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Author(s): Russell Zanca

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Uzbekistan Emerges from Karimov’s Shadow

RUSSELL ZANCA

President Shavkat Mirziyoyev of Uzbekistan has become an unexpected reformer since taking over the country after Islam Karimov’s long autocratic rule ended with his death in September 2016. In just two years, Mirziyoyev has moved fast to instill greater respect for human rights, improve relations with neighboring nations, and introduce economic reforms. He has urged more changes in the spheres of social and intellectual life, including greater freedom of expression, more open and critical mass media, and more rights for academics. Regardless of how liberal-minded Mirziyoyev turns out to be, Uzbekistan’s road to reform will have many twists and turns—but it is probably safe to say that the odds of a return to stifling dictatorship are low.

To understand the Karimov era and what it has meant to Uzbeks, for just a moment let’s look back to 1991. Despite an impotent, last-gasp coup attempt that August by hard-liners in Moscow, the Soviet Union expired. Many politicians and scholars in the West thought that a relatively quick period of initial chaos would be followed by the development of independent countries that were sure to adopt neoliberal and pluralist reforms, since the peoples of that vast ethnolinguistic checkerboard were weary of communism and its authoritarian misrule. The Western powers were poised to support transitional economies and political systems that would come to resemble their own liberal democratic institutions.

This prognostication has not quite been fulfilled. Apparently, the meaningfulness and structures of the Soviet system and state were not so ephemeral and universally despised. It remains fair and reasonable to talk about much of the former Soviet Union as a post-Soviet space precisely because many aspects of Soviet culture, Soviet

governance, and Soviet ways endure. This is the case even though these independent countries have long indigenous histories and are changing and dynamic, cultivating new global relationships as they revise their pasts and identities.

In the 1990s, Karimov and another post-Soviet Central Asian leader, Saparmurat Niyazov of Turkmenistan, seemed to be practicing a type of anti-Sovietism as they championed their countries’ independence while simultaneously clinging to neo-Stalinist forms of leadership and governance. These two emerging autocrats inverted Lenin’s dictum: the dispensation of independence was to be socialist in form and nationalist in content. Ironclad rule and carefully elaborated conservative reforms marked Uzbekistan from 1992 to 2016, while everything pretty much remains as it was in Turkmenistan, despite Niyazov’s death in 2006.

When Karimov died in 2016, many an Uzbekistan watcher was uncertain about the succession and how the population would react following 25 years of his dictatorship. Newscasts and social media showed thousands upon thousands of mourners throughout the country joining in vocal and public displays of bereavement, especially those paying homage at the late ruler’s ornate final resting place (there was no sparing of marble and onyx) in his natal Samarkand. In some ways, these overwrought wailers and weepers resembled those who turned out nearly 70 years earlier on the same streets for a much greater dictator’s death.

I was reminded of a phrase villagers used during multiple fieldwork forays of mine more than a decade before Karimov’s death, when they criticized his increasing cult of personality: “Everything is for Karimov,” they said. The mourning scenes also vividly brought to mind one farmer’s reenactment of his own grieving as a child when his parents told him about Stalin’s death. He told me such displays of mass mourning would probably happen again if Karimov died in office.

RUSSELL ZANCA is a professor of anthropology at Northeastern Illinois University.

Karimov's demise gave us researchers the chance, once again, to ponder the great imponderable: how popular was *Nash Papa* ("Our Dad," as ordinary people mockingly referred to the ruler)? In my sojourns in the country over the course of 20 years, I was accustomed to people confiding their unfavorable opinions of the president. But I also came across his supporters, who were not always elites or unreconstructed Communists. At times I suspected many were afraid to express themselves critically, but it also seemed true that for millions of Uzbeks, Karimov was a competent, Soviet-style boss whom they feared and may not have loved but respected enough to credit him with keeping the new country together and maintaining law and order.

From 1994 (when Karimov consolidated power) to 2016, despite the lack of personal freedoms, the pervasive poverty, an undeveloped and discouraged civil society, mass arrests, persecution of religious practitioners, abuses of criminal suspects (including torture and forced confessions), poor education, and erosion of women's rights, Uzbekistan at least experienced internal peace and a semblance of normal daily life. With the exception of the political ferment that characterized the late glasnost years in the 1980s and the tumult of the 1991–93 period, Uzbeks (particularly in rural areas) did not find everyday life much different than in more oppressive Soviet times.

