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Fundamental Freedoms and Migration

2026-06-26



Centre for Documentation
and Counter Extremism


Migrationsverket

COUNTRY INFORMATION FOR THE PROCESSING OF MIGRATION CASES

This report has been prepared by the Swedish Migration Agency (SMA) and the Danish Immigration Service (DIS) in accordance with [the EUAA's methodology for producing country information](#) (2023). The report contains country information intended for use in the processing of migration cases.

The report is based on carefully selected sources of information. All sources are cited, with the exception of descriptions of generally known facts.

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Executive summary

Uzbekistan has undergone visible change since President Shavkat Mirziyoyev came to power in 2016. Public life is more open; religious expression is more visible, journalism and blogging have expanded and civil society has cautiously awakened. At the same time, the reform process has not produced systematic liberalisation, and the Uzbek state remains authoritarian and with a high centralisation around the presidency. The reforms are described as uneven, selective and to one extent increasingly stalled, with improvements in practice not matched by durable legal safeguards, independent courts or effective limits on executive and security-service power. Although Uzbekistan has moved away from the most overtly coercive practices of the Karimov period, it retains a flexible, discretionary control system in which openings coexist with authoritarian safeguards and targeted repression.

Uzbekistan's political system remains centered on the president and genuine political pluralism is absent. Registered parties are loyal to the government and opposition parties cannot operate legally, leading to elections that do not offer voters a real choice. The 2023 constitutional amendments strengthened presidential power, extended the presidential term and reset term limits, reinforcing the conclusion that reforms have consolidated rather than diluted executive authority.

With regards to religious practice, Islam has become more visible in everyday society, e.g. through the reopening of mosques, the public call to prayer, online religious discourse and a broader piety movement. Outward expressions of faith, including hijabs and beards, are more tolerated than in the past. However, the state continues to manage religion through assertive secularism and a state-sanctioned interpretation of Islam. All religious groups must register, unregistered religious activity remains criminalised, private religious education is prohibited, and religious literature and sermons are subject to state approval. The Committee for Religious Affairs, the Muftiate, mahallas, police and the State Security Service oversee religious institutions, clerics, online spaces and private gatherings.

Religious activity outside state-approved boundaries carries risk for believers. Independent imams, religious bloggers, unregistered groups, informal study circles, minority faith communities and persons associated with unofficial religious figures face greater exposure than ordinary worshippers attending state-sanctioned mosques. Enforcement is selective, discretionary and shaped by factors such as visibility, perceived influence, geography, local rivalries and security assessments. Vague extremism provisions allow the authorities to treat non-violent religious debate, online sharing, possession of unapproved material or alleged links to proscribed groups as security threats. Although violent extremist activity inside Uzbekistan is assessed as limited, with recruitment of Uzbek nationals occurring mainly abroad, the threat of extremism remains a central justification for broad control over religious and political expression.

A similar pattern is evident in the area of political freedoms and civic space. Freedom of speech, press, association and assembly are formally guaranteed, but remain severely restricted. The early reform period opened space for media outlets, bloggers and civic initiatives, particularly in certain areas. More recently, however, although not a return to the level of repression under Karimov, clear backsliding has taken place. For instance, in tightening of legislation and increasing intolerance of criticism, growing self-censorship, tighter control over online discourse and an increase in legal cases against journalists and bloggers. Critical discussion is possible only within formal or informal ‘red lines’, however there is no unison picture among the consulted sources regarding exactly what these red lines entail and whether they are clearly defined, suggesting a degree of unpredictability.

Civil society is under strict formal constraint, state interference and dominance of government-organised NGOs. Independent human rights organisations face major obstacles to registration, while activists working on politically sensitive issues risk harassment, surveillance, administrative charges or criminal prosecution.

The Uzbek authorities use a broad legal toolkit against perceived critics. Defamation or insult, including of the president, dissemination of false information, extortion, attacks against the constitutional order, separatism and extremism-related provisions are examples of legal provisions used to punish dissent. Punishments range from administrative detention, fines and short-term punishments to forced psychiatric detention to imprisonment. Informal pressure includes ‘prophylactic chats’, intimidation of relatives, blacklisting, physical attacks and online smear campaigns. Torture and ill-treatment persist as serious problems, especially in politically sensitive detention contexts, as illustrated by the aftermath of the 2022 Karakalpakstan unrest.

The Uzbek state’s view on migration has undergone a substantial shift since the Karimov era. The requirement for exit visas has been abolished, and labor migration is structurally embedded in Uzbekistan’s economy and broadly accepted as necessary. Ordinary residence, study or work abroad is generally perceived with little suspicion. However, certain factors may trigger dubiety, among these – although not exclusively - the duration and country of residence, political or religious activity abroad, online conduct, diaspora contacts and perceived security risks. The Uzbek authorities closely monitor its diaspora abroad. While no documented cases of returnees suggest that the mere act of seeking asylum in itself carries risk upon return, surrounding factors connected to the individual at question, alongside the Uzbek authorities view that religious radicalization mainly occurs abroad are important elements to consider. In this regard, the general backsliding in the area of fundamental freedoms and civic space should also be taken into consideration, together with the lack of uniformity within the Uzbek authorities.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

In 2020, the Swedish Migration Agency (SMA) published a series of reports on the situation in Uzbekistan, covering the political development and the situation in the human rights area, vulnerable groups, and functioning of the justice- and security sector, and migration and return.

This report is product of a joint project carried out by the SMA and the Danish Immigration Service (DIS), aiming to provide updated information on a relevant selection of topics related to the current situation in Uzbekistan. Alongside this report, the project includes a report on the functioning of the justice- and security sector in Uzbekistan.

1.2 About the report

1.2.1 Aim, scope and limitations of the report

The aim of this report is to describe relevant aspects of the current situation in Uzbekistan in relation to religious practice and religious freedom, political freedoms and civic space, and matters related to migration and return.

Since 2016, Uzbekistan has undergone extensive reforms and major changes. The reform process encompasses important economic aspects, but the changes are undoubtedly broader and more far-reaching than the economic dimension alone, and also include important aspects of easing of authoritarianism in the areas of fundamental freedoms and rights. For this reason, the report includes two relevant reference points when describing the development and patterns of change that have taken place and are taking place; the first being the death of former President Karimov in 2016 and the assumption of power by current President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, and the other being the period that followed from 2020 onwards.

The report aims to provide an overview of the religious landscape in Uzbekistan, including the spread of violent Islamist groups. It examines the legal framework as well as how religious freedom is applied in practice, with a particular focus on unregistered religious groups and the consequences for individual religious practitioners. It further examines state control of religion in contemporary Uzbekistan, such as registration requirements for religious groups and the regulation of religious clothing and personal expressions of faith, as well as the application of anti-extremism legislation. In addition, it addresses surveillance and arbitrary enforcement as tools for suppressing independent religious discourse.

Furthermore, the report aims to provide an overview of the situation in Uzbekistan related to relevant aspects of fundamental political rights and civic space. The report traces back to the initial years of Mirziyoyev's rule with reforms relating to freedom of expression, assembly and association and examines the continued trajectory in these fields from 2020 to the present. In addition, it aims to provide a

general description of the current situation for political opposition, civil society, and media, journalists and bloggers. It also aims to exemplify how the legal system is used to target certain individuals who exercise their fundamental political freedoms and rights, as well as other potential consequences such individuals may face.

The report also examines migration from and return to Uzbekistan, with the aim to describe the Uzbek state's changed perception on migration and the situation for returning migrants. The report covers patterns of migration amongst Uzbek citizens as well as targeted monitoring of returnees, including asylum seekers and individuals with certain religious profiles, as well as state scrutiny of returnees based on a variety of factors such as residence abroad, activity and perceived security risks.

The report is not an exhaustive account of all aspects linked to the issues and topics mentioned above, but should primarily be seen as a description highlighting the most general aspects and relevant patterns, based on assessments and examples provided by consulted sources on the respective topics. If any particular aspect or pattern is not mentioned in this report, this does not mean that the aspect or pattern is not of relevance.

1.2.2 On availability of information

The availability of information on the situation in Uzbekistan has for a long time been limited. Since the end of the Karimov rule, independent journalists and international organizations have been permitted to operate in the country, and the Uzbek media landscape has to a degree undergone a transformation to where it is more open. As a result, domestic media has started to express more critical views. However, self-censorship is still widespread, and there are still serious limitations in the areas of freedom of speech and expression and civic space, which affects the availability of information.

In 2019, the Swedish Migration Agency (SMA) conducted a fact-finding mission (FFM) to Uzbekistan. In 2026, a joint FFM was carried out by the SMA and DIS, where official Uzbek sources alongside international and local organisations, and diplomatic sources were consulted. Furthermore, a number of interviews and meetings have been carried out with well-informed sources (such as journalists, academic researchers and NGOs) outside of Uzbekistan. This report draws primarily on findings from the FFM in 2026 and on the interviews conducted in 2025 and 2026. The report to some extent also draws on information from written sources, as well as findings after the 2019 FFM.

2. Religious practices and religious freedom

2.1 Soviet legacies and institutional continuity

Uzbekistan's approach to religion remains profoundly shaped by Soviet institutional legacies.¹ Under Soviet rule, religion was not separated from the state. Instead, it was tightly controlled. Religious practice was allowed in private, but public gatherings, independent sermons, and religious organisations were closely monitored by the authorities.²

Many of the structures created in that period continue to influence how the Uzbek state manages religion today. The system can be described as a form of assertive secularism: religious practice is permitted, but it operates under state supervision.³ Many officials in the security services were trained in Soviet-era institutions, and their working methods have remained largely unchanged. Although the security service has been renamed and some senior figures replaced, much of the institutional framework remains in place.⁴

Soviet-era practices remain deeply embedded in coercive methods within the security apparatus. Preventive conversations (*profilakticheskaya beseda*), reminiscent of Soviet informal warnings, are still employed to ensure compliance. Moreover, structural safeguards capable of constraining executive overreach or providing effective judicial remedies remain largely absent. Coercive interrogation techniques and quota-driven enforcement reflect administrative cultures inherited from Soviet security governance.⁵

According to one source, these continuities help explain current policies on religion. Historical memories also matter. In public debates, some people draw parallels with earlier Soviet campaigns to reshape society, such as the *hujum* campaigns of the 1930s that sought to change women's roles through state-led modernisation. Because of this history, present-day disputes about religion, identity, and modernity often carry wider cultural and historical meaning.⁶

2.2 Today's religious landscape of Uzbekistan

Although 94 % of Uzbekistan's population officially follows Islam, many individuals identify as culturally Muslim rather than active practitioners. Under the governance of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, there has been a notable increase in active adherence to Islamic norms, which sometimes diverge from official state interpretations. However, the government still enforces strict controls, through the Muftiate, the Muslim spiritual council led by a mufti and a council of ulema (Islamic

¹ Journalist A, interviews 2026; Edward Lemon, interview 2026

² Edward Lemon; Uzbek Forum for Human Rights, interview 2025

³ Edward Lemon

⁴ Researcher C, interview 2026

⁵ Researcher C

⁶ Researcher C

scholars) over religious practices to preserve a secular public sphere and uphold a singular, state-sanctioned interpretation of Islam.⁷

Since Shavkat Mirziyoyev assumed the presidency in 2016, Uzbekistan has experienced a visible, albeit limited, degree of liberalisation regarding the governance of religion.⁸ Initial reforms, presented as part of a broader modernisation strategy, facilitated a greater public presence of Islam and a relaxation of enforcement practices against expressions of religiosity, such as the wearing of religious clothing or beards.⁹

Signs of religious revival are visible in the growing number of religious bookshops, cafés, and online platforms.¹⁰ Furthermore, Muslim civil society organisations have expanded their charitable operations, serving as alternatives to state welfare. Online religious discourse has likewise grown.¹¹ Yet these developments should not be interpreted as evidence of systemic liberalisation, as such entities remain vulnerable to arbitrary inspections and closures by state security and tax authorities.¹²

Recent developments underscore the fragility of earlier openings. The prosecution of prominent religious figures and bloggers under broadly defined offences, such as incitement to social discord, demonstrates that the legal and administrative infrastructure for stringent state control over religious life remains firmly in place. Previously tolerated unregistered organisations are also facing renewed pressure.¹³

Statistical indicators lend some support to this picture of relative opening. According to several sources, the number of individuals imprisoned on political and religious grounds decreasing from approximately 12,000 in 2012 to between 2,000 and 2,200 by 2021¹⁴, though those released frequently face enduring criminal records that hinder social reintegration.¹⁵ Other reports suggest that as many as 16,000 individuals imprisoned on suspicion of religious extremism have been released, though figures vary across sources.¹⁶

Outward expressions of faith, such as the broadcasting of the call to prayer (azan), women wearing hijabs, and men wearing beards, are significantly more tolerated today.¹⁷ However, there is broad consensus among observers that these early measures have primarily served to improve domestic and international perceptions of Uzbekistan's human rights trajectory rather than drive deeper structural reform, which has subsequently stalled.¹⁸

⁷ The Diplomat, Uzbekistan's Tightrope Between Individual Religious Expression and Secular Governance, 27 August 2024, [url](#); OrientXXI, In Uzbekistan, an Islamic revival under strict surveillance, 19 November 2025, [url](#)

⁸ Edward Lemon; SWP Research Paper, Religious Policy in Uzbekistan, August 2023, [url](#)

⁹ Edward Lemon

¹⁰ Researcher C

¹¹ SWP Research Paper, Religious Policy in Uzbekistan, August 2023, [url](#)

¹² Researcher C

¹³ Edward Lemon

¹⁴ Edward Lemon; Researcher D, interview 2025

¹⁵ Researcher D

¹⁶ OrientXXI, In Uzbekistan, an Islamic revival under strict surveillance, 19 November 2025, [url](#)

¹⁷ OrientXXI, In Uzbekistan, an Islamic revival under strict surveillance, 19 November 2025, [url](#)

¹⁸ Edward Lemon; Luca Anceschi

Outward expressions of faith remain tightly regulated.¹⁹ The authorities actively signal that religious practice must be confined to the private sphere, extending their intervention into socio-economic activities.²⁰ For instance, security services have reportedly exerted pressure on businesses in Tashkent that refused to serve alcohol on religious grounds. Ultimately, religious life is permitted exclusively within boundaries established and monitored by the state.²¹

Moreover, the state's top-down promotion of a secularised Islam largely fails to resonate with the broader population and has instead inadvertently catalysed wider societal Islamisation.²² The official religious establishment nonetheless actively supports this approach: Grand Mufti Nuriddin Kholiqnazarov has publicly advocated for moderation in religious practice, with such guidance disseminated through local imams and platforms such as Telegram.²³

Religious life in Uzbekistan is governed by a state-managed hierarchy operating in coordination with the State Security Service²⁴, which continues to view religion primarily through the lens of public order and potential extremism.²⁵ To manage constituencies receptive to conservative or fundamentalist ideologies, the state employs a calculated strategy of containment rather than outright suppression.²⁶ The authorities promote officially approved religious bloggers who function as gatekeepers, delineating the boundaries of acceptable religious discourse. Potentially problematic conservative narratives are tolerated, provided they are articulated through these controlled channels by state-sanctioned figures.²⁷

For example, a prominent former cleric, despite facing criticism for his views on gender and social conduct, retains significant influence, operates freely, and has even initiated legal action against secular bloggers. Conversely, independent actors who attempt to engage in religious debate without official approval face severe constraints.²⁸

2.3 Legal framework on religious freedom

Under the Constitution (adopted in 1992, revised in 2023), Uzbekistan is formally a secular state with a strict separation of state and religion. While freedom of conscience is constitutionally guaranteed (article 35), the Constitution simultaneously empowers the state to restrict religious freedoms²⁹:

¹⁹ Edward Lemon; Joanna Lillis, interview 2026; OrientXXI, In Uzbekistan, an Islamic revival under strict surveillance, 19 November 2025, [url](#)

²⁰ Edward Lemon; The Diplomat, Uzbekistan's Tightrope Between Individual Religious Expression and Secular Governance, 27 August 2024, [url](#)

²¹ Edward Lemon

²² SWP Research Paper, Religious Policy in Uzbekistan, August 2023, [url](#)

²³ The Diplomat, Uzbekistan's Tightrope Between Individual Religious Expression and Secular Governance, 27 August 2024, [url](#)

²⁴ Journalist A

²⁵ SWP Research Paper, Religious Policy in Uzbekistan, August 2023, [url](#)

²⁶ Journalist A; Uzbek Forum for Human Rights

²⁷ Journalist A

²⁸ Journalist A

²⁹ Legal Clarity, Religion in Uzbekistan: Rights and Regulations, 13. December 2025, [url](#); LexUZ, The Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 1. May 2023, [url](#)

Article 71.

