



# EXPLORING UZBEKISTAN'S POTENTIAL POLITICAL TRANSITION

Alexey Malashenko



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# Contents

<b>About the Author</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>Summary</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>The President</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>The Struggle for the President</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>The President's Daughter</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Other Players in the Struggle for the Presidency</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Clans as a Political Factor</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Transition and Islam</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>External Actors</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Conclusions</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Notes</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Carnegie Moscow Center</b>	<b>21</b>



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## About the Author

**Alexey Malashenko** is the co-chair of the Carnegie Moscow Center's Religion, Society, and Security Program. Malashenko also taught at the Higher School of Economics from 2007 to 2008 and was a professor at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations from 2000 to 2006. Malashenko is a professor of political science as well as a member of the RIA Novosti advisory council. He serves on the editorial boards of the journals *Central Asia and the Caucasus* and *Acta Eurasica* and the newsletter *Russia and the Muslim World* and is a board member of the International Federation for Peace and Conciliation.



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## Summary

Islam Karimov has essentially been in power in Uzbekistan since 1989. Rumors abound that Karimov will not take part in the country's next presidential election in 2015, but it seems likely that he will participate. If he does, he is guaranteed to win. Though it is still too early to talk about the chances specific candidates have of replacing Karimov, it is important to look closely at the current ruling elite and the president's possible successors to see where the country might be heading.

### Possible Successors

- The president's eldest daughter, Gulnara Karimova, and the National Security Service chief, Rustam Inoyatov, are seen as the main actors in the struggle to gain the presidency after Karimov's departure, though there are a number of other potential candidates from both Uzbekistan's powerful clans and the government.
- The president's daughter is one of the richest people in the country. She has conducted local and foreign business transactions in violation of both national and European laws, expecting her father's protection. This undermined Uzbekistan's image, drawing father and daughter into conflict.
- Inoyatov is Uzbekistan's second most influential figure. He dismantled Gulnara's business empire and placed her under house arrest at the president's behest. Some experts believe that he is staking a claim to Karimov's seat and considers the president's daughter his main rival.
- Two other potential candidates are the current prime minister, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, and the deputy prime minister and finance minister, Rustam Azimov.

### Conclusions

- Karimov will decide when and to whom to transfer power. The president recently proposed constitutional changes that would give some presidential powers to the legislative and executive branches. This may signify his gradual exit from power, but the changes could also provide Karimov with legal grounds for running for president again.



## 2 | Exploring Uzbekistan's Potential Political Transition

- Inoyatov is likely to remain one of the key players during the power transition. Gulnara Karimova has little public support and is unlikely to succeed as an opposition figure or to be the successor.
- External actors are likely to have limited influence on the transition.
- Regardless of who emerges as the next president, regional clans and their political representatives will have a significant influence on the balance of power in the country.
- The eventual power transition is most likely to be peaceful, with interest groups and clans coming to an agreement to avoid instability. Yet, if a clan is dissatisfied with the new arrangement, it may appeal for public support and provoke social protests with an Islamist core.

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## The President

Islam Karimov has been in power in Uzbekistan since 1989, when he became the first secretary of Uzbekistan's Communist Party. Subsequently, he has been elected president three times—in 1991, 2000, and 2007. In 2014, Karimov proposed constitutional changes that would transfer some presidential powers to the legislative and executive branches.

Opinions about the move are divided. Some believe that Karimov's proposal marks the start of his gradual exit from power and interpret it as a sign suggesting that he will not take part in the 2015 presidential election. Others see it as a tactical move, which seeks to legitimate the continuation of Karimov's rule, since the constitutional changes that limit an individual to two terms in office would allow him to run for president again.<sup>1</sup> It seems more probable that this is a tactical move.

But even if Karimov actually intends to relinquish some of his powers to the government and parliament, and even if he plans to retire, he will still remain an indisputable leader, albeit unofficially this time. Thus, the question of a successor remains open, and this person will be effectively appointed by Karimov himself.

The prospects and time of the power transition largely depend on Karimov's physical condition. His health is the subject of some controversy. For instance, the renowned Uzbek opposition activist Muhammad Salih believes it is far from perfect, claiming that the president suffered several heart-related episodes and a massive heart attack in 2013. Many of those who met Karimov in the second half of 2013 remarked on his sickly appearance. For his part, Karimov never hinted at his poor health, and his daughter Lola wished her father's health to every seventy-five-year-old in a recent BBC interview.<sup>2</sup>

In recent years, Uzbekistan's potential power transition has been generating serious analytical discourse, numerous rumors, and much speculation. The question of who will take the reins is of particular interest. The president's eldest daughter, Gulnara, and the sixty-nine-year-old National Security Service (NSS) chief, Rustam Inoyatov, are seen as the main actors in the struggle to gain the presidency after Karimov's departure, though there are a number of other potential candidates from both Uzbekistan's powerful clans and the government.

