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Uzbekistan Amid Domestic Change and an Authoritarian Legacy

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This paper examines the complex political and economic landscape of Uzbekistan following the rise of Shavkat Mirziyoyev to the presidency in 2016. Mirziyoyev inherited a nation deeply entrenched in the authoritarian practices of his predecessor, Islam Karimov. Despite initiating significant reforms aimed at reducing corruption and enhancing transparency, the new administration faces substantial challenges. The establishment of the Anti-Corruption Committee and various legislative changes mark a departure from past governance; however, enforcement remains inconsistent, and high-level corruption often goes unpunished. While improvements in international corruption rankings suggest progress, critics argue that the reforms are superficial and fail to address systemic issues. This article also explores the broader socio-political dynamics, including the protection of whistleblowers and the role of media, highlighting the ongoing struggle between reform efforts and the enduring legacy of authoritarianism in Uzbekistan.

Keywords: Uzbekistan, authoritarian legacy, anti-corruption reforms, economic modernization, governance.

Uzbekistan experienced its first political leadership change since 1989, following Islam Karimov's death, with Shavkat Mirziyoyev's rise to power in 2016. The new President inherited a country that was plagued

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with a myriad of authoritarian practices, including the centralization of power and state repression.

Some commentators expressed their skepticism regarding the feasibility of fundamental reforms in a post-Karimov Uzbekistan, contending that the new President would be bound by Karimov's authoritarian legacy and practices (Lemon, 2019). Such assertions are unsurprising, considering Mirziyoyev's historical service as Prime Minister of Uzbekistan since 2003, under Karimov's presidency. During the course of his political involvement under Karimov's administration, Mirziyoyev earned the reputation of someone who, in the bluntest terms, "gets the job done" (Lemon, 2019).

Meanwhile, Mirziyoyev consistently strived to distance his regime from that of the former one by implementing certain measures such as improving the country's human rights record. This advancement in Uzbekistan's human rights standing was brought to fruition by the closure of the notorious Jaslyk prison and diminishment of censorship by lifting a ban on several websites which endorse anti-government criticism (Human Rights Watch, 2019).

Mirziyoyev adopted a reform-oriented agenda, which focused heavily on restructurings that were economic in nature and involved broader governance. Specifically, Mirziyoyev's government embraced the 'Development Strategy 2017-2021,' intended to carry out significant political and economic reforms, including but not limited to, changes in the public administration, judiciary, and macroeconomic spheres (Asian Development Bank, 2018).

Regarding the economic implications of the leadership change in Uzbekistan, it must be noted that by 2019, Mirziyoyev's economic reforms

led *The Economist* to name Uzbekistan as the “country of the year” (*The Economist*, 2019). Overstepping Karimov’s earlier “Uzbek Model,” Mirziyoyev has taken strides towards integrating the country into the global economy through finance and trade. Contrasting Karimov’s preference for a Soviet-style state-dominated economy, Mirziyoyev has conveyed great determination to transform the economy by improving economic efficiency through the introduction of a market mechanism, which in turn, invites foreign investment (Terzyan, 2020). Remarkably, according to the World Bank, Uzbekistan has undergone a considerable evolution since 2017 in reshaping its social and economic realms (*The World Bank*, 2020). The Uzbek government is turning its attention to implementing subsequent economic changes by considering structural constraints, including the lack of state supremacy as well as factor markets in the economy. Furthermore, Uzbekistan’s economic metamorphosis is also decorated by reforms to liberalize prices and eradicate limiting factors to international and domestic trade, even during a global pandemic (*International Monetary Fund*, 2020). Extraordinarily, Uzbekistan’s economy was amongst the small number of European and Central Asian countries to circumvent the negative economic digression in 2020 (*International Monetary Fund*, 2020).

Similarly, the ‘2020 Doing Business Report’ suggests that the entrepreneurial climate in Uzbekistan has substantially improved, thus placing the country amongst one of twenty of the world’s leading improved economies for ease of conducting business (*World Bank*, 2020).

Clearly, while the emphasis on modernization is directed towards the economy, the political shortcomings remain unaddressed. Uzbekistan appears to adhere to an “economy first, politics later” approach. The

illustration of this approach is best evidenced by the absence of a party system. According to the country's political regulations, no independent parties and only officially authorized parties are permitted to endorse candidates in the election process (Freedom House, 2017).

In the past, it has not been an uncommon practice for the government to ensure its unshakable dominance over society by suppressing dissent and pluralism. Predictably, some observers have employed the notion of “authoritarian modernization” to describe the nature of transformations in Uzbekistan. Namely, a well-informed observer aptly notes that the changes occurring in Uzbekistan should be set in the framework of authoritarian modernization rather than that of democratization (Aneschi, 2019). It follows that the reforms in Uzbekistan are best branded as an upgrade to local authoritarian practices rather than as liberalization of its political landscape (Aneschi, 2019).

In terms of accomplishments, it must be acknowledged that Uzbekistan has released more than 50 people imprisoned for politically motivated charges since September 2016, among them human rights activists, journalists, and opposition activists (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Uzbekistan has also reportedly freed hundreds of independent Muslims, who practice Islam outside of strict state control (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Whereas prisoners have been especially vulnerable during the COVID-19 pandemic, Uzbek authorities have failed to undertake significant efforts to reduce the prison population by implementing early, temporary, or short-term release schemes for certain categories of prisoners. In its statement following the annual Human Rights Dialogue with Uzbekistan, the European Union called on Uzbekistan to “take further commitments to eradicate torture, which include granting unhindered and

independent monitoring to detention facilities,” and “emphasized the need to rehabilitate former prisoners” (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

These political tribulations have been exacerbated during the pandemic. President Mirziyoyev’s reform agenda decelerated during the pandemic, as no substantial changes were presented during this time, and the government appeared to lose momentum. Although the country did not suffer critical setbacks, there are warning signs that the reform agenda could regress in future years to follow. This is due, in part, to the security services reasserting their power through media pressure and episodic internet blocks, as the country responded to the unprecedented COVID-19 crisis (Terzyan, 2022).

The political challenges stemming from the health crisis adversely affected political freedoms in Uzbekistan. In August 2020, the government published the Draft Law on Public Assemblies, requiring organizers to apply for permission at least 15 working days before the planned date of a mass event, despite the promises of Uzbek officials to align the legislation with international rights standards (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

Even though domestic media, such as news websites and live television programs, currently discuss social problems and sometimes criticize local officials, it is common for journalists to practice self-censorship to avoid harassment at the hands of the government (Freedom House, 2020). There has been amplified governmental pressure on media and civil society in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The government exercises official and unofficial restrictions on citizens’ ability to voice their disapproval of the government or to discuss matters of general public interest. The law restricts criticism of the president, and publicly insulting

the President is considered a crime punishable by up to five years of imprisonment (Putz, 2021).

In effect, generally since the pandemic, the media has been tightly controlled by the authorities. After instituting a harsh public lockdown in March 2020 with significant restrictions on the movement of citizens, President Mirziyoyev justified his methodology by saying, “If we are not heavy-handed, the situation will worsen... Japan prevented the rapid spread of the virus. Why? Because of strict orders” (Freedom House, 2021). Prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic, journalists presented daily reports of harassment of media personnel such as journalists and internet bloggers. (Freedom House, 2021). The restrictive environment compounded by state repression of dissent and pluralism in Uzbekistan remains a major hindrance to achieving a vibrant civil society.

In terms of anti-corruption efforts, it must be noted, that since Shavkat Mirziyoyev's ascent to the presidency of Uzbekistan in 2016, the country has undertaken significant measures to combat the persistent issue of corruption that was prevalent during Islam Karimov's tenure. One of Mirziyoyev's initial actions focused on addressing systemic corruption within government and public sectors. In 2017, Uzbekistan established the Anti-Corruption Committee, tasked with formulating and implementing anti-corruption policies and promoting transparency in government operations (OECD, 2019). This marked a significant departure from Karimov's era, where anti-corruption efforts were sporadic and largely ineffective. According to Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), Uzbekistan has shown gradual improvement in its ranking, moving from 153rd in 2019 to 146th in 2020, and further to 140th

in 2021 (Transparency International, 2021). These improvements indicate a positive trend in reducing corruption and enhancing transparency.

