



Toward A New Uzbekistan

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You could call it "Extreme Makeover: Central Asian Edition." Today, among the five post-Soviet republics that make up the region, there are heartening signs of political dynamism and a newfound drive for integration.

At the center of these changes is the Republic of Uzbekistan, which has launched a far-reaching program to reform and modernize the state.

This effort finds its roots in the passing of Uzbekistan's first president, Islam Karimov, last September, which precipitated a far-reaching policy rethink on the part of his successor, Shavkat Mirziyoyev. The product was "Uzbekistan's Development Strategy for 2017-2021," formally adopted by the country's government back in January.

The tenets of this strategy are fivefold:

Politically, the Mirziyoyev government has launched an administrative overhaul designed to diffuse power (previously concentrated in the presidency) to institutions such as the country's parliament, known as the "oliy majlis." In the near future, Uzbek officials say, this process will go further still, as regional posts like governorships transform into directly elected positions, thereby giving greater voice to the country's 32 million-person population.

The new strategy also places significant emphasis on strengthening the rule of law in the country. This includes ensuring "true" independence of Uzbekistan's traditionally weak judiciary, as well as enshrining greater protections for the rights of its citizens - an area where Tashkent has historically garnered major criticism from watchdog groups and the international community alike.

On the economic front, the Uzbek government has embraced a series of measures - from currency convertibility to the privatization of various industries - that are intended to make the country more dynamic and competitive. These steps have already generated positive reviews from institutions like the International Monetary Fund. But Uzbek officials are thinking bigger still; the objective, they say, is to become one of the world's top three fastest-growing economies by 2019.

Another area now receiving intense attention is the country's so-called human dimension. In recent years, the authoritarian governing style and political excesses of Uzbekistan under Karimov helped make the country something of an international pariah - a position that the Mirziyoyev government appears determined to improve. As a result, it has abandoned the historic practice of maintaining political black lists, beginning the process of rehabilitating some 16,000 individuals previously seen as enemies of the state. The rights of women in Uzbek society are also said to be receiving significant attention. And, perhaps most significantly, the Uzbek state (which previously viewed expressions of political Islam as a strategic threat) is making major efforts to reclaim the religion from extremists by establishing multiple religious centers throughout the country (such as the Imam Bukhari Center in Samarkand, already in operation, and the planned Center for Islamic Civilization being established in Tashkent) in an effort to help promote the training, teaching and understanding of the faith.

Far and away the most public element of Uzbekistan's new strategy, however, has been in the realm of foreign affairs. Since taking office in December, Mirziyoyev has quickly and decisively abandoned the regional policy of the Karimov era (which was characterized by cool relations with other Central Asian states) in favor of a "good neighbor" policy toward the region. The results have been striking. Frenetic diplomacy in recent months has yielded a surge in trade between Tashkent and its neighbors (which officials say has expanded by some 13 percent overall since 2016). It has also netted numerous new transport links between Uzbekistan and other regional states, including flights to Tajikistan in the south and a rail link to Kazakhstan in the north.

At the same time, the Mirziyoyev government has sought to forge closer ties to Europe and the United States as part of an effort to balance the country's historic dependency on traditional partners Russia and China. This quest for "stability," Uzbek officials say, is central to the country's vision of independence and prosperity.

Uzbekistan's newfound foreign policy dynamism was on display earlier this month in the city of Samarkand, at the "International Conference on Security and Sustainable Development in Central Asia," convened jointly by the government of Uzbekistan and the United Nations. The summit, which I attended as a guest of the Uzbek government, was a veritable who's who of foreign dignitaries - including the foreign ministers of all five Central Asian states, Iran's foreign minister and EU foreign policy czar Federica Mogherini, among many others. It was intended as a coming out party of sorts for Tashkent's new vision of regional integration.

Of course, only time will tell if Mirziyoyev's agenda will truly take hold - either at home or in the wider region. Indeed, heavy-handed state action against critics and far-flung corruption are still far from things of the past. Nevertheless, the Uzbek government is unquestionably moving forward with its plans to reshape the state, as well as its relations with its neighbors. And, as this month's proceedings in Samarkand made clear, people are beginning to take notice.

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