Who will actually come out on top remains unclear. The true inner workings of the Uzbek ruling elite are a closely guarded secret. Although the parties to the future transition prepare for it to the extent possible, they do not know how it will happen and where it will lead. Experts at the Moscow-based International Institute for Political Expertise conclude that no special arrangements for a successor have been developed in Uzbekistan as of today.<sup>3</sup> However, various political factions are vying for power away from the immediate ranks of the ruling circle.

Though it is still too early to talk about the chances specific candidates have of gaining Karimov's seat, it is important to look closely at the country's current ruling elite and the president's possible successors because leadership change in Uzbekistan could have a substantial effect on the situation in the Central Asian region. The next leader could also significantly impact Uzbekistan's relations with external players—China, Russia, and the United States. Changes at the top may bring Uzbekistan closer to the *ummah*—the global community of Islamic peoples—in addition to the Turkic-speaking community that includes inhabitants of Turkey and Central Asian countries as well as some minorities (including Tatars) living in the Russian Federation and Afghanistan.

## The Struggle for the President

The current situation has one distinct characteristic: the covert struggle to succeed Karimov is also the *struggle for Karimov himself*. Inoyatov has been at the helm of the NSS since 1995 and is considered the second most influential political figure in Uzbekistan after Karimov. He concentrated enormous powers in his hands and has been completely unopposed since 2005, when his rival, then internal minister Zakir Almatov, was held responsible for events in the city of Andijan—a revolt organized by Islamists in which Uzbek government troops killed protesters.

With his KGB training, Inoyatov has ensured that NSS agents penetrate every segment of Uzbek society. He keeps a file for every member of the country's elite, including those in Karimov's inner circle and his family. In addition to overseeing state-run institutions, the NSS structures control commercial banks and enterprises.<sup>4</sup> Some sources close to Karimov claim that the president has complete confidence in Inoyatov and entrusts him with the most complex and delicate assignments.

However, Rustam Inoyatov is not a mere executor of the president's orders. He also has his own ambitions. Institute for War and Peace Reporting analyst Inga Sikorskaya believes that he ultimately seeks to take control of the country.<sup>5</sup> According to Uzbek political scientist Kurban Yumashev, it is possible that “the country is being prepared for a military takeover headed by the force structures.”<sup>6</sup> Muhammad Salih expresses a similar view: “Inoyatov is able to isolate the president from his entourage, hence a significant number of governing mechanisms is in the hands of the NSS chief.”<sup>7</sup> According to information cited by *Forbes*

*Kazakhstan*, Inoyatov is trying to purge the NSS personnel loyal to Karimov, going as far as attempting to physically eliminate them.<sup>8</sup> While it is impossible to ascertain the extent to which this information is accurate, it is certainly true that the top NSS brass is fiercely loyal to Inoyatov.

Inoyatov is doing everything in his power to become completely indispensable to his patron. He also uses his power to influence Karimov by selecting what information the president may receive. Strict control over the information received by country's leader also existed during the Soviet era. In today's world, however, such control can hardly be absolute. Islam Karimov, who is known to be an inquisitive type, receives information from a wide variety of sources. He thus has nothing in common with the aged leaders of the late Soviet period. It is virtually impossible to block his access to information completely.

Inoyatov is essentially securing his central role at the time of power transition. At a minimum, this will guarantee his political future under any new leader. All of the current political figures are wary of the NSS chief, whose control over information will be one of the factors enabling him to play a key role during the power redistribution and cabinet reshuffle. It is possible that local politicians fear a repeat of the Russian scenario in which former KGB operatives all but monopolized their grip on power. A similar outcome would upset Uzbekistan's still strong clan power structure, posing serious problems for the country.

But the powerful security chief hardly covets the presidential post. He does not really need it. It appears that Karimov's trust and acceptance of Rustam Inoyatov to a large extent springs from Inoyatov's lack of visible presidential ambitions. He prefers to remain in the shadows, rarely appears in public, and clearly dislikes media attention. He is charismatic in a way that is not immediately obvious but nevertheless felt by the public. One can liken Inoyatov to the Soviet KGB head Yuri Andropov, who was not very noticeable but was widely known to be very powerful. Andropov was both feared and trusted, and many Soviet citizens believed him to be the only person capable of restoring order in the country.

## The President's Daughter

Some experts continue to see Gulnara Karimova as Inoyatov's opponent in the struggle for the presidential post. Gulnara, whose business and political role underwent cardinal changes in 2013–2014, is at the center of political intrigue.

Gulnara Karimova is one of the richest people in Uzbekistan. Her estimated net worth is \$2 billion, and her business empire extends to various economic spheres. She owns or controls several foreign-based companies. The largest one of them is a Zurich-based conglomerate, Zeromax, which Karimova used to make multi-million-dollar cotton, oil, and gas deals (dubbed "schemes" by her detractors). In 2008, Zeromax's operational expenses were \$3.298 billion, and the company

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failed to pay \$500 million in taxes on its export revenues. Zeromax went bankrupt in 2010.

Karimova is actively working in the jewelry business and owns the Guli designer clothing line. She also tried her hand in show business, starring in a music video featuring the controversial French actor Gerard Depardieu. She founded Uzbekistan's Forum for Arts and Culture, which sought to attract creative youth. In Moscow, Gulnara Karimova hosted receptions and banquets frequented by influential Russian politicians, including those close to the Kremlin.

Karimova controlled the information and communication business, allowing certain companies to operate in Uzbekistan while banishing others. In 2012, she ordered that Uzundrobita, a leading player on the local media market and a subsidiary of MTS, the Russian telecommunications giant, be stripped of its license and expelled from the country. Its general director, Radik Dautov, a citizen of the Russian Federation, was arrested. Dautov's wife, Tamara, wrote to Vladimir Putin asking him to investigate this incident. MTS's losses totaled \$1 billion. Uzbek businessmen know how dangerous competing against Karimova is. While in business, she pursued her own interests, sometimes resorting to illegal means to bankrupt several media companies.

Gulnara Karimova's ambitions also extended to foreign policy. A Harvard graduate and a PhD in political science, she had a diplomatic career. Beginning in 2010 she was the ambassador to Spain, and she was also a deputy foreign minister for international cooperation in cultural and humanitarian affairs. Until the middle of 2013, she also served as Uzbekistan's permanent representative to the United Nations and other international organizations.

Being the president's daughter, she considered herself invincible. In fact, family members and children of political leaders frequently become very influential political figures in the post-Soviet space. Heydar Aliev's son Ilham inherited Azerbaijan's presidency; Nursultan Nazarbayev's daughter Dariga was at the top in Kazakhstan for a long period of time; and Kyrgyz business was controlled by President Kurmanbek Bakiyev's son Maksim. While the fate of these presidential offspring is now quite clear—some of them are in power, while others are charged with crimes—Gulnara Karimova's future looks less certain.

Completely unaccountable (she did not even report to her own father), Gulnara has started to aggravate the Uzbek elite, the middle class, and especially the business community. She is especially disliked by the force structures, which seek to establish total control over society and are responsible for the country's security. Occasional rumors of her designs on the presidential seat fueled the discontent. The rumors often came from abroad and were not well substantiated.

Karimova's business practices also drew complaints from her Western partners. She has been accused of money laundering and ties to transnational organized crime. In late 2013, her domestic partner, Rustam Madumarov—the registered owner of Karimova's property—was implicated in a number of criminal cases in France, Latvia, Sweden, and Switzerland. Switzerland froze bank

accounts associated with Karimova's business. The case of TeliaSonera, a Swedish-Finnish mobile telephone service provider, generated the strongest negative reaction. The company paid Karimova \$300 million to enter Uzbekistan's telecommunications market. The money was transferred to a small Gibraltar company in the name of Gayane Avakyan, Karimova's associate. The investigation of the TeliaSonera affair commenced in 2012. In 2013, the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project added Gulnara Karimova to its "Person of the Year" list. The corrupt and even criminal nature of business dealings conducted by the president's daughter sullied Uzbekistan's business reputation abroad.

Uzbek force structures had been carefully collecting information related to Gulnara's business and then furnished it to her father. NSS chief Rustam Inoyatov was acting as both the protector of state security and the defender of the president's reputation and popularity. He had been increasingly shielding the president from Gulnara. It is unlikely that he feared her potential presidency, but she certainly posed a threat to his authority and, by extension, to his influence on the transition of power.

Karimova had a few chances to defeat Inoyatov. In her struggle against the NSS chief, she started portraying herself as a champion of social justice and even an advocate for human rights (she was proceeding cautiously and had no direct contacts with human rights activists). It is notable that she refused to be interviewed by the Fergana.ru Information Agency, which frequently publishes critical analyses of the situation in the country by experts and opposition activists.

Gulnara's writings appeared on the Proza.ru website, which is blocked in Uzbekistan, under the pseudonym of Marcus Aurelius. She fiercely criticized the ruling elite, particularly Inoyatov and Prime Minister Mirziyoyev. She accused the latter of inviting prostitutes and promiscuous government employees into his "royal chambers."<sup>9</sup> Another subject of Gulnara's criticism is her mother, Tatiana Akbarovna Karimova; their relations have been long and irreparably damaged. Gulnara denies her authorship of the texts, but many in Uzbekistan strongly believe her to be the author.

