

U4 Helpdesk Answer

U4 Helpdesk Answer 2023: 28

Corruption and anti- corruption efforts in Uzbekistan

Since coming to power in 2016, President Mirziyoyev has taken steps to liberalise the Uzbek economy and denounce corruption. Among other measures, a new Anti-Corruption Agency was established in 2020 and, under his administration, criminal charges have been filed against numerous public officials for embezzlement, bribes or abuse of power.

However, Uzbekistan remains an authoritarian state characterised by high levels of corruption, nepotism and abuse of power, including at the highest levels of government and in such sectors as healthcare and education. In recent years, political opponents, civil society figures and journalists have faced lawsuits, prosecution and even torture for reporting on corruption offences involving the president's inner circle and close allies.

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Caveat

This is an updated version of the original Helpdesk Answer first produced in October 2023.

Introduction

Political system

Uzbekistan has a president-centric political system with limited checks and balances and few opportunities for other elected political representatives to influence decision-making

MAIN POINTS

- Under the presidency of Shavkat Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan has embarked on a reformist path, seeking to transform its political and economic governance model from a Soviet-style top-down system towards an open-market economy.
- Yet, despite some progress in political and economic reforms, Uzbekistan remains an authoritarian state characterised by high levels of corruption among senior officials.
- According to public opinion data gathered by governmental research centre and the assessment of the Uzbek parliament and state anti-corruption agency, healthcare and education are among the most corrupt sectors in the country.
- Important institutions, such as the parliament, judiciary, prosecution and law enforcement are subject to undue influence by the president and other officials in the executive branch. There is limited due process within the judicial system, and law enforcement authorities arrest civic activists, journalists or political opponents on flimsy pretexts and dubious charges.
- Uzbekistan's civic space is considered closed with human rights defenders, investigative journalists and bloggers being prosecuted and sometimes tortured for publishing critical articles exposing entrenched corruption in the top echelons of the government.

(Freedom House 2023). In July 2023, incumbent President Shavkat Mirziyoyev was declared the winner of a snap election, reportedly receiving 87% of votes cast.

The Bertelsmann Foundation (2022) notes that independent candidates who are not members of political parties are not allowed to run in parliamentary and presidential elections. Moreover, there are no registered opposition parties in Uzbekistan that could challenge the ruling party (Bertelsmann Foundation 2022).

According to Freedom House (2023), unregistered opposition groups operate in exile while their domestic supporters and family members are persecuted and barred from participating in elections. Moreover, political competition is stifled by economic oligarchies and patronage networks of regional power brokers (Freedom House 2023).

The Bertelsmann Foundation (2022) argues that existing political parties, which avoid criticism of the government, are not socially or ideologically rooted. They reportedly lack qualified leaders and are therefore not able to engage in meaningful, issue-based, critical debates during pre-election campaigns (Bertelsmann Foundation 2022).

Election campaigns of political parties are financed by the state budget according to the Article 100 of the Uzbek Election Code.¹ According to the UNCAC Coalition (2022), this makes the party candidates dependent on state funding and reportedly undermines genuine political competition.

Moreover, most parties in Uzbekistan do not publish their financial reports, despite an obligation to do so. Therefore, the UNCAC Coalition (2022) concludes that amount of funding

allocated to those parties and the nature of expenses is often unknown.

Reform efforts

Mirziyoyev has begun liberalising the economy, which has started to attract significant investments from China and the EU and contributed to Uzbekistan's strong economic growth (EU Reporter 2023).

In particular, Presidential Decree 5177 from 2017 took steps to tackle the shadow economy by permitting the free purchase and sale of currency and the use of international mechanisms to set currency conversion rates (President of the Republic of Uzbekistan 2017). According to Current Time (2017), this decree eradicated the decades old "black market" where the difference between actual and official conversion rates was around 50%.

Certain political reforms have also contributed to a nascent liberalisation process in the country. The visibility of the work of the bicameral parliament (Oliy Majlis), consisting of the legislative chamber and the senate, has increased. This marks a departure from Mirziyoyev's predecessor, Islam Karimov, who ruled the country in a highly autocratic manner from 1991 until his death in 2016 (Bertelsmann Foundation 2022).

In 2020, Mirziyoyev established a new Anti-Corruption Agency via President Decree 6013 (President of the Republic of Uzbekistan 2020; UNODC 2022) and launched a mandatory online public procurement platform (Uz Daily 2020). The Anti-Corruption Agency is tasked with researching corruption, engaging with civil society, enhancing transparency, and is also charged with "strengthening the country's prestige and [the]

¹ Generally speaking, private financing of political parties is allowed though limits are imposed in accordance with

Articles 3, 13 and 14 of the "Law on Political Parties Financing."

increase of its position in international rankings” (President of the Republic of Uzbekistan 2020).

According to state statistics there has been a spike in criminal convictions related to corruption in 2021 and 2022 (State Agency on Statistics 2023). Nonetheless, there is little independent analysis of the strength of these convictions or the proportion of the sentences these officials have served. Freedom House (2023) suggests that at least some of these cases – particularly those in the security services – may have been politically motivated and served to rid the administration of the cadres from the Karimov era and to appoint those close to the new ruling family or their loyal supporters.

Indeed, Uzbekistan’s public administration continues to suffer from rampant corruption, mismanagement and a lack of qualified personnel and financial resources, which results in a sub-standard delivery of public services. According to the Bertelsmann Foundation (2022), scandals around the abuse of power by regional and local authorities remain a recurring problem.

Moreover, despite the parliament becoming more active, there are continued issues, including cases in which parliamentarians unanimously vote in favour of compromised officials being appointed to high office (Bertelsmann Foundation 2022). Legislators are generally reluctant to vote against government policies or engage civil society and independent experts and typically hold parliamentary hearings on key issues behind closed doors (Bertelsmann Foundation 2022). While local civil society, independent journalists and citizens have become more vocal in protesting the abuse of power by public officials, the government still maintains a tight control over media outlets (Bertelsmann Foundation 2022).

