

Uzbekistan

Capital: Tashkent
Population: 31.2 million
GNI/capita, PPP: US\$5.823

Source: World Bank *World Development Indicators*.

Nations in Transit Ratings and Averaged Scores											
	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
National Democratic Governance	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.0	7.00
Electoral Process	6.75	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	7.00	7.00
Independent Media	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00
Local Democratic Governance	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75
Judicial Framework and Independence	6.75	6.75	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00
Corruption	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	7.00
Democracy Score	6.82	6.86	6.89	6.93	6.93	6.93	6.93	6.93	6.93	6.93	6.96

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

On 2 September 2016, official media reported the death of President Islam Karimov, who ruled Uzbekistan for more than a quarter century. Karimov had not named an official successor, and his death prompted an unprecedented transition of power. The first indication of the outcome was when Prime Minister Shavkat Mirziyoyev took the interim presidential office in contradiction to the constitution, which states that the Chair of the Senate should assume the office in the case of the president's incapacitation. Mirziyoyev faced no real opposition in the elections on 4 December and became the second president in the history of independent Uzbekistan after receiving 88.61 percent of votes.

Mirziyoyev has said that he will continue Karimov's work, but some of his actions already diverge from Karimov's policies. Even as interim president, Mirziyoyev started to improve relations with neighboring countries and proposed economic liberalization, governance reforms, and some improvements in the judicial system. The new president is facing a difficult economic situation that may require immediate action. After U.S. sanctions and low oil prices hit the Russian economy starting in 2014, migrant remittances from Uzbek laborers in Russia decreased by half in 2015. The black-market price for the dollar has continued to rise, causing inflation and price increases.

There were some signs of a relaxation of the state's grip on civic life after Mirziyoyev's succession, but it remains too early to draw conclusions. Since Mirziyoyev came to power, many public figures—state officials, singers, writers, and actors—who were shunned by Karimov have once again returned to active public life. During the year, however, the regime continued to crack down on civil society activists, opposition members, and independent journalists. Early in 2016, activist Uktam Pardaev was sentenced to three years' probation. Another activist, Dmitry Tikhonov, was forced to flee the country in April after years of government harassment for his work documenting forced labor. Human rights defender Elena Urlaeva was forcibly kept in a psychiatric clinic for 87 days. There were some releases following Mirziyoyev's succession, perhaps intended to cultivate good will. In November, a month after U.S. Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Thomas Shannon visited Uzbekistan, the country's longest-serving political prisoner, Samandar Kukanov, was released. Earlier in October, Bobomurod Razzoqov, another human rights advocate, was also released from jail one year before the end of his term.

The 2016 cotton harvest that followed Mirziyoyev's succession continued to rely on the forced mobilization of students and government employees, such as schoolteachers and medical personnel. Although child labor in the harvest has lessened in recent years, adults are still forced to work in the fields under brutal conditions. In October, human rights activist Elena Urlaeva and journalists Malohat Eshonqulova and Timur Karpov were illegally detained and harassed while monitoring forced labor in cotton fields.

Many practicing Muslims are still under state harassment, as security services raid and interrogate families in Uzbekistan of religious and political refugees who have left the country. The National Democratic Institute (NDI), one of the few remaining American nongovernmental organizations in Uzbekistan, left the country in spring 2016 after foreseeing no prospects for independent work on the ground.

Although there was some loosening of pressures after Karimov's death, independent media continue to be almost nonexistent. Internet media reports predicting that the Chair of the Senate would become the interim president as stated in the constitution were ordered removed immediately by the authorities. The Uzbek government also said it would prosecute those who questioned the constitutionality of Mirziyoyev's becoming interim president, and threatened to ban media outlets that write about it. Despite the suspicious attitude of the government, social media continue to be the only venue where citizens document and complain about the harsh conditions of daily life.

Corruption is a major feature of the regime in Uzbekistan, and Mirziyoyev cannot avoid the issue if he intends to make a break with the past. After Islam Karimov's official visit to Russia in April 2016, several GM Uzbekistan executives, including director general Tohirjon Jalilov, were detained on charges of money laundering, embezzlement, and fraud. The Dutch telecom company VimpelCom paid the United States \$795 million to resolve an investigation into a bribery scheme in Uzbekistan involving ex-president Karimov's elder daughter, Gulnara Karimova. As a result of the investigation, the U.S. Justice Department has also placed a seizure order on nearly \$850 million in assets, which the Uzbek government is now seeking to recover. Meanwhile, Uzbek authorities kept Karimova's whereabouts secret from the public throughout 2016.

