to show whether he is committed to leading the country towards democracy and prosperity, as he claims.

# MAIN REPORT

## National Democratic Governance

2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00

- Uzbekistan has been known as a deeply authoritarian state since becoming an independent republic after the fall of the Soviet Union. The rule of president Islam Karimov, which lasted more than a quarter century, was notorious for gross violations of human rights, widespread corruption, and isolation from the world. In 2017, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who took power after Karimov’s death in September 2016, took palpable steps to liberalize the country, although many issues remain the same.
- President Mirziyoyev began his term gathering ideas for a five-year development strategy. After collecting suggestions from citizens through online and offline forms, the plan evolved into five priority areas for 2017–21: improvement of state and public infrastructure; ensuring rule of law and further justice reform; development and liberalization of the economy; development of the social sphere and ensuring security, interethnic harmony, and religious tolerance; and the implementation of a balanced, mutually beneficial, and constructive foreign policy. To oversee and assist implementation, a “Development Strategy Center” was established in early 2017.<sup>28</sup>
- The seemingly energetic and relatively open President Mirziyoyev traveled almost every week to meet with Uzbek citizens and promise solutions to their problems, or to neighboring countries to establish better relations. People began expressing feelings of hope after Mirziyoyev acknowledged the country’s existing problems in his speeches and called on the public to think critically. In this new environment, citizens and media slowly began to critically discuss social, legal, and political topics. For example, in June, Ijtimoiy Fikr, the long-standing national polling agency, conducted a novel survey on corruption and reported that 58.1 percent of respondents said there was corruption in Uzbekistan—results the agency would never have released under Karimov.<sup>29</sup>
- Progress has not been organic, however, since public and media discussions of issues or problems occur only after the president himself identifies them. The public’s reluctance or fear to critically engage with the country’s problems is partly due to the oppressive Karimov legacy; partly due to the old ways of local officials, who are unaccustomed to being criticized and threaten critics; and partly due to the controlling nature of the state apparatus, which approves some discussions and disallows others.
- Mirziyoyev harshly criticized the tightly controlled registered political parties in a televised speech on 12 July. In particular, he blamed them for long, useless meetings, petty meddling, and a lack of critical thinking.<sup>30</sup> He ordered all members of parliament (MPs) to open social media accounts in order to post necessary information.<sup>31</sup> He also ordered MPs to provide quarterly public reports on their activities through the media.<sup>32</sup> Road patrol posts at district and regional borders were closed by presidential order, removing a huge obstacle to public freedom of movement.<sup>33</sup>
- Some representatives and senators took Mirziyoyev’s criticisms to heart, appearing at the International Press Club or providing online video statements and Q&As, which sometimes produced embarrassing reversals. For instance, MP and chairman of the National Center for Human Rights Akmal Saidov, notorious until recently for his adamant defense of violations of human rights under Karimov, praised Mirziyoyev for teaching MPs about democracy and state governance, prompting a wide public response of disgust on social media. To expand the parliament’s involvement and power, it is now illegal for authorities not to respond to MP inquires.<sup>34</sup>
- Talk of liberalizing currency exchange, which started as soon as Mirziyoyev took over as interim president in September 2016, became a partial reality a year later. On 2 September, Mirziyoyev issued a decree on initial measures,<sup>35</sup> and on 5 September, banks started the free exchange of currency to citizens through conversion debit cards with a monthly limit, and for businesses and farmers in cash.<sup>36</sup>

The free exchange of currency to citizens in cash was planned to begin on 1 October, but for unknown reasons did not.<sup>37</sup> The vice-chairman of the Central Bank said that the transition to the free currency exchange will be a step-by-step process.<sup>38</sup> Meanwhile, the National Security Service (NSS) repeatedly raided illegal black market sellers despite the fact that banks had not started to exchange in cash to citizens.<sup>39</sup>

- The backdrop to these uneven steps is that Uzbekistan is suffering a constant shortage of actual cash, exacerbated by both the old closed system and the push to switch to a cashless economy. This explains both the inability of banks to handle cash conversions and the strategy of raiding the black market. This is also a space where inter-elite competition is visible: certain individuals control the flow of cash and hard currency assets through the NSS, not the banks, which limits the kinds of reforms a new government can enact by decree.
- In terms of power politics, the most important development in 2017 was that Mirziyoyev was able to eliminate his two other competitors in succeeding Karimov: Finance Minister Rustam Azimov and head of the NSS Rustam Inoyatov. Azimov was removed from his post in June,<sup>40</sup> and the Ministry of Finance was purged of his alleged supporters following the president’s “state of the nation” speech on 22 December.<sup>41</sup> In the same speech, the president pointedly said it was time to reform the NSS and proposed to develop a law “On the National Security Service of Uzbekistan,” a message widely understood as targeting Inoyatov.<sup>42</sup>
- Continuing a custom from the Karimov era, Mirziyoyev used his end-of-year speech to declare 2018 “the year of support for active entrepreneurship, innovative ideas, and technologies,” whereas 2017 was declared “the year of dialogue between the government and ordinary people.”<sup>43</sup>

## Electoral Process

2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00

- Uzbekistan’s electoral system is designed to prevent any genuine political competition. Party registration is tightly restricted, vote tabulation is opaque, and ballot stuffing is the norm. The opposition party Birlik has been refused registration since the first national elections in independent Uzbekistan in 1991. Imprisonment of political opposition leaders has been an established practice since that time, and there is no true opposition party in the country. Uzbekistan has never held free and fair elections in its history.
- After president Karimov’s death, then-Prime Minister Shavkat Mirziyoyev assumed the role of acting president in violation of the constitutional rules for transition of power. In the presidential election that took place on 4 December 2016, Mirziyoyev won with 88.61 percent of the votes.<sup>44</sup>
- At Mirziyoyev’s suggestion, a proposal for direct elections of *hokims* (governors/mayors) at the regional and district levels advanced but was not passed in 2017. Elections for Tashkent district councils were instituted for the first time, making the capital’s local governance equivalent in this regard to the other regions of the country (see “Local Democratic Governance”). On 15 August, a government decision on forming and maintaining a single electronic voter list was enacted. According to the decision, the national voter list would be piloted during the election for Tashkent district council representatives in December, and finalized for electronic voting before April 2018.<sup>45</sup>
- The first elections for Tashkent district councils took place on 24 December, with campaigning starting on 23 September.<sup>46</sup> The authorities admitted some violations, in particular, cases of family members filling out ballots for the whole family in Uchtepa district. Based on video footage of polling sites, the Election Commission concluded that the small number of voter irregularities did not affect the outcome of the electoral process, and members of this constituency were given a warning.<sup>47</sup>