Overall, despite some limited political liberalisation, Freedom House concludes that “Uzbekistan remains an authoritarian state with

few signs of democratisation” and categorises the state of political rights and civil liberties in the country as “not free” (Freedom House 2023).

Recent developments

In April 2023, a constitutional referendum was held in Uzbekistan. According to OSCE/ODIHR observers, the referendum “fell short of genuine political pluralism and competition” and was characterised by numerous serious violations, such as ballot box stuffing, pressure on citizens to participate in pro-referendum rallies and widespread misuse of administrative resources (OSCE/ODIHR 2023a).

International media outlets and observers suggested that the primary purpose of the referendum was to allow Mirziyoyev to extend his presidential tenure (The Diplomat 2023a; BBC NEWS 2023; Eurasianet 2023; DW 2023). Specifically, the referendum extended presidential terms from five to seven years and allowed certain senior officials to run again for office. This means that Mirziyoyev, who was first elected as the president in 2016, could now remain in office until 2037 (International IDEA 2023).

Indeed, soon after the referendum, Mirziyoyev announced that snap presidential elections would be held in Uzbekistan on 9 July 2023, more than three years ahead of the scheduled 2026 elections (International IDEA 2023). The OSCE/ODIHR (2023b) observers reported that the snap presidential elections were marred by:

- the blurring of state and party lines
- the lack of political competition and alternative political views
- the limitations on civil society participation in election processes
- the restrictions on editorial independence of the media and free speech

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- irregularities on the election day, including ballot box stuffing, voting without proper identification or on behalf of others, identical signatures on the voter lists and significant procedural errors and omissions during the counting and tabulation processes.

Economic outlook

Uzbekistan is a lower middle-income country with a population of around 35.6 million people. The country's annual GDP growth rate was reported at 5.7% by the World Bank in 2022. The GDP per capita has quadrupled in the last 22 years, from US\$558.2 in 2000 to US\$2,255.2 in 2022. Strong GDP growth has been driven by strong remittances, high private consumption and increase in exports, especially to Russia (World Bank 2022a).

The country is the world's ninth largest producer of gold and the seventh-largest producer of uranium (Bertelsmann Foundation 2022). The export of other commodities, including textiles, non-ferrous metals, fertilisers and food, also grew by 21%, while Russia accounts for 52% of Uzbek exports.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine resulted in the relocation of Russian citizens and businesses to Uzbekistan, which has contributed to the increased inflow of remittances and increased exports of transport and tourism services (World Bank 2022b). As a result of higher remittances, the country's poverty rate fell from 17% in 2021 to 14% in 2022 while the unemployment rate was 6%. However, increased costs of food, fuel and logistics caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine drove inflation up to 11.4% in 2022 from 10.8%, reported in 2021 (World Bank 2022b).

According to the World Bank, the share of Uzbekistan's GDP from the services sector is the highest at 35.5%. Industry (including construction) accounts for 31.1% of the country's GDP, while

agriculture, forestry and fishing comprise a 23.5% contribution to the GDP (World Bank 2022a).

Extent of corruption

According to international governance indices, Uzbekistan has been improving its efforts to curb corruption over the past 10 years, gaining 14 points on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI). However, it is still perceived to be a highly corrupt country as evidenced by the score of 31 out of 100, below the average score of 35 for the Eastern Europe and Central Asia region. It is ranked 126 out of the 180 countries assessed by the CPI 2022. (Transparency International 2023).

According to Transparency International's 2016 Global Corruption Barometer, 13% of public service users paid a bribe in the previous 12 months (Transparency International 2023). More recently, 39% of young Uzbeks surveyed as part of the first national report on combating corruption, produced in 2022 by the Anti-Corruption Agency of Uzbekistan, do not consider giving bribes to be a corruption offence (Anti-Corruption Agency of the Republic of Uzbekistan 2022a; The Tashkent Times 2022).

Under Mirziyoyev's rule, the number of arrests and prosecutions of public officials for alleged corruption has increased. According to the Bertelsmann Foundation (2022), in 2020, four officials from national state agencies, 15 officials from provincial state agencies and 626 officials from city and district agencies were charged and sentenced for corruption crimes. In 2022, there were a total of 3,116 convictions of public officials, of which 110 officials were from the national agencies, 264 from provincial agencies and 2,742 from city and district state bodies (Prosecutor General's Office, 2023). The majority of these cases related to embezzlement (2,103), abuse of position

(265), fraud (243) and bribery (169). On case in Fergana Criminal Court from September 2022 involved charges against local officials and a city prosecutor who allegedly embezzled more than UZ\$63 billion (US\$5.7 million) (US State Department 2022).

Yet according to the Bertelsmann Foundation (2022), it is rare that senior officials are held to account for corruption. For example, the former regional governor (*khokim*) of the Fergana province, Shukhrat Ganiev, was reportedly given a stern warning and a three-month probation period by the parliamentary Commission on Rules and

Ethics for his unethical behaviour. Despite this, he was appointed as the deputy prime minister in 2020 (ACCA Media 2020a).

In recent years, Uzbekistan has improved its scores in the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI). Yet it still performs poorly across such indicators as political stability, rule of law, and the control of corruption, the details of which are provided in Table 1 below (World Bank 2022c). The results of Uzbekistan's performance on other prominent governance indices are provided in Table 2.

Table 1: Uzbekistan's results on the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators at 5-year intervals

	2011		2016		2021	
	Score	Percentile rank	Score	Percentile rank	Score	Percentile rank
Voice and accountability	-2.12	1.41	-1.89	2.96	-1.40	12.56
Political stability	-0.60	28.44	-0.27	36.19	-0.24	39.15
Government effectiveness	-0.68	27.96	-0.58	32.69	-0.20	44.71
Regulatory quality	-1.56	3.79	-1.63	4.33	0.58	31.25
Rule of law	-1.45	3.29	-1.12	12.02	-0.89	19.71
Control of corruption	-1.39	2.84	-1.18	11.06	-0.81	23.08

Table 2: Uzbekistan's results on a selection of prominent governance indices

Governance indices	Uzbekistan's result
Corruption Perception Index 2022	Score = 31/100, rank = 126/180 countries
Freedom House 2023	Score = 12/100, not free
Civics Monitor 2023	Score = 20/100, closed
EIU Democracy Index 2022	Score = 2.12/10 (authoritarian), rank = 149/167 countries
WGI: Voice and Accountability 2021	Score = -1.40 (on scale from -2.5 to +2.5) (percentile rank: 12.56)
Rule of Law Index 2022	Score = 0.50/1, rank = 78/140 countries
Press Freedom Index 2023	Score = 45.73/100, rank = 137/180 countries
Global State of Democracy 2022 (Rule of Law)	Score = 0.39/1 (authoritarian)
Transparency Index	Score = 9/20, rank = 103/143 countries
Bribery Risk	Score = 58/100, rank = 131/194, (risk level: medium)

Forms of corruption

Grand corruption

In Uzbekistan, several grand corruption cases have come to light in recent years involving top-level public officials and their relatives, who siphon off ill-gotten gains as part of embedded kleptocratic networks.

The first such case pointing to the systemic nature of grand corruption within the government involved Gulnara Karimova, the elder daughter of the former president Karimov. Between 2000 and 2012, she controlled a powerful syndicate, which monopolised lucrative opportunities in sectors including services, construction, manufacturing, industrial, retail, natural resources and finance. Lasslett (2020) explains that by expropriating businesses, racketeering and soliciting bribes, this syndicate generated significant profits, assisted by senior state officials representing government committees, ministries, the courts, sector regulators and the security services. In 2017, Karimova and her associates were convicted of extortion, money laundering, misappropriating the property of others, and financial crimes (RFE/RL 2017). In March 2020, Karimova was sentenced to more than 13 years in prison (RFE/RL 2020). Karimova was also charged in the US for soliciting US\$865 million in bribes from foreign firms planning to do business in Uzbekistan (the Economist 2020).

More recent cases indicate that grand corruption remains a problem for Mirziyoyev's administration, manifested in the abuse of state power, conflicts of interest, the concealment of beneficial ownership through offshore structures and expropriation of businesses by the ruling elites.

The Tashkent City mega-project endorsed by the government in 2017 is a good illustration. The project envisaged property development worth

US\$1.3 billion in the heart of Tashkent. According to Lasslett (2020), the government did not ensure the transparency of the tender process for the project; investor companies were selected behind closed doors and did not disclose their beneficial owners.

In fact, Lasslett (2020) reports that teenagers were used as fronts, in conjunction with the opaque offshore structures, to conceal the real shareholders of the selected companies, which later turned out to be founded and owned by the mayor of Tashkent Jahongir Artikhodjayev. The latter served as a member of the administrative council in charge of selecting investors as well as a head of the public directorate responsible for implementing the Tashkent City project. Following the publication of this information, a voice recording emerged in which the mayor purportedly issued threats against the journalists concerned (Lasslett 2020). While President Mirziyoyev dismissed Artikhodjayev from the post of the Tashkent mayor in January 2023, the latter continues to serve as a senator and a deputy in the Tashkent city council, which grants him an immunity from prosecution, arrest or imprisonment (the Diplomat 2023b).

In another case of corruption in the construction/real estate sector, Qishloq Qurilish Invest and two other private companies were charged with embezzlement of budget funds to the amount of UZS1.5 billion (US\$81.8 million). Specifically, as reported by the General Prosecutor's Office, construction companies, with the help of corrupt public officials, sold apartments at inflated prices in two high storey buildings, the construction of which they failed to fulfil as per the tender requirements (ACCA Media 2020b).

The Sardoba dam collapse in May 2020, which killed six people, displaced over 100,000 and caused over US\$1 billion of damage, prompted Uzbek citizens to raise concerns about the negligence and corruption of the responsible public

officials, considering that the dam had only been completed three years before. Mirzoyoyev formed a task force to investigate the case. As a result of the investigation, nine people, including government officials and employees of the companies in charge of building the dam were arrested on charges of embezzlement, fraud, negligence and violation of health-and-safety rules (the Economist 2020). However, according to the Economist (2020), senior government officials and businessmen were not held responsible for the dam collapse while the journalists looking into the case were harassed and fired. Moreover, Abdugani Sanginov, a senator and a head of the state-owned enterprise Uzbekhydroenergo, which had awarded contracts for the dam construction, was included in the task force. The Economist (2020) cites certain media reports claiming that Sanginov's family members were affiliated with the companies that won the contracts.

In 2022, the Organised Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) reported that Achilbay Ramatov, Uzbekistan's first deputy prime minister and the former head of the state railway company, used a Swiss bank account and an offshore company belong to his wife to generate illicit profits from the Uzbek railway business through kickback payments.

Specifically, between 2010 and 2015, Ramatov, as the head of the state railway company, awarded state contracts to Orient Group, co-founded by Payzullajon Mirzaev, one of Uzbekistan's most powerful businessmen (UzInvestigations 2021). Around the same time, a company called Keltran International Limited was registered in the British Virgin Islands and a Swiss bank account was opened in the name of Ramatov's wife, while power of attorney for the account was granted to Mirzaev (OCCRP 2022). In 2015, a money laundering investigation was launched against Ramatova's offshore company, Keltran International Limited, soon after which her Swiss bank account with US\$1

million was closed and her company shut down (OCCRP 2022).

While the results of the criminal investigation are unknown, this case illustrates how large state contracts are awarded through direct purchase to companies whose hidden shareholders or beneficial owners appear to be top-level power brokers within the Uzbek government. As an expert interviewed by OCCRP (2022) put it, this is emblematic of how "authoritarian power [is] being used as a tool to carefully curate business empires for those who are controlling levers in the government".

