

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

December 6, 2021

The Honorable Antony Blinken
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Mr. Secretary,

We write to urge you to ensure human rights are at the center of the United States' developing partnership with Uzbekistan during the upcoming Strategic Partnership Dialogue. In the aftermath of the U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan, our bilateral relationship with Uzbekistan has become even more important to our interests and our values. As we increase our security and counterterrorism coordination we must also emphasize the importance of human rights in Uzbekistan and for our partnership. Despite much-lauded reforms, Uzbekistan remains among the world's most repressive countries, and at risk of reversing recent gains.

While we appreciate the progress on human rights that President Shavkat Mirziyoyev has made in his five years in office, including releasing dozens of political prisoners, hosting some foreign organizations, and freeing thousands of people from forced labor in cotton fields, these steps fall short of the wholesale reforms promised by the president. Reports that the reform drive has slowed, particularly when it comes to limits on free speech and media freedoms, are troubling.

We also note with concern the lack of substantial progress toward political liberalization. Last month, President Mirziyoyev won a second term in an election where opposition parties were not permitted to run candidates and independent candidates were banned. International election observers noted "significant procedural irregularities" and classified the election as "not truly competitive." The State Department concurred, saying the elections occurred "in an overly restrictive political environment" and that "important election safeguards were disregarded." Without true political liberalization, President Mirziyoyev's reforms could easily be reversed under future governments.

To that end, we urge you to work with the Uzbek government to support lasting and meaningful reform of its criminal code. The criminal code has been among the government's most effective tools for decades to repress dissent, cover up torture, limit political pluralism, and deny gender and sexual equality. Meaningful reform of the criminal code offers an historic opportunity to advance human rights in Uzbekistan by removing these tools of repression and to create the conditions for the social and economic development that the country desperately needs.

While the revised draft criminal code published by the government appears to offer some improvements over current law, we are concerned that many problematic provisions remain largely unchanged. Among them are several which violate the right to freedom of expression, including provisions criminalizing slander, insult, and insulting the president. The current draft also includes vague and overly broad extremism-related provisions frequently used in politically-motivated prosecutions of human rights activists, including treason, violation of the constitutional system, and the incitement of national, racial, ethnic, or religious hatred. Finally, the draft maintains the criminalization of consensual same-sex relations which contributes to torture and other abuses. These are just a few of the areas where reform is urgently needed to bring Uzbekistan in line with international human rights standards.

The upcoming Strategic Partnership Dialogue with Uzbekistan—the first of its kind under the enhanced partnership—offers a unique opportunity to establish respect for human rights as a fundamental component of the United States relationship with Uzbekistan. Meaningful reform of Uzbekistan’s criminal code would help create a strong foundation for the rule of law and human rights, as well as the social and economic development of the country. We call on you to take advantage of this opportunity by prioritizing respect for human rights in the United States’ strategic partnership with Uzbekistan and forcefully pushing for reform of the criminal code in the upcoming Strategic Partnership Dialogue.

Sincerely,



Robert Menendez
United States Senator



Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator



Richard J. Durbin
United States Senator



Kirsten E. Gillibrand
United States Senator



Sherrod Brown
United States Senator



Benjamin L. Cardin
United States Senator