



Uzbekistan: Reform or Repeat?

Crisis Group Europe and Central Asia Briefing N°84

Bishkek/Brussels, 6 December 2016

I. Overview

Uzbekistan's 4 December presidential election formally confirmed Shavkat Mirziyoyev in the office he assumed in an acting capacity on 8 September, within days of the death of Islam Karimov. After 25 years of Karimov's authoritarian rule, however, one of Central Asia's most repressive states faces challenges that can only be effectively addressed by genuine domestic and foreign policy departures. Mirziyoyev has received positive notices for a few small moves in the past three months, but there is no sign as yet that he intends to alter fundamentally the system he helped shape as prime minister since 2003, a system designed to protect those in power at the expense of the population's rights. His steps to repair relations regionally have been met with mistrust by Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, while the tough issues, such as sharing of resources, have yet to be broached. There has been even less indication of new directions internally, where the new president shares power with at least two other prominent members of the Karimov era.

Uzbekistan has pressing economic and social issues, unpredictable neighbours and a dangerous jihadist extremism threat, but Mirziyoyev's first priority will likely be to consolidate his position. A balance with Rustam Azimov, the finance minister, and Rustam Inoyatov, head of the National Security Service (SNB), appears to have been maintained since the death of Karimov, the only ruler the country had known since its 1991 independence from the Soviet Union. This bodes well for short-term internal stability but not for reform. Mirziyoyev will need to cultivate their continued support and that of others, including rich Uzbeks living in Russia and elsewhere, all of whom will want to preserve the status quo.

The new administration is likely to pursue business as usual with Russia, China, the U.S. and Europe. But each should use the opportunity Mirziyoyev presents to nuance their relations with Tashkent. Russia and China have an immediate interest in the stability of Uzbekistan, as any upset in Central Asia's most populous state could destabilise the entire region, but it is unclear whether they believe domestic reforms are a necessary component of lasting stability. Uzbekistan is but one of many countries about policy toward which it is impossible to predict the approach of the U.S. president-elect, but the European Union (EU) wants improved trade ties without sacrificing its human rights principles.

While Mirziyoyev must prove to his Central Asian neighbours that his pre-election efforts were more than calculated platitudes, they should push him for serious dialogue on resources, borders, trade and mutual security. Russia, China and the West should support their efforts at a high level as progress on those issues would contribute to regional security that is in the common interest.

II. Domestic Concerns

Though four parties were permitted to field candidates, they were given more air-time than in the past, and for the first time the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE/OHDIR) sent a full observation mission, the election campaign was premised from the start on an overwhelming Mirziyoyev victory. As he visited the regions, making appointments and dismissals, his campaign closely resembled Karimov's 2015 program, stressing no foreign alliances, less state involvement in the economy and more support for businesses and farmers.¹

The victor must now consolidate his power while balancing important competing interests. Rustam Azimov,² the longtime finance minister, who represented Uzbekistan at a Shanghai Cooperation Organisation meeting in Bishkek in November, is expected to take over Mirziyoyev's old job as prime minister. If he does not, it might indicate a serious rift in the troika that shared responsibility for the transition after Karimov's death, which includes Rustam Inoyatov, who leads the powerful SNB. The youth and policing laws adopted almost immediately after Mirziyoyev took office had both passed Senate hearings in August and were Karimov's last deeds rather than initiatives that demonstrated the new leader's strength.³

On 25 September, Mirziyoyev opened a "virtual reception" and telephone hotline on which citizens can file complaints. Though it received 50,000 petitions in its first three weeks, and the acting president declared that civil servants "work for the people and not vice versa", a young Tashkent resident who filed a complaint expressed scepticism: "The agencies give the same old responses that 'everything will be resolved soon'".⁴ A virtual reception also functions on the foreign ministry website for citizens living abroad. Some hesitate to use these platforms, as they ask for name and address. "Nothing will change, but they will know who complained and about what, I don't want to risk it", an IT worker in Tashkent said.⁵ Mirziyoyev has also instituted

¹ Crisis Group Asia Briefing N°82, *Uzbekistan: In Transition*, 29 September 2016. "Пришло время госорганам служить народу, а не наоборот" ["It is time for state agencies to work for the people and not vice versa"], *Gazeta.uz*, 22 October 2016. Mirziyoyev won 88.61 per cent of the vote; turnout was 87.73 per cent. "Шавкат Мирзиёев победил на выборах Президента" ["Shavkat Mirziyoyev won presidential elections"], *Gazeta.uz*, 5 December 2016. At his final presidential election in March 2015, Karimov received 90.39 per cent of the votes in a 91.08 per cent turnout. "ЦИК объявил Каримова избранным Президентом" ["Central Electoral Committee announced Karimov elected President"], *Gazeta.uz*, 6 April 2015.

