

# Election Watch for the Digital Age



## Uzbekistan

### Preelection assessment

*Presidential election set for October 2021*

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The October presidential election comes amid a stalled reform agenda and continued repression of opposition forces. Shavkat Mirziyoyev is expected to run for a second term after replacing Islam Karimov, who died in 2016 after more than two decades in power. Despite some moves to devolve executive power, genuine political competition remains sparse. In May 2021, the Justice Ministry rejected the registration of the Truth and Development Social Democratic Party, preventing well-known critic Khidimazar Allaqulov from running in the presidential election. All existing political parties generally toe the line of the ruling Uzbekistan Liberal Democratic Party.

President Mirziyoyev's tenure has included some positive reforms to the country's authoritarian governance. The 2019 parliamentary elections featured more open debate among parliamentary candidates, lawmakers, and independent journalists, and there has been incremental progress on judicial independence. Progress on media freedom and government oversight was stifled, however, after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the May 2020 collapse of the Sardoba dam, which displaced over 100,000 people in Uzbekistan and neighboring Kazakhstan. Mirziyoyev enacted new penalties for disseminating "false information" related to the pandemic, as well for online "insult and slander" of the president. These trends raise concerns about politicized targeting of online journalism ahead of the election.

Freedom House has identified the following as key digital interference issues to watch ahead of election day:

- **Arrests and prosecutions:** Legal actions against bloggers, journalists, and ordinary individuals could disrupt access to information and encourage self-censorship ahead of the election. Numerous vague laws permit the government to prosecute legitimate online activity, including prohibitions on threatening the constitutional order; inciting ethnic, national, racial, or religious hatred; and threatening public security. In May 2021, an Uzbekistan court sentenced blogger Otabek Sattoriy, who frequently reported on government corruption, to six and a half years in prison for allegedly extorting a mobile phone from the owner of a local market.
- **Forced deletion of content:** Continued removal of sensitive political content in the coming months could undermine voters' access to independent information related to the election. In May 2020, Jamoliddin Babajanov and Bobur Akmalov, the editor and lead director of television channel Sport, criticized state broadcaster Uzbekistan 24's coverage of the Sardoba dam collapse. A recorded video of the argument was later taken down from the website where it was initially published. Additionally, a reporter from the Uzbekistan National News Agency deleted a Facebook post, which mentioned that a resident had been told not to comment on the collapse, after she received "calls from above" pressuring her to remove the post because it could be viewed as a criticism of the president. The push for journalists to delete content extends beyond the collapse of the dam; in July 2020, the editors of three media outlets in the autonomous region of deleted

stories about the death of Musa Yerniyazov, the chairman of the parliament of Karakalpakstan who passed away in July 2021, after they were summoned to the prosecutor's office.

- **Harassment and violence:** Journalists and critics of the government regularly face attacks, including violent assaults, in response to their online activities. In March 2021, blogger Miraziz Bazarov was beaten by a mob, hospitalized, and subsequently placed in house arrest. Bazarov had publicly supported LGBTQ+ rights and questioned the government's spending of COVID-19 relief funds. Social media users who speak out about sensitive topics, notably LGBT+ rights, are subject to hate speech, intimidation, and offline violence.
- **Cyberattacks:** Prominent bloggers have faced attempted hacks in the past year. In August 2020, four administrators of popular Telegram channels were allegedly targeted by a coordinated phishing attack. The previous year, over 170 activists and journalists based inside and outside of the country faced a barrage of phishing attacks. Online news sites, including those critical of the government, have also been subject to DDoS attacks in recent years. Digital security remains a potential vulnerability ahead of the 2021 election and breaches could disrupt the reach or operations of activists and journalists who are targeted.
- **Blocking of platforms and websites:** The government blocks a number of websites, including Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Russian and Uzbek services, as well as public opinion platforms Avaaz and Change.org. In a small sign of progress, the websites of several independent media outlets, human rights groups, and platforms were unblocked in 2019. However, in June 2020, the government blocked access to Durakchi, a satirical website, and users reportedly had trouble accessing Facebook and Telegram throughout that summer. Moreover, the government maintains control over the country's internet infrastructure and could restrict access to additional websites and platforms ahead of the election.

Uzbekistan has a score of 22 out of 100, with 100 representing the least vulnerability in terms of election integrity, on Freedom House's Election Vulnerability Index, which is based on a selection of key election-related indicators. The score reflects a tightly controlled environment for expression and political engagement on and offline, as well as legislative and judicial branches that are subservient to the executive. The country is rated **Not Free** in *Freedom in the World 2021*, with a score of 11 out of 100 with respect to its political rights and civil liberties; **Not Free** in *Freedom on the Net 2020*, with an internet freedom score of 27 out of 100; and as a **consolidated authoritarian regime** in *Nations in Transit 2021*, with a score of 4 out of 100 for the country's democratic progress. To learn more about these annual Freedom House assessments, please visit the Uzbekistan country reports in [Freedom in the World](#), [Freedom on the Net](#), and [Nations in Transit](#).