*The formation and functioning of political parties and other non-profit non-governmental organizations, aiming to do the following, shall be prohibited: changing the existing constitutional system by force, coming out against state sovereignty, territorial integrity and security of Uzbekistan, advocating war and social, national, racial and religious hostility, or encroaching on the constitutional rights and freedoms of citizens, encroaching on the health and morality of the people, as well as armed associations and political parties based on the national and religious principles. - Secret societies and associations shall be banned.*³⁰

This provision has been drawn on extensively by the government to regulate the religious sphere through legislation and decree, typically invoking the prevention of extremism and the promotion of a state-sanctioned form of "traditional" Uzbek Islam.³¹

The legal framework on religious practice is based on the 1998 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organisations and the 2018 Law on Combating Extremism, both of which, according to one source, fall short of international freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) standards.³²

All religious groups are still legally required to register with the Ministry of Justice (MoJ); unregistered religious activity is criminalised. Registration requirements are stringent, including a minimum of 50 founding members who are citizens over 18 residing in the same district, a formal charter, and a legal address.³³

Organisations seeking to operate nationally must demonstrate a permanent presence in at least 8 of the country's 14 administrative units. Content is subject to equally strict controls: all religious literature must be approved by the Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA) prior to use, private religious education is prohibited, and instruction is restricted to officially sanctioned institutions and state-approved teachers.³⁴

The limitations of the reform process are most evident in the underlying legal and institutional architecture.³⁵ In July 2021, the government adopted a new Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organisations.³⁶

Although it removed certain prior restrictions, the legislation continues to fall short of international human rights standards, mandating comprehensive state regulation of religious institutions, educational facilities, and media.³⁷

³⁰ LexUZ, The Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 1. May 2023, [url](#)

³¹ Legal Clarity, Religion in Uzbekistan: Rights and Regulations, 13. December 2025, [url](#)

³² Freedom for Eurasia, interviews 2025 and 2026

³³ Legal Clarity, Religion in Uzbekistan: Rights and Regulations, 13. December 2025, [url](#)

³⁴ Legal Clarity, Religion in Uzbekistan: Rights and Regulations, 13 December 2025, [url](#)

³⁵ Researcher D

³⁶ LexUZ, Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan, On liberty of conscience and religious organizations, 26 June 2021, [url](#); HRW, Uzbekistan: Backsliding on Religious Freedom Promises, 24 May 2023, [url](#)

³⁷ HRW, Uzbekistan: Backsliding on Religious Freedom Promises, 24 May 2023, [url](#); SWP Research Paper, Religious Policy in Uzbekistan, August 2023, [url](#), p. 29

In 2023, the Uzbek authorities introduced article 184.4 of the Administrative Code, which penalises individuals for wearing face coverings in public that obstruct personal identification.³⁸ This law has frequently been used to target women wearing the niqab³⁹ and men with ungroomed or "messy" beards, which the courts define as covering the face. Nearly 800 people have been charged under article 184.4 and received administrative fines in less than a year (2023-2024). Over 52 % of these cases occurred in the densely populated and historically more religious region of Andijan.⁴⁰

Robust legal protections for individuals or groups operating outside state-sanctioned structures remain absent.⁴¹ Furthermore, legislative developments since 2017 indicate an ongoing consolidation of control mechanisms designed to mitigate the effects of liberalisation, aiming to suppress 'non-traditional' or 'extremist' doctrines while institutionalising a state-sanctioned, 'traditional' Hanafi Islam.⁴²

2.3.1 Extremism legislation and enforcement

The legal framework governing extremism in Uzbekistan is characterised by its breadth and flexibility, affording the authorities extensive discretion in the regulation of religious and political activities.⁴³ Human rights monitors have noted that the statutory definitions are excessively vague, facilitating the prosecution of journalists, critics, and religious adherents, rather than being strictly limited to actors demonstrating violent intent.⁴⁴

This framework is further characterised by a frequent blurring of extremism and terrorism.⁴⁵ The authorities maintain lists of proscribed organisations, including groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir and Islamic State, though these lists are not always publicly accessible, and removal from them is rare.⁴⁶ The mere possession, production, or dissemination of materials deemed extremist, such as certain online content or religious chants (*nasheeds*⁴⁷), can incur criminal liability.⁴⁸

Consequently, according to one source, individuals may face prosecution for sermons, sharing, reposting online commentary, or institutional criticism, even in the absence of evidence indicating violent intent. In practice, enforcement is often

³⁸ LexUZ Кодекс Республики Узбекистан об административной ответственности, Статья 184⁴. Нахождение в общественных местах в виде, не позволяющем идентифицировать личность, 11. April 2025, [url](#); The Diplomat, Uzbekistan's Tightrope Between Individual Religious Expression and Secular Governance, 27 August 2024, [url](#)

³⁹ Niqab is a veil covering the face except for the eyes

⁴⁰ The Diplomat, Uzbekistan's Tightrope Between Individual Religious Expression and Secular Governance, 27 August 2024, [url](#)

⁴¹ Researcher D

⁴² SWP Research Paper, Religious Policy in Uzbekistan, August 2023, [url](#)

⁴³ Freedom for Eurasia; Researcher D

⁴⁴ Freedom for Eurasia

⁴⁵ Freedom for Eurasia

⁴⁶ Researcher D

⁴⁷ Nasheeds are Islamic vocal chants or hymns, typically performed a cappella or with mini-mal percussion, with lyrics drawing on religious themes such as praise of God or the Prophet Muhammad.

⁴⁸ Researcher A, interview 2026

contingent upon an individual's public visibility, perceived social influence, and state security assessments, rather than demonstrable evidence of violence or threat.⁴⁹

Although large-scale mass arrests have decreased under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev compared to the Karimov era, extremism provisions remain a primary instrument for managing religious activity.⁵⁰ Unregistered religious activities, ranging from private gatherings and home-based study circles to informal instruction, may attract administrative penalties, whilst alleged affiliations with groups proscribed as extremist typically result in criminal charges.⁵¹ Such trials frequently lack transparency, and defence access to case materials is often restricted.⁵² This enforcement apparatus impacts both the Muslim majority and minority faiths, such as Shi'a Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses and Protestant Evangelical Christians, ensuring the state retains pervasive authority over religious and political expression.⁵³

2.3.2 Legal ambiguity and the regulation of religious clothing

The state's regulation of religious clothing exemplifies the legal ambiguity inherent in Uzbekistan's approach to religious expression.⁵⁴ For instance, while there is no explicit statutory prohibition on the hijab, the Ministry of Education enforces school dress codes that effectively function as a quasi-legal regulatory framework. Consequently, the permissibility of the hijab is largely subject to the discretionary authority of school and university administrators, an issue which frequently reignites public debate at the start of the academic year.⁵⁵ Enforcement appears to vary considerably across the country, though generalisations about regional patterns are difficult to sustain. Whilst some rapidly expanding suburban districts and the old city of Tashkent have largely ceased to enforce dress codes, other areas, including certain rural localities, have in recent years been at the centre of enforcement controversies, with documented cases of school directors pressuring female students to remove the hijab. The picture is, in short, uneven and difficult to predict on the basis of geography alone.⁵⁶

While the *platok*⁵⁷, a traditional headscarf that leaves the neck uncovered, is broadly accepted as a regional custom, more explicitly religious forms of dress occupy a precarious legal space where they are tolerated in some contexts but discouraged in others.⁵⁸ The regulation of personal appearance has historically extended to men, particularly regarding the wearing of beards.⁵⁹ However, the systematic police scrutiny and forced trimming prevalent under Islam Karimov have largely stopped under the Mirziyoyev administration. Although individuals with

⁴⁹ Freedom for Eurasia

⁵⁰ Edward Lemon

⁵¹ Edward Lemon

⁵² Freedom for Eurasia

⁵³ Freedom for Eurasia

⁵⁴ Journalist A

⁵⁵ Researcher C

⁵⁶ Researcher C

⁵⁷ *Platok/Платок*: Russian word for the Islamic Headscarf

⁵⁸ Researcher D

⁵⁹ Researcher D; Journalist B, interview 2025

particularly conspicuous beards may still attract official attention, direct interventions are now significantly less frequent.⁶⁰

Freedom for Eurasia paints a less optimistic picture, however. While Mirziyoyev initially pursued reforms that relaxed some of the religious restrictions inherited from the Karimov era, these improvements have, according to more recent reports, been substantially rolled back. Ten years into his presidency, incidents in which police detain men wearing long beards and forcibly shave and fine them are said to still be occurring.⁶¹

More broadly, religious observance has become increasingly visible within everyday public life. There has been an expansion of Islamic clothing retailers, and the *nikah* (Islamic marriage ceremony) is widely practised.⁶²

Despite the increased societal acceptance and visibility of the hijab, and the fact that beards generally attract less attention than previously, outward markers of religiosity continue to feature in state profiling practices. Distinctive religious clothing or specific prayer habits may still attract attention from the authorities.⁶³

2.4 The existence of violent, extremist religious groups

While several Islamist extremist organisations possess historical or contemporary links to Uzbekistan, their operational presence within the country is currently limited.⁶⁴ Historical entities, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), alongside networks associated with Hizb ut-Tahrir, have largely been dismantled domestically.⁶⁵

Furthermore, Uzbek factions that emerged during the Syrian conflict have predominantly been absorbed into larger armed coalitions, reducing their independent role.⁶⁶ In 2026, the primary security concern is probably the Islamic State, which predominantly targets Uzbek nationals for recruitment among migrant communities abroad, notably in the Russian Federation.⁶⁷

Nevertheless, the Uzbek authorities continue to actively disrupt suspected local extremist cells and utilise the existence of groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir and the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) to justify stringent domestic oversight.⁶⁸ This approach reflects a delicate balance between projecting religious soft power and maintaining strict internal control.⁶⁹

⁶⁰ Freedom for Eurasia; Journalist B

⁶¹ Freedom for Eurasia; Eurasianet, Report: Beard-wearers singled out for harassment in Uzbekistan, 12 February 2024, [url](#)

⁶² Researcher D

⁶³ Edward Lemon

⁶⁴ Researcher D; Joanna Lillis

⁶⁵ Edward Lemon

⁶⁶ Edward Lemon

⁶⁷ Researcher D; Joanna Lillis; OrientXXI, In Uzbekistan, an Islamic revival under strict surveillance, 19 November 2025, [url](#)

⁶⁸ Journalist B; Freedom for Eurasia

⁶⁹ OrientXXI, In Uzbekistan, an Islamic revival under strict surveillance, 19 November 2025, [url](#)

2.4.1 Patterns of extremism and radicalisation

Domestic radicalisation remains minimal, with no major terrorist attacks within Uzbekistan in recent years and no clear increase in extremist activity inside the country.⁷⁰ According to journalist B (specialised in Central Asia), the overall picture since 2021 has been one of continuity rather than major change, with reliable data scarce but the general trend pointing to low levels of domestic mobilisation.⁷¹ Most cases involving Uzbek nationals instead occur outside the country, with radicalisation tending to follow a transnational pattern shaped by labour migration, online networks, and difficult living conditions abroad.⁷²

In the 1990s, groups such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan attracted some Uzbek recruits. This was linked to a mix of factors: the collapse of the Soviet system, strong repression under Islam Karimov, and a broader religious revival among young people. In 2026, the situation is different, according to one source. While some underlying pressure remains, they no longer produce the same level of militant activity inside Uzbekistan.⁷³

The government's response has focused partly on economic stability. The idea is that better job opportunities and investment, particularly from countries like Russia, China, Türkiye, and Gulf states, can reduce the risk of people turning to extremist groups.⁷⁴

2.4.2 Recruitment outside of Uzbekistan

Although domestic activity is limited, recruitment linked to Islamic State still takes place online, especially on platforms like Telegram. This mainly affects Uzbek labour migrants abroad, particularly in Russia. Many of these migrants face economic hardship, social isolation, and discrimination. As visible Muslim minorities, they can feel excluded, which makes them more open to messages that offer identity, belonging, or purpose.⁷⁵

As a result, much of the radicalisation process happens outside Uzbekistan. Attacks involving Uzbek nationals in cities such as Moscow and Istanbul show this pattern: individuals were often recruited and influenced abroad, not at home. Cases involving returning fighters carrying out attacks inside Uzbekistan remain relatively rare.⁷⁶

2.5 Non-sanctioned religious practices

In Uzbekistan, as already stated, all religious activities must be formally registered with the state; any unregistered group or practice is categorised as non-sanctioned and is subject to penalisation, including fines, shutdowns of religious organisations

⁷⁰ Edward Lemon; OrientXXI, In Uzbekistan, an Islamic revival under strict surveillance, 19 November 2025, [url](#)

⁷¹ Journalist B

⁷² Journalist B

⁷³ Journalist B

⁷⁴ Journalist B

⁷⁵ Journalist B

⁷⁶ Journalist B

and places of worship, and criminal charges.⁷⁷ This regulatory framework applies across all faiths, affecting minority groups such as Christians and Sufi networks, and is designed to maintain comprehensive state control over organised religious life.⁷⁸

As outlined above non-sanctioned religious practices remain subject to significant legal and administrative constraints. Legislation mandates a licence for religious instruction, a requirement that is interpreted broadly to encompass the facilitation of small prayer groups, home churches, study circles and informal home-based religious discussions.⁷⁹ Although enforcement is comparatively less severe than under the Karimov administration, more broadly, visible religious minorities such as e.g. Jehovahs Witnesses continue to face higher levels of enforcement than other groups.⁸⁰

Formal oversight is exercised by the Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA), which defines the parameters of permissible practice. While certain organisations, such as Hizb ut-Tahrir, are strictly prohibited, all officially sanctioned religious activities are stringently managed. According to researcher D, with expertise on Uzbekistan, sermon content is scrutinised by the State Security Service and the Muftiate, ensuring that the increased public visibility of Islam under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev represents a strategically curated visibility rather than a genuine liberalisation of religious autonomy.⁸¹

The current administration has increasingly co-opted Islamic heritage into a broader civic-national narrative, promoting a state-sanctioned, civilisational Islam alongside a legacy of assertive secularism.⁸² Within this paradigm, the relationship between religious actors and the state is contingent upon political loyalty rather than theological orthodoxy.⁸³ Independent imams may operate with relative freedom provided they demonstrate allegiance to the regime; conversely, mild criticism of the state-aligned establishment can lead to serious legal consequences.⁸⁴

At the same time as, a rapidly expanding piety movement, characterised by strict literal observance, has emerged independently of foreign institutional control, encompassing an estimated 10-15 % of the population. The authorities generally tolerate such adherents, provided their practices remain apolitical, discreet, and without attempting to convert others.⁸⁵

More broadly, the state exercises expansive authority to suppress perceived religious extremism in both public and private domains. This strict definition of permissible conduct is further reinforced by absolute prohibitions on criticising the

⁷⁷ Edward Lemon; Joanna Lillis; Researcher C; Researcher D; Freedom for Eurasia

⁷⁸ Freedom for Eurasia

⁷⁹ Researcher C; Researcher D

⁸⁰ Noah Tucker; see also: Forum 18, UZBEKISTAN: Police conduct sexual harassment, threaten fines or jail for sharing faith, 16 December 2025, [url](#)

⁸¹ Researcher D

⁸² Researcher D

⁸³ Researcher C

⁸⁴ Journalist B; Researcher C; Forum 18: Jailed, fined for uncensored religious materials, 19 November 2025, [url](#)

⁸⁵ Researcher C

president or his family, alongside the criminalisation of public support for LGBT rights, which are deemed contrary to national traditions.⁸⁶ See more on red lines in [section 3.5](#).

