

Uzbekistan 2023 Human Rights Report

Executive Summary

There were no significant changes in the human rights situation in Uzbekistan during the year.

Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: arbitrary or unlawful killings, including extrajudicial killings; torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment by the government; involuntary or coercive psychological practices; arbitrary arrest or detention; serious problems with the independence of the judiciary; political prisoners or detainees; transnational repression against individuals in another country; arbitrary or unlawful interference with privacy; punishment of family members for alleged offenses by a relative; serious restrictions on freedom of expression and media freedom, including violence or threats of violence against journalists, unjustified arrests or prosecutions of journalists, censorship, or enforcement of or threat to enforce criminal libel and other laws to limit expression; serious restrictions on internet freedom; substantial interference with the freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of association, including overly restrictive laws on the organization, funding, or operation of nongovernmental and civil society organizations; restrictions on freedom of movement and on the right to leave the country; inability of citizens to change their government peacefully through free and

fair elections; serious and unreasonable restrictions on political participation; serious government corruption; serious government restrictions on or harassment of domestic and international human rights organizations; extensive gender-based violence, including domestic or intimate partner violence, sexual violence, child, early, and forced marriage; the enforcement of laws criminalizing consensual same-sex sexual conduct between men; crimes involving violence or threats of violence targeting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or intersex persons; and prohibiting independent trade unions or significant or systematic restrictions on workers' freedom of association.

Although the government took some credible steps to identify and punish some officials who may have committed human rights abuses, weak rule of law and a lack of transparency allowed human rights abuses to continue.

Section 1. Respect for the Integrity of the Person

a. Arbitrary Deprivation of Life and Other Unlawful or Politically Motivated Killings

There were reports the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings, including extrajudicial killings, during the year.

Nongovernmental organizations (NGO) Human Rights Watch and Freedom for Eurasia alleged the government used excessive, lethal force in its

response to the July 2022 Karakalpakstan protests, up to and including extrajudicial killings. The government had not fully responded to these allegations, released the results of its own investigation into the protests, or held security forces accountable for excessive use of force or extrajudicial killings.

In October, two Border Guards used lethal force to kill two men in the Vodil district of the Fergana region. According to an official press release, the two guards were compelled to use lethal force after a drunken, unruly crowd protesting the detention of the two men failed to respond to their warning shots. But *Ozodlik* and activists reported the two men were held down and shot in the back of the head after they protested the Border Guards' demand of payment to avoid arrest for narcotics the Border Guards allegedly planted in their vehicles. Investigations continued at year's end.

In May, the Ministry of Internal Affairs reported a man, age 21, arrested for drug possession died after jumping from a window in a pretrial detention facility. Following a public outcry, the government opened an investigation, which continued at year's end.

Courts sentenced 12 police officers in June for the March 2022 beating death of detainee Sanjarbek Mamajonov in pretrial detention. All but one of the officers, including the head of the pretrial detention facility, received sentences of three to four years in prison. An official responsible for overseeing Mamajonov's condition received three years' house arrest.

The Ministry of Internal Affairs announced in June the arrest of two Tashkent region police officers for beating a detainee to death in a Tashkent pretrial detention facility. A forensic examination confirmed bodily injuries. Five employees of the district police department were fired. The case was awaiting trial at year's end.

Social media reported the death of a detainee in police custody in Tashkent in August. The Ministry of Internal Affairs claimed the detainee fell ill and died while in custody, but the detainee's family said he was tortured. The Prosecutor General's Office opened a criminal investigation at the recommendation of the ombudsman. The results of the investigation were pending at year's end.

b. Disappearance

There were no reports of disappearances by or on behalf of government authorities.

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, and Other Related Abuses

The constitution and law prohibited torture, but there were credible reports that government officials employed the practice. The law banned the use of evidence obtained by torture in court proceedings. The law included liability for the use of torture and other inhuman or degrading treatment.

Human rights NGOs claimed that although the practice of coordinated, top-down orders to torture specific detainees had ceased, torture in pretrial detention remained commonplace and could have increased. Most abuse reportedly occurred during interrogations, where police used physical abuse such as beatings and psychological coercion to gain confessions. Under the country's legal system, psychological pressure and threats were not considered abuse or mistreatment.

Human rights activists reported a prolonged campaign of suppression of political discourse by security service members in Karakalpakstan that included the use of torture and psychological pressure. One activist reported being beaten, electrocuted, and threatened over the course of eight hours in April 2021 because of his contact with Aman Sagidullaev, leader of the Alga Karakalpakstan separatist movement. Human rights NGO Freedom for Eurasia reported a widespread use of torture during interrogations of those arrested for their participation in the July 2022 Karakalpakstan protests.

The Supreme Court convicted two Ministry of Internal Affairs officers in June for tortures committed during the investigations into the July 2022 Karakalpakstan protests. The Court sentenced the officers to seven years in prison. The Court did not release the officers' full names and further details of their crimes.

Human rights NGO Ezgulik reported the torture of detainee Hasanboy

Abdunabiev in pretrial detention after Abdunabiev was alleged to have entered the country with 38 pills of controlled substances. Ezgulik reported that members of the Tax Committee, Internal Affairs Ministry, and other law enforcement officers at the border crossing beat him and used a stun gun to get him to confess to being a drug dealer. Photos taken after the incident appeared to corroborate these claims. A member of the ombudsman's anti-torture committee visited Abdunabiev and confirmed that torture had been committed. Ombudswoman for Human Rights Feruza Eshmatova confirmed the finding and said the case had been referred to the Prosecutor General's Office, which was investigating the allegations at year's end.

Blogger Abdukodir Muminov reported being tortured during interrogations while in pretrial detention, after being arrested for fraud and extortion. The Ombudsman's Office did not investigate the allegations, despite their being widely reported in the media.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Prison conditions were generally not harsh or life-threatening. Reports from activists and former prisoners indicated that religious prisoners and women were especially vulnerable to abuse. Human rights activists reported that prison conditions had generally improved over the last five years, including better hygiene and more space for exercise.