² Oxford-educated Azimov, 57, was close to Karimov and "it is in Karimov's will that he still has his place, Azimov is the face of Uzbekistan to the world, he understands how to be a statesman". Crisis group interview, former Kyrgyz official, Bishkek, November 2016.

³ "Uzbekistan adopts law 'On state youth policy'", *Uzreport.uz*, 15 September 2016.

⁴ Crisis Group interview, Tashkent, November 2016. The virtual reception's webpage, <https://pm.gov.uz>, asks: "У Вас есть нерешённые проблемы, заявления, жалобы или предложения? Направляйте их Премьер-Министру Республики Узбекистан несколькими способами: по телефону, в виде обращения или посетите региональные партийные организации УзЛиДеП". ["Do you have unresolved problems, petitions, complaints or suggestions? Send them to the Prime Minister of the Republic of Uzbekistan in different ways: by phone, by appeal, or visit regional party branches of UzLiDeP [Liberal Democratic Party of Uzbekistan]"]. See also, "Пришло время госорганам служить народу, а не наоборот" ["It is time for state agencies to work for the people and not vice versa"], *Gazeta.uz*, op. cit.

⁵ Crisis Group interview, Tashkent, November 2016.

a Facebook page featuring his activities and selected citizen complaints, an innovation for Uzbekistan's stagnant political culture.⁶

As the new president consolidates power, he will confront problems that include a struggling economy, high unemployment, threadbare social services, corruption and an agricultural sector in vital need of modernisation. Citizens face extraordinary movement restrictions due to an antiquated *propiska* system and need for an exit visa to leave the country. The security services are corrupt and abusive; political prisoners and forced labour in the cotton fields are major reasons for the state's reputation as backward and brutal, recent gestures notwithstanding.⁷

Reform, if attempted will be slow, but the government would do well to address these issues sooner rather than later. The water-intensive cotton sector is the backbone of the economy, but its outdated practices and irrigation system leave the country overly dependent on upstream water from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Outside offers to help modernise the sector could be used not only to improve rural lives and increase incomes, but also to build opportunities for dialogue with Tashkent. Partners and donors, though, should be realistic about the pace of reform, even if Mirziyoyev gives full support. A Russian analyst noted:

If [he] tries to change [the system] fundamentally, he will face powerful forces within Uzbekistan. Political groups, clans, whatever you want to call it, have benefited from it, and they have sufficient resources to oppose fundamental changes ... No one is going to decline their benefits; no one will put up with such reforms, and Mirziyoyev understands this.⁸

III. Mending Fences?

President Mirziyoyev appears to be trying to repair relations with neighbours, but they are suspicious.⁹ Ahead of his several elections, Karimov also spoke of improving ties, but he never made good on his statements.¹⁰ There does appear to be a marked change of tone since September, but difficult issues remain, particularly Uzbek anxiety about water resources and upstream hydro-electric power plants (HPPs), and deep-seated mistrust of Tashkent's motives elsewhere in Central Asia. Karimov, it is

⁶ Facebook Profile "Шавкат Мирзиёев – Shavkat Mirziyoyev", @Mirziyoyev, Prime Minister of Uzbekistan.

⁷ "Your travel abroad is not appropriate': Propiska, 'exit visas' and other relics of the Soviet era in Uzbekistan today – Executive Summary", Uzbek-German Forum for Human Rights, 2010. Political prisoner freed after 23 years following death of Uzbek despot", *The Guardian*, 25 November 2016.

⁸ Crisis Group telephone interview, November 2016.

⁹ Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan agreed to increase trade on 26 September; on 29 September, Uzbek Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Kamilov and Tajik President Emomali Rahmon pledged restoration of rail and air connections and to increase economic cooperation. A Kyrgyz delegation of 130 officials from Osh, Jalalabad and Batken provinces led by First Vice-Prime Minister Muhametkaly Abulgazyev visited Andijan on 1 October and met Deputy Prime Minister Adkham Ikramov. On 11 October, Mirziyoyev spoke of the need to increase trade and cooperation with Afghanistan.

