

Uzbekistan

Overview

Uzbekistan is a landlocked country in Central Asia that became independent with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Because it has the largest population in the region and is the only country that borders all four other Central Asian states (Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan), many analysts see Uzbekistan as a potential regional leader. The country also shares a border with Afghanistan. Since Uzbekistan embarked on a wide-ranging reform program in 2016, the country has reengaged with the international community, leading to significantly improved relations with the United States. U.S. policymakers have identified Uzbekistan as a key partner in addressing regional threats such as illegal narcotics, terrorism, and violent extremism. Under the first Trump Administration and the Biden Administration, the U.S. Department of State praised Uzbekistan's ongoing reform efforts, while continuing to raise concerns about human rights and political freedoms. Some Members of Congress have expressed interest in expanding U.S. engagement with Uzbekistan on trade, democratic reforms, human rights, and security cooperation.

Political Background

Leadership Transition. From 1991 to 2016, Uzbekistan was led by President Islam Karimov, a former high-level Soviet official. International observers considered his rule authoritarian and highly repressive. After his death, Karimov was succeeded by Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who had served as prime minister under Karimov for 13 years. Mirziyoyev embarked on an ambitious reform program, aiming to transform Uzbekistan by modernizing and liberalizing the economy, addressing human rights concerns, and reengaging with the international community. He won reelection to a second five-year term in October 2021. Observers from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) noted "significant procedural irregularities" and concluded that Uzbekistan's reforms had "not yet resulted in a genuinely pluralistic environment."

Government. Uzbekistan's centralized government structure grants the executive branch extensive powers, with the president exercising a significant degree of control over the legislature and the judiciary. By law, the president is limited to two terms, but this limit was not observed by Karimov. The bicameral legislature (*Oliy Majlis*) has historically provided neither an effective check on the executive nor a venue for genuine political debate, although its role has expanded somewhat under Mirziyoyev, who has urged greater initiative from Parliament. In 2020, legislative amendments expanded parliamentary oversight powers.

Constitutional Reforms. A new constitution approved in an April 2023 referendum extended the presidential term

from five years to seven, potentially allowing Mirziyoyev to serve two additional, seven-year terms. The new constitution also introduced changes that address some popular grievances, including by bolstering property rights, and criminal justice reforms such as banning the death penalty. Uzbek officials state that the constitutional changes will serve to strengthen human rights protections, improve social services, and make the government more accountable to its citizens. Critics argue, however, that the new constitution does not bolster the rule of law and serves primarily to strengthen Mirziyoyev.

Recent elections. After the new constitution entered into force, Mirziyoyev secured 87% of the vote in a July 2023 snap presidential election. OSCE observers determined that the election "took place in a constrained political environment that was lacking genuine political alternatives." October 2024 parliamentary elections took place under a new, mixed electoral system, with half of the 150 members in the lower chamber elected in single-mandate constituencies and the remaining half elected from nationwide party lists. (The upper chamber comprises 65 indirectly elected members.) The ruling Liberal Democratic Party increased its share of seats; all five parties in parliament generally support Mirziyoyev. Independent candidacies are not permitted, and no new parties have been allowed to register.

Figure 1. Map of Uzbekistan



Source: Graphic created by CRS

Human Rights. International governments and nongovernmental organizations have lauded Uzbekistan's progress on human rights since its leadership transition, although concerns persist among some observers. The U.S. State Department has recognized the Mirziyoyev government's "significant efforts" to eliminate forced labor in the harvesting of cotton, the country's primary cash crop.

The International Labour Organization determined that Uzbekistan's 2021 cotton harvest was free from systemic forced labor and systemic child labor. The Uzbek state strictly controls and monitors religious practices. A new law on religion passed in 2021 eases some restrictions but has drawn criticism from religious freedom advocates for maintaining significant government control over religious life. According to the State Department, other major human rights issues in Uzbekistan include arbitrary arrest and detention, torture, restrictions on freedom of expression and media freedom, and restrictions on civil society.

Terrorism and Violent Extremism. Terrorist attacks within Uzbekistan are rare, but Uzbek nationals have been involved in international terrorist activity. Government crackdowns drove domestic Islamist extremist groups out of the country in the 1990s, and some Uzbek militants allied themselves with the Taliban, Al Qaeda, or the Islamic State (IS) in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Although other Uzbek nationals have been involved in terrorist attacks abroad, they were predominantly radicalized outside of Uzbekistan, often as labor migrants in Russia or Turkey. About 1,500 Uzbek nationals travelled to Syria and Iraq to fight with IS. Including women and children, the total estimated number of Uzbek citizens associated with IS is 3,000. Uzbekistan was among the first countries to undertake a large-scale repatriation and rehabilitation effort for its IS-affiliated nationals, bringing back over 500 women and children since 2019. Uzbek foreign fighters remain an international concern due to their ongoing participation in armed groups active abroad, including IS-Khorasan Province in Afghanistan.

Uzbekistan at a Glance

Land Area: 425,400 square km., slightly larger than California
Population: 36.5 million (2024 est.)
Ethnic groups: Uzbek 83.8%, Tajik 4.8%, Kazakh 2.5%, Russian 2.3%, Karakalpak 2.2%, Tatar 1.5%, other 4.4% (2017 est.)
Religion: Muslim 97.6% (mostly Sunni), Orthodox Christian 2.3%, other 1.5%
Language: Uzbek (official) 74.3%, Russian 14.2%, Tajik 4.4%, other 7.1%
GDP/GDP per capita (2023): \$101.6 billion/\$2,788.90
Data from the World Bank, the CIA World Factbook, and the U.S. Department of State

Economy

Key Sectors. Uzbekistan is a lower middle-income country with significant natural resources. Major export industries include cotton, natural gas, uranium, and gold. The country is the world's eighth-largest producer of cotton, and is moving to transition from raw cotton exports to textile production. Uzbekistan has sizeable natural gas reserves; the primary destination for natural gas exports is China, although the majority of production is consumed domestically. Since 2023, Uzbekistan has been a net importer of natural gas. Uzbekistan also is the world's fifth-largest uranium supplier. Uzbekistan has extensive economic ties to Russia, rendering it vulnerable to fallout

from the conflict in Ukraine and related sanctions. Remittances, primarily from Russia, equaled about 14% of GDP in 2023. The World Bank estimates 6% GDP growth in 2024, and projects a moderation to 5.8% growth in 2025.

Foreign Policy and U.S. Relations

Foreign policy. Under Karimov, Uzbekistan pursued a largely isolationist foreign policy. Since 2016, Uzbekistan has reengaged with the international community and has moved to normalize previously tense relations with its neighbors. In 2020, Uzbekistan became an observer in the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union but currently does not intend to seek full membership. Uzbekistan is actively pursuing accession to the World Trade Organization. Uzbekistan is a member of the PRC-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization and has received sizeable investment from China as part of Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative. China is Uzbekistan's largest trading partner, and in 2024 the two countries upgraded their relationship to an "all-weather comprehensive strategic partnership." Since the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, the government of Uzbekistan has avoided endorsing Russian aggression and has expressed support for Ukraine's territorial integrity. The United States has sanctioned multiple Uzbek entities and individuals for facilitating Russian sanctions evasion.

Afghanistan. Since the August 2021 Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, Uzbekistan has pursued high-level engagement with the Taliban, while maintaining that Uzbekistan will not extend recognition to the Taliban government before the international community does. Most analysts consider Uzbekistan's stance toward the Taliban to be pragmatic, with the priority of ensuring Uzbekistan's security. In 2024, Uzbekistan accepted a Taliban-appointed ambassador from Afghanistan.

U.S. Relations. U.S. relations with Uzbekistan have improved significantly since 2016, reflecting the country's broader development of international ties. President Mirziyoyev met with President Trump in Washington, DC, in May 2018 and lauded the "new era of the strategic partnership" between the two countries. In 2024, the United States transferred ownership of 46 aircraft previously operated by the Afghan air force to Uzbekistan. The second Trump Administration has expressed interest in engaging with Uzbekistan on investment in critical minerals and U.S. civil nuclear energy technologies.

U.S. Foreign Assistance. During the Biden Administration, U.S. assistance to Uzbekistan aimed to support the country's reforms and to reduce Uzbekistan's reliance on Russian and PRC markets. U.S. assistance to Uzbekistan also has included support for border security and counterterrorism capabilities, nonproliferation activities, and public health programs, as well as support for efforts to expand civil society, increase judicial independence, and develop governance capacity. The State Department requested \$49 million in assistance to Uzbekistan for FY2024 and allocated an estimated \$49.9 million in FY2023.

Maria A. Blackwood, Analyst in Asian Policy

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