The Uzbek government has introduced several legislative changes aimed at combating corruption, including stricter penalties for corrupt practices and measures to protect whistleblowers. Additionally, there have been efforts to digitize government services to reduce direct interactions between officials and citizens, thereby minimizing opportunities for corruption (World Bank, 2020). Despite these efforts, challenges remain. The anti-corruption reforms are still in their early stages, and their long-term effectiveness is uncertain. Critics argue that while the legislative framework is improving, enforcement is inconsistent, and high-level corruption cases often go unprosecuted (Terzyan, 2020).

While the anti-corruption measures introduced by Mirziyoyev have been praised, they have also faced considerable criticism. Despite the apparent progress in legislative frameworks and international rankings, several issues raise doubts about the depth and efficacy of these reforms.

Firstly, some critics contend that the reforms are superficial and fail to address the root causes of corruption (Terzyan, 2020). The Anti-Corruption Committee established in 2017 has been criticized for its lack of independence and effectiveness. In effect the committee's actions often seem more symbolic than substantive, lacking the authority and resources to pursue high-level corruption cases effectively (Freedom House, 2019).

Secondly, enforcement remains a significant challenge. Although new laws and stricter penalties have been introduced, their application is inconsistent. Transparency International has highlighted that while low-level officials may be prosecuted for corruption, high-ranking officials

often remain unscathed, perpetuating a culture of impunity at the highest levels of government (Transparency International, 2021). This selective enforcement undermines public confidence in the government's commitment to genuine anti-corruption efforts.

Furthermore, the reforms have not adequately addressed the systemic nature of corruption in Uzbekistan. Many of the country's economic and political structures remain opaque and centralized, providing fertile ground for corrupt practices. The World Bank has emphasized that without broader institutional reforms, such as increasing judicial independence and enhancing civil society's role in governance, anti-corruption measures will have limited impact (World Bank, 2020).

Additionally, there are concerns about the protection of whistleblowers and investigative journalists. Although the government has introduced measures to protect those who report corruption, these protections are often inadequately enforced. Reports from Freedom House indicate that journalists and activists who expose corruption continue to face harassment, intimidation, and even imprisonment (Freedom House, 2020). This hostile environment stifles transparency and discourages public participation in anti-corruption efforts.

In summary, while Uzbekistan's anti-corruption reforms under Mirziyoyev mark a departure from the entrenched practices of the Karimov era, they face significant criticism. Issues such as superficial reforms, inconsistent enforcement, systemic corruption, inadequate protection for whistleblowers, and a focus on improving international rankings rather than achieving substantive change highlight the challenges that remain in the country's fight against corruption.

Overall, whether in the long-run, economic reforms will trickle down to Uzbekistan's political landscape by overcoming the country's deeply ingrained authoritarian legacy, remains to be seen.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Uzbekistan's transition under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev marks a significant period of both promise and challenge. The shift from Islam Karimov's entrenched authoritarian rule to Mirziyoyev's reform-oriented agenda has introduced critical changes aimed at modernizing the country and integrating it into the global economy. Key initiatives, such as the Development Strategy 2017-2021, have focused on economic restructuring, improving human rights, and increasing transparency within the government.

However, despite these efforts, the legacy of authoritarianism continues to cast a long shadow over Uzbekistan's reform journey. The inconsistency in the enforcement of new laws, the persistence of systemic corruption, and the selective application of justice highlight the deep-seated challenges that remain. The struggle to protect whistleblowers, journalists, and civil society activists further underscores the ongoing battle for greater openness and democratic engagement.

While Uzbekistan has achieved notable improvements, such as climbing the ranks in Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index and being recognized for its economic reforms, these successes are tempered by the need for more profound and sustained changes. The emphasis on economic modernization, though important, must be balanced with genuine political reforms to ensure a holistic transformation.

As Uzbekistan continues to navigate this complex landscape, the effectiveness of Mirziyoyev's reforms will depend on the administration's ability to foster genuine institutional changes, enforce laws impartially, and promote an inclusive political environment. The path forward is fraught with challenges, but the commitment to ongoing reform and the gradual dismantling of authoritarian practices offers a cautious optimism for the future of Uzbekistan.

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