

The socio-political situation in Uzbekistan has been tense in recent years but now in many areas a crisis may be unfolding in the wake of the pandemic. As the economic tensions are reflected in the published figures, it can be seen that the country's external debt and levels of poverty are growing and an atmosphere of social control is on the rise.

This essay has been written by Uzbekistan based human rights experts who for safety reasons have requested to remain anonymous. This material has been prepared as part of the Foreign Policy Centre's [Spotlight on Uzbekistan](#) publication edited by Adam Hug. The opinions expressed in the essay do not reflect the position of the CABAR editorial board.

At the end of June this year, due to poverty, a group of young men robbed the houses of rich people in Kokand in the Fergana region, and in the Payarik district of Samarkand region, there was a mass theft of grain from a grain warehouse. Jamshid Kochkarov, the country's Deputy Prime Minister for poverty alleviation, will have a difficult financial year. This is a source of potential social protest, and the partial freedoms of speech granted by President Shavkat Mirziyoyev are likely sparks that could ignite a fire. President Mirziyoyev himself has stated his sadness at the gravity of the situation in the country, namely foreign debts, unemployment and the lack of reforms. The media has proclaimed that Uzbekistan has recently been promised potentially as much as \$26 billion in foreign direct investment and financial support but there are fears that the amount of money actually delivered so far has not yet reached even a billion, as much of the pledged support came in the form of memorandums of understanding. In addition, despite the reform process, the country's position in international rankings is not significantly changing for the better.

External debt

According to the Central Bank, in 2019 the external debt of Uzbekistan amounted to \$24.4 billion US dollars, of which \$15.8 billion is public debt and \$8.6 billion is private sector debt, equating to 42 per cent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP). According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) before COVID-19 the prediction for the 2020 level of public debt in Uzbekistan was due to be 29.7 per cent of GDP but this now is predicted to rise to 34.5 per cent due to the impact of the pandemic.[1] Uzbekistan's Eurobonds account for one billion US dollars in public debt. The level of public debt has significantly

increased since Karimov's time, it was 7.5 per cent in 2015.[2] There are concerns about whether this extra money coming in to the economy is reaching those who need it most.

Unemployment

According to the Ministry of Labor, the number of unemployed in the country as of June 1st 2020 reached 2.6 million people. According to the State Statistics Committee of Uzbekistan, the number of working age people is 14.9 million.[3] The true unemployment rate in the country is very high, when considering that more than four million people had living abroad as cheap labour (so called 'Gasterbaiters'), many of whom are now returning to Uzbekistan due to the downturn in the Russian and global economy. The loss of remittances will hit poorer and rural families particularly hard.

Pandemics and man-made disasters

Prolonged quarantine restrictions due to the coronavirus pandemic pose real challenges, potentially leading to a sharp increase in imports relative to exports. The impact on the services sector - aviation, railway, tourism, hotel chains, etc., is significant with job losses due to the almost complete cessation of activities. Problems may arise in financing the monthly expenses of employees working in state budget organisations. Also, enterprises operating in the above areas will need special support from the state. The near cessation of certain production during the pandemic means that demand is higher than supply for some products, with potential pressure on families who rely on them. The persistence of the economic downturn will increase the unemployment rate and lead to a sharp decline in the population's ability to pay. As a result, there will be a decrease in revenues to the state budget, including tax payments, which will negatively affect the formation of the budget.

The Sardoba dam tragedy is the result of ignoring climate change, 100 years of bad governance, 30 years of water disputes, as well as the demands to achieve rapid political results, rather than science and open discussion according to Evgeny Simonov, the international coordinator of the Rivers without Boundaries coalition in a recent article on the Sardoba tragedy bluntly entitled "Dam construction in Uzbekistan was a long-awaited disaster".[4] Viktor Dukhovny, who led the construction of canals in the Syrdarya basin during the Soviet era, says his team found the area unsuitable for a water infrastructure. On May 1st, at 5:55 a.m., after five days of rain, the Sardoba Reservoir in the Syrdarya region collapsed, flooding surrounding cotton fields and villages. Officials say six people have been killed, 35,000 hectares of land in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan flooded and at least 111,000 people displaced. If the long-term response in permanently rehousing these residents and rebuilding their communities is not handled well, particularly when it is no longer in the news, it will create the risk of social unrest amongst those who suffered in

the flood.

