

Uzbekistan's Second Chance



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After the 2016 death of independent Uzbekistan's first and only President, Islam Karimov, many Central Asian watchers, myself included, thought that the Presidency that followed, that of Shavkat Mirziyoyev, would be a continuation of Karimov's, with further and increasingly dire consequences for the country. Under Karimov the nation became isolated, withdrawing from or refusing to participate in regional organizations, and served as a counter-model to human rights in the world. There was no reason to assume that Mirziyoyev, who served as Prime Minister under Karimov from 2003 until his extra-constitutional ascendancy to the Presidency in 2016, would be any different. To a large extent we were wrong, as the last six months have seen rapid improvements in the domestic, regional, and international spheres.

The first year of Mirziyoyev's Presidency did not bring about any surprises. After his appointment as President in September 2016, an election was scheduled for December of that year. Here he received 88.6% of the vote, just slightly less than the 90% Karimov regularly received. After Mirziyoyev was sworn in on 16 December 2016, he began to consolidate his power. He removed his chief rival, Rustam Azimov, from the position of Finance Minister the next day, although Azimov remained a Deputy Prime Minister for the next six months, retired fully from public life only in June 2017. More optimistic Central Asia watchers hoped that

Azimov's dismissal signified a desire to reform Uzbekistan's moribund economy; after all, Mirziyoyev had been criticizing Azimov's handling of national finances for the previous six months, but it could just as easily have been a purge of a chief rival, much as had been done in the Soviet Union (USSR).

The second year would be a marked change from the first.

In November 2017 Uzbekistan returned to regional engagement. At a meeting held in Samarkand, the five Central Asian nations, sitting down together under the auspices of the United Nations (UN), announced a six-point plan, in which they agreed to:

- 1) increase regional trade;
- 2) develop transportation infrastructure that connects the region to world markets;
- 3) cooperate on security issues such as terrorism, religious extremism, and illicit drug trafficking;
- 4) complete border demarcation and delimitation;
- 5) regularize trans-boundary water issues; and
- 6) develop close neighborly relations.¹

These were important developments because Uzbekistan had been the chief roadblock in trade pacts and smooth regional transportation. In particular, it had all but sealed off the Tajik border, had cancelled bus connections between the two nations, and had threatened to go to war over water issues. These are now in the past. The border is once again open, with further crossings under review; busses run between the two nations for the first time in 26 years, and the water issues have been largely resolved.

In addition to re-introducing Uzbekistan to Central Asia, this meeting had the benefit of cementing Kazakhstan's ties to the region, as it continued to pull further and further away from Russia. The USSR had called the region "Central Asia and Kazakhstan," as if Kazakhstan was part Russian. After a quarter-century of mulling over its place in the post-Soviet world, however, Kazakhstan has now made its choice: it is fully a Central Asian nation, distinct from Russia, no longer a border or transition area, and it is increasingly tied to its Central Asian neighbors. Uzbekistan, in large part, had made this possible, with Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev correctly linking the entire sea-change shift to Mirziyoyev's re-engagement with

¹ <https://jamestown.org/program/central-asian-reset/>

Central Asia: 20 years' worth of problems have moved toward resolution, Nazarbayev noted, a result of Mirziyoyev's "Central Asia First" policy.

This newfound sense of unified 'Central-Asianness' was cemented on 18 March 2018, when the five nations sat down together and alone for the first time since 2011, with Nazarbayev stating: "in order to solve the problems of Central Asia, we do not need any third persons. We ourselves can resolve all questions, and that is why we are meeting."² A verbal shot had been fired against outside interference – in particular that from Russia and from China – and it was all possible thanks to Uzbekistan.

