

Uzbekistan

by Sarah Kendzior

Capital: Tashkent
Population: 30.8 million
GNI/capita, PPP: US\$5,830

Source: World Bank *World Development Indicators*.

Nations in Transit Ratings and Averaged Scores

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
National Democratic Governance	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00
Electoral Process	6.75	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00
Civil Society	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00
Independent Media	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00
Local Democratic Governance	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75
Judicial Framework and Independence	6.75	6.75	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00
Corruption	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75
Democracy Score	6.82	6.86	6.89	6.93	6.93	6.93	6.93	6.93	6.93	6.93

NOTE: The ratings reflect the consensus of Freedom House, its academic advisers, and the author(s) of this report. If consensus cannot be reached, Freedom House is responsible for the final ratings. The ratings are based on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 representing the highest level of democratic progress and 7 the lowest. The Democracy Score is an average of ratings for the categories tracked in a given year. The opinions expressed in this report are those of the author(s).

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

May 13, 2015 marked the 10th anniversary of the Andijon massacre, when Uzbek troops fired on a crowd assembled in a public square in the eastern Ferghana city of Andijon, killing at least 700 citizens. Though Andijon was barely mentioned by the Uzbek government, save for the release of a popular propaganda movie titled *Traitor*, the ramifications of the tragedy continued to shape Uzbek life as they have for the past decade. President Islom Karimov maintained the mostly isolationist stance he has embraced since 2005, vowing not to join military or economic alliances. Germany closed its military base at Termez at the end of the year that had supported Afghanistan operations, bringing to an end the last remaining Western military base in Central Asia.

Despite the government's isolationism, Uzbekistan's economy is dependent on Russia through its heavy reliance on migrant labor remittances. The Russian currency crisis and tightening of work restrictions for Central Asian migrants negatively impacted Uzbekistan's economy, prompting a black market currency crisis in the fall. Uzbekistan also bore the international fallout from presidential daughter Gulnara Karimova's corruption scandals in the telecommunications industry, which drove away major international investors like the Swedish telecoms giant TeliaSonera. Karimova remained under house arrest for all of 2015, while both her business associates and the state officials who prosecuted them were arrested under allegations of corruption. The arrests of Karimova's prosecutors, many of whom had served in the national security services, signaled an internal power struggle among Uzbek elites.

In October, US Secretary of State John Kerry visited Uzbekistan, prompting international human rights groups to implore him to convince the Uzbek government to release political prisoners. Shortly after Kerry's visit, political prisoner Murod Juraev, held since 1995, was released in what appears to be a token gesture. Uzbekistan's other political prisoners remain incarcerated while harassment, arrests, and abuse of Uzbekistan's few remaining human rights activists continued throughout the year. In July, the State Department upgraded Uzbekistan from Tier 3 to Tier 2 in its annual human-trafficking report due to an alleged cessation in the use of child labor in the cotton fields. Uzbek citizens and activists noted that while child labor may have lessened, adults were still being forced to work the fields under brutal conditions. Although overseen by local authorities, the forced cotton labor industry is an apparatus of the state. In October, local officials in the Ferghana region allegedly instructed laborers to glue white tufts of cotton back onto their bolls to give an impression of a bountiful harvest in anticipation of a visit by Prime Minister Shavkat Mirziyayev.

In March, President Karimov was reelected for a fourth presidential term with 90 percent of the vote, despite a constitutional amendment that limits the presidency to two terms. Karimov's opposing candidates sang Karimov's praises during their own campaigns, and the election was criticized as unfair and unfree by international organizations such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Throughout 2015, the government continued to target Uzbekistan's few remaining human rights activists, subjecting them to torture, sexual assault, forced hospitalization, and persecution of their families. Pious Muslims were also targets of state harassment, as security services forced women to remove their hijabs and banned children from religious celebrations.

