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## ASSESSING THE NEW LEADERSHIP IN UZBEKISTAN

**Dr Poonam Mann**  
*Research Associate, CAPS*

On 4<sup>th</sup> December, people of Uzbekistan elected their new President-Shavkat Mirziyaev. His victory was widely expected since he took over as interim leader of the country in early September, following the death of President Islam Karimov. The first leadership change in Uzbekistan (since its independence) was not chaotic as anticipated. It was rather a smooth and swift transition as the *Oliy Majlis* (the Parliament) of Uzbekistan named Prime Minister (PM) Mirziyoyev as interim President on September 8 in succession to the late President Islam Karimov. Under Article 96 of the new Uzbek Constitution, a Presidential election has to be held within three months, and PM Mirziyoyev, who was the official mourner-in-chief at President Karimov's funeral, was considered as the obvious choice. The assumption was based on the fact that the PM was not only appointed as the head of the committee organising the funeral, but later also accompanied the Russian President Putin to Samarkand to the Karimov's grave.

Further, the speaker of the Senate, Nigmatilla Yuldashev, who should officially have taken over the interim position, reportedly declined and the PM was appointed to the post instead. Therefore, PM Mirziyoyev was seen as the most likely candidate for the post of the second President of Uzbekistan and amidst these speculations, the country prepared for the election of their new President.

The bigger question here now is that will he be able to fill the skilful diplomatic shoes of Islam Karimov? The task could be tough and challenging. Islam Karimov ruled Uzbekistan since 1989, first as the communist leader of the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic and then as the President of the independent republic since 1991. He was extremely successful in developing bilateral relationships with different regional as well as extra-regional players with interests in the region, but without over-committing to any one of them.<sup>1</sup> Although he was largely criticised



for his authoritarian rule and human rights violations by the West, but he was successful in providing stability to his country and keeping the country together.

The new leadership in Tashkent could face pressure from different players with vested interests in the region to conform closer with their own respective interests in the country. With a population of 32 million, Uzbekistan is Central Asia's most populous state and possesses Central Asia's largest army. Being a land-locked country, it shares its border not only with rest of the four Central Asian republics i.e. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan but also with Afghanistan. It is a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which also includes Russia and China, but pulled out of the Russian-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organization for the second time in 2012. Due to its strategic location and rich endowment of natural resources (hydrocarbons, gold, cotton), it is and will remain a locus of interest not only to the regional players, but also to the West. Karimov was aware of this external focus, therefore, he designed his own foreign policy around it by connecting Uzbekistan to each of the major powers through various security and economic agreements, thus minimizing the chances to be cornered by any one great power. His successor will face the challenge of both maintaining internal order and holding demanding neighbours at bay and at the same time getting support and recognition from the

key players too. How successfully he will be able to navigate Uzbekistan's geopolitical paradigm will have a real impact on the future of the country.

However, it seems that Mirziyoyev will largely follow the political course of his predecessor. In his speech to a joint session of parliament as interim President, he indicated that Uzbekistan will continue the policy of not joining any international military alliances and not hosting any foreign military bases, along with not stationing its troops abroad.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, he spoke about the priority of developing relations with Commonwealth of Independent States and consistent and comprehensive strengthening of relations with Russia, further strengthening of comprehensive strategic partnership with China and hoped that relations with US will flourish in the spirit of mutual and constructive cooperation. But at the same time he has reversed some of the policies adopted by Islam Karimov. For example, he emphasized that strengthening of ties with neighbouring Central Asian states would be the main priority of Uzbekistan's foreign policy. He initiated some of the moves in this direction too. Exchanging of delegations with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, expanding border cooperation with Kyrgyzstan, resuming regular flights between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan for the first time in 24 years from next year (year 2017) are such examples.

Also, despite pledging continuity, on domestic front he proposed and signed laws on fighting corruption, improving protection of citizens' rights, and simplifying business registration. He announced plans for economic reforms including a liberalisation of the tightly controlled foreign exchange market. These steps are necessary as he has inherited the most populous country in Central Asia hit by economic crisis from two of its biggest financial partners: Russia and China. Cheap oil and Western sanctions drove Russia into recession which in turn has cut the remittances from two million Uzbek migrants working there. China's economic slowdown, meanwhile, has cooled investment in the region.<sup>3</sup> Without action to boost economic growth at home and attract foreign investors, Mirziyoyev risks being left with a national economy increasingly reliant on shrinking remittances.

How sincerely the reform policies will be implemented, the critics are not very hopeful. It is been believed by scholars with expertise on Uzbekistan that "there may be some economic reforms, but they will be gradual and carefully controlled, to ensure any changes benefit the ruling elite, rather than opening up rival pockets of power, or pathways for genuine democratic participation"<sup>4</sup> It is also been believed that the initiatives taken by Mirziyoyev over the last three months as interim President are just temporary moves to help him gain legitimacy and consolidate his position.

How the new leadership will chart out its path is yet to be seen. Its wait and watch for now as it will not be easy for the new President to match up Islam Karimov, Uzbekistan's larger-than-life founding father. Also, a country's future cannot be owed to one man only, new policies, societal characteristics and national mentality etc. play an important role.

*(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])*

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Gulshan Sachdeva, "What Next for Uzbekistan After Karimov?", 06 September, 2016 at <http://thewire.in/64376/what-next-for-uzbekistan-after-karimov/>, accessed on 15 September, 2016

<sup>2</sup> "Uzbekistan will retain the policy of non-alignment to military blocs, says Uzbek foreign minister", 26<sup>th</sup> September, 2016, at <http://news.tj/en/news/centralasia/20160926/231314>, accessed on 28 September, 2016

<sup>3</sup> Reid Standish "In First Vote Since Autocrat's Death, Uzbekistan New President Inherits Looming Economic Crisis", *Foreign Policy*, at [foreignpolicy.com/2016/12/05/in-first-vote-since-autocrats-death-uzbekistan-new-president-inherits-looming-economic-crisis/](http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/12/05/in-first-vote-since-autocrats-death-uzbekistan-new-president-inherits-looming-economic-crisis/), accessed on 06 December, 2016

<sup>4</sup> Catherine Putz, "To the Victor Go the Spoils? Uzbekistan's New President and the Fate of \$850 Million", *The Diplomat*, at [thediplomat.com/2016/12/to-the-victor-go-the-spoils-uzbekistans-new-president-and-the-fate-of-850-million/](http://thediplomat.com/2016/12/to-the-victor-go-the-spoils-uzbekistans-new-president-and-the-fate-of-850-million/), accessed on 06 December, 2016