Uzbekistan

by Bruce Pannier

Capital: Tashkent
Population: 28.2 million
GNI/capita, PPP: US$3,110

Source: The data above were provided by The World Bank, World Development Indicators 2012.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nations in Transit Ratings and Averaged Scores</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electoral Process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent Media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governance*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Democratic Governance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Democratic Governance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judicial Framework and Independence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corruption</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democracy Score</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

* 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, President Islam Karimov has exercised authority over all aspects of Uzbekistan’s governance and much of its public life. The executive branch of government dominates the legislative and judiciary bodies, whose sole purpose is to carry out the will of the president. International criticism of the regime’s rights abuses has been muted in recent years, owing to Tashkent’s role in supporting Western nations’ efforts in Afghanistan. In public statements, former critics now balance condemnation with appreciation, which has effectively relieved pressure on the regime to improve its rights record.

Backed by a formidable Interior Ministry and security forces, Karimov has eliminated nearly all civil society groups that do not embrace state policies. The closure of Human Rights Watch’s Tashkent office in June 2011 marked the departure of the last international rights organization from Uzbekistan. Likewise, there are nearly no independent print or broadcast media inside the country. The Uzbek government increased its efforts to control the flow of information online, blocking dozens of new websites in 2011. As the Arab Spring unfolded, Uzbek authorities also moved to restrict mobile phone use and requested internet operators to broadly follow user activities on social network sites.

Long-held suspicions about the systemic nature of corruption in Uzbekistan were supported by the whistleblower website WikiLeaks release of U.S diplomatic cables in late 2010 and early 2011, which indicated deal-brokering between Uzbek officials and organized crime figures.

National Democratic Governance. In 2011, the Karimov regime neither eased the tight restrictions that have been in place for years, nor introduced any meaningful democratic reforms, despite pledges for change. President Karimov’s regime continued its intolerance of opposition and offered no new meaningful opportunities for citizens to participate in the political process. Therefore, Uzbekistan’s rating for national democratic governance remains at 7.00.

Electoral Process. The electorate in Uzbekistan continued to have little say in choosing government representatives. The only changes made to the constitution were procedural, concerning the selection process for prime ministers and the president’s replacement should he become unfit to carry out his duties. Presidential term limits were reduced back to five years, but there is no indication that this change will affect the status quo in electoral process. Uzbekistan’s rating in this category remains at 7.00.

Civil Society. As in previous years, only a few rights groups were permitted to carry out limited activities in Uzbekistan. Most civil society organizations and religious
groups (other than state-approved Islamic or Russian Orthodox groups) are either
denied registration or face harassment, ranging from administrative fines to more
serious criminal charges and even physical attacks against members. Meanwhile,
Uzbek authorities sponsor counter groups and organizations that promote the
government’s ideas and values. Uzbekistan’s rating for civil society remains at 7.00.

**Independent Media.** Uzbek authorities nearly eradicated independent media in
Uzbekistan years ago. A small number of independent Uzbek journalists remain,
but those who report on sensitive issues without official approval face significant
harassment. The example of Elena Bondar, who was detained and threatened with
jail time for merely attending an Organization for Security and Cooperation in
Europe–sponsored training seminar in 2011, was a reminder that the government
still demands full control over media in Uzbekistan. Therefore, Uzbekistan’s rating for
independent media remains at 7.00.

**Local Democratic Governance.** Officials at the regional, municipal, and other
local levels are chosen by the central government, without input from Uzbek
citizens. The loyalty of these officials is to the state and their task is to maintain
order. In October, local town council leaders helped stop a “Mass Complaint”
protest in Karshi, demonstrating once again that local government serves its own
the interests over the rights of its constituents. Uzbekistan’s rating for local democratic
governance remains at 6.75.

