Political Reform in Mirziyoyev's Uzbekistan:

Elections, Political Parties & Civil Society

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Executive Summary

Since taking over from long-time President Islam Karimov in 2016, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev has pursued an aggressive policy to transform Uzbekistan's decision-making processes, invigorate civil society, encourage political competition, address human rights and develop a civic culture consistent with the country's status as a modernizing, forward-looking regional power in Eurasia with a steadily increasing majority of citizens under the age of 30. To declare significant these changes, which seem to take place daily, is to perhaps understate their potential in light of the last 30 years of history.

The transformation presently underway has its roots in the appointment of Mirziyoyev to the post of Prime Minister in 2003, after which he quietly worked to diversify the voices heard in national political discussions, though recognized the barriers that were preventing the country from using its vast human capital to meet the demands of an emerging power in the twenty-first century.

The various programs proposed by the new president and presently under implementation hold the promise of reshaping the domestic political landscape, changing the fundamental relationship between the citizen and state, and rebalancing the geopolitical order in a region long relegated as the domain of outside great powers.

Ahead of the December 2016 Presidential elections, Mirziyoyev campaigned on the principle of a government with a greater degree of openness and transparency serving the people – a novelty in the experience of independent Uzbekistan and most other post-Soviet countries.

To advance this agenda, President Mirziyoyev issued three key documents: A Program to Reform the Judicial and Legal System; an Action Strategy on Five Priority Areas of the Country's Development for 2017-2021; and a "Concept" of Administrative Reform.

The Program and Action Strategy, which focus on ensuring the rule of law, reforming the judicial system, promoting economic liberalization, and the development of the social sphere, contains numerous sub-objectives which, if fully implemented, will fundamentally transform the relationship between Uzbekistan's government and its people, and elevate independent civic advocacy organizations and informal institutions, such as Mahallas, to the status of partners of the government.

The Concept for Administrative Reform aims to result in an effective and transparent system of public administration capable of protecting the rights of citizens and bolstering Uzbekistan's economic competitiveness globally. It defined six priority areas, among which are; "the improvement of the institutional, organizational, and legal framework of the executive authorities' activities" and "the formation of an effective system of professional civil service, [and] the introduction of effective mechanisms to combat corruption in the system of executive authorities."

The Concept was developed with the participation of academics, practitioners, representatives of both international organizations and civic advocacy organizations based in Uzbekistan. In developing both the Action Strategy and the Concept, the government worked to solicit participation from the general public in order to present the Concept and receive critical feedback on its further development and implementation.

There have also been steps to change Uzbekistan's electoral system and the situation concerning political parties. Constitutional changes already in 2014, sought to redistribute power between the parliament and the executive, granting more decision-making power and control over the executive to the Parliament. Quite early on, President Mirziyoyev proposed to make governors and mayors directly elected by the people, as opposed to appointed by the President. In August 2017, legislation was amended by decree to allow for the direct election of Khokims of Wiloyats and the city of Tashkent, and set a date for Tashkent city elections, which took place on December 24, 2017.

In the coming months and years, one can expect further substantive changes to local and regional government, with the likelihood of many new faces in positions of authority, all of them popularly elected for the first time in Uzbekistan's independent statehood. The new leaders will have to be closely watched to determine whether they are acting on behalf of citizens or are drawn back into regional or local loyalty networks. In the end, direct local elections are a necessary but not sufficient condition for progress: the elections also need to be professionally and fairly administered at all levels – particularly the often-compromised District and Precinct Election Commissions. Furthermore, they must be scrutinized by active, independent NGO monitors.

The President also called on the parliament to be much more active in legislation. He prodded parliamentarians to get out of their offices and travel around the country to meet people, especially the youth, hear their concerns and come back with proposals on how to resolve the problems identified by citizens. He urged them to analyze proposed legislation and propose improvements. The President also suggested that political parties connect with foreign counterparts, which had been the norm up until the mid-1990s but in more recent years had been seen in a more negative light.

This brought results: parliamentarians now regularly visit rural areas, where they have appeared in live talk shows, used social media, participated in focus groups, and tried overall to become more connected with their constituents. However, there is still a long way to go in order to achieve a strong, multiparty system that accepts and encourages diversity of platforms and programs, and does not perceive opposing policies as anathema to the state.

Expanded competition among the five legally-registered political parties is likely to stimulate them to refine their platforms, redouble efforts to support gender equality and inclusion, engage more of the country's young and future voters, and seek diversity within their ranks. The emergence of a more open political system that embraces freedom of speech, association and assembly will offer an opportunity for all political actors to flourish.

Mirziyoyev's reforms have also had important implications for civil society. Rather than an adversary, the government now seeks to view civil society as an ally in its reform agenda. This was manifested in numerous legislative amendments and initiatives to ease the ability of NGOs to operate in the country. Since Mirziyoyev took office as Interim President in September 2016, 685 local civic advocacy organizations have successfully registered with the Ministry of Justice, more than an 8 percent increase. There remains much work to be done until impediments to the work of NGOs are completely removed, but the progress is clear.