¹⁰ "Uzbekistan, Tajikistan Flights to Resume After 24-Year Break", Eurasianet.org, 2 December 2016.

not forgotten, warned that if Kyrgyzstan or Tajikistan pressed ahead with proposed HPPs, it could spark a war.¹¹

The benefits of normalising borders and trade and reaching agreement on sharing natural resources are clear and should be a donor priority. The challenge for all, though, is to build trust in order to begin to address issues that have seemed intractable. Despite their misgivings, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan should offer top-level consultations and propose a tripartite council to oversee day-to-day management of water and land resources.

A. *Kyrgyzstan*

The bilateral border disputes are a longstanding source of tension and conflict that have created hardships for citizens on both sides of the border and in enclaves.¹² In a matter of weeks this autumn, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan carried out joint surveys and provisionally resolved almost all of the un-demarcated areas.¹³ According to the Uzbek foreign ministry, the initiative has the personal backing of Mirziyoyev and Kyrgyz President Almazbek Atambayev. Some international observers call the progress “remarkable”, yet possibly “too good to be true”. High-ranking Kyrgyz officials remain deeply suspicious and stress the agreements are provisional, and Uzbekistan could yet renege on them.¹⁴

Day-to-day border crossings are now easier, and the numbers crossing at Dostuk, near Osh, have risen from 300 to 1,000 daily since Uzbekistan agreed to visits for weddings and other family celebrations, not just funerals.¹⁵ But agreements have not been reached on the contentious Ungar-Too and Orto-Tokoy areas, and, according to a senior member of the Kyrgyz government, “Uzbekistan will never give us the Kempir-Abad and Andijan reservoirs, so it means we will never give them back what they want from us. These questions will never be solved”.¹⁶

¹¹ Raushan Nurshayeva, “Uzbek leader sounds warning over Central Asia water disputes”, Reuters, 7 September 2012.

¹² “Central Asia is home to eight enclaves with a total population of 100,000. Tensions and cross-border incidents are common, especially in and around the largest enclaves of Tajik-governed Sarvak and Vorukh, and Uzbek-governed Sokh and Shakhimardan. Access to water and pastures and strict border-crossing regimes are the primary causes of periodic conflicts that can affect up to 80,000 people”. “Caucasus and Central Asia Humanitarian Bulletin: Issue 02”, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Spring 2013.

¹³ Kyrgyzstan says there have been 58 un-demarcated areas, Uzbekistan 63. They agree that 56 have now been provisionally resolved. Alexandra Titova, “Как Кыргызстан и Узбекистан начали согласовывать границы” [“How Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan started coordinating the borders”], Kloop, 16 November 2016.

¹⁴ “Об очередной встрече рабочих групп правительственных делегаций Узбекистана и Кыргызстана” [“On another regular meeting of working groups of governmental delegations of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan”], Uzbek foreign ministry, 1 November 2016. Crisis Group interviews, Western diplomats, senior Kyrgyz official, Bishkek, October, November 2016.

¹⁵ “Потепление на узбекско-кыргызской границе: гражданам Кыргызстана разрешили приезжать к родственникам на свадьбы” [“Warming of relations on the Uzbek-Kyrgyz border: Kyrgyz citizens are allowed to visit their relatives’ weddings”], KyrTAG, 15 October 2016.

¹⁶ Crisis Group interview, senior Kyrgyz official, Bishkek, November 2016. See also, Timur Toktonaliev, “Uzbek-Kyrgyz Border Spat Highlights Tensions”, Institute for War & Peace Reporting, 24 March 2016; “Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan tighten border security”, Interfax-Ukraine, 3 September 2016; and Kubanychbek Joldoshev, “Кыргызстан намерен вернуть объекты, используемые Узбекистаном” [“Kyrgyzstan intends to take back its objects used by Uzbekistan”], RFE/RL, 29 March 2016.