Abusive Physical Conditions: Activists reported that inadequate heating in

the winter months remained a problem, and that due to a lack of uniforms, prisoners' family members had to purchase them. Activists reported that drinking water was scarce, particularly in Karakalpakstan, Khorezm, and Qarshi, the quality of the food varied among the prison facilities, the medical care in the prison system was very poor, and working conditions were harsh.

In its 2023 submission to the United Nations Universal Periodic Review for Uzbekistan, NGO International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR) reported that those convicted of crimes against the state and religious crimes faced increased risk in prisons. The IPHR reported former prisoners and their relatives alleged beatings and sexual abuse by prison guards and other inmates. The IPHR noted that devout Muslims were singled out for rape and sexual abuse. The IPHR reported inadequate care for pregnant prisoners at Zangiota District Women's Prison Colony. The NGO reported that women were forced to do heavy work to buy insufficient food until they gave birth, and the prison did not allow maternity leave. The IPHR reported that several women claimed they were pressured to terminate their pregnancies, and that HIV and hepatitis C were endemic to the prison.

Administration: The Office of the Ombudsman and the Prosecutor General's Office could investigate complaints from detainees and the public. The Ombudsman's Office reported that from January-October it made 452 monitoring visits and received 147 complaints of human rights violations from prisoners. It reported having submitted 17 of these cases to "relevant

ministries” for review.

Independent Monitoring: The International Committee of the Red Cross had not visited detainees since 2013 after being barred from conducting prison monitoring. Independent human rights NGO Ezgulik reported the Ombudsman’s Office had refused to allow the NGO to participate in prison monitoring visits since July 2022, although the legislature had mandated Ezgulik be a part of the country’s prison monitoring group.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The constitution and law prohibited arbitrary arrest and detention and provided for the right of any person to challenge the lawfulness of their arrest or detention in court. The government did not always observe these requirements.

Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees

By law a judge was required to review any decision to arrest accused individuals or suspects. Detention without formal charges was limited to 48 hours, although a prosecutor could request that a judge extend detention an additional 48 hours, after which the person had to be charged or released. Judges typically granted such requests, and the judge who issued such an extension was often the same one who presided over the trial, which created incentives to cover up violations. The arresting authority was

required to notify a relative of a detainee of the detention and to question the detainee within 24 hours of arrest.

Once authorities filed charges, suspects could be held in pretrial detention for up to three months while investigations proceeded. The law permitted an extension of the investigation period for as many as seven months. According to human rights advocates, authorities typically held suspects longer than the allowable period of detention.

The law provided for detainees to be released upon bail pending trial. While judges generally granted requests for bail hearings, they typically granted detention requests from prosecutors.

Defendants had the right to legal counsel from the time of arrest. State-appointed attorneys were available for those who did not hire private counsel. The country had relatively few defense lawyers. Officials did not always respect the right to counsel and some arrestees reported being forced to sign written statements declining the right. Authorities' selective intimidation and disbarment of defense lawyers produced a chilling effect that also compromised detainees' access to legal counsel.

Some defense lawyers noted difficulty in accessing clients, the lack of private meeting spaces at law enforcement facilities to meet with detainees, and the lack of access to information regarding their clients' cases.

The law required authorities at pretrial detention facilities to arrange a

meeting between a detainee and a representative from the Human Rights Ombudsman's Office upon the detainee's request. Officials allowed detainees in prison facilities to submit confidential complaints to the Ombudsman's Office and the Prosecutor General's Office.

The law provided for the National Guard, the Prosecutor General's Office, and police to electronically surveil attorneys' communications with clients. With the consent of the prosecutor or an investigator, officials (including prosecutors, investigators, and other law enforcement agencies) could have access to conversations, messages, and other forms of information conveyed between a defendant and their lawyer by telephone and other telecommunications devices. Officials could also record these conversations. In some cases, authorities detained suspects and required them to sign nondisclosure agreements that prevented them from discussing their cases publicly.

Members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transexual, queer, or intersex (LGBTQI+) community reported being arrested and then released, or being threatened with arrest by law enforcement officers unless they paid a bribe.

Arbitrary Arrest: There were reports of arbitrary arrest. Activists reported that Kalbike Sidavlaeva was arrested for 15 days in August 2022 after contacting Karakalpak separatist leader Aman Sagidullayev. She had contacted Sagidullayev while trying to find the whereabouts of her husband, political prisoner Saadatdin Reymov, who had also been jailed that month.

Activists reported that in September authorities arbitrarily prolonged the sentence of Sidavlaeva's son Siidatdin Saadatdin Reymov, who had been jailed for witness tampering in his father's case. Sidavlaeva claimed this prolongation was in retaliation for her meeting with foreign diplomats to discuss her husband and son's cases.

Pretrial Detention: Authorities did not provide access to a court for detainees to challenge the length or validity of pretrial detention, despite the law granting detainees the right to do so. Even when authorities did not file charges, police and prosecutors frequently sought to evade restrictions on the length of time that persons could be held without charges. No data were available on the approximate percentage of the prison and detainee population in pretrial detention, the average length of time held, or whether the length of pretrial detention frequently equaled or exceeded the maximum sentence if convicted of offenses charged.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

While the constitution provided for an independent judiciary, the government generally did not respect judicial independence and impartiality. The Prosecutor General's Office and other law enforcement bodies occasionally exerted inappropriate pressure on members of the judiciary to render desired verdicts. Judges were appointed by the Supreme Judicial Council, subject to concurrence by the Senate. By law the Supreme

Judicial Council could dismiss judges at will, regardless of the length of their terms, making them vulnerable to political pressure.

Trial Procedures

The constitution, revised by referendum on April 30, included provisions to guarantee Miranda-like rights for those arrested but the law did not yet reflect this change.

The law provided for the right to a fair and public trial, but the judiciary generally did not enforce this right. According to credible reports, state-appointed defense attorneys routinely acted in the interest of the government rather than of their clients because of their reliance on the state for a livelihood and fear of possible recrimination. Courts often arbitrarily decided to hold closed trials for cases that had garnered heavy public interest.

