

Emergence of Uzbekistan's New Leadership and its Challenges in Post Karimov Era

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ABSTRACT

The backdrop of this study is the emerging role of Uzbekistan in the Central Asia region in the Post Karimov era. Uzbekistan is most populated country in Central Asia with more than 33 million people. Under Late President Islam Karimov, in post-Soviet era Uzbekistan boasted steady economic development. After demise of Islam Karimov in 2016 who ruled with firm hand, Uzbekistan is now going through a big transition in terms of social changes, regional diplomacy and leadership aspirations in Central Asian region. With more than 40 percent of Uzbekistan's population is under the age of twenty-five, unemployment, economic growth, internal security, social policies regarding religious and political rights are the main challenges before New Uzbekistan in Post Karimov era. The aim of paper is to look into new steps taken by new President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev. Uzbekistan is strategically placed in the middle of Central Asia bordering with all the fellow states of the region as well as Afghanistan. This paper aims to study the Uzbekistan's regional aspirations and its clout over Central Asia. As border issues have a long potential long-term destabilizing effect on the relative peace and security in Central Asia, this study is directed to ascertain Uzbekistan's initiative regarding developing relations with its neighbours. Mirziyoyev has vastly improved bilateral-cultural relations and raised hopes for cooperation and integration in the region. Rich in energy sources and because of its strategic location, Uzbekistan is magnet for major powers. Its position as core of Central Asia is a source of strength and vulnerability. This study aims on how Uzbekistan can play its cards to emerge as the regional power when it is suffering from diverse set of complicated challenges that risk its stability. The objective of this paper is to find the challenges that Uzbekistan's political system, its security apparatus and economy will face in coming years.

Key Words : Challenges in Post Karimov Era, Emergence, Unemployment, Economic growth

INTRODUCTION

The Central Asian countries have big potential for interregional cooperation and development as they share common historical values, as well as spiritual and cultural heritage. Even before their independence in 1990s, the central Asian nations are brought together by their unity of faith, closeness of languages and cultural orientation of the people. The countries of the Central Asian region also share common water arteries, geography and transport communication lines that were developed hundreds of years ago. Being located in the heart of

Central Asia, Uzbekistan is the most important part of this region. It is not only the centre of regional geopolitics but also hub of inter-regional transport transit corridors. The region is facing challenges in terms of interstate relations, trans-boundary issues, water management and demarcation of borders and boundary issues.

After demise of its first President Islam Karimov in 2016, Uzbekistan is now going through a big transition in terms of social changes, regional diplomacy and leadership aspirations in Central Asian region under the leadership of second President Shavkat Mirziyoyev. He is bringing reforms in many aspects, from economy to diplomacy

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and many changes in policies in terms of social life to democratic functioning in Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan is the most important country in Central Asia region. It is most populated country in Central Asia with more than 33 million people, with more than 40 per cent of Uzbekistan's population is under the age of twenty-five; unemployment, economic growth, internal security, social policies regarding religious and political rights are the main challenges before 'New Uzbekistan' in Post Karimov era for new President Shavkat Mirziyoyev.¹ Uzbekistan is strategically placed in the middle of Central Asia bordering with all the fellow states of the region as well as Afghanistan.² Since it came into existence as independent state after the disintegration of Soviet Union, Uzbekistan's regional aspirations and its clout over Central Asia is rising. As border issues have a long potential long-term destabilizing effect on the relative peace and security in Central Asia, Uzbekistan's new leadership under Shavkat Mirziyoyev is taking new initiatives regarding development of relations with neighbours. After Mirziyoyev's accession in 2016, the new wave of reforms started knocking the door of Uzbekistan in 2017–18 (Pirani, 2019, 15). These reforms included may ground breaking changes in Uzbekistan; like liberalisation in foreign exchange, openness to global investors, new tax reforms and important steps to promote freedom of religion and other important steps things to break the barriers of free speech. So Mirziyoyev is focusing on the new economic and social outlook of Uzbekistan since he took over the Presidency in 2016.

As called by many analysts, Mirziyoyev's shuttle diplomacy has tried to break the ice on regional issues. He met his counterparts from Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan,

Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan at least twice in first 18 months after Mirziyoyev became President in December 2016.³ He has vastly improved bilateral-cultural relations and raised hopes for cooperation and integration in the region. Rich in energy sources and because of its strategic location, Uzbekistan is magnet for major powers. Its position as core of Central Asia is a source of strength and vulnerability. This study aims on how Uzbekistan can play its cards to emerge as the regional power when it is suffering from diverse set of complicated challenges that risk its stability. The objective of this paper is to find the challenges that Uzbekistan's leadership, its political system, its security apparatus and economy will face in coming years.

Uzbekistan under Islam Karimov and Transition of Power:

Karimov's style of functioning did not promote opposition in Uzbekistan. During his 27 years of rule in Uzbekistan, there was never any solid opposition that created any environment of vibrant democracy. During his tenure Steve Swerdlow described him as, "He is the state and the state is him, and it has been that way for at least 25 years."⁴ Throughout his term as President, Karimov had succeeded in one man system by neutralizing any political opposition.⁵ However, Karimov left a stable and united country with impressive signs of growing economy. The decade of nineties was very important for Uzbekistan as it was carved out from an economically unstable power. Post disintegration period of the Soviet Union, Uzbekistan's main objective was to strive to become market economy and leave its socialist outlook behind with other Soviet era characteristics.⁶ As

1. Pirani, S. (2019). Uzbekistan. In *Central Asian Gas: prospects for the 2020s* (pp. 14). Oxford Institute for Energy Studies. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep30971.11>
2. Raimondi, P. P. (2019). Uzbekistan. In *Central Asia Oil and Gas Industry - The External Powers' Energy Interests in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan* (page-72). Fondazione Eni Enrico Mattei (FEEM). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep21861.14>
3. Central Asia Leaders Confab but Stop Short of Binding Commitments (2018, March 16). *Eurasianet*. Retrieved online on 29-0-2022 from <https://eurasianet.org/central-asia-leaders-confab-but-stop-short-of-binding-commitments>
4. MacFarquhar, N. (2016, September 2). Islam Karimov Dies at 78, Ending a Long, Ruthless Rule of Uzbekistan. *The New York Times*. Retrieved on 23-08-2022 from <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/03/world/asia/uzbekistan-islam-karimov-obituary.html>
5. Hunter, S. (1996). Islam In Post-Independence Central Asia: Internal And External Dimensions. *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 7(2), Page- 297. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26195647>
6. Gidadhubli, R.G. (1994). Economic Transition in Uzbekistan. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 29(6), page-295. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4400756>

Uzbekistan started heading to become competitive multi-sector economy with gradual price liberalisation, Karimov took several steps to develop the Uzbekistan's economy on market principles. According to Alexey Malashenko "This economic success was largely due to increased state control, which created barriers to the development of a free market, hindered necessary liberal economic reforms, and held back the emergence of small- and medium-size businesses."⁷ Islam Karimov was man of destiny. After the dissolution of Soviet Union in 1991, the Central Asian republics which were part of Communist bloc gained their independence. It also included the Republic of Uzbekistan. The process of transition also brought bureaucratic political system inherited from Soviet Union. Islam Karimov who became the first President of Uzbekistan was product of Soviet bureaucracy who rose rapidly in the ranks of Communist Party of Soviet Union. Islam Abduganievich Karimov, born on 30 January 1938 in historic city of Samarkand, the south-eastern part of the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic (UzSSR). Karimov was born in an ethnic Uzbek family of civil servants; it helped him in getting opportunities of higher education as he earned the undergraduate degree in mechanical engineering from Central Asian Polytechnic Institute.⁸ After working for nearly two decades in engineering trade, Karimov was transferred to State Planning Office of the UzSSR. He worked there for more than 15 years as senior scientific specialist. Later he rose to serve as first deputy chairman of the office. 1980s saw the rise of Karimov in political circles as in 1983 he was appointed finance minister of UzSSR. In 1986, Karimov became deputy chairman of Council of Ministers and deputy head of UzSSR government. The journey of Islam Karimov continued through 80s and in June 1989 he became first secretary of the central committee of the Communist Party of the UzSSR (MacFarquhar, 2016). On 24 March 1990, the Supreme Soviet of the UzSSR elected Karimov as

President. As demise of Soviet Union was round the corner, in 1990 Karimov became head of People's Democratic Party of Uzbekistan. This was new name for former Communist Party of the UzSSR. On 31 August 1991, Karimov declared independence of Republic of Uzbekistan and announced elections for the supreme assembly of Uzbekistan OliyMajlis. Multi-candidate election held to choose the first post-UzSSR president and on 29th December 1991, Karimov was elected for a five-year term as President as he earned more than 86% of the vote.⁹ After one year, on 8th December 1992, OliyMajlis adopted new constitution based on liberal-democratic governments. He waged internal fights against political opposition as he portrayed his dissenters, both political and religious organizations, as threats to Uzbekistan's national stability (Roth, 2016). Then in series of continuous extension, Karimov held the power with plebiscite in 1995, re-election in 2000, and midway plebiscite in 2002 to extend the President's tenure from five years to seven years (Ilkhamov, 2002, 9). Karimov was projected to leave office in 2007 but he propounded an argument to legitimate his hold on power to guide Uzbekistan in social transformation. However, he has written extensively on the need to develop a democratic state, a free market economy and a civil society that support the political values of liberal societies. Karimov maintained that "human values, universally recognised norms of genuine democracy, freedom and human rights are rapidly filling the vacuum left by the de-legitimation of Soviet ideology."¹⁰

The last decade of Karimov regime in Uzbekistan witnessed mixed of events related to changes on social, economic and regional fronts. It was a period when political Islam in Uzbekistan started rising with war against Taliban next door in Afghanistan. Challenges before Islam Karimov multiplied not on external front but also domestically as he faced heat from terrorist groups like Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) & Hizb-ut Tahrir

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7. Malashenko, A. (2012). Uzbekistan: What Changes can be Expected? *Carnegie Moscow Center*. Vol. 14, Issue-5, page-4. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep26709>
 8. Roth, A. (2016, September 02). Islam Karimov, Uzbekistan strongman who exploited anti-terror fight, dies at 78. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved on 20-08-2022 from https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/islam-karimov-uzbekistan-strongman-who-exploited-anti-terror-fight-dies-at-78/2016/09/02/3e08f846-7059-11e6-8365-b19e428a975e_story.html
 9. Ilkhamov, A. (2002). Controllable Democracy in Uzbekistan. *Middle East Report*, 222, page-8. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1559262>
 10. Karimov, I. (1992). *Uzbekistan: The Road of Independence and Progress*. Publisher: Uzbekiston, Tashkent, 1992. ISBN-10: ý 5640014326, ISBN-13: ý 978-5640014327

(HuT).¹¹ Karimov did ease Soviet restrictions on the practice of Islam but cracked down on Islamic extremism with very harsh policies¹² Religious activities in Uzbekistan are overseen by the State Committee on religion and all religious leaders and their sermons must get approval by this organization. After the disintegration of Soviet Union; Uzbekistan saw the quick rise of Islam in early 1990s as thousands of mosques opened with the departure of communist USSR. Religious educational institutions called *Madaras* as built and Islamic literature were distributed for free, mainly backed by Pakistan and Saudi funding (Karagiannis, 2006, 263). Borders were open and there was influx of religious activists from Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan and literature that made way through financing from Saudi Arabia in all over Central Asia. This gave rise to conservative Wahhabi sect and Islamic extremism made inroads in the Ferghana Valley, the eastern part of Uzbekistan with mixed ethnic population.