The second major development of the second year was a change that sent both shockwaves and relief inside the nation. On 31 January 2018, Mirziyoyev dismissed Rustam Inoyatov, the long-serving and much-feared chief of the Uzbek National Security Service (SNB). Many wondered if it were simply a further consolidation of power; however, more astute observers again noted that Mirziyoyev had been speaking openly against the SNB's violation of basic legal principles, including presumed innocence of the arrested, that several political prisoners had been released in previous months, that 18,000 Uzbek citizens had been taken off of a "black list" that prevented them from working and traveling, and that Mirziyoyev had demanded that SNB pull its watchers out of Uzbek Embassies. Mirziyoyev believed that Uzbek Foreign Ministry officials should be able to report, without fear, to the President and not be watched over by the Security Services. Furthermore, it was long thought that Inoyatov, who had had presidential ambitions himself, was doing all he could to slow, if not stop, Mirziyoyev's reform attempts. If Uzbekistan were to move forward, he could no longer remain in his position.

This firing was quickly followed by a "major investigation" of the customs and tax agencies, which were headed by Botir Parpiev, who was related to Inoyatov by marriage. With his protection gone, the Uzbek government moved quickly to look into the misuse of up to US\$8.5 million by the Tax Committee. Another tightly-controlled government entity had been opened to public investigation. With this, Mirziyoyev sent a message to the entrenched bureaucracy, much of which opposed his new openness, that the reforms would continue.

On 2 March 2018, Mirziyoyev showed that he was also serious about both human and constitutional rights: Uzbek journalist Yusuf Ruzimuradov was released after being jailed for 19 years. Ruzimuradov had worked for an independent newspaper, *Erk* 'Freedom', which was correctly perceived by Karimov to be critical of his government. Ruzimuradov and *Erk*'s editor,

² <https://jamestown.org/program/central-asia-ready-move-without-russia/>

Muhammad Bekjanov, were charged with “attempting to overthrow the government” and sentenced to 15 years in prison. These sentences were randomly increased for alleged violations inside of prison. Bekjanov had already been freed the year before, during the first general amnesty of political prisoners.

Just five days later, an Uzbek court was asked to rule on whether claims of torture by another journalist, Bobomurod Abdullayev, could be part of his trial proceedings, after a defense motion that was supported by the State Prosecutor. Abdullayev alleged he had been beaten while in the custody of the SNB. The judge allowed the motion, citing Mirziyoyev’s November 2017 decree barring courts from using “evidence” gained through torture in trial proceedings. Abdullayev was allowed to remove his shirt in court to prove his claim. Ultimately, he was cleared of conspiracy charges, found guilty only of creating “anti-government propaganda,” but he was given community service as a punishment. This marked a clear break from the Karimov/Inoyatev years, when even a small discretion would be punished by years in prison.

While the Abdullayev case indicates that Mirziyoyev is willing to tolerate a more critical press because it helps him carry out much-needed reforms, there remains a very real question of whether freedom of speech extends to religious groups. Guzal Tokhtakhadjayeva and her husband, Muhammad Rashidov, also stand accused of sedition, namely for distributing materials by Hizb ut-Tahrir, an outlawed religious group. They are not alone in this, as several of their relatives also stand so charged, while other relatives have been or are still in prison for dealings with that group. They do not deny they are connected with Hizb ut-Tahrir, a group that advocates the re-establishment of the Islamic Caliphate, which would itself likely be opposed to the very freedom of speech for which they are arguing for here. How this case is resolved will help to define exactly what freedoms are allowed and which are not in Mirziyoyev’s Uzbekistan. Many nations are tolerant of religious differences; none are tolerant of groups that advocate the violent overthrow of a duly elected government, particularly when words lead to action or conspiracy to action.

The third major development of Mirziyoyev’s second year was the 15 May 2018 meeting with US President Donald Trump in Washington, DC. This was an important sign of re-engagement between the two nations and, moreover, of Uzbekistan with the wider world. Not since 2002, when President Karimov met with US President George W. Bush, had American and Uzbek Presidents met. In fact, following the [Andijan massacre of May 2005](#), after which NATO-ISAF were forced to pull its troops out of Uzbekistan, Uzbek foreign relations were largely limited to Russia. With this Washington visit, that has now changed. Mirziyoyev had previously visited and gained promises of economic investment and aid from Russia, China, and Turkey, but

dealing with illiberal neighbors, a matter of geopolitical necessity, is different than dealing with the democratic world, who might require certain reform benchmarks be met in exchange for aid.