**Judicial Framework and Independence.** The judiciary of Uzbekistan is entirely
subordinate to the executive branch, existing solely to legitimize the decisions of
the central government. Reports of arbitrary detentions, beatings, and torture in
holding facilities and jails continued in 2011. Courts routinely ignore claims from
visibly abused defendants that they were coerced into making confessions. Groups
or individuals targeted by the authorities have virtually no opportunity to prove
their innocence in Uzbekistan’s courts. The judiciary has been instrumental in
shutting down the offices of foreign-based organizations in Uzbekistan, the last
of which—Human Rights Watch—closed in June 2011 with little deliberation
in the Supreme Court and no official explanation. Uzbekistan’s rating for judicial
framework and independence remains at 7.00.

**Corruption.** Leaked diplomatic cables from the WikiLeaks website confirmed long-
held suspicions of connections between the regime and key figures in organized
crime. Toward the end of the year a number of local and ministry officials were
dismissed for corruption, but no steps were taken to tighten or introduce legislation
aimed at addressing the issue systematically. Uzbekistan’s rating for corruption
remains at 6.75.

**Outlook for 2012.** The government’s human rights record will likely remain
poor as Uzbekistan’s geopolitical significance continues to play in Tashkent’s
favor. Deteriorating relations between the United States–led North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) coalition and the Pakistani government have made NATO forces operating in Afghanistan almost entirely dependent on supply lines running through Central Asia, the bulk of which pass through Uzbekistan, the last secure country before Afghanistan. Uzbek authorities are keenly aware of this dependence and have used it to mute Western criticism of Uzbekistan’s internal affairs. As a result, Uzbek opposition groups can expect little meaningful support from foreign governments invested in the war in Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, a regime change seems unlikely in the near future as President Karimov neither shows signs of relinquishing power when his term expires in 2014 nor is he taking steps to reverse 20 years of authoritarian rule. As long as Karimov remains healthy enough to lead Uzbekistan, there is no reason to expect that the country will move toward a democratic system.
During the country’s first years of independence, President Islam Karimov—an economist by training—vowed Uzbekistan would undergo economic reform, followed by political reform. In the more than two decades of his rule, however, the president has demonstrated a commitment to neither.

Uzbekistan’s constitution enshrines the freedom of speech, religion, assembly, and participation in politics. In practice, the constitution is routinely ignored when it conflicts with government policy. The executive branch of government dominates both the legislative and judicial branches. As a result, parliament does little more than serve as a rubber stamp to the president’s will. Likewise, the court system functions as a mechanism for silencing the president’s opponents. Citizens occasionally lodge complaints and appeals, but authorities usually regard these as provocation against the regime, and the court system typically acts to defend the interests of the state, rather than the citizen.

The country’s Interior Ministry and National Security Service keep a watchful eye over the population and strike quickly to suppress potential enemies, a practice Uzbek authorities justify as necessary to maintain the country’s stability. Although Uzbekistan has the largest standing army in Central Asia, Uzbek authorities devote more financial resources and attention to internal security forces, perceiving threats from within the country as a greater challenge to security than those from abroad.

Citizens’ electoral rights are limited, with only two opportunities to cast ballots: in elections for the president and the lower house of parliament. In these elections, only the four officially registered, pro-presidential parties—which even President Karimov regards as practically indistinguishable from one another—can nominate candidates, leaving voters with virtually no genuine choice in either case. While the government boasts respect for citizens’ rights to participate in the political process, ordinary citizens are not able to register a political party or even a social organization without explicit government approval, effectively eliminating alternative political views. Independent candidates are not permitted to run in elections, and under a law passed in late 2008, no civil society group can nominate candidates. A lack of political alternatives has generated apathy on the part of voters, although official figures regularly claim that voter turnout is more than 90 percent.

President Karimov is the central figure of the government and the general public has little knowledge about the deputies representing them in parliament. The question of who will succeed the 73-year-old president remains up in the air. Under changes that came into effect in April 2011, the prime minister no longer
takes over if Karimov were to suddenly become unable to carry out his duties as president. Next in line is the chairman of the senate, Ilgizar Sobirov, who is virtually unknown to the public and, therefore, an extremely unlikely successor.