Score changes:

- **Corruption rating declined from 6.75 to 7.00** due to the evidence of a system totally captured by corruption, including through the conclusive documentation of Gulnara Karimova's corruption scheme, and the GM Uzbekistan corruption scandal.

As a result, Uzbekistan's Democracy Score declined from 6.93 to 6.96.

Outlook for 2017: The coming year will determine whether President Mirziyoyev keeps his promises to begin leading the country towards economic liberalization and democracy. While democratic reforms are unlikely, there is reason to hope the government will embrace a certain level of economic liberalization and opening to the outside world. A proposed currency reform to move away from the nonconvertible fixed system is supposed to start in 2017. Although shifting to a more modern currency system is a necessity, in the short term this may mean currency turbulence, including price hikes and inflation. Early efforts to build more neighborly relationships with other Central Asian countries might also result in broader trade among neighbors and more people-to-people exchanges due to easier border crossings. Proposed changes in local governance are expected to bring some improvements in access to the authorities and in the lives of people.

MAIN REPORT

National Democratic Governance

2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00

- On 2 September 2016, Islam Karimov, the first president of Uzbekistan, who had ruled the country for 27 years, died suddenly after having a brain hemorrhage. He had been reported hospitalized on 28 August,¹ but the announcement of his death did not come until 2 September. While he was hospitalized, rumors spread online about Karimov's death in the absence of official information on his condition.² After a few days of uncertainty, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, a disciple of Karimov who had served as prime minister since 2003, took the position of interim president. This transfer of power not only indicated Mirziyoyev's rise to become Karimov's successor but also contradicted Uzbekistan's constitution, which stipulates that the Chair of the Senate should become interim president in the event the president is incapacitated.³
- Mirziyoyev entered office at a difficult economic time. U.S. sanctions and low oil prices have hit the Russian economy since mid-2014, hence the number of Uzbek migrants to Russia has decreased; migrant remittances to Uzbekistan from Russia dropped by half from 2014 to 2015.⁴ The black-market price for the dollar continued to rise throughout the year, causing inflation and price increases in the country.
- A shortage of cash in banks has been consistent in the country's regions for the past several years, which has caused delays in salary payments. The problem became more evident in 2016 when the government started transferring large portions of salaries for public employees to plastic debit cards instead of paying in cash. Uzbeks prefer cash because many stores require only cash or charge up to 30 percent extra when sales are made with plastic cards.⁵ The issue of plastic cards and lack of cash was one of the problems most frequently reported to the online "virtual cabinet" of then-prime minister Mirziyoyev.⁶ ATMs do not have cash, and banks do not let people withdraw their money, even though this policy is illegal. Tight government control over the economy has led to a surge of black-market activities, such as individuals withdrawing their money outside the banking system using third-party services with fees up to 30 percent.⁷
- In one incident in August, more than 50 female janitors protested with spades and hoes in front of the Samarkand mayor's office asking for their salaries to be paid.⁸ Before the presidential elections on 4 December, interim president Mirziyoyev announced a draft decree on currency reform to get rid of the black currency market. If realized, this change would have a far-reaching impact on the economy and financial sector.⁹
- Shortages of gas and electricity in general, and charcoal during the winter season, continued in 2016. More than a hundred women blocked a highway in Jizzakh region in November demanding gas. The protesters were questioned long after the event, forced to give testimonies against the organizers, and made by the police to write thank-you notes to President Mirziyoyev.¹⁰
- There was little sign of softening in Uzbekistan's repressive surveillance system prior to Karimov's death, and whether Mirziyoyev will address this issue is a major question. Under a new electronic cadaster system that started from the beginning of 2016, authorities initiated searches in every house and apartment. Although the updated cadaster system has been applauded as a move to improve

recording of assets, reports show that it was used as a tool to pressure families of activists who are in exile and to surveil homeowners and their relatives abroad.¹¹