Independent media remained nearly non-existent, but social media proved a lively avenue through which Uzbeks documented the harsh conditions of daily life, particularly the use of forced labor in the cotton industry. Social media campaigns showcased mounting frustration among Uzbeks and in some cases, a willingness to protest their plight, with the most popular campaign involved Uzbeks proclaiming "We are not afraid" to state officials. But protest on the ground remained minimal, as most Uzbeks are primarily concerned with surviving in a weak economy made more vulnerable by the Russian economic crisis.

No score changes.

Outlook for 2016: As Russia's economic crisis continues, Uzbekistan will face a deepening shortage of labor opportunities both at home and abroad. Shrinking remittances are cutting into the supply of foreign hard currency, and 2015's black market currency crisis will likely continue. Economic instability could potentially lead to domestic unrest, although the likelihood of mass protest in authoritarian Uzbekistan remains slim. It is more likely that Uzbeks will continue to use the social media groups they created in 2015 to document corruption and the hardship of daily life. Crackdowns on free expression and religious expression will continue, particularly given the void in religious leadership following the death of Islamic leader Muhammad Sodik Muhammad Yusuf in 2015 and unease among state officials about Islamic fundamentalism. Internationally, the Uzbek government, now without any formal Western military presence in the country, will seek to maintain a mostly isolationist stance while retaining close economic ties with Russia.

MAIN REPORT

National Democratic Governance

2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00

- May 13, 2015 marked the ten-year anniversary of the shooting of over 700 Uzbek citizens by the state in Andijon. The Uzbek government largely ignored the occasion save for the release of the film *Sotqin* (“Traitor”), a parable version of the Andijon events that centers around Islamic extremists set to destabilize Uzbekistan with the help of foreign powers.¹ The film, which featured a number of high-profile Uzbek actors, was one of the most popular of 2015. Other celebrities, most notably famous singer Yulduz Usmanova, who had previously used her platform to criticize the Uzbek state, gave statements near the time of the anniversary praising Karimov and justifying his actions in Andijon.²
- Uzbekistan suffered from economic problems in 2015, in part as a result of decreased Russian remittances connected with the crash of the ruble and the declining Russian economy. In January, The Heritage Foundation think tank and The Wall Street Journal ranked Uzbekistan 160 out of 178 countries in terms of economic freedom.³ By March, remittances from Russia to Uzbekistan had dropped 15.5 percent, and by the end of the year they were down by 58 percent.⁴⁵ Already in February, Uzbek migrants began posting songs on social media describing their economic plight: “It became hard for us Uzbeks/ Your ‘rubles’ Putin *aka*/ Became converted to pennies in our country/ What have you done ‘Putin *aka*’?”⁶ It is difficult to obtain statistics as to how deeply Russia’s economic problems have affected Uzbeks, in no small part because the government denies the pervasiveness of migrant labor. In 2013, Karimov denounced migrants as “lazy” for working in other countries.⁷
- By fall 2015, Uzbekistan was experiencing a crisis in black market currency similar to that in other Central Asian states, although it was compounded by the longstanding existence of official and black market currency rates that typically diverge by about 25–30 percent. In October, the black market rate of the Uzbek soʻm skyrocketed to 5,700 soʻm to the US dollar, while the official rate remained at 2,836, around half of the black market rate. Media reported panic over the currency’s rapid depreciation.⁸ Though no Uzbek officials have responded to the currency crisis, independent reports on Uzbek social media said it led to dozens of businesses going bankrupt.⁹
- Uzbekistan experienced changes in its national intellectual leadership in 2015. In March, Uzbekistan’s most prominent Muslim leader, Muhammad Sodiq Muhammad Yusuf, died of a heart attack.¹⁰ Like Karimov, with whom he had an uneasy relationship, Yusuf had served in a state capacity since 1989, becoming independent Uzbekistan’s first mufti in 1991. His death left a void in state-sanctioned Islamic leadership that has not yet been filled. In August, Uzbeks reckoned with a different intellectual gap as state officials—many of whom had degrees in political science—banned the field in Uzbekistan, declaring it a useless discipline.¹¹
- Though connected to the world through its offshore bank accounts and migrant labor, officially Uzbekistan retained the relatively isolationist stance it has held since 2005. In January, likely in reference to the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union that Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan had joined, Karimov declared Uzbekistan would never join a large alliance like the USSR or host a foreign military on its territory.¹² In October, the Uzbek government ended its agreement to let Germany’s military use the base in Termez, closing the last Western military installation in former Soviet Central Asia.¹³ In November, Karimov met briefly with US Secretary of State John Kerry, and Uzbek security officials expelled a US reporter who asked about human rights during the conversation.¹⁴

Electoral Process

2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
6.75	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00

- Since Uzbekistan gained independence from the Soviet Union in late 1991, it has not had an election judged free or fair by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). That pattern continued in 2015.¹⁵ President Karimov, who has been president of Uzbekistan since independence, won his fourth consecutive term on March 29 with 90 percent of the vote amid 91 percent turnout.¹⁶ He was sworn in less than two weeks later. Karimov nominally represented the Liberal Democratic Party of Uzbekistan (LDPU) and ran against three little-known candidates: Khotamjon Ketmonov of the People’s Democratic Party (PDPU), Nariman Umarov of the Adolat (Justice) Social Democratic Party, and Akmal Saidov of the Milliy Tiklanish (National Revival) Party, all of whom praised Karimov and his policies during their own campaigns. OSCE monitors said the election lacked meaningful opposition to Karimov and was marred by legal and organizational shortcomings.¹⁷ In the spring, Uzbek dissidents protested Karimov’s reinstatement by creating a website called Virtual Uzbekistan and holding a “virtual election” in which the banned opposition candidates ran against each other in an online vote.¹⁸
- As the OSCE noted, Karimov’s fourth-term reelection violated Uzbekistan’s constitution, which states that the same person cannot be president for more than two consecutive terms. In December 2011, Uzbekistan’s parliament had reduced the presidential term to five years, creating a flimsy legal loophole for Karimov by arguing that the change had reset the constitutional two-term limit. While Karimov’s 2015 reelection was criticized by international media and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), Russia supported it, with the head of the Commonwealth of Independent States election monitoring mission, Sergei Lebedev—Russia’s former director of Foreign Intelligence Services and a confidante of President Vladimir Putin—declaring that the election complied with “democratic principles.”¹⁹
- Uzbekistan has four registered political parties—the LDPU, PDPU, Adolat, and Milliy Tiklanish—that are allowed to nominate candidates and participate in elections. All support the president. On March 14, the LDPU and Milliy Tiklanish announced that they had formed a “Bloc of Democratic Forces” in parliament. The two parties did not specify what policies they hoped to implement with their newfound majority but they will likely echo the predetermined platforms of the central government, as political parties in Uzbekistan have done for the past two decades.²⁰
- On February 2, one month before the election, Uzbekistan’s national security services announced that ISIS was planning to carry out a series of terrorist attacks in Uzbekistan in the spring.²¹ The remarks prompted some Uzbek exiles and analysts to wonder if Karimov was attempting to stoke fear in the population before the election to encourage them to embrace a strong and continuous security state. The ISIS attacks did not materialize and there is little evidence that ISIS has a presence in Uzbekistan. In November, the government arrested over 200 alleged “ISIS sympathizers,” most of them migrant workers returning from Russia, in a move Uzbekistani human rights groups said was a ploy to spread fear of Islamic militancy and obtain funding to fight terrorism.²²

Civil Society

2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00

- Only a few small independent rights organizations remain in Uzbekistan. As in previous years, these activists faced harassment, prosecution, and violence throughout 2015. Elena Urlaeva, the 58-year-old

head of the Human Rights Alliance of Uzbekistan and a long-time Uzbekistani activist, remained a prominent target of the state. On May 31 she was detained by police in Chinaz, a town 60 kilometers from Tashkent, and subjected to violence and sexual humiliation after she gathered evidence of forced labor in the cotton sector. She said that her family members and fellow activists were also interrogated.²³