## Civil Society

2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	6.75

- During 2017, there were a number of high-profile events that appeared to signal a new government approach toward human rights activism, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and religious freedom, but no systematic changes to legislation or practice. Uzbekistan still has one of the strictest regimes governing NGOs in the region. After the country expelled almost all foreign NGOs during the 2000s, independent civil society on the ground is practically nonexistent. There are strict rules for forming, operating, and funding NGOs or other forms of civil society, and huge administrative and criminal penalties exist for the slightest deviation from the regulations.<sup>48</sup>
- In early October, three prisoners of conscience were released after serving long prison terms: human rights defender Azamjon Farmonov from the notorious Jasliq prison,<sup>49</sup> journalist Solijon Abdurahmonov from Shaikhali prison,<sup>50</sup> and civil society leader Agzam Turgunov from colony number 49.<sup>51</sup> These prisoners of conscience were held on technicalities or secondary convictions long after their original sentences were completed, a common practice with political prisoners in Uzbekistan. Shortly before his release, Azamjon Farmonov, through representation by Freedom Now, had filed a petition to the UN Committee on Human Rights regarding his second conviction prolonging his prison sentence.<sup>52</sup> The men were among 16 prisoners of conscience released during the year.<sup>53</sup>
- These releases notwithstanding, human rights defenders continued to face harassment. On 1 March, Elena Urlaeva was illegally detained, beaten, and forcibly hospitalized in a psychiatric facility in Tashkent. Allegedly, the reason behind her forced hospitalization was to prevent her from attending a meeting with representatives of the World Bank on 2 March to discuss the practice of forced labor in the country.<sup>54</sup> Urlaeva was released from the psychiatric facility on 24 March.<sup>55</sup> On 4 October, police detained Urlaeva, alongside photojournalist Temur Karpov and a correspondent from the German magazine Stern while they were monitoring forced labor in Tashkent's Buka district. They were interrogated and released the same day.<sup>56</sup>
- To considerable surprise, the government announced in July that international NGOs like Human Rights Watch (HRW) might soon be able to start operating in Uzbekistan again.<sup>57</sup> Most international NGOs were forced out of the country in 2005 and 2006 after the government crackdown that followed the massacre in Andijon. HRW's office was closed in 2011. An HRW delegation indeed visited Uzbekistan in early September and was able to meet with members of civil society groups as well as government officials.<sup>58</sup> However, on 25 September, the chairman of the National Center for Human Rights, Akmal Saidov, announced that HRW could not open a branch in Uzbekistan due to an existing court decision against the organization.<sup>59</sup>
- Despite the president's talk of greater religious freedom, key aspects of the state's repressive approach remain unchanged. For example, during the month of Ramadan and the Eid holiday, as usual, children were barred from entering mosques. Women and girls wearing headscarves continued to face harassment and discrimination. Criminal prosecutions and persecution of religious people continued. The government took credit for the release of some religious prisoners and their acceptance of the state's official version of Islam, but to what extent these released prisoners are voluntarily accepting the state-approved version of Islam is unknown.
- Mirziyoyev's government used Islam in its state propaganda and the enforcement of official and unofficial laws in 2017. Throughout the year, police and NSS agents continued to raid, surveil, seize religious literature, arrest, deport, fine, and sentence and torture without impunity people who practiced religion outside the state's tightly proscribed limits, whether Islam or Christianity. "Anti-terrorist measures," "pre-Novruz inspection," "passport regime inspection," and a hunt for an alleged fugitive drug dealer were all excuses police gave to raid homes and seize religious literature. For example, an Urgench Protestant Pastor under surveillance was followed to a neighboring region where a meeting

was raided. The court ordered that a confiscated Bible be destroyed, and one person was tortured.<sup>60</sup> Two sisters, Mehrinisso and Zulhumor Hamdamova of Qarshi, who were sentenced more than seven years ago for holding Muslim meetings for women without state permission, had three years added to their prison terms after their initial sentences expired.<sup>61</sup>

- Despite these continuities, there were a number of small positive steps softening restrictions on religious freedom. For the first time in recent history, Arabic language courses were announced at the religious school under the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan in December 2017. Previously, the government strictly limited Arabic language classes to the public, and any other way of learning Arabic was considered illegal religious education.<sup>62</sup> It was also announced during the year that an Islamic Academy of Uzbekistan would be established. The Academy will have a specialized council for the defense of master’s and doctoral dissertations and will offer master’s degrees, PhDs and docent qualifications in Islamic sciences.<sup>63</sup>
- On 6 December, the country’s first online religious-educational radio station Azon FM was launched, airing recitations of the Quran, interviews with famous Uzbek scholars, lectures on religious issues, answers to questions, as well as the works of well-known Uzbek poets and writers.<sup>64</sup> People were allowed to conduct all-night prayers during Ramadan and prayers were even broadcast online, something banned completely under Karimov.<sup>65</sup> Mosques were also allowed to play the call to prayer using speakers, something long forbidden in Uzbekistan.<sup>66</sup>
- Homosexuality is still a criminal act in Uzbekistan, and transgender and gay people face violence and persecution. On 29 September, a video appeared on social media<sup>67</sup> of a group of young people in Fergana violently assaulting a young man who they allegedly accused of being gay. Similar videos appear frequently and are very popular in Uzbek social media. The authorities are said to have detained five people related to the incident.<sup>68</sup>
- On 19 May, the prominent human rights lawyer Polina Braunerg, who represented a number of imprisoned human rights activists and political prisoners, died after suffering a stroke. Uzbek authorities had refused to issue her an exit visa to leave the country despite her needing medical treatment abroad.<sup>69</sup> A number of political prisoners, including Murat Djuraev, died shortly after their release, leading to the conclusion that the motivation for their release may have been to avoid the potential embarrassment of their dying in custody after being denied adequate medical treatment.<sup>70</sup>