Karimov's biggest contribution to the whole Central Asia region and the world is to protect Uzbekistan from onslaught of radical Islam. His tough policies which are often termed as iron fist rule shielded Uzbekistan from instability and terrorism from south in Afghanistan to make any inroads in his country. Karimov realised this danger that was coming through injection of religion in secular Uzbek society. To stop radicalism, all the religious institutions in Uzbekistan are funded and supervised by State that put cap on any pernicious sermons or spread of hatred through extremist ideologies. Karimov's policies were decisive in crushing the IMU in the 1990s. Capital of Uzbekistan, Tashkent faced big terrorist attacks in February 1999 when 16 people were killed in six car bomb explosions orchestrated by IMU.¹³ While some former Soviet republics descended into chaos in the 1990s,

Karimov steered Uzbekistan to stability. But that stability came at a heavy cost to the country's citizens, he became increasingly ruthless in his intolerance of dissent, closing down opposition groups and jailing thousands of critics. Karimov ruled Uzbekistan with iron fist, "I'm prepared to rip off the heads of 200 people, to sacrifice their lives, in order to save peace and calm in the republic. If my child chose such a path, I myself would rip off his head", he said after bomb attacks in Tashkent in 1999.¹⁴ On May 13, 2005, city of Andijan's local jail witnessed a raid by a group of gunmen that led to uncontrolled situation. It started with demonstrations that led to violence across Andijan, later crushed by government forces. The clashes between armed forces and demonstrators led to the death of 187 people, but some NGOs reported the real figure was higher.¹⁵ Karimov was surrounded with the accusations of human rights violations with many people lodged in jail during his tenure that were considered threat for the security of Uzbekistan. But the challenges were serious. Both the IMU and the HT have common goals to overthrow the present day Uzbek government (Rodríguez, 2016). In early 2004, HT got divided in Central Asia, with one group known as Zamots was behind the Tashkent attacks during March 28-April 1 in 2004 which led to death of 46 people. Such suicide attacks were big shock for Uzbekistan as coming couple of years brought Uzbekistan to point major internal security threats caused by religious extremist organisations. The common uniting objective of all the named religious extremist groups is the creation of theocratic States in Central Asia.¹⁶

After the 9/11 terrorist attacks on United States, Karimov provided free its Karshi-Khanabad Airport near Termez to US for operations in Afghanistan. This was in contrast to neighbouring Kyrgyzstan, which demanded

11. Karagiannis, E. (2006). Political Islam in Uzbekistan: HizbUt-Tahrir Al-Islami. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 58(2), page-264. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20451186>
12. Brennan, D. (2016, September 02). Islam Karimov Obituary. *The Guardian*. Retrieved on 26-08-2022 from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/sep/02/islam-karimov-obituary>
13. Tayal, S. (2016, September 26). The End of an Era in Uzbekistan. *IDSIA Comment*. Retrieved on 22-09-2022 from https://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/the-end-of-an-era-in-uzbekistan_stayal_260916
14. Brennan, D. (2016, September 2). Islam Karimov Obituary. *The Guardian*. Retrieved on 24-09-2022 from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/sep/02/islam-karimov-obituary>
15. Rodríguez, A. (2016). The Road Ahead: What The Death Of Islam Karimov Means For Uzbekistan And Central Asia. *Harvard International Review*, 38(1), Page-39. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26445664>
16. Dwivedi R. (2006). Religious Extremism in Ferghana Valley. *Strategic Analysis, IDSIA*, Vol. 30, No. 2. Retrieved on 30-08-2022 from https://www.idsa.in/strategicanalysis/Religious%20Extremism%20in%20Ferghana%20Valley_rdwivedi_0406

heavy payment for the use of its airport at Manas. But relations between Uzbekistan and US were strained when the West criticised Islam Karimov for crushing an Islamic rebellion in Andijan in May of 2005.¹⁷ Karimov initiated economic reforms before democratic ones, arguing an economically stable country would be better able to make the adjustment to a democratic system. For most of the 1990s, his idea seemed to work. Tajikistan fell into civil war, and Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan were paralyzed by endless protests and standoffs between the presidents and parliament. Most of the Central Asians states were dependent on international aid for their survival. But Uzbekistan remained stable, while seemingly able to provide its people with basic goods and services, including electricity and natural gas. President Karimov adopted a foreign policy of constant balancing and realignment as political winds shift. In 2005, Karimov said that “strategic uncertainty remains in the region. Geostrategic interests of major world powers and our neighbouring countries concentrate and sometime collide in this part of the world.”¹⁸ Although this behaviour has made Uzbekistan unpredictable, it has also enabled Karimov to maintain a greater degree of autonomy vis-a-vis other actors such as Russia, limiting the ability of Moscow to pressure Uzbekistan in the way that its weaker neighbours know all too well. While Uzbekistan is a member of several regional organizations, it prefers to address issues bilaterally rather than in multilateral forums. Uzbekistan's often half-hearted participation in these regional organizations underscores its continuing wariness of such forums. The country's relations with its neighbours, especially Tajikistan, are strained. Short skirmishes between border guards and closures of border crossings for security and political reasons are common. Uzbekistan has participated in efforts in the region to combat terrorism and the narcotics trade.

During Karimov's Presidency, Tashkent's relations with its immediate neighbours have ranged from bad to horrible. Ties with Turkmenistan warmed after the country's first president, Saparmurat Niyazov, died in late 2006, and in then Karimov also found some common ground with Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbaev in 2010 when he visited Tashkent and said that “There are no contradictions between our countries. No clashes, no primacy – all these are just invented. We have enough will and political understanding to prevent this.”¹⁹ But Karimov was tough on eastern neighbours Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Uzbekistan has tense relations with its neighbours over unregulated border issues, disputes about water resources, the problems of Uzbek minorities in border areas, which in the case of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan has at times teetered on the edge of open armed conflict. Uzbekistan is the sole supplier of gas to neighbouring Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. This gave Karimov considerable leverage over his neighbours, and there were frequent gas cut-offs due to unpaid bills and other disputes.²⁰ In 2012, Islam Karimov even warned about war in Central Asia on water sharing issue. Karimov displayed staunch opposition towards hydropower dam projects in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Uzbekistan is opposed to Rogun dam project on Vakhsh River in Tajikistan which is headwaters of Amu-Darya and Kambarta dam project on Naryn River of Kyrgyzstan which becomes the Syr-Darya. According to Uzbekistan, these dams will disrupt water to downstream states and it will adversely impact its economy and environment. Both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan consider these dam projects as key to their economic ambitions. In September, 2012 Islam Karimov during an official visit to Kazakhstan, warned that dispute regarding water sharing of Amu-Darya and Syr-Darya could emerge as armed conflict in the region. He warned that the effort to build hydroelectric

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17. Herd, G. P., & Palazzolo, K. (2009). CENTRAL ASIA: Power Plays. *The World Today*, 65(7), 25–26. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41548925>
 18. Muzalevsky, R. (2014). Regional and Domestic Dynamics Constraining Central Asia's Connectivity. In *Central Asia's Shrinking Connectivity Gap: Implications for U.S. Strategy* (page-112). Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep11955.8>
 19. Tolipov, F. (2013, August 09). Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan: Competitors, Strategic Partners or Eternal Friends? *The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*. Retrieved on 20-08-2022 from <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/12786-uzbekistan-and-kazakhstan-competitors-strategic-partners-or-eternal-friends>
 20. Lang, J. (2016, September 9). The Death of Karimov: The Game for Uzbekistan. *OSW Centre of Eastern Studies*. Retrieved on 24-08-2022 from <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/2016-09-09/death-karimov-game-uzbekistan>

power projects on these rivers upstream could spark war. On sharing the water resources Karimov said “forget that the Amu-Darya and Syr-Darya are trans-border rivers. Why do you think such questions are discussed by the United Nations? Because today many experts declare that water resources could tomorrow become a problem around which relations deteriorate, and not only in our region. Everything can be so aggravated that this can spark not simply serious confrontation but even wars.”²¹ Dushanbe has likewise accused Uzbekistan of masterminding attacks in Tajikistan. Neighbouring states have also accused Karimov’s security forces of crossing into their territories to seize people wanted back in Uzbekistan.²² In September of 2016, Central Asia’s most iconic and infamous strongman took his last breath. There had also been unconfirmed reports of his death in the days prior to the official announcement, with many speculating that the news was withheld several days in order to redraw and clarify the lines of succession and minimize the chances of a coup amidst the vacuum of power left behind after Karimov’s demise. Chairman of the Uzbek Senate Nigmatilla Yuldashev nominated the Prime Minister Shavkat Mirziyoyev for the position of president. Mirziyoyev has been considered by many to be Karimov’s political protégé. He rose to political prominence rather quietly and until being appointed as Prime Minister, had only been considered a mediocre player in the Uzbek political theatre.²³

In election for new President, Shavkat Miromonovich Mirziyoyev of the People’s Democratic Party was declared winner with 88.6 percent of the vote. The other three contenders received between two and four per cent of the total ballots cast. Two of these three contenders (Ketmonov and Umarov) had earlier stood against former President Karimov in the 2015 election. Around 600 observers and media representatives from many international organisations like OSCE, CIS, SCO, OIC, *Association of World Election Bodies*, and from

50 countries were accredited to observe and report on the elections. P Stobdan, said that when he visited three polling stations in Bukhara and eight in Samarkand to observe the preparation for elections and ballot casting. By all accounts, the conduct of the elections was flawless. There was no doubt that the electoral process was open and transparent. Stobdan added that overall impression one got was that the democratic process is making marked progress, albeit as per Uzbekistan’s own political ethos and traditions. However, it was widely understood that Shavkat Miromonovich Mirziyoyev was the odds-on favourite. He had long been touted as a potential successor to Karimov, along with the Intelligence Chief Rustam Azimov and Karimov’s eldest daughter Gulnara Karimova. Mirziyoyev was at the helm of affairs as Prime Minister for 13 years and had the widest experience of governance. Therefore, he was the most qualified candidate to be the country’s new leader. During his three-month tenure as interim President, Mirziyoyev is said to have undertaken some reformist steps that may have boosted his popularity at home and abroad.²⁴

Changes and Challenges in Post Karimov Uzbekistan:

Before rising to the Presidency of Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev had the widest experience of governance as he was among most qualified candidates to be the country’s new leader. Mirziyoyev served as Prime Minister for 13 years since 2003. Mirziyoyev appearance on biggest stage was not a big surprise, but he emerged as an innovative and sharp leader just after taking charge of the affairs. As a chief of Karimov party in Jizzakh and later in major region Samarkand, Mirziyoyev built his reputation of sobriety, decisiveness and ruthlessness. According to Russell Zanca, “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 served as a dedicated Karimovite in

21. Lillis, J. (2012, September 07). Uzbekistan Leader Warns of Water Wars in Central Asia. *Eurasianet*. Retrieved on 27-08-2022 from <https://eurasianet.org/uzbekistan-leader-warns-of-water-wars-in-central-asia>
22. Pannier, B. (2009, June 24). Uzbekistan’s ‘Big Papa’ Karimov Marks 20 Years Of Iron-Fisted Rule. *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*. Retrieved on 22-08-2022 from https://www.rferl.org/a/Uzbekistans_Big_Papa_Karimov_Marks_20_Years_Of_Iron_Fisted_Rule/1761704.html
23. Saeed M., *Uzbekistan: Are Things Any Better Under Shavkat Mirziyoyev*. International Policy Digest, 17th April 2017.
24. Stobdan, P. (2016, December 26). Leadership Change in Uzbekistan: An Election Observer’s Impressions. *IDS Comment*. Retrieved on 21-08-2022 from https://idsa.in/idsacomments/leadership%2520change%2520in%2520Uzbekistan_pstobdan_26122016

the capacity of Prime Minister.”²⁵ After the demise of Islam Karimov, Mirziyoyev was appointed interim President for three-month but later he consolidated his position by registering a big win in December 2016 election with massive 88.6 percent vote that made him President for full five-year term (Zanca, 2018, 282). Although international observers reported that the election was not fully transparent.

