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Uzbekistan: The Year After

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Source: The Kremlin, Moscow

- A year ago, Islam Karimov, who had ruled Uzbekistan for 27 years, passed away with no designated or apparent heir. After a few days' of uncertainty, then prime minister Shavkat Mirziyoyev took over and was subsequently elected president in December 2016. This was the first change of power in Uzbekistan's post-Soviet history and its aftermath was closely watched by those following the country's politics.
- There are signs of positive change in Uzbekistan, particularly in the media space. Uzbekistan's media outlets are now publishing pieces indirectly or—much more rarely—directly criticizing legacy policies and advocating changes, unseen and unheard of during the Karimov years. The new president has also relaxed some trade and economic regulations, particularly export procedures, and has taken steps toward floating the national currency. Additionally, Uzbekistan significantly improved relations with neighboring states.
- Yet none of these changes constitute systematic reform in any one area and are seemingly only designed to strengthen Mirziyoyev's hold on power. It seems clear that the Mirziyoyev government has chosen the path of China and, to an extent, Russia, with a heavy focus on growing the economy and carrying out only as much political reform as needed to boost these policies. In addition, by increasing the transparency of some government operations and slightly cutting back on corruption that has traditionally enriched law enforcement, Mirziyoyev may be looking to weaken the entrenched elites and transfer wealth to his support base—a more dynamic, pro-trade, pro-business elite.
- In the process of opening up the tightly controlled media, exploring previously taboo topics, and expanding freedoms, the Mirziyoyev government may inadvertently change Uzbeks' expectations of their government and could, in the longer term, face increased demands for a more democratic system of governance. Thus, in an effort to purge the old elite, secure its own power base, and redistribute wealth, the Mirziyoyev government could unintentionally build the foundations for true change in Uzbekistan.
- Nonetheless, overpromising and then failing to carry out substantive political reform would not only be a mistake but could, in fact, lead to security challenges in Uzbekistan's very young and growing population. The international community should acknowledge positive changes in the country but continue nudging the government toward a full-scale reform to ensure a prosperous, secure, and pluralistic Uzbekistan.

This month commemorates the one-year anniversary of the death of Islam Karimov, Uzbekistan's heavy-handed autocratic ruler of 27 years. Symptomatic of the opaqueness of the Central Asian republic's political system, it is still not clear what the actual date of his passing was. While officially he died on September 2, it is widely speculated, and is likely more accurate, that he passed away on August 27, 2016. This was indirectly confirmed by the Uzbek government's own 11-month remembrance events on July 27, 2017. This paper looks at the past year in Uzbekistan and aims to analyze how, if in any way, one of the world's worst human rights violators has changed.

Old Guard New President

Despite rumors at the time, it is unclear if there was much internal discourse, let alone infighting, about who would succeed Karimov after he had passed away. With no heir apparent and Gulnara Karimova, the eldest daughter of the president and once-presumed successor, under house arrest, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, then prime minister and Rustam Azimov, the deputy prime minister at the time, became the two most widely mentioned successors. In a country that had only seen one president and had been deliberately devoid of prominent political leaders of any rank, there were only indirect signs of an emerging leader.

Yet, in the days following the formal announcement of death, it became evident that Mirziyoyev would be taking over the rule. He had an outsized role in the organization of the multi-day burial ceremonies and in receiving foreign dignitaries, and was overall given prominence in the country's media. The Uzbek Constitution dictates that in case the president is incapable to govern (for health and other reasons), the chairperson of the upper chamber of the parliament would step in to take over the responsibilities and organize an election within 90 days. Interestingly, but not unexpectedly, the chairman of the Senate announced that in deference to Mirziyoyev's experience, he would prefer that Mirziyoyev be made interim president. Many experts believed that this was an unconstitutional move but the parliament quickly approved it. It is clear that Mirziyoyev was a consensus figure agreed upon by the ruling elites as he had been seen as more likely to continue Karimov's policies and maintain the political status quo. In December, Uzbekistan held an election that the Organization for the Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) evaluated as "devoid of genuine competition" and Mirziyoyev became president, winning the election handily.

Mirziyoyev, who was appointed prime minister in 2003, had been part of the late president Karimov's inner circle for many years, quickly rising through the ranks to serve as governor of the Jizzakh and then Samarqand regions. He had maintained a lower profile than his would-be rival Rustam Azimov who had gained prominence as the face of Uzbekistan in negotiations with international financial institutions.
It is more than likely, ultimately, that the lower profile was the main factor in allowing Mirziyoyev to be perceived as the status quo candidate and emerge victorious. Central Asia watchers and analysts had therefore concluded that Mirziyoyev would continue Karimov's policies and there would be little hope for substantive social or economic reform or positive changes in the country's human rights record and democratic trajectory. The question then is, a year after Karimov's death and for all practical purposes, a year of the Mirziyoyev rule, have the analysts in their eternal skepticism been wrong?

Signs of a Thaw

Mirziyoyev's initially unofficial and then presidential rule has been marked by multiple events that may leave even the most skeptical of analysts questioning their pessimism. Already, the December 4 presidential election and the campaign prior to it were a departure from the past elections, where Karimov's handpicked competitors would publicly announce their support for him. In 2016, there were four candidates who ran on only slightly, but nonetheless, different platforms. While the three opposing candidates never directly criticized Mirziyoyev, they voiced criticism of certain policies implemented under his watch as prime minister. In what would constitute a semblance of an election campaign, there was also a celebrity-touted campaign to get people to vote.

The result itself was also interesting in that Mirziyoyev won 88.6 percent of the vote, below the 90.4 percent Karimov had received in the 2015 election. While the difference in the figures is negligible, it does indicate that Mirziyoyev cared about the perception of its legitimacy at home and, more importantly, abroad,

something a 90-plus percent result would significantly undermine. While certainly the election was a carefully orchestrated event of which the OSCE said that "the media covered the election in a highly restrictive and controlled environment, and the state-defined narrative did not provide voters the opportunity to hear alternative viewpoints;"[1] in a country as restrictive as Uzbekistan, even the smallest hints at a regular election process are important.

Two months later, some saw the release from prison of Muhammad Bekjan, an independent journalist and brother of an exiled opposition leader, as "the true litmus test for the regime."[2] The step was welcomed by many as Bekjan had been languishing behind the bars since 1999 on trumped up charges.[3] In November, Mirziyoyev also released Samandar Kukanov, an opposition activist after 23 years in prison and Rustam Usmonov, a banking pioneer who ended up in prison after criticizing the government, after 19 years in jail.

Among his first steps, Mirziyoyev sought to repair relations with Uzbekistan's neighbors. With multiple trips to Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, Mirziyoyev demonstrated Uzbekistan's desire to cooperate on regional issues long ignored by Karimov. The reopening of the borders and more cordial and friendly intraregional relations have allowed Uzbek citizens to visit their families and trade with the neighboring countries. While under Karimov transport links with neighboring nations were limited, the Mirziyoyev government moved fast to establish new train and plane routes to these countries.

Some of the most relevant and acute issues facing many Uzbeks have been the so-called exit visas and the issue of propiska. The exit visa is a Soviet legacy, which requires Uzbek citizens to receive a Ministry of the Interior issued sticker in their passport before being able to travel outside the country. This process is constitutionally dubious at best and one of the largest sources of corruption, government intimidation, and control. For example, it is a well-documented practice that the Uzbek government will refuse to issue exit visas to human rights activists. On August 16, 2017 the Uzbek government announced it would abolish the exit visa starting January, 2019 and introduce passports for foreign travel.[4] Of course, as it was the case with Turkmenistan, the abolishment of the exit visa policies does not automatically mean expanded freedom of movement. The to-be-introduced foreign travel passports may yet serve the same "carrot and stick" purpose as exit visas do.

Perhaps the area where the signs of the thaw are most visible is the media space.

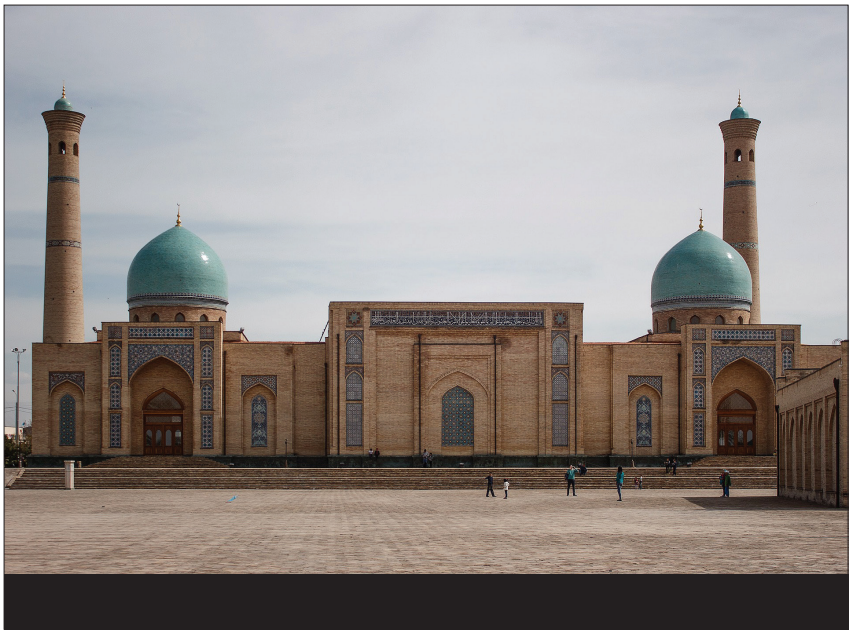
The ***propiska*** or city registration is another legacy policy that denies Uzbek citizens from the regions their right to live, work, and buy property in the capital, Tashkent. Again, this policy is a direct violation of the Uzbek constitution and a major source of corruption. The Mirziyoyev government took small steps to address this problem. First, it expanded the list of people who can receive ***propiska*** in Tashkent to include students, government employees, and some other categories. It also promised to issue registration to anyone buying property in newly built apartment buildings.

Perhaps the area where the signs of the thaw are most visible and felt is the media space. Possibly inspired by and taking Mirziyoyev's words about the need for critical media at the face value, Uzbekistan's many outlets started publishing pieces indirectly or—much more rarely—directly criticizing government policies. Policies that could be criticized without fearing repercussions has been limited mostly to the economy and social policies. Similarly, media have started to openly criticize regional governors and other state institutions only after receiving a "blessing" from Mirziyoyev himself in the form of a speech or remark criticizing the said official or institution. Yet, it is clear that many previously taboo topics—including the failing currency exchange policies, hostile relations with the neighboring countries, or the large number of Uzbek labor migrants in Russia—are now openly discussed and citizens are encouraged to provide their feedback and opinion on them.

Observers have also noted a slight opening for civic activism. While previously any sign of active citizenry was brutally suppressed, public outcry following a brutal murder[5] in spring 2017 signaled that things may have changed, even if slightly. The case, initially swept under the rug, reemerged on the general prosecutor's agenda after demands on social media that the government bring justice to the perpetrators. Normally, the authorities would ignore such requests but this time, given the scale of the outcry, they responded by opening a criminal case and providing a handful of statements on the progress of the case. This level of

responsiveness was unprecedented for Uzbekistan and gave hope to many for potential changes toward a fairer justice system.

There also seems to be a greater opening for religious freedom in Uzbekistan. For years, the Karimov government had restricted religious freedoms by prohibiting religious clothing and attending Friday prayers for public employees, students, university professors, and others. Religious service at mosques was also limited in its scope. Any person suspected of not following the government-sponsored version of Islam was immediately targeted by the authorities and, in many cases, labeled an "extremist." Human rights organizations criticized these policies as violating the tenets of Uzbekistan's own constitution.



Source: Pixabay

While it is too early to talk about the reversal of these egregious policies, for the first time in many years the government allowed all-night prayers during Ramadan—something previously banned. It also started a semblance of a conversation about labeling everyone a "terrorist" and "extremist," reportedly removing more than 4,000 from so-called blacklists that contain people suspected of "radical Islamist affiliations."[6] The importance of this for the people who had been blacklisted cannot be overstated, as a former imam told EurasiNet. "People removed from blacklists can now work where they want and they will no longer have to go to the police station to give reports on their doings. They will be eligible for welfare benefits and they can visit public events in their region."[7] In early August 2017, for example, the prominent Uzbek journalist Khayrulla Khamidov was removed from the list and received permission to work in the National Radio and Television Company.[8]

Seemingly, then, there is a thaw in Uzbekistan. But the question is whether this is simply a thaw with no sign of a spring bloom or—even worse—only a brief respite before the coming re-freeze.

Tempering Expectations

In a country that for the last two decades has become synonymous with systematic human rights abuse, dictatorial rule, and a stagnating economy, any sign of a positive change is welcome. And, indeed, that has been the case for many Uzbeks and the more skeptical Uzbek diaspora abroad: The ever so slightly freer media punctuated by the launch of a 24-hour news channel that was quick to deliver on the criticism of the Karimov-era policies; the relaxing of export and travel regulations; the overall dynamism the new president brought to the political arena are certainly lifting the spirits of many. This however should not take away from the fact that to this day, none of the changes mentioned above added up to a substantive systematic reform in political, social or economic spheres. The Mirziyoyev government seems intent on fixing the most obvious and egregious problems of the post-Karimov reality in Uzbekistan, but is not too quick to undertake systemic reforms that will bring true change to Uzbekistan.

One example is the now infamous "public complaint boxes." Upon taking office as interim president, Mirziyoyev announced that there would be an electronic complaint submission system on the prime minister's website, where any person can submit a complaint about anything. The move proved popular and soon all government ministries followed suit. Initially touted as a communication tool, the boxes became an instru-

ment of populist appeasement that would allow people to let some steam off but also collect unverified information on local officials and later use it to attack, criticize, and possibly remove them from their jobs. Essentially, the boxes transformed into useful tools for spreading the narrative of "the good king, bad officials." Were the Mirziyoyev government serious about reform efforts, it could collect and analyze the massive amounts of data it is receiving and align its policy priorities based on the data. This, however, is certainly not the case. Moreover, the constant reshuffling of government officials, sometimes in less than six months on the job—while contributes to a sense of dynamism and government responsiveness to citizen complaints—reveals a lack of a cohesive transformation and reform plan.

With the bar for media freedom in Uzbekistan so low, the small signs of the expanding independence are encouraging. Yet, it is obvious that there are certain no-go zones for the media and criticism. While outlets can criticize local governors, Karimov-era regulations or, for that matter, any topic president Mirziyoyev himself is critical of, there is a very clear lack of criticism of the president. It is obvious that the media, whether through self-censorship or through direct instructions, are doing their best to further contribute to the "good king" narrative being created in Uzbekistan. The irony, of course, is that while slowly undermining Karimov's legacy, they are assisting in the creation a new cult of personality.

The release of political prisoners—while certainly an important development—was done so in a manner that did not discuss or condemn the arbitrary and unfair reasons for their multi-year prison terms in the first place. This does not give hope that the persecution of activists will stop and, importantly, does not start a conversation, let alone specific efforts, to reform the corrupt and subservient judiciary.

The constant fits and starts of efforts addressing freedom of movement are also indicative of a government that is trying to correct the wrong, but is doing so with minimal effort at actual, substantive reform. At almost a year of the Mirziyoyev rule, Uzbeks are yet to be able to move freely within their own country and travel internationally.

President Mirziyoyev on a few occasions has spoken about the ineffectiveness of the parliament, Oliy Majlis, which serves as a rubberstamp for executive decisions. He has also encouraged political parties to define their ideologies and compete with each other. In July 2017, Uzbekistan experimented with the live broadcast of parliamentary hearings and while it is not clear if the practice will continue, this brings a certain level of transparency to the work of the body. Yet, were the Uzbek government serious about its commitment to free and fair political competition, it would allow true opposition parties to register and operate in the country. Doing anything short of that will at best result in a "managed democracy," similar to that of Russia, with all the semblance of a competitive system but none of the substance.

When it comes to one of the most flagrant human rights violations in Uzbekistan, that of forced labor, the new administration has yet to address it. Uzbekistan is one of the world's largest cotton exporters, with students, doctors, teachers, and government employees annually forced to harvest cotton. The legacy practice, much criticized by human rights organizations, not only violates Uzbekistan's own laws, but has also become a de facto segregation instrument, with the well-off paying up government officials to avoid forced labor. Ending this practice would send the strongest and most tangible signal yet that the Uzbek government is indeed on the path of reform.

A Tested Model or Building True Change?

The only area where the government seems intent on bringing about real change is the economy, specifically floating the national currency—something the IMF has recommended for many years—and removing trade barriers to boost exports. This could be key to understanding the development trajectory of Uzbekistan and suggests that the Mirziyoyev government has chosen the path of China and, to an extent, Russia, with a heavy focus on growing the economy and carrying out only as much political reform as needed to boost pro-growth policies. In addition, by increasing the transparency of some government operations and thus removing some of the corruption mechanisms that have traditionally enriched law enforcement,

Mirziyoyev may be looking to weaken the entrenched elites and transfer wealth to his support base—a more dynamic, pro-trade, pro-business, "new" elite.

Contrary to what some had thought would happen in a post-Karimov Uzbekistan, a year after his death not much fundamental change has occurred in the country. The dynamism of constant small modifications to what essentially is the Karimov-era government and governance systems masks the fact Mirziyoyev has yet to address the true structural democratic and human rights challenges in the country. Thus, a more skeptical observer will likely conclude that the above-mentioned and yet-to-come changes are superficial in nature and are designed to strengthen Mirziyoyev's hold on power. This may be true. There is, however, a silver lining: in the process of opening up the previously tightly controlled media, expanding freedoms, exploring previously taboo topics, the Mirziyoyev government may inadvertently change Uzbeks' expectations of their government. Mirziyoyev has already announced with big fanfare the appointment of two 20-somethings to deputy minister positions. He is clearly trying to portray himself as a champion of the youth and win over their support.[9] Yet, by raising expectations, Uzbekistan's government may find itself in a position of actually having to respond to public concerns and face increased demands for a more democratic system of governance.

Hence, it may yet be the case that the Mirziyoyev government, in an effort to purge the old elite, secure its own power base, and redistribute wealth could unintentionally build the foundations for true change in Uzbekistan. However, with the very young and growing population, which is expected to reach 40 million by 2050, overpromising and failing to deliver may in fact lead to violence. The international community should acknowledge positive changes in the country but continue nudging the government toward a full-scale reform to ensure a prosperous, secure, and pluralistic Uzbekistan.

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[1] Mirziyaev Declared Winner of Uzbekistan's Presidential Election. RFE/RL, December 6, 2016, https://www.rferl.org/a/uzbekistan-presidential-election-2016-mirziyaev/28156160.html

[2] Will Mirziyoyev Bring Change to Uzbekistan? The Carnegie Endowment for Democracy. December, 201,. http://carnegie.ru/commentary/66493

[3] Uzbekistan: Free Long-Imprisoned Journalist. Human Rights Watch. December 16, 2016, https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/12/16/uzbekistan-free-long-imprisoned-journalist

[4] Uzbekistan to Introduce Foreign Travel Passport in 2019. Kun.uz, August 16, 2017, http://kun.uz/news/2017/08/16/uzbekiston-2019-jildan-horizga-cikis-pasportlarini-zorij-etadi

[5] In the spring of 2017, a 17-year-old Jasurbek Ibragimov was brutally beaten by his classmates and subsequently died of the sustained injuries.

[6] Uzbekistan: Thousands of Suspected Radicals Rehabilitated, EurasiaNet, July 28, 2017, http://www.eurasianet.org/node/84536

[7] Ibid.

[8] Узбекистан: Журналист Хайрулла Хамидов исключен из «черного списка» и хочет снова работать на телевидении [Uzbekistan: Journalist Khairulla Khamidov taken off of "blacklist" and wants to work again on TV], FerganaNews, August 8, 2017, http://www.ferghananews.com/news/26722

[9] In an August 9, 2017 speech, Mirziyoyev said he was looking to replace every official in the country with somebody "young and who is a patriot" within the following two years, see: http://kun.uz/news/2017/08/09/ikki-jildan-kejin-amma-zojga-es-vatanni-sevgan-kadrlar-keladi-prezident

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