

Uzbekistan's Human Rights Reforms

(Publicity)

Uzbekistan's progress in the field of human rights

In recent years, Uzbekistan has achieved substantial results in the field of human rights protection. Today, the country has developed its own model of systematic and phased integration of international human rights standards into national legislation and law enforcement practices.

President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev has initiated large-scale reforms to liberalize the country's social and political life and ensure the rule of law in accordance with the principle of "human interests above all." The priorities include the issues of unconditional observance of human rights and freedoms, as well as the strengthening of the role of state and public institutions in the administration of justice.

Uzbekistan has become a party to more than 80 main international human rights documents, including six main U.N. treaties and four Optional Protocols, and submits regular national reports on their implementation to the U.N. human rights protection bodies.

An enormous amount of work has been done to eradicate forced and child labor. The government has closely collaborated with international organizations (including the International Labor Organization) and civil activists. As a result, based on the data for 2020, the ILO announced in its report that child and forced labor is no longer used in Uzbekistan's cotton industry. According to the organization's information, the republic has made significant progress in enforcing basic labor rights in cotton fields.

Uzbekistan has come a long way in ensuring its citizens' religious rights and freedoms. Favorable organizational and legal conditions have been created for the freedom of religion, the state fee for the registration of religious organizations has been re-



Courtesy of Uzbekistan Embassy

President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev speaks at the 46th session of the United Nations Human Rights Council held in Geneva on Feb. 22 via videoconferencing.

duced five times, and the quarterly reporting of such organizations is no longer required. The authority to decide whether a religious organization should terminate its operations has been transferred from the Ministry of Justice to the judiciary branch.

The practice of using the so-called "black lists" has been abandoned, and more than 20,000 citizens suspected of having connections to religious extremist organizations are no longer under surveillance. In 2017, our country was visited for the first time by Ahmad Shaheed, U.N. Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in matters concerning the freedom of religion or convictions. Based on his recommendations, the parliament approved a Roadmap to ensure the freedom of religion and belief. Following President Shavkat

Mirziyoyev's initiative, the United Nations adopted a special resolution, "Education and Religious Tolerance." Uzbekistan has been removed from the U.S. Special Watch List for Religious Freedom.

Freedom of speech and the media has become the hallmark of the new Uzbekistan. Information resources that were previously inaccessible in the country have been unblocked, accreditation of foreign journalists has been initiated (Voice of America, BBC, The Economist, etc.), citizen journalists — the so-called "bloggers" — have become a real new force. Journalists openly raise previously avoided topics, while criticism and analysis have started appearing in the press more often. As a result, according to the Reporters Without Borders global press freedom

barometer, from 2017 to 2020 the country improved its ranking by 13 positions. Human Rights Watch reports note that under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev "the press freedom situation has improved, and the media environment has started changing." The government has released multiple prominent journalists that had been imprisoned.

Another achievement has been the systematic work to eradicate torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. The regulatory framework has been fundamentally revised, and strict liability has been established for the use of illegally obtained evidence. Article 235 of the Criminal Code (torture) has been harmonized with Article 1 of the U.N. Convention against Torture.

In accordance with recommendations by international organizations, the notorious Jaslyk colony in Karakalpakstan has been closed down. Since March 2019, Oliy Majlis, Commissioner for Human Rights (Ombudsman), has been monitoring institutions for sentence execution, detention points, and special reception centers to learn the extent to which human rights and freedoms are enforced there. Representatives of civil society institutions and parliamentarians also take part in the monitoring.

Another important area of activities concerns reforms to enforce gender equality and women's rights. According to President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, "women have a great role to play in identifying and timely resolving social problems as well as amplifying management effectiveness." In 2019, a parliamentary Commission on Gender Equality was created. The Government of Uzbekistan has developed a Strategy to Achieve Gender Equality

by 2030 and initiated a procedure, which requires that new draft laws be analyzed from a gender perspective. In addition, laws have been adopted to protect women from harassment and violence, and to guard reproductive health.

A gender quota was used in the 2019 parliamentary elections — elected female parliamentarians represented 32% of the total number of elected parliamentarians and 25% of the Senate. This is in line with the established U.N. recommendations. With respect to the number of women parliamentarians, over the past five years the Parliament of Uzbekistan has risen from 128th to 37th place among 190 national parliaments of the world.

Reforms on human rights in Uzbekistan are carried out at a systemic and comprehensive level. On June 22, 2020, the National Strategy on Human Rights was adopted, which became the first strategic document that defined a set of long-term targeted measures to ensure personal, political, economic, social and cultural human rights.

Human rights reforms in Uzbekistan are being implemented at a systemic and comprehensive level. On June 22, 2020, the National Strategy on Human Rights was adopted, becoming the first strategic document to define a set of long-term targeted measures to enforce personal, political, economic, social, and cultural human rights.

Undoubtedly, the achieved results are getting well-deserved international recognition. On Oct. 13, 2020, for the first time in history, Uzbekistan was elected a U.N. Human Rights Council member for a three-year term — from 2021 to 2023. In these elections, Uzbekistan received the largest number of votes — 169 out of 193 U.N. member states cast their

votes for our country.

At the same time, enforcing human rights is not a static process, but a dynamic one, requiring consistent improvement and full commitment. There are still multiple issues, the solutions of which will contribute to subsequent improvements of the systems of human rights protections in the country. In particular, with respect to identifying and preventing cases of torture, it is planned to take measures to ratify the Optional Protocol to the U.N. Convention against Torture; in the area of gender equality and women's rights — to consider the issue of increasing criminal liability for domestic violence; with regard to the freedom of speech — to develop further measures to eradicate unlawful interference in the activities of the media. It is a known fact that a new Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities recently came into force in our country, and in the near future the Parliament of Uzbekistan will ratify the U.N. Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The country plans to adopt a Law on the Ombudsman for Children.

Summarizing the above, we can say that the listed facts testify to important milestones in Uzbekistan's path of reforms to enforce human rights and the international community's recognition of the policies implemented in this area. The country is not going to dwell on the achieved progress and will continue its work to address the pressing challenges of protecting human rights. It is encouraging that there is a political will in the country's leadership to do so. The historical status of a U.N.H.R.C. member will allow Uzbekistan to leverage international platforms for the exchange of experience and more effective implementation of its initiatives in the international arena.