- Apart from the cadaster-related searches and surveillance, the National Security Service (NSS) has registered more than 150,000 Uzbeks living abroad under the guise of countering terrorism.¹² Additionally, people arriving from abroad were questioned in airports and local police offices for hours about their trips and lives abroad.¹³ Although such practices were already common, they significantly expanded in 2016, including even people who had been outside the country for only a few days.¹⁴ The NSS has named and shamed the parents of some people living abroad to demand their return with threats, such as annulling their citizenship.¹⁵ While it has been a custom to have occasional raids prior to big events, such as the Independence Day celebrations and the presidential election, such raids became more extensive during the year.
- Freedom of movement of citizens continued to be restricted in 2016. The Uzbek authorities use such formal restrictions, which are widely violated but arbitrarily enforced, as a tool to control the citizenry. Residency registration (*propiska*) for Tashkent was made available and then canceled without official notice,¹⁶ and delays and corruption in obtaining registration documents and renewing passports were widespread. Obtaining an exit visa remains particularly problematic, especially for dissidents and activists, as well as for young women and girls. Some reports suggested that authorities gave an instruction not to issue exit visas for young women in order to prevent prostitution by Uzbek nationals abroad.¹⁷
- Under Karimov, Uzbekistan was seen as an obstacle to regional integration, and relations with its immediate neighbors have ranged from bad to worse. During 2016, Uzbekistan continued to have conflicts with neighboring countries, especially Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, over undemarcated borders. Yet less than a month after Mirziyoyev came to power, he took practical steps to improve ties with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, and in doing so, has sparked hopes for a new era of regional cooperation.¹⁸ Friendship delegations have been sent to neighboring countries, and border guards have been withdrawn from disputed areas. After negotiations started on border demarcation with Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan, international crossings for residents in border towns improved significantly.
- Mirziyoyev has been quick in consolidating power. He has shown himself as a man in charge by replacing several officials, district mayors, prosecutors, and police chiefs. He also reappointed several high-level officials who had been removed by Karimov to nearly the exact same positions they held before. For example, Abdulla Aripov was reappointed as deputy prime minister in charge of information and telecommunications, a similar position to the one he left in 2012 amid a corruption scandal involving the Russian telecommunications company MTS and Gulnara Karimova, Karimov's elder daughter.¹⁹
- To strengthen his popularity among the masses, Mirziyoyev launched a "virtual cabinet" online to receive complaints from citizens.²⁰ Many reported to be satisfied with responses to their problems, while some said they were harassed by local officials for their pleas.⁶ Mirziyoyev made it mandatory for state officials to personally receive citizen complaints every business day in the morning. Some Tashkent residency rules, a frequent means of extorting or pressuring migrants who come to the capital, also eased slightly after Karimov's death.²¹ In a small but significant gesture, Mirziyoyev signed a decree giving citizenship to 179 stateless residents, which Karimov had declined to do in the past, leaving many native-born Uzbeks and long-residing residents without proper protection.²² During his interim presidential and campaign speeches, Mirziyoyev openly talked about many problems that existed in Uzbekistan for years but were never spoken of. This, in itself, constitutes a

significant shift in Uzbek politics after many years when it was forbidden to even mention the existence of some social, economic, and legal issues.

Electoral Process

2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00

- For the first time since independence in 1991, Uzbekistan held a presidential election without Islam Karimov on 4 December 2016. Each of the four registered political parties—the Liberal Democratic Party of Uzbekistan (LDPU), People’s Democratic Party of Uzbekistan (PDP), Justice Social Democratic Party, and National Revival Democratic Party (NDPU)—nominated a candidate and participated in the election. Interim president Shavkat Mirziyoyev was nominated by the LDPU, the same party Karimov had represented in his last two elections.²³ Two of the candidates had run against Karimov in the 2015 elections.
- Mirziyoyev won the elections overwhelmingly, garnering 88.61 percent of the vote.²⁴ There were no debates among the candidates during the campaign season. The election programs did not differ significantly among the candidates, and none criticized the current government or Mirziyoyev’s program. When the RFE/RL Uzbek Service asked the NDPU about this, they openly said that the party did not oppose the government.²⁵ In some regions, members of all three parties were reportedly instructed to campaign for Mirziyoyev, not their own party’s candidate.²⁶
- This was the seventh election observed by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe’s Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR), and the first full-scale election mission with systematic observation of election-day proceedings. OSCE/ODIHR’s preliminary conclusions about the election stated that the campaign took place in a highly regulated environment and was characterized by an apparent homogeneity of materials and events by the four candidates. OSCE/ODIHR found that there was no “genuine competition” and voters lacked “genuine choice of political alternatives.”²⁷
- In October, several sources reported that personnel in some hospitals were forced to join the LDPU. The application for membership, which was published in the media, mandated that each month 1 percent of the employee’s salary should be transferred to the LDPU’s local branch.²⁸ Students in Tashkent were sent on vacation for four days during the elections.²⁹ Before the polls, law enforcement personnel undertook a house-to-house search in the capital and several regions to check residents’ documents and registration.³⁰ In November, a month before election day, the authorities stopped issuing passports. While the official statement said the suspension was for technical maintenance of the system, there was speculation that it was for security reasons ahead of the election.³¹
- Then-prime minister Mirziyoyev’s launch of an online “virtual cabinet” in the preelection period to receive complaints from citizens gained wide attention and support from the public, but OSCE/ODIHR concluded that the prime minister’s encouragement of using LDPU branch offices to lodge complaints with the government blurred the line between the state and the political party, in contradiction with paragraph 5.4 of the 1990 OSCE Copenhagen Document.³²
- Possibly frustrated by the monotonous campaigns, an Uzbek internet user created a fake Twitter profile for PDP candidate Khatamjan Ketmonov. With a fake picture depicting Ketmonov with

