

# Uzbekistan

**Population:** 26,400,000

**GNI/Capita:** \$420

**Life Expectancy:** 67

**Religious Groups:** Muslim [mostly Sunni] (88 percent), Eastern Orthodox (9 percent), other (3 percent)

**Ethnic Groups:** Uzbek (80 percent), Russian (6 percent), Tajik (5 percent), Kazakh (3 percent), other (6 percent)

**Capital:** Tashkent

**Political Rights:** 7

**Civil Liberties:** 7 ↓

**Status:** Not Free

**Ratings Change:** Uzbekistan's civil liberties rating declined from 6 to 7 due to the government's violent response to a popular uprising in May and a subsequent crackdown against independent media and the civil society sector.

## Ratings Timeline (Political Rights, Civil Liberties, Status)

| Year Under Review: | 1996   | 1997   | 1998   | 1999   | 2000   | 2001   | 2002   | 2003   | 2004   | 2005   |
|--------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| <b>Ratings:</b>    | 7,6,NF | 7,6,NF | 7,6,NF | 7,6,NF | 7,6,NF | 7,6,NF | 7,6,NF | 7,6,NF | 7,6,NF | 7,7,NF |

## Overview:

Uzbekistan's poor human rights record deteriorated further in 2005 following the government's violent suppression of a mass public demonstration in the city of Andijon in May in which hundreds of largely unarmed civilians were reportedly killed. The aftermath of the uprising saw an intensified crackdown by the government of President Islam Karimov against independent media, civil society organizations, and human rights activists, particularly those with ties to Western governments or groups regarded as posing a potential challenge to the regime. On the international front, the Andijon events sparked condemnation from the European Union (EU), brought support from Russia and China, and further strained relations with the United States and neighboring Kyrgyzstan.

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Located along the ancient trade route of the famous Silk Road, Uzbekistan was incorporated into Russia by the late 1800s. The Uzbekistan Soviet Socialist Republic was established in 1924, and its eastern region was detached and made the separate Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic five years later.

On December 29, 1991, more than 98 percent of the country's electorate approved a popular referendum on Uzbekistan's independence. In a parallel vote, Islam Karimov, former Communist Party leader and chairman of the People's Democratic Party (PDP), the successor to the Communist Party, was elected president with a reported 88 percent of the vote. The only independent candidate to challenge him, Erk (Freedom) Party leader Mohammed Solih, charged election fraud. Solih fled the country two years later, and his party was forced underground. The opposition group Birlik (Unity) was barred from contesting the election and was later refused

legal registration as a political party, and the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) and other religious-based groups were banned entirely. Only pro-government parties were allowed to compete in elections to the first post-Soviet legislature in December 1994 and January 1995. A February 1995 national referendum to extend Karimov's first five-year term in office until the year 2000 was allegedly approved by 99 percent of the country's voters.

The government's repression of members of the political opposition and of Muslims not affiliated with state-sanctioned religious institutions intensified following a series of deadly bombings in Tashkent in February 1999. The authorities blamed the attacks, which they described as an assassination attempt against Karimov, on the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), an armed group seeking the overthrow of Uzbekistan's secular government and its replacement with an Islamic state.

Of the five parties that competed in the December 1999 parliamentary election, which was strongly criticized by international election observers, all supported the president and differed little in their political platforms. In the January 2000 presidential poll, Karimov defeated his only opponent, Marxist history professor Abdulhasiz Dzhalalov, with 92 percent of the vote. The government refused to register genuinely independent opposition parties or permit their members to stand as candidates.

In August 2000, the IMU engaged in armed clashes with government troops. As part of its declared effort to prevent renewed invasions by the IMU, Uzbekistan subsequently placed land mines along portions of its borders with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which led to protests by both governments and reports of accidental deaths of civilians in the region.

After the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C., Uzbekistan became a key strategic ally of the United States in its military operations in Afghanistan. Tashkent's decision to permit the deployment of U.S. troops on its territory for search-and-rescue and humanitarian operations was widely seen as an effort to obtain various concessions from the West, including economic assistance, security guarantees, and reduced criticism of its poor human rights record. In March 2002, the United States and Uzbekistan signed the Declaration on the Strategic Partnership and Cooperation Framework, in which both countries agreed to cooperate on economic, legal, humanitarian, and nuclear proliferation matters. Uzbekistan's continued collaboration with the U.S.-led antiterrorism campaign led to American commitments of financial assistance in exchange for promises from Karimov of political reforms.