President Karimov has touted Uzbekistan’s economic success, especially during the recent global economic crisis, in order to boost the regime’s image domestically and abroad. After an economic assessment mission to Uzbekistan in November 2011, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) concluded that the country had weathered the financial crisis well due to robust growth beginning in the mid-2000s. Over the last five years, Uzbekistan’s gross domestic product (GDP) has grown an average of 8.5 percent annually, which is higher than the average growth for Central Asia. The Uzbek government published these and other similar statistics in state-run media in an effort to showcase Uzbekistan’s economic prosperity in comparison to many other countries in the world and discredit dissatisfaction with the regime.

The government replaces civic education with moral instruction, resembling propaganda, which glorifies the image of the regime and dictates what it believes is the right behavior for its citizens. Uzbek authorities perceive Western democratic as well as conservative Islamic values as deeply threatening, and state media warn about the danger of their influence on Uzbek culture.

### Electoral Process

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Popular elections in Uzbekistan are only held for the office of the president and the lower house of parliament (Oliy Majlis). The next, lower house elections, are scheduled for 2014. The law permits only the four registered, regime-loyal political parties—the Adolat Social Democratic Party, Milli Tiklanish (National Revival) Party, Democratic Party of Uzbekistan, and Liberal Democratic Party—to nominate candidates in elections. President Karimov does not face another election until 2014, having won an unconstitutional third term in 2007. A law passed in December 2011 shortened the presidential term to five years, reversing the result of a 2002 national referendum that had extended it to seven years. However, since the regime made no steps to move toward a more democratic system, there is no indication that this change will affect the status quo in electoral process.

In 2011, parliament adopted changes, initiated by President Karimov, giving the political party with the most seats in the lower house of parliament the right to nominate a prime minister, who must then be approved by the president. If two parties have the same number of seats, they jointly nominate a candidate. Since April 2011, the prime minister is no longer the president’s automatic successor, therefore the significance of his role has somewhat diminished.

Elections in Uzbekistan are carefully orchestrated events that offer little in the way of genuine electoral choice. Since independence in late 1991, no elections have been judged free and fair by the Organization for Security and Cooperation
in Europe (OSCE). The OSCE’s final report on Uzbekistan’s last parliamentary election in 2009 noted that the organization “has never deployed a full-fledged election observation mission to Uzbekistan due to a lack of minimum conditions for democratic elections.”

In the absence of any genuine alternative party or movement, voters are left to choose from among the four registered political parties, which consistently support the president’s policies and hesitate to act without clear approval from Karimov. None of the country’s political parties claim more than 500,000 members. In the late 1990s, the People’s Democratic Party (PDP) claimed to have more, but its membership declined after the 2000 presidential elections, when the PDP candidate announced he himself was voting for Karimov.

Currently, there are no genuine opposition parties registered in Uzbekistan. While opposition parties, including the Birlik movement and Erk Democratic Party, have applied for registration in the past, requests are routinely denied or simply ignored. Opposition political activity is discouraged, and those engaging in it suffer harassment. Most of Birlik and Erk leadership were forced to flee Uzbekistan in the mid-1990s due to attacks and repressive measures brought on by the regime. A failed initiative by opposition groups to register an independent candidate during the last presidential campaign in 2007 led to a change in election laws in late 2008, clarifying that only registered parties can put forward candidates in elections. During the 2009 parliamentary elections, the opposition made no attempt to register candidates.

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 and abuse of office accusations against top officials are not tolerated. Only a few small independent rights organizations—Ezgulik (Virtue), the Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan (HRSU), the Expert Working Group (composed of members of Ezgulik and the HRSU), the Initiative Group of Independent Rights Defenders of Uzbekistan, and the Rapid Reaction Group—have been allowed to operate, but government pressure confines their activities to monitoring the plight of the individual citizen rather than confronting broader rights issues.