Nepotism and clientelism

Independent civic groups have alleged instances of nepotism and clientelism in the privatisation of state assets to Mirziyoyev's family members, given that the price of the assets sold was apparently suspiciously low (Freedom House 2023). It is a fact that the extended presidential family dominates most strategic sectors of the Uzbek economy, including construction, natural gas, agribusiness, waste management, real estate, textile, alcohol, tourism and rail (RFE/RL 2023a).

RFE/RL reported (2023) that Mirziyoyev's wife, Ziroatxon Xoshimova, has extensive leverage over government appointments, especially in the Ministry of Health and pharmaceutical sectors. Mirziyoyev's eldest daughter, Saida Mirziyoyeva, served as the deputy director of the Agency on Information and Mass Communications until January 2020, after which she became the deputy chair of the board of trustees of the National Mass Media Support and Development Public Fund (RFE/RL 2021a). In November 2022, she was appointed as the head of the communications and information policy branch at the presidential administration (Qalampir Uz 2022a), and in an August 2023 Saida became the President's Assistant (Presidential Press Secretary 2023). Mirziyoyev's second daughter, Shaxnoza

Mirziyoyeva, is the first deputy director of the newly created National Agency for Social Security (RFE/RL 2023a).

Mirziyoyev himself is said to maintain close connections with large banks and enterprises, which are dominated by husbands of his daughters and other members of his inner family circle. For instance, CentralAsia.News (2020) reported that the president's son-in-law, Oybek Tursunov, who serves as the first deputy head of the presidential administration controlling all key government appointments, owns stakes in banks such as Kapitalbank, as well as companies operating in profitable sectors of the Uzbek economy, such as the cotton industry. According to experts interviewed by CentralAsia.News (2020), anti-corruption efforts have served as a pretext to drive "those not associated with the president's clan" out of lucrative markets.

Mirziyoyev's other son-in-law, Otabek Umarov, serves as deputy head of the presidential security service. According to RFE/RL (2023), Umarov has used his proximity to the presidential family to pressure business competitors and secure lucrative government contracts on the basis of presidential decrees allowing him to bypass the procurement requirements. Umarov is also reported to have business dealings with the Abdukadyr brothers in relation to the real estate market, including investments that have reportedly led to the destruction of the country's national heritage (RFE/RL 2023). The Abdukadyr brothers are tycoons who, according to RFE/RL (2023), "made a fortune running a trading monopoly built on bribery and political patronage that stretched across Central Asia". Using shell companies and with backing from Umarov, they are said to have invested more than US\$2 billion in Uzbekistan (RFE/RL 2023b).

Administrative corruption

The lack of qualification and integrity of civil servants in Uzbekistan is a persistent problem, and civil service recruitments are deemed by the Bertelsmann Foundation (2022) to be based more on connections than on merits. Even though some state agencies have started to publish vacancy announcements on their website, these are mostly for low-level positions, while appointments and promotions to high-level positions are often based on political loyalty, denoting widespread nepotism within the civil service recruitment system (UNCAC Coalition 2022).

Bribery has continued to be widespread among low and mid-level public officials. There are frequent instances when citizens bribe relevant public officials to obtain licences and permits, including to relocate to a new city or to enrol at a university (Freedom House 2023). To give just one example, in September 2017, a chief of the Main State Inspectorate for Plants Quarantine at the Ministry of Agriculture and Water Resources was found guilty of extorting a bribe of US\$700 from a private company in exchange for issuing an import licence for 600 trees (OECD-ACN 2019).

The Mirziyoyev government has taken steps to reduce petty corruption among traffic police and officials tasked with issuing identification documents through the introduction of traffic cameras and video surveillance (Freedom House 2023).

Governance in key sectors

Referring to the public opinion survey conducted by the National State Research Centre Ijtimoiy Fikr from 2016 to 2018, the OECD-ACN (2019) identifies the healthcare and education sectors as the most corrupt in Uzbekistan. The latest available survey data from Ijtimoiy Fikr from 2020 indicates

that 32.4% of respondents consider the healthcare system to corrupt, while 33.3% of respondents noted that corruption is widespread in the education system (Ijtimoiy Fikr 2020).

In 2021, the Anti-Corruption Agency rated the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Higher and Secondary Specialised Education and the Ministry of Construction and Housing and Communal Services as the most corrupt government bodies in the country (Kun.uz 2021). A year later, the senate likewise stated that healthcare and education are the most corrupt sectors in Uzbekistan (US State Department 2022). According to a statement from the chair of the National Anti-Corruption Council, Tanzila Norbayeva, in 2021, “every third criminal case initiated in the courts has been committed by officials of health care, education, or banks” (Qalampir.uz 2022b).

It is worth noting that while bribery is doubtless widespread in service delivery sectors such as health and education, less attention has been paid by government agencies to corruption in strategic and highly lucrative sectors such as oil and gas, heavy industry, or construction and property development.

Healthcare

A 2020 study conducted by the International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR) revealed that poor infrastructure and low salaries in the state healthcare system encouraged medical workers to engage in corruption. For instance, there are numerous cases in which healthcare workers charge for medical services that are officially free and refuse to treat patients who cannot pay. There is reportedly also widespread collusion between healthcare professionals and pharmaceutical companies who offer financial incentives to doctors in return for prescribing certain medication. In addition, healthcare workers are reported to solicit bribes from applicants in

state recruitment processes (IPHR 2020). These findings are confirmed by a public opinion survey conducted by Ijtimoiy Fikr (2020). Similarly, through opaque selection criteria and examination systems, medical universities admit candidates based on how much they can pay rather than on merit. This in turn results in sub-standard services provided in Uzbek medical facilities and a significant brain-drain of skilled candidates (IPHR 2020).

