

## PRESENTATION

Freedom of Movement, Assembly and Association in Uzbekistan

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The situation with these fundamental freedoms in Uzbekistan is dire. There has been a widespread crackdown on all forms of political and civil liberties since Andijan. Uzbekistan has slid to the very bottom of Freedom House's annual "Freedom in the World" survey, joining Turkmenistan, and only six other countries that Freedom House ranks as the world's most repressive regimes (Burma, Cuba, Libya, North Korea, Sudan, and Syria).

Following the forced closure of international NGOs civil society in Uzbekistan has been deprived of international support for its activities.<sup>1</sup> The very few international organizations still operating in the country are mostly concerned with humanitarian issues which the Uzbek Government sees as "non – controversial". The Freedom House liquidation, for example, was ordered due to "gross" violation of Uzbek law regulating the licensing of internet access, work with Human Rights Defenders as "non – registered groups", and the failure to register Freedom House's logo. Charges against other organizations have been similar in nature.

These actions by the Government of Uzbekistan are not only a violation of international human rights standards. They are also carefully planned to **monopolize political life** in Uzbekistan. Intellectuals, who cannot work in the private sector, are now left voiceless in the society. Young people can either to take part in Government organized association, marginalize themselves or leave Uzbekistan.

Since the beginning of the crackdown, more than 200 local NGOs have been closed in shame proceedings and trumped up charges. Truth to be told, human rights NGOs, save from the very few, were never registered in the first place. No sector of Uzbek society has faced a higher level of government harassment, intimidation, and oppression than civil society. Numerous Human Rights Defenders have been arrested and some held incommunicado for months. Human Rights Defenders who

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<sup>1</sup> During the last year Internews, Eurasia Foundation, IREX, Freedom House, AED, ACCELS, ABA CEELI, and Central Asian Free Exchange have ended operations inside Uzbekistan.

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have not been charged with a crime have often been detained for short periods or have been placed under house arrest. Naturally, new human rights organizations cannot be formed, independent political parties critical to the Government no longer exist, and other independent associations are impossible to form. Furthermore, recent amendments to the Uzbek criminal code impose severe penalties for groups operating without registration. For example, one of the charges against Freedom House was, believe it or not, providing internet access to “unregistered” groups.

Uzbekistan has never really lived up to its OSCE commitments. For instance, there is no right to choose one’s residence in Uzbek Constitution. Uzbek citizens are required to have a “propiska” to be able to choose their residence. Any citizen wishing to move to a new city, needs to receive permission from local authorities. A legacy of the Soviet times, the propiska system continues to dominate lives of Uzbek citizens. The issue is not regulated by law. Authorities in the capital (Tashkent) rarely grant permission to move even in cases when all requirements are met, and it is common knowledge among local residents that registration (propiska) requires a bribe. Often, even when a person possesses an apartment in Tashkent she/he is not given registration. Allegedly about 90 per cent of applicants are not permitted to register.

Citizens in Uzbekistan can travel inside the country, but are exposed to constant searches by the police at checkpoints.

Exit visas are still required to leave the country and citizens are in violation of Uzbek law even if they travel from a country outside Uzbekistan to a third country after their exit visa has expired. Exit visas are regularly denied to “suspicious” people. People listed as suspicious are also not allowed to receive money transfers. Talib Yakubov,<sup>2</sup> who is present at this meeting, is included on this list.

Finally, the Uzbek government regularly argues that “security” and “criminal activity” justifies their curbing of freedom of association, assembly and movement for Uzbek citizens. However, the Uzbek government must differentiate genuine security concerns and freedoms that are the core of the democratic political process and public participation in developing and implementing public policy.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://enews.ferghana.ru/article.php?id=1608>

Recommendations:

**We Urge the Government of Uzbekistan:**

To allow registration and participation in political life of independent political parties and civil society organizations;

To implement its OSCE commitments and international obligations from ICCPR and Declaration on Human Rights Defenders;

**At the same time:**

We encourage members of the OSCE to reach out to all governments, not just Uzbekistan, which are currently not respecting these rights and pressure them to do so and to refrain from passing legislation that further restricts these rights.