- The attack on Urlaeva followed the February awarding of South Korea's Tji Haksoon Justice and Peace award to Urlaeva and fellow UHRD activist Shukhrat Rustamov. The authorities denied Urlaeva and Rustamov exit visas to leave Uzbekistan and prevented them from traveling to Seoul to receive the award.²⁴ In November, prominent human rights activist Uktam Pardaev, head of the Independent Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan, was arrested in Jizzakh on charges of extortion and bribery. Prior to his arrest, he reported that friends as well as citizens he helped had been interrogated and tortured by the state security services, or SNB.²⁵ Pardaev remained in detention through the end of the year.
- In September, Urlaeva and Malohat Eshonqulova of the Birdamlik (Solidarity) movement were arrested and subjected to body cavity searches by a gynecologist in the presence of male police officers. Their requests for privacy during the invasive search were denied.²⁶ The same month, police detained and reportedly beat activist Dmitriy Tikhonov after he photographed teachers and older students being mobilized to pick cotton. In October he was summoned to answer charges filed against him based on a complaint filed by local government officials. Upon his return home, Tikhonov discovered that his office containing records of his investigations of human rights abuses by state authorities had been burned to the ground, and digital copies of his evidence stolen.²⁷
- Over the past two decades, Uzbek activists, including Urlaeva and a nephew of President Karimov, Jamshid Karimov, have been forcibly placed into psychiatric clinics by security officials. This tactic continued throughout 2015. On March 12, Shukhrat Rustamov told RFE/RL that activist Aliqul Sarimsoqov, who had gone missing, was forcibly confined to a psychiatric clinic in his native city of Jizzakh.²⁸ Prior to being committed, Sarimsoqov had participated in public rallies against the reelection of President Karimov.
- Having silenced Sarimsoqov, Uzbek officials moved on to his colleague Rustamov, who had documented Sarimsoqov's forced hospitalization. On August 18, the Tashkent City Court upheld the decision of the Shajhantahurskiy Regional Court of Common Pleas, which had declared Rustamov "mentally incompetent."²⁹ The court relied on a medical examination which Rustamov says was never conducted. Though observers expected Rustamov to be forcibly hospitalized after the ruling, it ultimately did not occur—instead, on October 28, Rustamov was detained by security officials and taken to an undisclosed location. At the time of his detention, Rustamov had authored 855 complaints addressed to the prime minister against inaction on the part of officials and sent them to the cabinet of ministers.³⁰ In late 2015, Rustamov was released, after the notoriety of the state's declaration of mental incompetence had attracted even more attention to his human rights activities. Ferghana.ru reported he had authored another 500 complaints since July and petitioned the UN to investigate human rights abuses in Uzbekistan.³¹
- As in previous years, Uzbek officials attempted to suppress criticism of the state by intimidating and arresting the relatives of prominent activists, even those living outside of the country. In April, Aman Sagidullaev, the leader of the "Alga, Karakalpakstan!" (Karakalpakstan, Forward!) independence movement, said that Uzbek authorities had arrested five of his brothers in Uzbekistan over his political activities.³² Sagidullaev has lived in exile in Kyrgyzstan since 2012 and is wanted in Uzbekistan for "economic crimes." His case mirrors other recent state attacks on exiles' families, such as the arrest of the US-based Birdamlik ("Solidarity") party leader Bahodir Choriyev's father in Uzbekistan in 2013.
- Throughout 2015 state authorities cracked down on expressions of Muslim piety, as they have in past years. In April national security service officers patrolled bazaars and forced women wearing

headscarves to remove them.³³ In September the government issued a decree banning children from attending mosques during Eid, threatening to fine parents \$750 if they brought them.³⁴