Mirziyoyev’s government has taken controversial steps to address corruption in the healthcare sector. These include compelling nearly 40 heads of medical institutions to tender their resignation (Centre1.com 2017) and convicting more than 110 health workers for alleged corruption in 2018-2019 (Gazeta.uz, 2019). The IPHR (2020) warns that such convictions – even if merited – fail to address the root causes driving the widespread practice of patients paying medical staff at virtually all stages of treatment. Indeed, despite these punitive measures, perceptions of corruption in the healthcare sector remain high among Uzbek citizens (OECD-CAN 2019).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, officials at the Service for Sanitary and Epidemiological Welfare and Public Health embezzled more than US\$171,000 from the government’s US\$1 billion pandemic fund, according to the findings of the Anti-Corruption Agency (Eurasianet 2020). In June 2021, Mirziyoyev announced that US\$8 billion had in fact been spent to curtail the pandemic, but he did not explain the eightfold increase in funding compared to the initial plan. An investigation by Radio Free Europe’s Uzbek service found that the government overspent on the construction of medical facilities, including a quarantine centre and a hospital for COVID-19 patients (RFE/RL 2021b). According to reporting by RFE/RL (2021b), the construction of those facilities was contracted through uncompetitive tendering to companies controlled by figures in the

president's inner circle. While the General Prosecutor's Office launched an investigation into the case, this mainly targeted low-level civil servants from the regions (RFE/RL 2021b).

In 2022, the Anti-Corruption Agency uncovered corruption in human resources management in the Bukhara Regional Health Department and its institutions. The violations were found in the hiring, appointment and rotation of medical workers. These long-serving workers were implicated in various forms of corruption including: the concealment of vacancies and the untimely provision of information about those vacancies to prospective applicants; incorrect forecasting of the number of trained personnel needed in medical facilities, in hiring relatives of medical workers; and in medical personnel soliciting bribes (Anti-Corruption Agency of the Republic of Uzbekistan 2022b).

As an illustration of widespread nepotism in the system, the Anti-Corruption Agency found 493 cases in which various positions in medical facilities were occupied by the relatives of managers of those facilities. In 214 cases, the new recruits were directly subordinated to their relatives (Anti-Corruption Agency of the Republic of Uzbekistan 2022b).

In a recent case of corruption in Uzbekistan's healthcare system, the executives of Quramax Medical, a company selling Indian medicines in Uzbekistan, reportedly paid US\$33,000 in bribes to state officials to skip a mandatory inspection of medical products that they imported. As a result, a contaminated Indian cough syrup imported by Quramax Medical without a mandatory inspection killed 65 children (Reuters 2023). It was also found that the company was importing medical products from India at an inflated price via Singapore based intermediary companies to evade taxes. Following these revelations, the General Prosecutor's Office charged the Quramax Medical executives with

bribery, sale of substandard or counterfeit medicines, abuse of office, negligence and forgery (Reuters 2023).

Another scandal emerged in September 2023 in relation to the state iodisation programme for children. Reportedly, around 600 children were hospitalised with suspected toxification from a drug called Antistrumin No. 100 (Gazeta.uz 2023a; Qalampir.uz, 2023). This drug was allegedly procured by the Ministry of Health from a company called LLC Samo without a tender for a price 2-3 times higher than the market rate (Yep.uz 2023). Civil society has reported that the founder of the company, Nodir Yunusov, previously pictured with Mirziyoyev at high level events, is wanted in the United States on charges of human trafficking, RICO and forced labour offences (Gazeta.uz 2023b).

Maternal and perinatal health

According to the 2022 assessment of a new UN programme to be implemented under the Uzbekistan Vision 2030 Fund, which aims to reduce preventable maternal and newborn deaths in Uzbekistan, 42 newborn babies die in the country every day. The neonatal mortality rate has increased from 12 per 1,000 live births in 2018 to 17 per 1,000 live births in 2022 (UN MPTF 2023).

At the same time, the maternal mortality rate stands at 30 per 100,000 live births, which is three times higher than the average in Europe and Central Asia. Corruption in the healthcare system is one factor behind these alarming figures. For instance, nepotism-based recruitment and widespread bribery in the recruitment process has contributed to the

fact that 77% of patronage nurses² in maternity institutions could not recognise danger signs of maternal and neonatal mortality during pregnancy (UN MPTF 2023: 3). Furthermore, an assessment by the Ministry of Health found that over 42% of medical equipment in maternity institutions needed replacement, while the public procurement and contract management processes lacked transparency and accountability (UN MPTF 2023).

The UN Multi-Partner Trust Fund Office (UN MPTF) in charge of administering the UN maternal and perinatal health programme in Uzbekistan has identified weak regulation, the lack of integrity culture and internal oversight in the country's healthcare system as key contributing factors to the widespread corruption in the system (UN MPTF 2021).

Education

During Karimov's presidency, corruption and bribery was widespread at Uzbek universities, especially in admissions. It was common for rich families to pay the equivalent of tens of thousands of US dollars to help their child enrol at university. In 2017, the Mirziyoyev government introduced a "super-contract" system allowing university applicants to pay an increased university fee and become a student even if they had not met the scores for enrolment. According to the Diplomat (2023c), depending on how close to the entry score the applicants scored, the university fees they had to pay for the 2018-2019 academic year under the "super-contract" system ranged from UZS 82 million (US\$7,100) to UZS 276 million (US\$24,000) for the first year of studies. While this reform was meant to reduce corruption in the system, cases of corruption and bribery were still

detected. For instance, the exam scores of 117 applicants at 10 universities were reportedly forged to reduce their university fees (the Diplomat 2023c).

Based on data from Uzbekistan's General Prosecutor's Office, in 2018, 83 criminal cases were opened in the country for corruption, fraud and abuse of power in the education system. Of these, 16 were committed in secondary schools, 31 in universities, and 36 in colleges and academic lyceums. Most of those corruption cases occurred during the admissions process to higher educational institutions, while others occurred during the delivery of such educational services as paying the exam fees, entering a doctoral programme and defending a dissertation (Diplomatic News Agency 2019).