Defendants in several criminal trials reported the inability to get court documents necessary to file timely appeals within the 20 days allotted by law.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

There were reports of political prisoners.

In June, the Supreme Court upheld the 16-year prison sentence of Dauletmurat Tazhimuratov, alleged ringleader of the July 2022

Karakalpakstan protests. The Court originally convicted Tazhimuratov in January for conspiracy to seize power or overthrow the constitutional order, theft by embezzlement, organization of riots, and production and distribution of materials containing a threat to public safety. In its analysis of the publicly televised trial, Human Rights Watch stated the government did not present any evidence proving Tazhimuratov called for violence, “instigated an uprising,” or otherwise committed acts that should be criminalized according to international human rights standards. Most appellants in this case were either released from prison or had their sentences reduced.

Tazhimuratov’s lawyer reported his client had been kept in solitary confinement since the rejection of his appeal in June, without access to television, radio, the prison’s library, or other media, as well as insufficient provision of food, health care, or bathing facilities. Several international NGOs, including Human Rights Watch, have called for his release.

According to activists, authorities arrested former Karakalpak activist Saadatdin Reymov in August 2022 and charged him with attempted overthrow of the constitutional order, reportedly due to nonviolent comments he claimed he made in a private telephone conversation, and despite claiming to be inactive in the Karakalpak separatist movement since 2021. He was sentenced to four years in a labor camp.

Antigovernmental blogger Otabek Sattoriy, who was convicted of extortion

and slander and sentenced to 6.5 years in prison in 2021, remained in prison.

The Ministry of Internal Affairs reported that in 2022 more than 1,800 prisoners, approximately 6 percent of the country's prison population, were held for crimes related to their alleged religious extremism. NGO representatives stated they could not independently verify the numbers of such individuals who remained in detention, and the government did not provide updated statistics for 2023.

Authorities sometimes did not provide political prisoners and detainees the same protections as other detainees, including by limiting access to their lawyers, depriving them of adequate food, hygiene, exercise, or reading materials, psychologically intimidating their family members, and disallowing family visits. The government sometimes did not permit access to such persons by human rights or humanitarian organizations.

Amnesty: For the first eight months of the year, the government pardoned 827 prisoners, including nine prisoners convicted of religious extremism or on other religious charges.

f. Transnational Repression

There were reports the country engaged in transnational repression.

Threats, Harassment, Surveillance, and Coercion: In September, the wife of

a U.S. citizen reported harassment due to her husband staging a protest outside of the UN General Assembly meeting in New York. She claimed a group of unidentified men beat on her door and screamed abusive language late at night after the protest received media coverage in Uzbekistan.

Efforts to Control Mobility: There were reports that the government attempted to control mobility to exact reprisal against citizens abroad by revoking their identity documents to jeopardize their legal status, restrict their movement, or provoke their detention in the country where they were located.

A member of the separatist Alga Karakalpakstan movement reported authorities confiscated his passport so he could not return to the Kyrgyz Republic, where he had been living with his family. He reported being told by security services he would never receive a passport, and that he should bring his family back to Uzbekistan to live with him.

g. Property Seizure and Restitution

On May 1, new constitutional amendments entered into force, which included the creation of a new right to private ownership of nonagricultural land and the prevention of property confiscations without a court order.

Government urban renewal campaigns to demolish older, Soviet-era apartment blocks and private homes in Tashkent and other regions continued to displace citizens from their homes or businesses, often without

due process or adequate restitution.

The Department of State's *Justice for Uncompensated Survivors Today (JUST) Act Report* to Congress, released publicly in July 2020, can be found on the Department's website: <https://www.state.gov/reports/just-act-report-to-congress/>.

h. Arbitrary or Unlawful Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

The constitution or law prohibited such actions, but there were reports that the government failed to respect these prohibitions. The law required that prosecutors approve requests for search warrants for electronic surveillance, but there was no provision for judicial review of such warrants.

Human Rights Watch reported several cases of individuals who were convicted based on information found from warrantless searches of telephones. In some of these cases, the individuals arrested had their telephones confiscated, and then were released without their telephones, all without a warrant or court order.

Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties

a. Freedom of Expression, Including for Members of the

Press and Other Media

The newly revised constitution provided for freedom of expression, including for members of the press and other media, but the government did not respect this right. The law restricted criticism of the president, and publicly insulting the president was a crime punishable by up to five years' imprisonment. The law specifically prohibited publication of articles that incited religious conflict and ethnic discord or that advocated for subverting or overthrowing the constitutional order, which the government used to silence dissenting voices. The government officially and unofficially restricted the ability of individuals to criticize the government or discuss matters of public interest, and it made frequent use of laws criminalizing libel and slander as "hate speech."

Freedom of Expression: The government frequently used libel, slander, and morality laws to stifle freedom of expression.

Well-known human rights activist Tatyana Dovlatova claimed police detained her in March and demanded she sign a document promising not to oppose the April constitutional referendum. They released her after she livestreamed the incident on Facebook. Other journalists and activists also reported receiving similar pressure to not oppose the constitutional referendum.

Violence and Harassment: Police and security services subjected print and

broadcast journalists to arrest, harassment, and intimidation.

During the year, at least three bloggers were arrested for blackmail and fraud: Khurshid Daliev, a journalist connected to the Telegram channel *kompromat.uzb* (sentenced to jail for seven years); blogger Abduqodir Muminov (sentenced to jail for seven years); and blogger Olimjon Haydarov (trial pending). Two more outlets (*sof.uz* and *kun.uz*) and a commentator (Yuliy Yusupov) were sued by officials for slander or damaging their reputation after reporting on corruption in businesses owned by these officials. Many domestic and international media outlets stated these actions were part of a campaign to silence the most critical voices in media despite official attempts to make the prosecutions and litigation appear to be in response to unethical journalistic practices.

