

Uzbekistan: Washington Must Stand Up for Democracy

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Robert Blake, the US assistant secretary of state for South and Central Asia, is scheduled to be in Uzbekistan on February 17-18 for the second Annual Bilateral Consultations between the United States and Uzbekistan. As the Obama administration seeks to reengage President Islam Karimov's government in Tashkent, Blake should ensure that Uzbekistan's respect for basic individual rights is a central topic of discussion.

A number of issues make Central Asia in general, and Uzbekistan in particular, strategically important to Washington. Large reserves of natural gas and Uzbekistan's central location make it commercially important. Uzbekistan has also emerged as a [critical cog](#) in the effort to stabilize Afghanistan. It serves a key role in the Northern Distribution Network (NDN), a web of land and air routes used for the transport of non-lethal goods to US and NATO forces in Afghanistan. An [Uzbek-Afghan rail link](#) is under construction and Uzbekistan is currently providing some of Kabul's electricity.

Strategic considerations risk pressuring the United States to overlook the fact that Karimov leads one of the most repressive regimes in the world. Human rights violations are endemic in Uzbekistan. Independent groups continue to document the widespread use of forced child labor in cotton fields. Members of unregistered Christian and Muslim religious groups face persecution. And criminal defendants report numerous cases of torture during pre-trial detention.

In January, The Economist released its Democracy Index for 2010. Uzbekistan ranked 164 out of 167. (Blake was in Turkmenistan, which came in at 165 in the Economist ranking, for several days of talks prior to his arrival Tashkent, according to a State Department statement). Karimov has been at the helm in Uzbekistan since the nation gained independence amid the Soviet collapse in 1991, and only parties loyal to him are allowed to register and participate in elections. The government frequently subjects political opposition leaders and human rights defenders to politically motivated prosecutions—often on fabricated charges of economic crimes.

The case of [Akzam Turgunov](#) is representative of this repression.

Turgunov is the founder and chairman of the Tashkent based human rights group Mazlum, and director of the Tashkent section of the political opposition party Erk. Previously detained for over a year on politically motivated charges in 1998 for his activism on a neighborhood committee, authorities again arrested Turgunov in July 2008.

At the time of his arrest, Turgunov was working as a lay public defender and investigating official corruption in the semi-autonomous region of Karakalpakstan. He was accused of extortion by a client's ex-husband after attempting to collect a court judgment on her behalf. Police detained him incommunicado for 18 days, during which time an interrogator poured boiling water down Turgunov's back, causing him to lose consciousness and suffer severe burns.

After a trial—which failed to meet even the minimum international standards for due process—the court sentenced Turgunov to 10 years in prison. The prosecution's main "evidence" presented at trial was a statement allegedly signed by the accuser. The court prevented Turgunov from calling his accuser as a witness. As other activists were prohibited from entering the courtroom, the trial judge's niece called out: He will never be free. A few months later, Turgunov's lawyer had his license to practice law revoked as part of the governments "re-licensing" procedure.

Turgunov is now detained at a prison camp where, at 59, he is forced to work in a brick-making factory seven days per week. The government also denies him adequate food, clothing, and medical care. As a result of these deplorable conditions, he weighs less than 50 kilograms.

As the United States seeks to rebuild the strong strategic relationship that existed between Washington and Tashkent prior to the 2005 [Andijan massacre](#), it cannot lose sight of the democratization element that has always been a part of Washington's foreign policy. Blake should feel obligated to raise rights concerns with Uzbek officials, especially cases such as Turgunov's. Turning a blind eye to the civil society dimension of US foreign policy undermines Washington's ability to achieve its strategic goals in the region. Such behavior merely encourages [corrupt and arbitrary behavior](#) in authoritarian-minded regimes.

Turgunov is an innocent man who is being punished for his human rights advocacy. He must be released. The United States must not accept empty promises in an attempt to expand relations with Uzbekistan. Instead, it must demand that Uzbekistan respect the fundamental rights of its citizens and establish clear consequences for the Karimov regime should it continue these abuses.

Editor's note: Patrick Griffith is an attorney with Freedom Now, an organization that advocates on behalf of prisoners of conscience, and serves as international pro-bono legal counsel for Akzam Turgunov.

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