Further, in 2022, the Anti-Corruption Agency found instances of nepotism and bribery at the Engineering and Technology Institute of Bukhara. Specifically, the institute's rector was found to be awarding high marks to students in exchange for bribes and to be holding uncompetitive public tenders. In another case of abuse of power and corruption, the General Prosecutor's Office charged the chief accountant of the Regional College of the Olympic Reserve of Fergana for the embezzlement of UZS 4 billion (US\$386,000) of public funds. He stole the money from the salaries and overtime payments of teachers and spent it on online gambling (ACCA Media 2022).

School textbook case

At the beginning of academic year 2022, criticism of school textbooks developed by the Republican Center for Education (RCE)³ started circulating on social media, which according to a source cited by

² Patronage nurses are supposed to be qualified nurses trained in obstetrics. They are often the first health professionals visiting the family of a newborn baby.

³ RCE is a governmental body authorised to develop curricula and textbooks by Ministerial Decree (Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Uzbekistan 2021).

(Gazeta.uz 2022a) seemed to be part of an organised campaign to discredit the authors. The textbooks being criticised had been developed in cooperation with UNICEF (President of the Republic of Uzbekistan 2022a; UNICEF Uzbekistan 2021: 85).

A working group was formed under the President's Office to conduct a comprehensive examination of the textbooks, and Komil Allamjonov, then Deputy Chief of Staff in President's Administration, became the head of the working group (Yangi O'zbekiston DUK 2022; Allamjonov 2022). In December 2022, this body presented the alternative textbooks to the President (Gazeta.uz. 2022b; President of the Republic of Uzbekistan 2022b). In an interview, Allamjonov later admitted that the development of these textbooks had started back in 2019 and it was he who financed this process (Ozodlik Radiosi 2023).

According to Gazeta.uz (2023c), in September 2023, textbooks developed by Allamjonov's team were introduced into schools and replaced those developed earlier by RCE. It was announced that 920 billion Soms (US\$75.4 million) were allocated from the government budget to develop the elementary school textbooks (Ministry of Pre- and Elementary Education Official 2023).

The publisher selected to provide the content of the textbooks was reportedly LLC "Novda Edutainment," a private enterprise that shares the same address with "Avtotest Mirobod" (Gazeta.uz 2023c), which is an entity founded by Allamjonov (Roney 2014). According to Gazeta.uz (2023d), the same publisher had also produced Allamjonov's autobiography.

Gazeta.uz (2023c) states that the textbooks were later approved by Scientific-Methodological Center for Development of Education under the President's Office, a new government body established in 2023. The head of the Center, Vokhid Khamidov, had previously worked as the director of both "Novda Edutainment" and "Avtotest Mirobod" (Gazeta.uz 2023d).

There is no suggestion that the 920 billion Soms were awarded to Novda Edutainment. Nonetheless, where an individual holds multiple roles that could have conflicting interests, such as membership of a working group to select providers of goods and services, as well as links to a selected supplier, this could constitute an integrity risk. Should Novda Edutainment at any point in the future profit financially from the decision to select the company to provide the content for the textbooks, this may point to a conflict of interest.⁴

Justice sector

Despite constitutional provisions on independence, the judiciary in Uzbekistan is subject to undue influence from the president, law enforcement agencies and prosecution authorities (OECD-ACN 2019). According to the 2019 assessment of the OECD-CAN (2019), only 3% of judges in Uzbekistan are appointed for life, which seriously undermines judicial independence in the country.

This is exacerbated by the lack of clear and fair criteria for the selection of candidate judges and by the lack of transparency in the selection process. The same holds true for the selection of the prosecutor general and career prosecutors who are also subjected to political influence and lack

⁴ Transparency International (2018) defines a conflict of interest as a "situation where an individual or the entity for which they work, whether a government, business, media

outlet or civil society organisation, is confronted with choosing between the duties and demands of their position and their own private interests."

operational independence. The OECD-ACN (2019) assessment also found that the judiciary suffers from a lack of transparency and efficiency in court operations, bureaucracy and abuse of office by court staff, inefficient coordination with law enforcement agencies to enforce court decisions, as well as limited access to justice for citizens and public information about court activities.

In recent years, some senior officials from within the justice system have been convicted on bribery charges. In January 2022, the senior prosecutor of the Fergana Regional Prosecutor's Office was arrested for taking a bribe after promising a citizen to register ownership of 3.7 acres of land (US State Department 2022). In November 2018, the chairman of the Tashkent city criminal court and his subordinated judges were convicted for receiving US\$620,000 in bribes from criminal defendants in exchange for issuing unlawful court rulings to leave to them property that was subject to confiscation (OECD-ACN 2019).

According to Freedom House, there is limited due process within the judicial system as law enforcement authorities arrest civic and religious activists or political opponents on dubious charges and using forged witness testimonies (Freedom House 2023). Amnesty International UK (2019) claims that the police and security forces in Uzbekistan frequently use torture as a means to extract confessions from arbitrarily detained civic activists and political opponents and to intimidate their families or to extract bribes from them. The courts then rely on these "torture-tainted confessions" to convict suspects, while the police and security forces justify such repressive measures

on the grounds of national security and the fight against terrorism.

Lawyers are generally reluctant to represent citizens in administrative court cases involving the abuse of power by public officials (Bertelsmann Foundation, 2022). The Lawyers' Chamber, a regulatory body with compulsory membership, is reportedly used as a mechanism of state control over the legal profession (Freedom House 2023).⁵

Business sector

Anti-trust and anti-monopoly legislation and policies are in place in Uzbekistan. However, according to the Bertelsmann Foundation (2022), political elites dominate state-owned monopolies in key sectors, including energy, telecommunications, transport, banking, construction, chemical and mining sectors.

