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## UZBEKISTAN MAY SCRAP EXIT VISAS

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Since Uzbekistans new leader Shavkat Mirziyoyev (pictured) came to power last fall, his every move has been scrutinized as a possible harbinger either of reform or backsliding to the iron-fisted methods of his predecessor, Islam Karimov.

Travel both into and out of the isolated country is the current hot topic among Uzbekistan watchers. First came the buoyant news that visa rules would be dropped or eased for citizens of two dozen countries – swiftly followed by Mirziyoyevs decree postponing the change until 2021.

Now the president has called for an end to the Soviet-era practice of exit visas.

In a statement posted Tuesday, Mirziyoyev suggested that lawmakers vote to end the use of exit visas, Newsweek reports.

Once favored by Soviet and other authoritarian regimes as a way of controlling who could leave the country, exit visas have nearly disappeared, with North Korea being one notable exception, Newsweek says.

Another burdensome restriction for Uzbeks is tight controls on buying and selling foreign currency. A draft directive released by the new administration in November intends to create equal conditions for importers and to set the exchange rate only using market mechanisms, according to Nikkei Asian Review.

The publication quoted independent Central Asian analyst Kate Mallinson, as saying that rigid controls and the artificially low exchange rate created a lively black market for currencies and made life difficult for importers in particular.

Mirziyoyev may face a clash with elite figures who profit hugely on the gap between official and black-market exchange rates, Mallinson said.

Such elites may include chiefs of the powerful security agencies, EurasiaNet.org suggests, writing that Graft too is said by the business community to be a lucrative source of income for the most powerful wings of the security apparatus.

Mirziyoyev explained the delay in easing travel rules for foreign visitors as necessary to gain time

for development of the tourism infrastructure and to ensure the safety and health of visitors and citizens.

The UN human rights agency and the UN-affiliated Center for Civil and Political Rights urged Uzbekistan in 2009 to end exit visas as well as the propiska system of controls on movement within the country. Exit visas can be easily used to stop human rights defenders from leaving the country, their report stated.

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Kaynak/Source: