

Uzbekistan's Rocky Road to Reform

President Shavkat Mirziyoyev is pursuing an agenda focused on getting the economy on track while showing no appetite for democratic change.

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Uzbekistan's president Shavkat Mirziyoyev. **Vladimir Smirnov / TASS**

Shavkat Mirziyoyev cruised to victory in Sunday's presidential poll in Uzbekistan to embark upon another five years at the helm of Central Asia's most populous country. The incumbent was always the overwhelming favorite to win the vote, and the only surprise was his vote share falling from 89% last time to 80.1% this time around.

Since coming to power in 2016, the president has overseen sweeping changes that have set the country on a new economic course. Mirziyoyev is genuinely popular with the electorate. He has received praise for the way he has opened up the economy and improved living conditions for many.

Observers speculate that the reduction in the president's vote share — clearly a move sanctioned from the top — is intended to allow Uzbekistan to point to a more competitive system evolving, although the opponents he faced in this vote were all from state-sanctioned parties, with no independent or real opposition candidates allowed onto the ballot paper.

Maksuda Varisova, the only female candidate in the race, pulled off a surprise second place finish with 6.6%, giving further support to the semblance of inclusivity in Uzbekistan's opposition-free politics.

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International observers from the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and the European Parliament saw things differently.

While welcoming the reforms Uzbekistan has made, their joint statement criticized the election for being uncompetitive, with only carefully selected opponents allowed to participate. They noted a lack of engagement between the candidates and with the voters.

On election day, a number of serious irregularities were reported, ranging from a lack of proper ID checks to ballot stuffing. Old practices, such as the head of the family casting the votes for all the family members, persist, with numerous cases reported.

Mirziyoyev cut his political teeth as his predecessor Islam Karimov's prime minister for 13 years, so his reform agenda came as a surprise to many when he assumed power.

Karimov, who led the country from before its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991 until his death in 2016, headed a brutal regime that tortured and imprisoned foes while prioritizing an isolationist position in relation to neighbors and trade.

On Mirziyoyev's watch, the foreign currency black market has been swept away, forced labor in the cotton fields has been significantly reduced, cross border trade has increased and more attractive conditions for foreign investors have been introduced.

The reforms seem to be working. Uzbekistan's economy was one of a select few in the world to achieve positive growth in 2020, even as the Covid-19 pandemic shut down business for long spells. Gross domestic product expanded by 1.6% last year, according to the World Bank. In 2021, the bank is expecting the recovery to continue and growth to reach pre-pandemic levels of 6.2%.

Having dealt with some easier to achieve changes, the reform program has lost some of its initial momentum as more difficult tasks present themselves. The next stage will see a privatization program of state-owned banks and the sale of the state's holdings in a copper mine, power generation companies and much more besides.

At the Tashkent Economic Forum in September, many speakers said that privatization alone was not enough to deliver sustainable growth and stressed the need to make business more competitive. Major investment in human capital to move Uzbekistan toward more value-added production rather than relying on natural resource exports is seen as key to

maintaining growth in the coming years.

Rebuilding relations

Another major achievement of the president's first term was the rebuilding of relations with neighbors, which were in a fractured state under Karimov. A thaw in relations with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan has led to the borders opening up for the flow of both goods and people.

To the south, the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan presents security challenges, but the government is trying to paint it as an opportunity for Tashkent to increase energy exports and the supply of goods and services. If security and financing challenges could be overcome, Afghanistan could also provide a rail route to Pakistan's ports — a vital consideration for doubly landlocked Uzbekistan, which relies on its neighbors to reach international markets.

In 2019, Mirziyoyev earned a lot of plaudits for closing the notorious Jaslyk Prison, which had been at the center of his predecessor's brutal suppression of religious and political dissent. However, a report this month by the U.S. Commission on Religious Freedom highlighted that despite more than 1,000 religious prisoners being released in recent years, over 2,000 people remain behind bars for their religious beliefs in Uzbekistan.

While pursuing an agenda focused on getting the economy on track, Mirziyoyev has shown no appetite for democratic reform. No opposition parties have been registered since he took power. Attempts to set up new parties or field candidates in the presidential poll have met with resistance, often backed up with threats and intimidation.

With business in Uzbekistan increasingly tied to a tight-knit circle that has formed around the president, it is highly unlikely that Tashkent's thaw will extend to the political sphere any time soon, since that might upset the status quo.

Under the constitution, this is Mirziyoyev's final term, but tinkering with the law to keep him in power beyond 2026 is certainly not ruled out in a region renowned for constitutional sleights of hand to keep leaders at the helm. As his second term progresses, expect increasing levels of authoritarianism and intolerance of dissent as the inner circle plots how to cling onto power.

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