

THE EVOLUTION OF NATIONAL IDENTITY IN UZBEKISTAN: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

Uzbekistan had many colonial rulers throughout its history before the establishment of the independent Republic of Uzbekistan in 1991. Overall, Arabs, Mongols and Russians, as colonial rulers, have had a great impact on the formation of the Uzbek culture and nation with both positive and negative influences.

Allayarov Sardor Frunzeyevich

Graduate Student, Faculty of Political Sciences and Law, University of Szeged, Szeged, Hungary

Uzbekistan is one of the countries of Central Asia, surrounded by five neighboring countries,¹ with about 2500 years of historical heritage, meaning that the country has come a long way before becoming an independent state (Watt & Wilson, 2021). The earliest records of the word 'Uzbek' dates back to the 11th-12th centuries. It initially originated among the Turkish tribes who lived in the territory called "Movara ounnahr."² Today, there are many assumptions about the origin and the meaning of the word 'Uzbek,' expressed by Western and Eastern scholars. The most probable hypothesis is that the word 'Uzbek' connotes self-sufficient or self-governed/ruled (Sagdullayev, 2019). It can be concluded that the emergence of the proto-Uzbek nation started from the beginning of the 13th century, in the period of the Golden Horde khanate.

The first Uzbek statehoods were organized in the form of khanates, emirates, or empires. The culture and values of the Uzbek nation developed differently in each khanate or emirate. Many historical studies identify Amir Timur, who founded the Timurid Empire in the 14th century, as the founder of the early Uzbek statehood (Meri, 2006). He introduced 'Timurid Renaissance' based on Islamic ideals, as a result of which arts, literature, science and architecture developed significantly in the territory of Timurid Empire.³ At those times, large-scale projects were carried out throughout the empire, including creating religious centers and Islamic mosques, architectural

buildings such as Registan Complex.⁴ We can date back the initial stages of the establishment of Uzbek culture and identity to that period. In addition to the Timurid Empire, several khanates and emirates, such as the Khanate of Bukhara, the Khanate of Khiva and the Khanate of Kokand, too, played important roles in the evolution of Uzbek statehood between 16th and 20th centuries. At the beginning of the 19th century, the Russian Empire's conquest of Central Asia began. Bukhara and Khiva managed to retain their independence, but the Soviet invasion in 1924 led to the downfall of the monarchies and to the establishment of the Soviet power of the quasi-independent people's republics of Khorezm and Bukhara, which were integrated into the USSR as Uzbekistan Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR).

The Evolution of Uzbek Culture

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During the Soviet Union times, schools were an integral part of Uzbek ideology, that is, a set of ideas, beliefs and principles to build Uzbek statehood and society,



which includes cultural, traditional, religious and historical aspects. However, the Soviets had a revolutionary project for colonized countries based on Marxist-Leninist ideas that meant to substitute national identity by class identity. The Soviet pedagogy intended to consolidate loyalty to the Soviet Union and eliminate the idea of independent nation. The Soviets gave the name of Russian heroes to places and streets in Uzbekistan SSR. Also, Russian-language schools were established, and many existing schools switched to teaching in Russian. One of the radical educational reforms was a misinterpretation of historical events, such as describing Uzbek historical heroes in a negative manner and giving importance the power and role of the Soviet Union in the history. Even, there were special songs and dances honoring the Soviet leaders like “Lenin is Our Honored Grandfather” (Keller, 2007). The denationalization was clearly shown even in the state symbols, for instance, the Uzbek SSR flag, the state emblem and the anthem. As such, Soviet ideology and pedagogy were a major obstacle against the development of Uzbek national and religious identity.

In general, transforming family and social lives were important objectives of the Soviet Union. As mostly all

Uzbeks were Muslims, they highly respected the Islamic principles in social life. The Soviets, however, aimed to introduce a ‘soviet lifestyle’ in Uzbek territory. The most notable aspect of the ‘soviet lifestyle’ was gender equality and the participation of women in social life. Accordingly, soviet policies were directed at fostering women’s participation in political and economic life. Indeed, the family relationship and women’s role and status transformed considerably during the Soviet times (Lapidus, 1978). The mission started with the unveiling campaign in which thousands of Muslim women gathered to cast off their “paranji” on 8 March 1927 (Kamp, 2006). The Soviets also created institutions to control and prevent polygyny, early marriage, forced marriage and unregistered marriage. As a result of these policies, participation of women in social life, education and taking part in the work force outside the home developed during the times of the Soviet Union.