In the middle of 2013, Karimova repeatedly criticized the course of the Uzbek government, which is essentially her father's course. She assailed his migration policy, saying that migrants are unfortunate people who are forced to leave their homeland to help their families survive. She questioned the official employment statistics for the period 2005–2011: 5 million new jobs were reportedly created, 60 percent of them in small and midsize businesses. Karimova also mentioned the poor health of Uzbekistan's citizens, which supposedly made them shorter. Describing her trip to the historic city of Kokand in her Twitter account, she remarked that she did not see a single public restroom during her travels (I took the same trip once and can confirm the accuracy of her observation).

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**Karimova cannot succeed as an opposition figure since she has little popular support.**

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At the end of November 2013, Gulnara visited the headquarters of Uzbekistan's Interior Ministry to secure the release of students arrested for frequenting "antigovernment" websites. The detained students participated in the "Kelajak Ovozi" youth contest, which attracted Uzbekistan's student elite. Karimova wrote that the authorities erred in arresting the students, which may lead to political confrontation.

However, Karimova cannot succeed as an opposition figure, since she has little popular support. By criticizing the top echelon of the elite, she is also depriving herself of influential political patrons. She cannot really expect to restore her credibility with the West, either. Americans and Europeans sympathize with genuine human rights activists who have a proven track record of advocating for human rights. Nevertheless, as a victim of persecution at the hands of the force structures and Inoyatov himself, Karimova may get some sympathy from the opposition activists living in the West. Well-known opposition figure Bakhodir Choriyev urged no rejoicing over Gulnara's downfall, since it indicates that "Karimov's power is now in the hands of the NSS."<sup>10</sup> But the opposition does not see her as their ideological partner, let alone their ally.

Islam Karimov grew tired of his daughter's unseemly behavior and decided in mid-2013 to punish her. Gulnara was removed from her ambassadorial post in Spain and stripped of her diplomatic immunity, which will complicate her visits to a number of European countries. She was planning to visit the United States but was not allowed to leave the country. Her TV and radio stations were silenced, and the Forum for Arts and Culture was shut down. Her team was also affected: her cousin and her business aides were arrested, and her security chief fled the country.

Many experts on Central Asia believe that Gulnara Karimova's "opposition work" was not the reason for her falling-out with her father. Rather, the conflict between the father and his eldest daughter concerns the redistribution of enormous financial flows as well as business and political influence. Tired of Gulnara's business escapades, the president realized "how seriously his daughter's recent behavior harmed Uzbekistan's reputation."<sup>11</sup> She became "too heavy a burden for the aging authoritarian president."<sup>12</sup> Thus, Western partners were informed that the criminal aspects of Karimova's activities should not be equated with official state policy; on the contrary, Uzbekistan abides by international norms and regulations. French authorities immediately reacted to the Karimova affair by conducting searches on Gulnara's property, which included her Paris apartment. The dialogue between the European Union and Uzbekistan has traditionally been problematic,<sup>13</sup> not only because of economic cooperation but mostly concerning democracy and human rights in Uzbekistan, and Karimov does not want any additional complications, so he took strong action.

The conflict should also not be seen as a struggle inside the ruling family. "The Karimov clan" is effectively represented by one person—President Karimov.



Unlike some other neighboring countries (such as Tajikistan and until recently Kyrgyzstan), there is no consolidated ruling family in Uzbekistan. The fact that Gulnara has long been at odds with her mother and younger sister Lola has practically no bearing on the country's political life.

Lola Karimova-Tillyayeva, Uzbekistan's permanent delegate to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, is occasionally (albeit very rarely) mentioned as a possible presidential candidate. For instance, human rights activist Matabar Tadjibayeva subscribes to this view.<sup>14</sup> However, such an outcome is very unlikely.

Unless something extraordinary takes place, the "clan" beyond Islam Karimov will quietly pass the time outside of the country's borders, although Gulnara Karimova may experience problems abroad in connection with her questionable business practices in Europe.

Gulnara Karimova's drama should not be viewed as the first stage in Uzbekistan's power transition. It looks more like an early test of strength, primarily on the part of Rustam Inoyatov.

Indeed, the crackdown on Gulnara is a victory on the part of Rustam Inoyatov. Therefore, Karimova has every reason to lay the blame at the feet of the NSS chief. She believes that he is eliminating her as a rival and is intending to come to power himself. "Inoyatov is struggling for power already," Gulnara stated on her website. She also wrote about the attempts on her life.