The fragile state of Uzbekistan's political stability was highlighted by a series of suicide bomb attacks and related violent clashes in late March and early April 2004 in Bukhara and Tashkent, in which some 50 people lost their lives. Most media outlets provided limited coverage of the events and focused almost exclusively on official government accounts, which led to widespread rumors about the identities and motives of the attackers. The fact that police appeared to be the main targets of the violence prompted speculation that the bombings were acts of revenge carried out by relatives of those imprisoned for alleged religious extremism. The authorities maintained that the bombings were the work of radical international Islamist groups—singling out the banned Hizb-ut-Tahrir (Islamic Party of Liberation) and the IMU—and dismissed charges of any links between the violence and the government's repressive political and economic policies. Meanwhile, a previously unknown Islamist group called Jamoat, a successor to the IMU, claimed responsibility.

In the days following the attacks, law enforcement agencies detained and arrested hundreds of alleged suspects and increased security measures in the capital and other large cities.

According to Human Rights Watch, they targeted Muslims practicing outside of state-controlled mosques, including women. Dozens of defendants were convicted in the second half of the year for their alleged roles in the attacks, and all received lengthy prison sentences in trials that did not meet basic standards of due process. On July 30, several people were killed when suicide bombers struck again, in coordinated attacks on the U.S. and Israeli Embassies and the office of Uzbekistan's prosecutor-general. Several Islamic groups, including the IMU and Jamoat, claimed responsibility.

Elections for the lower house of a new bicameral parliament were held on December 26, 2004. Only the country's five legal parties, all of which are considered to be pro-presidential, were granted registration to participate in the elections. Several opposition groups, including Erk and Birlik, announced in November that they would boycott the vote after being unable to register candidates. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), which sent only a limited observer mission over concerns regarding the poor electoral law framework and lack of registered opposition parties, criticized the vote as falling "significantly short of OSCE commitments and other international standards for democratic elections."

The city of Andijon in Uzbekistan's Ferghana Valley, an area that has suffered both from the government's continued repression of Islamic groups and from high poverty and unemployment, was the scene of a violent crackdown by armed forces against a popular uprising in May 2005. The events took place against the backdrop of the trial of 23 local businessmen charged with involvement in a banned Islamic extremist group, accusations that the defendants denied. Some observers of the case maintained that the trial was actually motivated by the government's concern over the economic success and growing power of the 23 defendants, all wealthy businessmen. On May 10 and 11, family members and supporters of the businessmen staged a peaceful demonstration in anticipation of the trial verdict. During the next two days, the situation turned violent, as armed supporters of the businessmen attacked a police station and army barracks. They stormed the prison, freeing inmates—including the 23 businessmen—and captured the local government administration building. Thousands of local residents, among them women and children, subsequently gathered in the center of Andijon, where people were making speeches on political and economic issues, including anti-government statements.

Government forces responded by opening fire on the demonstrators and storming the occupied building. The authorities moved to cut off all communications with Andijon and expel foreign journalists from the town. The unrest spread quickly to the eastern border town of Karasu on May 14, when protestors demanded that a border crossing to Kyrgyzstan closed by the Uzbek authorities two years earlier be reopened to allow for cross-border trade. Angry crowds chased out the local authorities before government forces reclaimed control of the town five days later.

By May 14, the authorities had regained control of Andijon and driven the gunmen out of the local government administration building. Scores of people were subsequently arrested in connection with the uprising. Although the authorities maintained that the protestors were the first to open fire, eyewitness accounts reported that the armed forces began shooting indiscriminately, including at people who were fleeing from the scene or were already injured. Official figures reported that some 180 people had been killed, a number disputed by unofficial sources that put the death toll at nearly 800, most of them unarmed civilians. The government accused Islamic extremists of orchestrating the demonstrations, though most of the protestors appeared to be motivated by economic and social grievances. On November 14, a Tashkent court sentenced 15 alleged organizers of the violence in Andijon, including three Kyrgyz nationals, to between 14 and 20 years in prison.

Reaction from the international community to the events in Andijon were mixed. While the European Union (EU) condemned the “excessive, disproportionate, and indiscriminate use of force” in Andijon, China strongly supported the Uzbek government actions and Russia alleged widespread terrorist involvement in the unrest. Meanwhile, Karimov repeatedly rejected calls from the United Nations, EU, OSCE, and United States for an independent international inquiry into the violence. Instead, an Uzbek parliamentary commission that was established to investigate the events confirmed the official account of the events.