The Independence of Uzbekistan

Although the Soviet Union established the Uzbekistan Soviet Socialist Republic (Uzbekistan SSR), hence pre-

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sented the Uzbeks a statehood, there was a huge political and economic dependence on the Soviet Union. All affairs relating to governing were directed from the center, that is, Moscow. Yet, in late 1980's, Uzbek nationalism and religious enlightenment began gaining further supporters especially during the so-called Afghanistan War in 1979-1989. There had been several specific reasons that boosted national resurrection and anti-Soviet resistance.

- **Severe discrimination and cruelty against Jadidists⁶ and unfair treatment of Uzbeks.** The Jadidists denounced improper policies and measures of the Soviet government and sought to establish the notion of Uzbek nationalism and independent statehood among the Uzbek with their writings about history, literature and education. These actions were negatively received by the Soviet government. As a result, many Uzbek intellectuals were exiled to remote areas and many were even sentenced to death.

- **Imposition of cotton monoculture.** As a result of strong emphasis on cotton production, the majority of the population including school children were engaged in the cotton-farming. Working hours were significantly long and working conditions were extremely difficult.

- **Grievances against the state language.** At that time, the official state language was Russian. This caused significant complaints among Uzbek people. Some intellectuals demanded from Moscow to declare the Uzbek language as the state language.

- **Suppression of Islamic traditions.** Many religious centers or places were closed and most of them were turned into workshops. Dressing up according to Islamic rules was prohibited for women. Many religious practices and Islamic rituals were banned (Sara, 2006).

These issues were the main troubles that directed people towards a pro-independence stance. However, gaining independence had not been an easy endeavor to achieve. Most local government officials working in the state system were in favor of remaining in the Soviet Union instead of secession. But, the president of Uzbekistan SSR, Islam Karimov, with his vision of Uzbekistan as an independent country, implemented various reforms towards independence in a systematic way. One of the important

steps that was taken was the adoption of the Law on the State Language in October 1989. In line with this law, teaching in Russian language was gradually reduced in favor of the Uzbek language. Uzbek-language literature textbooks were created to teach in educational institutions. In 1990, presidency was established as a fundamentally new stage in the process of independence. The Uzbek nationalists were given chance and priority in appointments to official posts (Karimov, 1992). Eventually, the state sovereignty of Uzbekistan was declared on 20 June 1990, and on 31 August 1991 Uzbekistan was declared as an independent state. Islam Karimov was elected as the first president of independent Uzbekistan (Tesch, 2021).

The Role of Nationalism and Religion in Uzbek Policymaking

Nationalism plays an important role in Uzbek policymaking. National identity and culture are taken into account while formulating policies in social, economic and political spheres. Despite that, the first and the second presidents of Uzbekistan, I.A. Karimov and Sh.M. Mirziyoyev, respectively, have developed diverse practices in the governance.

The first President Islam Karimov ruled the country from 1991 to 2016. From the early years of his administration, he focused on ensuring political stability and nation-building. He sustained a policy of nation building that heavily relied on the idea of Uzbek nationhood dating back to the Timurid Empire. The Karimov regime based its nation building policies on what he labeled as traditional national values, such as respect for family, elders and traditions (Laruelle, 2021). President Karimov expressed his stance as: "the ideology must first reflect the spiritual particularity and uniqueness of the sacred traditions and aspirations of our nation, formulated over many centuries and millennia."

In this process, mass media and schools were instrumentalized. In 1994, a television channel and publishing house called Ma'naviyat (Spirituality) were established. Then, special classes called Ma'naviyat and Ma'rifat (Spirituality and Enlightenment) were introduced in school and university programs. The post of Deputy Director (Dean) for Spirituality and Enlightenment was established in higher and secondary special education institutions; whose responsibility was to monitor the teaching discipline and the clothing of young men and women. In 2004, Republic Centre for Spiritual Propaganda was created. One of the important tasks of this organization was to carry out propaganda to enhance 'ideological immunity' of the population.



The New Uzbekistan under the Second President Shavkat Mirziyoyev

After the death of Karimov, Shavkat Mirziyoyev assumed presidency in 2016 by winning the presidential election with 88,6% of the votes (The Economist, 2016). From the first days of his presidency, Mirziyoyev initiated the Strategy of Actions on Further Development of Uzbekistan in 2017–2021, which prioritized reforms on five areas, namely, economy, judiciary and law, religion, international relations, and societal matters (Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2017). The Strategy set the framework of modernizing and liberalizing the economy, as well as the society. With this strategy a set of actions were initiated to reinvent Uzbekistan. In a short span of time, Uzbekistan was transformed from a closed country to an open one.