Censorship or Content Restrictions for Members of the Press and Other

Media, Including Online Media: Accredited journalists widely reported practicing self-censorship as well as being directed to remove articles the country's media agency, the Agency of Information and Mass Communications, deemed too sensitive. Journalists reported intentionally not covering President Mirziyoyev and his family, religion, or LGBTQI+ issues for fear of reprisal.

At least two websites (*Rost.uz* and *Anhor.uz*) and at least one blogger (Farrukh Samarkandi) reported having closed or stopped their activities for a time due to the chilling effect of government pressure on journalists and

bloggers.

Libel/Slander Laws: The law imposed substantial monetary fines for defamation, including libel and slander. The government used charges of libel, slander, and defamation to punish journalists, human rights activists, and others who criticized the president or the government.

A 2021 law established criminal liability for publicly insulting or defaming the president using social networks, the internet, or both. Conviction of an offense was punishable by three years' correctional labor, restriction of movement for two to five years, or up to five years' imprisonment.

State-owned Khududgaztaminot, a gas company, filed a libel suit against Lola Islamova, editor in chief of *Anhor.uz*, in July because of critical reporting on the company. The company dropped the suit after Islamova agreed to publish a retraction.

Actions to Expand Freedom of Expression, Including for Members of the Press and Other Media: The new constitution contained language protecting freedom of speech and of the press; however, the government made little progress in implementing these protections.

Internet Freedom

The government restricted or disrupted access to the internet and censored online content.

According to the Ministry of Justice, the government had the authority to block websites or blogs without a court order. The government implemented procedures to restrict access to websites that included “banned information.” Based on these regulations, a website or blog could be blocked for calling for the violent overthrow of the constitutional order and territorial integrity of the country; spreading ideas of war, violence, terrorism, religious extremism, separatism, and fundamentalism; disclosing information that was a state secret or protected by law; or disseminating information that could lead to national, ethnic, or religious enmity, information that involves pornography, or promotes drug use. Conviction of insulting or slandering the president online or in the press was punishable by up to five years’ imprisonment.

The government generally allowed access to the internet, including news and social media sites, although select “sensitive” websites remained blocked. The government continued to block human rights and news websites such as *Forum 18* and Radio Free Europe/Radio Free Liberty.

b. Freedoms of Peaceful Assembly and Association

The government restricted freedoms of peaceful assembly and association.

Freedom of Peaceful Assembly

On October 29, authorities prevented a pro-Palestinian rally in Tashkent.

Media reported that police detained approximately 100 protesters, most of whom they released after questioning, and charged three with disobeying a police officer and violating the law for organizing and holding rallies. The three spent 15 days in jail.

Freedom of Association

While the law provided for freedom of association, the government continued to restrict this right. Authorities sought to control NGO activity, international NGOs, and unregulated Islamic and minority religious groups. The operating environment for independent civil society, in particular human rights defenders, remained restrictive. Several independent NGOs continued to face barriers to registering locally.

The Ministry of Justice, which oversaw the registration of NGOs, required NGOs to obtain the ministry's approval to hold large meetings with nonmembers, including foreigners; to seek the ministry's clearance on any event where materials were to be distributed; and to notify the ministry in writing of the content and scope of the events in question.

There were legal restrictions on the types of groups that could be formed. The law required that organizations with an operating budget and funds registered formally with the government. The law allowed for a six-month grace period for organizations to operate while awaiting registration from the Ministry of Justice, during which time the government officially classified

them as “initiative groups.” Several NGOs continued to function as initiative groups for periods longer than six months.

The Ministry of Justice did not require NGOs to obtain approval to conduct events, but they had to notify the ministry of plans to conduct public programs. The minimum period for informing the ministry of planned activities was 10 days before the start of an event without the participation of foreign citizens, and 20 days before the start of the event with the participation of foreign citizens. The ministry provided NGOs with written notice only in cases of refusal to conduct the event. The law also required that NGOs file annual reports to the government.

The law granted the Ministry of Justice authority to inspect and audit NGOs. The administrative liability code imposed substantial monetary fines for violations of procedures governing NGO activity as well as for “involving others” in “illegal NGOs.” The law did not specify whether the term referred to NGOs suspended or closed by the government or merely NGOs not officially registered. The administrative code also imposed penalties against international NGOs for engaging in political activities, activities inconsistent with their charters, or activities the government did not approve in advance.

Due to the burdensome challenges of registering NGOs, many prominent and respected organizations could not obtain registration from the government.

Local NGOs had to submit to the Ministry of Justice a notification of receipt of foreign funds for implementing international grant projects. These regulations created a chilling effect on the operation of civil society by allowing the government to arbitrarily decline to approve certain foreign-funded grant projects.

Human rights group Memorial reported security services interrogated several activists, including Norway-based Karakalpak opposition leader Aman Sagidullayev's sisters. Memorial claimed these visits have been a regular practice since the July 2022 violent protests.

c. Freedom of Religion

See the Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report* at www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/.

d. Freedom of Movement and the Right to Leave the Country

The constitution and laws provided for freedom of internal movement, foreign travel, emigration, and repatriation, and the government generally respected these rights.

In-country Movement: The government required hotels to register foreign visitors with the government daily. The government required foreigners staying in private homes to register their addresses within three days of

arrival.

Foreign Travel: Activists reported that in August the government prevented five employees of Singapore textile company Indorama from traveling to Almaty for a labor rights workshop. Some reported intimidation and confiscation of their passports, while at least two men were forcibly prevented from boarding their flight by border guards accompanied by men in plain clothes.

e. Protection of Refugees

The government did not cooperate with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to refugees, returning refugees, or asylum seekers, as well as other persons of concern. The country was not a signatory of the 1951 Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocols and did not aid refugees within its borders. UNHCR was not accredited in the country and was unable to directly assist refugees.