At the height of the unrest, hundreds of Uzbeks fled across the border to Kyrgyzstan, seeking international protection and finding shelter in hastily constructed refugee camps. Uzbekistan repeatedly sought the extradition of large numbers of refugees, claiming that there were terrorists and criminals among them. In June, the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) condemned the deportation of four Uzbek men from Kyrgyzstan to Uzbekistan—one of whom was reportedly subsequently tortured to death—and called on Kyrgyzstan not to agree to any further extradition requests from Uzbekistan. In July, the UNHCR transferred more than 400 Uzbek refugees to Romania, a move that the Uzbek government harshly criticized. Other refugees were subsequently accepted by other foreign countries, some remained in refugee camps or detention centers in Kyrgyzstan, and some were believed to be in hiding in other areas of Kyrgyzstan.

In the wake of the violence in Andijon, the government of Uzbekistan intensified its already harsh repression of dissent and opposition to the regime. The authorities targeted foreign media outlets, which they accused of producing biased and slanderous reports about the Andijon events, and civil society groups. Among the media representatives facing arrest or deportation were employees of the international media organization Internews, a journalist for the Norwegian religious freedom group Forum 18, and a correspondent for the Uzbek language service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. The government also engaged in a crackdown against the country’s independent nongovernmental organization (NGO) sector, leaving it on the verge of being eliminated entirely. The government also renewed its attacks on those suspected of links with Islamic groups, reportedly arresting and detaining hundreds.

On the international front, the repercussions of Andijon led to a notable deterioration in Uzbek-U.S. relations. Washington’s call for an independent investigation into the unrest in Andijon, coupled with U.S. assistance in evacuating Uzbek refugees from Kyrgyzstan, appeared to have led the Uzbek government to request that the United States withdraw its troops from the Karshi-Khanabad air base—which Washington had been using since 2001 to support military operations in Afghanistan—by the end of January 2006. Karimov denied a direct link between the events in Andijon and the decision to ask the United States to leave Uzbekistan, claiming that it was the result instead of inadequate financial compensation by the United States for use of the air base.

Relations with Kyrgyzstan, already soured by the refusal of the Kyrgyz government to extradite most of the Uzbek refugees fleeing Andijon, were further damaged by Uzbek assertions that extremist groups involved in the Andijon events had been trained in Kyrgyzstan, charges that the Kyrgyz authorities strongly denied. In September, the EU imposed sanctions against Uzbekistan for its refusal to permit an independent inquiry into the violence in Andijon. Meanwhile Tashkent’s ties with China and Russia—both of which dismissed the need for an independent inquiry—were strengthened during the year.

## **Political Rights and Civil Liberties:**

Citizens of Uzbekistan cannot change their government democratically. President Islam Karimov and the executive branch dominate the legislature and judiciary, and the government severely represses all political opposition. The national legislature largely confirms decisions made by the executive branch. The 1994-1995, 1999, and 2004 parliamentary elections and the 2000 presidential poll, in which only pro-government candidates could participate, were neither free nor fair. In a January 2002 nationwide referendum, 91 percent of voters allegedly approved amending the country's constitution to extend the presidential term from five to seven years. Karimov's current term in office will therefore end in 2007, rather than in 2005.

In a parallel vote, 93 percent of voters officially supported replacing the country's 250-member, single-chamber legislature with a bicameral parliament consisting of a 120-seat lower house (with members elected by popular vote for five-year terms) and a 100-member upper house, or Senate (with 84 members elected by regional councils and 16 appointed by the president). Independent observers raised serious doubts about the validity of the referendum, citing the presence of police in polling stations and the fact that some people had been able to vote on behalf of several individuals. In April 2003, the parliament adopted legislation providing former presidents immunity from prosecution and lifelong, state-funded security for them and their immediate family.

Parties based on ethnic or religious affiliations and those advocating subversion of the constitutional order are prohibited. Only five parties, all pro-government, have been registered, and no genuine political opposition groups function legally or participate in the government. Members of unregistered secular opposition groups, including Birlik and Erk, are subject to discrimination, and many are in exile abroad. In October, the authorities arrested Sanjar Umarov, the head of the Sunshine Uzbekistan opposition movement and a prominent businessman, on charges of embezzlement. The group, which was formed earlier in the year, had been unusually critical of the authorities, which led to the speculation that it had been established with the support of the government.