2.5.1 Potential consequences of adhering to or practicing non-sanctioned religion

Participation in unsanctioned religious practices carries significant legal risks. The possession of unapproved religious literature, independent study of Arabic for religious purposes, and unregulated religious education abroad are scrutinised as potential conduits for uncontrolled influence.⁸⁷ The conditional nature of the state's tolerance is evidenced by reports indicating that the government ordered the demolition of approximately 400 unregistered mosques in 2023.⁸⁸

Furthermore, the possession of unapproved religious literature, participation in unregistered gatherings, or associations with independent religious groups can trigger official investigations. Therefore, while overt expressions of faith are tolerated to a greater degree than in the past, religious life remains constrained by a system of discretionary oversight, permitting the state to intervene whenever it deems necessary.⁸⁹

Religious activity in Uzbekistan operates within an environment of pervasive surveillance and stringent institutional control.⁹⁰ The State Security Service exercises comprehensive oversight over religious institutions, including the vetting of clerics and the pre-approval of sermons, with non-compliance potentially resulting in criminal prosecution.⁹¹

The threshold for state intervention is in any case rapidly crossed by individuals engaging in unsanctioned practices: independent religious instruction, unregistered gatherings, or informal study circles frequently result in administrative penalties or criminal prosecution, particularly where sermons touch on politically sensitive topics, criticism of the government, or jihad.⁹²

According to one source, risk tends to build up over time. Being connected to unofficial religious figures, especially online, can increase attention from the authorities. Overall, enforcement is selective and depends on behaviour, context, and whether someone is seen as challenging state control.⁹³

Surveillance and online monitoring

The surveillance architecture is both transnational and digital in scope: the authorities are reported to closely monitor online religious forums, social media, and messaging applications, while also tracking diaspora communities and refugees

⁸⁶ Researcher A

⁸⁷ Researcher D

⁸⁸ Joanna Lillis

⁸⁹ Edward Lemon

⁹⁰ Researcher D

⁹¹ Freedom for Eurasia

⁹² Journalist B; Uzbek Forum for Human Rights

⁹³ Journalist B

abroad,⁹⁴ though individuals practising religion in exile typically attract less attention than those engaged in political activism, such as dissidents connected to the Karakalpakstan issue (see [section 3.4.6](#)).⁹⁵ According to Uzbek Forum for Human Rights, this has resulted in individuals facing imprisonment or psychiatric detention for minor digital activities, such as 'liking' religious content or participating in private messaging groups.⁹⁶

This monitoring apparatus extends beyond officially sanctioned venues to encompass unregistered gatherings, private residences, and minority faith groups, such as Christian congregations, Buddhist centres, and Jehovah's Witnesses.⁹⁷ At the local level, outward expressions of religiosity are scrutinised by *mahalla* (neighbourhood) committees, police officers, and counter-terrorism units, primarily to ensure that religious affiliation does not challenge state authority and hierarchical loyalty.⁹⁸

Risks for ordinary believers

While Islam is recognised as part of the national culture, authorities focus primarily on organisers and leaders rather than ordinary worshippers, meaning that adherents attending state-sanctioned mosques generally face minimal risks. Thus, the level of risk for ordinary believers depends less on personal belief than on compliance with state regulations.⁹⁹

However, Freedom for Eurasia assesses that ordinary believers nonetheless remain vulnerable to local rivalries, opportunistic behaviour, and extortion, with families allegedly having been pressured in some cases to pay bribes to secure the release of detained relatives, though the full extent of such practices remains difficult to verify.¹⁰⁰

Visibility and religious minorities

Public visibility is a critical risk factor; prominent independent imams, civic activists, and religious bloggers with large audiences are particularly vulnerable to targeting.¹⁰¹ The authorities routinely classify such independent activities as extremist or terrorist, utilising expansive lists of designated organisations as legal mechanisms for control rather than as indicators of genuine militant threats.¹⁰²

According to Freedom for Eurasia, minority interpretations of Islam, notably Shia communities, appear to encounter acute pressure, as illustrated by the imprisonment of a blogger for administering a Shia online group. Freedom for Eurasia further argues that this scrutiny equally affects prominent Sunni figures operating

⁹⁴ Researcher D; Researcher A; Journalist B; OrientXXI, In Uzbekistan, an Islamic revival under strict surveillance, 19 November 2025, [url](#)

⁹⁵ Researcher D

⁹⁶ Uzbek Forum for Human Rights

⁹⁷ Freedom for Eurasia

⁹⁸ Uzbek Forum for Human Rights

⁹⁹ Journalist B

¹⁰⁰ Freedom for Eurasia

¹⁰¹ Freedom for Eurasia

¹⁰² Freedom for Eurasia; Edward Lemon

outside state structures, with the authorities reportedly justifying such prosecutions by referencing broader regional instability in order to frame independent religious authority as a threat to political order.¹⁰³

Bureaucratic and regional differences

The enforcement of religious legislation is shaped not only by security considerations but also by systemic bureaucratic imperatives and localised dynamics.¹⁰⁴ Law enforcement agencies reportedly operate under informal arrest quotas, frequently conducting sweep operations to meet bureaucratic performance metrics rather than in response to actual security threats. This practice often leads to surges in detentions following major international incidents, such as the Crocus City Hall attack in Russia.¹⁰⁵

Furthermore, risk exposure varies significantly by geography and demography. The Ferghana Valley, particularly the Namangan region, historically records higher rates of prosecution due to a concentration of independent religious activity and stringent local enforcement.¹⁰⁶ Similarly, rural areas are subject to denser surveillance networks compared to the relative anonymity of larger urban centres like Tashkent, and ethnic minorities, such as Tajik communities in Samarkand and Bukhara, occasionally experience heightened official suspicion.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ Freedom for Eurasia

¹⁰⁴ Edward Lemon; Freedom for Eurasia

¹⁰⁵ Edward Lemon

¹⁰⁶ Edward Lemon; OrientXXI, In Uzbekistan, an Islamic revival under strict surveillance, 19 November 2025, [url](#)

¹⁰⁷ Edward Lemon

3. Political freedoms and civic space

3.1 General background

Fundamental political freedoms such as freedom of speech and expression, freedom of press, freedom of association and freedom of assembly are formally guaranteed by the Uzbek constitution. In practice, however, they are severely restricted.¹⁰⁸

3.1.1 A centralised political system revolving around the president

Uzbekistan is a republic with presidential rule,¹⁰⁹ and the political system remains centred around president Mirziyoyev, who is described as the subject of a ‘well-maintained personality cult’.¹¹⁰ Recent constitutional amendments extended the president’s power, and reduced the role of the legislature,¹¹¹ which is described as loyal to the president,¹¹² and merely serving as a ‘rubber stamp’ for the executive branch.¹¹³ In 2024, cautious steps towards political pluralism in the country’s system took place through the president requiring that the role of the opposition in parliament be strengthened.¹¹⁴ Still, however, political pluralism does not exist in Uzbekistan, and real political opposition is not tolerated by the state.¹¹⁵

3.1.2 Early developments during the post-Karimov rule of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev

When gaining power in 2016, president Shavkat Mirziyoyev embarked on ambitious political and economic reforms,¹¹⁶ announcing a move towards what is referred to as the “New Uzbekistan”¹¹⁷. Mirziyoyev repeatedly expressed support for freedom of speech and encouraged critical reporting,¹¹⁸ and fundamental changes

¹⁰⁸ Bertelsmann Stiftung (BTI), BTI 2024 Country Report – Uzbekistan, 19 March 2024, [url](#) pp. 10; Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2024 – Uzbekistan, 29 February 2024, [url](#); Human Rights Watch, World Report 2026 – Uzbekistan, 4 February 2026, [url](#); Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), Republic of Uzbekistan, Parliamentary Elections 27 October 2024, [url](#) s. 3

¹⁰⁹ Utrikespolitiska Institutet (UI); Uzbekistan – Inrikespolitik och författning [paywall], 27 October 2024, [url](#)

¹¹⁰ Bertelsmann Stiftung (BTI), BTI 2026 Country Report – Uzbekistan, 26 March 2026, [url](#), pp. 10, 14

¹¹¹ Uzbek Forum for Human Rights, Uzbekistan’s Improved Constitutional Rights Are Meaningless, 8 May 2023, [url](#)

¹¹² Bertelsmann Stiftung (BTI), BTI 2026 Country Report – Uzbekistan, 26 March 2026, [url](#), pp. 10

¹¹³ Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2024 – Uzbekistan, 29 February 2024, [url](#)

¹¹⁴ Bertelsmann Stiftung (BTI), BTI 2026 Country Report – Uzbekistan, 26 March 2026, [url](#), pp. 40

¹¹⁵ Bertelsmann Stiftung (BTI), BTI 2024 Country Report – Uzbekistan, 19 March 2024, [url](#), pp. 15; Journalist B; UI, Uzbekistan – Demokrati och Rättigheter [paywall], 7 May 2026, [url](#)

¹¹⁶ Western Embassy, meeting 2026

¹¹⁷ Uzbek Forum for Human Rights, “A Dark Cloud” – No Space for Freedom of Expression in Mirziyoyev’s Uzbekistan, June 2025, [url](#), pp. 8

¹¹⁸ International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR), Punished for their opinions – bloggers and social media commentators in Uzbekistan, July 2024, [url](#); pp. 3-4

were initiated in the human rights area,¹¹⁹ signalling a greater tolerance for public criticism and personal expression.¹²⁰

The changes included the already mentioned release of a large number of political and religious prisoners,¹²¹ declarations of openness for civil society organisations and international media,¹²² laws to ease restrictions of speech and assembly,¹²³ and measures to strengthen the judiciary.¹²⁴ In addition, media was encouraged to engage in critical debate, and various channels for public criticism of officials were established.¹²⁵

According to Bertelsmann Stiftung, independent journalism, although in its early stages, is making steady progress. Furthermore, independent bloggers are becoming an increasingly important part of the media landscape and there has been a gradual awakening of civil society, with local populations having begun to protest regional abuse of power and openly voice frustrations over certain issues.¹²⁶ In this light, Uzbek citizens currently enjoy a greater degree of freedom than at any previous point in the country's history, in an Uzbekistan that bears little resemblance to the country under Karimov.¹²⁷

3.1.3 Constraints on the reform progress

President Mirziyoyev has continued to speak out in favour of free speech,¹²⁸ and reforms promoting fundamental political freedoms and rights are officially still presented as a priority. As an example, and as outlined in the 'Uzbekistan – 2030 strategy',¹²⁹ priority areas include 'making protection of human rights and freedoms the main criteria for judicial and legal reforms', 'strengthening the independence of the judiciary and ensuring its openness', and 'furthering developing a free civil society and the activities of the mass media'.¹³⁰

Simultaneously, the political reforms are reported to have faltered across many areas, and the democratisation and liberalisation process is described to fluctuate

¹¹⁹ OHCHR, Uzbekistan is building a culture of Human Rights, but concerns about political prisoners, torture, forced labour and corruption remain experts of the Human Rights Committee say, 3 March 2020, [url](#)

¹²⁰ Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2024 – Uzbekistan, 29 February 2024, [url](#)

¹²¹ Researcher C; Uzbek Forum for Human Rights, "A Dark Cloud" – No Space for Freedom of Expression in Mirziyoyev's Uzbekistan, June 2025, [url](#), pp. 8

¹²² Uzbek Forum for Human Rights, "A Dark Cloud" – No Space for Freedom of Expression in Mirziyoyev's Uzbekistan, June 2025, [url](#), pp. 8

¹²³ International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), Uzbekistan: The Right to Reparations for Political Prisoners, December 2020, [url](#), pp. 4, 7

¹²⁴ Uzbek Forum for Human Rights, "A Dark Cloud" – No Space for Freedom of Expression in Mirziyoyev's Uzbekistan, June 2025, [url](#), pp. 8; International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), Uzbekistan: The Right to Reparations for Political Prisoners, December 2020, [url](#), pp. 4, 7

¹²⁵ NGO representative A, interview 2026; Journalist E, meetings 2017; Anonymous source A, interview 2017; Uzbek Embassy in New Delhi, Address by president Shavkat Mirziyoyev at the solemn ceremony dedicated to the 27th anniversary of the constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 10 December 2019, [url](#)

¹²⁶ Bertelsmann Stiftung (BTI), BTI 2026 Country Report – Uzbekistan, 26 March 2026, [url](#), pp. 4

¹²⁷ Western Embassy

¹²⁸ IPHR and AHRCA, Punished for their opinions – bloggers and social media commentators in Uzbekistan, July 2024, [url](#), pp. 4

¹²⁹ The Uzbekistan 2030 Strategy is a national development roadmap, described as the main document in force relating to the ongoing reforms in the country. See: Development Strategy Center, "Uzbekistan – 2030" strategy, 18 January 2025, [url](#)

¹³⁰ Development Strategy Center, Priority Areas, 2026-01-15, [url](#)

between forward movement and setbacks.¹³¹ According to a diplomatic source, the reform programme stalled approximately five years ago, and some of the ‘new’ freedoms have been reversed, although not to the level of repression under Karimov.¹³² The reforms are criticized for lacking in depth, consistency,¹³³ implementation¹³⁴ and sincerity. The reforms are criticized for lacking in depth, consistency,¹³⁵ implementation¹³⁶ and sincerity. One academic researcher describes the reform process in Uzbekistan through the concept of ‘authoritarian modernisation’, stating that although the overall situation has improved since the Karimov era, any lacking progress in the human rights area should be understood as deliberate, and attributable to the intentions of the political leadership.¹³⁷ The reform agenda is halted by vested interests,¹³⁸ and some sources claim that the reforms are mainly driven by a wish to improve Uzbekistan’s international ratings.¹³⁹ Following this logic, the decline in international attention to human rights related issues among many Western countries has been accompanied by a reduced prioritization of such issues in Uzbekistan,¹⁴⁰ with the initial reform momentum following Karimov’s death having largely stalled.¹⁴¹

Despite the government’s proclaimed commitment to human rights protection and its engagement with international human rights institutions, sources further indicate that there has been noticeable backsliding in the human rights area in the past few years,¹⁴² showcased by strengthened authoritarianism¹⁴³, growing intolerance of criticism, and an increase in legal cases against journalists, activists, social media influencers and religious figures.¹⁴⁴

Despite the ten years of intensive reforms since the death of Karimov, Uzbekistan is still described as an authoritarian state, ruled by a government that, according to Utrikespolitiska Institutet (UI) persecutes, imprisons and forces dissidents into exile.¹⁴⁵ Freedom House labels Uzbekistan a ‘consolidated authoritarian regime’, categorises as ‘Not Free’, and with few signs of democratisation, scoring 12/100 in the Freedom in the World 2025 index (including 2/40 for political rights and 10/60 for civil liberties).¹⁴⁶

¹³¹ Researcher A; Bertelsmann Stiftung (BTI), BTI 2026 Country Report – Uzbekistan, 26 March 2026, [url](#), pp. 4

¹³² Western Embassy

¹³³ International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), Uzbekistan: The Right to Reparations for Political Prisoners, December 2020, [url](#), pp.7

¹³⁴ Uzbek Forum for Human Rights

¹³⁵ International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), Uzbekistan: The Right to Reparations for Political Prisoners, December 2020, [url](#), pp.7

¹³⁶ Uzbek Forum for Human Rights

¹³⁷ Luca Anceschi

¹³⁸ Joanna Lillis

¹³⁹ Journalist B; Uzbek Forum for Human Rights

¹⁴⁰ Journalist B; Researcher D

¹⁴¹ Joanna Lillis

¹⁴² Uzbek Forum for Human Rights; IPHR and AHRCA, Freedoms under Threat as Uzbekistan continues to put pressure on journalists and human rights defenders, 1 July 2025, [url](#); Joanna Lillis

¹⁴³ Researcher D

¹⁴⁴ Joanna Lillis; Uzbek Forum for Human Rights, Uzbekistan: International Human Rights Organizations Call on President Mirziyoyev to Veto “Undesirable” Foreigners Law, 5 July 2024, [url](#)

¹⁴⁵ Utrikespolitiska Institutet (UI), Demokrati och rättigheter [paywall], 7 May 2026, [url](#)

¹⁴⁶ Uzbekistan scores 12/100 in the Freedom in the World 2025 index (including 2/40 for political rights and 10/60 for civil liberties). See: Freedom House, Uzbekistan: Country Profile, [undated], [url](#)

3.1.4 Recent legislative changes related to fundamental freedoms and civic space

Since 2020, a series of legislative changes impacting the areas of fundamental freedoms and civil liberties have been observed. In April 2023, controversial constitutional amendments were pushed through,¹⁴⁷ strengthening the powers of the president, extending the presidential term and resetting the existing two-term presidential limit, allowing for Mirziyoyev to stand for re-election and stay in office until 2040.¹⁴⁸ Although the new constitution contains language protecting freedom of speech and the press, the implementation of these protections is lacking,¹⁴⁹ and the constitutional changes have been criticised for being carried out with the main objective of serving the personal interests of Mirziyoyev.¹⁵⁰

In 2020, legislative changes regarding dissemination of false information were made to the Administrative Code (article 202-2¹⁵¹ and the Criminal Code (article 244-6¹⁵²) respectively, making it an offense punishable with fines or restriction of freedom up to three years.¹⁵³ The law has been criticised for limiting public debate and was early identified as a concern for further self-censorship of journalists.¹⁵⁴

In 2021, another criticised amendment was made to the Criminal Code (article 158-3¹⁵⁵), establishing criminal liability for publicly insulting or slandering the president online,¹⁵⁶ an offence punishable with up to five years imprisonment.¹⁵⁷

In 2024, the so-called ‘Undesirable Foreigners Law’ was signed, allowing for deportation and entry bans for foreigners designated as ‘undesirable’ for ‘discrediting’ the republic of Uzbekistan. Critics highlight the law’s vague wording and fear that it could be misused by the authorities to target e.g. journalists, researchers and

¹⁴⁷ Bertelsmann Stiftung (BTI), BTI 2026 Country Report – Uzbekistan, 26 March 2026, [url](#)

¹⁴⁸ Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2024 – Uzbekistan, 29 February 2024, [url](#); University of Helsinki, Rule of Law Centre, Tracking rule of law in Uzbekistan – constitutional reform and coming challenges, 29 January 2025, [url](#)

¹⁴⁹ US Department of State, 2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Uzbekistan, 22 April 2024, [url](#)

¹⁵⁰ Bertelsmann Stiftung (BTI), BTI 2026 Country Report – Uzbekistan, 26 March 2026, [url](#), pp. 9; Uzbek Forum for Human Rights

¹⁵¹ LexUZ, Uzbekistan, Administrative Code of the Republic of, Uzbekistan, article 202-2, [url](#)

¹⁵² LexUZ, Uzbekistan, Criminal Code of the Republic of Uzbekistan, article 244-6, [url](#)

¹⁵³ Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), Uzbek parliament moves to criminalize ‘dissemination of false information’, 21 December 2020, [url](#); Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2024 – Uzbekistan, 29 February 2024, [url](#); Kun.uz, Uzbekistan criminalized dissemination of false information, 26 December 2020, [url](#)

¹⁵⁴ Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2024 – Uzbekistan, 29 February 2024, [url](#); Kun.uz, Uzbekistan criminalized dissemination of false information, 26 December 2020, [url](#); International Press Institute, Uzbek government criminalizes “fake news”, 3 April 2020, [url](#); Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), Uzbek parliament moves to criminalize ‘dissemination of false information’, 21 December 2020, [url](#)