Following the August 2021 fall of Kabul, thousands of Afghans sought refuge from the Taliban in the country. The government reported that as of late 2021, there were 13,000 Afghan citizens residing in the country, while the United Nations estimated the number at 17,000. The government had not released updated numbers since then, although international organizations estimated that hundreds of Afghans had left Uzbekistan, either returning to

Afghanistan or moving on to third countries. Most of these individuals were well established, having arrived before the Taliban takeover, but approximately 2,000 needed assistance. The government refrained from refouling these individuals back to Afghanistan but provided few services.

Access to Asylum: A presidential decree technically established a system of political asylum, but there were no reports of any individuals receiving political asylum in the country. International observers reported the political asylum system was “nonexistent.”

Refoulement: While there were no reports of the government refouling Afghan refugees, Afghans reported government officials often “encouraged” them to return to Afghanistan. The visa renewal process was expensive and rife with corruption; some individuals who applied for renewal received “exit visas,” which they interpreted as requiring them to depart the country.

Employment: Afghan citizens who entered on tourist visas were legally barred from working. While some refugees were able to find informal employment, most depended on their savings and money transfers from friends and family members.

Access to Basic Services: Afghans in the country were typically able to receive care at government hospitals and clinics. Most refugees reported they were unable to enroll their children in local schools.

Temporary Protection: In the fall of 2021, the government provided

temporary protection to 498 persons who entered from Afghanistan in former Afghan-government military aircraft. Refugees were held in a secure residential camp near Termez pending third-country processing and relocation. Approximately 2,000 other Afghan refugees who lived in the country did not receive humanitarian protection from the government.

f. Status and Treatment of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)

Not applicable.

g. Stateless Persons

In September, the government claimed that “since 2014, more than one hundred thousand stateless persons have been identified in the Republic of Uzbekistan, and the cases of 83,793 people have been resolved.” It also claimed that “as of mid-2023, there are 25,413 stateless people living in Uzbekistan, most of whom are former citizens of the former Soviet Union and their descendants.”

Section 3. Freedom to Participate in the Political Process

The constitution and law provided citizens the ability to choose their government in free and fair periodic elections held by secret ballot and

based on universal and equal suffrage. The government did not conduct free and fair elections, restricted freedom of expression, and suppressed political opposition.

Elections and Political Participation

Abuses or Irregularities in Recent Elections: Following the April referendum approving a revised constitution, snap presidential elections took place in July, three years earlier than expected. Four of the five registered political parties nominated candidates for the election. Incumbent President Mirziyoyev won reelection with 87 percent of the vote.

The four presidential candidates represented parties that were vetted by the country's ruling party. The short timeline between the announcement and holding of the elections did not allow other candidates who might have offered different views to register. For example, during the year authorities twice rejected attempts by Khidirnazar Allakulov of the Truth, Development, and Solidarity movement to register as a political party, which prevented him from participating in the election. Authorities alleged he had not received the required number of signatures for registration.

Domestic civil society organizations could not legally monitor elections. The country's five political parties and international organizations were legally permitted to monitor the election.

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Office of

Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) deployed a limited election observation mission for the April constitutional referendum and a full observation mission for the July presidential election. OSCE/ODIHR announced May 1 that the referendum was “technically well-prepared and widely promoted as a move to enhance various rights and freedoms” but “took place in an environment that fell short of genuine political pluralism and competition.” OSCE/ODIHR expressed similar concerns with the environment in which the presidential election was conducted.

Political Parties and Political Participation: The law allowed independent political parties. The Ministry of Justice had broad powers to oversee parties and could withhold financial and legal support to those it judged to be opposed to government policy. There were five registered political parties. The law made it difficult for genuinely independent political parties to organize, nominate candidates, and campaign. The law allowed the Ministry of Justice to suspend parties for as long as six months without a court order.

The government exercised control over established parties by controlling their financing and media exposure. By law, election-related expenses were largely financed from the state budget. Private citizens and legal national entities could make monetary contributions ranging from 135 million soum (\$12,600) for private individuals to 1.35 billion soum (\$126,000) for legal entities. The law prohibited judges, public prosecutors, State Security

Service officials, members of the armed forces, foreign citizens, and stateless persons from joining political parties. The law prohibited parties that were based on religion or ethnicity; opposed the sovereignty, integrity, or security of the country, or the constitutional rights and freedoms of its citizens; promoted war or social, national, or religious hostility; or sought to overthrow the government. The law also prohibited the Islamist political organization Hizb ut-Tahrir, stating it promoted hatred and condoned acts of terrorism. Independent party registration was suppressed and individuals not of an approved party who sought to run for the presidency were excluded.

International organizations, including OSCE short- and long-term monitors, were present in the periods prior to the April referendum and July presidential election.

Section 4. Corruption in Government

The law provided criminal penalties for corruption by officials, but the government did not always implement the law effectively. There were numerous reports of government corruption.

The government continued development of a database of official corruption that included the names of former corrupt government officials to prevent their reemployment with government. The law prohibited civil servants from accepting gifts and engaging in business activities, opening accounts

outside of the country, or acquiring real estate abroad. They also had to declare income and assets. The president, senators, members of parliament, judges and judicial, law enforcement and military personnel were exempt from the law.

Corruption: There were numerous reported abuses. In August, the Tashkent City Court began a corruption trial related to a cough syrup that killed at least 65 persons. On July 27, the Termez Criminal Court sentenced former Termez Mayor Isroil Khudoyberdiev to 11 years in prison for bribery, embezzlement, abuse of power, and legalization of proceeds from criminal activity. The court sentenced the other 17 defendants in the case to restriction or imprisonment from 3.6 to nine years.

In 2022 the Supreme Court handed down a verdict to a group of 45 Andijan officials, including former Mayor Bahromjon Khaidarov, former city prosecutor Gayrat Fozilov, and other regional officials on embezzlement, fraud, bribery, official negligence, and forgery charges. The court sentenced the former mayor and the former city prosecutor to 10 years in prison. The other 43 defendants received sentences from four to eight years in prison and were ordered to pay back the \$5.2 million embezzled.

For additional information about corruption in the country, please see the Department of State's *Investment Climate Statement* for the country, and the Department of State's *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report*, which includes information on financial crimes.