There are also groups that at first glance appear independent but were either created or are sponsored by Uzbek authorities. The most visible of these is the Ecological Movement of Uzbekistan. Created in August 2008, the movement is an organization in which “both citizens and nongovernmental noncommercial organizations can be the participants.” The movement is “called to unite the citizens of the country supporting ideas and wishing to participate actively in protection of
the environment and health of the person,” and it is also automatically given 15 seats in the lower house of parliament. Another state-sponsored social organization is the Kamolot Public Movement of Youth of Uzbekistan, an Uzbek version of the Soviet Komsomol that has been around for about a decade.

The handful of genuinely independent civil society groups in Uzbekistan regularly face criminal prosecution for exposing sensitive information. In March, Ezgulik faced a defamation suit for a September 2007 report on the suicide of 31-year-old folk singer Dilnura Kadyrjanova, who police said hanged herself in her apartment. Ezgulik published claims from Kadyrjanova’s mother that the singer had been involved in an illicit affair with a senior police officer, who was also the brother of the interior minister. In the report, Kadyrjanova’s mother asserted the officer’s jealous wife and son had actually killed her.

Individual activists also face harassment for pursuing activities that criticize regime policies. Veteran rights activist Elena Urlayeva was detained twice in 2011: once in August in Namangan for showing support for three local journalists she claimed had been unjustly charged with extortion, and again in October near Tashkent for attempting to expose child labor violations by filming an empty elementary school whose students were out picking cotton. In the past, Uzbek authorities have forcibly committed Urlayeva to psychiatric hospitals for engaging in antigovernment activities.

In July, well-known human rights defender Tatyana Dovlatova was fined 10 million sums (US$4,000) for making a statement on the Russian television channel Rossiya 1 about the plight of the elderly living on very small pensions in Uzbekistan. In August, police searched her home and detained her son on suspicion of selling heroin. Dovlatova claimed the charges of selling narcotics were fabricated and were retaliation for her rights work. Her request to represent her son in court was denied. In October, Dovlatova was fined for hooliganism and a court ordered her apartment and its belongings appraised (in order, Dovlatova believed, that they could be sold if she could not pay her fine). On 23 December, Dovlatova’s son was convicted of narcotics possession and sentenced to nine years in jail.

International pressure caused the regime to release a few activists in 2011. President Karimov’s nephew, Jamshid Karimov, was ordered to undergo six months of psychiatric treatment in September 2006 presumably for his human rights activism and independent journalism, but remained in treatment until he was finally freed in November 2011. Bakhtiyor Hamrayev, a member of the Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan, believes that Jamshid was released as a result of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s visit to Tashkent in October. The head of the Samarkand region branch of the HRSU, Norboy Holjigitov, was arrested in October 2005 in connection with the crackdown on human rights activists that followed the Andijan massacre in May 2005 and sentenced to 10 years’ imprisonment. Holjigitov was released in October 2011 after numerous international appeals citing his deteriorating health condition.

The Uzbek government is greatly concerned by the activities of religious groups. Islam is allowed and encouraged for the majority-Muslim population,
but only at state-approved mosques led by regime-backed clerics. In an effort to suppress religious extremism, the government has introduced restrictions on mosque attendance by minors. Uzbek courts mete out their harshest punishments to those convicted of membership in banned Islamic groups and these inmates serve their sentences in the worst of Uzbekistan’s prisons. *Maballas*, or neighborhood councils, are tasked by central authorities with watching the activities of mosques and monitoring suspicious activity.