However much Karimov was loved or loathed, he could not have struck too many people as a complete anomaly in terms of his character, style, and policies, though he no doubt disappointed those who expected economic reforms and freedoms that failed to materialize. What he represented was a conservatism akin to that of Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev, minus the largesse—rural Uzbeks affectionately recalled the Brezhnev era (1964–82) as the "time of plenty," despite the common outside assessment that it was a period of stagnation. By contrast, into the mid-1990s, the very limited introduction of capitalism signified the potential loss of almost everything Uzbeks had come to know, depend on, and appreciate. While ordinary citizens for the first time became accustomed to an abundance of foreign consumer products, most could neither afford them nor appreciate them.

A CAUTIOUS AUTOCRAT

Karimov, for all of his dark and cruel qualities, projected an air of impregnable authority and unlimited self-confidence. His combination of distancing Uzbekistan from the Soviet experience and creating a relatively sane form of nationalism (unlike, say, Niyazov, who built up a personality cult of monumental scale as Turkmenbashi, or "Father of the Turkmen") infused the masses with pride in the birth of their nation-state. For better and mostly worse, Karimov was the father of Uzbekistan and many people embraced his guarded, decidedly non-radical approach to sovereignty, capitalism, and democracy (he kept his constituents from the latter with a twenty-foot pole). Uzbekistan would slowly stand on its own two feet, taking orders from no one—Russia, Turkey, or the United States—as it gradually figured out its own path toward independence. That his rule was tantamount to neo-totalitarianism, rife with kleptocracy and a system of political gangs (commonly called clans) based on regional affiliations and natural-resource control, was another matter entirely.

Under Karimov, Uzbekistan rarely played well with others, including the United States and Russia. Although it remained closer to Russia (thanks to Moscow's lack of concern about human rights, and trade ties involving vital resources), the Karimov government tended to shun its immediate neighbors. Clashing over a host of regional issues, particularly mismanaged water and energy resources, co-ethnic populations and their rights as minorities, and cross-border worries about grazing lands, drug smuggling, and terrorism, Uzbekistan had at best fair or poor relationships with Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. Relations with its colossal northern neighbor, Kazakhstan, were not great either, but there were fewer bones of contention between them.

All of the Central Asian countries at various times have been ruled by autocrats and megalomaniacs, though Kyrgyzstan arguably has had the most open and pluralist government in the region since independence. Whatever the causes and affronts that resulted in poor relations (apart from Karimov's partly paranoid isolationism), the refusal to play nice hampered Uzbekistan's ability to develop and sustain growth that could have benefited most of the population, more than half of which remains rural.

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Despite what could be called a mini–Cold War of petty regional antagonisms, Karimov never overreacted to what might have been justifiably perceived as grave provocations. The worst of these were the pogroms against the ethnic Uzbek population of southern Kyrgyzstan in 2010. Hundreds in the predominantly Uzbek city of Osh were murdered by Kyrgyz mobs.

Karimov stayed true to a kind of tacit Central Asian leaders' consensus on how to handle cross-border co-ethnic communities: noninterference. More cynical observers would say that Karimov never was concerned with the problems Uzbeks faced living in neighboring countries—even in the extreme case of Kyrgyzstan, where Uzbeks have endured sustained official and unofficial discrimination and violence since at least as far back as the late 1980s.

LOCAL PERSPECTIVES

It is unlikely that Uzbeks themselves are capable of seeing Karimov in full perspective barely two years after his death. Outsiders may judge the cruelties, corruption, and underdevelopment that characterized his reign, but they must also take stock of his nationalist agenda and ideas.

During the 1990s and into the 2000s, Uzbek people often asked me what I thought of their country and how it stacked up against America. They knew that Uzbekistan was not an advanced, rich nation, but they seemed to want to hear me say something positive, especially about the future. More than one person said something to the effect of: “Your country has developed for more than 200 years, but we’re just getting started. Times are tough now, but we’re going to develop.”

Rarely were these conversations a referendum on Karimov's leadership. They struck me more as a hopeful endorsement of slow and steady progress. Reminiscent of chats I had in the 1980s, they had a Soviet edge about hardships Americans could not imagine, which were now giving way to a tide of inexorable improvement.

Uzbekistan is a country of significant regional differences in terms of relative wealth and development, to say nothing of culture. The eastern provinces of Ferghana, Namangan, and Andijan (constituting most of the prosperous, restive, and religiously conservative Ferghana valley) probably were the most anti-Karimov. In the city of Andijan in 2005, hundreds of people—possibly many more—were killed in the streets by security forces. The government and its controlled media outlets

justified the killings by claiming that armed Islamic militants were trying to overthrow local state institutions and then incite a coup.