Corruption is reportedly widespread throughout various levels of government, with bribery a common practice to obtain lucrative positions. Uzbekistan was ranked 137 out of 159 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2005 Corruption Perceptions Index.

The state imposes strict limits on freedom of speech and the press, particularly with regard to reports on the government and Karimov. The government controls major media outlets and newspaper printing and distribution facilities. The country's private broadcast and print media outlets generally avoid political issues, are largely regional in scope, and suffer from administrative and financial constraints. Although official censorship was abolished in May 2002, the responsibility for censoring material was transferred to newspaper editors, who were warned by the State Press Committee that they would be held personally accountable for what they publish. Self-censorship is widespread, while the few journalists who dare to produce probing or critical reports of the authorities face harassment, physical violence, and closure of their media outlets. The government has blocked a number of non-Uzbek news websites, and access to controversial information on the internet remains extremely difficult.

In the aftermath of the violence in Andijon in May 2005, the authorities intensified their attacks on independent and foreign media representatives still operating in the country. In August, two employees of Internews, an international media training and support organization, were convicted of illegally producing materials; the following month, a court in Tashkent

ordered Internews to shut down its office in Uzbekistan. The BBC closed its bureau in Tashkent in October following continued government harassment since its reporting on the violence in Andijon. Igor Rotar, a journalist with the Norwegian religious freedom organization Forum 18, was deported from Uzbekistan in August. In the same month, Nosir Zokirov, a Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty correspondent, was sentenced to six months in prison for slandering a state official. Journalist Sobirjon Yakubov, of the weekly *Hurriyat*, was imprisoned for “undermining the constitutional order” and religious extremism. His colleagues maintain that the charges were politicized and that Yakubov was being punished for advocating democratic reforms in an article published in March. Meanwhile, the country’s state media produced reports about the Andijon unrest that supported the official government version.

The government permits the existence of certain mainstream religions, including approved Muslim and Jewish communities, as well as the Russian Orthodox Church and some other Christian denominations. However, the activities of other congregations are restricted through legislation that requires all religious groups to comply with burdensome state registration criteria. Involvement in religious activities carried out by unregistered groups is punishable by fines or imprisonment, and meetings held by such groups have been raided and participants interrogated and arrested. The 1998 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations prohibits activities including proselytizing and private religious instruction, and requires groups to obtain a license to publish or distribute materials.

The government exercises strict control over Islamic worship, including the content of imams’ sermons, and is suspicious and intolerant of followers of Muslim organizations not sanctioned by the state. Many members of such groups have been arrested or imprisoned on charges of anti-constitutional activities, often under the pretext of the government’s fight against militant Islamists. Muslim prisoners are frequently tortured for their religious convictions or to compel them to renounce their beliefs. Authorities have targeted members of the banned Hizb-ut-Tahrir, an international movement calling for the creation of an Islamic caliphate throughout the Muslim world. Suspected members have been forced to give confessions under torture, and their family members have been subjected to interrogation, arrest, and extortion. According to Forum 18, the authorities followed the wave of 2004 suicide bomb attacks with a new crackdown against religious Muslims, as well as believers of other faiths, including Protestants and Jehovah’s Witnesses. This policy of repression accelerated after the May 2005 killings in Andijon; Human Rights Watch documented 194 religious believers convicted by November 2005.

The government limits academic freedom, according to the 2005 U.S. State Department’s human rights report. While professors generally are required to have their lectures pre-approved, implementation of this restriction varies. Nevertheless, university professors reportedly practice self-censorship. Corruption is widespread throughout the educational system, with bribes commonly required to gain entrance into exclusive universities and to obtain good grades.

Open and free private discussion is limited by the *mahalla* committees, traditional neighborhood organizations that the government has turned into an official system for public surveillance and control. According to Human Rights Watch, mahalla committee members went door to door to warn residents not to speak with journalists or foreigners about the 2005 Andijon killings.

