
GOOD NEWS FOR UZBEKISTAN IS NOT GOOD NEWS FOR TURKMENISTAN

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As if Turkmenistan didn't already have an image problem, it must now contend with neighboring Uzbekistan changing its policies and earning cautious but consistent praise from the global community and renewed interest from international companies and investors.

More concerning for Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov is how Uzbekistan is achieving such a turnaround.

Berdymukhammedov visited Tashkent on April 23-24, the first time he had visited Uzbekistan's capital since March 2008.

That time, he was going to meet with then-Uzbek leader Islam Karimov. The late President Karimov and Turkmenistan's first president, the late Saparmurat Niyazov, really have helped define the image of a Central Asian dictator in the post-Soviet period.

This time, Berdymukhammedov went to meet with Uzbekistan's relatively new president, Shavkat Mirziyoev.

Mirziyoev is not the internationally criticized, iron-fisted ruler Karimov was. Mirziyoev is implementing administrative, economic, and foreign policy reforms that have attracted the attention of countries in the region, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), and in East Asia, Europe, and the United States.

It's a really awkward example for Berdymukhammedov's Turkmenistan.

Different Paths

When Karimov was publicly declared dead on September 2, 2016, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan were very similar in their styles of rule.

Uzbekistan was increasingly isolationist; Turkmenistan had been an isolationist country for decades.

In both countries, there was a heavy internal security-force presence; the slightest hint of opposition was quickly eliminated. Thousands languished in prisons, with international rights organizations claiming that many were tortured into making confessions and condemned at unfair trials without access to proper legal representation.

Uzbekistan's economy was in bad shape, but so was Turkmenistan's at the time of Karimov's death.

Soon after Mirziyoev came to power in September 2016, the changes started in Uzbekistan. Some long-imprisoned political and rights activists and independent journalists were released.

Turkmenistan has not released any of its imprisoned activists or political opponents in that time, though information surfaced in August 2017 suggesting that Niyazov's security chief, Akmurad Rejepov, had died in prison after being confined there 10 years earlier.

Mirziyoev's government is also experimenting with loosening controls over Uzbek media. Some abusive and/or corrupt local officials have been exposed due to greater latitude for outlets and journalists, though top officials and current government policies still seem to be a step too far.

Turkmen media looks much as it has for nearly all its more than 26 years of independence. The president is everywhere and everything is great, according to state media.

Mirziyoev has purged and reorganized the Prosecutor-General's Office, Interior Ministry, and, most of all, the feared National Security Committee. In all three cases, Mirziyoev has promised that abuses of the past will no longer be tolerated and officials will be held accountable for misdeeds toward citizens.

Turkmenistan has continued its long-standing policy of regularly shuffling officials without any meaningful results coming from these personnel changes.

Uzbek authorities are talking about scrapping the odious exit visa for citizens, possibly by 2019.

In Turkmenistan, citizens with tickets to international flights are being turned away at Turkmen airports, and men under 30 years of age with train tickets abroad are being turned away at Turkmen train stations.

Uzbekistan implemented a badly needed currency devaluation in September 2017, dropping the national currency's exchange rate dramatically to bring it into line with the black-market rate, seen as the more genuine exchange rate.

Turkmenistan has stubbornly resisted currency devaluation since it implemented two devaluations at the start of 2015, dropping the value of the manat by some 23 percent. The manat's official rate is 3.5 to \$1 while the black market rate is currently more than 16 manats.

Improving Ties

Mirziyoev's greatest success to date has been improving Uzbekistan's foreign ties generally; but in Central Asia in particular. Uzbekistan's relations with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan have improved dramatically since Mirziyoev took power.

Uzbek ties with Turkmenistan are better, too, but they were already good when Mirziyoev became leader -- and Mirziyoev's first official visit as Uzbekistan's elected president was to Turkmenistan in March 2017.

Mirziyoev was also instrumental in helping to convene the first Central Asian summit in nearly 20 years in Astana, Kazakhstan, on March 15, 2018.

Berdymukhammedov did not attend. He went to Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates instead.

Uzbekistan has opened its doors to foreign investors, urging them to come and set up shop in Uzbekistan. It appears to be showing signs of working, as Uzbek authorities have been in talks with ExxonMobil, for example, and there is seemingly increased interest from Russian companies.

The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) opened an office in Tashkent on November 8, the same day that Uzbekistan's State Investment Committee said foreign investment since the start of 2017 amounted to more than \$4 billion.

Vanity Projects

Turkmenistan has been hunting for foreign investment but has not offered any of the greatly coveted onshore contracts for hydrocarbon fields that so far only the China National Petroleum Corp can claim to have.

Turkmenistan's fondness for the construction of white marble buildings, and other vanity projects, is enough to give would-be foreign investors pause; but Turkish company Polimeks and Belarusian company Belgorkhimprom claim Turkmen authorities owe them hundreds of millions of dollars for work done in Turkmenistan and other companies have smaller financial claims.

Turkmenistan is in a dire economic crisis at the moment. The government had to scrap subsidies for water, gas, and electricity that the public had been receiving since the early 1990s; there are reported shortages of basic foods; unemployment could be as high as 60 percent; banks are barely functioning; and hard currency is almost impossible to get.

Berdymukhammedov does not appear to have any easy path to getting out of this financial mess anytime soon without drastically changing policies he has pursued since becoming Turkmenistan's leader at the end of 2006.

Berdymukhammedov has shown no inclination to change his policies, so Turkmenistan is likely to

continue to be run as it has been and the economic woes are likely to continue to multiply.

But Uzbekistan has started to turn itself around and is now creeping forward.

And all it took was a change in policies, and a change in leadership.

Kaynak/Source: