

INTERNATIONAL EXPECTATIONS AND DOMESTIC PRIORITIES: A THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF UPR RECOMMENDATIONS ADDRESSED TO UZBEKISTAN

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Abstract: This article analyses the thematic recommendations addressed to Uzbekistan during the fourth cycle of the United Nations Universal Periodic Review (UPR). Drawing on the national report submitted by Uzbekistan, the Working Group report, and the thematic list of recommendations compiled by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the article examines the principal thematic directions of the recommendations, identifies the rights most frequently addressed, considers the state of implementation and the challenges that remain, and evaluates the role of institutional actors and civil society in the follow-up process. The article further contextualises the recommendations against Uzbekistan's domestic reform agenda and considers their implications for the country's international standing.

Keywords: Universal Periodic Review; Uzbekistan; human rights; treaty ratification; judicial independence; freedom of expression; gender equality; civil society; implementation; international reputation.

Аннотация: Настоящая статья посвящена анализу тематических рекомендаций, адресованных Республике Узбекистан в ходе четвёртого цикла Универсального периодического обзора (УПО) Совета ООН по правам человека. На основе национального доклада Узбекистана, доклада Рабочей группы и тематического перечня рекомендаций УВКПЧ рассматриваются основные направления рекомендаций, наиболее часто затрагиваемые права, состояние выполнения обязательств и сохраняющиеся трудности, а также роль

институциональных субъектов и гражданского общества в процессе последующего контроля.

Ключевые слова: Универсальный периодический обзор; Узбекистан; права человека; ратификация договоров; независимость судебной системы; свобода выражения мнений; гендерное равенство; гражданское общество; выполнение рекомендаций; международный авторитет.

Annotatsiya: Ushbu maqola BMT Inson huquqlari kengashining Universal davriy ko'rib chiqish (UDK) to'rtinchi sikli doirasida O'zbekiston Respublikasiga yo'naltirilgan mavzuli tavsiyalarni tahlil qilishga bag'ishlangan. O'zbekistonning milliy hisoboti, Ishchi guruh hisoboti va YUUHO tomonidan tuzilgan mavzuli tavsiyalar ro'yxatiga asoslanib, tavsiyalarning asosiy yo'nalishlari, eng ko'p ko'rib chiqilgan huquqlar, bajarish holati va qolgan muammolar, shuningdek institutsional subyektlar va fuqarolik jamiyatining keyingi nazorat jarayonidagi roli ko'rib chiqiladi.

Kalit so'zlar: Universal davriy ko'rib chiqish; O'zbekiston; inson huquqlari; shartnomalarni ratifikatsiya qilish; sud mustaqilligi; fikr bildirish erkinligi; gender tengligi; fuqarolik jamiyati; tavsiyalarni bajarish; xalqaro obro'.

Introduction

The Universal Periodic Review is a mechanism established by the United Nations Human Rights Council in 2006 under which the human rights situation in every UN member state is examined on a rolling four-year cycle. Unlike treaty body procedures, the UPR is addressed to all states without exception and draws on a tripartite documentary basis: the state's own national report, a compilation of UN bodies' findings, and a summary of civil society submissions. The outcome document — a set of recommendations addressed to the reviewed state — does not carry binding legal force in the traditional sense, yet the accumulated weight of accepted recommendations, combined with the reputational dynamics of the review process, has made the UPR one of the most practically significant mechanisms of international human rights oversight. Uzbekistan completed its

fourth UPR cycle in 2023–2024. The national report¹ submitted in August 2023 and the Working Group report² adopted in December 2023, together with the thematic list of recommendations compiled by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights³, constitute the primary documentary basis for the present analysis. The fourth cycle is of particular interest because it unfolds against the backdrop of the country's most ambitious reform period since independence: a new constitution was adopted in 2023, a National Human Rights Strategy was approved, and a range of legislative amendments were enacted across multiple domains. It is therefore timely to examine what the international community expects of Uzbekistan, how those expectations map onto the state's own declared priorities, and where the gaps between legislative reform and practical implementation remain most acute.

Thematic Directions of the Recommendations

The fourth-cycle recommendations addressed to Uzbekistan⁴ cover a broad spectrum of subjects, which may be grouped into six principal directions.

The first concerns international treaty ratification and compliance. A recurring call across multiple delegations is for Uzbekistan to accede to outstanding core human rights instruments, including the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture (OPCAT), the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW-OP), the International Convention on the Protection of the

¹National Report Submitted in Accordance with Human Rights Council Resolutions 5/1 and 16/21: Uzbekistan, UN Doc A/HRC/WG.6/44/UZB/1 (28 August 2023). Available at: <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/WG.6/44/UZB/1> (accessed 13 June 2026).

²Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review: Uzbekistan, UN Doc A/HRC/55/8 (18 December 2023). Available at: <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/55/8> (accessed 13 June 2026).

³Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Thematic List of Recommendations: Uzbekistan, Fourth UPR Cycle (UPR44_Uzbekistan_Thematic_List_of_Recommendations). Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/upr/uz-index> (accessed 13 June 2026).

Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, and the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol. Accession to these instruments would extend the scope of the review mechanisms to which Uzbekistan is subject and would create additional treaty-based obligations reinforcing the domestic legal framework.

The second direction relates to strengthening the domestic legal framework through alignment with international standards. This includes, among other things, revising the Penal Code's definition of torture to bring it fully into conformity with Article 1 of the UN Convention against Torture, and improving procedural guarantees such as habeas corpus and the right to appeal.

The third direction addresses institutional reform, in particular the independence and capacity of the judiciary and national human rights bodies. Recommendations in this cluster call for strengthening the tenure and appointment procedures of judges and for upgrading the Ombudsman/National Centre for Human Rights to Paris Principles 'A' status, a threshold the institution has not yet attained.

The fourth direction targets the protection of fundamental civil and political freedoms — freedom of expression, media freedom, freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of association. Many recommendations specifically call for the abolition of repressive media legislation, the effective protection of journalists, and the easing of restrictions on NGO registration and operation.

The fifth direction concerns non-discrimination and equality, encompassing the adoption of comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation, the elimination of gender-based and socially-motivated discrimination, and specific measures on hate crimes. A number of recommendations also call for the decriminalisation of consensual same-sex relations, a category that Uzbekistan has declined to accept.

The sixth and final direction addresses socio-economic rights: access to healthcare, education and housing; the eradication of forced labour; the expansion of social protection

for vulnerable groups; and progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals more broadly.

Rights Most Frequently Addressed

Of the six thematic directions identified above, civil and political rights and the rights of vulnerable groups attract the greatest density of recommendations. Freedom of association and expression appears with particular frequency: recommendations 135.82–135.86, for instance, call on Uzbekistan to adopt the measures necessary to guarantee freedom of expression and opinion and to ensure that journalists and human rights defenders are not subjected to harassment or arbitrary prosecution. The independence of the judiciary and fair-trial guarantees are similarly prominent, with recommendations 135.75–135.78 focusing on the need to ensure the independence and impartiality of the judiciary in accordance with Article 14 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

The rights of women and children represent another area of concentrated attention. Recommendations 135.169–135.178 address women's political and economic participation and the full implementation of the national gender equality strategy, while recommendations 135.182–135.192 concern the criminalisation of domestic and gender-based violence, victim support mechanisms, and enforcement of the domestic violence law enacted in recent years. Child rights, including child marriage and corporal punishment, also feature prominently.

Recommendations on the rights of persons with disabilities — clustered at paragraphs 135.206–135.216 — urge full implementation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and effective measures to ensure physical and informational accessibility. Socio-economic rights, including access to education, health services, poverty reduction and social protection for marginalised groups, round out the picture, reflecting the UPR's mandate to address all rights comprehensively rather than to privilege any single category.

Implementation: Progress and Persisting Challenges

Reported Progress

In its national report, Uzbekistan presents a substantial record of reform since the third cycle. Constitutional reform is the centrepiece: the new constitution, adopted in 2023, contains an expanded catalogue of human rights and expressly prohibits torture. The death penalty, abolished by an earlier presidential decree, is now constitutionally entrenched. Treaty ratification has also advanced: the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was ratified in June 2021. Legislative reform has been pursued across multiple fronts, including amendments to the Penal Code's torture provisions, the enactment of a law on protection from domestic violence, and the development of a National Human Rights Strategy. Institutionally, a Children's Rights Ombudsman's Office was established in 2019, the national Ombudsman has been designated as the national preventive mechanism under OPCAT pending ratification, and a Business Ombudsman has been appointed. Uzbekistan reports that of the 198 recommendations it accepted in the third cycle, 171 — representing 86 per cent — have been implemented.

Persisting Challenges

The national report itself acknowledges the existence of what it terms 'legal lacunae in the implementation of international standards' — a candid admission that legislative progress has not been uniformly accompanied by changes in practice. The gap between law on the books and law in action is a recurring theme. Legal protections enacted in recent years must still be consistently applied by courts, prosecutors and police if they are to produce tangible results for rights-holders. External assessments reinforce this concern. During the UPR dialogue, Norway drew attention to ongoing restrictions on civil society and called for rigorous investigation of alleged abuses, including those connected with events in the Karakalpakstan region in 2022. This points to systemic accountability deficits that legislative reform alone cannot address. The national report itself identifies the need for stronger parliamentary and public scrutiny as a means of tracking implementation, and acknowledges that improved human rights education is necessary — an indirect concession that societal receptiveness to rights norms cannot be assumed. The situation of civil society

organisations merits particular note. While the national report states that consultative meetings were held with NGOs in the course of preparing the submission, and that recommendations were shared with 'all stakeholders', the practical constraints on NGO operation in Uzbekistan remain significant. The document's own call to 'ensure participation of civil society institutions in decision-making at all levels' implicitly acknowledges that such participation is currently limited rather than embedded. In this context, the gap between consultation and genuine inclusion in policy-making represents one of the more structurally significant challenges facing the implementation process.

Institutional Actors and the Role of Civil Society

The coordination of UPR follow-up has been assigned to the National Centre for Human Rights, which functions as the Ombudsman's office and has been designated the central point of contact between the government and the UN human rights machinery. A dedicated monitoring unit operating under the presidency was established to track the implementation of UN recommendations, and each ministry has a designated focal point responsible for coordinating with the Centre. Parliamentary involvement takes the form of a Commission on Compliance with International Human Rights Obligations, established in 2020, which in July 2023 considered the draft national report and discussed the state of implementation.

At the sectoral level, the relevant ministries — Justice, Interior, Education and others — are responsible for drafting and implementing legislation corresponding to the recommendations within their remit. Specialised bodies, including the Children's Rights Ombudsman and the Business Ombudsman, exercise monitoring functions within their respective mandates, including the power to inspect places of detention relevant to child rights.

Civil society's role in the UPR process remains constrained. The formal architecture of the review provides for independent civil society submissions, and Uzbek NGOs have engaged with the process to varying degrees. However, regulatory restrictions on NGO registration and operation, combined with limits on international funding, circumscribe the

capacity of non-governmental actors to conduct sustained, independent monitoring. The documents under analysis point to a trajectory in which civil society is progressively included in consultative processes, but the distance between consultation and substantive co-determination of policy remains considerable.

Contextualisation of Recommendations within Uzbekistan's Reform Agenda

A reading of the fourth-cycle recommendations alongside Uzbekistan's domestic reform documents reveals a high degree of overlap between the international community's expectations and the government's own stated priorities. The New Uzbekistan Development Strategy 2022–2026 emphasises economic modernisation, improved public services, and gradual legal reform — goals that align with UPR recommendations on socio-economic rights, governance, and the rule of law. Constitutional reform, the enactment of gender equality legislation, and ratification of the CRPD are all simultaneously government initiatives and responses to UPR recommendations, reflecting a mutually reinforcing dynamic between international scrutiny and domestic policy.

Not all recommendations, however, fit neatly within this convergence. Those calling for the liberalisation of NGO legislation or the decriminalisation of consensual same-sex conduct were declined, reflecting the limits set by the government's assessment of socio-political feasibility. The pattern of accepted and rejected recommendations therefore offers a window into the boundaries of Uzbekistan's reform agenda as currently conceived: the government is willing to accept recommendations that can be framed as complementary to its development and modernisation narrative, but draws back where recommendations are perceived as running counter to prevailing social norms or established political constraints.

Priority Recommendations and Implications for International Standing

Although the UPR outcome document does not formally rank recommendations in order of priority, the pattern of government action and statement allows certain inferences to be drawn. Uzbekistan has moved most quickly and publicly on constitutional and legislative reform, on the ratification of selected treaties, and on institutional capacity-building — areas in which reform can be demonstrated through formal acts readily

verifiable by international observers. The criminalisation of domestic violence and the establishment of child protection mechanisms are further examples of priority areas where international recommendations and domestic political will have converged.

The national report explicitly links the implementation of UPR recommendations to progress in 'ensuring respect for and protection of human rights', and frames that progress as an element of Uzbekistan's broader international engagement. Positive assessments by other delegations — recognising the new constitution, the development strategy, and gender-equality measures — confirm that engagement with the UPR process carries reputational dividends. Conversely, unaddressed concerns, whether regarding media restrictions, accountability for abuses, or constraints on civil society, are noted in UN reports and in statements by individual states, and temper the overall assessment. The practical implication is straightforward: implementation of high-profile recommendations, particularly those concerning the prohibition of torture, judicial independence, and the protection of human rights defenders, carries the greatest weight in determining how Uzbekistan is perceived within the UN human rights system and by international partners more broadly.

Conclusion

The fourth-cycle UPR recommendations addressed to Uzbekistan constitute a comprehensive and in many respects demanding reform agenda. They span treaty ratification, legal reform, institutional strengthening, fundamental freedoms, non-discrimination, and socio-economic rights — areas that together map the full spectrum of international human rights obligations. Uzbekistan's response to this agenda has been substantive in legislative and constitutional terms, with a rate of reported implementation from the previous cycle that compares favourably with many peer states.

Yet the more searching challenge lies not in the enactment of laws but in their consistent application. The gap between a reformed statute book and a reformed practice of public administration, prosecution and adjudication is one that cannot be closed by legislative instrument alone. It requires sustained institutional commitment, independent

oversight — including by a civil society that is not merely consulted but meaningfully empowered — and a legal culture in which rights are understood as operative constraints on public power rather than aspirational statements. The UPR process, imperfect as it is, provides a structured occasion for Uzbekistan to take stock of that gap at regular intervals and to account for it before the international community. The value of the mechanism lies less in the recommendations themselves than in the discipline of returning to them.

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