



Uzbekistan in Brief

From its independence from the USSR in 1991 to 2016, Uzbekistan was ruled by President Islam Karimov whose 27-year reign was distinguished by brutal human rights abuses, such as the 2005 Andijan massacre in which hundreds of

unarmed people were killed by government forces. Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who succeeded Karimov, made promises of expansive reform under his New Uzbekistan program. In Mirziyoyev’s first term, many political prisoners were released, some foreign human rights organizations and media were allowed to open offices, and the government ended systematic forced labor by children.

Key Data	
GDP (2020)	\$59.9 billion
FDI (2020)	\$1.7 billion
Population	34.2 million
FreedomHouse FreedomScore (2021)	11/100
TI Corruption Perceptions Index Score (2020)	26/100

While the climate of repression in Uzbekistan has somewhat lifted, Mirziyoyev’s reforms have taken place mostly in the economic sphere. The country remains a deeply authoritarian and repressive state in which the media is highly proscribed, there is no accountability for torture and ill-treatment, which remain common, and people continue to be imprisoned just for speaking their minds. Mirziyoyev was reelected in October 2021, though genuine opposition parties were prevented from participating, and the election was characterized by voting irregularities, little actual campaigning, and an absence of pluralism according to independent observers.

The Human Rights Agenda

Uzbekistan’s emergence from authoritarianism is incomplete without steps to loosen the government’s grip on nearly all aspects of life, enabling people to play an active role in political and social affairs, and addressing abuses from the country’s checkered past. Among the areas where tangible reform is urgently needed are Criminal Code reform, the rehabilitation of former political prisoners, and the lifting of restrictions on civil society.

Reform the Criminal Code

Uzbekistan should amend the Criminal Code to: decriminalize defamation; specify proscribed activities and narrow the definition of extremism in compliance with international law; decriminalize homosexuality; and end the arbitrary extension of prison sentences.

Piecemeal changes to the 1994 Criminal Code made since 2016 have left untouched provisions which long served as the government’s key tools of repression. A new draft Criminal Code, published in February 2021, proposes some meaningful change, though its likelihood of passage is doubtful.

Several provisions of the Criminal Code significantly proscribe the freedom of expression in Uzbekistan. The Code criminalizes defamation, a provision used to harass and imprison journalists and activists for reporting on corruption and speaking their minds. Vague anti-extremism provisions are wielded in politically-motivated prosecutions of human rights activists and journalists. The Criminal Code outlaws homosexuality, and the authorities have convicted at least 44 individuals since 2016 under this provision, subjecting some to degrading forced anal exams.

Rehabilitation of Former Political Prisoners

Uzbekistan should establish an independent Reparations Committee to evaluate cases of former political prisoners and others arbitrarily detained and determine their individual reparation and rehabilitation needs.

One of the most heralded changes in Uzbekistan since Mirziyoyev assumed power has been the release of more than 50 political prisoners from wrongful detention. Unfortunately, these individuals represent only a small percentage of the

country's estimated thousands of wrongfully-imprisoned people. While Uzbekistan has a mechanism to compensate people for their wrongful imprisonment, those released have been unable to obtain reparations from the government.

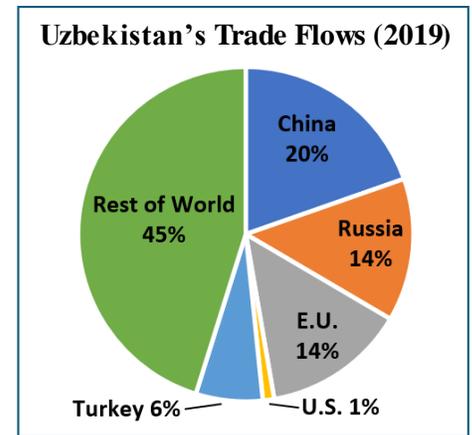
Freedom of Association and Restrictions on Civil Society

Uzbekistan should amend NGO laws to bring them into compliance with international standards and ensure the process is transparent and open to input from independent civil society.

Karimov's regime heavily regulated and harassed independent NGOs and human rights defenders. While Mirziyoyev has introduced reforms in this area, NGOs that work on issues deemed sensitive by the government, such as human rights or forced labor, still face challenges. Registering an NGO, which is required in order to operate, can take up to ten months, far beyond the one-month official timeframe. Many NGOs are often rejected for simple spelling or grammatical errors. Authorities have used the registration process to intimidate human rights activists. In some cases, after rejecting an NGO's application multiple times, the secret police have visited people associated with the group, ostensibly to verify their identities.

Uzbekistan in the International Context

Uzbekistan has improved historically-caustic relations with its neighbors in recent years, opening up new transit and business opportunities to the entire region. It has also aggressively courted Russian, Chinese, European, and U.S. officials and businesses in an effort to rebrand itself and generate investment and business. Generally wary of Russian influence, Uzbekistan made overtures towards Russia recently by joining on as an observer to Russia's pet regional economic project, the Eurasian Economic Union free trade area. Russian-Uzbekistani relations in the security sphere improved following President Karimov's death and the countries generally see eye to eye about threats to stability flowing from Afghanistan. In a short time, Uzbekistan went from spurning security cooperation with Russia to purchasing significant weapons and training its officers in Russian military schools.



Turkish-Uzbek relations are also experiencing a revival. In 2018, the presidents of Turkey and Uzbekistan set aside historic antagonism and distrust among the two countries when they swapped visits, signed new trade deals, and increased their political integration. Relations with the E.U. are also on the upswing. In 2020, Uzbekistan was granted favorable access to the E.U. market under the GSP+ scheme. This benefit is conditioned upon meeting human rights, labor, and environmental benchmarks, though watchdogs say that the country is not even close to meeting the standards. Uzbekistan is also seeking to enhance its political relationship with the E.U, and membership in the WTO, though progress on both fronts is slow.

Uzbekistan's relationship with the U.S. is also on the upswing following Karimov's death and significant lobbying of U.S. policymakers and businesses. Since the fall of the government in Afghanistan, U.S. attention has focused on how Uzbekistan and its neighbors can help address security and humanitarian priorities in Afghanistan now that the U.S.-led coalition no longer has a presence on the ground. The U.S. and Uzbekistan re-launched their Strategic Partnership in 2018, and had their first Strategic Partnership Dialogue in December 2021. At the Dialogue they agreed to establish expert-level working groups to discuss various bilateral issues.