

Post-Karimov Uzbekistan: Business as usual

The death of Uzbekistan's long-standing president, Islam Karimov, on 2 September 2016 threatened to trigger national instability. Despite initial fears of a conflict between the country's rival clans over his successor, the issue was speedily resolved with the appointment of Prime Minister Shavkat Mirziyoyev as interim president. Presidential elections are scheduled for 4 December 2016.

Karimov's legacy: omnipotent leadership and sluggish progress

In December 1991, the former leader of the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic, [Islam Karimov](#), became the first president of the newly independent country following what some believe to be a [seriously marred](#) election. Karimov gradually became all-powerful, to the detriment of political freedom, pluralism and democratisation. A 1995 referendum extended Karimov's mandate until January 2000, and he was re-elected for a five-year period, capturing 92 % of the vote. In January 2002, the presidential term of office was extended from five to seven years, enabling Karimov to hold onto power until 2007, when he was re-elected with 90.7 % of votes. In 2008, constitutional amendments barred independent candidates from standing for the presidency; in 2011, the length of the presidential term was [changed](#) back from seven to five years. Islam Karimov was elected for what was to be his fourth term on 29 March 2015, leaving the issue of succession uncertain.

Over its 25 years of independence, Uzbekistan has known only Karimov's repressive rule. He is likely to be remembered for his [heavy-handed](#) tactics to crush the opposition and his systematic human rights [violations](#), but also for having orchestrated torture, censorship, arbitrary detentions and imprisonment, while practising rampant corruption and [nepotism](#). As a result, political and economic freedoms have not improved since independence. Classified as '[consolidated authoritarian](#)' by Freedom House, Uzbekistan ranked 166th of 180 countries in the 2016 [World Press Freedom](#) Index; 153rd of 168 countries in the 2015 [Corruption Perception](#) Index; and 166th of 178 countries in the 2016 Index of [Economic Freedom](#). On a slightly more positive note, in the 2015 [Human Development](#) Index, Uzbekistan came 114th of 188 countries.

Political situation

Uzbekistan has a presidential system of government vesting most executive powers in the president, who is also the head of state and gets elected by absolute majority vote through a two-round system. Article 98 of the [constitution](#) stipulates that executive power is exercised by the Cabinet of Ministers answering both to the president and the bicameral parliament, *Oliy Majlis* (Supreme Assembly). [At least on paper](#), a series of constitutional amendments have given the legislature more responsibilities. For instance, on 16 April 2014, Karimov [signed](#) amendments granting parliament the right to exercise oversight over the government and to dismiss the government through a vote of no-confidence. In addition, the political party holding the majority in parliament was entitled to nominate the prime minister. None of these [checks and balances](#) seriously undermined Karimov's grip on power. With a ban on opposition parties, and independent candidates barred by the 2008 amendments to the [Election Law](#), only pro-government parties participate in legislative elections.

Given Karimov's absolute hold on power and his failure to designate an heir before dying, there were serious concerns about who would succeed him. In particular, there were fears of instability stemming from a possible clash between [rival clans](#), that is, regional/tribal networks fighting for control and influence in politics. Karimov belonged to one of two major clans: the Samarkand clan, the other being the Tashkent clan.

Karimov's death and a calm transition

On 28 August, President Karimov's daughter [announced](#) through social media that her father had been hospitalised after a cerebral haemorrhage, sparking rumours about who would/could succeed him should he pass away. According to Article 96 of the constitution, should the president fail to perform his duties, the Senate chairman is vested with the duties and powers of acting president, and general presidential elections



are to be held within three months. In line with this provision, Senate Chair, Nigmatilla Yuldashev, not a popular figure, [assumed](#) the caretaker role until the presidential elections.