Section 5. Governmental Posture Towards International and Nongovernmental Monitoring and Investigation of Alleged Abuses of Human Rights

Several domestic human rights groups operated in the country, although the government often hampered their ability to operate, investigate, and publish their findings on human rights cases. Government officials were either unresponsive or attempted to refute their views. At times government security services harassed and intimidated human rights and civil society activists.

International NGOs, including those that focused on human rights, continued to face obstacles in legally registering. The government did not allow unregistered international organizations to open bank accounts, and impeded efforts to overcome Supreme Court rulings banning certain international NGOs from registering and operating in the country.

Retribution Against Human Rights Defenders: Harassment of activists continued to be a problem. Human rights activists and political opposition figures generally assumed that security agencies covertly monitored their telephone calls and activities.

In May, Kazakh human rights activist Galym Ageleulov reported that Uzbekistan Airways informed him he could not board a flight to Tashkent

because of a ban from the country's border authorities. Ageleulov planned to observe the appeal trials of defendants convicted of rioting in the July 2022 Karakalpakstan protests.

Government Human Rights Bodies: The goals of the Human Rights Ombudsman's Office included promoting observance and public awareness of fundamental human rights, assisting in shaping legislation to comply with international human rights norms, and resolving cases of alleged abuse. The Ombudsman's Office was tasked with mediation of disputes among citizens who contacted it and made recommendations to modify or uphold decisions of government agencies, but its recommendations were not binding. The Ombudsman's Office could make unannounced inspections of prisons and had a separate division to investigate government abuse of businesses. According to human rights activists, the Ombudsman's Office was closely connected to high-ranking officials in the government, which limited its independence. Moreover, activists and prisoners noted that the Ombudsman's Office often investigated torture allegations months after receiving the complaints, when there was no longer any evidence of torture, which led to an underreporting of cases.

The National Human Rights Center was a government agency responsible for educating the public and officials on the principles of human rights and democracy and for government compliance with international obligations to provide human rights information.

Section 6. Discrimination and Societal Abuses

Women

Rape and Domestic Violence: On April 11, President Mirziyoyev signed into law legislation explicitly criminalizing domestic violence from the first offense and introducing stronger legal protections for women and children. The law also introduced administrative penalties for harassing or stalking women, negated the ability of convicted sex offenders to gain early release, and removed a legal provision by which sex offenders could avoid harsher penalties by claiming ignorance of the age of their victim.

The law also allowed a judge to introduce a mandatory reconciliation period of up to one year before issuing a verdict or drop the case entirely if the victim withdrew their complaint. Some civil society activists noted this could deter victims from seeking legal redress and allow abusers to escape punishment.

In September, the government published statistics on the number of protection orders issued for gender-based violence. According to those statistics, nearly 22,000 women received protection warrants for harassment and violence by September; 85 percent of those cases were in families.

Despite these laws, cultural norms discouraged women and their families

from speaking openly regarding rape. Irina Matvienko, journalist and founder of *nemolchi.uz*, an independent project seeking to combat domestic violence in the country, drew attention to several instances of domestic violence and sexual harassment, which led authorities to investigate. There were no public statistics on convictions under the new law, but media reported on several cases that resulted in convictions. In May, a Tashkent judge sentenced a man to five days in jail for sexually harassing a woman. In September, a Tashkent man was sentenced to 18 years in prison for sexually abusing a girl, age seven. There were government-run and NGO-run shelters for survivors of domestic abuse and telephone hotlines for survivors seeking assistance. Survivors of domestic violence could access services at government Centers for Rehabilitation and Adaptation. Authorities provided women in the shelters with food, medicine, hygiene products, and funds to cover other expenses.

Other Forms of Gender-based Violence or Harassment: The April law introduced penalties for sexual harassment, which could be punishable by a fine of up to \$200 or up to 15 days of jail time. It was illegal for a male supervisor to coerce a woman into a sexual relationship. Social norms, lack of reporting, and lack of legal recourse made it difficult to assess the scope of the problem. The government made efforts to enforce the law and prevent sexual harassment, but there were no statistics available.

In June, media reported that local police broke up a teenage dance party at

a water park in Samarkand. Police then allegedly compelled the women participants to be tested for STDs and HIV. The Ministry of Internal Affairs later clarified that media reports of these police actions were “hasty” but stopped short of denying that these actions occurred. The ministry was reportedly conducting an internal investigation into the police response.

Discrimination: The law provided for the same legal status and rights for women as for men in the areas of health care, education, science, culture, labor, and social protection. According to the updated constitution, the state will “ensure equal rights and opportunities for women and men in the administration of public and state affairs and in other spheres of social and state life.”

By law women could own property, inherit goods, secure employment outside the home, obtain credit, and own and manage a business.

Traditional views on the role of women contributed to increased social difficulties for women pursuing their legal rights in these areas. In some regions, due to religious and cultural views, husbands did not allow their wives to work.

Reproductive Rights: There were no reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization on the part of government authorities. Citizens had access to voluntary family planning, including the ability to choose methods of contraception. Women had the legal right to receive medical assistance for individual selection of contraceptive methods, based on their medical

condition, age, and individual characteristics.

Contraception was not always available to men and women. Nevertheless, most districts had maternity clinics staffed by trained doctors who provided a wide range of prenatal and postpartum care. Menstrual health and hygiene products were available on the market but not accessible to all strata of the population, especially in poorer regions of the country. Poor sanitation and access to clean running water in rural areas was a problem for menstrual hygiene, especially among school-age girls.

The government provided access to sexual and reproductive health services, including emergency contraception for women who reported sexual violence; but no postexposure prophylaxis was provided. Activists reported the topic of sexual violence remained taboo, and there were no official statistics on the number of cases.

Systemic Racial or Ethnic Violence and Discrimination

There were no legal impediments for citizens who belonged to one of the country's ethnic minorities. By law all citizens had equal rights without regard to their ethnicity.