Energy shortage

Uzbekistan annually produces about 60 billion cubic meters of gas and seven million tons of liquid hydrocarbons. Experts say these reserves should be enough to meet the demand of country's population. However, corruption in this area and unsustainable export volumes are artificially creating energy shortages in the country. Also, one of the most important problems of the increasing population of Uzbekistan is the huge demand for electricity and oil products. Particularly in rural areas where there are shortages of gas, a low and erratic electricity supply and many houses without water supply from the mains. If economy suffers then those reliant on using expensive local generators for power and bottled water (or long trips to springs) will suffer even more.

Freedom of speech

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) has recently published the World Freedom of Expression Index for 2020.[5] According to it, Uzbekistan ranks 156th out of 180 countries surveyed. Uzbekistan, where freedom of speech is 'complicated', is in red on RSF's world map. In red states, freedom of speech is considered very weak and unstable. On the plus side, Uzbekistan has previously always been 'black', reserved for the world's worst abusers of freedom of expression, as in the past decades there has been no mention of freedom of speech as the state has struggled with the concept and has seen journalists, bloggers, and free information as its enemies. Over the next two to three years, Uzbekistan's rating has improved slightly, but has not changed dramatically. The problematic aspect of the situation is that freedom of speech in Uzbekistan is still not widespread and stable. That is why Uzbekistan is a 'complex, troubled country about freedom of speech'. According to the ranking, neighboring Kyrgyzstan is in 82nd place, Afghanistan is 122nd, Pakistan is 145th. After Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan - 157th, Tajikistan - 161st, Turkmenistan - 179th.

In the coming years, the conflicts within Uzbekistan, the socio-economic crises will intensify. In particular, the situation with the coronavirus has added an additional cause. It is in these times of conflict that maintaining, nurturing and transforming free speech into a sustainable institution is a crucial task. In some institutions of the state, there is a growing tendency to restrict freedom of speech in order to maintain social stability in the wake of the pandemic. In the future, there will be many contradictions and tension, both temporary and fundamental, between freedom of speech and stability, between freedom of speech and bureaucracy, and between freedom of speech and systems of power. If the institution of freedom of speech continues to function, and freedom of speech is given

priority in these conflicts, Uzbekistan will be able to significantly change its global position in a positive way in the next decade.

Torture and social control

Uzbekistan is still at the forefront of the fight against torture. Today, the main protest in Uzbekistan is against physical torture. However, there is little talk of psychological torture in Uzbekistan. In Uzbekistan, through the institutions of the mahallas, with the help of relatives and through social relations in society, there is a system of denial of human rights through psychological pressure, which use carries a subjugation much wider than only physical torture. The goal of combating all forms of torture is to ensure that a person feels free and at ease, and to keep the state within the legal framework. However, in the context of Uzbekistan, 99 per cent of the pressure used to ensure an authoritarian society and the rule of law is psychological pressure.

From these concerns set out above it can be concluded that Uzbekistan is at risk of a social explosion. If and when the powder keg explodes depends, in part, on what political steps the Uzbek government will take. 2021 is the year of the Presidential election, which in many ways means the government has to reckon with the public. But, unfortunately, this process is not transparent. At the request of President Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan will join the Eurasian Economic Union by the end of this year. In this case, the country's economic independence will be cracked, and the conditions for political reform will depend on Russia. The country's integration into the world economy is also weakening. Currently, the situation with coronavirus in the country is very tense. It is believed the government is 'hitting its own leg with an axe' because of concerns amongst activists that some officials may not be being fully transparent about the mortality and morbidity statistics. If the Uzbek Government does not redouble its efforts to manage the crisis in an accountable way this will add to the risk of social unrest over the coming months.

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[1] IMF, Republic of Uzbekistan Requests for disbursement under the rapid credit facility and purchase under

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[2] See General Government Debt World Bank Selected Indicators,
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[3] State Statistical Committee, Labour Market,
<https://stat.uz/uz/180-ofytyalnaia-statystyka-uz/6555-mehnat-bozori> Figure for working age population as of Q1 2019.

[4] Eugene Simonov, Uzbekistan dam collapse was a disaster waiting to happen, The Third Pole.net, June 2020, <https://www.thethirdpole.net/2020/06/23/uzbekistan-dam-collapse-was-a-disaster-waiting-to-happen/>

[5] Reporters Without Borders, World Freedom of Expression Index 2020, <https://rsf.org/en/ranking>



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