U.S. president-elect Donald Trump and other heads of state, and tweets of promises about real reforms and changes, this fake profile grew more popular than the candidate's real one.³³ The party had to issue a formal statement to denounce the fake profile.³⁴

Civil Society

2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00

- Only a few small independent human rights organizations remain in Uzbekistan. One of the last American NGOs, National Democratic Institute (NDI), left the country in 2016 after foreseeing no prospects for independent and meaningful work on the ground.³⁵ Throughout 2016, the government continued to target Uzbekistan's scarce remaining human rights activists, subjecting them to torture, sexual assault, forced hospitalization, and persecution of their families. Earlier in 2016, Uktam Pardaev, a human rights activist, was charged with fraud, taking a bribe, and insult. He was kept for eight weeks in pretrial detention where he was severely beaten. Pardaev was sentenced to three years' probation and lives under constant surveillance by security services.³⁶ Dmitry Tikhonov, another human rights activist, was forced to flee the country after years of government harassment for his work documenting forced labor.³⁷ Activist Elena Urlaeva and journalists Malohat Eshonqulova and Timur Karpov were illegally detained and interrogated for 10 hours while they were monitoring cotton fields. Some of their property was confiscated.³⁸
- The International Labor Rights Forum awarded Elena Urlaeva, Dmitry Tikhonov, and Uktam Pardaev with the 2016 Labor Rights Defenders Award, but none of the three awardees could attend the event in Washington, DC, after authorities denied them exit visas to leave the country.³⁹ In March, Urlaeva had been forcibly hospitalized in a psychiatric clinic when she started collecting her documents for the exit visa application. She was kept in the hospital for 87 days. Urlaeva said that authorities initially planned to keep her in the hospital until after the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) meeting that took place June 24–26. However, she was released early in June as a result of a request made by the U.S. and German Embassies in Tashkent and the Uzbek-German Forum for Human Rights in Germany.⁴⁰ Over the past two decades, several Uzbek activists, including Urlaeva and Jamshid Karimov, a nephew of Islam Karimov, have been forcibly placed into psychiatric clinics by security officials. Jamshid Karimov remained in a psychiatric clinic at the end of 2016.⁴¹
- In May, rights activist Ganikhon Mamatkhonov, who was sentenced to five years in prison in 2009 for fraud and bribery, received three additional years to his sentence. Mamatkhonov and human rights activists believe that he was persecuted in retaliation for his work as an activist, but his sentence was initially prolonged in 2014.⁴²
- A disabled journalist, Dildora Boymurodova, was harassed for expressing critical views about Mirziyoyev to RFE/RL. Some 20 women came to her home and shouted insults at her for speaking ill about her *mahalla* (neighborhood council) in Navoiy. The local head of Boymurodova's mahalla threatened to evict her. She has also been harassed by the authorities for picketing in front of the local mayor's office to defend her elderly aunt's rights.⁴³ Later, her home was searched and she was threatened for sending too many complaints to Mirziyoyev's virtual cabinet.
- The late president Karimov was known for his dislike of homosexuality. In February, he called it a "vile phenomenon of Western culture" during a televised meeting of people's deputies of the

Tashkent region in February. Uzbek law, which was carried over into the laws of independent Uzbekistan from the Soviet period, punishes homosexual acts by prison terms of up to three years.⁴⁴ In January, a video that captured several Tashkent city policemen in plain clothes beating a transgender person and his companions at his apartment went viral on Uzbek social media.⁴⁵ Instead of condemning the police violence, many Uzbeks applauded their actions.

