UZBEKISTAN AFTER KARIMOV: NO PROGRESS ON HUMAN RIGHTS

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After the death of President Islam Karimov in 2016, there was cautious optimism that Uzbekistan might embark on a path toward greater human rights protections and democratic reforms. However, under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, the country has remained one of the most authoritarian regimes in the post-Soviet region. While the government has taken superficial steps toward reform—such as releasing a small number of political prisoners and easing certain media restrictions—these measures have failed to bring about meaningful institutional change. Instead, the state continues to enforce its authority through arbitrary detentions, political crackdowns, and strict limitations on fundamental freedoms, including speech, assembly, and association. The State Security Service (SGB) remains a primary tool of repression, employing surveillance, intimidation, and harassment to stifle dissent, suppress independent journalism, and target human rights advocates. In reality, the regime suppresses human rights in the country as well as political rights of the citizens. Uzbekistan has a significant number of political prisoners.

Following the death of President Islam Karimov on September 2, 2016, the acting Prime Minister Shavkat Mirziyoyev was appointed by the Supreme Assembly as the interim president of Uzbekistan. He was subsequently elected as President in the December 2016 presidential election, winning 88.6% of the vote, and was sworn on December 14, 2016. The presidential elections were considered to be rigged by the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), which said the elections underscored “the need for comprehensive reforms”

in Uzbekistan, where Karimov had extended his power for years in a series of votes denounced as undemocratic by western governments and international observers.[1]

Human Rights Watch reports that on September 27, 2017, Uzbek security services detained Bobomurod Abdullaev, an independent journalist, in Tashkent, on what appears to be a politically motivated charge. He was charged with "attempts to overthrow the constitutional regime" under Article 159 of Uzbekistan's Criminal Code, and faced up to 20 years in prison.

Police also detained Nurullo Muhummad Raufkhon, an Uzbek author, at Tashkent airport on September 27, 2017, after he had arrived from Turkey. He was charged with extremism for producing a work of literature which criticizes Uzbekistan's former authoritarian president Islam Karimov. He was released on October 1, but still faced charges.[2]

A third blogger, Hayot Nasretdinov, was arrested in October 2017 on charges similar to those facing Abdullaev. Also, Uzbekistan's internet is still highly censored. Many websites are blocked, including independent media outlets, Fergana and Radio Ozodlik.[3]

In 2022 the Uzbek government announced changing the constitution which seemingly should improve the state of human rights in the country. However, in reality, the new constitution helped "reset" President Mirziyoyev's terms to zero, permitting him to stand for two more. With the duration of presidential terms also set to be extended from five years to seven, President Mirziyoyev could retain power until at least 2040. He would merely need to keep winning re-election, which is eminently doable in a country with no political opposition. The

[1] Uzbekistan elects Shavkat Mirziyoyev as president. The Gardian. December 5, 2016. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/05/uzbekistan-elects-shavkat-mirziyoyev-president-islam-karimov
[2] Uzbekistan: 2 Activists Freed, Others Arrested. hrw.org. October 4, 2017. https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/10/04/uzbekistan-2-activists-freed-others-arrested
[3] Censorship Still Alive and Well in Uzbekistan. hrw.org. December 13, 2017. https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/12/13/censorship-still-alive-and-well-uzbekistan

new constitution would even entitle him to turn his current five-year term into a seven-year one and thus rule until 2042.

In Karakalpakstan, for example, voters have been very skeptical. The constitutional reform sparked turmoil in the autonomous region in 2022, after Karakalpaks took to the streets to protest over a clause in a first draft of the rewrite that would have stripped them of their right to secede. President Mirziyoyev scrapped the clause after 21 people were killed during an intervention by security forces to quell the protests. Anger played a serious role over the killings and its aftermath—including the conviction of 61 prominent lawyers, journalists and other civilians of fomenting the turbulence as part of a separatist plot. No law-enforcement officers have been held responsible for the deaths. In Nukus, Karakalpakstan's capital, many plan to stay away from polling stations. "I'm not voting after they killed all those people!" exclaimed one market trader, a typical response in Karakalpakstan.