Mirziyoyev have undertaken some big reformist steps that boosted his popularity at home as well as abroad. With many landmark changes Mirziyoyev is trying to portray his image of a reformist in the region. He launched a very ambitious program in 2017 that was based on market-oriented reforms called Uzbekistan's National Development Strategy for 2017-2021, which was aimed to make Uzbekistan a more liberalized economy to fuel the private sector growth.²⁶ To ease social discontent, Mirziyoyev had promised to revive the economy, focus on housing projects, attract more foreign investment, simplify registration for new business and fight the deeply rooted corruption in society. On human rights front, an important sign of his reform measures included the release of 72-year-old Samandar Kukanov, an opponent whom Karimov had imprisoned 23 years ago. Journalist Muhammad Bekjanov, who was editor of Uzbekistan's leading opposition newspaper *Erk*, was also released on Feb. 22, 2017 after 18 years in prison.²⁷ So President Mirziyoyev is working on reforms to better the record of human rights in Post Karimov era. The director of the Uzbek-German Forum for Human Rights Umida Niyazova said, “I am not sure if Bekjanov's release is the start of real change. The release of the prisoners cost Mirziyoyev nothing. However, it is in his favour that

these detention terms were halted.”²⁸

Islam Karimov was infamous for dictatorial and repressive policies. After the disintegration of Soviet Union, Uzbekistan emerged as the most populous country in Central Asia, but it was always on target of human rights groups. During Karimov tenure, Uzbekistan like other Central Asian states had no political opposition parties that could have challenged his rule. From International human rights groups to neutral observers, democracy in Uzbekistan was always presented an opaque outlook. Internationally, Karimov's image emerged as intolerant towards political opposition. This is the biggest challenge before Mirziyoyev to change the perception about Uzbekistan political system. Mirziyoyev in his presidential campaign promised that he will increase accountability of law enforcement agencies. He campaigned to bring change in the life of Uzbek citizens by acknowledging that there is lack of reform in many key aspects of society in Uzbekistan. He even spoke about criminal justice system and vowed to take reforming steps during first year in office. According to 2016 figures of Human Rights Watch, Uzbekistan had some 10,000 people in jail who were perceived to be opponents of Karimov regime; they were from political and religious background, journalists and many witnesses of the Andijan shootings.²⁹ Another report of 2016 by Initiative Group of Independent Human Rights Defenders (IGHRD) mentioned that at least 12,800 people were imprisoned since 2002.³⁰ Mirziyoyev came as a big surprise for them and many thousands of Uzbek citizens who were on government's black list. In August of 2017, Uzbek officials removed some 16,000 Uzbek citizens including political dissidents from their blacklist and now

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25. Zanca, R. (2018). Uzbekistan Emerges from Karimov's Shadow. *Current History*, 117(801), 281–282. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48614376>
26. Raimondi, P. P. (2019). Uzbekistan. In *Central Asia Oil and Gas Industry - The External Powers' Energy Interests in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan* (page-62). FondazioneEni Enrico Mattei (FEEM). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep21861.14>
27. Uzbek journalist Muhammad Bekjanov freed after 18 years (2017, February 22). *BBC*. Retrieved on 23-08-2022 from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-39054928> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-39054928>
28. Yildirim, C. (2017, April 03). Little hope for change in Uzbekistan, experts say. *Daily Sabah*. Retrieved on 25-08-2022 from <https://www.dailysabah.com/asia/2017/04/03/little-hope-for-change-in-uzbekistan-experts-say>
29. Lillis, J. (2016, September 02). Uzbekistan: The Life and Legacy of Islam Karimov. *Eurasianet*. Retrieved on 28-08-2022 from <https://eurasianet.org/uzbekistan-the-life-and-legacy-of-islam-karimov>
30. Mirovalev, M. (2016, January 07). Thousands of Uzbek Muslims jailed for 'extremism'. *Al Jazeera*. Retrieved on 23-08-2022 from <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/1/7/thousands-of-uzbek-muslims-jailed-for-extremism>

hope to foster a more liberal political climate in the country. "We attach great importance to bringing a sense of normalcy back to the people in their daily lives. Our lack of knowledge and experience caused us to fall under the influence of destructive ideas and movements," Mirziyoyev said.³¹ Freedom House in August of 2017 suggested that "the Mirziyoyev government seems intent on fixing the most obvious problems of the post-Karimov reality in Uzbekistan, albeit not being quick to implement systemic reforms that would bring true changes in country."³²

Under Islam Karimov, Uzbekistan witnessed suppression of religious practices but Mirziyoyev is trying to turn a new page in Uzbek society. During an International conference in Samarkand on 10-11 November 2017, titled 'Central Asia: One Past and common future, cooperation for sustainable development and mutual prosperity', Uzbekistan's President Mirziyoyev announced the establishment of Imam Bukhari International Research Centre in Samarkand and Centre for Islamic Civilization in Tashkent.³³ His policies quickly started showing effect as airports in Uzbekistan arranged separate place or hall for offering prayers. Such openness or freedom of religion continued in the holy month of Ramzan when government allowed all-night prayers in the mosques, something that was previously banned in Uzbekistan.³⁴ While Karimov had successfully merged the religion and nationalism into an official ideology of Uzbekistan, he also made this fusion as political life and character of the country (Malashenko, 2012, 3). However, it would be test for Shavkat Mirziyoyev, whether he will continue to strike the right balance between nationalism and Islam.

On diplomatic front, Mirziyoyev reversed Islam Karimov's unpopular policy in the region and reached out to the neighbouring states to reduce inter-state tensions. During the International conference in Samarkand on 10-11 November, Mirziyoyev lined up his priorities for regional partnership and new initiative towards a new outlook in its approach towards relations with neighbours. Along with restarting direct flights between Tashkent and Dushanbe after a gap of 24 years, the meeting also witnessed border agreements with Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan.³⁵ On such regional developments, Mirziyoyev instantly received support from Moscow as well as from the leaders of neighbouring Central Asian states. Some critics believe that measures taken by Mirziyoyev are just populist in nature and simply targeted to gain legitimacy at home and abroad.