- Throughout 2016, state authorities continued to crack down on expressions of Muslim piety. In January, traffic police in Tashkent fined several women for wearing headscarves and threatened them with more punishments if their headscarves were not removed.⁴⁶ In February, in Margilan in the Fergana region, authorities raided bazaars and confiscated ablution tools in restrooms, ordering the administrators of the bazaar to shut off the flow of hot water to prevent people from performing ablution for daily prayers.⁴⁷ In May, parents in a local school in Andijan were forced to write a letter stating that they would not send their children to mosques to attend prayers.⁴⁸ In July, the government banned children from attending mosques during the Eid holiday.⁴⁹ Announcements appeared on public transportation asking people to report to the police if they saw someone speaking against the government, or “intending to engage in terrorist or subversive acts”—a sign of expanding spying efforts on issues of government interest.⁵⁰
- Internet activism is gaining some small momentum in Uzbekistan. Citizens learned in 2016 that widespread tree removal from parks and public squares in Tashkent and capitals of other regions that had started a few years ago was partially the work of Murad Buildings, a successful real estate construction firm. Citizen anger grew on social media, and an online petition to the mayor of Tashkent and relevant government agencies on the petition website Change.org collected nearly 4,000 signatures.⁵¹

Independent Media

2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00

- The number of independent internet news outlets in Uzbekistan is increasing constantly. However, all of them self-censor and lack original reporting. Most outlets copy and paste stories from each other, while others base their stories on unconfirmed sources or rumors circulating on social media.
- Self-censorship is assured through the swift punishment of undesirable information. In September, when several internet news outlets predicted that the chairman of the Senate would become interim president after the death of Islam Karimov, they were ordered by the authorities to remove such information immediately.⁵² In January, two sports journalists, the brothers Zafar and Diyor Imomkhojaev, were fired a day after broadcasting a controversial TV report that exposed corruption and match fixing in national soccer tournaments. Their shows were then pulled from the air.⁵³ Also in January, 12news.uz, a news website that had operated for four years and is believed to belong to the president’s former press secretary, was shut down. Although administrators said it was closed due to technical and financial reasons, speculation held that the site’s demise was due to unapproved content.⁵⁴
- As in previous years, Uzbek officials continued to attempt to demonize the free flow of information online as detrimental to the morality of youth.⁵⁵ In January, the government-sponsored youth movement Kamolot proposed a ban on social media in Uzbekistan. It claimed a ban was necessary to save young people from the evils of extremism and foreign ideas.⁵⁶ In February, however, in

unrelated remarks, President Karimov said that anyone who tries to stop the internet is a fool.⁵⁷ However, authorities continue to block foreign news websites that are critical of the government and harasses independent journalists and bloggers. There have been attempts to establish alternative social media websites specifically for Uzbeks. Recent launches include Davra.uz, a Facebook-style social media site created with state support in June, which offered free internet data to use the platform. Like other such attempts, however, it did not become popular.⁵⁸

- In March, the Muslim Religious Board of Uzbekistan published a book called *Threats on the Internet*. Presentations of the book were held in every region and major cities throughout the country.⁵⁹ In April, the Criminal Code was amended to increase the punishment for disseminating extremist religious materials online from five years to eight years in prison.⁶⁰ In August, Uzbek TV cut out the words “Allohgah Shukur” (Thanks be to God) from an Olympic gold medalist’s statement during an interview after his victory.⁶¹ This is not the first time that national media have censored statements that indicate piety.
- In August, rumors about the hospitalized president spread on the internet for several days in the absence of official confirmation. The authorities reportedly detained more than 10 people who were suspected of spreading rumors about the death of Karimov on social media. In Tashkent region, the authorities forced many people, including schoolchildren and students of technical colleges, to delete the WhatsApp and Telegram apps from their mobile devices to prevent the spread of rumors online about Karimov’s health.⁶²
- On Uzbek social media, mourning for the “Father of the nation” surged during Karimov’s illness and death. An army of online trolls appeared to attack anyone who spoke ill of Karimov. Independent journalists, opposition figures, refugees in exile, and civil society activists, in particular, faced harsh condemnations when they tried to analyze the situation in a neutral tone without eulogizing Karimov.⁶³ The government allegedly uses sophisticated surveillance technology to track the email, social media, and phone conversations of citizens.⁶⁴
- In October, Timur Karpov, a freelance photojournalist for the Fergana News online portal, was detained while on assignment in the Boka district in eastern Uzbekistan. Karpov was reportedly beaten and held in custody for approximately 10 hours. According to Karpov, his detainment was not officially documented as required by law. He also alleged that police deleted all video and photo materials from his mobile phone.⁶⁵
- Two journalists, Edda Schlager of Germany⁶⁶ and Ekaterina Sajneva of Russia,⁶⁷ were deported in November. Both were in Uzbekistan to cover the presidential elections after interim president Mirziyoyev had invited international media to come and report on the campaigns. Because accreditation is almost impossible to obtain for independent foreign journalists, they had entered the country on tourist visas.
- Interim president Mirziyoyev’s virtual cabinet and his proposals for socioeconomic reforms opened up chances for some local media outlets to write and report about certain existing problems, such as local community and currency issues. Although all media outlets self-censor their materials, there were some encouraging signs after the death of Karimov. For example, the popular local internet news site Kun.uz mentioned exiled opposition leader Muhammad Solih in a neutral way as a former contender for president in an article about previous presidential elections in the country.⁶⁸ The same outlet also raised some of the critical points from OSCE/ODIHR’s assessment about the presidential election, such as a lack of media independence, government control over information,⁶⁹ and the need for broader reforms.⁷⁰ The same trend was observed on Gazeta.uz.⁷¹ More interestingly, Kun.uz bravely reported about Freedom House’s *Freedom on the Net 2016* annual report, which names Uzbekistan among the worst countries in the survey in terms of freedom online.⁷² The outlet correctly mentioned Uzbekistan among the worst as stated in Freedom House’s report.

