

# On the reform path: Uzbekistan opens up after years of isolation

*After death of President Islam Karimov, who ruled for decades, government attempts to be more transparent and fair.*

*by Agnieszka Pikulicka-Wilczewska*

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Analysts said they have high hopes for Uzbekistan but do not expect competitive elections any time soon [Agnieszka Pikulicka-Wilczewska/Al Jazeera]

**Tashkent, Uzbekistan** - On September 25, friendly staff at Uzbekistan's Supreme Court warmly greeted dozens of guests, among them journalists, foreign diplomats and members of the international community, allowing the visitors to take photographs of the building's impressive interior.

The atmosphere was festive and open, and yet surreal. Until recently, the Supreme Court of Uzbekistan was a heavily guarded place whose name invoked little more than fear.

But on this day, the top court had a good reason to celebrate.

With the help of the United States Agency for International Development and the United Nations Development Programme, it launched a new website which, among other features, allows the public to view court trials across the country in real time online. While the pilot project involves 12 courts, it will gradually extend to the rest of the country.

[Uzbekistan](#) was until recently one of the world's most isolated countries, with institutionalised forced labour on its vast cotton fields, a torture record and restricted individual freedoms.

Now, it opening up.

Since President Shavkat Mirziyoyev took power in December 2016, following the death of Islam Karimov, who ruled the country since independence in 1991, Uzbekistan has been on the reform path.



Mirziyoyev, second left, and his family members pose for a picture at a polling station during a presidential election in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, December 4, 2016 [Anvar Ilyasov/Reuters/Pool]

The rule of law reform, aimed to enhance the transparency and accessibility of the allegedly corrupt courts, has been just one of the steps to improve Uzbekistan's image.

Faced with a collapsing economy, international isolation, and a growing number of unemployed youth following years of Karimov's misrule, the country had little choice but to open up.

"The reform agenda that the president launched in February last year, the Action Strategy, is very well aligned with what the UN is working towards globally through Agenda 2030," Helena Fraser, UN resident coordinator and UNDP resident representative in Uzbekistan, told Al Jazeera.

"It includes the reform of the judiciary, reform of public administration, liberalisation of the economy, education, health and social protection reforms, and then interestingly, the fifth pillar is about security, tolerance and constructive foreign policy."

The reforms have encompassed all spheres of social and political life from freeing the country's currency to normalising relations with its neighbours.

The scope of change has come as a surprise to everyone, not least Uzbeks themselves.

In an effort to bring politics closer to people, Mirziyoyev launched a virtual reception centre which allows citizens to raise issues that concern them with the president.

These include complaints about corrupt local officials, which has made bureaucrats more accountable and responsive to the public.

"There is a new confidence in politics, which was not there before. People used to say that nothing changes because no one thinks about us and we can say and do nothing, so let's live our simple life and forget about politics," Akhmed Rahmanov, an Uzbek business consultant told Al Jazeera. "Now, if something goes wrong, they can write to the president."

In a country with no democratic experience, where until recently citizens had few rights and fear prevailed, people finally feel they can discuss their problems openly.

[Social media](#) has become a vibrant platform for activists, bloggers, journalists and citizens alike to discuss the country's most pressing issues.

"Fairly quickly, he (Mirziyoyev) set a new tone. And that new tone has been the main factor driving change because the system has had to adapt both to the new president's expectations and to his willingness to make the state more responsive to citizen concerns," said Uzbek VOA journalist Navbahor Imamova, noting that her views shared here were personal and did not represent her employer's.

Importantly, Mirziyoyev openly recognised the abuses of the previous administration and vowed to address the state's egregious [human rights](#) record. He has already proved these were not only words.

"The most notable developments on human rights in the little more than two years of Mirziyoyev's presidency has been the release of approximately 30 or more high-profile political prisoners, the easing of some restrictions on the freedom of speech and assembly and in that area we've seen the emergence of a fairly dynamic media environment as compared to what used to exist," Steve Swerdlow, Human Rights Watch Central Asia researcher, told Al Jazeera.

As Swerdlow explains, the government also took 17,000 people off the infamous blacklist, which included individuals suspected of having ties with "Islamic extremists", heavily restricting their rights and freedoms.

Moreover, at least five officials have been prosecuted for the use of torture during the Karimov years.

Forced cotton picking, obligatory for all public administration workers, medical and educational staff, students and schoolchildren has been abolished.

This September, the US Department of Labour removed Uzbekistan from the list of countries relying on forced child labour.

## **More work to be done**

The government has still a lot to do to prove its commitment to reform.

It is yet to recognise the victims of Karimov's regime. Freedom of religion remains restricted, there is internet censorship and the BBC, HRW and other organisations are still banned. Finally, political structures at all levels have to absorb the reforms to effect systemic transformation.

The most important change is also yet to come.

Years of authoritarian rule wiped out all opposition, political ideas and democratic movements in the country. For years, advocates of political [Islam](#) were the only alternative to state propaganda.

Today, despite all changes, Uzbeks still find it hard to organise themselves politically, not least because they fear possible repercussions.

"For the moment, a competitive, pluralistic democracy, or competitive elections even, remain distant dreams," HRW's Swerdlow said.

In a one-man system like Uzbekistan, Mirziyoyev is the only one who can trigger the emergence of new political forces. And in order to do so, he will have to make clear that political opposition is what the country needs. Only then will he prove his commitment to lasting change.

Meanwhile, as the UN's Fraser explains, the international community should use the momentum to catalyse further change. For that, it will need to continue supporting Uzbekistan with investments, resources and expertise.

"The worst outcome would be that the government does everything that it has been encouraged to do for decades, whether it's on human rights, health systems, the rule of law, tax reforms, or gender violence, and we then walk away and say that we are not going to support it," Fraser said.

For the moment, the hopes are high.

"Everyone I talk to in the Uzbek government, both on the record and off the record, tells me that there is no way the country is going to move backward - towards what it was like under Karimov," journalist Imamova says. "Uzbekistan is determined to move forward."



Karimov had run the ex-Soviet nation since 1991. Nearly half of the country's 32 million citizens were born after he came to power [Mikhail Metzler/TASS via Getty Images]

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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