¹⁵⁵ LexUZ, Uzbekistan, Criminal Code of the Republic of Uzbekistan, article 158-3, [url](#)

¹⁵⁶ Uzbek Forum for Human Rights; Journalist A; Researcher D; IFEX, Uzbekistan: New laws introduce prison sentences for insulting the president, 2021-05-02, [url](#)

¹⁵⁷ US Department of State, 2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Uzbekistan, 22 April 2024, [url](#); LexUZ, Uzbekistan, Criminal Code of the Republic of Uzbekistan, [url](#), (art. 158)

human rights monitors,¹⁵⁸ and preventing foreign civil society activists from operating in the country.¹⁵⁹

3.2 Political parties and political opposition

3.2.1 Political parties

Uzbekistan lacks a strongly society-rooted party system,¹⁶⁰ and no genuine opposition parties operate legally in the country. Although some parties formally play the role of opposition in elections, all registered parties are loyal to the government.¹⁶¹ The five registered parties include:

- Uzbekistan Liberal Democratic Party (*O'zLidep*),
- the People's Democratic Party of Uzbekistan (*XDP*),
- the Justice and Social Democratic Party (*Adolat*),
- the Uzbekistan National Revival Democratic Party (*Milliy Tiklanish*)
- the Ecological party.¹⁶²

All five parties hold a special niche, as if they were specialised state agencies rather than real political parties.¹⁶³ There are no registered parties representing the interests of specific ethnic or religious minority groups,¹⁶⁴ and religious parties are not allowed.¹⁶⁵

3.2.2 Unregistered political groups

The requirements for party registration are arduous,¹⁶⁶ and the authorities have a record of rejecting registration of political opposition parties, forcing them to operate unofficially.¹⁶⁷ Broad legal grounds are also used for suspending party activities,¹⁶⁸

¹⁵⁸ Uzbek Forum for Human Rights; Human Rights Watch, Uzbekistan Targets 'Undersireable' Foreigners and Stateless Persons, 20 November 2024, [url](#)

¹⁵⁹ Joanna Lillis; Uzbek Forum for Human Rights, Uzbekistan: International Human Rights Organizations Call on President Mirziyoyev to Veto "Undesirable" Foreigners Law, 5 July 2024, [url](#)

¹⁶⁰ Bertelsmann Stiftung (BTI), BTI 2024 Country Report – Uzbekistan, 19 March 2024, [url](#), pp. 15

¹⁶¹ Bertelsmann Stiftung (BTI), BTI 2026 Country Report – Uzbekistan, 26 March 2026, [url](#)

pp. 15; Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2025 – Uzbekistan, 26 February 2025, [url](#)

¹⁶² Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2025 – Uzbekistan, 26 February 2025, [url](#); Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2024 – Uzbekistan, 29 February 2024, [url](#); Freedom House, Election Watch 2024: Uzbekistan, 30 August 2024, [url](#); Bertelsmann Stiftung (BTI), BTI 2024 Country Report – Uzbekistan, 19 March 2024, [url](#), pp. 10

¹⁶³ Bertelsmann Stiftung (BTI), BTI 2026 Country Report – Uzbekistan, 26 March 2026, [url](#) pp. 15

¹⁶⁴ Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2024 – Uzbekistan, 29 February 2024, [url](#)

¹⁶⁵ Utrikespolitiska Institutet (UI); Uzbekistan – Inrikespolitik och författning [paywall], 27 October 2024, [url](#)

¹⁶⁶ Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), Republic of Uzbekistan, Parliamentary Elections 27 October 2024, [url](#), pp. 4

¹⁶⁷ Bertelsmann Stiftung (BTI), BTI 2024 Country Report – Uzbekistan, 19 March 2024, [url](#) pp. 10; Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2025 – Uzbekistan, 26 February 2025, [url](#); Journalist C, interview 2025; International Press Institute, Seven years into new era, Uzbekistan's independent media fight for survival, 18 July 2023, [url](#)

¹⁶⁸ Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), Republic of Uzbekistan, Parliamentary Elections 27 October 2024, [url](#), pp. 4

and political opposition often meet bureaucratic obstacles, law enforcement or arbitrary arrests when trying to organise or attend party activities.¹⁶⁹

Unregistered opposition groups exist primarily in exile.¹⁷⁰ Among these are the secular parties Unity (*Birlik*) and Freedom (*Erk*); both with a democratic, nearly liberal approach. Amongst newer movements is Free Farmers (*Ozod Dehqonlar*). All of these parties are banned in Uzbekistan.¹⁷¹

In the presidential election 2021, the Erk party attempted to register, nominating a well-known Uzbek singer as its candidate. The singer, after falling victim to threats and attacks, withdrew from the process.¹⁷² Another oppositional group, The Truth and Development party (*Haqiqat va Taraqqiyot*), was also harassed as it tried to organise, and ultimately failed to obtain registration.¹⁷³

According to Freedom House's Election Watch for Uzbekistan 2024, Uzbek political opposition is suppressed through arrests and legal action against e.g. bloggers, journalists and ordinary individuals expressing criticism online. Websites and social media platforms that host political and social content are routinely blocked and filtered by the authorities, and persons criticising the government are at risk of facing attacks, violent assaults and torture while in detention. Uzbek authorities employ coordinated networks to spread disinformation, smear critics and counter negative commentary about the government online.¹⁷⁴

3.2.3 Election integrity

Despite reforms related to Uzbekistan's electoral framework, Uzbek elections fail to meet international standards and fundamental freedoms, leading to critique from international election observers.¹⁷⁵ An "invisible state control" has been described at each stage of the election process,¹⁷⁶ including in the information landscape,¹⁷⁷ leaving voters without a real choice.¹⁷⁸

¹⁶⁹ Journalist C

¹⁷⁰ Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2024 – Uzbekistan, 29 February 2024, [url](#); Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2025 – Uzbekistan, 26 February 2025, [url](#)

¹⁷¹ Utrikespolitiska Institutet (UI); Uzbekistan – Inrikespolitik och författning [paywall], 27 October 2024, [url](#)

¹⁷² International Press Institute, Seven years into new era, Uzbekistan's independent media fight for survival, 18 July 2023, [url](#)

¹⁷³ International Press Institute, Seven years into new era, Uzbekistan's independent media fight for survival, 18 July 2023, [url](#); Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, Нападение на дом Джахонгира Атаджанова: Партия «Эрк» выдвинула кандидата на президентские выборы в Узбекистане (видео), 27 May 2021, [url](#); VOA News, Uzbek Opposition Party Tests Limits of Political Reform, 8 April 2021, [url](#); The Diplomat, New Opposition Party in Uzbekistan Denied Registration, Again, 22 July 2021, [url](#); Intellinews, PANNIER: Party in parliament declares itself Uzbekistan's Opposition. Something to get excited about?, 19 May 2025, [url](#)

¹⁷⁴ Freedom House, Election Watch 2024: Uzbekistan, 30 August 2024, [url](#)

¹⁷⁵ Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), Uzbekistan's draft information code shows promise but still needs improvement, OSCE Human Rights Director and Media Freedom Representative say, 9 July 2024, [url](#); Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), Uzbekistan's parliamentary elections 2024: ODIHR election observation mission final report, 27 February 2025, [url](#)

¹⁷⁶ Bertelsmann Stiftung (BTI), BTI 2026 Country Report – Uzbekistan, 26 March 2026, [url](#); pp. 9

¹⁷⁷ Freedom House, Election Watch 2024: Uzbekistan, 30 August 2024, [url](#)

¹⁷⁸ Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), Republic of Uzbekistan, Parliamentary Elections 27 October 2024, [url](#), pp. 3

As an example, the constitutional referendum in 2023, criticised for merely serving to enable Mirziyoyev to prolong his presidency,¹⁷⁹ fell short of genuine political pluralism and competition, with no organised opposition to the constitutional amendments.¹⁸⁰ Sources describe social and political pressure in relation to the referendum, with civil servants and university students being pressured to participate in the vote,¹⁸¹ and activists and journalists being pressured by authorities not to oppose the referendum.¹⁸²

3.3 Media, journalists and bloggers

3.3.1 Expansion of media and emergence of bloggers

After the death of Karimov, the Uzbek media sphere opened up,¹⁸³ and independent media outlets emerged and gained popularity.¹⁸⁴ By the transformation program for 'New Uzbekistan', and with Mirziyoyev's expressed support for freedom of speech and the encouragement of critical reporting, independent journalism, online commentary and debates started to burgeon. Discussions on a wide range of social, economic and political topics were initiated.¹⁸⁵

Another development attributable to Mirziyoyev's rule is the emergence of a sphere of independent bloggers, still growing in both number and capacity.¹⁸⁶ Mirziyoyev saw bloggers as a means to expose local and regional shortcomings,¹⁸⁷ and they are becoming an indispensable part of civil society.¹⁸⁸ Social media platforms have become increasingly popular as a means to access news and information outside of state-sponsored media, and serve as an important platform to voice opinions and grievances about topics in the public interest.¹⁸⁹ Bloggers are described as 'citizen journalists',¹⁹⁰ and together with independent journalists they have disclosed many cases of abuse of office.¹⁹¹

Between 2016 and 2024, the total number of magazines, TV channels and online media outlets increased substantially, together with the number of internet users and vocal online activists.¹⁹² One source describes the media as more professional

¹⁷⁹ Bertelsmann Stiftung (BTI), BTI 2026 Country Report – Uzbekistan, 26 March 2026, [url](#), pp. 9

¹⁸⁰ Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2024 – Uzbekistan, 29 February 2024, [url](#)

¹⁸¹ Uzbek Forum for Human Rights, Uzbekistan's Improved Constitutional Rights Are Meaningless, 8 May 2023, [url](#)

¹⁸² US Department of State, 2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Uzbekistan, 22 April 2024, [url](#)

¹⁸³ Kristian Lasslett, interview 2026; Researcher B, interview 2026

¹⁸⁴ Journalist A; Bertelsmann Stiftung (BTI), BTI 2026 Country Report – Uzbekistan, 26 March 2026, [url](#), pp. 11; Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2024 – Uzbekistan, 29 February 2024, [url](#)

¹⁸⁵ IPHR and AHRCA, Punished for their opinions – bloggers and social media commentators in Uzbekistan, July 2024, [url](#), pp. 3

¹⁸⁶ Bertelsmann Stiftung (BTI), BTI 2026 Country Report – Uzbekistan, 26 March 2026, [url](#), pp. 4

¹⁸⁷ Journalist A

¹⁸⁸ Bertelsmann Stiftung (BTI), BTI 2024 Country Report – Uzbekistan, 19 March 2024, [url](#), pp. 5; Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2024 – Uzbekistan, 29 February 2024, [url](#)

¹⁸⁹ Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2024 – Uzbekistan, 29 February 2024, [url](#)

¹⁹⁰ Journalist C

¹⁹¹ Bertelsmann Stiftung (BTI), BTI 2026 Country Report – Uzbekistan, 26 March 2026, [url](#), pp. 13

¹⁹² Justice for Journalists, Attacks on Media Workers in Uzbekistan in 2024, 11 February 2025, [url](#)

and diverse [than under Karimov],¹⁹³ and Freedom House reports that a slight reduction in media repression can be noted, with media outlets today cautiously discussing social problems and criticising local officials.¹⁹⁴

At the same time, the transformation of the media and information landscape has been explained to lack sincerity.¹⁹⁵ One source describes this transformation as primarily an exercise in image-building on the part of Mirziyoyev.¹⁹⁶ Another source conveys that the promotion of private media outlets is part of an intentional government strategy, as they are able to reach a broader audience than traditional state-owned media. While encouraging bloggers, the president has also expected their loyalty, using them as a means to reshuffle government and justify his reforms.¹⁹⁷

3.3.2 Increased targeting of critical voices

Several sources point out that the second half of Mirziyoyev's rule has been characterised by backsliding in the area of freedom of speech and expression.¹⁹⁸ A few different turning points in time are highlighted, among these the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, the arrests of bloggers emerging in the information environment from 2021, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the unrest in Karakalpakstan in 2022.¹⁹⁹ One source describes how some of these developments and events strengthened the security arm of the state and increased the president's reliance on it, and that since then it is difficult to identify positive changes.²⁰⁰ The backsliding is further explained as a move by the authorities to regain control over information and public opinion.²⁰¹ Sources describe a resumed targeting of critical voices, which is manifested through a rise in administrative and criminal prosecution, harassment and pressure against bloggers, journalists and human rights defenders critical of the president or the government.²⁰² One well informed NGO representative describes that one must exercise a higher degree of caution when writing or reporting about politically sensitive matters.²⁰³

In 2026, Reporters Without Borders ranked Uzbekistan at 147th place on their World Press Freedom Index²⁰⁴, a deterioration from its ranking a few years

¹⁹³ IPHR and AHRCA, Punished for their opinions – bloggers and social media commentators in Uzbekistan, July 2024, [url](#), pp. 3

¹⁹⁴ Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2024 – Uzbekistan, 29 February 2024, [url](#)

¹⁹⁵ Kristian Lasslett

¹⁹⁶ Researcher B

¹⁹⁷ Journalist A

¹⁹⁸ NGO representative A; Joanna Lillis; Researcher B; Journalist A; IPHR and AHRCA, Punished for their opinions – bloggers and social media commentators in Uzbekistan, July 2024, [url](#), pp. 4

¹⁹⁹ NGO representative A; Researcher D; Journalist A

²⁰⁰ Journalist A

²⁰¹ IPHR and AHRCA, Punished for their opinions – bloggers and social media commentators in Uzbekistan, July 2024, [url](#), pp. 4

²⁰² NGO representative A; IPHR and AHRCA, Punished for their opinions – bloggers and social media commentators in Uzbekistan, July 2024, [url](#), pp. 4; Human Rights Watch, World Report 2025 – Uzbekistan, 16 January 2025, [url](#)

²⁰³ NGO representative A; Journalist A

²⁰⁴ Reporters Without Borders, World Press Freedom Index, Uzbekistan, [url](#)

earlier.²⁰⁵ Simultaneously, their designation of the Uzbek press freedom environment has gone from “difficult” in 2023 to “very serious” in 2026.²⁰⁶

3.3.3 State control over media content and self-censorship

The Uzbek authorities exercise tight control over media,²⁰⁷ and journalists operate under significant restrictions with regards to what they may publish.²⁰⁸ Police and security services subject journalists to arrest, harassment, and intimidation, and warn them against publishing critical articles or covering topics deemed sensitive by the authorities.²⁰⁹ Journalists also face criminal penalties for a variety of offenses.²¹⁰ For more information on potential consequences for critics, see [section 3.6](#).

There are special legal limitations on criticising the president,²¹¹ and bloggers critical of the president have faced arrest.²¹² The law also specifically prohibits publication of material that “incites religious conflict and ethnic discord” or that “advocates for subverting or overthrowing the constitutional order”, and according to US Department of State (USDOS) reporting covering 2023, the government uses these provisions to silence dissenting voices.²¹³ In 2025, a number of media outlets were forced to shut down following attempts to publish material on the mistreatment of religious groups, and criminal cases were initiated against journalists working for the same media.²¹⁴

Formal state censorship was abolished in Uzbekistan in 2002, but self-censorship amongst journalists is widespread,²¹⁵ and growing.²¹⁶ Reporters Without Borders (RSF) convey that criticism of those in power remains ‘very complicated’,²¹⁷ and most media outlets refrain from criticism, such as e.g. openly criticising Mirziyoyev and the government.²¹⁸ According to RSF, there are five jailed journalists in Uzbekistan as of May 2026,²¹⁹ but this “relatively low” number of jailed journalists is explained by a ‘system of self-censorship’²²⁰ and the awareness amongst

²⁰⁵ In 2023, Uzbekistan was ranked at 137th place on RSF:s World Press Freedom Index; see: 2023 World Press Freedom Index – journalism threatened by fake content industry, 2023, [url](#)

²⁰⁶ Bertelsmann Stiftung (BTI), BTI 2026 Country Report – Uzbekistan, 26 March 2026, [url](#)

pp. 11; Reporters Without Borders, World Press Freedom Index, Uzbekistan, [url](#)

²⁰⁷ Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2025 – Uzbekistan, 26 February 2025, [url](#); Reporters Without Borders, World Press Freedom Index, Uzbekistan, [url](#); Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2024 – Uzbekistan, 29 February 2024, [url](#)

²⁰⁸ Freedom for Eurasia

²⁰⁹ US Department of State, 2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Uzbekistan, 22 April 2024, [url](#)

²¹⁰ Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2024 – Uzbekistan, 29 February 2024, [url](#)

²¹¹ Western Embassy

²¹² Bertelsmann Stiftung (BTI), BTI 2026 Country Report – Uzbekistan, 26 March 2026, [url](#)

pp. 11

²¹³ US Department of State, 2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Uzbekistan, 22 April 2024, [url](#)

²¹⁴ Freedom for Eurasia

²¹⁵ Freedom for Eurasia

²¹⁶ Journalist A

²¹⁷ Reporters Without Borders, World Press Freedom Index, Uzbekistan, [url](#)

²¹⁸ Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2024 – Uzbekistan, 29 February 2024, [url](#); Reporters Without Borders, World Press Freedom Index, Uzbekistan, [url](#)

²¹⁹ Reporters Without Borders, World Press Freedom Index, Uzbekistan, [url](#)

²²⁰ Western Embassy

journalists of what topics are not acceptable to report on.²²¹ The number of journalists subject to intimidation or fines is described to be higher.²²²

There are also examples of journalists being required to submit articles for approval by the security services before their publication,²²³ and independent online media outlets being blocked or prevented from publishing their work.²²⁴ Furthermore, there are cases of journalists being pressured by the authorities to delete already published material.²²⁵ Journalists wanting to publish matters related to religion have to obtain permission from the authorities. There are examples of cases of news outlets and bloggers being fined, administratively prosecuted or jailed for online posts with religiously related content.²²⁶ Media platforms also risk being shut down by the authorities.²²⁷

The situation for foreign journalists in Uzbekistan is described as ‘difficult’, with examples of journalists being denied media accreditation, deported from and/or denied entry to the country.²²⁸ Even sharing information with independent media outlets in exile is described to carry risks.²²⁹

Furthermore, independent media is hampered by funding restrictions, especially by foreign-based organisations that support free press, and journalists are under economic pressure and face corruption from officials. The reduction in funding from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has reportedly had a negative impact on the press situation in the country, further weakening independent media outlets.²³⁰

3.3.4 Bloggers and social media users

Bloggers often raise local issues and, although they are not always known nationally, they are often popular within their local communities. This focus on local issues often renders them unpopular with the local authorities.²³¹ Bloggers raising issues on local levels are subject to harassment, surveillance and threats of prosecution.²³²

²²¹ Uzbek Forum for Human Rights; Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2024 – Uzbekistan, 29 February 2024, [url](#)

²²² Western Embassy; Freedom for Eurasia

²²³ International Press Institute, Seven years into new era, Uzbekistan's independent media fight for survival, 18 July 2023, [url](#)

²²⁴ IPHR and AHRCA, Freedoms under Threat as Uzbekistan continues to put pressure on journalists and human rights defenders, July 2025 [url](#)

²²⁵ International Press Institute, Seven years into new era, Uzbekistan's independent media fight for survival, 18 July 2023, [url](#); Joanna Lillis; Journalist A

²²⁶ Joanna Lillis

²²⁷ Reporters Without Borders, World Press Freedom Index, Uzbekistan, [url](#)

²²⁸ Journalist B, Journalist A; Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Foreign ‘Undesirables’: Who Are The Targets Of Uzbekistan’s Incoming Deportation Law?, 14 July 2024, [url](#); Uzbek Forum for Human Rights, Uzbekistan: International Human Rights Organizations Call on President Mirziyoyev to Veto “Undesirable” Foreigners Law, 5 July 2024, [url](#)

²²⁹ Uzbek Forum for Human Rights

²³⁰ Reporters Without Borders, World Press Freedom Index, Uzbekistan, [url](#)

²³¹ Uzbek Forum for Human Rights; Reporters Without Borders, Wave of closures of Telegram news channels in Uzbekistan: RSF asks President Mirziyoyev to respond, 16 June 2023, [url](#)

²³² Bertelsmann Stiftung (BTI), BTI 2026 Country Report – Uzbekistan, 26 March 2026, [url](#) pp. 11; Kristian Lasslett

Many regional bloggers have stopped their activities due to harassment and pressure from local authorities,²³³ and one source states that there are examples of bloggers who ‘have diminished’ after exposing provincial shortcomings.²³⁴ One well-known case includes a blogger, arrested after reporting on corruption related to land-confiscation in 2022 and released in 2024, but has since disappeared from the public view.²³⁵

There are also examples of bloggers being forcibly committed to psychiatric facilities after publishing critique against public officials on social media.²³⁶

The Uzbek government engages in extensive surveillance of electronic communications,²³⁷ observes online activities and closely monitor social media discourse, both inside and outside Uzbekistan.²³⁸ Websites and social media platforms that host political and social content are routinely blocked,²³⁹ among these are examples of prominent news websites and websites belonging to human rights organisations.²⁴⁰ Sources indicate that the authorities systematically target speech disseminated on digital platforms and in social media,²⁴¹ and social media accounts with content ‘not sitting well with the authorities’ have been subject to closure.²⁴² The government also restricts internet access during times of unrest, which was seen under the Karakalpakstan protests in 2022.²⁴³

3.4 Civil society and activists

3.4.1 A limited awakening of civil society

The Uzbek reform agenda is described to have led to a slow awakening of civil society, with an expansion of social networks and local populations now daring to openly express dissatisfaction in certain areas.²⁴⁴ According to Bertelsmann Stiftung, there is demonstrated enthusiasm among some NGOs and individuals for advancing public and private interest and voicing specific social needs, and a

²³³ Uzbek Forum for Human Rights; Reporters Without Borders, Wave of closures of Telegram news channels in Uzbekistan: RSF asks President Mirziyoyev to respond, 16 June 2023, [url](#)

²³⁴ Journalist A

²³⁵ Reporters Without Borders, Uzbekistan: anti-corruption blogger Otabek Sattoriy has not been seen or heard from despite his release from prison, 1 October 2024, [url](#)

²³⁶ Norwegian Helsinki Committee, Uzbekistan: End the Punitive Psychiatric Detention of Shohida Salamova, 24 April 2026, [url](#)

²³⁷ Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2024 – Uzbekistan, 29 February 2024, [url](#)

²³⁸ Researcher A; Joanna Lillis;

²³⁹ Freedom House, Election Watch 2024: Uzbekistan, 30 August 2024, [url](#); US Department of State, 2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Uzbekistan, 22 April 2024, [url](#)

²⁴⁰ US Department of State, 2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Uzbekistan, 22 April 2024, [url](#)

²⁴¹ Uzbek Forum for Human Rights, “A Dark Cloud” – No Space for Freedom of Expression in Mirziyoyev’s Uzbekistan, June 2025, [url](#), pp. 4

²⁴² Uzbek Forum for Human Rights, Tech Oligarchs’ Greed For Profit Endangers Free Speech in Uzbekistan: How Meta and Youtube Are Failing Rights Activists and Enabling Repression, 8 April 2026, [url](#); Anchor, «Это огромный удар по нашему маленькому СМИ»: Meta отключила аккаунты Instagram ряда СМИ и активистов в Узбекистане, 31 January 2026, [url](#)

²⁴³ Freedom House, Election Watch 2024: Uzbekistan, 30 August 2024, [url](#)

²⁴⁴ Bertelsmann Stiftung (BTI), BTI 2024 Country Report – Uzbekistan, 19 March 2024, [url](#) pp. 5

gradual expansion of e.g. environmentalists, youth organisations and social media networks.²⁴⁵

Simultaneously, civil society in Uzbekistan is generally described as weak,²⁴⁶ and the spread of real grassroots campaigns and civil society pluralism is effectively hindered by political control and the state.²⁴⁷ Furthermore, the country lacks a genuine civil rights movement,²⁴⁸ and a civil society structure as understood in the Western context.²⁴⁹

In Uzbekistan, associations tend to be based on kinship, traditional forms of organisation and welfare support that fill niches which the state has left unaddressed. The most traditional form of community based public association within the Uzbek civil society is the mahalla, which function as self-governing bodies playing an important role in maintaining the community and resolving family and neighbour disputes. Although serving as a foundation for civil society participation in one regard, Bertelsmann Stiftung describes that the mahalla also limits the space for independent activism and critical discourse outside of the mahalla structure.²⁵⁰ Furthermore, the mahalla is described as oppressive in character, combining the functions of a parish council, neighbourhood watch, and security service.²⁵¹

Since 2020, different government initiatives and legal measures have been undertaken to enhance and develop the role and space for civil society in Uzbekistan. Among these is a presidential decree on the development of civil society²⁵², a dedicated chapter on civil society organisations in the new constitution,²⁵³ the announcement of a planned Code of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), and a designated Public Chamber.²⁵⁴ However, the effects of these initiatives are limited, either due to lacking operationality or lacking implementation.²⁵⁵

Simultaneously, legislation limiting the operational space for civil society has also been introduced, including e.g. specific obligations and limitations targeting organisations receiving international funding.²⁵⁶

²⁴⁵ Bertelsmann Stiftung (BTI), BTI 2026 Country Report – Uzbekistan, 26 March 2026, [url](#), pp. 32

²⁴⁶ Bertelsmann Stiftung (BTI), BTI 2026 Country Report – Uzbekistan, 26 March 2026, [url](#), pp. 14

²⁴⁷ Journalist B; Bertelsmann Stiftung (BTI), BTI 2026 Country Report – Uzbekistan, 26 March 2026, [url](#), pp. 32

²⁴⁸ Freedom for Eurasia

²⁴⁹ Bertelsmann Stiftung (BTI), BTI 2026 Country Report – Uzbekistan, 26 March 2026, [url](#), pp. 32

²⁵⁰ Bertelsmann Stiftung (BTI), BTI 2026 Country Report – Uzbekistan, 26 March 2026, [url](#), pp. 32

²⁵¹ Western Embassy

²⁵² Bertelsmann Stiftung (BTI), BTI 2026 Country Report – Uzbekistan, 26 March 2026, [url](#), pp. 33

²⁵³ International Center for Not-For-Profit Law (ICNL), Civic Freedom Monitor, Uzbekistan, 29 April 2026, [url](#)

²⁵⁴ Development Strategy Center, Public Chamber, New Institution, New opportunities, 18 April 2020, [url](#); Bertelsmann Stiftung (BTI), BTI 2026 Country Report – Uzbekistan, 26 March 2026, [url](#), pp. 10

²⁵⁵ Bertelsmann Stiftung (BTI), BTI 2024 Country Report – Uzbekistan, 19 March 2024, [url](#), pp. 10; Bertelsmann Stiftung (BTI), BTI 2026 Country Report – Uzbekistan, 26 March 2026, [url](#), pp. 15

²⁵⁶ Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2024 – Uzbekistan, 29 February 2024, [url](#); Bertelsmann Stiftung (BTI), BTI 2026 Country Report – Uzbekistan, 26 March 2026, [url](#), pp. 16; ICNL, Uzbekistan: New Law on Amendments to NNO-related Legislation, 11 September 2025, [url](#)

3.4.2 Registration and governmental control with NGOs

NGOs must be formally registered with the MoJ in order to operate legally.²⁵⁷ Operating without registration can lead to administrative or criminal prosecution, with punishments ranging from fines to imprisonment for up to five years,²⁵⁸ and unregistered NGOs have faced severe repression and harassment.²⁵⁹

There are 12,644 legally registered NGOs in the Uzbekistan.²⁶⁰ However, the majority of these are mahallas or government organised non-governmental organisations (GONGOs), with ties to the state and the political leadership.²⁶¹ Other types of registered NGOs are either small, weak or carry out work in areas outside the sphere of government concerns.²⁶² The number of GONGOs is growing each year and such organisations are often mobilised by the government to serve their political interests for different purposes, also internationally.²⁶³

NGOs face burdensome challenges and administrative requirements when seeking registration, rendering the process both difficult and time consuming. Denials can be based on questionable technicalities such as grammatical errors, or vague and unclear grounds forcing organisations to resubmit applications several times. The arduous registration process hinders even prominent and respected organisations from obtaining registration,²⁶⁴ and the process is described as instrumentalised when denying registration for organisations engaged in politically sensitive or human rights related issues.²⁶⁵

One source conveys that it is in practice impossible to register an independent human rights organisation, and although there are numerous NGOs carrying out humanitarian or charitable work, they do not threaten the government's position.²⁶⁶ Another source notes that no new human rights organisations have been registered

²⁵⁷ NGO representative A, ICNL, Civic Freedom Monitor, Uzbekistan, 29 April 2026, [url](#)

²⁵⁸ Uzbek Forum for Human Rights, Restrictions on Freedom of Association in Uzbekistan, Briefing to EBRD Annual Meeting, Samarkand, May 2023, [url](#)

²⁵⁹ Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2024 – Uzbekistan, 29 February 2024, [url](#)

²⁶⁰ Data from the MoJ online registry of registered NGOs, [url](#) (accessed 10 June 2026)

²⁶¹ Bertelsmann Stiftung (BTI), BTI 2026 Country Report – Uzbekistan, 26 March 2026, [url](#), pp. 10, 14; Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2024 – Uzbekistan, 29 February 2024, [url](#); NGO representative A

²⁶² Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2024 – Uzbekistan, 29 February 2024, [url](#)

²⁶³ Uzbek Forum for Human Rights

²⁶⁴ Bertelsmann Stiftung (BTI), BTI 2024 Country Report – Uzbekistan, 19 March 2024, [url](#), pp. 10; International Center for Not-For-Profit Law (ICNL), Civic Freedom Monitor, Uzbekistan, 29 April 2026, [url](#); US Department of State, 2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Uzbekistan, 22 April 2024, [url](#); Joanna Lillis; NGO representative A; Uzbek Forum for Human Rights; Uzbek Forum for Human Rights, Uzbek Forum for Human Rights, Restrictions on Freedom of Association in Uzbekistan, Briefing to EBRD Annual Meeting, Samarkand, May 2023, [url](#); IPHR and AHRCA Joint Submission to the United Nations Universal Periodic Review 44th session of the UPR Working Group [url](#)

²⁶⁵ Uzbek Forum for Human Rights; Uzbek Forum for Human Rights, Restrictions on Freedom of Association in Uzbekistan, Briefing to EBRD Annual Meeting, Samarkand, May 2023, [url](#); NGO representative A; US Department of State, 2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Uzbekistan, 22 April 2024, [url](#); Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2024 – Uzbekistan, 29 February 2024, [url](#); IPHR and AHRCA Joint Submission to the United Nations Universal Periodic Review 44th session of the UPR Working Group [url](#)

²⁶⁶ Uzbek Forum for Human Rights

the past three years.²⁶⁷ Some prominent international NGOs, such as e.g. Human Rights Watch, are banned from operating in Uzbekistan.²⁶⁸

The authorities also exercise control and interference in the operational sphere of NGOs. Everyday work and activities require the compliance of several procedures such as informing the authorities in advance – and in some cases receive their approval - which in practice restricts the operational ability of many organisations.²⁶⁹ Failure to adhere to these processes might lead to legal repercussions such as administrative charges.²⁷⁰ Organisations also adhere to limitations and requirements related to financial funding. Foreign funding must be approved beforehand by the competent authorities.²⁷¹

3.4.3 Activists

At the highest political level, the government does not openly impose significant restrictions on assembly and associations, but at the local level, executives often target certain associations and activist groups with intimidation and harassment.²⁷² Activists risk coming into conflict with law enforcement or ending up in court on vaguely defined grounds, purely for conducting legitimate activities to hold power to account.²⁷³ According to HRW, in 2024 the authorities increasingly targeted independent activists with unfounded criminal charges and blocked independent monitors' access to the country.²⁷⁴ There are also more recent examples of activists being accused of administrative violations, something which observers claim is politically motivated and reflects a broader systematic issue with the country's treatment of civil society, where authorities 'deploy legal traps' to suppress and discourage independent voices and dissent.²⁷⁵

Human rights activists are also reportedly being subjected to psychological intimidation and harassment by the authorities,²⁷⁶ and one well-known human rights defender had their passport destroyed in order to prevent them from travelling abroad and attending an international award ceremony. Human rights organisations were also denied access to major international events held in Uzbekistan for arbitrary 'security reasons'.²⁷⁷

²⁶⁷ NGO representative A

²⁶⁸ Researcher D

²⁶⁹ US Department of State, 2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Uzbekistan, 22 April 2024, [url](#); NGO representative A; International Center for Not-For-Profit Law (ICNL), Civic Freedom Monitor, Uzbekistan, 29 April 2026, [url](#); Uzbek Forum for Human Rights; Uzbek Forum for Human Rights, Restrictions on Freedom of Association in Uzbekistan, Briefing to EBRD Annual Meeting, Samarkand, May 2023, [url](#)

²⁷⁰ NGO representative A; Uzbek Forum for Human Rights

²⁷¹ International Center for Not-For-Profit Law (ICNL), Uzbekistan: New Law on Amendments to NNO-related Legislation, 11 September 2025, [url](#); International Center for Not-For-Profit Law (ICNL), Civic Freedom Monitor, Uzbekistan, 29 April 2026, [url](#); IPHR and AHRCA Joint Submission to the United Nations Universal Periodic Review 44th session of the UPR Working Group [url](#)

²⁷² Bertelsmann Stiftung (BTI), BTI 2026 Country Report – Uzbekistan, 26 March 2026, [url](#); pp. 10

²⁷³ Joanna Lillis

²⁷⁴ Human Rights Watch, World Report 2025 – Uzbekistan, 16 January 2025, [url](#)

²⁷⁵ Association Central Asia, Legal Pressure on Civil Society: The Case of Gulnoz Mamarasulova Highlights Threats to Freedom of Association in Uzbekistan, 29 July 2025, [url](#)

²⁷⁶ Western Embassy; Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Foreign 'Undesireables': Who Are The Targets Of Uzbekistan's Incoming Deportation Law?, 14 July 2024, [url](#)

²⁷⁷ Freedom for Eurasia

3.4.4 Lawyers

The space for independent lawyers is very small, particularly those working on politically sensitive cases or human rights-related cases. One source conveys that lawyers are exposed to quite a significant risk of being harassed, surveyed or losing their licences.²⁷⁸ Qualification commissions have the authority to revoke advocates' licences for alleged disciplinary violations, which can sometimes be based on politically motivated grounds. For this reason, lawyers in politically sensitive cases rarely give media interviews and generally limit themselves to providing formal legal representation.²⁷⁹

3.4.5 Protesting

Freedom of assembly is severely restricted in Uzbekistan,²⁸⁰ and public assemblies are uncommon.²⁸¹ Practically all unsanctioned gatherings are broken up by the authorities and participants are subject to detention.²⁸² The procedure to legally organise protests include a number of regulatory documents and requirements, and human rights observers convey that unclarities in legislation means that virtually any peaceful gathering can be interpreted as a violation of the procedure for holding assemblies.²⁸³

According to one source, spontaneous protests are not often seen in Uzbekistan - regardless of the issue.²⁸⁴ Another source conveys that smaller protests that are not critical of the government or the president can be seen, e.g. when it comes to energy issues.²⁸⁵ A diplomatic source assesses that the possibility to assemble groups is determined by what issues are at stake; certain issues are acceptable to congregate around, while other issues remain effectively off limits.²⁸⁶ For information on the 'red lines' limiting the space for critical discourse, see [section 3.5](#).

