

Once Closed and Repressive, Uzbekistan Is Opening Up

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President Shavkat M. Mirziyoyev of Uzbekistan is spearheading a political and economic overhaul called the Uzbek Spring.

Credit: Valery Sharifulin/TASS, via Getty Images

URGENCH, Uzbekistan — Muhammad Bekjanov, often called [the world's longest-imprisoned journalist](#), did 18 years of hard time in some of Uzbekistan's most notorious prisons, with nicknames like "Goodbye to Youth." He was a writer with never much hope for a happy ending to his own story.

"I was accused of insulting President Karimov," he said, referring to Islam A. Karimov, the thin-skinned and iron-fisted former president of Uzbekistan, a strategically important country north of Afghanistan. In prison, Mr. Bekjanov lost his hearing in one ear and contracted tuberculosis.

And yet, despite his years of suffering and deprivations, Mr. Bekjanov has become an improbable spokesman for a political and economic overhaul underway in Uzbekistan that began after Mr. Karimov's death last year, a movement sometimes called the Uzbek Spring.

The thaw, which started to take shape quietly this year, has already loosened police controls on the population and is testing the limits of gradual political change in a

region more noted for its revolutions, such as those that deposed authoritarian leaders in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan.

“I am hopeful,” Mr. Bekjanov said of the shift.

So far, the government has elevated the authority of locally elected councils, [met with human rights observers](#) and, this fall, [freed thousands of students](#) from the usual drudgery of picking cotton in state-owned fields for little or no compensation. It has also loosened the screws on political journalism, allowing a few live talk shows on television.

The opening is one of the more improbable developments in the politics of the former Soviet states, among which Uzbekistan, the third-most-populous former Soviet country, has long been written off as a black hole of repression and poverty.

It has caught many political observers off guard, not least because of the person championing the program, President Shavkat M. Mirziyoyev. A former Soviet apparatchik, Mr. Mirziyoyev served for 13 years as prime minister to the mercurial and heavy-handed Mr. Karimov, who in his final years had taken to imprisoning even members of his own family.

“This is the moment of hope,” Steve Swerdlow, a researcher with Human Rights Watch and a longtime critic of Uzbekistan’s political system, said in an interview. The rights group plans to publish a cautiously [upbeat report on Uzbekistan](#), the first in years, on Thursday. “The question now is how structural and sustained this will become.”



The Uzbek government is replacing the cult of personality that swirled around the former president with a new national idea it calls “Enlightened Islam,” focusing on Islamic modernization.
Credit: Bahtiyar Abdukerimov/Anadolu Agency, via Getty Images

Some see in the opening only a feint toward liberalism, intended to dupe international observers just long enough to lift trade embargoes imposed on cotton, a major export commodity.

Mr. Swerdlow, for example, has called attention to the arrest last month of a dissident writer, [Nurullo Otahonov](#), after he returned from exile hoping to take advantage of the thaw. “It’s two steps forward, one step back,” Mr. Swerdlow said.

Still, the thaw, if it persists, could redraw the political map at the center of Asia. Uzbekistan is an important supply route for United States military operations in Afghanistan, a potential trading partner with Afghanistan and a steppingstone for overland trade between China and Europe — a role it has played since the days of the fabled Silk Road.

The thaw is all the more surprising because another powerful figure, Rustam R. Inoyatov, the head of the domestic intelligence agency, the S.N.B., the main successor to the K.G.B. in Uzbekistan, remains in place. It was Mr. Inoyatov who reportedly had persuaded the aging Mr. Karimov to [prosecute his own daughter](#), Gulnara Karimova, on extortion and embezzlement charges and to imprison a nephew in a psychiatric clinic. The nephew has since been released; the [daughter](#) remains in detention.

Behind-the-scenes tension between Mr. Mirziyoyev and Mr. Inoyatov over the scope of the thaw has now become the main narrative thread of Uzbek politics, analysts say. For now, Mr. Mirziyoyev seems to have the upper hand.

“What is kind of fascinating is we don’t know the extent the current leadership wants to reform, how far they will go,” said Sean R. Roberts, a professor of international affairs at George Washington University and a close observer of Uzbekistan. “One of the characteristics of Uzbek politics is it is extremely opaque.”

Pressing economic woes seem to be part of the motivation. Uzbekistan, with a population of 34 million and a high birthrate, is unable to provide enough jobs for a bulging youth population, Mr. Roberts said.

“Economic concerns drove him to decide they had to delicately dismantle Karimov’s system,” he said of Mr. Mirziyoyev. “It’s possible they want enough reform to open their economy for foreign investment, without opening the political sphere.”

Still, Mr. Roberts said, Uzbekistan’s liberalization represents some of the first positive political news out of Central Asia in years. “It’s been quite some time,” he said.

The authorities are, for example, pointing to a recent acquittal in a criminal case, something virtually unheard-of in Uzbekistan, where judges traditionally rubber stamped decisions made by prosecutors. That is one reason the prisons are overflowing.

In foreign policy, the new government has sought to tamp down seemingly senseless conflicts with its neighbors over water and borders. The Uzbek opening helps Afghanistan, too, in enhanced trade; next month, Ashraf Ghani, the Afghan

president, will pay the first state visit by an Afghan leader to Uzbekistan since the American invasion in 2001.

The Uzbek government in September lifted restrictions on exchanging foreign currency, eliminating a black market and opening the way for foreign investment.

After years of criticism for bringing in the cotton harvest with forced labor, including by children, the government demonstrably called back students from the fields midway through this year's harvest, though young-looking fieldworkers were still seen in some fields on a recent visit.

The government is replacing the cult of personality that swirled around the former president with a new national idea it calls "Enlightened Islam," focusing on Islamic modernization, referring to the scientific accomplishments in algebra and astronomy achieved in Central Asia in past centuries.

"We are opening to the world," Aliyor N. Tilavov, a department head in the Uzbek Foreign Ministry, said in an interview about the political and economic program.

Still, a heavy-handed police surveillance system tracking people suspected of Islamist extremism has not been fully dismantled. There are still no independent nongovernmental organizations or political parties.

And the government has released only 16 political prisoners so far out of a population that runs into the thousands, human rights groups estimate, more than all other former Soviet countries combined.

Mr. Bekjanov, a tall, strapping grandfather, bore the brunt of the old system. Human Rights Watch called him the world's longest-imprisoned-journalist; he was convicted of a number of trumped-up charges, including terrorism, while he was writing for the opposition newspaper Erk, or Freedom.

He is now enjoying his newfound freedom, and he said he did not carry a grudge. "The man I am angry with is dead," he said.

If the reformers triumph in what he sees as a struggle with the unreformed security apparatus, he said, Uzbekistan could see real change.

But he does not plan to return to journalism. Instead, he is writing a book, which he will call — after the story of his life and the name of one of the prisons where he spent 18 years — "Goodbye to Youth."