Inoyatov did not score a decisive victory, and Karimova remains his rival, although much weaker. Islam Karimov punished his daughter quite seriously, but he did not sever his ties with her completely, in a sense leaving some room for her in the country's political life.

This arrangement perfectly blends into Uzbekistan's political landscape, where Karimov masterfully plays the role of a mediator. It is quite possible that he intentionally let the Gulnara affair reach the boiling point so that he would have a chance to suddenly curb the all-powerful Inoyatov, thus showing him who the real head of the country is. Daniil Kislov of Fergana.ru news agency asserts that "the president controls the situation. He is known for easily eliminating any official, minister or a close associate if he stopped working for his [the president's] benefit."<sup>15</sup> Kislov is certain that "Karimov still keeps the situation in his khanate under complete control"<sup>16</sup> and views the scandal as a "theatrical production" directed by Islam Karimov himself in order to demonstrate his power and strength.

The Karimovs' crisis culminated in late 2013 (it was rumored that the father slapped his daughter on the cheek, although more informed sources refuted this allegation). Soon after that, father and daughter appeared to reconcile, which was evidenced by the gift Gulnara presented to her father for his 76th birthday—she sang him an aria from Camille Saint-Saens's opera *Samson and Delilah*.

However, the peace turned out to be short-lived: in the middle of February, special services stormed into Karimova's apartment and conducted a search there.



In the course of the search, they acted crudely and, by some accounts, even used physical force. As a result, Karimova and her daughter Iman (a U.S. citizen) found themselves held under house arrest. No one can predict how Islam and Gulnara Karimovs' relations will develop in the future.

## Other Players in the Struggle for the Presidency

Some people in the president's inner circle, who bear greater responsibility for the situation in the country than others, can also be put on the short list of potential successors. The two other potential candidates are current Prime Minister Shavkat Mirziyoyev<sup>17</sup> (he has held his position since 2003) and Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Rustam Azimov.

### The Prime Minister and the Deputy

The 56-year-old Mirziyoyev is known for his personal loyalty to the president. It is believed that he can be the best guarantor of preserving the Karimov family assets if he is to become president. As a prime minister, Mirziyoyev has earned some popularity with the people by improving agriculture. Some analysts believe him to be the protégé of Inoyatov's security services.<sup>18</sup> Mirziyoyev is a distant relative of influential Russian billionaire Alisher Usmanov. This connection can be interpreted as a sort of information channel and a possible instrument of Russia's influence on Uzbekistan's balance of power. But Alisher Usmanov is first and foremost a member of the Russian business community and does not appear interested in positioning himself as an actor on the Uzbek political stage.

Prime Minister Mirziyoyev comes from the Bukhara-Samarkand clan, which provides him with significant support. Some call him a Tajik; others use the more cautious label of "Tajik speaker." In any event, his fluency in Tajik can be considered another factor that brings him closer to President Karimov.

However, Mirziyoyev's educational background is lacking. He graduated from the low-ranked Tashkent Institute of Irrigation and Agricultural Mechanization. Perhaps this fact explains his lack of informal contacts with the Western-minded younger generation of the Uzbek elite.

The 55-year-old deputy prime minister and finance minister, Rustam Azimov, can boast a more prestigious biography. Azimov is a son of a renowned scientist, a member of the Uzbek Academy of Sciences. He graduated from Tashkent State University with a degree in history (besides, he obtained a degree from Tashkent Irrigation Institute). From 1992 to 1998, he worked at the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and chaired the National Bank for Foreign Economic Activity. He has been first deputy prime minister since 2005 and is considered Uzbekistan's best expert in finance. Azimov comes from the Tashkent clan, which actually has little bearing on his political career prospects. Just like

his patron, Islam Karimov, he belongs to the extra-clan (or supra-clan) generation of the Uzbek elite.

Azimov enjoys the support of Defense Minister Kabul Berdiyev and Rustam Inoyatov. However, support from the military means little in Uzbekistan's political intrigues (this is a major difference between the Central Asian countries and the Arab or South Asian states). But no Uzbek politician can refuse the support of the force structures. Azimov's problems with Ilak Yuli Bank, which he owns, were solved thanks to Inoyatov's support after he was accused of illegalities in 2012 to 2013.

### Other Players

This short list is missing names from the Ferghana clan. At this point, Ferghana politicians lack a charismatic figure; besides, their religious conservatism raises some concern. And Ferghana natives are less trusted after the Andijan events (although, as explained below, Andijan residents, in a sense, belong to a separate autonomous clan that has its own interests).

Uzbekistan's public politicians dwarf the more humble figures that have no chance of winning the presidential election but are capable of swaying public opinion, especially in case problems with the transfer of power arise. Jahangir Shosalimov is one such figure. His political activism peaked in the 1990s, when he supported Muhammad Salih—Karimov's main opponent—in the 1991 presidential elections. In the 2000s, Shosalimov criticized Islam Karimov and even attempted to run in the 2007 presidential elections, but he was foiled by the authorities. Shosalimov hopes to make another attempt during the 2015 elections. He operates under the slogan "From ineffective and harmful state governance to honest state governance."

Tojiboy-ugli (Abdulloh Mirsoyatov) is also preparing for a run in the upcoming election. His previous 2007 bid was unsuccessful. When his registration was denied on procedural grounds, Tojiboy-ugli filed numerous lawsuits against the Central Election Commission, the ruling Liberal Democratic Party, and even Islam Karimov himself. Naturally, no response was ever received. In 2006, Uzbekistan enacted legislation that requires every presidential candidate, including the independents, to run only as a candidate from a political party. Thus, Tojiboy-ugli dreams of transforming his "For Honest and Fair Elections" movement into a political party by 2015. Then he can run as its candidate. He believes that the country's political climate might improve, which will allow him to take this step.

One more activist who tried to participate in the 2007 presidential elections was Shukhrat Rustamov of Uzbekistan's Human Rights Alliance. He is known for defending the rights of individuals who have been wronged by officials. In 2007, anyone who gathered 300 signatures from the members of a citizens' action group could become a candidate. Rustamov, who enjoys a lot of popular support, especially in his own community, had an easy time doing it. However, police

officials visited the members of the group on the eve of their meeting, warning them about the possible consequences of supporting Rustamov. As a result, the meeting never took place. Rustamov was intimidated as well. It is still unclear how he is planning to participate in the next presidential campaign in 2015.

A U.S. émigré, Bakhodir Choriyev, who heads the Birdamlik Movement, may become another presidential candidate. He stresses that he advocates a nonviolent course of action, which is in a way reminiscent of the protests carried out by the Soviet dissident movement. For instance, his associates organized public gatherings in city squares, where they took group photos in front of government buildings with the Constitution of Uzbekistan in their hands.

Shosalimov, Tojiboy-ugli, Rustamov, and Choriyev do not directly participate in Uzbekistan's political life. They can be more aptly described as civic leaders. However, given the growing tensions and conflicts within the ruling class, the primary cast of political characters will have to take these individuals into account to some degree. It is worth noting that Gulnara Karimova has already tried to look for supporters among those discontented with the president's authoritarian methods.

### Potential Outcomes

Currently, there is no official discussion of presidential succession. Both Shavkat Mirziyoyev and Rustam Azimov are potential presidential hopefuls in theory only. Neither of them will dare even drop a hint of their possible interest in greater political prospects. The same is true of Rustam Inoyatov and to an even greater extent of Gulnara Karimova. Moreover, the most likely candidate for the top position in the eyes of local and foreign analysts could be easily sidelined and even disciplined for his real or imaginary political ambitions.

An unscientific poll conducted by the independent Uzbek sociologist Khayet Khan Nasreddinov sheds some light on the potential outcomes of an election. His acquaintances answered the poll questions for his article as a favor to him. Nasreddinov asked the people about the possible results of the 2015 presidential elections if the elections were free. According to the data he obtained, Islam Karimov would get 27.18 percent of the vote, Gulnara Karimova—11.41 percent, a force structure representative (in this case, Inoyatov – *A.M.*)—13.63 percent, Shavkat Mirziyoyev—10.82 percent, Rustam Azimov—5.71 percent. Opposition leaders come next on Nasreddinov's list: Bakhodir Choriyev would finish with 4.41 percent; Sanjar Umarov would get 2.61 percent, and Muhammad Salih—24.24 percent. Nasreddinov admits that his poll is hypothetical, and "people would vote differently during the actual elections."<sup>19</sup>

This informal, essentially unscientific poll can be viewed as a reflection of public sentiments. Although Uzbek citizens may not voice them in public, these sentiments can nevertheless affect the situation in the country. A case in point is the Soviet intelligentsia, especially its dissident segment, whose protest views appeared marginal and absolutely irrelevant during Soviet times. Nevertheless, it

was the nonconformists that were the driving force behind perestroika, which led to the Soviet collapse.

## Clans as a Political Factor

Regardless of who emerges as the next president, regional clans and their political representatives will have a significant influence on the balance of power in the country.