## Independent Media

2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	6.75

- Uzbekistan has long been one of the worst countries, both regionally and worldwide, for independent journalists. But in 2017, there was palpable progress in allowing the media to independently report and discuss issues. This progress was not smooth, however, as government officials still responded harshly to critical reporting, the media still self-censored, and journalists continued to be afraid to push the envelope.
- On 30 March, President Mirziyoyev harshly criticized the work of TV and other media during a televised address, saying the old way of working was no longer acceptable and that TV should present critical and analytical materials.<sup>71</sup> During the year, live TV shows started to appear.<sup>72</sup> Journalists began discussing public problems and criticizing local or low-level officials. Initially, the broadcasted criticisms parroted President Mirziyoyev’s statements highlighting problems in certain sectors. But, slowly, some TV shows, the press, and internet media began to feature genuine discussions of issues.<sup>73</sup>
- An International Press Club was established in the spring. High-level officials, including ministers, chairmen of state committees, senators, and parliamentary representatives, started addressing regular citizens through the club. The moderator, Sherzod Qudrathojaev, attending journalists, and citizens

asked previously taboo questions about such issues as forced labor and the mistreatment of citizens in foreign countries by Uzbek diplomats, among others.

- Harassment of print,<sup>74</sup> television,<sup>75</sup> and internet journalists<sup>76</sup> reporting on critical issues continued. On 21 August, Prime Minister Abdulla Aripov criticized the journalist Sherzod Qudrathojaev of the International Press Club for “not knowing his limits” and allegedly insulted him personally during a meeting with the National Tele Radio Company of Uzbekistan (NTRCU) and its journalists.<sup>77</sup> Reports claim that the prime minister ordered an end to live TV shows,<sup>78</sup> which were suspended.<sup>79</sup> These broadcasts resumed in mid-September.<sup>80</sup>
- As was the case for human rights activists, there were high-profile releases of journalists in 2017. On 1 March, a journalist from Djizzakh, Djamshid Karimov, president Karimov’s nephew, was released from a psychiatric hospital where he had been held since 2006.<sup>81</sup> On 22 February, journalist Muhammad Bekjanov was freed after 18 years in prison.<sup>82</sup>
- In March, journalist Jamshid Niyozov’s investigative reporting on the corrupt practices of notaries was published in the newspaper *Jamiyat* (Society).<sup>83</sup> Instead of investigating the corrupt officials, the authorities turned against the journalist who dared to bring up the issue. However, the topic of corrupt practices of notaries was widely discussed on live TV shows afterwards.<sup>84</sup>
- In late September, an independent journalist, Bobomurod Abdullaev, was detained and the NSS opened a criminal case against him for allegedly disseminating materials on the internet, published under the pseudonym Usmon Haknazarov, attacking officials and aiming to overthrow the existing constitutional order.<sup>85</sup> After Abdullaev’s arrest, exiled opposition leader Muhammad Solih announced that Abdullaev was indeed Haknazarov.<sup>86</sup> However, articles published under the Haknazarov pen name were far from calling for an overthrow of the constitutional system. They were a sort of political fantasy fiction rather than someone from inside closed groups leaking actual classified secrets. Abdullaev’s lawyer, Sergei Mayorov, was not allowed to see him during interrogations, although he was later able to visit him in jail.<sup>87</sup> However, Mayorov said Abdullaev had dropped him as his attorney in December, most likely due to pressure from authorities.<sup>88</sup>