Independent Media

2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00

- In late December 2014, the website UzNews.net—a major Uzbek, Russian, and English language source for news from Uzbekistan—shut down after ten years in operation. The site had long documented corruption, episodes of state violence like the 2005 Andijon massacre and its aftermath, forced labor in the cotton fields, and the nuances of state politics, among other topics that enraged state officials. On November 10, 2014 editor-in-chief Galima Bukharbayeva’s email account had been hacked and confidential documents from it posted online, endangering the website’s journalists in Uzbekistan.³⁵ The closure of UzNews was a sharp blow to independent reporting from Uzbekistan as it was the most frequently updated multilingual independent site for local news. Remaining sources of independent information include the Uzbek-language Ozodlik service; its English-language counterpart, RFE/RL; Ferghana News; and Eurasianet, all of which are blocked in Uzbekistan.
- Social media continued to play a large role in Uzbek politics, with several Facebook pages run mainly by exiled Uzbeks receiving a large amount of traffic and followers. New Facebook groups dedicated to topics like corruption and the migrant labor crisis emerged in 2015. One of the most notable groups was “Qo’rqmaymiz” (“We are not afraid”),³⁶ which launched in August 2014 but gained the majority of its over 12,000 members in 2015.³⁷ The “Qo’rqmaymiz” page began with Uzbeks posting pictures of themselves holding signs that proclaimed “Qo’rqmaymiz,” but evolved into a popular discussion group on Uzbek politics in which everyone from state officials to Hizb-ut Tahrir members to dissidents to ordinary Uzbeks participated. “Qo’rqmaymiz” is also a major avenue for the circulation of articles from sites censored in Uzbekistan, who are able to follow links and discussion about them through Facebook, which the Uzbek government has not blocked.
- In August, a bridge collapse in the western city of Urgench killed an unknown number of Uzbek spectators who had gathered on it to watch a concert.³⁸ The collapse highlighted Uzbekistan’s decaying infrastructure and the incompetence of local officials in fixing it. The website Kun.uz took the surprising step of posting comments from anonymous witnesses criticizing local officials.³⁹ “Why did they allow so many people on the bridge? Why didn’t they call for more control?” one asked. “The irresponsibility of the security services was to a great extent what led to this tragedy.” Earlier in the year Kun.uz—a BuzzFeed-style news site that is tolerated but not run by the Uzbek government—had reported on bus crashes and other small-scale disasters in Uzbekistan that highlighted the incompetence of regional officials.⁴⁰ Kun.uz’s articles were popular on Uzbek social media, while state media remained silent on Urgench and other tragedies.
- As in previous years, Uzbek officials continued attempts to censor the internet by cloaking their initiatives in rhetoric about the morality of youth. On February 25, Uzbek lawmakers passed a decree requiring internet cafes and computer clubs to close by 9 p.m. and banning minors from internet cafes during school hours. The decree said internet cafes were having a “negative impact on underage youth” and contributed to the “growing incidence of violence committed by minors.”⁴¹ In August, Isokjon Begmatov, the imam at Tashkent’s Tukhtaboy Mosque, called upon Muslims to reject the use of the internet and cellular phones.⁴²
- The Uzbek government took new steps to coopt online media in 2015, launching national campaigns intended to showcase patriotism, starting in March with the state-sanctioned hashtag campaign #WithKarimov prior to the presidential elections. Uzbek state media erroneously reported that #WithKarimov trended on Twitter worldwide.⁴³ In response to #WithKarimov, Uzbeks from around

the world began using the hashtag #WithUzbeks on Facebook and Twitter to show dissatisfaction with life under the current regime. On Twitter, users placed the hashtag next to photographs of Uzbeks living in poverty, *militsiya* officials on patrol, migrant workers in Russia, suffering children, and other images that highlight the difficulty of life in Uzbekistan. The #WithUzbeks and Qo'rqmaymiz initiatives show how the spread of forbidden information through social media has helped compensate for the closure of organized independent news agencies like UzNews. Social media, not traditional journalism, now poses the greatest obstacle to the censorship of the Uzbek state.