Complaints of societal violence or discrimination against members of ethnic minority groups were rare. The law did not require Uzbek language ability to obtain citizenship, but language often was a sensitive matter. Uzbek was the state language, and the constitution required that the president speak it

to conduct official business. The law also stated Russian was “the language of interethnic communication.” There were criminal penalties for creating discord through inflammatory statements against other ethnic groups.

There were no government programs to mitigate societal, racial, or ethnic biases.

Children

Child Abuse: Legal protections against child abuse existed. Society generally considered child abuse to be an internal family matter. Little official information was available on the subject, including on the government’s efforts to combat it.

Human rights activists reported that patterns of child abuse existed and that law enforcement agencies often did not act on reports of violence and child abuse.

Child, Early, and Forced Marriage: The minimum legal age for marriage was 18 for both sexes. District authorities could lower the age by one year in exceptional cases. In some rural areas, girls aged 15 or younger married men in religious ceremonies not officially recognized by the state.

Sexual Exploitation of Children: The law sought to protect children from “all forms of exploitation,” including the sale, grooming, offering, or procuring of children for commercial sexual exploitation, and practices

related to child pornography. The April law removed a legal provision by which sex offenders could avoid harsher penalties by claiming ignorance of the age of their victim. Authorities did not effectively enforce the law.

The minimum age for consensual sex was 16.

In September 2022, the head of the orphanage was quietly sentenced to five and a half years in jail, while the two regional government officials were sentenced to 18 months of house arrest. A regional court upheld these sentences in December 2022. In March, an investigative news outlet published a comprehensive report that alleged that two regional government officials and the head of a state-run orphanage engaged in prolonged, egregious sexual abuse of underage girls living at the orphanage. Following a public outcry at the perceived light sentences, the prosecutor appealed the sentences, and in November the two ex-officials were sentenced to two and three years in prison.

Antisemitism

Observers estimated the Jewish population at fewer than 10,000, concentrated mostly in Tashkent, Samarkand, the Fergana Valley, and Bukhara. Their numbers continued to decline due to emigration, largely for economic reasons. In November, media reported a synagogue in Tashkent was defaced with the words “Free Gaza” and “Free Palestine” painted on the outside.

Trafficking in Persons

See the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

Acts of Violence, Criminalization, and Other Abuses Based on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity or Expression, or Sex Characteristics

Criminalization: Article 120 of the Penal Code criminalized consensual same-sex sexual conduct between men. Conviction was punishable by up to three years' imprisonment. The law did not criminalize consensual same-sex sexual conduct between women.

A separate law, which criminalized the knowing transmission of HIV or other sexually transmitted diseases, was reportedly used to disproportionately jail gay men. This law carried a maximum penalty of five years in prison.

The government reported that during the year authorities initiated 22 criminal cases for same-sex sexual relationships among men, with more than 27 men involved in these cases. The government had not reported the number of men incarcerated for same-sex relations.

Human rights defenders claimed security services used informants to entrap and blackmail men suspected of being gay. They alleged security services

routinely told arrested LGBTQI+ persons they would serve prison time if they did not agree to serve as informants on other LGBTQI+ persons.

Violence and Harassment: Reports of societal harassment and discrimination against LGBTQI+ persons continued. Alleged perpetrators of violence against LGBTQI+ persons were not investigated or prosecuted. LGBTQI+ persons reported that the rise in religiosity in the country also contributed to an increase in restrictions and harassment. LGBTQI+ youth reported being sent to imams for corrective help with their “conditions,” only to be subsequently sexually abused by the imams.

Uzbeks detained under Article 120 reported being subjected to the inhuman practice of forced anal exams by law enforcement or judicial officials as evidence of LGBTQI+ conduct. LGBTQI+ detainees also reported being subjected to psychological violence and abuse at the hands of prison officials and inmates.

Discrimination: The law did not prohibit discrimination against LGBTQI+ persons in housing, employment, nationality laws, and access to government services, such as health care. The law did not explicitly recognize LGBTQI+ couples and their families, nor grant them rights equal to the rights of other persons. Social and employment discrimination were reported by LGBTQI+ individuals. LGBTQI+ individuals from rural areas especially reported facing intense pressure to keep their orientation secret for fear of discrimination and harassment in their communities, and risk of

abuse and ostracism from their families if they were outed. LGBTQI+ individuals reported having difficulties maintaining steady employment, since most workplaces were hostile towards them.

The Ministry of Health reportedly considered compulsory HIV testing of men who had sex with men as a response to rising HIV rates. Additionally, activists and media reported that the Ministry of Health had an information-sharing agreement with the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and regularly identified HIV-positive individuals to the Ministry of Internal Affairs for compulsory testing. Activists have noted this caused HIV-positive individuals to not report their status to the Ministry of Health.

Availability of Legal Gender Recognition: The law provided a pathway for someone to legally change their gender, although transgender and gender-nonconforming Uzbeks reported difficulty in finding willing medical providers. Individuals reportedly were able to successfully undergo gender reassignment surgery and change their gender on their national identity documents.

Involuntary or Coercive Medical or Psychological Practices: According to the government, inmates convicted of same-sex sexual conduct between men had to undergo psychological counseling to “keep them from similar repeat offenses.”

Restrictions of Freedom of Expression, Association, or Peaceful Assembly:

Deeply negative social attitudes related to sexual orientation and gender identity limited the freedom of expression of the LGBTQI+ community and led to discrimination. Society generally considered same-sex sexual conduct a taboo subject. There were no known LGBTQI+ organizations.

Persons with Disabilities

Persons with disabilities did not have access to education, health services, public buildings, and transportation on an equal basis with others, despite laws requiring such access. Government information and communication on disability concerns was generally not provided in accessible formats.

There were no reports of violence, intimidation, or abuse of persons with disabilities, but the Soviet legacy of discrimination continued. The First Lady's organization, Zamin Foundation, reported that family stigma towards children with disabilities tended to isolate their children from society.