- Inspired by President Mirziyoyev’s call for a return to the homeland during his trip to the United States, the writer Nurullo Otakhonov returned to Uzbekistan from Turkey on 26 September, only to be arrested at the airport. While in Turkey, Otakhonov had published his book *These Days*, which openly criticized Karimov and his hostile policies towards religion. A criminal investigation was opened accusing him of attacking the constitutional order of the Republic of Uzbekistan and spreading material that threatens public security. Otakhonov was also charged with spreading extremist ideas, according to the “technical assessment” of the Committee on Religious Affairs under the Council of Ministries of Uzbekistan, which Otakhonov had particularly criticized in his book. Many suspect that the opinion’s impartiality was compromised by a desire for revenge against the writer’s criticism of the committee.<sup>89</sup> While lawyers refused to defend Otakhonov out of fear for their own safety, a group of writers issued a statement condemning the arrest,<sup>90</sup> and social media activists prepared a petition to send to President Mirziyoyev.<sup>91</sup>
- Otakhonov was released from detention on 1 October after the extremism charges were not proven. However, the investigation into the first charges—of attacking the constitutional order of the Republic of Uzbekistan and preparing, storing, disseminating, or displaying material that threatens public security and public order, while using media or telecommunication networks and the World Wide Web—is still in progress.<sup>92</sup>
- Reporting on previously taboo subjects by local media outlets has shown a slight but significant improvement. Popular websites Kun.uz and Sof.uz reported heavily on forced labor, official abuse, and mentioned political prisoners. For example, in July, Sof.uz published an audio recording of the head of a district branch of the Public Education Ministry insulting and threatening teachers and nurses and forcing them to pick cotton and sow potatoes in the fields. The recording also captured the district head gathering “involuntary” applications of retired people to receive their pension in plastic debit cards and collecting money for “necessary” books.<sup>93</sup> The audio recording was one of the first pieces of evidence

of forced labor published in local media after hokims, the Public Education Minister, and other officials had denied that forced labor existed, ignored such questions,<sup>94</sup> or promised that the practice would stop. The head of the district branch was reportedly fired<sup>95</sup> but then reinstated to the same position due to a lack of qualified candidates.<sup>96</sup>

- In another example, in late August, Kun.uz published a video of the Sayhunobod district hokim, Nosirjon Egamberdiev, insulting and beating school directors in his district.<sup>97</sup> The hokim appeared to be punishing the directors for not bringing teachers to Independence Day celebrations, as the hosting stadium was supposed to be filled with people watching the events. Although local Uzbek hokims are notorious for violence and insulting language—as foreign media have previously documented—this was the first time that local media had reported on such behavior. The Sirdaryo region prosecutor’s office reportedly initiated an investigation of the case.<sup>98</sup> Finally, it was reported that the hokim was charged with an administrative violation after Kun.uz published a critical article.<sup>99</sup> However, the college director who recorded the video also faced civil charges for harming the hokim’s reputation following a counterclaim.<sup>100</sup>

