

**STATEMENT UPR Pre-session on Uzbekistan
Geneva, 29 August 2023**

Delivered by: Uzbek Forum for Human Rights

1- Presentation of the Organisation

This statement is delivered on behalf of Uzbek Forum for Human Rights, an independent Berlin-based organization dedicated to protecting human rights and strengthening civil society in Uzbekistan. Uzbek Forum has participated in the UPR processes at the national level since 2013.

2- National consultations for the drafting of the national report

From what we understand, national consultations have only been held with governmental organisations and not with independent civil society organizations.

3- Plan of the Statement

This statement addresses (1) Freedom of expression and repressions against bloggers and journalists and (2) freedom of association and restrictions on the activities of civil society organizations.

4- Statement

ISSUE 1: Freedom of Expression and Repressions against Bloggers and Journalists

A. Follow-up to the first review

Sweden and Germany recommended lifting restrictions on the right to freedom of expression and allowing the media to operate without government interference, including by allowing effective access to information online. Lithuania urged the Uzbek government to review laws on defamation which are being increasingly used to silence critical voices. Although the government followed recommendations and has established a roadmap for the implementation of the National Strategy on Human Rights, rights violations persist and, in some respects, have increased.

B. New developments since the first review

Despite President Mirziyoyev's stated support of greater press freedom, the government has recently adopted a series of restrictive amendments that have had negative effects on bloggers and journalists. The government has also retained tight control over public information, and most news sources are dominated by pro-government journalists and bloggers, while some foreign media outlets remain blocked. Additionally, the crime of "disseminating false information" in the media or online was added to the criminal code in 2020 along with "public calls to mass disturbances and violence against citizens".

Other amendments criminalize "public insult or defamation" against the president online, carrying a penalty of up to five years' imprisonment. As a result, in the last two years, the climate for freedom of expression has become increasingly restrictive.

The case of one blogger who was imprisoned for six-and-a-half years in 2021, was considered by the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention to be unlawful but there has been no response or comment from the Uzbek government.

In the last three months alone, at least ten bloggers and journalists have been detained by the authorities in the course of conducting their work. Many of them claim the charges are fabricated and some of them are facing lengthy prison sentences if found guilty.

C. Recommendations

- a. Decriminalize insult, defamation, and insulting the president online.
- b. Ensure a safe working for journalists and bloggers and desist from prosecuting journalists and bloggers for their legitimate work.
- c. Immediately grant pardons to all journalists and bloggers who have been wrongly imprisoned and ensure that that they are swiftly released and rehabilitated.

ISSUE 2: Restrictions on Freedom of Association

A. Follow-up to the first review

Several countries urged Uzbekistan to address restrictions on civil society organizations and freedom of association. Germany and Spain recommended lifting prohibitive registration requirements and burdensome regulations while Italy called on the government to enhance efforts to create an environment in which journalists, human rights defenders and NGOs can freely operate in accordance with international standards.

B. New developments since the last review

The Uzbek government claims there are over 10,000 registered NGOs in Uzbekistan. However, the vast majority of these are affiliated to or overseen by government agencies. This includes the Federation of Trade Unions of Uzbekistan which is not recognized as an independent organization by the International Trade Union Confederation. Since President Mirziyoyev came to power in 2016, only a handful independent human rights organizations have been successfully registered while others are rejected time and again for trivial reasons. In addition, there are burdensome regulations on funding from foreign donors which require approval from the Ministry of Justice.

Furthermore, a government decree of June 2022 stipulates that NGOs receiving funds from foreign donors must be appointed a national partner or representative of a government agency that oversees implementation and can make changes to NGO projects. Such restrictive measures violate the Uzbek law on non-governmental non-profit organizations and the new Uzbek constitution adopted in May this year.

C. Recommendations

- a. Introduce a simplified registration process for civil society organizations, including independent trade unions, and desist from interfering in civil society activity.
- b. Lift funding restrictions on non-governmental organizations and abandon the requirement for NGOs to work with a representative of a government agency.

Thank you for your attention.