There was massive dissatisfaction with Karimov because of political repression, economic stagnation, and extortion that affected people throughout the country. In supporting or acquiescing to his rule, however, Uzbeks would often talk about peace and order. While they rarely claimed that Uzbekistan was in better shape than Kazakhstan, for example, they pointed to Tajikistan as a neighbor that was poorer, less developed, and prone to outbreaks of civil war, or noted that Turkmenistan was also poor and led by a mad dictator. The Kyrgyz had greater freedoms, but paid a high price for them because they were impoverished and riven by inter-ethnic strife. Maybe Uzbekistan wasn't so bad after all, people thought.

Part of Karimov's nationalist ideology dwelled on the denigration of Uzbek culture and social structures under Soviet rule. For many ordinary people his regime seemed to maintain some of the best elements of the old system, including basic welfare measures and respect for interethnic relations, while taking to task Soviet disrespect and prejudice toward Uzbeks. In this light, Karimov's capricious responses to Russian overtures regarding military and economic alliances made him appear to be a true champion of the nation and bolstered his status as its father figure.

To this day, Uzbeks have a love-hate relationship with Russia, Russians, and the Russian language. Karimov understood this as well as anybody and handled it in a way that appealed to many—except for much of the Russian-speaking population (mostly non-Uzbek and non-Turkic Muslim minorities including Russians, Ukrainians, Poles, Koreans, and Armenians) and both conservative Muslims and Islamists.

Karimov also proved astute in his initiatives to rehabilitate and exalt Central Asian Turkic and Muslim-nationalist movements of modern history, as well as Uzbek politicians of the Soviet era, all of whom had been maligned, repressed, or excised from history during the late-colonial and Soviet eras. Among them were the Jadids (radical intellectual Muslim reformers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) and later figures such as Faizullah Khodjaev and Sharaf Rashidov.

Khodjaev, Soviet Uzbekistan's first leader, was killed during Stalin's purges in 1938; Rashidov led the Uzbek Soviet Republic from the Khrushchev era through the Brezhnev years (1959–82) and

committed suicide in 1983 when Soviet leader Yuri Andropov accused the entire Uzbek Communist Party leadership of massive corruption. Serious allegations focused on false reporting of cotton production levels and the misappropriation of profits, in a scandal that became known as the “Uzbek Affair.” But the Uzbek people respected Rashidov because he was seen as having defied Moscow for the greater good of the republic. They welcomed Karimov’s rehabilitation of such figures as an assertion of national pride.

INTOLERANCE FOR ISLAM

One extraordinarily important aspect of Uzbekistan’s national psyche and identity with which Karimov either could not or did not want to reconcile is Islam. As a trained Soviet technocrat, he showed an unwillingness to create any sort of space or role for devout and orthodox Muslims. He trusted that worshippers who were anti-Soviet and anti-Russian in the late 1980s would subordinate themselves to his brand of nationalist leadership, just as official clerical bodies had been marginalized and declawed under Soviet rule. He wanted Uzbekistan to be nothing other than a secular power. To him this was modernity, a matter of twentieth-century progress.

While he understood the inherent senselessness of proclaiming atheism as the “faith” of the state, he was willing to abide only the trappings of Islam in society: swearing oaths on Qurans, saying prayers and benedictions during life-cycle rituals, occasionally attending a Friday service, and wearing Uzbek garb that was traditional and homemade. However, from early on in his tenure, Karimov also understood that not all religious types would succumb readily to his narrow vision of a kind of nationalist Sufism. An Uzbek Islamic revival had been ongoing since the late 1980s, and despite Karimov’s repression the turn toward religion was unstoppable. He went to war with anyone he saw as openly pious and activist, not only those he considered extremists or terrorists. His scorched-earth policy meted out barbaric punishments to repress any potential fanaticism.

While there is no doubt that extremists and terrorists have operated on Uzbek territory, including well-known organizations such as Hizb-ut-Tahrir and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, they never gained much sympathy or popularity among the masses. There were sporadic attacks on police and even collective farm administrators in various parts of the country, as well as a spate of mostly

ineffectual bombings in Tashkent during the late 1990s and into the early 2000s. Uzbeks recently have carried out more deadly attacks in foreign cities such as Istanbul and New York, acting as individuals affiliated with international terrorist networks like the Islamic State.