In general, the reform is just the sort of constitutional trickery used by Mirziyoyev's predecessor to rule for 25 years. A media crackdown during the constitution campaign also recalls President Islam Karimov's time. Social-media users have been under pressure to delete posts critical of the new constitution. Mirziyoyev said that he was committed to the "spirit of freedom" for the media, but that promises to be somewhat short of the real thing. "The press cannot raise the issues it wants to," 40 free-press advocates said in a statement in March 2023, which also complained of media "pressure and intimidation". "We'll see after the referendum whether there will be no censorship and whether people who pressure journalists will be punished," said Anora Sodiqova, a reporter who was one of the signatories. She recently

announced her departure from a pioneering independent media outlet that she had cofounded, citing “pressure and blackmail” from unidentified figures.[4]

With the new constitution the regime has been using the old Soviet trick: it officially promotes improvements in its policy toward human rights, running a show for the free world, but, in reality, exploits it as an opportunity to strengthen its power. Thus, neither cosmetic changes such as “improving” the constitution has led to real changes of the politics of the government.

One of the defining characteristics of the regime is its pervasive corruption. Corruption in Uzbekistan is deeply entrenched and firmly embedded in the mindset of the local society. It is also an integral part of all aspects of Uzbek society, starting from maternity hospitals, kindergartens, schools to higher authorities, ministries, police and courts. People in Uzbekistan prefer to resolve their problems by bribing officials, who in their turn procrastinate in anticipation of a bribe, to speed up the process rather than complaining to higher rank officials or the court. Corruption is so rampant in Uzbekistan and so "natural" for Uzbek societal fabric that people bribe officials even if the latter did not do their job because they, the bribe fivers, feel uncomfortable if they did not pay.[5] Another disturbing side of corruption in Uzbekistan is its close ties to organized crime, which has infiltrated many segments of the government in Uzbekistan.

The source of corruption in Uzbekistan stems from years of autocratic governance and a lack of institutional accountability. Corruption is deeply ingrained in its political, judicial, and economic frameworks. The centralization of authority within the executive branch, coupled with weak oversight mechanisms, has enabled cronyism, graft, and financial misconduct to thrive.

[4] Enough Mirziyoyev. *The Economist*, April 22, 2023, pp. 31-32.
[5] Узбекистан, коррупция и общество (Uzbekistan: Corruption and Society), Ozodlik Radiosi, April 2012, http://www.ozodlik.org/content/article/24543689.html

Instead of functioning as an unbiased enforcer of justice, the judiciary is frequently manipulated to advance the interests of the ruling class. Law enforcement bodies, including the National Security Service (State Security Service), have long been wielded as instruments of oppression, silencing those who expose or resist corrupt practices. Public officials abuse their positions for personal enrichment, demanding illicit payments in return for favorable legal outcomes, business opportunities, and regulatory exemptions.

Financial misconduct is equally pervasive, particularly in sectors dominated by the government and powerful elites, including energy, agriculture, and construction. The systemic exploitation of forced labor in Uzbekistan's cotton industry—long condemned by the international community—illustrates how corruption and abuse intertwine, allowing state authorities and influential business figures to profit at the expense of ordinary citizens. Government contracts and privatization initiatives are frequently marred by preferential treatment, with lucrative deals handed to politically connected individuals rather than through transparent competition. Entrepreneurs encounter significant bureaucratic hurdles, which, in turn, incentivize bribery as a means of bypassing regulatory obstacles, and high-ranking officials continue to act with impunity. The persistence of these corrupt practices not only hinders economic progress and deters foreign investment but also erodes public confidence in state institutions, perpetuating a cycle of systemic exploitation.

Corruption within Uzbekistan's court system is deeply ingrained, transforming the judiciary into a tool for political dominance rather than a pillar of justice. Judges frequently endure overwhelming pressure from state officials, security agencies, and regional powerbrokers to deliver rulings that serve the interests of the governing elite, rather than upholding legal principles. Bribery is rampant, with plaintiffs and defendants often expected to offer payments to

judges, prosecutors, or court personnel to obtain favorable judgments or sway legal proceedings. Higher courts habitually overturn lower court verdicts that fail to align with political or financial agendas, further eroding judicial autonomy. Moreover, judges who oppose corrupt practices or refuse to bow to external coercion face severe repercussions, including career setbacks, forced resignation, or even fabricated criminal allegations. The Supreme Judicial Council, which is meant to uphold judicial ethics, frequently acts as a means of purging independent-minded judges rather than ensuring fairness.[6] The constitution provides for an independent judiciary, but judges reportedly often render verdicts requested by the Prosecutor General's Office and other law enforcement agencies. Legislation is often interpreted inconsistently and in conflict with other courts. Lawyers may be reluctant to take on politically sensitive cases especially when dealing with allegations of an official's abuse of office. The notion of a conflict of interest is largely unknown to civil servants, which combined with the absence of a strong judiciary has fueled corruption to the point where it is unrestrained.