- Social media continues to play a major role in the discussion of Uzbek politics. There are several pages and groups on Facebook, where users both inside the country and abroad talk about current issues in Uzbekistan. Facebook groups dedicated to topics of public interest, such as money and banking issues,⁷³ roads and traffic,⁷⁴ monitoring public works (“public control”),⁷⁵ and general advice,⁷⁶ have large and active followings. While harsh government critique is not visible on these sites, problems are openly discussed, usually with irony and indirect language that avoid naming or holding anyone in particular accountable for problems.

Local Democratic Governance

2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75

- In Uzbekistan, the state appoints key local officials based on their loyalty and ability to fulfill demands from Tashkent. *Mahallas*, or neighborhood councils, are traditional Uzbek community structures that regulate the everyday life and services for community residents. Although the Uzbek government argues that mahallas represent civil society, in reality they have become government instruments to control citizens at the grassroots level.
- Throughout 2016, local officials continued to force Uzbek citizens to work in construction and other government-initiated labor projects during the spring and summer and finally in cotton fields during the harvest season. Local officials are tasked with ensuring that enough residents work in cotton fields to meet government-set production targets. Bureaucrats who shirk their duty to support the national cotton industry risk punishment. In November, a prosecutor in Chinaz district mistakenly revealed the official directive requiring forced cotton picking.⁷⁷
- Despite continuous international advocacy efforts and the change in the president in September, forced labor in the cotton fields continued in 2016. Schoolteachers, medical personnel, students of universities and technical colleges, and employees of other state-funded organizations were mobilized to pick cotton. Students in some regions were kept in the fields until the end of November despite the fact there was no cotton left to pick.⁷⁸
- In July, Uzbekistan was downgraded from the Tier 2 Watch List to Tier 3, the lowest category in the U.S. State Department’s annual human-trafficking report. A Tier 3 designation means that the government of Uzbekistan did not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking and was not making significant efforts to do so. Government-compelled forced labor of adults remained endemic, and a small number of child labor cases were reported as well. The report also noted that the government had “increased its attempts to conceal possible labor violations in cotton fields by aggressively confronting, harassing, and detaining independent monitors attempting to observe and document the harvest.”⁷⁹
- In April, Uzbekistan adopted a “law on parliamentary control” that would give the legislative chamber (Oliy Majlis) and senate, its factions and groups, and the Ombudsman the power to control the legality of acts of government agencies and officials. Despite the law, there has been no visible change or improvement in the practices of government agencies or the work of officials.⁸⁰
- As in previous years, district mayors (*hokims*) continued abusing farmers with verbal insults, physical assaults, and threats of further violence.⁸¹ In April, the provincial head of Andijan insulted the mayor of Izboskan district, calling him a “dog”; the mayor, in turn, called farmers “traitors.”⁸² In May, a former mayor of Andijan, Nurillo Alimov, and his criminal group were sentenced to 18 years

in prison for abuse of power, bribery, and financial crimes.⁸³ A farmer in the Furqat district of Fergana region died of a heart attack after being insulted by the local hokim, Numonjon Nazirov.⁸⁴ Another farmer, whose mother was also insulted by Nazirov, sued the hokim. Nazirov was assessed the minimum fine and apologized.⁸⁵ In July, another person died of a heart attack after being insulted by the hokim of the Nishon district of Qashqadaryo region. He was taken to the hospital directly from the meeting room.⁸⁶ A new hokim in the Qarshi district of Qashqadaryo region began his public service by beating and insulting farmers. He was reported to detain farmers in police isolation cells without court orders and to have beaten the chief doctor of the hospital in Qarshi.⁸⁷ In June, local police and prosecutors assisted a local mayor in beating farmers in buses while monitoring their work in the fields in the Qo'shtepa district of Fergana region.⁸⁸