Although the constitution guarantees freedom of religion, the government only tolerates attendance at state-registered mosques and Russian Orthodox churches. Most frequently Uzbek authorities target Islamic sects, which it considers suspicious, such as the Nurchilar, which originated in Turkey, or Hizb ut-Tahrir, which originated among Palestinian refugees in the early 1950s. The country’s security forces have tenaciously hunted members of “suspicious” groups even if there is no credible evidence that members committed acts of violence. Rights organizations claim that in the pursuit of Islamic extremists, many innocent Muslims have been falsely arrested and imprisoned.15

Russian Orthodox Christianity is accepted due its long presence in Central Asia and the still sizeable Slavic population living in Uzbekistan. Other Christian groups, however—the majority of which received official registration in the 1990s—face regular obstacles and harassment. In February, the Bible Society of Uzbekistan, an interdenominational Christian organization, was fined for failing to inform the state’s Religious Affairs Committee in advance about a shipment of bibles from Russia. The committee ordered the organization to pay for returning the approximately 15,000 books to Russia.16 Authorities often deny Christian groups permission to use structures other than official Russian Orthodox churches as houses of worship, and have been known to break up and fine simple social gatherings, which it believes are illegal religious services. In February, three members of the Full Gospel Pentecostal Church were detained for 15 days and ten church members were fined for holding an illegal religious meeting, which the group claimed was actually a birthday party.17

The office of the human rights ombudsman lacks independence from the executive branch, failing to act as an advocate for human rights groups. Uzbekistan’s ombudsman Sayora Rashidova, told parliament in February 2011 that she had handled 10,619 citizen appeals in 2010, providing no explanation of the nature of these appeals or their outcomes. In reality, there have been no substantiated reports of Rashidova intervening on behalf of citizens or speaking out against abusive state policies since parliament elected her in 1995. Rashidova issued no statement against the forced closure of Human Rights Watch (HRW) in Tashkent in June 2011, despite entreaties by her Kyrgyzstani counterpart to oppose the move.18 HRW was the last international rights organization left in Uzbekistan.

Uzbekistan’s opposition-in-exile continues efforts to rally the population against government oppression, but distance and limited access to the Uzbek public have mitigated its success in encouraging demonstrations in Uzbekistan. In May 2011, representatives of the opposition Erk party, the Andijan–Justice
and Revival organization, and the Tayanch organization jointly established the People’s Movement of Uzbekistan (PMU) in Germany. The new movement is led by veteran opposition figure and 1991 presidential candidate, Muhammad Solih, who is arguably the best-known Uzbek opposition figure. The PMU’s calls for President Karimov’s ouster by “organizing actions of disobedience [and] merging together ever more protests in [its] ranks.” However, no protests were reportedly organized by the PMU in 2011. Bahodir Choriyev, the U.S.-based leader-in-exile of another opposition group, Birdamlik, attempted to organize “Mass Complaint” demonstrations in Uzbekistan in October in which citizens were invited to submit written complaints about abuses committed by officials, but local authorities prevented the protest.

Independent Media

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Independent media have been largely eradicated in Uzbekistan, a country of 28 million people. A dwindling number of independent journalists—mostly reporting for foreign media outlets—remain in Tashkent and a small number of independent online forums still have Uzbekistan-based staff. Journalists are systematically harassed and frequently imprisoned on charges ranging from defamation to extortion, forgery, and smuggling. Foreign journalists are routinely denied entry, and unflattering portrayals of Uzbek society can be a criminal offense.

Abdumalik Boboyev, a freelance correspondent for the U.S. government-funded Voice of America news service, was denied an exit visa in early 2011, following a December 2010 conviction for libel and insult. This prevented Boboyev from starting a year-long program on 1 April as he intended, but he was eventually granted the exit visa in June. In late August, Tashkent airport customs authorities also briefly detained freelance independent journalist Elena Bondar for failing to declare a few USB drives, CDs, and videocassettes upon her arrival from Kyrgyzstan, where she attended an OSCE-sponsored training course. On 5 September the airport customs department warned Bondar that although there was no illegal content, she “should not count on [them] being so lenient next time.” Authorities presumably intended to use the incident to intimidate other journalists from engaging in independent reporting or attending OSCE-sponsored training seminars.