To understand the intricate relation between organized crime, which is called in the vernacular "mafia", corruption and the government in Uzbekistan, it would be necessary to briefly examine existing political and social networks in Uzbekistan where regionalism, nepotism, clans and elite networks or groups are very strong. Research of Uzbekistan distinguishes several regional elite groups in Uzbekistan: the Samarkand group, the Tashkent group, the Fergana group, the Khorezm group and the Karakalpakstan group. The Samarkand group and the Tashkent group are the most powerful ones.[7]

[6] **Uzbekistan** risk report. Gan Integrity, November 5, 2020. https://www.ganintegrity.com/country-profiles/uzbekistan/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

[7] Idil Tuncer-Kilavuz, Political and social networks in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan: 'clan', region and beyond, Central Asian Survey, Vol. 28, No. 3, September 2009, 323-334

Traditionally, during the Soviet Union, important positions were shared between cadres from Tashkent, Samarkand, and Fergana. Such divisions can be attributed to the lack of a strong historical tradition of statehood, as the three major regions, Samarkand, Tashkent and Fergana belonged to different historical khanates. In different regions of Uzbekistan, people look differently, speak different languages and have different traditions. The differences are so strong that Uzbekistanis can often distinguish between accents of people from different regions and identify the speaker's place of origin. [8] Regionalism, nepotism and elite networks play a crucial role in recruitment for work, mainly in key governmental positions, which give access to government resources to advance the interests of the group.

The elite networks are so powerful that centralized power is not capable of eradicating them and has to share power with them. The elite networks have acquired a great degree of economic independence by tapping into the natural resources and economy of Uzbekistan.

To avoid bloodshed, which devastated neighboring Tajikistan and Afghanistan, President Islam Karimov had to accommodate the interests of elites by granting them high profile and influential government posts. For example, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, the current President of Uzbekistan, is a member of the Samarkand group. Rustam Azimov, the First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance of Uzbekistan, is a member of the rival Tashkent group.

In addition, under President Karimov new powerful elites known as *siloviki* had emerged, which was apparently an attempt to counter omnipotent regional elites. The SNB (Sluzhba Natsionalnoy Bezopasnosti in Russian, Milliy Havfsizlik Hizmat in Uzbek or National Security Service in English; now SGB), the successor of the Soviet KGB, is a powerful political elite group with close ties with both, the Tashkent group and the Samarkand group. The SGB is often

[8] Idil Tuncer-Kilavuz, Political and social networks in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan: 'clan', region and beyond, Central Asian Survey, Vol. 28, No. 3, September 2009, 323-334

called a "state within a state." According to some estimates, the number of the SGB officers has increased twenty six times compared to the number of officers employed by the KGB. SGB officers can be found in practically all governmental departments and major companies regardless of whether they are private or state-owned. SGB officers also supervise different banks, firms, joint ventures and educational facilities.[9]

The SGB did not diminish its role in the country where 2,200 inmates – 10% of the prison population – are still in jail on religiously and politically motivated charges. Its goes after the political opposition which is not tolerated by the regime. The government refuses to register opposition parties and no one can challenge the president.[10] Since 2007, Uzbekistan's security services has been cooperating closely with Russia's counterparts. Uzbek agents are trained in FSB educational institutions.[11]

In other words, the political and social structure of Uzbekistan resembles that of feudalism where heads of the elite networks are granted access to state resources in exchange for a certain degree of loyalty. According to the analysis provided by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, in Central Asia, including Uzbekistan, where members of a strong regime are involved in organized crime, the regime will often provide protection for its organized crime allies while its organized crime allies in turn provide beneficial services to the regime, "the regime can appear virtuous in its attack on selected criminal organizations while continuing to benefit from its cooperative relationship with others."[12] Needless to say, regular subjects have no