Local Democratic Governance

2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75

- In Uzbekistan, the state appoints key local officials based on their loyalty and ability to fulfill demands from Tashkent. Provincial governors are usually rotated every few years, apparently in order to prevent any single official from gaining significant power. *Mahallas*, or neighborhood councils, are the most localized level of governance, and expected to report suspicious activities to higher authorities in order to eliminate antigovernment sentiment.
- Despite years of international outcry, in 2015 local officials continued to follow national directives that force Uzbek citizens work in the country's cotton fields. Local officials in Uzbekistan are tasked with ensuring that enough residents work in cotton fields to meet government-set production targets. Bureaucrats who shirk their duty to support the national cotton industry risk punishment. Media attention on the cotton sector makes it one of the few areas in which local governance can be scrutinized, since the late 2014 shutdown of the website UzNews drastically reduced non state-sanctioned coverage of regional politics.
- In October, local officials in the Ferghana region reportedly instructed forced cotton laborers to glue white tufts of cotton back onto their bolls to give an impression of a bountiful harvest in anticipation of a visit by Prime Minister Shavkat Mirziyayev.⁴⁴ Over 400 workers were said to have participated in the gluing process at the order of the provincial governor. Several residents took photos of the process—part of a growing trend of citizen documentation of forced cotton labor.
- On social media, critical memes about cotton labor gained wide traction, prompting many Uzbeks to post their own stories of being forced into labor by local officials. On the Facebook page of the satirical website Troll UZB, a meme was created showing an image showing a smiling Uzbek schoolgirl holding her textbook and saying, “Hooray! I’m a student! In September I’ll start studying!” Below it, an image of a cotton plant says, “I don’t think so.”⁴⁵ Many Uzbeks shared stories of bribing local officials to get out of the harvest or not having the money to do so. The popularity of the meme, shared over 3,000 times, and related online discussion highlighted the inability of local officials to keep their labor practices secret.
- In July, Uzbekistan was upgraded from Tier 3 to the Tier 2 Watch List in the U.S. State Department’s annual human-trafficking report.⁴⁶ Reasons given for the upgrade were that the government is making significant efforts to eliminate trafficking, including through the government’s 2014 ban on forced child labor in the cotton harvest (although some children under 18 continued to be forced into the fields), as well as new fines targeting university directors and farms for exploitative practices. The International Labor Organization (ILO) will monitor the 2015–17 cotton harvests in five World Bank-funded project areas, after years of being denied access. Nonetheless, the State Department’s own report noted that Uzbekistan did not fully comply with “minimum standards” and that “serious concerns persist, as government-compelled forced labor of adults remained endemic in the 2014 cotton harvest.”⁴⁷ Numerous Uzbek citizens told Reuters that cotton labor practices remained brutal,

claiming that extortion, bullying, and threats of job loss forced them into the fields. Reuters spoke with State Department officials who said its own analysts had urged that Uzbekistan not be upgraded, but that they were overruled by senior diplomats.⁴⁸

Judicial Framework and Independence

2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
6.75	6.75	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00

- In 2015, Uzbekistan’s judiciary continued to function as a tool of the executive branch, serving interests of the president and the state, instead of protecting individuals’ rights and ensuring justice. Defense lawyers require approval of a Ministry of Justice-run body to practice. The presumption of innocence and right to a fair trial are guaranteed by Uzbekistan’s constitution but routinely ignored in detention facilities and courtrooms.⁴⁹
- On February 11, popular journalist, poet, and political commentator Hayrullo Hamidov was granted an early release from prison.⁵⁰ Hamidov, a sports journalist with wide appeal among Uzbek citizens, was arrested in 2010 for alleged links to an alleged extremist group called “Jihadists,” although there remains no evidence that such a group ever existed. The arrest followed Hamidov’s publication of poems and statements emphasizing Muslim piety and decrying the degradation of the Uzbek people under the Karimov regime. Following his release, Hamidov ceased criticism of his country’s conditions.
- In October, the UN Human Rights Committee ruled that Uzbekistan is obligated to investigate the claims of exiled activist Mutabar Tadjibayeva, who says authorities in Uzbekistan arrested and tortured her repeatedly from 2002 to 2009, violating the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which Uzbekistan acceded to in 1995.⁵¹ In their decision, the UN committee wrote that, “instead of providing detailed information and explanations to the Committee in refutation, the State party [Uzbekistan] accused the author [Tadjibayeva] of having presented ‘invented and biased’ allegations.” Uzbekistan state officials have shown no intention of following through with the UN’s request for an investigation of Tadjibayeva’s injuries, which include forced sterilization, wounds and trauma from torture and gang rape, and memory loss.
- In April, relatives of 26-year-old Kamoliddin Kuziev said that police murdered him after he was taken into custody on accusations of “hooliganism.” Uzbek police allege that Kuziev committed suicide while in detention. Kuziev’s brother, Bobomurod Kuziev, told RFE/RL that police brought Kamoliddin’s dead body to his family, told them he hanged himself in detention, and urged them to bury him “as soon as possible.” He added that the police had pre-dug his grave.⁵²
- In October, US Secretary of State John Kerry visited Uzbekistan, prompting Amnesty International to issue a plea that Kerry address Uzbekistan’s prison situation.⁵³ In a statement, Amnesty singled out A’zam Farmonov, Isroil Kholdorov and Muhammad Bekzhanov as “prisoners of conscience” whose sentences were victims of arbitrary extension of their prison sentences. In November, Uzbek dissident Murad Juraev, behind bars since 1995, was released, a move experts speculated was prompted by Kerry’s visit.⁵⁴