In confronting the threat, the Karimov regime lost sight of proportionality. Savage repression may have the intended effect of terrifying a population, but it also has the unintended effect of creating additional extremists as people begin to think that they have no other recourse than to protect themselves and their loved ones by any means necessary. Karimov’s justification for anti-Islamist brutality may well have been a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Unfortunately, the United States frequently set aside its own ideals about human rights in favor of tacit support for Karimov in the name of fighting Islamic terrorism. After 9/11 and the start of the war in Afghanistan, Washington turned at least a half-blind eye to his human rights violations and antidemocratic politics, thanks to Uzbekistan’s role in assisting the US war effort in Afghanistan—from allowing the use of its military bases to intelligence sharing and joint training and operations. Few other countries or international organizations criticized or sanctioned Uzbekistan, with the exception of groups such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. Their impact was negligible: the Uzbek government simply kicked them out of the country. From the Andijan massacre of 2005 until Karimov’s death in 2016, the nation endured its most intolerant and isolationist period.

MIGRATION NEAR AND FAR

By the late 1990s Uzbeks took a more or less unprecedented turn in their own development: many left their natal villages (where more than 60 percent of the population resided) and small towns for cities such as Tashkent, Samarkand, and Namangan. Locals referred to this as the “villagization” of cities. It was a typical developing-world process. Many new arrivals did not have the legal right to live in cities or the associated housing and employment rights, since Uzbekistan adhered to a variation of the Soviet *propiska* (residence permission) system.

This trend did not result in great overcrowding, but did lead to the growth of shantytown-like areas and increased tensions in hardscrabble working-class neighborhoods of poorly maintained high-rise housing complexes from the Soviet era. Un-

employment reached staggering unofficial levels among young people in many districts. The most industrious country cousins scrambled to open up makeshift bakeries, car washes, repair shops, and eateries. Some also jostled for work at sprawling wholesale marketplaces located on cities' fringes.

The rural exodus formed a prelude to a more significant demographic shift. By 2000, Uzbeks began flying, driving, and riding to what people called the "near abroad," setting in motion a large-scale labor migration to Russia, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan. During much of the 2000s, migratory patterns were seasonal, comprising mainly unskilled and uneducated male laborers, though this process became increasingly feminized by the end of the first decade. Over time, anywhere from three to four million Uzbeks were migrating both seasonally and permanently to destinations that also included Turkey, South Korea, Western Europe, and North America. Concurrently, tens of thousands of students participated in academic exchanges and programs all over the world.

Counting the labor migrants, students, and even sex-trafficked workers, perhaps some 12-15 percent of the entire population was living outside Uzbekistan. Many did so out of impatience with waiting for what Karimov had called "the future great state." They made their livings abroad, sending much of their earnings to desperate families back home. By 2015, according to some estimates, around 20 percent of Uzbekistan's gross domestic product depended on migrants' remittances. Among the post-Soviet countries, perhaps only Tajikistan was more remittance-dependent at the time of Karimov's death.

Even now, Uzbeks continue to view Russia as a land of opportunity in spite of its economic volatility during the past three years of oil price fluctuations and the effects of international sanctions imposed in response to its actions in Ukraine. No matter how precarious living in Russia may be, Uzbeks will continue looking for work beyond their own borders for years to come. A visitor to almost any part of Uzbekistan's vast countryside (the nation is about the same size as California) would be hard-pressed to meet a family without at least one member who has become a labor migrant.

Karimov disparaged labor migrants as unpatriotic and "lazy," accusing them of turning their backs on the task of developing their own country

in pursuit of easy money in Russia or elsewhere. Such histrionics succeeded only in revealing his powerlessness and inability to build a stronger economy and stanch the flow of what became millions of Uzbeks seeking work abroad. His iron-handed rule was no match for the globalized reality of the twenty-first century.

In newly independent Uzbekistan, one might have expected the rise of a middle class given the number of highly educated and talented people in a more or less modern economy, especially since the new state was supposed to relinquish control. However, the Karimov regime kept in place an inconvertible currency, fickle and unpredictable application of laws, and extortionate tax collection. Labyrinthine rules and poor profit margins deterred foreign direct investment.

After more than 25 years in power, Karimov left a disastrous economic legacy. Today Uzbekistan consistently ranks in the lowest tiers of international development indices, even if labor migrants' remittances are counted in per capita income averages.