Following the official announcement of Karimov's death on 2 September, Shavkat Mirziyoyev – prime minister since 2003, who also enjoys support from the Samarkand clan – appeared as a potential successor. Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister, Rustam Azimov, and National Security Committee Chair, Rustam Inoyatov, both from the rival Tashkent clan, were also seen as [possible heirs](#). However, Mirziyoyev, who headed the funeral committee and received foreign leaders [visiting](#) the country to offer their condolences, soon emerged as the most likely candidate. His chances were further boosted when the Senate Chair stepped down as interim president and urged the parliament to appoint Mirziyoyev instead, which it duly did at a joint session of the *Oliy Majlis*' two houses on 8 September. Mirziyoyev's [appointment](#) as interim president even before the presidential election [suggests](#) that the elites have reached a consensus on his nomination. In doing so, they have assured a smooth transition and helped to avoid a drift to political turmoil.

The Central Election Commission [confirmed](#), on 28 October, that Mirziyoyev will stand as the presidential candidate of the [Liberal Democratic Party](#), along with three other runners: Sarvar Otamuratov from [Milliy Tiklanish Party](#); Hatamjon Ketmonov from the [People's Democratic Party](#) and Nariman Umarov from Adolat Social Democratic Party. [Early presidential elections](#) will take place on 4 December 2016.

New president: business as usual?

Known as a Karimov loyalist and having served many years as prime minister under his presidency, Mirziyoyev is unlikely to usher in a new era in Uzbekistan. In fact, his first statements indicated that he would adhere to the late president's policies, both foreign and domestic. However, Mirziyoyev is taking new [steps](#) that portend a [thaw](#) in Uzbekistan's relations with neighbouring Central Asian states, especially with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, with which Uzbekistan has [water management](#) and [border delimitation](#) issues.

With regard to foreign policy, Mirziyoyev [told](#) the parliament on 9 September that Karimov's firm policy of non-membership of international military alliances and of having no military bases on Uzbek territory would continue. Under Karimov, Uzbekistan enjoyed good relations with each of the major powers active in the region – the USA, China and Russia. During the US-led war in Afghanistan, Uzbekistan provided military assistance by letting the coalition use supply routes through its territory. After the [Andijan events](#), which Karimov [accused](#) the USA of instigating to overthrow him, Uzbekistan joined the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), but withdrew from it in 2012. Uzbekistan also has close economic ties with China, whose natural gas imports from central Asia are growing – from Uzbekistan itself and from Turkmenistan, with Uzbekistan serving as a transit country. In addition, Uzbekistan is a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, of which China and Russia are both members. Mirziyoyev is likely to try and continue this balancing act between the USA, China and Russia, to avoid over-dependence on any of them. Therefore, despite Russia's [willingness](#) to readmit Uzbekistan to the CSTO, Mirziyoyev [seems](#) reluctant to join what he calls 'a military-political bloc'. Moreover, Mirziyoyev did not [attend](#) the latest Commonwealth of Independent States summit in Bishkek on 16 September.

Even though he has not yet been elected president, Mirziyoyev has started [consolidating](#) his power. Real changes are not [expected](#) on the domestic policy side either, with repression and human rights remaining a major concern. The new cabinet will not have the power needed to bring about significant changes in the country.

EU-Uzbekistan relations

[Bilateral relations](#) between Uzbekistan and the EU have been governed by a [partnership and cooperation agreement \(PCA\)](#) since 1999. However, the EU imposed [sanctions](#) on Uzbekistan in October 2005 after its government rejected calls for an international inquiry into the events in Andijan. After some political prisoners were released and the death penalty was abolished, the EU [lifted](#) its sanctions in October 2009. In January 2011, then-European Commission President, José Manuel Barroso, met President Karimov in Brussels to sign a memorandum of understanding on [energy relations](#). The [12th meeting](#) of the EU-Uzbekistan Cooperation Council and ninth round of human rights dialogue were held in May and November 2015 respectively. Uzbekistan also participated in the 12th EU-Central Asia ministerial meetings [held](#) in Brussels in October 2016.

In October 2014, the European Parliament adopted a [resolution](#) on human rights in Uzbekistan, calling for the release of all persons imprisoned on politically motivated charges. A [resolution](#) of April 2016 greeted the relative progress in eliminating child labour; in view of this, the EP's International Trade Committee is currently working on a [resolution](#) on extending the PCA to incorporate textiles trade, previously excluded on the grounds of children working in the sector.