Requirements for licensing, registration and permits can be changed without notice, raising corruption risks. Related challenges include the lack of transparency in public procurement, poor enforcement of public-private contracts, private property rights and intellectual property rights as well as an underdeveloped banking sector (Bertelsmann Foundation 2022).

One of the most prominent cases of corruption in the business sector relates to an investigation by the US Department of Justice into a massive bribery scheme in Uzbekistan's telecommunications sector. Following the Manhattan federal court's decision, the Swedish telecom company Telia and its Uzbek subsidiary Coscom had to pay a combined total penalty of more than US\$965 million to resolve

⁵ It is noteworthy that according to article 3(1) of the Law on Advocacy, the Ministry of Justice acts as the licensing body for lawyers (advocates), and issues permits allowing them to represent people and entities. Thus, the access to legal

profession is granted by the state rather than the specialised body.

bribery charges (US Department of Justice 2017). By using the shell companies and bank accounts in the US, Telia and Coscom were found to have bribed the Uzbek government between 2007 and 2012 to establish a lucrative telecommunications business in the country.

A year before, in a similar case, Amsterdam based VimpelCom Limited and its Uzbek subsidiary, Unitel LLC, were also charged for bribery by the US Department of Justice. The companies were made to pay a combined fine of US\$1.76 billion for making US\$114 million bribe payments to the Uzbek government between 2006 and 2012 (US Department of Justice 2017).

It is noteworthy that Gulnara Karimova was implicated in the bribery scandals surrounding Uzbekistan's telecommunication sectors. According to Transparency International EU (2020), she received bribes and shares worth US\$1.3 billion from the aforementioned Swedish, Dutch and also Russian telecom companies in exchange for licences allowing them to operate in Uzbekistan. These companies were then charging the Uzbek telecom users unusually high rates for their mobile phone services to recover the cost of the bribes paid (Transparency International EU 2020).

Legal and Institutional anti-corruption framework

The Law on Combating Corruption, adopted in 2017 soon after Mirziyoyev came to power, is the main legal basis for countering corruption in Uzbekistan. The law requires state employees to inform their supervisors about corruption offences they may be directly or indirectly involved in and is meant to ensure protection for whistleblowers. Further, the law grants media outlets the right to request information on corruption offences from state agencies. It also envisages the mandatory examination of regulations being drafted by

ministries and other state agencies to ensure they do not create new opportunities for corruption (Kosta Legal 2017).

According to the National Database of Legislation of the Republic of Uzbekistan, other important legislative acts in the area of anti-corruption include:

- the constitution (last amended in May 2023)
- the criminal code (last amended in March 2023 to address illegal self-enrichment of public officials)
- the law on public civil service (last amended in November 2022)
- the law on public procurement (last amended in April 2021)
- the law on public-private partnerships (last amended in June 2019)
- the law on distributing legal aid information and ensuring access to it (last amended in September 2017)
- the law on the openness of state authorities and administration (last amended in May 2014)
- the law on e-government (last amended in June 2016)
- the law on public control (last amended in April 2018)
- the law on countering legalisation of income derived from criminal activities, financing of terrorism and financing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (last amended in January 2019), which provides a legal framework for anti-money laundering

The Civil Service Law, which entered into force in 2022, forbids civil servants from accepting gifts, from engaging in business activities and from opening foreign bank accounts or purchasing real

estate abroad. It also introduces a mandatory asset and income declaration system for civil servants (US State Department 2022). However, as of 2022, the mandatory asset and income declaration system for civil servants had not yet been implemented (UNCAC Coalition 2022). Moreover, according to Article 3 of Civil Service the scope of the law does not cover the president, members of parliament, members of the Central Election Commission or the governing bodies of the Central Bank, judges, law enforcement or military personnel. Since these positions are not considered civil servants, they are exempt from mandatory asset declaration.

Under Article 7 of the 2017 Law on Combating Corruption, state agencies responsible for implementing the law on combating corruption include the Anti-Corruption Agency (ACA) established in 2020, General Prosecutor's Office, the State Security Service, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Justice, and the Department on Fighting Economic Crime under the General Prosecutor's Office.

There is also a National Council on Combating Corruption and its territorial bodies that aim to coordinate the efforts of all the relevant institutions and develop state anti-corruption programmes (Article 8). The ACA serves as the working body of the Council (Article 8(1)), which is headed by the chair of the senate.

The ACA has a preventive mandate authorising it to request state agencies to provide documentation on their expenditure of public funds, sales of state assets and public procurement as well as on their investment projects and implementation of state programmes. It can also consider appeals of citizens and legal entities on corruption issues and conduct administrative investigations into corruption offences, the results of which should then be shared with law enforcement bodies (Dentons 2020).

Uzbekistan is a signatory to the United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC) as well as to the Istanbul Anti-Corruption Action Plan, which is the main subregional initiative in the framework of the OECD Anti-Corruption Network for Eastern Europe and Central Asia (ACN).

In 2022, the UNCAC Coalition, a global civil society network monitoring UNCAC implementation, undertook an assessment of Uzbekistan's anti-corruption efforts. According to this assessment, Uzbekistan's ACA, whose director is appointed by the president, lacks political independence and enforcement powers. The UNCAC Coalition (2022) pointed to several high-profile cases, including the one in which the Tashkent mayor awarded state contracts to companies of which he was the beneficial owner, as indicative of poor enforcement of legislation to prevent conflicts of interest in public service.

While the law on public procurement requires state agencies to publish all their public tenders online and to disclose beneficially owned companies of the bidders, in practice, these rules are often bypassed. This was evidenced in the case involving the Orient Group mentioned above, which concluded numerous unpublished contracts with the state railway company (UNCAC Coalition 2022). Another example is Gid Systems Tashkent LLC that was awarded a contract to replace nationwide property documents with "smart cards" by government decree without a tender (RFE/RL Uzbek Service, 2020).