[9] Узбекистан. Кто станет преемником Ислама Каримова? (Uzbekistan. Who will become Islam Karimov's successor?) Newsland, September 2010, http://www.newsland.ru/news/detail/id/554336/
[10] From Gulag to Ordinary Grumbles. *The Economist*, October 23, 2021, p. 37.
[11] Спецслужбы России и Узбекистана Договорились Усовершенствовать Взаимодействие в Сфере Борьбы с Терроризмом и Экстремизмом [The Special Services Of Russia And Uzbekistan Agreed To Improve Cooperation In The Field Of Combating Terrorism And Extremism]. Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation, October 11, 2007. http://www.fsb.ru/fsb/comment/remark/single.htm%21id%3D10362554%40fsbComment.html
[12] An Assessment of Transnational Organized Crime in Central Asia, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, New York, 2007.

rights or freedoms and systematically become victims of human rights violations under such a regime, as the law enforcement and judicial system serve the interests of the elites fused with organized crime groups.

For example, the situation that arose in the Surkhandarya Region of Uzbekistan is common to all regions of Uzbekistan. In the Surkhandarya Region, local authorities used forced and unpaid labor to prepare the Barkamol Avlod (Perfect Generation) for the Republican sports competition among students of professional colleges. According to an expert group, students and teachers of secondary schools, lyceums and colleges are forcibly taken to the sports facilities in the Region for cleaning and reconstruction. The labor of the students and teachers is not paid. Their travel expenses are not reimbursed either. Some teachers also complained that in order to resolve the food deficit in the region, Turabjon Djurayev, the *khokim* (governor) of the region, mandated local schools to organize small farms to breed cattle and poultry.[13]

The victims cannot find any remedy within the judicial system or law enforcement because it only serves the interests of members of the economic and political elites.

In addition, the U.S. Bureau of Diplomatic Security also admits that organized crime, which is thought to be widespread in Uzbekistan, touches the expatriate community but not very often. Thus, it is difficult for the victims to escape retribution even if they flee Uzbekistan.

Corruption is pervasive within the Uzbek police as well. Corruption exists in the entire chain of command of the police; bribes are often passed along to senior officers. The local police often demand irregular payments from drivers and extort bribes from criminal suspects. There are reports that the police detain people on false charges as an intimidation tactic to prevent individuals from exposing cases of corruption. Police investigations and detention of prominent

[13] Сурхандарья "закипает" из-за поборов местных властей (Surkhandarya is "boiling" because of exactions of the local authorities), UzNews, April 2011, http://www.uznews.net/news_single.php?lng=ru&sub=&cid=30&nid=16836

business people are presented by the government as part of anti-corruption efforts, but rather they are more often part of the disputes between the elite. In recent years, corruption in the police force has been fueled by the rise of criminal groups that control the currency exchange market. One in five businesses reports paying for security.[14]

The case of Nodirbek Hojimatov gives a glimpse into the mechanism of the corruption at work. On September 12, 2019 police in Shahrikhan, in eastern Uzbekistan, arrested Hojimatov, a blogger who writes about political and social issues on Facebook, according to reports by BBC Uzbek and the Uzbek service of the U.S. Congress-funded Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, known as Radio Ozodlik. A few days before the arrest, the blogger told Radio Ozodlik that a local prosecutor had pressured him to stop writing critical blog posts, according to the broadcaster.

The arrest was related to an open letter that Hojimatov published on Facebook on September 9, which was addressed to Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev and called on the president to launch a corruption investigation into two local officials. Following his arrest, the Shahrikhan district court sentenced Hojimatov to 10 days in prison for violating Article 41 of the country's administrative code, which refers to offenses against a person's dignity, according to those reports.

"In recent years, authorities in Uzbekistan have made steps to improve the press freedom environment. However, the imprisonment of blogger Nodirbek Hojimatov sends a signal that critical speech continues to be a punishable practice," said CPJ's Europe and Central Asia program coordinator, Gulnoza Said, in New York.

