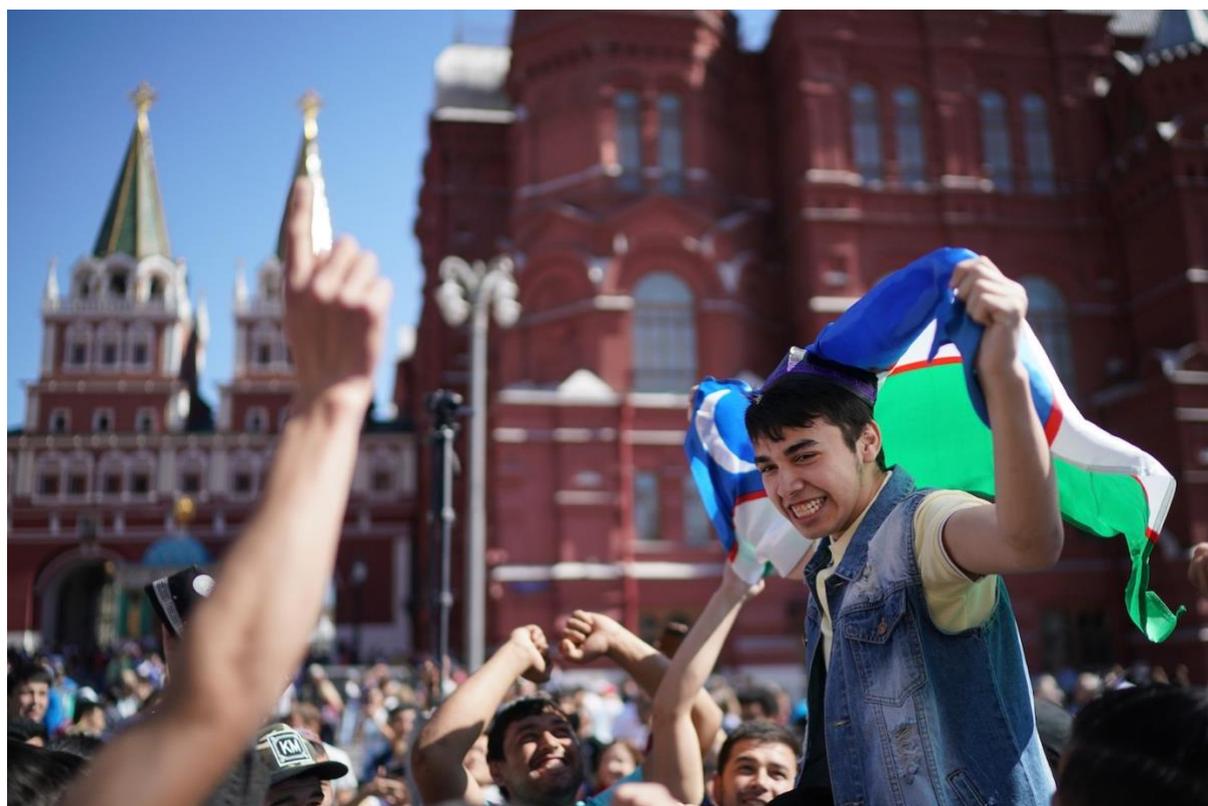


# Uzbekistan's New Era Might Just Be Real

Long-needed reforms are changing what was once a grim autocracy. Washington can help.

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Football fans from Uzbekistan celebrate near Red Square on June 15, 2018 in Moscow, Russia. (Photo by Christopher Furlong/Getty Images)

Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev is only the second person to hold that office, but the contrast with his predecessor, Islam Karimov, one of Central Asia's most brutal dictators, is increasingly stark. On his visit to the White House last month, Mirziyoyev was feted as an institutional and economic reformer and [praised](#) as a potential catalyst for change in Central Asia, where cooperation has been rare and Uzbekistan was often the spoiler.

It is a moment I never quite believed I would see. And yet change *is* in the air in Uzbekistan, even if just saying that sometimes feels surreal.

I was born, grew up, and began my career as a journalist in a country where every public word was censored by the state. A classic dictatorship, Uzbekistan was ruled from 1989 to 2016 by Karimov, who became the country's Communist Party chief in 1989, when it was still a Soviet republic. Karimov carved out an independent Uzbekistan from the ruins of the Soviet Union in 1991 yet retained most of the features of the *ancien régime*.

Uzbekistan was a dictatorship through and through. But for ordinary Uzbek people, the heavy hand of Karimov's security state did not stifle the aspiration to seek individual opportunity: economic choices, better life chances, and greater mobility. I myself am a product of that innate aspiration, having studied in India and the United States on scholarships and established myself professionally in Washington, D.C. as a multimedia journalist at the Voice of America's Uzbek service, a position I still hold.

Individual Uzbeks never wavered in their desire to pursue the requisites of freedom, even in the face of repression. What was missing was a state prepared to permit the space for some of these aspirations to flourish. And Mirziyoyev has begun to provide that space, to the surprise of not just the international community but also his own people.

Mirziyoyev has surprised precisely *because* he was a product of Karimov's security state. A technocrat who became a government apparatchik, he governed two of the country's most important regions before becoming prime minister in 2003. In that role, he became associated with one of the more notorious legacies of Karimov's era, a national cotton production system that is widely reported to have depended on involuntary forced labor. So, when Mirziyoyev became president, he was expected to govern much as Karimov did. What was more, he was initially part of a troika that included the feared head of Uzbekistan's security service, the successor organization to the Soviet KGB.