3.4.6 The Karakalpakstan unrest of 2022

In July 2022, mass protests erupted in the Uzbek province of Karakalpakstan, triggered by proposed constitutional amendments aiming to downgrade the province's autonomous status. In response, the authorities initiated a swift and violent crackdown, deploying police and special forces and using lethal force against protesters. A one-month emergency was declared in the province, and mobile network coverage and internet access was restricted.²⁸⁷

²⁷⁸ IPHR, interview 2026; See also: Uzbek Forum for Human Rights, Uzbek Court Strip Lawyer Allan Pashkovsky of License After Video Appeal to President, 5 February 2026, [url](#)

²⁷⁹ Uzbek Forum for Human Rights

²⁸⁰ Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2024 – Uzbekistan, 29 February 2024, [url](#); US Department of State, 2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Uzbekistan, 22 April 2024, [url](#)

²⁸¹ International Partnership for Human Rights, Uzbekistan: Pressure on critical voices continue, 18 October 2024, [url](#)

²⁸² Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2024 – Uzbekistan, 29 February 2024, [url](#)

²⁸³ Uzbek Forum for Human Rights, Sardoba Flood Victims Fined for Peaceful Protest for Promised Housing, 23 February 2026, [url](#)

²⁸⁴ Journalist C

²⁸⁵ Edward Lemon

²⁸⁶ Western Embassy

²⁸⁷ Bertelsmann Stiftung (BTI), BTI 2024 Country Report – Uzbekistan, 19 March 2024, [url](#), pp. 6; Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2024 – Uzbekistan, 29 February 2024, [url](#); Jamestown, Tashkent Cracks Down Hard on Massive Protests in Karakalpakstan, 5 July 2022, [url](#); Reporters Without Borders, Uzbekistan: The slow death of journalism in Karakalpakstan, 1 July 2024, [url](#)

According to official statistics, 21 people were killed and hundreds were wounded during the unrest, including members of the security forces.²⁸⁸ Karakalpak civil society groups, however, estimate that the deaths far exceed those reported officially.²⁸⁹

During and after the protests, more than 500 people, including journalists, bloggers and activists, were reportedly arrested,²⁹⁰ and the unrest has been referred to as ‘a defining moment’ in the president’s approach to freedom of expression,²⁹¹ and as a significant test of the reform agenda, failed by the authorities.²⁹² The arrests included excessive use of force, arbitrary detentions, torture and ill-treatment. Many of the arrested were released after administrative charges, but several dozen faced criminal charges in trials reported to fall short of international standards.²⁹³

According to HRW, 61 persons were criminally prosecuted for their alleged involvement in the protests.²⁹⁴ Some trial hearings were collective,²⁹⁵ one being held in January 2023, with more than 20 persons being presented charges, including for “conspiracy to overthrow the constitutional order”, and several received lengthy prison sentences.²⁹⁶ Some of them have reportedly endured abuse, including torture, while in custody.²⁹⁷ Human rights groups have denounced these trials as politically motivated.²⁹⁸

The Uzbek government tasked a parliamentary commission to investigate alleged human rights violations, but, according to HRW, their findings have not been made public and besides from the prosecution of two police officers, the authorities have not acknowledged any responsibility or taken accountability for the excessive use of force.²⁹⁹ Other human rights organisations also criticise the lack of information and accountability.³⁰⁰

In the years following the protests, authorities have put effort into continued targeting of persons with real or perceived connections to the unrests.³⁰¹ Sources indicate that civil society working in Karakalpakstan has been significantly affected, and

²⁸⁸ International Press Institute, Seven years into new era, Uzbekistan’s independent media fight for survival, 18 July 2023, [url](#); Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2024 – Uzbekistan, 29 February 2024, [url](#); Bertelsmann Stiftung (BTI), BTI 2024 Country Report – Uzbekistan, 19 March 2024, [url](#), pp. 6

²⁸⁹ Researcher D; International Partnership for Human Rights, Uzbekistan: Pressure on critical voices continue, 18 October 2024, [url](#)

²⁹⁰ International Partnership for Human Rights, Uzbekistan: Pressure on critical voices continue, 18 October 2024, [url](#); Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2024 – Uzbekistan, 29 February 2024, [url](#)

²⁹¹ Uzbek Forum for Human Rights, “A Dark Cloud” – No Space for Freedom of Expression in Mirziyoyev’s Uzbekistan, June 2025, [url](#), pp. 8

²⁹² Joanna Lillis

²⁹³ International Partnership for Human Rights, Uzbekistan: Pressure on critical voices continue, 18 October 2024, [url](#)

²⁹⁴ HRW, Karakalpakstan Victims Await Justice Three Years on, 2 July 2025, [url](#)

²⁹⁵ Eurasianet, Uzbekistan: Appeal case of Karakalpakstan protesters nears verdict, 2023-06-04, [url](#)

²⁹⁶ Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2024 – Uzbekistan, 29 February 2024, [url](#)

²⁹⁷ Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2024 – Uzbekistan, 29 February 2024, [url](#); OHCHR, Uzbekistan must ensure safety of human rights defender Dawletmurat Tajimuratov and release him immediately: UN expert, 26 January 2026, [url](#)

²⁹⁸ International Press Institute, Seven years into new era, Uzbekistan’s independent media fight for survival, 18 July 2023, [url](#)

²⁹⁹ HRW, Karakalpakstan Victims Await Justice Three Years on, 2 July 2025, [url](#)

³⁰⁰ International Partnership for Human Rights, Uzbekistan: Pressure on critical voices continue, 18 October 2024, [url](#)

³⁰¹ Researcher D

that there are still significant risks to work with or speak out on what happened, including for journalists, lawyers and civil society representatives.³⁰²

Furthermore, local administrations and university leaders have reportedly threatened students expressing support for the protests, and their social media is monitored by the authorities.³⁰³ The Uzbek authorities are also targeting Karakalpak activists in the diaspora with legal charges.³⁰⁴

3.5 ‘Red lines’ limiting the space for critical discourse

Sources indicate that in today’s Uzbekistan, compared to under Karimov, a certain level of criticism is tolerated, as long as specific red lines are respected.³⁰⁵ There are, however, differing perceptions regarding where these red lines go, what they contain and whether or not they are clearly defined.

Some sources state that the red lines of acceptable criticism are well established, and clearly understood.³⁰⁶ According to one source, there are only three ‘taboo areas’ in relation to sensitive topics to voice opinions about: critique against the president or his family, raising religious issues such as e.g. political Islam, and covering LGBTI-issues. This point is underlined by what the source explains as the prevalence of criticism of low- and mid-level state officials across Uzbek social media.³⁰⁷

Other sources stress that the lines of acceptable criticism are not always clear or well defined, leading to a level of uncertainty amongst e.g. bloggers and activists as to which topics they may safely address.³⁰⁸ Critique that does not threaten the authorities’ power position’,³⁰⁹ or risks developing into ‘real opposition or people organising’,³¹⁰ is described as more likely to be accepted. One source also explains that, when an issue ‘bubbles up’ in the debate, it is often because somebody ‘wants it to bubble up’, implying a level of prior acceptance.³¹¹

Sources highlight corruption as a sensitive topic for public debate, with examples of e.g. journalists and bloggers being jailed for publicly speaking out on corruption related issues.³¹² Other sensitive topics raised by the sources are e.g. critique against projects or development managed by persons connected to the ruling elite, the president’s family or oligarch interests³¹³ and expressions of dissatisfaction

³⁰² Bertelsmann Stiftung (BTI), BTI 2026 Country Report – Uzbekistan, 26 March 2026, [url](#) pp. 11; IPHR and AHRCA, Civicus monitor The silencing of critical voices deepens in Central Asia, July 2025, [url](#)

³⁰³ Bertelsmann Stiftung (BTI), BTI 2026 Country Report – Uzbekistan, 26 March 2026, [url](#), pp. 10-11

³⁰⁴ International Partnership for Human Rights, Uzbekistan: Pressure on critical voices continue, 18 October 2024, [url](#)

³⁰⁵ Researcher A; Researcher D

³⁰⁶ Luca Anceschi; Researcher A

³⁰⁷ Researcher A

³⁰⁸ Uzbek Forum for Human Rights; IPHR and AHRCA Uzbekistan: Punished for their opinions – new report highlights persecution of bloggers in Uzbekistan, 8 July 2025, [url](#)

³⁰⁹ Researcher D

³¹⁰ Uzbek Forum for Human Rights

³¹¹ Journalist B

³¹² Journalist C; IPHR and AHRCA, Uzbekistan: Punished for their opinions – new report highlights persecution of bloggers in Uzbekistan, 8 July 2024, [url](#)

³¹³ Freedom for Eurasia

with the government on a national level.³¹⁴ Another source conveys that it may also carry risks to criticise local authorities if ‘they are on the president’s side’.³¹⁵ The limited space for expression and speech is described to have led to the emergence of various ‘framing strategies’ when raising sensitive issues,³¹⁶ as well as a tendency to veil criticism of e.g. corrupt officials by simultaneously praising the president.³¹⁷

Although the information space on religious questions has opened up, religious matters are still sensitive to engage in debate about³¹⁸ and the lines of acceptance in relation to religious debate are described as unclear by one source.³¹⁹ For more information on religious practices and religious freedom, see [section 2](#).

Other topics serving as examples of what sources have identified as sensitive to engage in debate about is critique against Russia and Russia’s full-scale war in Ukraine,³²⁰ international investment and expansion in Uzbekistan,³²¹ and issues related to housing rights and urban development.³²² The latter is described to have become more politically sensitive and difficult to address since 2025.³²³ Furthermore, reporting or debating on issues related to Karakalpakstan is also combined with risks.³²⁴ For more information on the Karakalpakstan unrest in 2022; see [section 3.4.6](#).

3.6 Potential consequences for individuals perceived as critics

3.6.1 Administrative and criminal prosecution

A series of legal provisions in the Uzbek Administrative Code (*O‘zbekiston Respublikasining Ma’amuriy Javobgarlik To‘g‘risidagi Kodeksi*³²⁵) and the Criminal Code (*O‘zbekiston Respublikasining Jinoyat Kodeksi*³²⁶) are reportedly used by the authorities to target dissent and critical voices.³²⁷

According to one well-informed source, there has been a ‘slew of administrative charges’ against human rights defenders in recent years,³²⁸ also with examples of individuals being targeted for carrying out civil activism lawfully.³²⁹ The

³¹⁴ Journalist A

³¹⁵ Luca Anceschi

³¹⁶ Journalist B

³¹⁷ Uzbek Forum for Human Rights

³¹⁸ Journalist A; Joanna Lillis

³¹⁹ Journalist A

³²⁰ Uzbek Forum for Human Rights, “A Dark Cloud” – No Space for Freedom of Expression in Mirziyoyev’s Uzbekistan, June 2025, [url](#), pp. 9-10; Researcher D

³²¹ Uzbek Forum for Human Rights

³²² Western Embassy; IPHR and AHRCA, Uzbekistan: Forced Evictions – The Case of Olga Abdullayeva, June 2025, [url](#)

³²³ Western Embassy

³²⁴ Bertelsmann Stiftung (BTI), BTI 2026 Country Report – Uzbekistan, 26 March 2026, [url](#), pp. 11

³²⁵ See: Administrative Code of the Republic of Uzbekistan, [url](#)

³²⁶ See: Uzbekistan, Criminal Code of the Republic of Uzbekistan, [url](#),

³²⁷ Uzbek Forum for Human Rights, “A Dark Cloud” – No Space for Freedom of Expression in Mirziyoyev’s Uzbekistan, June 2025, [url](#), pp. 6-7

³²⁸ Researcher D

³²⁹ Association Central Asia, Legal Pressure on Civil Society: The Case of Gulnoz Mamarasulova Highlights Threats to Freedom of Association in Uzbekistan, 29 July 2025, [url](#)

organisation Justice for Journalists reports that administrative prosecution and ‘mild’ punishments such as detentions for up to 15 days are actively used against e.g. media workers.³³⁰

Speech related offences

Charges involving alleged defamatory speech are some of the most common criminal prosecutions in Uzbekistan,³³¹ and they are reportedly used on a regular basis to punish e.g. journalists, human rights activists, and others critical of the president or the government.³³²

Uzbek media, with reference to information from the Uzbek Supreme Court, reported that in the first 10 months of 2024, over 30,000 people were prosecuted for defamation or insult.³³³ According to Freedom House, several of these cases concerned online speech.³³⁴ Most of the cases involved administrative charges (under articles 40 and 42 of the Administrative Code) and led to fines for those convicted. However, 572 cases involved criminal charges (under articles 139 and 140 of the Criminal Code) with sentences ranging from fines to correctional labour and restriction of freedom.³³⁵ Out of these, Uzbek Forum for Human Rights reports that 92 were sent to prison.³³⁶

For initial violations of defamation or insult, administrative penalties typically apply, while criminal charges are reserved for e.g. aggravated cases or repeated offenses.³³⁷ In insult related cases, disproportionate punishment and selective justice are particularly noticeable.³³⁸ One exemplifying case regards a blogger and human rights activists who was sentenced to forced psychiatric detention in December 2022 after criminal charges for defamation and insult due to a post on social media about a high-ranking official. In April 2026, she was still reported to be forcibly committed to a psychiatric facility.³³⁹

Since the introduction of the provision criminalising public insult or slander against the president in the Criminal Code in 2021, the number of criminal cases related to

³³⁰ Justice for Journalists, Attacks on Media Workers in Uzbekistan in 2024, 11 February 2025, [url](#)

³³¹ Uzbek Forum for Human Rights, “A Dark Cloud” – No Space for Freedom of Expression in Mirziyoyev’s Uzbekistan, June 2025, [url](#), pp.11

³³² IPHR and AHRCA, Uzbekistan: Punished for their opinions – new report highlights persecution of bloggers in Uzbekistan, 8 July 2024, [url](#); Uzbek Forum for Human Rights; US Department of State, 2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Uzbekistan, 22 April 2024, [url](#); Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), Uzbekistan’s parliamentary elections 2024: ODIHR election observation mission final report, 27 February 2025, [url](#), pp. 5

³³³ Kun.uz, Over 30,000 people prosecuted in Uzbekistan for defamation and insult in 2024, 21 November 2024, [url](#)

³³⁴ Freedom House, Freedom on the Net 2025, Uzbekistan, 13 November 2025, [url](#)

³³⁵ Kun.uz, Over 30,000 people prosecuted in Uzbekistan for defamation and insult in 2024, 21 November 2024, [url](#)

³³⁶ Uzbek Forum for Human Rights, “A Dark Cloud – No Space for Expression in Mirziyoyev’s Uzbekistan, June 2025, [url](#), pp. 11

³³⁷ Kun.uz, Over 30,000 people prosecuted in Uzbekistan for defamation and insult in 2024, 21 November 2024, [url](#)

³³⁸ Uzbek Forum for Human Rights, “A Dark Cloud” – No Space for Freedom of Expression in Mirziyoyev’s Uzbekistan, June 2025, [url](#), pp. 11

³³⁹ Norwegian Helsinki Committee, Uzbekistan: End the Punitive Psychiatric Detention of Shohida Salomova, 24 April 2026, [url](#)

this legislation is estimated to a dozen.³⁴⁰ The provision has been used against people making negative comments about the president or his family on social media³⁴¹ and blogs, but also in privately sent text messages, including audio, video and photo material.³⁴² Sentences range from forced psychiatric hospitalisation to prison for up to five years.³⁴³ Observers have criticised the law [article 158-3 of the Criminal Code] for its vague provisions, not distinguishing between malicious and defamatory speech, and legitimate critique of the president.³⁴⁴ The law is also criticised for having a chilling effect on bloggers, social media users and journalists.³⁴⁵

In speech related legal cases, the authorities make use of linguistic expert analyses,³⁴⁶ where the alleged offensive or insulting speech is analysed in relation to the relevant legal provision. These analyses are conducted almost exclusively by state employees,³⁴⁷ and one source estimates that these trials tend to always lead to convictions.³⁴⁸