### Local Democratic Governance

2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75

- Since independence, Uzbekistan has performed poorly in local democratic governance due to the centralization of state functions and widespread corruption. Few people know the names or faces of local officials—or even ministers—due to Karimov’s monopolization of all forms of authority. The new trend in 2017 was the Mirziyoyev government’s policy of increasing local officials’ accountability through “virtual complaint boxes” and “people’s reception centers” (renamed “expedited public service agencies” by the end of the year), part of a strategy for encouraging public engagement through media and the internet. As a result, people started to recognize and petition their leaders and demand accountability. However, despite some progress, the centralized system of governance and dated mindset of local actors meant that many issues as yet remain unaddressed.<sup>101</sup>
- Since the beginning of 2017, President Mirziyoyev has changed and reappointed many regional and district *hokims* (governors/mayors), as well as the heads of prosecutors’ offices, police, and other agencies.<sup>102</sup> Unlike under Karimov, fired officials, including hokims, were not banished but instead appointed to other offices. At the same time, the frequent and constant changing of officials is a sign that the new government lacks consistent criteria and policies regarding civil servants.
- In a speech on Constitution Day in 2016, Mirziyoyev had suggested introducing direct elections for regional and district hokims.<sup>103</sup> The suggestion was incorporated into the Development Strategy, with the goal of developing a concept for the law by the end of 2017. Additionally, a law introducing elections to the newly created Tashkent district councils was adopted on 30 August.<sup>104</sup> All the districts of Uzbekistan’s 12 regions have councils where representatives are chosen in direct, two-round elections. The capital Tashkent is equal to a region in status, but its districts did not have district-level councils previously. The new law established a basis for the creation of Tashkent district councils, which will be equal in status with the districts of other regions. Elections for the Tashkent city councils were held in December (see “Electoral Process”).
- The local internet publication Kun.uz conducted interviews with regional and district hokims and other local officials,<sup>105</sup> as did the International Press Club, where many issues, including forced labor, were discussed openly.<sup>106</sup> There have been incidents where local hokims and leaders intimidated<sup>107</sup> or tried to obstruct journalists from completing their work.<sup>108</sup> On the other hand, some local actors have begun to connect and engage with people.<sup>109</sup> For example, the governor of Surkhondaryo region, Erkinjon Turdimov, held a live broadcast on 17 December on the “Surkhondaryo” regional TV channel, reporting to the public about his work over the past year and introducing plans for 2018.<sup>110</sup> Turdimov also

established a method of receiving petitions and complaints through the widely used messenger app Telegram, making the complaint procedure easier for the public.<sup>111</sup>

- Despite government promises and superficial efforts to educate people on the illegality of forced labor, when cotton-harvesting season came, local hokims sought to meet their quotas as usual through forced labor. Following orders from their superiors, they mobilized teachers, medical employees, and other government employees. When journalists questioned the hokims over the mobilizations, they claimed that the workers were volunteers,<sup>112</sup> although evidence showed the opposite.
- However, within hours of President Mirziyoyev’s speech at the UN General Assembly and meetings with the World Bank and IMF heads, all forced laborers were ordered to return from the cotton fields. Despite this, many people reported being forced to pick cotton under the label of “*fidoyi yoshlar*” (selfless youth) and told to keep silent. The government did not develop a plan to stop using forced labor, indicating a lack of intent or political will to address the issue. On 4 October, a parliamentary committee on ensuring citizens’ guaranteed labor rights was formed, and senator Svetlana Ortigova, who had previously approved of forced labor in a summer interview at the International Press Club, was appointed head of the committee.<sup>113</sup>
- Such contradictory signals ensured the continuation of forced labor in the harvest. Prime Minister Abdulla Aripov fired hokims and prosecutors in several regions for inflating the amount of cotton harvested in their districts in 2017. Under such pressure, local officials turned to force to encourage their staff to pick cotton. An audio tape of the head of the Parkent district in Tashkent region, Nematulla Abdullaev, appeared on the RFE/RL Uzbek Service, where Abdullaev questioned every official who had not sent enough people to pick cotton; he accused them of tampering with reports on the cotton harvest, and threatened, humiliated, and insulted them using deeply offensive language.<sup>114</sup> In another tape obtained by RFE/RL, the mayor of Andijan region,<sup>115</sup> Dilmurod Rahmatullaev, cursed the directors of colleges and high schools who had sent insufficient people by train to the Tashkent region to pick cotton. Rahmatullaev was charged with insult and violation of honor and dignity, and fined.<sup>116</sup> At least nine people died due to forced labor in the cotton fields in 2017.<sup>117</sup> In December, President Mirziyoyev issued a decree mandating that farmers sell cotton directly to textile companies.<sup>118</sup>