Corruption

2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
6.50	6.50	6.50	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75

- Corruption is systemic in Uzbekistan, which ranks 153rd in Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index, with a score that has improved by only two points on a 100-point scale since 2012.⁵⁵ The fallout from the Gulnara Karimova corruption scandal that began in 2012 continued throughout 2015. President Karimov’s first daughter remained under house arrest on corruption charges stemming from her illegal business transactions in the telecommunications industry that have allegedly cost the Uzbek government—or more precisely, the Karimov family and its associates—hundreds of millions of dollars.⁵⁶ In 2015, arrests extended beyond Karimova to her network of associates.
- In January, Uzbekistan convicted and sentenced as many as 60 directors, deputies, bookkeepers, and other employees of three enterprises associated with Karimova on financial fraud and embezzlement charges.⁵⁷ In March, the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) obtained documents that showed that Karimova received more than \$1 billion worth of payments and ownership shares from international telecom-related companies, destroying companies who did not meet her payment demands and “continuously bleeding her victims through extortion.”⁵⁸ OCCRP traced Karimova’s corporate crimes back nearly two decades. In August, nine more Karimova associates were arrested on corruption charges, among them two former senior managers of a local Coca-Cola bottler and her former financial advisor.⁵⁹
- In the second half of 2015, the corruption investigation began to spill over into domestic politics. In May, Jahangir Ghulomov, the former chief of the Ministry of Justice’s department tasked with implementing court decisions, was detained in Kazakhstan and extradited to Uzbekistan. Ghulomov, who had been responsible for confiscating the assets of Karimova, was charged with corruption and abuse of office.⁶⁰ That same month, Ghulomov’s uncle, Hayot Sharifhojaev, Uzbekistan’s top security official responsible for investigations against Karimova, was removed as first deputy of the National Security Service (NSS).⁶¹ In July, Sharifhojaev was arrested on corruption and embezzlement charges.⁶² His brother, NSS official Javdat Sharifhojaev, had been arrested on similar charges in May. It is difficult to ascertain the significance of the arrests of those who prosecuted Karimova given the murky environment of Uzbek elite politics. It is more likely that the arrests signal an internal power struggle among elites than that they indicate a change in the culture of corruption itself. By fall, Karimova’s scandals had driven at least two major European foreign investors from Uzbekistan—though some Russian investors remained committed—with Swedish telecom giant TeliaSonera pulling out in September.⁶³ In November, Norwegian telecoms group Telenor hired a law firm to independently investigate its handling of affiliate Vimpelcom’s entry into Uzbekistan. Vimpelcom was already under investigation by the United States and the Netherlands.⁶⁴

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Sarah Kendzior, PhD, is an analyst, researcher, and writer. She has published articles about Uzbekistan in a number of academic journals and mainstream news outlets.

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