Use of extortion charges against critics

Extortion related criminal charges are also commonly used for targeting critical voices,³⁴⁹ and is a fairly new pattern described to have started approximately in 2021.³⁵⁰ Extortion cases are used intentionally as a means to de-politicise cases,³⁵¹ being brought against activists and bloggers to avoid the political dimension and make it appear as an ordinary criminal offense.³⁵² A diplomatic source describes these cases as often being fabricated, where authorities invent or enlarge wrongdoing in order to open up a case.³⁵³ Furthermore, extortion cases are described as easy to fabricate and do not require the presentation of material evidence.³⁵⁴

Freedom House reports on examples of journalists and activists being sentenced to lengthy prison sentences on charges of alleged extortion.³⁵⁵ One well-documented case concerns a teacher and human rights activist who exposed corruption within

³⁴⁰ Researcher D; Researcher A; Uzbek Forum for Human Rights, "A Dark Cloud" – No Space for Freedom of Expression in Mirziyoyev's Uzbekistan, June 2025, [url](#), pp. 11

³⁴¹ Joanna Lillis; Journalist A

³⁴² Uzbek Forum for Human Rights, "A Dark Cloud" – No Space for Freedom of Expression in Mirziyoyev's Uzbekistan, June 2025, [url](#), pp. 4

³⁴³ Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2025 – Uzbekistan, 26 February 2025, [url](#)

³⁴⁴ Uzbek Forum for Human Rights, "A Dark Cloud" – No Space for Freedom of Expression in Mirziyoyev's Uzbekistan, June 2025, [url](#), pp. 4

³⁴⁵ Uzbek Forum for Human Rights, "A Dark Cloud" – No Space for Freedom of Expression in Mirziyoyev's Uzbekistan, June 2025, [url](#), pp. 11

³⁴⁶ Researcher D; Uzbek Forum for Human Rights, "A Dark Cloud" – No Space for Freedom of Expression in Mirziyoyev's Uzbekistan, June 2025, [url](#), pp. 4-5

³⁴⁷ Uzbek Forum for Human Rights, "A Dark Cloud" – No Space for Freedom of Expression in Mirziyoyev's Uzbekistan, June 2025, [url](#), pp. 11

³⁴⁸ Researcher D

³⁴⁹ NGO representative A

³⁵⁰ Journalist A

³⁵¹ Journalist A

³⁵² RFE/RL, After Freedom of Speech Opening, Uzbekistan Is Now Binge-Arresting And Imprisoning Bloggers, 17 August 2023, [url](#)

³⁵³ Western Embassy

³⁵⁴ RFE/RL, After Freedom of Speech Opening, Uzbekistan Is Now Binge-Arresting And Imprisoning Bloggers, 17 August 2023, [url](#)

³⁵⁵ Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2024 – Uzbekistan, 29 February 2024, [url](#)

the education sector, and was convicted of extortion in 2024. Human rights organisations describe this case as politically motivated.³⁵⁶

Other examples of criminal prosecution

Other examples of criminal articles used against perceived critics are those criminalising attacks against the constitutional order, which carries the stiffest penalties, and dissemination of materials containing threat to public security and order.³⁵⁷ According to Amnesty International, in 2025, a minimum of 30 individuals were criminally convicted for allegedly spreading “separatist” propaganda online, some of them for sharing online material related to the Karakalpakstan unrest.³⁵⁸

Legal provisions related to extremism are also reportedly used to regulate political activities.³⁵⁹ Their definitions are excessively vague, facilitating the prosecution of e.g. journalists and critics rather, than being strictly limited to actors demonstrating violent intent.³⁶⁰

3.6.2 Informal methods of targeting dissent

The Uzbek authorities also enact in less formal targeting of perceived critics, one example being through so-called ‘prophylactic chats’, where the person (or their family members) is invited to informal conversations with security service officers, and subjected to intimidation, threats or pressure due to their ‘unwanted’ activities. Representatives from a diplomatic source emphasises one specific and exemplifying case of a prominent and well-known activist, who was brought in for such a conversation in connection to work carried out in the human rights area during 2025.³⁶¹

Other forms of informal punishments include the ‘blacklisting’ of persons, rendering it difficult for them to e.g. open bank accounts.³⁶² One source also raises examples of journalists being subjected to physical attacks by ‘mafia like organisations’ or organised criminal groups, coordinated and managed by the state security service.³⁶³

3.6.3 Physical ill-treatment and torture

In its 2026 World Report, HRW states that torture and ill-treatment persist as serious problems in Uzbekistan, citing reports of physical violence conducted by police officers and prison authorities, as well as the deaths and injuries of prisoners.³⁶⁴ Freedom House reports that critics of the government, including journalists, regularly face attacks, violent assaults and torture while in detention.³⁶⁵ Amnesty International highlights the allegations that detained protesters in Karakalpakstan were

³⁵⁶ NGO representative A; Uzbek Forum for Human Rights, Dildora Khakimova’s Life is at Risk: Free Her Now!, 16 September 2025, [url](#)

³⁵⁷ Researcher D

³⁵⁸ Amnesty International, Uzbekistan 2025, 21 May 2026, [url](#)

³⁵⁹ Freedom for Eurasia; Researcher D

³⁶⁰ Freedom for Eurasia

³⁶¹ Western Embassy

³⁶² Western Embassy

³⁶³ Freedom for Eurasia

³⁶⁴ Human Rights Watch, World Report 2026 – Uzbekistan, 4 February 2026, [url](#)

³⁶⁵ Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2024 – Uzbekistan, 29 February 2024, [url](#)

tortured, and convey that the Uzbek authorities have continued to delay legal reforms addressing impunity for perpetrator of torture and ill-treatment, and to establish genuinely independent mechanisms for monitoring detention conditions.³⁶⁶ According to UI, relatives of victims of torture are often subjected to threats or harassment from the police.³⁶⁷

3.6.4 Transnational repression

The Uzbek government engages in transnational monitoring of persons engaging in, or related to persons engaging in, political activism and oppositional activities outside of Uzbekistan.³⁶⁸ As already stated, the authorities also track diaspora communities and refugees abroad.³⁶⁹ Uzbek citizens and bloggers living abroad have reportedly been subject to legal charges in Uzbekistan,³⁷⁰ including for accusations of insulting the president, with cases of individuals being extradited to Uzbekistan.³⁷¹ There are also examples of citizens living abroad being subjected to revocation of their identity documents, with the aim of jeopardising their legal status, restricting their movement and provoking their detention.³⁷²

³⁶⁶ Amnesty International, Uzbekistan 2025, 21 May 2026, [url](#)

³⁶⁷ Utrikespolitiska Institutet (UI), Demokrati och rättigheter [paywall] 7 May 2026, [url](#)

³⁶⁸ US Department of State, 2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Uzbekistan, 22 April 2024, [url](#); Researcher D

³⁶⁹ Researcher D; Researcher A; Journalist B; OrientXXI, In Uzbekistan, an Islamic revival under strict surveillance, 19 November 2025, [url](#)

³⁷⁰ IPHR and AHRCA, Freedoms under Threat as Uzbekistan Continues to Put Pressure on Journalists and Human Rights Defenders, 1 July 2025, [url](#)

³⁷¹ OC Media, Azerbaijan extradites man accused of insulting Uzbek President Mirziyoyev, 25 July 2025, [url](#); Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2024 – Uzbekistan, 29 February 2024, [url](#)

³⁷² US Department of State, 2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Uzbekistan, 22 April 2024, [url](#)

4. Migration and return

4.1 Migration trends

Uzbekistan faces a structural imbalance in its labour market, with approximately 600,000 young people entering the workforce annually against a significantly lower number of available domestic positions, producing a substantial net deficit that constitutes a key structural driver of outbound labour migration.³⁷³

Uzbekistan has a well-established pattern of labour emigration, which is primarily characterised by circular migration involving seasonal or temporary employment abroad followed by return to Uzbekistan.³⁷⁴ The vast majority of this migration, estimated at approximately 95 %, takes place through informal channels, relying on personal contacts and community-based networks rather than formal or state-managed recruitment mechanisms.³⁷⁵

4.2 General view on migration and labour migration policy

Migration in Uzbekistan is widely acknowledged by both the authorities and the general population as a necessary and structurally embedded feature of the national context.³⁷⁶ Although not considered desirable in principle, it is generally regarded as essential for maintaining economic stability and social balance.³⁷⁷ This perception is underpinned by enduring domestic economic constraints, including high unemployment, low wage growth, and the potential for social tension linked to insufficient job creation.³⁷⁸

Despite having a larger and more diversified economy than neighbouring states such as Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan remains unable to absorb the full labour supply.³⁷⁹ Consequently, seasonal and cyclical labour migration has become a structural necessity.³⁸⁰ Migration flows have shown resilience, continuing during the COVID-19 pandemic and remaining largely unaffected by the ongoing war in Ukraine, particularly with regard to movements to Russia.³⁸¹

Remittances from Uzbek nationals employed abroad, notably in Russia and Türkiye, represent a substantial source of income at both the household and national levels. Such transfers support a range of economic activities, including construction and small-scale enterprise development. From the perspective of the Uzbek

³⁷³ IOM; Researcher C; Uzbek Forum for Human Rights

³⁷⁴ IOM; Researcher C

³⁷⁵ IOM

³⁷⁶ Edward Lemon; Journalist B; Freedom for Eurasia; Uzbek Forum for Human Rights

³⁷⁷ Researcher C; Edward Lemon; Researcher D; Journalist B; Journalist C; Uzbek Forum for Human Rights

³⁷⁸ Researcher D; Freedom for Eurasia

³⁷⁹ Researcher C

³⁸⁰ Journalist B; Journalist A; Researcher C

³⁸¹ Researcher C

authorities, outward labour migration is regarded as economically beneficial, provided it does not generate security-related concerns.³⁸²

As a result, the authorities have adopted a generally proactive approach to legal migration.³⁸³ Following the abolition of the exit visa requirement, emigration is largely unrestricted for the broader population,³⁸⁴ while monitoring and constraints are applied selectively, primarily in relation to politically sensitive individuals.³⁸⁵

The government has also sought to direct migration towards more economically beneficial destinations. Through bilateral arrangements and quota systems, it promotes access to higher-wage labour markets, framing such efforts as “high-value migration” that can enhance domestic economic performance.³⁸⁶ Under the administration of Shavkat Mirziyoyev, migration policy reflects a broader pragmatic orientation characterised by pro-investment and pro-business reforms. The Uzbek diaspora is increasingly portrayed as a strategic resource, with officials engaging diaspora communities abroad, including business networks in cities such as New York City, to attract investment and expertise.³⁸⁷

At the societal level, mahalla affiliation and regional identity continue to constitute important structuring forces within Uzbek society, where social pressure is pervasive and communal norms remain strongly collectivist in orientation.³⁸⁸ It is within this context that Uzbek men frequently perceive labour migration as a social obligation tied to expectations of providing financial support for their families. The mahalla system plays a correspondingly central role in facilitating the migration process, functioning both as a mechanism of social regulation and as a source of practical assistance for prospective migrants.³⁸⁹

Nonetheless, migration has produced observable social impacts in certain areas. Evidence suggests that prolonged parental absence due to labour migration has affected family structures, with some children growing up without one or both parents for extended periods. Such patterns underscore the social costs that accompany the economic benefits of labour mobility.³⁹⁰

The authorities maintain oversight of the Uzbek diaspora’s geographic distribution, residence patterns, and social networks, reflecting both security considerations and the scale of the migrant population.³⁹¹

³⁸² Edward Lemon

³⁸³ Journalist A

³⁸⁴ Journalist B; Journalist C; Edward Lemon

³⁸⁵ Journalist B; Journalist C

³⁸⁶ Journalist B; Journalist A; Researcher C

³⁸⁷ Researcher D

³⁸⁸ Representatives of an international organisation, interview 2026

³⁸⁹ Representatives of an international organisation

³⁹⁰ Luca Anceschi

³⁹¹ Luca Anceschi

4.3 The abolishment of exit visas

Uzbekistan formally abolished exit visas in 2019, representing a significant expansion of freedom of movement compared to the Karimov era. Citizens are now generally able to travel abroad provided they hold a valid passport, and, where required, a visa for specific destinations. The majority of Uzbeks possess passports, particularly as travel to key migration destinations such as Russia requires one.³⁹²

This reform builds on earlier measures under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, including the abolition of the propiska system³⁹³, which previously restricted internal mobility. Collectively, these changes reflect official recognition of the importance of both internal and international movement.³⁹⁴ In general, the state does not hinder departures; however, isolated cases indicate that certain individuals, particularly activists or critics of government policy, may encounter restrictions, such as deliberate obstruction of passport or visa applications, as a form of extrajudicial pressure.³⁹⁵

Although the exit visa requirement was abolished in January 2019, individuals who departed Uzbekistan for third countries without the requisite documentation prior to the reform remain liable to prosecution upon return. At the time, travel without an exit visa was permitted only to CIS countries; however, some individuals transited through Georgia or Armenia in order to travel further abroad without obtaining the required documentation.³⁹⁶

Uzbek authorities continue to pursue such cases on the grounds that the violations were committed while the rules were still in force.³⁹⁷ A case from 2024 demonstrates that this provision remains active: upon returning to Uzbekistan, an individual who had previously travelled to Iran without an exit visa was convicted both of insulting the president and of violating exit visa regulations.³⁹⁸

The source argues that such prosecutions raise questions regarding the retroactive application of legal reforms, contending that penalising conduct no longer prohibited is arguably inconsistent with general principles of legality, though the practical enforceability of such cases remains uncertain.³⁹⁹

The denial of passport issuance has effectively replaced historical exit visas as an administrative tool to restrict the mobility of activists, critics, and protesters.⁴⁰⁰ One illustrative case involved a labour rights activist in the cotton sector whose passport was deliberately damaged during transit, preventing her from attending an award

³⁹² Edward Lemon; Journalist C; Journalist B

³⁹³ Propiska is the old Soviet residence permit system; the word is still used in Russia to describe a Person's permanent residence. For more information on Propiska please read here: HRW, the residence permit system (propiska), [url](#)

³⁹⁴ Edward Lemon

³⁹⁵ Journalist B

³⁹⁶ Uzbek Forum for Human Rights

³⁹⁷ Uzbek Forum for Human Rights

³⁹⁸ Gazeta.uz, Житель Намангана осуждён за оскорбление президента Узбекистана, 30 April 2024, [url](#)

³⁹⁹ Uzbek Forum for Human Rights

⁴⁰⁰ Journalist C; Edward Lemon

ceremony abroad, suggesting that state actors may impede movement without resorting to formal charges or detention.⁴⁰¹

4.4 Uzbek citizenship and issuance of passports

While Uzbekistan does not formally recognise dual nationality, citizens who acquire foreign citizenship, such as Russian nationality, remain legally regarded as Uzbek citizens unless they complete formal renunciation procedures. Consequently, individuals who engage in armed conflict abroad, such as the war in Ukraine, remain subject to domestic prosecution and potential extradition.⁴⁰²

Although formal revocation of citizenship for political reasons is documented, it remains exceptionally rare and lacks systematic application. Nevertheless, disputes concerning dual or former citizenship generate significant legal uncertainty, particularly for targeted demographics such as Karakalpak activists residing in Kazakhstan.⁴⁰³

Furthermore, Uzbek law mandates that citizens residing abroad, with the exception of those in the Russian Federation, register with their respective consulates. Under Article 25 of the Law On Citizenship of the Republic of Uzbekistan, failure to enter the permanent consular register within seven years without good reason constitutes grounds for the deprivation of citizenship; however, the practical enforcement of this provision remains opaque due to a lack of publicly available data.⁴⁰⁴

Fundamentally, the legislation governing citizenship and consular registration remains deeply rooted in the Soviet legal framework, preserving broad administrative discretion over the legal status of individuals.⁴⁰⁵

Generally, Uzbek citizens can obtain passports inexpensively and without difficulty, and the state does not routinely restrict foreign travel. However, the right to travel is occasionally instrumentalised as a mechanism of state control.⁴⁰⁶

For citizens residing abroad, obtaining or renewing passports can present significant difficulties. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) may decline to renew a passport or confirm citizenship status without providing any justification, leaving affected individuals unable to establish their legal standing through official channels. The authorities appear to handle such cases on an individual basis. When individuals are deemed to be of particular political or strategic interest, the state may facilitate their repatriation, occasionally offering assurances of amnesty or non-prosecution. Conversely, administrative measures, including passport denial, continue to be applied discretionarily, reflecting a persistent lack of substantive institutional reform within the broader migration framework.⁴⁰⁷

⁴⁰¹ Journalist C

⁴⁰² Journalist A

⁴⁰³ Journalist C

⁴⁰⁴ EUI, Law on Citizenship of the republic of Uzbekistan, 28 February 2020, [url](#); Researcher C

⁴⁰⁵ Researcher C

⁴⁰⁶ Journalist C; Edward Lemon

⁴⁰⁷ Researcher C

4.4.1 Illegal exits

Prior to the abolition of the exit visa regime in 2019, exceeding the permitted period of stay abroad could lead to criminal charges for illegal border crossing.⁴⁰⁸ Illegal departures remain uncommon and rarely documented, with administrative fines representing the most common outcome in cases involving irregular border crossings.⁴⁰⁹ Under Article 223 of the Criminal Code, illegal exit from or entry into Uzbekistan is punishable by a fine of 50-100 minimum monthly wages or imprisonment from three to five years.⁴¹⁰ Prolonged absence, irregular migration histories, or failure to maintain valid biometric documentation may nonetheless still give rise to suspicion.⁴¹¹

