
MAJLIS PODCAST: A LOOK AT UZBEKISTAN UNDER NEW LEADERSHIP

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After 25 years, Uzbekistan has elected its second president. Former Prime Minister Shavkat Mirziyayev won the December 4 election easily, as expected, receiving nearly 90 percent of the vote.

Mirziyayev's December 14 inauguration officially marked the start of a new era for Uzbekistan, one without late President Islam Karimov, who died in office at the start of September after leading Uzbekistan for all its years as an independent country.

There are all sorts of predictions, and renewed hopes, for Uzbekistan's future now that there is a new leader.

What should Mirziyayev change? What must he change to keep the country together or to move it forward? What changes has he already initiated and why?

These are some of the topics that were addressed in the latest Majlis podcast (listen below). But this one differed a bit. This Majlis podcast was an in-house talk for RFE/RL colleagues at our Prague headquarters.

Moderating the talk was Tom Kent, RFE/RL's president and formerly a longtime journalist at the Associated Press, including time as its Moscow bureau chief. Alisher Sidik, the director of RFE/RL's Uzbek Service, known locally as Ozodlik, was also on the panel, as was Noah Tucker, who now works for RFE/RL but has been well-known for years for his work on Central Asia, including heading the Registan website. I also sat in on the panel and spoke about the promising changes to Uzbekistan's regional foreign policy since Mirziyayev took over.

Sidik provided a brief history of the means by which Mirziyayev became acting president, which included circumventing the constitution. He also talked about some of the moves Mirziyayev made in his three months as interim president: "Businesses were relieved of adverse pressure and bribe extortion [and] the law on protection of businesses was immediately approved."

And Sidik said that Mirziyayev appeared to be reaching out to the people: "[Mirziyayev] improved accountability by establishing a virtual hotline -- people can address their problems directly to the prime minister and hope that the problems [are] resolved."

One of Uzbekistan's biggest problems is its economy. Reported figures, often backed by international financial organizations, paint a picture of a thriving economy. For 2016, the IMF predicts 6 percent GDP growth, while the Asian Development Bank forecasts 6.9 percent growth, and the Uzbek government says 7.8 percent.

Testimony from the ground suggests something different.

There are shortages of gasoline, despite the fact that Uzbekistan has oil and refineries. There are still power outages, and every winter dozens of villages, towns, and even parts of cities are suddenly cut off from natural-gas supplies. The black market rate for the U.S. dollar is more than twice the official rate.

Uzbekistan's population is approaching 32 million, according to state statisticians. At least 2 million people from the eligible workforce -- possibly twice that number -- are migrant laborers, working mainly in Russia and Kazakhstan.

"Tashkent," Tucker recalled, "was once the location of most of the big international organizations [and] media organizations. Everything really happened in Tashkent, and it had enormous international investment from participation in the national economy throughout the 1990s and into the early 2000s."

That has largely dried up, mainly due to the policies of Karimov's government and voracious elites.

"International investors dropped away, as more of them were expropriated of the investments that they made, as people were cut out of the country and it became increasingly unattractive for them to try to participate," Tucker said.

Uzbekistan became semi-isolationist. The country obstructed cargo transiting its territory en route to neighboring Central Asian states. It chose a few mainly East Asian countries as its trade partners and sources of investment.

Tucker suggested that the wealth that accumulated inside Uzbekistan during the 1990s and early 2000s has dwindled, and he argued that this will force Mirziyayev's government to change Uzbekistan's economic and trade policies.

"The elites that are in power have divided up everything that they can. They've cut out as many of their competitors as they can," Tucker said. "It's no longer in their interests to live in an economy, in a political economy, that's as closed as this one has become."

Uzbekistan's government has already stated it will move toward currency convertibility in 2017. The panel suggested that that will be a challenging process, particularly since powerful people are allegedly involved in the black-market currency exchanges.

The Majlis podcast also considered the possibilities for Russia. Moscow and Tashkent had tense relations for most of the Karimov years. Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev attended Karimov's September 3 funeral in Samarkand. Russian President Vladimir Putin arrived a few days later on his way from a G20 summit in China. Mirziyayev said before his inauguration that his first foreign visit as Uzbekistan's president will be to Russia.

Sidik mentioned that Russia's LUKoil boosted its ties with Uzbekistan once Mirziyayev took over. So

has Gazprom. Sidik said Mirziyayev has close contacts with Russia, and Uzbekistan's population tends to view Russia positively.

Responding to a question about possible Russian interference in Uzbekistan's succession process, Tucker said that appeared unlikely, but he added that the Kremlin seemed to want people to believe it had a hand in making Mirziyayev Uzbekistan's second president.

A recurrent topic in the discussion was whether these early fair words and a few fair deeds denote a genuine change in policy.

Mirziyayev has released two aging political prisoners, but there is no indication that any of the thousands of other people seemingly imprisoned on dubious charges will be set free. In a bid to boost tourism, the government released a list of 27 countries whose tourists could travel to Uzbekistan without a visa.

But as Sidik pointed out, Mirziyayev has given no signals about his policies toward the independent media or the return of foreign NGOs to Uzbekistan, for example.

And domestic politics has not changed much under Mirziyayev so far. The use of forced labor in the cotton fields at harvest time continued again this season. There are still reports of security forces raiding flats, looking for Islamic extremists or sympathizers.

It took Islam Karimov 25 years to construct Uzbekistan's current system, and Mirziyayev is a product of that system. Changing it will not be easy.

These issues and more were discussed during the podcast, and the panel took questions from an audience that included members of RFE/RL's other Central Asian services, as well from our Afghan and Iranian broadcasters.

Kaynak/Source: