

## Opinion – Uzbekistan at A Political Crossroads?

Written by Martin Duffy

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MARTIN DUFFY, NOV 7 2021

As we psephologists are fond of saying, the October 2021 Uzbekistan votes are in with President Shavkat Mirziyoyev winning over 80% of the votes. The result, putting the matter bluntly, is that nothing much has changed. The OSCE point to “lack of genuine electoral competition in this election. Independent opposition parties were excluded from the registration process contrary to international standards and OSCE commitment (and) there were reported cases of intimidation”. It is apparent that the process of democratization in Uzbekistan has far to go if elections aim to achieve full legitimacy. There was no genuine pluralism or meaningful engagement between candidates or with citizens. And, as Reinhold Lopatka noted, there was substantial adding to voter lists, ballot box stuffing in multiple polling stations and widespread flaws in counting procedures.

“The recent and ongoing reforms are an encouraging sign,” said Heidi Hautala, Head of the EP delegation. “But the exclusion of opposition parties and the lack of genuine competition, as well as the high number of irregularities we saw on election day, remain substantial obstacles in the path of the democratization process”. Daniela De Ridder, Head of the OSCE PA delegation noted “the continuance of negative practices observed in past decades” (OCSE).

As for regime performance, preliminary results published by the CEC have shown incumbent President Shavkat Mirziyoyev winning a second term with a majority 80.1%, although faring the worst performance for an incumbent in terms of vote share since 1991. As polls closed at 8pm on 24<sup>th</sup> October 2021 the Uzbekistan Central Election Commission were able to report that voter turnout at the country’s presidential elections had exceeded 80%. In the early presidential elections in 2016, the voter turnout had been 87.83%. Five candidates, including incumbent President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, had vied for the presidential office but to all intents it was always a one-man race. Mirziyoyev faced no genuine opposition and victory will let him extend his reform campaign and improve foreign trade and investment – while still protecting Miziyoys’s centralized power.

No genuine opposition parties were registered and while there was some relaxation on social media, criticism of the President is all but constitutionally forbidden. So, the four candidates running against Mirziyoyev were nominated by parties which support the president.

Mirziyoyev pledged to cut poverty through rapid economic growth and gradually decentralize decisionmaking by devolving power to district councils. In the extremely limited monitoring of public opinion discernible even in urban areas, the President was able to mobilize his party faithful, and from such opinion polls as were conducted he had retained lukewarm support even among younger voters. Press and civic observers certainly voiced in favor of state measures against financial hardship. This was a slogan the President could easily exploit, but it now remains to be seen if it can be delivered. Perhaps it simply does not matter as Uzbekistan emerges from this election no more pluralistic than it had entered it.

International observers will be hesitant to see this as a mere “sham election” but at the least it is an election without genuine candidacy. It is, more accurately, an act of political acclimation orchestrated by president and party. It also raises questions over Uzbekistan’s so-called new era of ‘openness’ which had been trumpeted in front of American and European audiences.

Regrettably, on this election day, as those before it, Uzbekistan remains one of the most repressive regimes in the

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world. This election answers unequivocally the hopeful narrative of some western observers that perceptibly Uzbekistan could be getting more democratic. The Central Asian nation, infamous for systematic human rights abuses may have rebadged itself “New Uzbekistan – new elections” but there is barely a shred of evidence that anything has genuinely changed. Uzbekistan has improved its relations with neighboring states, some of which were previously considered “sworn enemies” and its citizens could travel, with a visa-free regime serving more than 50 countries. Symbolically the old security boss of Karimov’s regime was made redundant and high-profile political releases included Muhammad Bekjan, one of the world’s longest-imprisoned journalists. It is also true that a lighter touch has been taken to press freedoms with independent media, including the BBC and Voice of America having fresh accreditation. However, there is little to support the President’s assertion before the election that nobody can put pressure on civil society and mass media.

As in 2019, the 2021 race further demonstrates that the core of the political system in Uzbekistan remains the same – no oppositional parties are allowed to run. All five parties participating in the election are loyal to president and regime. The oppositional Erk party and its exiled leader Muhammad Solih remain banned in Uzbekistan. One must concede that pre-election media and results coverage gave a veneer of live TV debates, the president and his family remained untouchable.

Prior to these elections the UN Committee against Torture expressed concerns over continued use of torture by law enforcement and prison officials. UN rights expert Diego Garcia-Sayan concluded following his visit to Uzbekistan that “substantial threats against judicial independence and the rule of law remain”. Human Rights Watch retained its classification of “authoritarian country” despite some tokenistic releasing of political prisoners.

That no genuine Uzbek grass-root organization observed the voting process on Sunday shows that the government is still wary of civil society. On Karimov’s death Uzbekistan was so repressive it was endangered by protest. Mirziyoyev could only rescue legitimacy by some limited change. Even in authoritarian states, presidents require some measure of public approval and support, and the election suggests again that this pseudo-liberalism might have paid off.

Freedom of speech has certainly been on the line in ‘New Uzbekistan’. The tightening of control on new media outlets and bloggers in the immediate pre-election period demonstrates Mirziyoyev’s scant commitment to freedom (RFERL.org) The OSCE interim report noted “an increased possibility to critically report on some social and political issues...many longstanding issues remain, including intimidation and harassment of journalists and bloggers, and a restrictive legal framework for the media”. The Associated Press were still more blunt, “Uzbekistan has never held an election that was deemed fair or democratic by Western observers”.

Uzbekistan has fascinated me since my college years when I dreamt of a train journey across Tashkent, Samarkand, Bukhara, and Khiva. As an international election observer, I have now happily made these journeys several times and the country remains as enchanting as ever. Regrettably, the same might have to be concluded about its stubborn authoritarianism. The changes steamrolled through by President Shavkat Mirziyoyev might have signaled economic but not political change. Proclaimed in 2017, Mirziyoyev’s Development Strategy for 2017–2021, promised to modernize and liberalize the Uzbek state and society. According to state propaganda, a new Uzbekistan awaits. The reality of the situation is that Mirziyoyev has pushed a development but hardly a genuine human rights agenda.

There is (however) also a danger that over-insistence from the west could threaten the progress made so far in Uzbekistan’s slow journey towards democracy. The western agenda with its espousal of judicial reforms, press freedoms, support of sexual minorities and gay marriages may prove to be too much, too soon unless Mirziyoyev can bring his powerbrokers with him. Uzbekistan today seems split between international aspirations and a conservatism which remains deeply embedded in the Uzbek mentality. Putting it crudely, Uzbekistan’s path for liberalization is dependent on Mirziyoyev’s direction while the outside soft power methods will have effect only when the local people are still given enough freedom to redesign the country’s moral compass.

The road to Uzbek democracy is paved with broken promises. Under Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan’s political system has continued to be tightly controlled. While a variety of parties ran in the 2019–20 parliamentary election, all of them

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were loyal to the government. In May 2020, the state announced reforms to 'liberalize' its media and electoral laws. In November 2020, a delegation led by Uzbek Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Kamilov visited the US looking to strengthen its strategic relationship. The meetings resulted in US\$100 million being given to Uzbekistan for economic assistance, and the US pledging Uzbekistan's UN Human Rights Council bid. Some reforms had been implemented and Parliamentary sessions were more often accessible to the public. However, MPs continued to vote unanimously on issues like the appointment of provincial governors, without attempts at debate or pluralistic decision-making.

In the atrophied state of Uzbekistan politics, how the future state handles opposition will be noted by observers and by Uzbek civic groups, many of whom have been accused of acting as Mirziyoyev stooges. In some respects, he has shown himself to be a shrewd manipulator of the political system, more adroit than any of his cold-war predecessors.

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### About the author:

**Martin Duffy** has participated in more than two hundred international election and human rights assignments since beginning his career in Africa and Asia in the 1980s. He has served with a wide range of international organizations and has frequently been decorated for field service, among them UN (United Nations) Peacekeeping Citations and the Badge of Honour of the International Red Cross Movement. He has also held several academic positions in Ireland, UK, USA and elsewhere. He is a proponent of experiential learning. He holds awards from Dublin, Oxford, Harvard, and several other institutions including the Diploma in International Relations at the University of Cambridge.