Tensions over the proposed Kambarata-1 dam have dissipated since Russia left the project, and Kyrgyzstan struggles to find an alternative investor.¹⁷ But local tensions over water and pasture access remain. On the back of demarcation cooperation, the governments should work to resolve water issues at community level in the border areas. Tashkent should recognise that Karimov's rule sapped trust and goodwill in Kyrgyzstan, which despite its problems charted a different course than authoritarian Uzbekistan. "Uzbekistan is trying to kill us with their embrace", a senior Kyrgyz official said. "We shouldn't romanticise the thaw".¹⁸

International observers also worry that if the Uzbek government begins to lose interest in its post-Karimov, pre-election initiatives, the Kyrgyz government lacks the political skills and continuity to maintain engagement.¹⁹ That Kyrgyzstan will hold its own presidential election in 2017 is a further source of distraction and potential disruption that could derail the recent progress.

B. *Tajikistan*

Amid talk of abolishing visas and restoring flights between capitals, there has been scant reaction from Tashkent about construction of the Rogun dam, which began on 29 October.²⁰ Uzbekistan has been vehemently opposed, and Mirziyoyev's no-comment approach for now does not necessarily signify a change. Water and energy management is critical for all five Central Asian states. Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan face shortages of water in summer and energy in winter, with rural Tajikistan and the Uzbek portion of the Ferghana Valley suffering acutely.²¹

Karimov's and President Emomali Rahmon's relationship was openly antagonistic. Under Mirziyoyev, contact with Dushanbe has been stepped up, but the "warming of relations ... is not framed as widely and positively as cooperation with Kyrgyzstan", an Uzbek analyst said. A senior Kyrgyz official dismissed Mirziyoyev's efforts at outreach with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan as a charm offensive.²² A Tajik analyst was equally cautious but said bilateral relations are so poor that small improvements are possible on discrete issues:

Under Karimov everything was tied into one package, but Mirziyoyev seems to be willing to untie that package and resolve each problem separately. If border issues are negotiated only as border issues, they can be resolved quickly. The same relates to many other issues. Roads to connect both states can be built or repaired quickly, just like air connections can be restored fast. It could be realistic to solve these issues in half a year or one year.²³

¹⁷ Mariya Zozulya, "Kyrgyzstan's Hydropower Projects Stall Again", Institute for War & Peace Reporting, 25 August 2016.

¹⁸ Crisis Group interview, senior Kyrgyz official, Bishkek, November 2016.

¹⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Western diplomats, Bishkek, November 2016.

²⁰ "Авиасообщение между Узбекистаном и Таджикистаном возобновится в первой половине 2017 года" ["Flights between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan to resume in the first half of 2017"], Podrobno.uz, 7 November 2016. The Rogun dam on the Vakhsh River, 100km downstream of Dushanbe, would be up to 335 metres tall with a 3,600 MW capacity.

²¹ Rustam Qobil, "Will Central Asia fight over water?", BBC, 25 October 2016.

²² Crisis Group interviews, Bishkek, November 2016.

²³ Crisis Group telephone interview, November 2016.

Rogun, though, is different. A Russian analyst said, “for Uzbekistan, Rogun has been a painful topic for too long. Uzbekistan [cannot] suddenly change its position. Right now they prefer not to talk about it at all”.²⁴ The difficult negotiations ahead also depend on the Tajik government’s ability to reassure Uzbekistan that water will not be politicised. Rahmon says this repeatedly, but Tashkent may consider the increasingly authoritarian president inherently unreliable.²⁵

IV. Beyond the Region

Mirziyoyev bolstered his pre-election stature by high-profile meetings with senior Russian, Chinese, EU, U.S. and Turkish representatives that underscored the widespread strategic interest in Uzbekistan. The foreign ministry also facilitated many regional diplomatic sessions. Though these were viewed positively, an Uzbek analyst said, they “could be merely part of the presidential campaign; their sustainability is in question”.²⁶

A radical or swift departure from Karimov’s foreign policies should not be expected. Uzbekistan’s partners may find more openness to dialogue, but the issues remain the same. Russia seeks a closer relationship, but Tashkent, while cautiously increasing security cooperation, will continue to avoid economic or military bloc membership.²⁷ China, which views Central Asia as a commercial conduit and investment opportunity, considers its most populous state (31.8 million) particularly attractive. Foreign Minister Wang Yi, following 12 November Tashkent meetings with Mirziyoyev and his Uzbek counterpart, Abdulaziz Kamilov, stressed there is “new impetus” for even deeper cooperation.²⁸ Early indications are that the Obama administration has wanted to maintain a strategic relationship, including through the C5+1 format, a platform the Central Asian states and the U.S. created in 2015.²⁹

The EU is open to more ties and trade, including a textiles protocol, despite continued forced labour in the cotton sector. Rapporteur Maria Arena said the EU International Trade Committee’s 10 November recommendation was not a blank cheque: “We want the Uzbek government to fully cooperate with the International Labour Organisation to eradicate child and forced labour. In the case of serious human rights violations, the Parliament will immediately ask for the suspension of the agree-

²⁴ Crisis Group telephone interview, November 2016.