Uzbek authorities placed new restrictions on journalists’ contacts with foreign embassies in 2011. The National Association of Electronic Mass Media Information of Uzbekistan (NAEMMIU) ruled in March that chief editors of radio stations must report any proposals from foreign embassies regarding joint projects or trips, or invitations to press conferences to the chairman of NAEMMIU, Abdukhalikov Firdaus, and await his personal response before accepting.
Authorities also made moves to further restrict the broadcast of foreign media over cable and satellite television. In February, Uzbekistan suspended broadcasting of Russia’s TNT and DTV television channels, based on claims from the director of Uzbekistan’s cable television that these stations did not have contracts to rebroadcast in Uzbekistan. Some online media speculated that TNT and DTV had been shut down because some of the content of Russian programming was deemed “immoral” by Uzbek authorities. After the restriction of popular Russian programming, sales of satellite dishes reportedly skyrocketed in Tashkent. While most people undoubtedly invested in satellite television for entertainment programming, it also granted access to coverage of the Arab Spring, which did not appear in Uzbek media. The possibility of unrestricted access to foreign media alarmed the Uzbek government, leading the regime to establish a special committee of experts on information and mass communication in August to monitor new media, satellite systems, and foreign TV stations. The committee is made up of government apparatchiks and represents a new arm in the government’s constantly adapting surveillance system.

The growth of the internet has presented a challenge for Uzbekistan’s authorities and their efforts to control the flow of information. The National Security Service actively engages in internet censorship through the blocking of websites it considers undesirable. Since 2005, several news sites, including Fergananews.com, as well as other sites covering domestic issues have become inaccessible during certain periods. In March 2011, Timur Yusupov, chief editor of the online version of the Russian daily Russkiy Reporter, claimed that the newspaper’s website was blocked in Uzbekistan. Yusupov attributed this to articles Russkiy Reporter posted about U.S. diplomatic cables on the WikiLeaks website, which pointed to reputed Uzbek crime boss Salim Abduvaliev’s ability to “sell” government positions. In August, just before celebrations began to commemorate the 20th anniversary of Uzbekistan’s independence, Uzbek authorities blocked dozens of websites known for critical reporting, including the International Women’s Rights Project, Deutsche Welle, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, the BBC and Russia’s Nezavisimaya Gazeta as well as Uznews.net, Uzmetronom.com, Eurasianet.org, and Asia-plus.tj. While no official reason was given for blocking these sites, authorities probably intended to preempt the spreading of government criticism before anniversary celebrations. Ironically, access to these sites was blocked just prior to the internet festival in Tashkent aimed at promoting internet use in Uzbekistan and the national .uz domain suffix.

As the Arab Spring unfolded in early 2011, Uzbek authorities grew wary of the role of SMS and mobile technologies in organizing protests and moved to restrict mobile phone use. In March, the Uzbek Agency for Communication and Information (UzACI) informed all Uzbek cell phone providers that, if requested by the government, they must switch off their systems immediately. The authorities also requested that internet operators broadly follow activities on social network sites. In August, Uzbekistan launched the social networking website Muloqot.
uz, an Uzbek version of Facebook. Muluqot.uz, like Cuba’s RedSocial Facebook look-alike, will allow the government to extend its surveillance over the flow of information into the social media sphere and limit the influence of global social networking sites.

Local Democratic Governance

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Local officials in provinces, districts, towns, and villages are appointed by the state and chosen based on their loyalty and ability to fulfill demands from the central government in Tashkent. Provincial governors are usually rotated every few years, apparently in order to prevent any single official from remaining in the same position for long enough to gain significant power. Further down the chain of command, officials usually stay longer at their posts, especially in towns and villages.