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14 Uzbekistan Corruption Report. Gan: Business Anticorruption Portal, June 2017. https://www.ganintegrity.com/portal/country-profiles/uzbekistan/

Hojimatov's open letter alleged that an Andijan regional governor and a Shahrikhan district governor were undeserving of presidential awards they recently received, and alleged that they were involved in corruption in local construction projects. The letter also claimed that Hojimatov had received threats from both officials. According to Article 41 of Uzbekistan's administrative code, punishment for offending a person's dignity can carry a fine of up to 8.9 million Uzbek sums ($950), but the code does not stipulate any jail sentence. Hojimatov's father told Radio Ozodlik that neither he nor his son were allowed to testify at the trial, and he said that Hojimatov did not have a lawyer.[15] Arbitrary courts, lack of legal defense and impunity of the authorities allow the regime to punish those who dare stand up against corruption in the country.

In general, Uzbekistan suffers from unleashed corruption. Uzbekistan is the 146th most corrupt nation out of 180 countries, according to the 2020 Corruption Perceptions Index reported by Transparency International.[16]

Uzbekistan received a score of 33 out of 100 on the 2023 Corruption Perceptions Index, as documented by Transparency International. The country's Corruption Index has maintained an average of 22.08 points from 1999 to 2023, peaking at its highest recorded level of 33.00 points in 2023.[17]

In order to control the population, the Uzbekistan government preserved the Soviet system of *propiska*. Every citizen or inhabitant of the country must be registered in the police and to obtain from them a stamp in his/her passport or an identification document for non-citizens which indicates the person's address. Without police permission the person cannot move

[15] Uzbek blogger Nodirbek Hojimatov sentenced to 10 days in prison for Facebook post. Committee to Protect Journalists, September 16, 2019. https://cpj.org/2019/09/uzbek-blogger-nodirbek-hojimatov-sentenced-to-10-d.php
[16] Uzbekistan. Transparency International, 2020. https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/uzbekistan
[17] Uzbekistan Corruption Index. Trading Economics, no date. https://tradingeconomics.com/uzbekistan/corruption-index

from one place to another. The system of the *propiska* is an effective instrument to control the population.

Moreover, the Uzbekistan authorities strengthened this system by dividing the administrative units in cities into smaller divisions. If under the Soviets, the smallest division was ‘raion’ or district; nowadays in Uzbekistan the smallest division is mahallah or mahallah committee. The purpose of the mahallah is to administer the neighborhood and to police the population regarding the *propiska* and political views of the population.

Due to the preservation of the system of *propiska* in Uzbekistan, the government regulates the migration and relocation of the citizens. Every person who moves from one place to another is a subject of government checks. The person must be registered by the police and Mahallah authorities and without their permission cannot reside anywhere.

In sum, in Uzbekistan, the extremely authoritarian government is fused with political elite networks and organized crime, which use nepotism, regionalism and corruption to advance their interests at the expense of government resources, while regular citizens are stripped of their rights and freedoms and have absolutely no recourse to widespread human rights violations.

There are no signs of improvement of human rights in Uzbekistan even to the present day with President Mirziyoyev after Karimov’s death. In fact, the situation can be characterized as critical. The political leadership that has not changed in Uzbekistan for decades, but has only experienced strategic reshuffling by unchallenged President Islam Karimov, and his successor President Mirziyoyev.

The abuse of human rights and the inhumane and degrading treatment of those opposed to the government or fighting for freedom and human rights continues to be an increasingly serious problem in Uzbekistan.

In January and February 2019, the Council of State Security began to spread "alarming" information that the Erk party planned mass disorders and protests in Uzbekistan in March and April 2019. The leadership of the Erk pointed out that the Uzbek government's campaign attempts to renew the image of the Erk as an enemy of the state.[18] This is a very dangerous development. The new campaign targets members of the party and shows that the regime is looking for new opportunities to suppress the opposition movement, which is in deep underground in Uzbekistan. It is very symptomatic that the Erk party became the primary target of this campaign.

The new campaign obviously targets those who left the country and settled in the West. It is clear due to the fact that Erk members as well as members of other opposition parties and groupings as well as ordinary individuals who disagree with the Uzbek regime left the country.

