

Civil and Political Rights in Uzbekistan and Central Asia

Testimony

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Introduction

Co-Chairman Pitts, Co-Chairman McGovern, it is an honor to be here to speak with you today on the human rights situation in Central Asia. I assumed my current position three weeks ago, having come most recently from the U.S. Mission to the United Nations, where I had the privilege of working under a staunch advocate for human dignity in Ambassador Samantha Power, and witnessed on a daily basis the importance of principled U.S. leadership. I am proud to be able to carry with me these lessons to the work of the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor.

I would like to begin my remarks by reiterating a critical point DAS Rosenblum made, which is that protection and promotion of human rights and freedoms are essential to security and stability in the region. Restrictive governance and heavy-handed tactics risk fueling social grievances that catalyze the very security threats that we and the Central Asian governments seek to address.

Central Asian governments are particularly anxious about external geopolitical developments, from instability in Afghanistan to pressure from Russia. These uncertainties have led the region's governments to accelerate efforts to neutralize independent and opposition voices they already deemed threatening to the stability of their regimes.

For this reason, now more than ever, the *people* of Central Asia feel that the true added value of continued U.S. engagement is that we promote principles that other partners will not: most importantly, that respect for their individual rights and freedoms is an integral corollary to (and component of) our cooperation in other regards.

So while we work with the countries of the region in a number of areas, we continue to call for political reforms and for the region's governments to respect the universal rights of their citizens, as well as for an end to corrupt governance. Only when these conditions are met will the Central Asian states truly provide their peoples with the free, prosperous, and secure societies they deserve.

With this as context, I want to briefly discuss various areas of concern, providing a few illustrative examples, and then turn to our diplomatic efforts and, in some cases, successes.

Religious Freedom/CVE

A significant area of concern is the intensification of heavy-handed policies, including detentions, torture, and punishment of peaceful religious activities and expression under the guise of “countering extremism.”

These policies generate a cycle of repression that breeds radicalization, which in turns breeds further repression. And so the United States is using every opportunity we have—as I will next week at an Astana Regional CVE Summit—to highlight **that violent extremists do not need freedom of religion to conduct their activities; rather, the Central Asian people need it to be an effective bulwark *against* violent extremism.**

Political Space and Elections

Turning to political space and recent elections, meaningful participation in free, fair, transparent electoral processes –including space for opposition—is a key part of a healthy, pluralistic democracy.

Recently, we have seen severely problematic elections in the region. According to the OSCE, **Uzbekistan’s** March 29 presidential elections not only contravened the constitutional limit of two consecutive presidential terms, but lacked genuine political alternatives, and involved restrictions on freedoms of expression and association.

Similarly, **Tajikistan’s** March 1 parliamentary elections were neither free nor fair. The government harassed and interfered in the campaign activities of opposition groups like the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan, and engaged in ballot box stuffing that unseated this party from their last remaining parliamentary seats.

Finally, **Kazakhstan’s** April 26 snap presidential elections lacked political alternatives, and took place within a restrictive media environment that stifled public debate and freedom of expression. Current anti-democratic efforts to preserve presidential power challenge the development of political pluralism and threaten long-term economic vibrancy and security in Kazakhstan.

Civil Society and Media Freedoms

We have also seen tighter limitations on the operating space for independent civil society and the media throughout the region, including through the introduction of legislation aimed at restricting the activities of NGOs. This is extremely troublesome, especially at a time when civil society should be assisting governments in addressing unprecedented socioeconomic challenges.

Following Moscow’s lead, **Kyrgyzstan** has introduced a draft “foreign agents” law, that, if it moves forward, threatens to greatly curtail civil society and damage Kyrgyzstan’s reputation as a democratic country.

In **Kazakhstan**, the government enacted a Criminal Code that sharply increases the range of offenses, and gravity of criminal punishments, for civil society. Draft legislation introduced late last year seeks to establish a government “Operator” to control funding to NGOs. After meaningful U.S. engagement, we recently learned that the government revised the draft Criminal Code and will not regulate private or foreign funding to NGOs. We are watching this situation closely to guard against restrictive amendments.

With respect to restrictions on media:

In **Uzbekistan**, we have long-standing concerns about lack of space for free, independent media and the real threats to journalists who undertake this essential work.

In **Tajikistan**, there are continued reports of blocked web content and telecommunications during politically sensitive periods, an issue I raised with the Tajikistani delegation during this month’s Annual Bilateral Consultation.

And in **Turkmenistan**, the government enforces censorship and continues to subject journalists to growing harassment and surveillance.

Corruption

Political disenfranchisement is compounded by rampant corruption, which isolates a wide swath of citizens from resources and undermines the impact of foreign investment. Corruption in Central Asia has a direct impact on the prosperity of the region’s people. Without robust democratic institutions and strong rule of law, as well as respect for labor rights and space for the free exchange of information, Central Asia’s huge economic potential cannot be fully realized.

Endemic corruption in **Tajikistan** perpetuates poorly managed and crumbling energy infrastructure, including the TALCO Aluminum plant that is thought to consume up to 40% of the country’s electricity.

In **Uzbekistan**, endemic corruption among the political elite contributes to a poor investment climate, discouraging increased foreign investment.

And despite establishing Central Asia’s only parliamentary democracy, corruption in **Kyrgyzstan** is eroding public trust, including in the police and judiciary.

Torture and Security Force Conduct

Finally, further constraining the breadth of our bilateral and regional cooperation with the Central Asian states are continued reports of systemic abuse and ill treatment of citizens by state security forces. It is imperative that military and police forces effectively prevent and account for human rights violations that have undermined public trust and security.

As a step toward broader security and justice sector reform, we have called upon the region's governments to grant unobstructed access by relevant UN special mandate holders and other third party monitors like the ICRC. In Uzbekistan, at least eleven UN special mandate holders have outstanding entry requests to which the government has not responded.

Diplomatic Efforts and Successes

Given this clearly difficult operating environment, we continue to call, both publicly and privately, for political reform in Central Asia, recognizing that it is both a moral and a strategic imperative for the United States to work, however painstakingly, toward a democratic, rights-respecting region. We make these calls frequently and at the highest levels, and we will continue to do so until we see meaningful change.

We also make clear to regional governments that we could do more through our bilateral relations—in the security sector, with economic initiatives, and through people-to-people exchanges—if these governments undertake meaningful reform and improve their human rights landscapes.

To that end, we make use of individual meetings and Annual Bilateral Consultations to have frank discussions with Central Asian interlocutors on tough human rights issues. These formal discussions serve as markers for the many other engagements we pursue throughout the year, as well as for our assistance programming.

We have seen a modicum of progress in certain corners of the region. For example, we are pleased to see **Uzbekistan's** recent willingness to work with the ILO on a *Decent Work Country Program*, agreement to conduct cotton harvest third-party monitoring, and effort to address forced child labor in the cotton sector.

In **Tajikistan**, we have repeatedly raised a problematic Law on Public Associations. The Ministry of Justice modified the law with language that we hope will protect NGOs from some of the scrutiny and interference they may have faced otherwise.

And in **Turkmenistan**, where, frankly, there is not much to celebrate, we have repeatedly raised the issue of religious freedom with the government, and several prisoners of conscience have subsequently been released.

In conclusion, we intend to build on these small improvements by speaking plainly to the Central Asian governments and offering the view that it is in *our*, as well as *their*, best interests to promote their people's rights and freedoms while addressing credible security threats.

Thank you, and I look forward to our discussion.