Other loopholes include the fact that legislation on anti-money laundering does not provide a clear definition of "public official" or clear criteria for suspicious transactions, as a consequence of which such transactions are not subject to thorough scrutiny by the relevant agencies (UNCAC Coalition 2022).

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Further, the law on the openness of state authorities and administration does not provide for an independent external oversight and appeals body, which would ensure compliance with the law and would encourage citizens to become more active in requesting public information and protect their right to access information. On the contrary, civic activism, journalistic investigations, and freedom of speech are suppressed through the existence of criminal liability for defamation and insult (OECD-ACN 2019).

Other stakeholders

Civil society

While there are more than 9,000 legally registered NGOs, according to Bertelsmann Foundation (2022) many of them have been established by government decree. Others are small organisations that mainly work on service provision or on issues that are not politically sensitive.

In recent years, independent civic groups, mostly environmentalists and youth groups, have become more active in advocating on issues of public interest and in reporting about corruption cases involving public officials (Bertelsmann Foundation 2022). However, Uzbek state agencies do not engage with these independent civic groups on anti-corruption issues. They instead use so-called government-organised non-governmental organisations (GONGOs) to “mimic genuine civil society participation” (UNCAC Coalition 2022).

In 2019, the government created a new organisation, the Center for the Development of Civil Society (CDCS), to oversee the activities of registered NGOs (Freedom House, 2023). In 2020, Mirziyoyev proposed the position of a special representative of NGOs in parliament uphold the interests of NGOs and created a state support fund for NGO/GONGOs to provide them with regular

grants. In 2021, this fund allocated UZS16 billion (US\$ 1.45 million) from the state budget to finance more than 290 NGO/GONGO programmes and projects (ANKASAM, 2022).

In June 2022, the government issued a decree requiring NGOs to obtain the so-called “national partner” status to allow them to implement foreign grants under state supervision as well as a prior state approval for receiving those grants. Independent NGOs expressed concern that the said decree, adopted without prior public consultation, allows for direct state intervention in their activities and imposes additional bureaucratic barriers for obtaining and implementing foreign donor grants (Amnesty International, 2023).

The MoJ is in charge of overseeing the registration and activities of NGOs, including the authority to inspect and audit them. According to CIVICUS, independent NGOs in Uzbekistan, especially those working on human rights issues, face obstacles in trying to register as legal entities. For instance, Agzam Turgunov, a human rights defender and former political prisoner, has received 10 rejections from the MoJ while trying to register his organisation, Human Rights House. The Ministry cited technical mistakes in registration documents as the ground for rejection (CIVICUS, 2022). NGOs are also required to submit their annual activity reports to the government. The failure to comply with the above requirements could result in substantial monetary fines (US State Department, 2022).

The US State Department (2022) notes that human rights activists as well as opposition political figures are frequently subjected to abuses from security agencies who use pressure, intimidation, physical abuse, asset freeze or seizure, travel bans, and covert wiretapping. Due to strict state control and restrictions over freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly in Uzbekistan,

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CIVICUS rated the civic space in the country as “closed” (CIVICUS, 2022).

Media

While media freedom has slightly improved under Mirziyoyev’s presidency, all mass media continue to be under strict control of the presidential apparatus and state security agencies, which restrict critical discussions on TV and official websites (US State Department 2022). There is no private TV network in Uzbekistan, and private radio stations and written press avoid criticising the government for fear of being shut down. The operation of independent press and online media outlets is restricted, including through legal restrictions on receiving funding, especially from foreign donors that support media freedom (Reporters Without Borders 2023). The government commonly appoints chief editors of media outlets, with the result that self-censorship is widespread and investigative journalism limited (US State Department 2022).

Critical bloggers have been prosecuted and dismissed from their jobs because of pressure from state authorities. In 2019, the blogger Nafosat Ollashukurova was detained for 10 days and placed in a psychiatric clinic for publishing on Facebook allegations about corruption by local authorities (Bertelsmann Foundation 2022). In 2021, Otabek Sattoriy, a prominent Uzbek blogger covering corruption and a founder and editor of the YouTube channel Xalq Fikri (People’s Opinion), was sentenced to six and a half years imprisonment on charges of extortion and defamation.

Another blogger, Behruz Nematov, covering Sattoriy’s court proceedings was kidnapped and beaten with a rubber truncheon (Reporters Without Borders 2021). In July 2022, an independent journalist, Lolagul Kallykhanova, was detained and allegedly tortured for covering mass protests following the proposed constitutional

amendments to abolish the autonomous status and the right of the Republic of Karakalpakstan to secede (Amnesty International 2023).

In March 2021, the parliament amended the law on information to require online media outlets not to disseminate false or defamatory information defined under vague terms (CIVICUS 2022). It is noteworthy that the government does not need to obtain a court order to block access to websites or blogs that include information that the government deems to be impermissible.

During the campaign for presidential elections held in October 2021, 60 websites of local and international media outlets, services and human rights organisations were blocked and the access to social media platforms was restricted. The internet services were also disrupted during protests in the Karakalpakstan region and critical articles were temporarily removed from such independent online media outlets as Gazeta.uz (CIVICUS 2022).

In December 2022, the Agency on Information and Mass Communications submitted for public discussion the draft information code aiming to regulate information which is “insulting” or “disrespecting society and the state”. Amnesty International considers this proposal a restriction on freedom of expression (Amnesty International 2023).

In 2023, the World Press Freedom Index ranked Uzbekistan 137 out of 180 countries with a score of 45.73 denoting a difficult environment (Reporters Without Borders 2023).

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Corruption and anti-corruption efforts in Uzbekistan

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The U4 anti-corruption helpdesk is a free research service exclusively for staff from U4 partner agencies. This service is a collaboration between U4 and Transparency International (TI) in Berlin, Germany. Researchers at TI run the helpdesk.

The U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Centre shares research and evidence to help international development actors get sustainable results. The centre is part of Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI) in Bergen, Norway – a research institute on global development and human rights.

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