Freedom in the World 2019 estimated the following for Uzbekistan:

Aggregate Freedom Score 9 (least free = 0 and most free = 100)

Freedom Rating 6.5/7

Political Rights 7/7

Civil Liberties 6/7 where 1=Most Free, 7=Least Free

The same source points out that while ongoing reforms under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev have led to improvements on some issues, Uzbekistan remains a consolidated authoritarian regime. No genuine opposition parties operate legally. The legislature and judiciary effectively serve as instruments of the executive branch, which initiates reforms by decree, and the media remains tightly controlled by the state. Reports of torture and other ill-treatment remain common, although highly publicized cases of abuse have led to dismissals and

[18] Muhammad Salih. Заявление Центрального Совета демократической партии "Эрк" (Statement of the Central Council of the Erk Democrat Party. O'zbekistan Xalq Harakati, March 3, 2019. https://uzxalqharakati.com/ru/archives/24533

prosecutions for some officials. Despite some high-profile releases, the government still holds numerous prisoners on political or religious grounds.[19]

The presidential elections which took place on July 9, 2023 gave Shavkat Mirziyoyev 87.1% of the vote results paving his way to another seven years in power. Three other candidates ran in the election, but all represented parties that support the president.[20] Mirziyoev received another seven years of presidency which would be, undoubtedly, a continuation of his dictatorial politics.

The parliamentary elections in Uzbekistan on October 27, 2024, have drawn sharp criticism from international observers and analysts. The political landscape remained heavily restricted, depriving voters of any real choice. All participating candidates were from the five officially registered political parties, none of which represented a genuine opposition to President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's regime. This lack of political diversity resulted in a parliament dominated entirely by pro-government forces, undermining the democratic process. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) highlighted that fundamental freedoms, such as the rights to association, peaceful assembly, and expression, continue to be severely curtailed by both legislation and practice. Furthermore, tight control over the media limited voters' exposure to alternative viewpoints, further suppressing democratic engagement. The absence of real opposition and continued suppression of key civil liberties have raised serious doubts about Uzbekistan's genuine commitment to democratic values.[21]

Even minor criticism triggers a severe response from the government, as exemplified by the case of Gayrat Dustov.The incarceration of a regular driver who ended up in jail after his

[19] Uzbekistan. Freedom in the World 2019. https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedomworld/2019/uzbekistan
[20] Uzbek leader re-elected for seven-year term in snap election. Reuters, July 10, 2023. https://www.reuters.com/world/uzbek-leader-re-elected-seven-year-term-snap-election-2023-07-10/
[21] Parties loyal to Uzbekistan's president win parliament seats in election devoid of real opposition. AP, October 28, 2024. https://apnews.com/article/uzbekistan-election-mirziyoyev-opposition-727630591da7ab4c887346b1ba363d69

outburst over fuel scarcity gained widespread attention. Gayrat Dustov shared his expletive-filled complaint late 2024 from a gas station in Tashkent, the nation's capital. “Surely in a democratic state where there is freedom of speech, freedom of citizens and supremacy of the law, I have the right to speak?” Mr Dustov asked. Evidently, the answer was no. A court promptly sentenced him to 15 days in detention on charges of hooliganism.

Scores of individuals have been incarcerated under a law enacted by President Mirziyoyev in 2021, which criminalizes criticism of the president and carries a sentence of up to five years behind bars. One woman was even jailed in 2024 for charges that included making comments about Mirziyoyev in private voice recordings.[22]

Uzbekistan continues to lack genuine democracy, with the regime’s authoritarian control upheld through political repression, silencing of dissent, and state-sponsored violence. Real political power remains tightly concentrated in the hands of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, leaving little room for opposition. Government critics face intimidation, arbitrary arrests, and torture in detention. Numerous human rights organizations have documented severe mistreatment of detainees by law enforcement. Freedom of expression is severely restricted, with independent journalists and activists frequently targeted and imprisoned. Rather than promoting democratic development, the government prioritizes suppressing civil society and eliminating dissent, highlighting its authoritarian nature and disregard for basic rights and democratic values.

Uzbekistan is one of the most repressive states which emerged after the Soviet Union collapsed.

Several members of the most prominent Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan and the Independent Organization of Human Rights in Uzbekistan were imprisoned for their activities.