- Mirziyoyev began his time as interim president by replacing hokims of districts, regions, and chiefs of district police and prosecutors, including five district hokims in Surkhandaryo region and almost all officials in Karakalpakstan. During his initial 20 days in office, Mirziyoyev replaced one official per day on average.⁸⁹
- In October, the Tashkent mayor organized a meeting where more than 5,000 businesspeople from all over the country spoke about their problems. Representatives from the prosecutor general's office, State Tax Committee, Ministry of Justice, and Ministry of Internal Affairs also attended the meeting. Although some participants were optimistic about the opportunity to speak about problems they face, some said there were no actions taken to deal with the problems and that some of the officials, especially a representative from the State Tax Committee, warned the participants of dire consequences for not paying taxes.⁹⁰

Judicial Framework and Independence

2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
6.75	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00

- In 2016, Uzbekistan's judiciary continued to function as a tool of the executive branch, serving the interests of the president and the state instead of protecting individuals' rights and ensuring justice. Defense lawyers require approval from a Ministry of Justice-run body to practice. The presumption of innocence and right to a fair trial are guaranteed by Uzbekistan's constitution yet routinely ignored in detention facilities and courtrooms.⁹¹
- The standard for rule of law was demonstrated in clear fashion by the succession process. After ex-president Karimov's death in September, then-prime minister Mirziyoyev took the interim presidential office in breach of the constitutional provision stating that the Chair of the Senate should take the position if the president were incapacitated. The Constitutional Court, which should have decided in case of confusion or disagreement, did not even comment. In Uzbekistan's independent history, the court has so far decided only 38 cases, most of which concerned insignificant issues.⁹²
- In February, Aramais Avakyan, an Armenian Christian, and four others were convicted of ISIS-related terrorism charges and sentenced to five years in prison in a bizarre case.⁹³ Local officials who allegedly wanted to seize Avakyan's property are believed to be the real plotters behind this case.⁹⁴ Avakyan's lawyer and his relatives, including his wife, were not allowed to attend the court hearing. During the appeal, one of the defendants admitted to lying after undergoing torture during interrogation. In the courtroom, Avakyan showed signs of torture on his body to the gathered human rights activists, the U.S. ambassador to Uzbekistan, and Armenian government officials. Despite the

evidence, the verdict was not repealed. While the case was still in the appeal stage, a state television channel broadcast a show linking Avakyan and four other men to a Russian extremist group called GTA.⁹⁵ However, very little evidence was presented to support the connection between this group and GTA. Avakyan's lawyer, Odil Kabilov, was first stripped of his license and then sentenced to seven years in prison for fraud and bribery, which his family and activists believe is retaliation for defending Avakyan.⁹⁶ He was released in mid-June.⁹⁷

- In January, a businessman from Jizzakh region, Alijon Kamolov, was beaten by police and tax officers after revealing embezzlement of nearly \$8 million by authorities.⁹⁸ In March, bailiffs confiscated household items that belonged to the relatives of independent journalist and activist Malohat Eshonqulova for her unpaid fines.⁹⁹
- In January, it was confirmed that religious figure Akrom Yo'ldoshev had died in prison five years earlier. He allegedly headed the controversial banned Islamic group Akromiya, was arrested after 1999 bombings in Tashkent, and blamed for the 2005 violence in Andijan. His relatives had lost contact with him over a decade ago and were never officially informed of his fate until 2016.¹⁰⁰
- In March, the Cabinet of Ministers adopted advisory ethics rules noting that civil servants must be impartial, respect citizens' dignity, fight corruption in all cases, and not allow conflicts of interest.¹⁰¹ Despite the rules, no significant change has been observed in civil servant behavior. The Law on Internal Affairs, which was adopted in August 2016 while Karimov was alive, was signed in September. For the past 25 years, there was no law to regulate the work of law enforcement personnel. It was allegedly delayed on purpose to give security organs broad unchecked powers and allow them to escape impunity.¹⁰² The new law will go into effect in March 2017.¹⁰³ Similarly, there is still no law to regulate the National Security Service.¹⁰⁴ In October, Mirziyoyev announced further reforms to strengthen the judicial system, including guarantees of the protection of citizen rights and freedoms.¹⁰⁵
- In October, the mayor of Tashkent, Rahmonbek Usmanov, promised to publicize the names of those who apply for divorce in an attempt to keep married couples together. According to Usmanov, names will be broadcast at 11 p.m. every 15 days on the state-owned Tashkent TV and published in the newspaper *Toshkent Oqshomi* ("Evening Tashkent"). The Tashkent prosecutor and police chief also attended the meeting in which Usmanov made the announcement but did not contest his pledge.¹⁰⁶
- In February, two prisoners of conscience died in custody after serving several prolonged sentences. Relatives of the prisoners said that they had been tortured. Both of the prisoners had been convicted of joining Hizb ut-Tahrir, a banned Islamic group. Funerals were conducted under the strict watch of the police.¹⁰⁷
- Earlier in 2016, police beat a pregnant woman in a Tashkent bazaar. When she appealed, she was charged with defamation, libel, and not following police orders.¹⁰⁸ In April, four former policemen in Qashqadaryo region who were convicted of torturing detainees, including sodomizing them, were released through an amnesty.¹⁰⁹ In the same month, a video showing a Tashkent policeman kicking a mentally ill woman in public spread on social media. Later, it was reported that the perpetrator had been fired due to publicity around the case.¹¹⁰