Analysts identify three to seven clans, including the Samarkand-Bukhara, Tashkent, Ferghana, Jizzakh, Surkhandarya-Kashkadarya, Khorezm, and Karakalpak clans. It is hard to come up with a more exact number, since the economic, kinship, and even geographic borders of the clans are quite blurred. According to one assessment, the Tashkent and Ferghana clans practically represent a single entity. On the other hand, the Tashkent and Ferghana factions have always been somewhat separate. In the last ten years, Tashkent was not very happy about the large influx of Ferghana residents who moved into the capital in an attempt to obtain important political positions. Another assessment identifies an additional Andijan clan within the Ferghana (Ferghana-Tashkent) clan. Some question the existence of the Jizzakh clan, which can also be seen as a part of the Tashkent clan. As for the Samarkand-Bukhara clan, one may focus on the rivalry between its Samarkand and Bukhara factions. There are also several smaller clans that do not exert significant influence on a nationwide scale.

Every clan has its own sphere of influence, though it is not entirely clear what influence each of the clans has on political life, given their varied classifications. Analysts from the International Institute for Political Expertise attempted to assess a clan's influence on a 10-point scale, with a score of 10 indicating a high degree of influence. The Samarkand-Bukhara clan received 8 points, Tashkent—7.5, Ferghana—6, Jizzakh—5, Surkhandarya-Kashkadarya (Surkash)—4.5, Khorezm—4, Karakalpak—2.5.<sup>20</sup> This appears tentative in light of supra-clan interests and interclan cooperation.

As of today, the Samarkand-Bukhara and Tashkent clans remain the most influential ones, as the International Institute for Political Expertise research bears out. Central Asia expert Andrei Grozin also adds the Ferghana clan to this category, albeit with some reservations.<sup>21</sup> For his part, Sergei Gorshkov believes that the Samarkand-Bukhara clan has been the only power hub since 1989.

The Tashkent clan gravitates toward economics and finance, as well as science and the arts. It is more European than the other clans. Samarkand natives are accustomed to being in power. The current president hails from the Samarkand clan. The Ferghana clan is known for its commitment to traditional values and has produced a number of spiritual leaders. In this respect, one cannot help drawing parallels with

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Tajikistan, where, as the adage goes, “Leninabad (Khujand) rules, Pamir dances, and Kulob guards.”

The last serious clash between the Tashkent and Samarkand-Bukhara clans occurred at the turn of 2000. It mostly manifested itself as a standoff between Jurabek Aminov of Samarkand (otherwise known as “The Gray Cardinal”) and Timur Aliev of Tashkent (“The Great Timur”), who also drew support from Ferghana natives.<sup>22</sup> Aliev’s supporters were confident that he would subsequently become the president of the country. But Islam Karimov put an end to the scuffle by banishing both

rivals from big politics and thus undermining the importance of the clan factor. The conflict between Tashkent’s Rustam Inoyatov and Samarkand’s Zakir Almatov, which flared up after the Andijan events, can hardly be considered an instance of interclan struggle. It was a duel between the heads of two security organizations, between two politicians, and neither of them asked “his” clan for assistance.

While clan divisions should not be overstated, one’s origin does continue to play a certain role in the distribution of administrative positions. But by and large, under Karimov, clans do not play a central role in the distribution of power. Karimov, whose Samarkand origin is still stressed by some political analysts (some also call him the head of both the Tashkent and Samarkand-Bukhara clans), has eliminated the clan approach to politics and unquestionably become the national leader. He does not deny the existence of clans and maintains a balance between them, for instance, by distributing power positions to Khorezm and Surkash representatives. At the same time, the president looks down on regional solidarity, believing that “clan struggle threatens the republic’s stability”<sup>23</sup> (apart from pure pragmatism, Karimov’s position can be explained by the fact that his own family line is not the most influential one in the Samarkand clan). It is personal loyalty that is most important to Karimov. He also often reshuffles his team, thus preventing its members from accumulating excessive power, and he instituted direct appointment of *khokims* (regional governors) for this very reason. Because of this, it will not be possible for presidents after Karimov to emphasize their clan affiliations.

It is also clear that, no matter how and when the transition of power takes place, the new president will not be as authoritative a national leader as Karimov is now. He will have a harder time mediating between clans, whose competition may escalate when political positions are distributed. Under such conditions, the role of the clan factor may increase for a period of time.

## Transition and Islam

As has frequently been the case in the past, public discontent may manifest itself in religious, Islamic form, which is typical of any Muslim country. While the main Islamic opposition force in Uzbekistan, Hizb-ut Tahrir al-Islami (the Islamic Liberation Party) is weaker today, and its activists are forced to live in neighboring countries and Russia, where there are possibly hundreds of them, the organization may spring back to life and take charge of the protest in the time of crisis, especially in the Ferghana Valley. Paradoxically, the force structures may take advantage of the growing activism on the part of the Islamic opposition; they may initially allow protest in its extreme form only to suppress it later, thus again demonstrating their ability to restore order.