## Judicial Framework and Independence

2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00

- The judiciary in Uzbekistan is not independent. It submits to the formal and informal orders of the executive, and corruption is widespread. After fierce criticism from President Mirziyoyev,<sup>119</sup> Uzbek judges issued a public statement promising that “critical analysis, strict discipline, and personal responsibility will be daily norms and the main criteria of [their] work.” This fine sentiment notwithstanding, judges’ obeisance before the president again clearly indicated the lack of separation of powers.<sup>120</sup> Nonetheless, in 2017 there were a number of formal changes indicating an intention to overhaul the staffing and structure of the justice system.
- In February, President Mirziyoyev signed a decree on the merger of the Supreme and Higher Economic Courts, formation of economic and administrative courts, and establishment of the Supreme Judicial Council.<sup>121</sup> At the same time, the Supreme Qualification Commission for Selection and Recommendations for the position of judges under the president was abolished. Amendments were adopted on establishing specific terms for judges.<sup>122</sup>
- The Law on the Courts was amended, restricting the maximum age of city, district, and regional judges to 65 years, and 70 years for judges on the Supreme Court. The Civil Procedure Code was amended to replace punishment in the form of arrest with community service. Amendments also reduced the terms of detention for persons suspected of committing crimes and applying preventive measures in the form

of detention and house arrest. Amendments also transferred from prosecutors to judges the authority to approve exhumations, monitor mail and telegraph exchanges, and other questions affecting human rights.<sup>123</sup> Amendments to laws also made participation by the defendant mandatory in appeals, cassations, and supervisory reviews in courts.<sup>124</sup> That such changes were even necessary is an indication of how weak protections for due process were in the existing system.

- On 21 February, President Mirziyoyev’s decree “On measures to radically improve the structure and effectiveness of the judicial system of the Republic of Uzbekistan” transferred military courts from the Armed Forces to the Supreme Court. The decree envisaged the introduction of the positions of Assistant Judge and Senior Assistant Judge to increase the effectiveness of the courts and prepare judicial personnel reserves.<sup>125</sup>
- The introduction of digitization and online access into the judicial sphere expanded in 2017. The Plenum of the Supreme Court issued a resolution on aspects of holding court sessions via videoconference in dislocation, criminal, and administrative cases.<sup>126</sup> Videoconferencing has been piloted in the economic courts in recent years.<sup>127</sup> In May, President Mirziyoyev issued a decree mandating that interrogation of suspects must be conducted only in rooms outfitted with recording equipment, and that interrogations must be recorded in order to be admissible, which enters into force from 1 January 2018.<sup>128</sup>
- The informal practice of denying government employment to the relatives of convicted persons was abolished.<sup>129</sup> The possibility exists that an addendum to the Labor Code will be enacted to prohibit the refusal of employment to a person with previous convictions (except for cases envisaged by law) or to those with convicted close relatives.<sup>130</sup> Introduction of class action petitions to the courts is also being discussed.<sup>131</sup>
- In April, Mirziyoyev issued a decree on “measures to radically increase” the effectiveness of the activities of internal affairs bodies to strengthen their responsibility for ensuring public order and protection of the rights, freedoms, and legitimate interests of citizens.<sup>132</sup> The decree on the police, and other statutes subsequently enacted, seem to have only slightly if at all affected the status quo due to their lack of enforcement. A group of policemen complained that the decree violated their rights and leadership;<sup>133</sup> as a result, police abuse of citizens’ rights<sup>134</sup> and freedoms has continued as before.<sup>135</sup>
- In a positive development, a clinic providing legal counseling to the population in the Yakkabog neighborhood in Chilanzar district of Tashkent was opened, with support from the project “Improving the legal culture in society by improving the transparency of public prosecutor’s office activities and expanding public awareness,” jointly implemented by the Prosecutor General’s Office and the OSCE Project Coordinator in Uzbekistan.<sup>136</sup> On 12 December, the International Labour Organization (ILO) Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organize Convention came into force in Uzbekistan.<sup>137</sup>
- On the eve of the 25th anniversary of the adoption of the Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan, President Mirziyoyev signed a decree pardoning 2,700 convicted persons, which was Uzbekistan’s first public pardon. Pardons are still done individually in relation to the convicted person and are not considered an acquittal or rehabilitation.<sup>138</sup>