Corruption

2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
6.50	6.50	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	7.00

- Corruption is systemic in Uzbekistan, which ranks 156th in Transparency International's 2016 Corruption Perceptions Index, with a score of 21 on a 100-point scale.¹¹¹ Fallout from the Gulnara Karimova corruption scandal that began in 2012 continued throughout 2016. In April, Nurmuhhammad Sodiqov, also known as "Nurik," a personal accountant of Karimova, was sentenced to 18 years in prison for financial crimes.¹¹² The Dutch telecom company VimpelCom paid the U.S. \$795 million to resolve investigations into a bribery scheme in Uzbekistan. It admitted to a conspiracy to pay more than \$114 million between 2006 and 2012 to an unnamed Uzbek official to enter the Uzbek market. Documents indicate that the official in the case was Gulnara Karimova.¹¹³ In August, the Russian telecom company MTS left Uzbekistan amid fallout from the case.¹¹⁴
- In addition to the VimpelCom fine, the U.S. Justice Department is seeking the forfeiture of another \$850 million held in various bank accounts across Europe that it considers the proceeds of bribery.¹¹⁵ The Uzbek government has claimed the assets, and has entered into negotiations with the United States that have been extended several times and continued at the end of the year after more than nine months. A final decision is expected in early 2017. Uzbek civil society activists abroad have launched advocacy efforts to stop the repatriation of the money to the Uzbek state, requesting that it be used for victims of corruption and human rights violations and to support civil society work for the development of Uzbekistan.¹¹⁶ Meanwhile, Gulnara's whereabouts remained a mystery during the year. Gulnara Karimova's son, also named Islam Karimov, said the National Security Service was responsible for locking her up and for refusing to provide access to or information about her.¹¹⁷
- After Islam Karimov's official visit to Russia in April 2016, several GM Uzbekistan executives, including director general Tohirjon Jalilov, were detained on charges of money laundering, embezzlement, and fraud. Vehicles meant for export to Russia were reportedly "re-exported" back to Uzbekistan to be sold for higher prices.¹¹⁸
- In 2016, the authorities uncovered a vast pyramid scheme allegedly organized by businessman Ahmadboy Tursunbayev, who reportedly convinced individuals to hand over their money with promises that they would receive a minimum 100 percent return per year. Apparently, it took several years for the illegal scheme to be exposed by authorities, and rumors held that it was backed by officials. Reportedly, police seized Uzbek *so'm* in the amount of \$2.1 million and another \$12 million in U.S. currency swindled in the scheme that left 40,000 victims.¹¹⁹
- In April, an article revealing corruption schemes in admissions at the Tashkent State Institute of Economics appeared on centralasia.ru, apparently authored by the former rector of the institute. Despite the allegations, there has been no investigation or change at the institute.¹²⁰ According to a recent survey conducted by an anonymous group on social media, Uzbeks consider the Ministry of Internal Affairs, prosecutors' offices, and courts to be equally corrupt. When asked which government agencies are most corrupt, respondents pointed to passport registration, exit visa offices, and traffic police.¹²¹
- Systematic petty corruption is prevalent in all government services. College students in Tashkent reported endless chains of extortion and "forever absent" (but still graduating) students.¹²² Several cases of officials being charged for bribery and convicted have been reported;¹²³ however, it is hard to believe real motives behind such cases since prosecution of bribery has been selectively applied. Amid the euphoria of Mirziyoyev's online "virtual cabinet" for public complaints, some people expressed their willingness to assist in exposing corrupt officials.¹²⁴ But many remain doubtful that virtual cabinets can solve corruption because of the extent of the problem and the questionable sincerity of the new government to combat it.

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