The situation may escalate if the factions engaged in the transition of power prove unable to reach a quick settlement. In this case, one of the parties (especially the one that senses its own defeat) may resort to religious protest rhetoric in its appeal for public support.

## External Actors

External actors—China, Russia, and the United States in particular—are unlikely to play a significant role in Uzbekistan's power transition.

The pro-Russian lobby did not emerge in Uzbekistan. Actually, Moscow did not launch an organized effort to create it. The Kremlin hopes that Islam Karimov himself will ensure the continuation of Russian-Uzbek relations, but Karimov has initiated and consistently implemented a multi-vector foreign policy. While maintaining bilateral economic relations with Russia, Karimov strongly opposes Uzbekistan's participation in the Russian integration projects: the Customs Union and the Eurasian Union. He refrained from joining the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). In 2009, Tashkent failed to sign the agreement on the creation of a rapid reaction force within the CSTO framework.

There are no clearly Russia-oriented politicians among the potential presidential candidates. After the annexation of Crimea and the conflict between Russia and the West that followed, closer ties with Moscow may hinder the development of relations with the United States and Europe. Uzbekistan has already indirectly expressed its negative stance on the Kremlin's Ukraine policy by abstaining during the UN vote on its resolution on the Crimean annexation. Uzbekistan also outbid Russia on NATO cargo transit. Russia requested 50,000 euros per container, while Uzbekistan offered just 30,000 euros.<sup>24</sup> Respect for Russia's decisive moves along its Western borders is accompanied by fears of its growing ambitions along the entire perimeter of the post-Soviet space. Tashkent is even more unsettled by the quasi-Soviet rhetoric used by Moscow politicians and the red flags on Russian city squares. If this trend continues, Uzbekistan will continue drifting farther away from Russia under the next president.



Even today, Moscow's influence on Uzbekistan's internal politics is insignificant, and any attempts to influence the country's power transition can only trigger a negative reaction from the Uzbek ruling class. Thus, Russia is reduced to an observer's role in Uzbekistan's internal matters.

The United States exerts more influence on Uzbekistan's power transition, but its role also appears limited. There are Western-oriented politicians in Tashkent. Among them are Rustam Azimov and former foreign minister Sodiq Safoyev. The younger American- and European-educated high-ranking officials can also be considered part of the pro-American lobby. Their influence is growing; they are replacing their older Russian-speaking counterparts, thus creating a pro-Western atmosphere. While not forcing change, Washington is cautiously facilitating the evolution of the political landscape in accordance with its interests.

Tashkent was promised that it would receive some of the American military equipment after the coalition troop withdrawal from Afghanistan. Uzbekistan will become part of the main route for the cargo shipped from Afghanistan, according to the 2012 Northern Distribution Network agreement. "The US views the country's territory as most attractive for creating large regionally-significant transportation hubs and military installations (bases) that do not have to function on a permanent basis."<sup>25</sup> After the events in Ukraine, the interest in developing U.S.-Uzbek relations will be increasing, and the country's next president will do everything in his power to improve them.

For its part, China does not pay much attention to the question of who will become Uzbekistan's new leader. Beijing is certain that the new Uzbek leader will treat China as his country's stable, economically advantageous partner. Cooperation with China also insulates Uzbekistan from excessive pressure on the part of Russia and the United States. In this respect, Uzbekistan is no different from other countries in the region, which also treat the Chinese presence in the area as an inevitability. Besides, Beijing is likely to take a more active position mediating regional conflicts, which include the essential issue of the distribution of water resources, which Russia did not succeed in resolving.

## Conclusions

It is impossible to formulate any substantiated predictions on the power transition in Uzbekistan. In the run-up to the 2015 elections, Islam Karimov announced that he is ready to relinquish some of his powers to the parliament and government, which is in no way indicative of his weakness as a national leader. Should he decide to participate in another election, his victory is guaranteed.

The succession question is not yet on the agenda. An interim "dark horse" may emerge, allowing Karimov to retain the position of indisputable leader during the transition period and also making for a softer transition. None of the politicians mentioned in this article are guaranteed the presidential seat. Each of them rejects any mention of such a possibility.

Despite the covert competition among the politicians and regional clans, they are amenable to consensus and compromise. Otherwise, Uzbekistan will face social and political upheavals. The escalation of conflict will invigorate Islamic opposition.

However, contrary to the information circulated on the Internet (incidentally, it appears on non-Uzbek websites), Uzbekistan has greater chances of avoiding the local scenarios of the Arab Spring and Orange Revolution. The country, alongside Kazakhstan, is also likely to remain a main regional power under the next president.





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