As the central government has ultimate say in who receives what position and for how long, local officials prioritize Tashkent’s demands. This is especially noticeable at cotton harvest time, when local officials reportedly force residents, including children, to work in cotton fields to ensure that government-set production targets are met. Child labor in Uzbekistan’s cotton fields is a widely publicized issue, but in 2011 there were reports that doctors, teachers, and even imams were also “urged” by local officials to perform their “patriotic duty” by picking cotton. Pressure is high to fulfill the central government’s cotton quotas, leading local officials to impose unreasonable demands on their constituents as well as punishments if those demands are unmet. In Yangiyul district (Tashkent province), prosecutor Ziyodullo Yuldashhev allegedly demanded that the deputy chief of the local mahalla, Zukhridin Zakirov, provide 100 people every day to harvest cotton. Zakirov told the Alliance of Rights Defenders of Uzbekistan that when he could only find half that number, Yuldashhev came to the village and beat him.

Mahallas govern towns and cities, the lowest levels of local governance. Mahalla leaders are expected to be aware of everything that goes on in the neighborhood and ensure that state rules are being observed. By reporting suspicious activities to higher authorities, they prevent manifestations of antigovernment sentiment in their neighborhoods. Mahalla leaders helped stop the “Mass Complaint” protest in Karshi on 12–14 October organized by the opposition Birdamlik movement, which called on citizens to carry complaints about local officials to their superiors. According to Birdamlik leader Bahodir Choriyev, protesters in Karshi were surrounded by a ring of police and representatives of the mahallas, who intended to intimidate participants from submitting complaints against local authorities and deny access to the site of the demonstration.
Judicial Framework and Independence

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Uzbekistan’s judiciary functions as a tool of the executive branch, serving the president’s interests. Courts imprison or fine the regime’s perceived enemies—the greater the perceived threat, the harsher the sentence. Defendants have appeared in court after suffering obvious physical abuse in detention, but the courts provide no redress when the abuse is reported. Likewise, there are cases where witnesses for the state have recanted testimony, undermining the prosecution’s case against defendants, yet the courts have ignored the changed evidence.

Since 2005, Uzbekistan’s court system has been instrumental in shutting down the offices of foreign-based organizations in Uzbekistan, the last of which—Human Rights Watch—closed in June 2011. The closure was a culmination of years of legal harassment and registration challenges. HRW was finally expelled as the result of Justice Ministry requests in March and June, which the Supreme Court ultimately confirmed after only a few minutes of deliberation. The Uzbek government issued no information about the alleged grounds for the closure and there was no opportunity for appeal.

Judges are all appointed and, like local officials, owe their positions to the central government, which compromises their independence. The presumption of innocence and right to an attorney are guaranteed by Uzbekistan’s constitution, but are routinely overlooked in detention facilities and courtrooms. While the right to appeal exists, in practice, lower court rulings are rarely overturned by higher courts and at best, the appeals process provides an opportunity to reduce one’s sentence.

In the aftermath of the May 2005 violence in Andijan—where government troops opened fire on peaceful protesters, killing at least 187—many people were arrested, detained, and tortured. The French-based Association for Human Rights in Central Asia published a report in 2011 detailing the experience of a witness who was brought in for questioning, but was subsequently detained and tortured for three months after the violence. During his interrogation, he did not have an attorney present and after every answer, he reported being “hit with a rubber truncheon in the crotch or stomach. This went on for a very long time.”

Due process is frequently ignored in police investigations. In October, Salohiddin Tilavov of Samarkand was attacked on the street by a knife-wielding robber. Tilavov and a friend managed to chase the man away, but when he was later found dead, Tilavov automatically became the police’s prime suspect. Tilavov was detained and severely beaten by ten policemen, hoping to force out a murder confession. In the meantime, another suspect was apprehended and Tilavov was released.