Unlike Islam Karimov, Shavkat Mirziyoyev is trying to sail with inclusive approach in Central Asia region. During the initial years after the independence of Uzbekistan, Karimov wanted to promote regional identity that was based on Islamic and Turkic values. To position himself in direct ideological competition with President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev's concept of Eurasia, Karimov tried to bring back 'Turkestan', the historical name he dubbed as Turanism.³⁶ Uzbekistan's new leader, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, quickly made a difference in regional politics in Central Asia. In less than one month after taking command as President, Mirziyoyev moved to improve ties with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, and in so doing sparked hopes for a new era of regional cooperation. According to Svante Cornell, "The Uzbeks have been self-imposed isolationists and now are about opening up to their neighbours. Karimov

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31. Yildirim, C. (2017, September 08). Human rights in Uzbekistan improves in post-Karimov era, observers say. *Daily Sabah*. Retrieved on 29-08-2022 from <https://www.dailysabah.com/asia/2017/09/08/human-rights-in-uzbekistan-improves-in-post-karimov-era-observers-say>
 32. Peshkova S.(2016). Religion Under Karimov and After. Uzbekistan Forum, Central Asian Survey, Special Issue, 2016
 33. Embassy of Uzbekistan (2017, November 10). *President ShavkatMirziyoyev got acquainted with the construction of Imam Bukhari International Research Center*. Retrieved on 24-07-2022 from <http://www.uzbekembassy.in/president-shavkat-mirziyoyev-got-acquainted-with-the-construction-of-imam-bukhari-international-research-center/>
 34. Nishanov, B. (2017, November 30). Uzbekistan: The Year After. *Freedom House*. Retrieved on 28-09-2019 from <https://freedomhouse.org/report/analytical-brief/2017/uzbekistan-year-after>
 35. Mirziyoyev S., *Central Asia: One Past and a Common Future, Cooperation for Sustainable Development and Mutual Prosperity*, Speech by President of Uzbekistan at Samarkand, 10-11 November, 2017.
 36. Laruelle, M. (2021). Centrality and autochthonism: Uzbekistan's nationhood. In *Central Peripheries: Nationhood in Central Asia* (page-40). UCL Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1gn3t79.7>

was also putting in place a strategy for fuller engagement with the outside world, but he had a lot of PR problems. Not so with Mirziyoyev. At least on the rhetorical level, I am pleasantly surprised with how he has implemented foreign policy.”³⁷

In a speech on his first day as acting president, Mirziyoyev said that Uzbekistan would continue the policy of not joining any international military alliances and it will not host any foreign military bases on its territory, along with not stationing its troops abroad. Mirziyoyev said, “We will continue our constructive cooperation with all foreign countries and communities in the world, the categorical position of our country remains as it was before — not to join any military political blocs, opposing any deployments of foreign bases or facilities on the territory of Uzbekistan or sending our military abroad.”³⁸ Uzbekistan, a major producer of cotton and hydrocarbons, borders volatile Afghanistan and lies in a strategic region where Russia, China, and the West vie for influence. It is a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which also includes Russia and China, but it pulled out of the Russia-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) for the second time in 2012.³⁹ In the 8th September 2016 speech, Mirziyoyev also said that “strengthening ties with neighbouring Central Asian states is ‘the main priority’ for Uzbekistan’s foreign policy.”⁴⁰ He also got praise for apparent steps in that direction. According to Pier Paolo Raimondi “President Mirziyoyev has undertaken some serious efforts to reform the conservative economic scenario; for this reason, he is trying to improve relations with its regional neighbours in order to lessen the burden of isolation as well as his reforms are aiming to attract more

foreign investors” (Raimondi, 2019, 62). Within days of Karimov’s death, Uzbekistan released the four nationals of neighbouring Kyrgyzstan and withdrew security forces from a border area disputed by the two countries. On September 23 2017, Tajikistan announced that the two countries had agreed to resume flights between their capitals, Dushanbe and Tashkent, which were suspended in 1992. After Shavkat Mirziyoyev became President, he has taken many important steps that may play important role in resetting the Uzbekistan’s relations with its neighbouring countries. Mirziyoyev’s initiative towards Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan is a big sign of departure in Uzbekistan’s old policy when it was headed by Islam Karimov. During Karimov era, Uzbekistan’s relation with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan were mostly marked by disagreements on issues related to border demarcation, water sharing etc. While Uzbek and Kazakh governments are trying to end long-standing border demarcation issues; Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan have agreed on a treaty to end territorial disputes with each other.⁴¹ Such developments sparked hopes that unlike Karimov who was seen as throwing up obstacles to regional cooperation, the new leadership in Tashkent after his demise is eager to take a softer line towards neighbours and regional disputes. Such measures can be short-lived, but for the moment Mirziyoyev is seen as bringing radical changes in policies carried throughout Karimov era. In January 2017, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have agreed to visa-free travel between the two Central Asian countries and other border-crossing measures. The new border regulations will allow people of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan to visit each other’s countries without visas for up to 30 days.⁴² On the foreign relations front however, Shavkat

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37. Rapoza.K. (2017, September 14). Eurasia’s Latest Economic Reboot Can Be Found in Uzbekistan. *Forbes*. Retrieved on 23-08-2022 from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kenrapoza/2017/09/14/eurasias-new-perestroika-uzbekistan-silk-road-china/?sh=df1ed5e6f25c>
38. Sharkov, D. (2016, September 9). Uzbekistan’s New Leader Vows To Stay Out of Russian Military Alliance. *Newsweek*. Retrieved on 22-08-2022 from <https://www.newsweek.com/uzbekistans-new-leader-vows-stay-out-russian-military-alliance-496882>
39. Laruelle, M. (2012). *Factoring the Regional Impact of Uzbekistan’s Withdrawal from the CSTO*. German Marshall Fund of the United States, page-1. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep18654>
40. Rakhimov, M. (2017, April 17). New Priorities of Uzbekistan. *Urbanisation and International Affairs. Journal of International Affaris, Columbia SIPA, Vol. 74, No. 1*. Retrieved on 21-08-2022 from <https://jia.sipa.columbia.edu/online-articles/new-priorities-uzbekistan>
41. Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan sign deal to end border disputes (2021, March 21). *Eurasianet*. Retrieved on 24-08-2022 from <https://eurasianet.org/kyrgyzstan-uzbekistan-sign-deal-to-end-border-disputes>
42. Tajikistan, Uzbekistan Agree On Visa-Free Travel (2017, January 11). *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*. Retrieved on 26-08-2022 from <https://www.rferl.org/a/tajikistan-uzbekistan-visa-free-travel/28969523.html>