²⁵ Emomali Rahmon, speech at the Vakhsh River Diversion Ceremony, Rogun city, transcript on the president’s website, 29 October 2016, www.president.tj/en/node/13409; Crisis Group Europe and Central Asia Briefing N°78, *Tajikistan Early Warning: Internal Pressures, External Threats*, 11 January 2016.

²⁶ Crisis Group interview, Bishkek, November 2016.

²⁷ “Узбекистан усилит свои вооружённые силы с помощью России” [“Uzbekistan will strengthen its military forces with the help of Russia”], *Anhor*, 24 November 2016.

²⁸ “Wang Yi: China-Uzbekistan Comprehensive Strategic Partnership is Believed to Achieve New Progress”, Chinese foreign ministry, 13 November 2016; “Исполняющий обязанности президента Республики Узбекистан Шавкат Мирзиёев 12 ноября принял министра иностранных дел Китайской Народной Республики Ван И” [“Acting President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev Received Minister of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China Wang Yi on 12 November”], Uzbek foreign ministry, 12 November 2016.

²⁹ “Meeting with U.S. Under Secretary of State”, Uzbek foreign ministry, 29 October 2016; also, “U.S.-Central Asia (C5+1) Joint Projects”, press release, U.S. Department of State, 3 August 2016.

ment”.³⁰ Activists, however, argue that Uzbekistan has made little progress on cotton-sector forced labour and want the European Parliament (EP) to reject it in December. This is unlikely, since the EU believes not incorporating the protocol into the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement could risk dialogue across the board.³¹ If the EP gives final approval, the onus will be on Brussels to commit firmly to the conditionality it outlines and use what Uzbekistan will see as both symbolic gesture and economic opportunity to push for deeper dialogue on reforms, including regionally consequential ones on resources and borders.

V. Conclusion

If Mirziyoyev follows through, Uzbekistan may become a better neighbour in Central Asia and a more reliable actor with partners in South Asia, China, Russia and Europe. Its citizens’ lives would also improve. But the new president is a product of Karimov’s system, an insider whose priority will be consolidating his power. He may feel little incentive to reform a system that has rewarded him and other members of the political and economic elite. The need for reform is great, however.

The long-term stability of the country and Central Asia requires successful transition from a police state to one able to meet obligations to its citizens. That is not yet happening. Steps to rid the cotton sector of child labour have had some success, but children have been replaced by older students, for example, and the coercive system for adults remains in place. Western partners consequently should use such leverage as they have to press on human rights. Russia and China are possibly more influential actors and also have a stake in promoting development and better regional relations to foster sustainable regional stability, but their appreciation of the link between human rights and that stability is problematic.

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³⁰ “MEPs Back Trade in Textiles with Uzbekistan”, EP press release, 10 November 2016. It added: “In December 2011, Parliament adopted an interim report postponing its decision on consent pending an improvement in the human rights situation ... particularly in the fields of child and forced labour in the annual cotton harvest. Since then the International Labour Organization (ILO) has carried out three monitoring missions which revealed that child labour has been virtually eradicated. The Uzbek authorities have made several commitments to progressively abolish adult forced labour, and in its latest report of 2015, ILO identified a number of indicators linked to abusive work conditions and controversial recruitment processes, which are currently being addressed by the Uzbek government in cooperation with the ILO”. Activists strongly disagree, saying there is ample evidence of continuing abuses. “Letter to European Parliament Committee on International Trade regarding ... textile protocol”, Human Rights Watch, 7 November 2016.

³¹ Umberto Bacchi, “EU Lawmakers Back Uzbekistan Trade Deal Opposed by Anti-Slavery Activists”, Reuters, 10 November 2016.



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