But despite all this, Mirziyoyev consolidated power, purged the other two members of the troika, and has taken serious steps toward reform. The first move was to recognize that the state's promises had little credibility with the public. The new president, even though he emerged out of Karimov's system, has managed to change the conversation between state and citizen by openly recognizing abuses and then raising the most critical issues of public concern. It is no small thing to hear the president of Uzbekistan talk about [justice](#), acknowledge [torture](#), call out deep [corruption](#), publicly recognize the realities of [forced labor](#), and repeatedly own up to the various forms of abuse that kept the previous leader in power.

Carefully and slowly, Mirziyoyev has leveraged these words into small but meaningful actions, not least by accepting the many facts that contributed to Uzbekistan's image as having one of the worst regimes in the world. One example is that, as of last month, there are no journalists behind bars in a country that Western nongovernmental organizations have repeatedly noted as one of the worst oppressors of the practitioners of my profession. Meanwhile, [Human Rights Watch](#), which has been given access to the country, reports that most political prisoners have been released.

Alongside this, Mirziyoyev has dramatically improved relations with Uzbekistan's neighbors. Karimov repeatedly picked fights with these countries, especially neighboring Tajikistan, not least by blocking its flagship hydropower projects. Mirziyoyev visited every Central Asian capital during his first year, dropped Tashkent's opposition to Tajikistan's leading dam project, and took diplomatic steps to assure the resumption of long-stalled electricity trade. A country that was long seen as the obstacle to economic and political cooperation is suddenly driving it. This, of course, interests the United States, which worries about instability in Central Asia and has [praised](#) Tashkent for, in particular, hosting a major diplomatic conference on Afghanistan in March.

Mirziyoyev has also moved quickly to unleash Uzbekistan's economic potential. Karimov favored Soviet-style planning, perhaps because he spent 20 years of his career working in the Uzbek State Planning Committee. The new president has taken steps Karimov shunned, winning praise from the [World Bank](#) for introducing currency convertibility, lowering or removing import barriers on agricultural products, and lifting trade and investment barriers.

Deeds, not words, will determine the scope of change. But the pace has been astonishing; Karimov died less than two years ago. It will be a long road to make the state not just a representative of Uzbek identity but responsive to the demands and expectations of Uzbek citizens, as Mirziyoyev has repeatedly [promised](#). But for the first time since independence, the state is speaking the language of service.

Unsurprisingly, many doubt Mirziyoyev's genuineness, calling him a "populist" but not a true reformer.

Some have argued, for instance, that [criticism of officialdom](#) can still get you in trouble. And the cotton production system — dependent on *corvée* labor — remains a problem: International campaigners have been allowed to present [recommendations](#) to the government but some of the pillars of the system remain in place.

And there are difficulties standing in the way of reform, like bureaucratic obstructionism and, above all, a security service that, despite the purges, remains powerful — held in check more by Mirziyoyev than by institutionalized checks and balances, much less the rule of law. That, in turn, has led Washington to be cautious about throwing its weight fully behind Mirziyoyev. In a recent [interview](#), U.S. Ambassador Pamela Spratlen, told me that Washington is enthused and supportive, but taking a measured approach to the pace of change. "We need serious work," she told me, "and serious work requires time."

But the best way to test the Uzbek leader's real resolve for reform is to give him the chance to see it through. Americans should try to goose the change that we now see in Uzbekistan. A country this closed that suddenly — tantalizingly — is flirting with greater openness is a once-in-a-generation test of whether the United States actually *can* play a concrete role in helping a system that is undergoing change, instead of just urging it rhetorically in speeches, government reports, and op-ed pieces.

Americans stand to benefit from progress in the largest country in Central Asia. Just north of war-torn Afghanistan, a successful Uzbekistan would be a more reliable partner, not just in ensuring regional security but as a source of economic opportunity and greater openness in this too-closed region.

Concretely, that means seizing the moment by substantially supporting the reform process in Uzbekistan. This is not so much about spending aid money or signing multibillion-dollar commercial contracts to sell Boeing 787s or other big machinery. Rather, it is about opening America's doors. Uzbekistan has been locked down for a generation, thus people like me — who have studied, worked, and thrived in the West, and transition easily between two nations and their two distinctive cultures — are too rare.

Openness to Uzbek students will shape the next generation. So will greater flows of American capital and investment back *into* Uzbekistan, not just through sales but also through investment that can stand as a vote of confidence in Uzbekistan's economic future. Educating students who can return while helping to create jobs and opportunity there will mean an everlasting impact on Uzbekistan's political and economic system but also the minds of people.

Uzbeks tend to come to the United States when they win the lottery — figuratively in the form of student visas, or quite literally when they win the green card lottery. But too few American universities recruit Uzbek students. And Washington has ended some of the critical programs that supported them, including the Edmund S. Muskie Graduate Fellowship that brought me to the U.S. as a master's degree student in 2001.

Restoring funding for fellowships and building public-private partnerships with universities and businesses interested in Central Asian students and technical talent would help Washington to satisfy its longer-term strategic goals. Some Uzbeks who have earned degrees in the United States, especially in technical subjects, are now thinking about returning, lured by the opportunity to make a meaningful difference to their country's future for the first time since independence. But Uzbekistan still lacks a policy that facilitates the process and creates conditions for them to work. Washington's assistance in this sphere would be welcomed by Tashkent.

Undersecretary of State Thomas Shannon [told me](#) in an April interview that, America's "reform efforts have the greatest impact when we have a partner to work with." When I was growing up in Uzbekistan, the United States didn't have that partner. Today, it just may.

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