Mirziyoyev has proven to be significantly more dynamic than his predecessor. In the short span of time since taking office, Mirziyoyev committed himself to a gruelling regimen of meeting regional and foreign leaders to expand trade and cooperation.

The comeback of Taliban is also a test for Shavkat Mirziyoyev as Tashkent hosted very important meetings on Afghanistan peace process. Just before the fall of Kabul to Taliban in August 2021, Uzbekistan hosted a big conference that discussed the issue of connectivity between Central and South Asia, with special focus on Afghanistan.⁴³ After the withdrawal of US and International forces from Afghanistan in 2021, Mirziyoyev said that “We are in contact with the Taliban every day. I am ready for any dialogue in order to ensure there is no fire in the direction of Uzbekistan.”⁴⁴ The larger question for Mirziyoyev would be the extent to which he will engage with the new administration in Kabul as Taliban remains a big source of instability for the region. Under Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan has improved its relations with NATO unlike Karimov era when US and NATO forces were shunned because of their critical observations post Andijan shooting.⁴⁵ The renewed cooperation is also helping Uzbekistan in building its defence capabilities in view of emerging security situation in Afghanistan. Uzbek Special forces are also getting training from US counterparts since 2015 and it is also receiving assistance to develop professional military institutions.⁴⁶ From Karimov to Mirziyoyev, there is no doubt that Uzbekistan is trying to establish itself as the regional political powerhouse. His relations with regional states have helped Tashkent to spread its feathers as it is also enhancing economic relations with fellow states.

New Reforms by Shavkat Mirziyoyev:

In 2017, Mirziyoyev signed a decree on “Uzbekistan’s Development Strategy”; a document that had strategy for the period of 2017-2021 to bring development in various sectors of the country. It involved following points⁴⁷:

1. Strengthening the system of state and public construction by deepening democratic reforms and bringing modernisation.
2. Reforming the judicial system and ensuring the rule of law through independent judiciary, increasing authority of courts, promoting human rights and improving the criminal civil, administrative and commercial law.
3. Strengthening the macro-economic stability through bringing structural reforms, liberalisation and maintenance of high growth rate.
4. Focus on modernisation of agriculture sector
5. Encouraging the sustained socio-economic development at provincial and district level by increasing job creation opportunities and improving social security system.
6. Affordable housing and new infrastructure to improve the living standards of the population.
7. Promotion of inter-ethnic harmony and spread values for religious tolerance.
8. Resolving border issues with neighbours through implementation of mutually beneficial and constructive foreign policy.

Mirziyoyev has liberalized the country’s most unpopular policy of controlling the currency market. Mirziyoyev signed a decree in 2017 to liberalise the monetary policy of Uzbekistan. The decree defines priority areas of the state economic policy in the field of further

43. Soliev, N., & Pantucci, R. (2022). Central Asia : Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan. *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, 14(1), page-97. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48640765>

44. Uzbek leader says in daily contact with Taliban to ensure security (2021, August 27). *Reuters*. Retrieved on 21-09-2022 from <https://www.reuters.com/world/uzbek-leader-says-daily-contact-with-taliban-ensure-security-2021-08-27/>

45. Tok togulov, B. (2022, January). Uzbekistan's Foreign Policy Under Mirziyoyev : Change or Continuity? *Eurasian Research Journal, ERJ, Vol. 4, No. 1*, pp. 49-67. <https://doi.org/10.53277/2519-2442-2022.1-03> <https://erj.eurasian-research.org/yonetim/icerik/makaleler/101-published.pdf>

46. Kelkitli, F.A. (2022). Uzbekistan's Foreign Policy Under The Leadership of Mirziyoyev : Struggle to Sustain Autonomy. *ARABTIRMA MAKALESY, IX (1): 25–43* (ISSN 2529-0045); DOI: 10.16985mtad.1087202 <https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-03695651/document>

47. Uzbekistan’s Development Strategy for 2017-2021 has been adopted following public consultation (2017, February 08). *The Tashkent Times*. Retrieved on 25-09-2022 from <http://tashkenttimes.uz/national/541-uzbekistan-s-development-strategy-for-2017-2021-has-been-adopted-following-discussion>

liberalisation of the foreign exchange market. According to the decree that came in effect on 5th September 2017, legal entities of Republic of Uzbekistan can, “without restriction, purchase foreign currency in commercial banks for payment of current international transactions. People can also freely sell in exchange offices and purchase foreign currency in commercial banks. The currency reforms have all but rid Uzbekistan of its black market, which was netting the vested interests controlling multi-billion dollar profits, at the expense of ordinary Uzbeks.”⁴⁸ Uzbekistan’s new policy is designed to boost its regional standing and solidify its status as a crucial New Silk Road Transit state, taking advantage of the fact that the country has Central Asia’s largest population which means big market potential. Uzbekistan already provides secure transit for several Chinese-Turkmen pipelines and could become the central node along a Central Asian high-speed railway in the future to connect China with Iran. According to Andrew Korybyko, “the North-South connectivity could also function as Russia’s gateway to Afghanistan that leads further to Persian Gulf through Iran. Therefore, a landlocked country, Uzbekistan is strategically positioned to play big role in future between Eurasia, West Asia and South Asia.”⁴⁹ In this case, the main challenge before Shavkat Mirziyoyev is to maintain zero problems with neighbours and start opening up the Uzbekistan for whole region. He will have to make Uzbekistan a perfect destination for global investors by developing a perfect environment that includes free society and confidence among investors.⁵⁰

After getting elected for second five year term with 80.1 percent votes in 2021, Shavkat Mirziyoyev is

expected to further open up the foreign trade and investment opportunities in Uzbekistan.⁵¹ According to Temur Umarov “Mirziyoyev will likely continue this path during his second term, but it will be more difficult to carry out reforms. The Karimov era is becoming an increasingly distant memory, and it will get harder and harder to put the blame for any failures on Mirziyoyev’s predecessor. In addition, people are no longer afraid to be critical, either on social media or in person: more than 250 protests have been held in the last three years.”⁵² So the society of Uzbekistan is experiencing some freedom under Mirziyoyev administration which was not even a rare thing during Karimov era. Mirziyoyev is going ahead with many more such reforms. After the first term of Development Strategy (2017-2021), Mirziyoyev signed the decree for 2022-2026 in January 2022. It includes seven priority areas, mainly to speed up the economic development of Uzbekistan⁵³:

1. Main focus is on economy to increase the gross domestic product (GDP) per capita by 1.6 times in the next five years

2. Mirziyoyev is trying to bring new reforms in energy sector, as he has abolished the monopoly on the supply of electricity and planned to increase the natural gas processing from 8 to 20 percent.

3. Uzbekistan is looking for huge investment as Mirziyoyev has instructed to bring \$120 billion by 2026.

4. Increase of agricultural output by 5% and doubling the income of farmers.

5. Tourism is on high priority for Mirziyoyev as he is expecting the 3 times growth in the sector with the creation of 3.5 million jobs.

48. An Uzbek Spring has Sprung, but Summer is Still a Long Way Off. (2017, December 14). *The Economist*. Retrieved on 25-08-2022 from <https://www.economist.com/asia/2017/12/14/an-uzbek-spring-has-sprung-but-summer-is-still-a-long-way-off>

49. Korybko, A. (2017, October 12). Uzbekistan’s Mirziyoyev Is Undoing Karimov’s Legacy, And Its About Time. *Oriental Review*. Retrieved on 23-08-2022 from <https://orientalreview.org/2017/10/12/uzbekistans-mirziyoyev-is-undoing-karimovs-legacy-and-its-about-time/>

50. Uzbekistan’s New President Tiptoes Toward Liberalisation (2017, October 30). *The Washington Post*. Retrieved on 21-08-2022 from https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/uzbekistans-new-president-tiptoes-toward-liberalization/2017/10/30/d50ef888-bd99-11e7-959c-fe2b598d8c00_story.html

51. Uzbek president secures second term in landslide election victory (2021, October 2021). *Al Jazeera*. Retrieved on 23-09-2022 from <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/25/uzbek-president-secures-second-term-in-landslide-election-victory>

52. Umarov, T. (2021, October 21). In Uzbekistan, The Real Challenge Begins Now. *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. <https://carnegiemoscow.org/commentary/85669>

53. Shavkat Mriziyoyev signs New Uzbekistan’s Development Strategy for 2022-2026 Decree (2022, February 1). *The Tashkent Times*. Retrieved on 27-09-2022 from <http://tashkenttimes.uz/economy/8284-shavkat-mriziyoyev-signs-new-uzbekistan-s-development-strategy-for-2022-2026-decree-economy-highlights>.

Despite all these efforts by Mirziyoyev, the new developments in his second term is still viewed with cautious approach as he is trying to turn Uzbekistan into a liberal democracy with new economic reforms. Expecting big changes from Uzbekistan's new leadership will still require deep monitoring at all levels. Revitalizing the economy or modernising the ways that Uzbekistan is employing to bring new confidence among its citizens need some time as the most expected perception for new Tashkent administration is a 'Soft Fist' without excessive repression of the Karimov era.

Conclusion:

Uzbekistan has earned a reputation as a nation of flourishing reforms with many new steps taken by Mirziyoyev government in the last six years. Unlike Karimov era, the administration of Shavkat Mirziyoyev is also presenting itself as more accommodative with regional issues. As Uzbekistan shares border with all the states of Central Asia, it is objectively interested in turning the region into a zone of stability, sustainable development and good neighbourliness. Shavkat Mirziyoyev has many challenges with regards to regional security including, extremism, terrorism, border issues and matters regarding equal distribution of water resources in the region. Economically prosperous, a secured Central Asia is the mail goal of Uzbekistan to fulfil its aspirations in the region. In all future projects, Uzbekistan will play anchor role in Central Asia. Here leadership of Shavkat Mirziyoyev will be on test, as his foreign policy initiatives will lay

foundation of future relations of Uzbekistan in whole region. Mirziyoyev's rise after Karimov's demise and current political developments may still be viewed critically in Uzbekistan. Although even if the system still appears not fully transparent, it is the only key to anchoring policies regarding state and society.

One aspect of new Uzbekistan's new political system is that it revolves around major clan-regional networks that have shaped this country from last three decades in terms of its economic and commercial interests. Uzbekistan's social and economic factors play important role in political scenario. Like Islam Karimov, Mirziyoyev also comes from same powerful Samarkand-Jizzakh clan. The other major clan or regional groupings that influence politics are Tashkent, Ferghana and Kashkadaria. Uzbekistan is now implementing the strategy of actions on further development of the country programmed for 2022-26. It was first adopted as decree on Uzbekistan's Development Strategy in 2017 by President Mirziyoyev. The strengthening of parliament to deepening democratic reforms, independence of judiciary and promotion of civil rights; all these factors are yet to give desired results that can help Shavkat Mirziyoyev in rising above the image of Karimov era Uzbekistan that still presents the global picture of this Central Asian state. Till now on paper it appears to be a success for Mirziyoyev, whose leadership is taking many liberal decisions but they need to be observed closely and carefully.