4.5 Return

Information on the situation of returnees to Uzbekistan remains largely anecdotal, drawing on migrant networks, social media exchanges, and individual accounts rather than systematic data collection. While the level of state coercion is generally assessed to have decreased compared with the period prior to 2016, some interviewed sources argue that the duration and location of residence abroad continue to constitute relevant factors upon return, suggesting that extended stays in Western countries, particularly when combined with political or religious activity, may increase the likelihood of scrutiny, though the extent to which this translates into concrete consequences remains difficult to verify.⁴¹²

Return migration is officially encouraged at a symbolic level. President Shavkat Mirziyoyev has publicly invited long-term expatriates and former exiles to return, promoting a narrative of reconciliation and national reintegration. In practice, however, returnees may be subject to scrutiny. Available information indicates that security services monitor certain individuals, including through the examination of personal devices and social media activity.⁴¹³

While there is limited evidence of systematic monitoring or sanctioning of ordinary returnees, religious practices or political engagement abroad may be interpreted as risk indicators and attract increased scrutiny. This reflects a dual approach whereby the state presents itself as supportive of its diaspora while maintaining vigilance towards individuals considered politically or ideologically sensitive.⁴¹⁴

The majority of citizens returning from abroad encounter no obstacles, provided they retain their Uzbek citizenship, as dual citizenship is not formally recognised.⁴¹⁵ According to journalist A, specialised in Central Asia, there is greater formal acceptance of international mobility compared with the Karimov period. Residence in Europe, the United Kingdom, or the United States for study or

⁴⁰⁸ Researcher D

⁴⁰⁹ Journalist C; Researcher D

⁴¹⁰ LexUZ, Uzbekistan, Criminal Code of the Republic of Uzbekistan, [url](#);

⁴¹¹ Researcher D

⁴¹² Researcher A; Researcher D

⁴¹³ Researcher D

⁴¹⁴ Researcher D; Journalist C

⁴¹⁵ Journalist C

professional employment is generally less likely to arouse suspicion, particularly where such movement aligns with state-supported labour migration policies. The same source suggests that temporary employment in Western countries, such as work as a long-distance driver, would ordinarily be regarded as economically advantageous and unlikely to trigger adverse measures.⁴¹⁶

Nevertheless, Luca Anceschi, a researcher with expertise on Uzbekistan, argues that migration to the West is perceived by the authorities as carrying distinct political sensitivities, with official concern that exposure to Western liberal values could introduce ideologically destabilising influences domestically. Anceschi further contends that the state consequently monitors information flows and ideological exchanges within the diaspora. The source acknowledges, however, that tracking the activities of migrants in Western countries remains practically more challenging than monitoring the larger and more concentrated communities in Russia.⁴¹⁷

Periodic concerns have arisen regarding the potential for large-scale return migration, particularly following external shocks affecting Russia, which remains the principal destination for Uzbek labour migrants. Events such as the 2008 global financial crisis, the imposition of sanctions on Russia in 2014, economic disruption during the COVID-19 period, and the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine have prompted speculation about mass returns. While the number of Uzbek migrants in Russia has fluctuated, there is no evidence of sustained, large-scale return movements.⁴¹⁸

Nevertheless, policymakers and researchers have highlighted potential challenges related to the reintegration of returning migrants, particularly young men of working age. Specific concern is directed towards individuals who have spent prolonged periods in conflict affected environments such as Syria or Iraq. State monitoring mechanisms within Uzbekistan, often based on administrative and community level structures, are more effective domestically, whereas extended residence abroad is perceived to reduce oversight and potentially increase exposure to criminal or extremist networks.⁴¹⁹

In this context, individuals who have established residence abroad are not, in general, compelled to return. Opportunities for effective legal redress in relation to past grievances remain limited. Economic migrants who have relocated in pursuit of employment or improved living conditions are considered to have exercised individual choice and are not typically subject to pressure to repatriate. However, individuals facing potential risks linked to political, religious, or security related factors may encounter particular vulnerabilities upon return, as assurances of protection cannot be guaranteed.⁴²⁰

⁴¹⁶ Journalist A

⁴¹⁷ Luca Anceschi

⁴¹⁸ Edward Lemon

⁴¹⁹ Edward Lemon

⁴²⁰ Luca Anceschi

4.5.1 Duration of residence abroad

The situation of returnees to Uzbekistan is influenced primarily by the duration and geographical context of their residence abroad, as well as by any political or social activities undertaken during that period. Long-term migrants, particularly those absent for extended periods, may be perceived as having adopted foreign, including Western, norms or political views, which can result in increased scrutiny upon return.⁴²¹

The length of absence constitutes a key factor upon re-entry. Individuals who have resided abroad for many years are more likely to attract attention from the authorities.⁴²² A lengthy stay may prompt questioning, particularly where official documents are missing; however, in the absence of prosecutable offences, individuals are generally admitted after brief interrogation.⁴²³ Acquisition of foreign citizenship, particularly where Uzbek nationality has been formally renounced, may also prompt questioning upon return.⁴²⁴

These contemporary practices must be understood against the backdrop of a significant reduction in overt coercion since 2016. During the Karimov era, entry into Uzbekistan was frequently accompanied by thorough inspections and interrogations at passport control, especially for persons associated with opposition groups abroad. In countries such as Sweden, which hosted a sizeable Uzbek opposition community, security personnel reportedly attempted to pressure travellers into acting as informants, and members of the diaspora were at times compelled to monitor one another.⁴²⁵

Researcher A, with expertise on Uzbekistan, assesses that since 2017, such practices appear to have largely diminished, with interactions at border crossings reported to be less intrusive and fewer indications of attempts to recruit returnees for intelligence purposes abroad. While researcher A characterises this as a notable reduction in coercive practices, the source nonetheless notes that selective scrutiny of certain categories of returnees persists.⁴²⁶

4.5.2 Country of residence

Beyond destination alone, the decisive factor in the authorities' assessment of returning nationals is the nature of activities undertaken abroad.⁴²⁷ Political demonstrations, public criticism of the government, or engagement with activist networks may provoke closer examination upon return.⁴²⁸

Residence in Western Europe, North America, or Australia is generally associated with greater scrutiny than time spent in Russia, Kazakhstan, South Korea, or, in many cases, Türkiye, reflecting official concerns regarding possible political

⁴²¹ Journalist B

⁴²² Researcher C

⁴²³ Researcher D

⁴²⁴ Edward Lemon

⁴²⁵ Researcher A

⁴²⁶ Researcher A

⁴²⁷ Journalist B; Researcher D; Researcher C

⁴²⁸ Researcher D

opposition links or ideological influence acquired abroad. Longer stays, particularly in Western jurisdictions, tend to increase suspicion further.⁴²⁹

Travel to states such as Pakistan or Egypt, particularly for study or religious purposes, may give rise to enhanced scrutiny, including temporary detention at the airport or placement on confidential watch lists.⁴³⁰ The scale of the Uzbek diaspora in Russia, however, renders comprehensive surveillance operationally unfeasible, as noted by researcher C, with expertise on Uzbekistan.⁴³¹

Practical factors further shape this differentiation. Heightened security concerns relating to Türkiye, by contrast, stem from reports of small jihadist networks allegedly engaged in recruiting Uzbek nationals in that country.⁴³²

While many returnees experience only brief questioning, isolated cases have involved arrest at Tashkent airport, including individuals returning from Australia and, more rarely, from Sweden.⁴³³ There are also less publicised accounts of returnees from Africa and other regions who were reportedly detained on arrival and subsequently disappeared. In certain high-profile instances, arrest followed immediately upon entry.⁴³⁴

The authorities appear mindful of maintaining the formal impression that return is permissible, with prospective returnees often advised to obtain documentation from Uzbek embassies abroad, enabling advance risk assessment. Individuals without deportation orders or prior criminal cases generally encounter minimal interference, though researcher C notes that partner organisations have documented cases in which assurances of amnesty were reportedly provided prior to return, only for the individual to be arrested thereafter.⁴³⁵

In cases involving deportation from a third country due to violations of migration agreements, the Uzbek Ministry of Foreign Affairs indicates that a prohibition on exiting Uzbekistan of up to one year may be imposed. The Ministry frames this not as a punitive measure but as a disciplinary one intended to discourage breaches of agreements or domestic law.⁴³⁶

4.6 Procedures and screening at the border

Screening and monitoring of returnees constitute established practices in Uzbekistan, though scrutiny is targeted rather than universal.⁴³⁷ The majority of returnees pass through passport control without incident.⁴³⁸ Those most likely to face questioning include deportees, individuals perceived as politically sensitive or of

⁴²⁹ Journalist B; Researcher D; Researcher C

⁴³⁰ Journalist A

⁴³¹ Researcher C

⁴³² Researcher C

⁴³³ Researcher A

⁴³⁴ Researcher C

⁴³⁵ Researcher C

⁴³⁶ MFA

⁴³⁷ Freedom for Eurasia

⁴³⁸ Researcher A

security concern⁴³⁹, and those who have resided abroad for extended periods, particularly without documentation.⁴⁴⁰

Muslims who had fled Uzbekistan under President Karimov fearing religious persecution were in some cases arrested and prosecuted on religious extremism-related charges upon their return, despite prior assurances given to them or their relatives by police that they would not face prosecution. Rejected asylum seekers may be subjected to intense interrogation by the security services on arrival. Their treatment is likely to depend on their activities abroad, including any connections to critics or religious figures outside Uzbekistan, as well as criticism of the authorities or religious activities conducted online.⁴⁴¹

Interrogations are conducted selectively, most prominently at Tashkent International Airport. Depending on whether the individual has been flagged by the security services, questioning may subsequently continue through local police structures and mahalla committees. Border officials report directly to the security services and are trained in interrogation procedures.⁴⁴²

Mobile telephones and computers are frequently examined, with particular attention to digital communications, social media subscriptions, and engagement with politically or religiously sensitive content. Even limited engagement with diaspora networks or online discussions may be interpreted as indicative of political or religious association.⁴⁴³ Even where detention does not follow, individuals may remain under surveillance to ensure they refrain from activities perceived as oppositional to the state.⁴⁴⁴

The authorities' approach reflects a calibrated risk assessment rather than automatic sanction, with factors considered including the duration of stay abroad, the nature of activities undertaken, perceived political or religious identity, and social associations.⁴⁴⁵

4.6.1 Asylum seekers including failed asylum seekers

Some sources suggest that the Uzbek authorities maintain a markedly negative view of citizens who have applied for asylum abroad, with the act of seeking asylum, particularly on political or religious grounds, frequently interpreted as disloyal and hostile to the state.⁴⁴⁶ One of the sources further states that human rights practitioners generally consider that individuals returned following unsuccessful asylum applications cannot be assured of safe treatment and may face a significant risk of arrest solely on the grounds of having sought asylum.⁴⁴⁷

⁴³⁹ Freedom for Eurasia

⁴⁴⁰ Researcher A

⁴⁴¹ Freedom for Eurasia

⁴⁴² Researcher A; Researcher D

⁴⁴³ Freedom for Eurasia; Researcher D; Researcher C

⁴⁴⁴ Freedom for Eurasia

⁴⁴⁵ Researcher D

⁴⁴⁶ Freedom for Eurasia; Journalist A

⁴⁴⁷ Journalist A

Simultaneously, other sources state that the mere fact of applying for asylum does not automatically result in prosecution, and scrutiny appears more closely linked to pre-existing concerns such as political affiliation, religious association, or minority status.⁴⁴⁸ According to one source, asylum claims framed in economic terms or private disputes generally attract less attention,⁴⁴⁹ and research from Uzbek migrant communities abroad indicates that some applicants have exaggerated religious claims, with no legal consequences upon return typically following where such assertions prove unfounded.⁴⁵⁰

Reliable data on returnees remain limited due to restricted access for independent monitoring. No documented cases were identified in which individuals previously granted asylum abroad faced specific legal penalties solely on that basis upon voluntary return.⁴⁵¹ Furthermore, no documented cases in which failed asylum seekers faced legal prosecution upon return solely on the basis of seeking asylum abroad have been identified in the research for this report.

4.6.2 Return of religious believers and monitoring

According to Freedom for Eurasia, cases have been documented involving Uzbek religious believers who fled to Europe following the outbreak of war in Ukraine, having previously resided in Ukraine.⁴⁵²

Several subsequently faced allegations related to extremism, including outstanding charges dating back to the Karimov period, and were returned to Uzbekistan without full procedural safeguards; practitioners report that some of these returnees later disappeared into the Uzbek prison system. In Freedom for Eurasia's assessment, these cases illustrate the heightened vulnerability of religious believers whose profiles intersect with allegations of extremism, particularly where prior charges remain active or can be reactivated upon return.⁴⁵³

Researcher C notes that monitoring practices are embedded within administrative and security structures that allow for discretionary identification of individuals deemed politically or religiously sensitive, with inclusion on wanted lists, whether public or confidential, capable of triggering interrogation, surveillance, or arrest. The source further observes that these mechanisms operate with limited transparency and are difficult to assess independently due to restricted access for external observers.⁴⁵⁴

4.6.3 Official lists of wanted persons

The Ministry of Internal Affairs maintains an official public register of wanted persons, internally referred to as the ROZISK, administered in coordination with the State Security Service, with criteria for inclusion determined by these authorities

⁴⁴⁸ Researcher D; Researcher C

⁴⁴⁹ Journalist B

⁴⁵⁰ Researcher A

⁴⁵¹ Researcher C

⁴⁵² Freedom for Eurasia

⁴⁵³ Freedom for Eurasia

⁴⁵⁴ Researcher C

rather than established legal standards.⁴⁵⁵ This public list does not encompass all individuals sought by law enforcement, functioning primarily as an alert system prioritising those accused of serious offences such as murder, terrorism, or major criminal activity, with minor offences generally excluded.⁴⁵⁶

In addition to the public register, researcher C notes that the authorities reportedly maintain internal lists used for monitoring and suspicion. Inclusion on such lists may stem not only from formal investigative criteria but potentially from the attention of individual security officials, who may initiate adverse measures affecting not only the person concerned but also their relatives or business interests.⁴⁵⁷

A notable example is the so-called blacklist of suspected religious extremists, whose existence was officially denied until 2017; although announcements were made that individuals would be removed, the source reports that subsequent re-arrests of former members of groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir suggest that similar mechanisms were reconstituted. The source further argues that designations of extremism lack narrowly defined legal parameters, are applied with considerable discretion, and that expert testimony in judicial proceedings tends to align with governmental determinations.⁴⁵⁸

Overall, researcher C assesses that the system of official and unofficial wanted lists, combined with broader monitoring practices, constitutes a flexible administrative framework through which the state retains the capacity to identify and sanction individuals, particularly religious believers, whose activities or affiliations are regarded as threatening to public order or state authority.⁴⁵⁹

4.7 Surveillance and monitoring of returnees

Oversight of Uzbek citizens abroad is assessed to be selective, targeting individuals considered potentially problematic rather than the broader diaspora.⁴⁶⁰ Researcher C notes that towards the end of the Karimov presidency, leaked materials indicated that the security services maintained a regularly updated database of citizens residing abroad for extended periods, and that while monitoring practices are reported to have become less systematic in recent years, similar mechanisms remain in place and have reportedly been utilised in subsequent legal proceedings. The consular registration requirement applicable to Uzbek citizens residing abroad provides an additional administrative tool through which authorities may track individuals considered politically sensitive, including dissidents and asylum seekers in Europe and North America.⁴⁶¹

Researcher C further argues that the capacity for transnational surveillance appears constrained by logistical and resource limitations, with Uzbekistan lacking the

⁴⁵⁵ Edward Lemon; Journalist A

⁴⁵⁶ Edward Lemon

⁴⁵⁷ Researcher C

⁴⁵⁸ Researcher C

⁴⁵⁹ Researcher C

⁴⁶⁰ Journalist C

⁴⁶¹ Researcher C

global monitoring capability of larger states. In Russia, oversight is facilitated indirectly through cooperation with Russian authorities, including the sharing of registration data, whereas in Western countries, where formal cooperation is more limited, information gathering may occur through diplomatic channels, embassy or consulate contacts, or monitoring of relatives remaining in Uzbekistan, particularly in cases involving individuals of heightened political relevance.⁴⁶²

4.7.1 European databases and exit visa considerations

Where the Uzbek authorities flag an individual as a security or public threat, this classification may carry implications extending beyond Uzbekistan's borders. Such designations/listings may be transmitted through international cooperation frameworks and result in entries in international databases, including the Schengen Information System. Once recorded, removal of such alerts is procedurally complex, and the practical consequences for the individual may be considerable. Even where the underlying allegations are contested or arguably politically motivated, the individual concerned may face long-term impediments with respect to cross-border travel, residence rights, access to financial services, and employment.⁴⁶³

⁴⁶² Researcher C

⁴⁶³ Freedom for Eurasia

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