[22] The fate of a ranting driver raises doubts about the “new” Uzbekistan. *The Economist*, January 23, 2025. https://www.economist.com/asia/2025/01/23/the-fate-of-a-ranting-driver-raises-doubts-about-the-new-uzbekistan

The Uzbekistan authorities use psychiatric wards and their personnel against the regime's opponents. Uzbek security services (the SNB – National Security Service, renamed the State Security Service (SGB) in 2018) are notorious for "extraordinarily gruesome ways of torturing and even killing" to keep opponents of the regime under control. SNB (SGB) torture methods include putting "a gas mask on the face of the detainee, and then cutting off the air supply by blocking the filters…" "…causing death by immersing the suspect into a drum of boiling water, and shackling normal, healthy suspects next to incurable tuberculosis patients in hospitals or prison cells."[23]

In 2020, the United Nations Human Rights Committee review of Uzbekistan expressed concerns about persistent torture in detention, political prisoners, and limits on basic freedoms. In particular, the Committee expressed concerns about "torture and ill-treatment of people deprived of liberty, as well as restrictions on the freedom of conscience and religious belief, freedom of association and peaceful assembly." The committee also flagged "continued reports of torture and ill-treatment, including sexual violence and rape, by prison officials and law enforcement personnel against persons deprived of liberty, including individuals detained on what appear to be politically motivated charges."[24]

The case of Alexander Trofimov vividly illustrates the Uzbek police practices. Alexander Trofimov, 29-year-old father of two, who is registered as disabled, was tortured by police on 6 and 7 May 6-7, 2021 while being detained at Chilanzar District Police Directorate in the capital city of Tashkent without contact with the outside world.[25]

[23] Dilip Hiro. Inside Central Asia: A Political And Cultural History Of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkey And Iran. Overlook Duckworth: New York, 2009, p. 154.
[24] Uzbekistan: UN Cites Concerns on Torture, Freedoms. Human Rights Watch, April 6, 2020. https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/08/uzbekistan-un-cites-concerns-torture-freedoms#
[25] Uzbekistan: authorities must investigate allegations of torture against Alexander Trofimov. IPHR, June 4, 2021. https://www.iphronline.org/uzbekistan-alexander-trofimov.html

Human rights violations within prisons include torture, denials of medical care, and denials of the possibility to read sacred texts and pray openly. In one of a number of recent cases, in November 2020 prison guards tortured a Muslim man for praying the namaz (Islamic daily prayers). "The prison officers beat him up really badly, leaving bruises on his body and face," family members who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals revealed. "Why did the authorities punish him simply for praying the namaz? What day and age do we live in?"

Prisoner of conscience Tulkun Astanov, jailed in 2021 for defending Muslims' freedom of religion and belief, has been put under special surveillance. Prison authorities removed copies of the Koran, Constitution, and Criminal Code from the prison library when they realised he wanted to read them. He has been tortured by being "beaten on his body on 30 June 2021 for praying the namaz in prison". His wife told that "he has lost 25 kg of weight since he was jailed". Prison authorities also send prisoners – such as Astanov - to prisons far from their homes as an apparent part of their punishment. Against Uzbekistan's binding international human rights obligations under the UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, no official suspected of involvement in torture of people who exercised their freedom of religion or belief is known to have been arrested and put on criminal trial for torture.

Despite this, Aziza Kenzhayeva of the International Section of the Interior Ministry's Chief Directorate for the Enforcement of Punishments claimed in February 2021 that "there are no problems in Uzbekistan's prisons today".[26] The brutality of the Uzbek law enforcement is notorious and the police officers have no mercy for anyone. Torture and other forms of ill-

[26] Mushfig Bayram and John Kinahan. Forum 18 UZBEKISTAN: Religious freedom survey, November 2021. Forum 18, November 26, 2021. https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2699

treatment continued to be pervasive in detention facilities, while those responsible for such abuses frequently escaped accountability.[27]

The regime uses torture in order to intimidate the population and to fabricate cases against real and alleged enemies of the regime among political opponents, religious people and ethnic minorities. Using a broad arsenal of torture techniques the regime suppresses ethnic and sexual minorities as well as religious people who exercise the freedom of religion.

The government controls the population through the mandatory police registration, and recently issued *mahallah* (neighborhood) management files on dwellers. Any person is a subject of police harassment and abuse. The harsh treatment of the opposition, religious activists and often ordinary religious people is the policy of the Uzbekistan government. Other minorities also experience government pressure.