The official White House statement³ following the meeting demonstrates the opportunities that await Uzbekistan, providing they continue to liberalize at home. After promising to “reinvigorate the 2002 Declaration of Strategic Principles,” it lays out three key areas in which the two nations will work together: regional security; reforms and people-to-people ties; and economic cooperation. Namely, the United States and Uzbekistan agree to work together to promote stability in Afghanistan, to increase educational cooperation and to work to improve human rights conditions, including religious freedom, and to explore greater economic cooperation, seen in part through the signing of 20 business deals worth nearly US\$5 billion. The statement also mentioned Mirziyoyev’s “Five Year Strategy of Action,” which promotes traditional liberal values, such as “good governance, judicial reform and rule of law, economic liberalization, social development, and an open and constructive foreign policy.” Clearly Mirziyoyev feels that he will not be able to improve his country’s condition without turning toward a more liberal model of statecraft. In this way, he has been compared to Mikhail Gorbachev, the last General Secretary of the USSR, who also opened up his country in order to restructure the established order. The lesson of how those reforms turned out should not be lost on Mirziyoyev, as that is why he is now President of an independent nation.

Whether this meeting and others outside the region ultimately change Uzbekistan’s relationship with the West, as well as with liberal nations in Asia, or will have positive effects on its attempts to liberalize internally, remains to be seen. After all, Central Asia has had limited experience in liberal democracy; only Kyrgyzstan has held elections for Parliament and President that have met liberal, democratic standards. Likewise, it is notoriously difficult to reform a police state, particularly one as deeply entrenched as Uzbekistan has been. As Alexis de Tocqueville wrote: “The most dangerous moment for a bad government is when it begins to reform.” There are those in the country and in the region who will want Uzbekistan to fail, especially among its neighbors.

Neither Russia nor China have been very tolerant of liberal regimes, especially when they threaten their regional hegemony or internal security. Both bullied Kyrgyzstan through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) when its liberal proclivities threatened to undermine

³ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/united-states-uzbekistan-launching-new-era-strategic-partnership/>

the established regional order. A liberalizing Uzbekistan could likewise threaten them. Furthermore, it puts the two Eurasian powers, both of which make hegemonic claims on Central Asia, on notice. Uzbekistan, along with much of Central Asia, is looking for other options. By re-engaging with others in the region and with the Western world, this is now increasingly possible. With these new options, neither Russia's Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) nor China's Belt and Road Initiative (OBOR/BRI) will be able to serve as the sole economic control mechanism in Eurasia, a notion that concerns both of them. However, the EEU has gained little traction anyway, and OBOR/BRI increasingly seems to be a branded marketing strategy for a road to nowhere, a way to convince the world that numerous, often one-sided bilateral agreements, are somehow linked together in a "project" where Chinese investment continues to fall well below Chinese hype.

That everything will work out well within Central Asia itself is far from certain. Kazakhstan has been first among non-equals for the past twenty years. Uzbekistan is well-positioned to be an equal, if not overtake Kazakhstan in many areas. Together, and with an Uzbek economic resurgence that could make the Central Asian group negotiating position much stronger and make the region as a whole more attractive to outside investment, they could make a strong hedge against Russian and Chinese neo-imperialism, which has become more aggressive in the last two years. In conflict, however, they could leave the region ripe for plucking and force Uzbekistan to return to increased nationalism and tightened controls, thus negating all the reforms to this point.

While we have seen reforms begin elsewhere in the world, only to see them end just as quickly, including in Central Asia, we should be heartened for the present. What we have seen so far gives Uzbekistan a second chance in Central Asia and in the world, and it gives the world and Central Asia a second chance in Uzbekistan.

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