Visually impaired students had access to dated braille books published during Soviet times and specialized computers. A local nonprofit, Mekheerli kollarr ("Kind Hands"), had a braille printing shop publishing braille books in Russian and Uzbek braille but these were not readily available to everyone who needed them.

The government mandated that urban and residential areas, airports, railway stations, and other facilities had to provide for access to persons with disabilities, although there were no specific government programs

implemented and activists reported difficulties with access. The law provided for monetary fines if buildings, including private shops and restaurants, were not accessible. Disability rights activists reported accessibility remained inadequate, noting, for example, that many of the high schools constructed in prior years had exterior ramps but no interior modifications to facilitate access by wheelchair users. The availability of accessible transportation was also almost nonexistent.

The government reserved approximately 9,000 employment positions for adults with disabilities, but only 896 adult persons with disabilities were employed in one of the apportioned positions. The law obliged public institutions and private enterprises, where at least 20 individuals were employed, to reserve at least 3 percent of jobs for persons with disabilities. Activists reported this law was rarely implemented or enforced. Activists noted the amounts of disability benefits and pensions were inadequate to the needs of socially vulnerable families due to the lack of an officially established minimum subsistence level.

Other Societal Violence or Discrimination

The law prohibited discrimination against those infected with HIV and provided for free health care. Persons known to be HIV-positive reported social isolation and discrimination by public agency workers, health personnel, law enforcement officers, landlords, and employers after their

HIV status became known. The military summarily expelled recruits in the armed services found to be HIV-positive. Some LGBTQI+ community activists reported that hospital wards reviewed the personal history of HIV-positive patients and summarily categorized them as drug addicts, homosexuals, or engaged in commercial sexual exploitation. Hospital officials reportedly sometimes marked some HIV-positive patients' files as "homosexual" and referred them to police for investigation.

Section 7. Worker Rights

a. Freedom of Association and the Right to Collective Bargaining

The law allowed workers to form and join independent unions and bargain collectively, but no independent labor unions operated in the country. The state-controlled Federation of Trade Unions of Uzbekistan (FTUU) was the dominant operating labor union. Some civil society activists accused the FTUU of preventing workers from forming independent unions.

The law neither provided for nor prohibited the right to strike, but it prohibited antiunion discrimination. The law on trade unions stated that workers could not be fired due to trade union membership, but it did not clearly state whether workers fired for union activity had to be reinstated. Volunteers in public works and workers employed by individuals without

documented contracts did not have strong legal protections of their rights.

The law prohibited the interference of government bodies in the trade union activities, but the state still retained significant control. International and local critics criticized local and state government officials for failing to protect workers' rights and interests.

The law provided penalties for violating freedom of association laws.

Penalties were not commensurate with those for other laws involving denials of civil rights, such as discrimination and were rarely applied against violators. FTUU unions remained centralized, controlled by, and dependent on the government. Regional and industrial trade unions remained managed by the state. Workers believed that attempts to create independent alternative unions would be repressed. Some civil society experts noted a lack of freedom of association for independent monitoring and reporting of labor rights violations.

There were reports that state and local government officials failed to enforce the labor code in response to worker complaints and alleged labor violations at Indorama Agro, one of the country's largest cotton agribusinesses.

b. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

See the Department of State's annual Trafficking in Persons Report at

<https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

c. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

See the Department of Labor's *Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor* at <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/resources/reports/child-labor/findings/>.

d. Discrimination (see section 6)

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

Wage and Hour Laws: The law provided for a national minimum wage, which was roughly double the official minimum consumption expenditure. The law established a standard workweek of 40 hours and required a 24-hour rest period. The law provided for paid annual holidays. The law provided overtime compensation as specified in employment contracts or as agreed with an employee's trade union. Such compensation could be provided in the form of additional pay or leave. The law stated that overtime compensation should not be less than 200 percent of the employee's average monthly salary rate. Additional leave time should not be less than the length of actual overtime work. An employee could not work more than 120 hours of overtime per year, but this limitation was not generally observed, particularly in the public sector. The law prohibited compulsory overtime. There were reports that the government did not effectively enforce these laws in the formal economy. In August, an

anonymous survey of 560 civil servants showed 57 percent of them worked overtime, and 82 percent were not paid for it. Penalties for violations of wage and overtime laws were not commensurate with those for similar crimes, such as fraud. No data was available on enforcement of these laws in the informal economy.

Occupational Safety and Health: The Ministry of Employment and Labor Relations established and enforced occupational safety and health (OSH) standards in consultation with unions. According to the law, health and safety standards should be applied in all sectors. State Labor Inspectors regularly conducted workplace safety inspections and actively identified OSH violations. State Labor Inspectors could levy administrative penalties in the form of fines. The government maintained a hotline to respond to citizen complaints about labor violations.

The law provided that workers could legally remove themselves from hazardous work if an employer failed to provide adequate safety measures for the job, and the employer was required to pay the employee during the time of the work stoppage or provide severance pay if the employee chose to terminate employment. The law required employers to protect against civil liability for damage caused to the life or health of an employee in connection with a work injury, occupational disease, or other injury to health caused by the employee's performance on the job. In addition, a company's employees had the right to demand, and the administration was

obliged to provide them with, information on the state of working conditions and safety at work, available personal protection means, benefits, and compensations.

Wage, Hour, and OSH Enforcement: The government effectively enforced wage, hour, and OSH laws in the formal economy. No data was available on enforcement of these laws in the informal economy. Penalties for violations of OSH laws were administrative in nature; state labor inspectors could levy only administrative penalties (such as fines). The Ministry of Employment and Labor Relations maintained protocols requiring investigation into labor complaints within five business days. The ministry or a local governor's office could initiate a selective inspection of a business, and special inspections were conducted in response to accidents or complaints. Inspectors had the authority to make unannounced inspections and initiate sanctions.

The most common violations committed by private-sector employers were violations of wage, overtime, and OSH standards. Although regulations provided standards for workplace safety, workers reportedly worked without necessary protective clothing and equipment at some hazardous job sites. Labor protections were rarely extended to workers in the informal labor sector.