Mirziyoyev has a different approach to governance and national identity. Unlike President Karimov, he is critical of the understanding of ‘ideological immunity’ and embarks on liberal nationalism. For him, ‘ideological immunity’ initiated by President Karimov does not correspond to the current socio-economic development trends and tendencies. To build effective and direct communication with the population, the year of 2017 was declared as the “Year of Dialogue with the People and Human Interests” with the goal of creating mechanisms for people to express their views and concerns directly to governmental bodies (UZA, 2016).

The governing style of President Mirziyoyev is based on principles and values, such as liberalism, institution-

alism, human dignity, rule of law, freedom of expression, and democracy. The independence of the mass media and freedom of expression were guaranteed within the country by introducing new laws. The legislative reforms were intensified considerably within the guidelines of the Strategy of Actions initiated by the president. Obliging government officials and politicians to demonstrate greater openness, justice and accountability is one of the characteristics of President Mirziyoyev’s regime. No other speeches of President Mirziyoyev would clearly represent the main purposes and objectives of this era than his speech during the inaugural address:

In further deepening the democratic reforms and implementing the concept of developing a civil society, we believe that, as it was before, the citizens’ self-governance bodies – mahallas, as well as the non-state, non-profit organizations, free and impartial mass media will take an active place. In implementing the important principle, namely, “From a strong state to a strong civil society”, above all, we will lean upon the strength and capabilities of such social institutions.

Under Mirziyoyev’s presidency, the approach to nation building is based on new constructive ideas, such as “New Uzbekistan – new worldview,” “the third renaissance,” and “for human dignity”. Here, it should be noted that the construction of a ‘new Uzbekistan’ is not just a subjective wish or choice, but a fundamental historical requirement. Put differently, it is an objective necessity that meets the age-old aspirations of Uzbek people which fully meets its national interests (MIA, 2021). ‘New Uzbek-

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istan' is being built on the principles of friendly cooperation with the world community, adhering to universally recognized norms and principles of democracy, human rights and freedoms. The ultimate goal is to create a free and prosperous life for Uzbek people.

As for economic reforms, from his early days in office, Mirziyoyev calibrated his focus on reducing unemployment and increasing the welfare of the population. In this regard, special state programs have been introduced to boost business and entrepreneurial activities in Uzbekistan, such as "Every family is an entrepreneur" or "Youth is our future." Enabling bank loans with low interest rates is a policy adopted for this end. Uzbekistan under the administration of Mirziyoyev is on the way of establishing a new outlook towards the economy and a totally new form of economic relations.

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Some of the eye catching results of Mirziyoyev's policies could be highlighted as follows:

- Human Development Index value of Uzbekistan was 0,720 in 2019; by comparison it was about 0,599 between 2000 and 2019 (UNDP, 2020);
- Poverty rate has gone down in recent years that the percentage of the population living below the national poverty line was 11 % in 2019 (ADB, 2021);
- The amount of FDI inflows of USD 2.3 billion was nearly four times higher in 2019 than in 2018 (The UNCTAD, 2020);
- Uzbekistan was considered as the "most developed country" in 2019 by the Economist (2019).

Conclusion

Religion, history, language and external influences played and still plays an important role in the formation of Uzbek national ideology and national identity. It would be expedient to connect the starting point of the Uzbek statehood with the emergence of Timurid Empire. We can see the characteristics of Timurid Empire in public administration and the principles of nation-building of khanates and emirates, even in the reforms and policies of the present-day independent Uzbekistan. The Soviet occupation of the Central Asia had a negative impact on the national identity of Uzbekistan at that time and radically changed the socio-economic life. After gaining independence, the two presidents of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov and Shavkat Mirziyoyev, ruled the country in a completely different way. The first President governed the country in an isolated way through less cooperation with international actors. The second President Mirziyoyev, on the other hand, takes on a liberal approach towards further socio-economic development and aims to build a new Uzbek identity based on universal values. As a result, under the administration of the second President, there have been radical reforms in jurisdiction, politics, economy and society, which aim at increasing the welfare of Uzbek nation.

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Endnotes

- 1 Neighboring countries are Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Turkmenistan.
- 2 Movaraounnahr refers mainly to the several regions of Central Asian countries; outside of Turkmenistan and the southern parts of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan.
- 3 The territory of Timurid Empire refers to modern-day Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Iran, the southern region of the Caucasus, Iraq, Kuwait, Afghanistan as well as parts of contemporary Russia, India, Pakistan, Syria and Turkey.
- 4 Registan Complex is a square in Samarkand that consists of three madrasahs, which represent Islamic architecture.
- 5 “Paranji” is a special clothes that covers the whole body of a woman. When women wear “paranji”, it is a must to cover the face with black net.
- 6 Jadidist is a special term used to describe Uzbek national reformers in the time of the Soviet Union. The word jadidist simply means intellectual.