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Uzbekistan Election Likely to Tighten Karimov's Grip on Power

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Russian President Vladimir Putin (L) meets with his counterpart from Uzbekistan Islam Karimov in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, on Dec. 10, 2014.

Uzbeks went to the polls on Sunday to vote in parliamentary elections at which all four parties support President Islam Karimov, ensuring that the ballot will further reinforce his 23-year grip on power.

Karimov, 76, has ruled Central Asia's most populous nation of 30 million people with an iron hand since first taking office in 1991 and is widely expected to seek reelection in March.

On Sunday, four pro-Karimov political parties were competing for 135 seats in the lower house of parliament, Russia's Interfax news agency reported.

The remaining 15 seats are reserved for an ecological movement made up of pro-government environmentalist groups.

Uzbekistan, like other Central Asian states, has played its Soviet-era master Moscow off

against the growing influence of China as well as that of the United States, which aims to draw down its troops in neighboring Afghanistan after more than a decade of conflict.

President Vladimir Putin visited Uzbekistan earlier this month, at a time when Russia is increasingly worried about regional security.

Interfax reported that the results of Sunday's parliamentary elections would be declared valid since voter turnout had exceeded the minimum level of 33 percent.

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