The judicial system is also used to persecute members of illegal Islamist groups. On 28 May, a court in the eastern city of Namangan sentenced seven men to jail terms ranging from 5 to 10 years after finding them guilty of membership in the
banned Islam Jihadchilar group. Surat Ikramov, head of the Initiative Group of Independent Human Rights Defenders of Uzbekistan, reported that only two of the six defendants had their lawyers present because the trial was announced at the last minute; the group also claimed the suspects were beaten in prison.41

Anecdotal evidence of corruption in Uzbekistan’s large bureaucracy is abundant, implicating high-ranking officials and small business owners alike. Citizens have grown accustomed to paying bribes to lower-level officials for basic government services such as obtaining necessary identification documents or business permits, as well as settling traffic violations, enrolling children in good schools, and buying them good grades.

Corruption cases involving mid to lower-ranking officials (usually caught accepting bribes) come to light every year in Uzbekistan. In 2011, the head of Tashkent’s Yunus-Abad district, Kobul Farmonov, and the prosecutor of the Adkarya district near Samarkand were both investigated for accepting bribes in February and May respectively. Farmonov was sacked and reportedly hanged himself in a remand center cell at the end of February, although the Human Rights Alliance of Uzbekistan believes he may have been killed to keep him from revealing the names of cohorts who were high-ranking officials.42 In March the former head of the Interior Ministry’s investigative department in Jizzakh province was handed a prison sentence for accepting a bribe. In June, a correspondent for Inson va Qonun (Man and the Law), the Justice Ministry’s newspaper, was also charged with involvement in a bribery scheme.

Although corruption is also widespread among higher ranks, senior level officials are rarely investigated for corruption while still in office. Large-scale corruption among top government officials and their associates typically comes under investigation only after falling from power, as in the 2008 case of former parliament speaker Erkin Khalilov.43

The diplomatic cables posted by the whistleblower WikiLeaks website in January confirmed long-held suspicions of connections between the regime and key figures in organized crime. In one cable, U.S. Ambassador to Uzbekistan John Purnell, who left his post in 2007, claims “tenders and government positions can be fairly easily secured by paying the right amount of money to the appropriate individual.”44 The cable names one of those individuals Salim Abduvaliyev, the current president of Uzbekistan’s wrestling association, as one of the “bosses of the criminal world” in Uzbekistan. The cables reveal that Abduvaliyev paid the ministers of finance, interior, justice, and foreign affairs for the sight to sell a range of government positions, including hokims (regional governors) and police chiefs.45 Other cables allege Abduvaliyev was a middleman between foreign investors and
the Uzbek government, submitting applications to Karimov’s daughter, Gulnora Karimova, for approval, and accepting a fee for selecting the winners of Uzbek government tenders.46

In May 2011, the U.S. Department of Justice found the Tenaris company, maker of steel pipes and equipment for the oil industry, guilty of bribing officials of OJSC Uztashqineftgaz, an Uzbek state–controlled oil and gas production company, for the receipt of tenders in 2006 and 2007.47 Despite the U.S. government’s ruling against Tenaris, the Uzbek government reportedly took no action against officials at Uztashqineftgaz, who were implicated in the corrupt deal.

Like many Central Asian leaders, President Karimov has engaged in unrestrained nepotism, bestowing significant patronage on his daughters, Gulnara and Lola Karimova. Both represent the Uzbek government abroad: Gulnara is Uzbekistan’s ambassador to Spain and representative to the UN in Geneva, and Lola is Uzbekistan’s United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization’s representative in Paris. The Swiss magazine Bilan listed the sisters together as, the third richest women in Switzerland, noting a combined fortune estimated at US$1 billion.48 While the origins of their wealth remains murky, the 2010 government takeover of Zeromax, Uzbekistan’s largest private conglomerate, is said to have significantly contributed to the personal enrichment of the Karimov family.49

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23. Ibid.


Khalilov was parliament speaker for more than a decade, even standing in for President Karimov at multilateral summits. His relationship with the regime helped him to acquire
several houses—one reportedly so large it had a lake and a private hunting ground—as well as a number of foreign cars. Within days of his dismissal in January 2008, Khalilov’s three-story house in Tashkent was demolished, and an estate outside Tashkent was seized along with several expensive automobiles.


45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.