## Corruption

2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
6.50	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	7.00	7.00

- Corruption in Uzbekistan is widespread: both petty corruption for public services and in universities, and grand corruption at the highest official levels including embezzlement and self-dealing. For the past few years, president Karimov’s elder daughter Gulnara Karimova and her involvement in a grand corruption scheme have been major news in international media. In 2017, there were changes to the

legal framework for combatting corruption and developments in the government's official stance towards Karimova, but no significant changes in the enforcement of laws or eradication of corruption.

- In January, a law on the fight against corruption was enacted.<sup>139</sup> The law lays out the authority and responsibilities of different government branches and establishes rules for conflicts of interest and ethics for officials. It also covers the education of state officials about corruption and the prevention and prosecution of corruption-related crimes.
- In a surprising act, on 28 July the Prosecutor General's office issued a statement about Karimova, stating that she had been charged with offenses from the Criminal Code (Articles 165, 167, 179, 184, 227, and others) and found guilty in a ruling on 21 August 2015 by the Tashkent Regional Criminal Court, in which Karimova was sentenced to five years' imprisonment. Additionally, the statement said that investigative efforts were underway in another criminal case against Karimova for her alleged role in assisting a criminal group. In this matter, she was charged with articles 168, 178, 182, 189, 228, and 243 of the Criminal Code and has been arrested.<sup>140</sup>
- On 21 September, the Swedish telecommunications company Telia (formerly known as TeliaSonera) and its Uzbek subsidiary signed a pretrial settlement agreement with the U.S. Department of Justice to pay \$965 million in penalties for alleged bribes worth \$331 million to access the country's telecom market.<sup>141</sup> According to other reporting, the bribes were allegedly part of a scheme organized by Karimova. The next day, the Swedish prosecutor's office formally charged three former Telia managers. In the indictment, the Swedish prosecutor's office asked the court to petition Russian authorities with a request to question Behzod Ahmedov, a former associate of Karimova, who fled Uzbekistan in 2012 and who Karimova blames for the embezzlement.<sup>142</sup>
- Before the university entrance exams on 1 August, First Deputy Minister of Higher and Secondary Special Education Inomjon Majidov, when asked by journalists in the International Press Club, promised action against corrupt schemes during the exam.<sup>143</sup> Several investigations have reported of university authorities bribing people with the promise of admission to universities. For example, Nilufar Komilova, head of the department of "Social Geography" of the faculty of Geography and Geology at the National University of Uzbekistan, was arrested for demanding \$5,000 to help a student be admitted.<sup>144</sup>
- Despite the First Deputy Minister's promise, and strict screening and searching of exam participants before entering the exam buildings, investigative reporters found suspicious patterns in the results from entrance exams at Tashkent State University of Economics and Tashkent State Institute of Finance.<sup>145</sup> According to one of these schemes, closed groups were organized under which the admission notice for this area of study would be removed from the ad banner at the admission commission. On exam day, test papers were completed by substitutes. As a result, almost everyone in these special groups received high scores and were granted admission. Despite the reporting, outrage from netizens on social media, and even testimony by a member of parliament,<sup>146</sup> the prosecutor's office did not find any violations during the entrance exams.<sup>147</sup>
- Corruption, nepotism, pre-agreed games, and the use of betting machines in the Uzbekistan Football Federation (UFF) were widely and openly discussed in 2017.<sup>148</sup> After a 10-year term, the UFF elected a new president in August.<sup>149</sup> The new president, Umid Ahmadjonov, promised to change 90 percent of UFF cadres.<sup>150</sup>

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