Overall, the regime continues its repressive policy toward dissenters. Human Rights Watch stresses that serious violations persist, including torture in prison, many people jailed on politically motivated charges, and severe limits on freedom of assembly, speech, and association. While real opposition practically does not exist in the country, President Mirziyoyev has no inclination to allow it to come from abroad, where the vast majority of Uzbekistan government's critics fled from persecution. [28] As a prominent dissident Silmurod Saidov states: "The old team is still in place." [29]

The government uses its power to quell the opposition. It persecutes those who dare stand up against the regime and mercilessly deals with them. Torture, labor camps and killings are

[27] Uzbekistan 2023. The Amnesty International, 2024. https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/europe-and-central-asia/eastern-europe-and-central-asia/uzbekistan/report-uzbekistan/

[28] Мирзияев заявил, что не допустит в страну оппозицию, которая приходит из-за границы (Mirziyoyev Stated That He Would Not Allow Opposition Which Comes From Abroad). Belyi Parus, December 30, 2019. https://paruskg.info/u_sosedey/170054-mirzijaev-zajavil-chto-ne-dopustit-v-stranu-oppoziciju-kotoraja-prihodit-iz-za-granicy.html#sel=1:12,3:3

[29] Dissidents under late Uzbek leader still out in the cold. France 24, July 10, 2019. https://www.france24.com/en/20191007-dissidents-under-late-uzbek-leader-still-out-in-the-cold

major methods of suppressing the opposition and active members of ethnic and religious minorities. The police and the SGB being major instruments in the hands of the regime commit atrocities against the political opponents which are considered as a threat to the regime and integrity of Uzbek society. *The Economist* points out: The Intelligence services' continued clout creates a "climate of fear" and 'adversely affects" judicial independence according to the UN rapporteur.[30] The security services retain vast powers to detain perceived critics, and there is no genuine political pluralism.[31]

The regime in Uzbekistan removes its critics and opponents using all possible means in order to clear the way for the repressive regime. The government under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev continues the policies of the late Islam Karimov. The number of political prisoners is still counted in the thousands, and the security services rule the country.

Uzbekistan's government stands as one of the most oppressive in the post-Soviet region, maintaining an iron grip on power through a rigidly centralized authoritarian structure that leaves no room for dissent. Under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, the regime has reinforced the legacy of Islam Karimov, perpetuating widespread political repression, state-sanctioned brutality, and systematic violations of fundamental rights. The State Security Service (SGB) operates with complete impunity, employing arbitrary detentions, physical abuse, and coercive tactics to silence opposition. Political pluralism is effectively nonexistent—independent parties are systematically denied registration, and those who dare to challenge the ruling elite face relentless persecution. Even the mildest forms of dissent, from online criticism to peaceful demonstrations, provoke severe retaliation, leading to extended prison terms or extrajudicial punishment.

[30] Blind Obedience. *The Economist*, April 11, 2020, p. 27.
[31] Uzbekistan: Events of 2019. Human Rights Watch, 2020. https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/uzbekistan#

The cruelty of the state is perhaps most evident in the treatment of detainees and prisoners, many of whom endure appalling conditions. Torture is not just a method of control but a routine practice within Uzbekistan's detention centers. Human rights organizations continue to document harrowing cases of inmates being subjected to electric shocks, severe beatings, and psychological torment, often forced to confess to crimes they never committed. Medical neglect is rampant, and prisoners from religious and ethnic minority groups face even harsher treatment. Muslim detainees have been physically assaulted for practicing their faith, while copies of the Quran are confiscated to prevent worship. The brutal crackdown in Karakalpakstan in 2022 stands as a stark reminder of the regime's reliance on violence to maintain absolute control.

Freedom of speech, assembly, and association are virtually nonexistent in Uzbekistan, with the government exercising near-total control over media and public discourse. Independent journalists, bloggers, and activists live under constant threat, facing harassment, imprisonment, or forced exile for voicing criticism. Even private remarks about the government can lead to detention, as authorities monitor online activity and communications with increasing sophistication. State-controlled media serves as a propaganda tool, drowning out alternative viewpoints and reinforcing the regime's narrative. Meanwhile, the judiciary functions not as an independent institution but as an extension of state power, rubber-stamping politically motivated verdicts and imposing harsh sentences on anyone deemed a threat. Uzbekistan remains one of the most repressive regimes in the world, where human rights violations are not exceptions but the norm, embedded into the very structure of governance.