Despite international aid and infrastructure expansion, key areas of the economy fell victim to gross negligence and theft, including cotton, oil, gas, and almost all heavy industry.

Uzbeks pride themselves on centuries of experience, entrepreneurialism, and skill in the fine and applied arts and craftsmanship—from woodworking to textiles, brass, and ceramics. But isolationism stifled regional and international trade, and borderland residents encountered hardships in trying to do business, visit friends and relatives, and seek employment and education. In addition to these literal roadblocks, one of the most feared and hated state agencies is the tax inspectorate, which has ruined many businesses and livelihoods with false allegations of unpaid taxes and arbitrary penalties.

A NEW ERA?

Shavkat Mirziyoyev did not come out of nowhere, but surprisingly he emerged as a sharp and innovative president just months after burying his boss. As a head of the Karimov party in the rural province of Jizzakh and later in Samarkand, he built a reputation for decisiveness, sobriety, and ruthlessness. There is some dispute about whether or not he was a main player in Karimov's powerful Samarkand clan. For 13 years, starting in 2003, he

*Under Karimov,
Uzbekistan rarely played
well with others.*

served as a dedicated Karimovite in the capacity of prime minister.

Once in power, he boldly started an anticorruption campaign at many levels of the economy, cracking down on low-level bribe-taking and high-level theft among regional party bosses, and purging leaders in myriad sectors. He consolidated his rule soon after Karimov's death by winning a full five-year presidential term in a December 2016 election with 88.6 percent of the vote, according to official results, though international observers reported that the election was not free and fair. It appears that he continues to enjoy popular support, both domestically and from Uzbeks abroad.

Mirziyoyev has reversed many of his predecessor's ugliest policies and shown himself to be a pragmatist. He has released political prisoners and fired abusive agents and chiefs within the state security organs. He has worked to mend relations with neighboring countries and eased restrictions on regional trade and population movements. He has enforced secularism but eased the persecution of pious Muslims. Critics rightfully point out that he has not tackled the corruption of the tax inspectorate or moved seriously against the power of the regional clans.

However, he has encouraged and tolerated a freer mass media, which has responded with increasingly hard-hitting journalism. He has eased restrictions on civil society and human rights institutions, Uzbek and international groups alike, and also allowed universities and academic institutes to cultivate ties abroad.

Scholars, analysts, and other professionals who focus on Central Asia wonder why and how Mirziyoyev decided to buck Karimovism in favor of a lighter form of authoritarianism. I would argue that there are at least six pillars supporting his moves to change Uzbekistan, but they are unlikely to reflect a genuine affinity for liberal democracy—despite the name of his ruling Liberal Democratic Party.

First, labor migration brought the country to a point of no return: millions of the poorest Uzbeks could no longer be cut off from the rest of the world and brainwashed. In turn, the labor migrants have internationalized Uzbekistan and

made it clear that the country cannot develop and succeed economically through isolation.

Second, relations with immediate neighbors had to be improved and expanded because of Uzbekistan's severe dependence for its water and energy needs on Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, where the sources (glaciers) are concentrated. Third, Uzbekistan's educated, dynamic, and tech-savvy young people must not be hindered any longer if the country aspires to a modestly prosperous twenty-first-century economy. Fourth, Mirziyoyev has noted in speeches and official statements that he recognizes the need for economic diversification in the era of globalization. Fifth, he recognizes that gross violations of human rights suppressed civil society engagement, with negative ramifications for political and economic stability.

Finally, Mirziyoyev took stock of the sizable emigré population, especially in the United States, where there are more than a half a million people with Uzbek heritage. Because many tens of thousands of these people are young, successful, and relatively recent arrivals, they are a potential resource for Uzbekistan—and could foster trade, investment, and improved ties with the West. On his visits to Uzbek communities abroad, Mirziyoyev has made clear that he recognizes authoritarianism must be tempered in order for Uzbekistan to develop and achieve widely shared prosperity. A Soviet-style system cannot make that happen.

Whoever and whatever Shavkat Mirziyoyev proves to be as Uzbekistan's president, it is unlikely that he can right all of the country's wrongs without incurring a backlash from powerful, entrenched interests. What he may be able to accomplish, however, is to unleash the country's capable people, especially Uzbek youth at home and abroad, who may be more willing to take greater risks—from starting businesses to engaging in civic activism—as long as they know that people in the highest echelons of power have their proverbial back. Yet staying on a liberalizing reformist path will be all the more challenging in an era that has seen governments even in Europe and the United States move farther and farther rightward. ■