Freedom of association is restricted. Unregistered NGOs, including the Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan (HRSU), do not exist as legal entities and can face difficulties operating. In the wake of the unrest in Andijon, the government intensified its crackdown against civil

society organizations and human rights activists in order to suppress any possible challenges to the regime. The Uzbek authorities have been particularly interested in closing NGOs that receive funding or other support from the United States and Western Europe—groups that the Karimov regime associates with the popular protests that led to the recent overthrow of the leaders of Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan. According to a November 2005 report by the Soros Foundation’s Open Society Institute, “the authorities took decisive and direct measures to eliminate any and all NGOs, regardless of their loyalty to the regime or their missions” and “the independent local NGO sector in Uzbekistan is on the verge of being wiped out.” NGOs have reportedly been forced to report to the Justice Ministry to close down “voluntarily” or face legal action and more repressive measures. During the months of August and September alone, some 200 domestic NGOs, including branches of foreign-based groups, were reportedly forcibly closed by the authorities. In September 2005, the activities of the U.S.-based International Research & Exchanges Board (IREX) were suspended by court order for six months on charges that the board had engaged in activities that did not comply with its charter.

At the end of May, two unknown men beat Sotvoldi Abdullaev of the Uzbek branch of the International Human Rights Society; he suffered a severe concussion. In August, Yelena Urlyayeva, a prominent human rights activist, was arrested on charges of trying to organize an antigovernment protest; she was sentenced to a psychiatric hospital. Mukhtabar Tojibaeva, the head of a human rights organization based in the Ferghana Valley, was arrested in October as she was preparing to leave for a human rights conference in Ireland; she was a strong critic of the killings in Andijon.

Despite constitutional provisions for freedom of assembly, the authorities severely restrict this right in practice. Law enforcement officials have used force to prevent demonstrations against human rights abuses in the country, and participants have been harassed, detained, and arrested. In May, the government cracked down harshly on demonstrators in the town of Andijon. Troops opened fire indiscriminately on the protestors, reportedly killing hundreds, most of whom were unarmed civilians. The Council of the Federation of Trade Unions is dependent on the state, and no genuinely independent union structures exist. Organized strikes are extremely rare.

The judiciary is subservient to the president, who appoints all judges and can remove them from office at any time. Police routinely physically abuse and torture suspects to extract confessions, which are accepted by judges as evidence and often serve as the basis for convictions. Law enforcement authorities reportedly often plant narcotics, weapons, and banned religious literature on suspected members of Islamic groups or political opponents to justify their arrest. According to Human Rights Watch, the trial of those accused of organizing the May 2005 unrest in Andijon “violated international fair-trial standards.” The similarity of the confessions of the defendants—all of whom pleaded guilty—and their consistency with the prosecutor’s indictment raised serious concerns that they had been coerced or tortured into confessing. The defendants were denied access to effective legal counsel, and the prosecution failed to present credible evidence in support of the indictment.

Prisons suffer from severe overcrowding and shortages of food and medicine. The Jaslyk prison camp is notorious for its extremely harsh conditions and ill-treatment of religious prisoners. Inmates, particularly those sentenced for their religious beliefs, are often subjected to ill-treatment or torture, and Human Rights Watch has documented a number of torture-related deaths in custody during the last few years.

Although racial and ethnic discrimination is prohibited by law, the belief that senior positions in government and business are reserved for ethnic Uzbeks is widespread.

The government severely limits freedom of movement and residence within the country and across borders. There are restrictions on foreign travel, including the use of a system of exit visas, which are often issued selectively. Permission is required from local authorities to move to a new city, and the authorities rarely grant permission to those wishing to move to Tashkent. Bribes are often paid to obtain the necessary registration documents.

Widespread corruption, bureaucratic regulations, and the government's tight control over the economy limit most citizens' equality of opportunity. There has been little reform in the country's large and predominantly centrally planned agricultural sector, in which the state sets high production quotas and low purchase prices for farmers. A series of government regulations and decrees over the last few years have placed increasing restrictions on market traders and their ability to continue to operate.

Women's educational and professional prospects are restricted by traditional cultural and religious norms and by ongoing economic difficulties throughout the country. Victims of domestic violence are discouraged from pressing charges against their perpetrators, who rarely face criminal prosecution. The trafficking of women abroad for prostitution remains a serious problem. According to a 2005 investigation conducted by journalists from the London-based Institute for War and Peace Reporting, women have been forced to undergo hysterectomies and contraception implants as the result of a secret order from the Health Ministry to reduce the birth rate among rural women. Local authorities frequently use schoolchildren as free or cheap labor to harvest cotton; many children work long hours under unhealthy conditions, often receiving inadequate food and water.