An overarching goal of the President's reform program and Action Strategy is to root out corruption and inefficiency at the local and national levels of government. The translation of written objectives into demonstrable action has proceeded apace, as local administrators from a multitude of governmental departments have been called to answer for their actions in a very public way, resulting in presidential chastisements and numerous officials being sacked for a variety of offenses.

After Mirziyoyev criticized the performance of the Ministry of Finance, it fired 562 officials. After the President denounced officials who use vulgar language in interactions with citizens, a mayor was fined for insulting a citizen, a "first" in Uzbekistan. These moves put officials at all levels of government on notice and confirm that Mirziyoyev is serious about his pledge to make government accountable to the people. But most importantly, the President proceeded to remove the leadership of both the Prosecutor General's office and the National Security Service, institutions that had been highly influential and feared in society. Reforms in these institutions will be key to the reform agenda as a whole, and particularly to the struggle against corruption.

Almost half of Uzbekistan's population is under 25 years of age, and as such, the outlook of the young generation will determine the country's future. The Action Strategy prioritizes education as the cornerstone of the government's approach to the rising generation, calling for greater standardization of basic education and for gender equality. It is expected that economic growth and training provided

by the country's four-hundred vocational-technical "colleges" will go far towards creating the new jobs that are so urgently needed. These are also the cornerstones of the government's program to reduce radicalization among Uzbekistan's youth.

President Mirziyoyev nonetheless used a speech before the United Nations to argue that the provision of education and opportunities for young people is a global demand, and not purely national. Beyond these points, he has consistently underscored the need for tolerance, and calls for communicating what he calls "the truly humanistic essence of Islam both to young people and the world at large, where intolerance of Muslims is growing." However, President Mirziyoyev has yet to stress the importance of a secular state with secular laws and courts as a *sine qua non* for a humane and open civic culture.

President Mirziyoyev has demonstrated a commitment to revisiting Uzbekistan's human rights record on an international scale. One key step in this regard was the invitation extended to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. The Uzbek government announced it would allow a permanent representative of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to be based in Tashkent, and invited Human Rights Watch to resume activities in the country.

Among tasks still to be faced are to implement reforms of local government, promote accountability and transparency, implement direct elections for regional and local Khokims, encourage Mahallas to cooperate with local government, and follow through on the democratization program, as set forth in the Action Strategy. None of these tasks will be simple or short-term. Both active and passive resistance can be predicted: the National Security Service and the Finance Ministry both initially resisted a number of key reforms and may have sought to check the President's efforts. Such incidents may be signs of possible future concerns.

However, even if all key figures continue to firmly support the new president, implementing the governance reforms proposed by Mirziyoyev will pose a formidable challenge. Besides structural changes, they call for fundamental shifts in the political culture and even the mentality of ordinary Uzbeks. Public

passivity and inertia can delay or derail reforms at many levels, as can the exercise of too much or too little force from above. This will be all the more complex when it is done in the context of the new president's stated goal of broadening the political spectrum and promoting greater diversity of opinion.

Introduction

This study will examine the reform of Uzbekistan's political structure proposed and enacted by President Shavkat Mirziyoyev. If successful, these innovations have the potential to fundamentally alter the relationship between citizens and the state and, indeed, the overall system of governance. Background will be provided by a review of civic activism and engagement in independent Uzbekistan during the first quarter century of independence and the changes begun during Mirziyoyev's 13 years as prime minister, before being elected to the presidency following Karimov's passing in 2016. The initiatives undertaken by the new president during his first year-and-a-half have aimed to develop civic activeness, to encourage advocacy and political competition, to address long-existing human rights concerns, to improve citizen-government communication, and to hold public officials accountable. Together, they laid the groundwork for a fundamental transformation of citizens' basic relationship with their government and hence the political culture as a whole.

The collapse of the Soviet Union thrust Uzbekistan into an uncertain independence. After watching the coup fail in Moscow and its leaders arrested, Karimov quickly adapted to new realities, resigned from the Communist Party, and asserted authority over Soviet military units on Uzbek territory. Overall, he took advantage of the rapidly evolving situation in Moscow to consolidate Uzbekistan's sovereignty and his own position in the republic. Real threats from armed extremists in Namangan and perceived threats from other quarters put Uzbekistan's sovereignty at risk and provided the backdrop against which policies were developed to suppress and control opposition and sideline real and

potential political opponents. This "sovereignty first" approach would set the tone for the first decade of post-Soviet Uzbek independence.[1]

The perception of needing to limit the space for potential rival sources of power or influence was based on the notion that strong opposition political parties as well as other non-state actors from the civil sector – not to speak of vocal Islamist factions – could present a danger to the still-crystallizing political order in the country, and personally to Karimov. As will be discussed, at the time of independence there were newly-established political movements such as Erk, Birlik and the Solidarity Democratic Movement Birdamlik, as well as a fledgling, though rapidly expanding, civic sector that appeared poised to grow incrementally, as it was doing elsewhere in Central Asia in the early-to-mid 1990s.

Uzbekistan had a history of civic advocacy organizations dating back to the late Soviet period. However, the government perceived these as centrifugal forces that would weaken central authority and hence, so it was argued, sovereignty. The limits placed on potential opposition groups and parties resulted in a "pro-presidential" one-party state with a strong central government and dominant leader. Other newly independent countries in Central Asia largely exhibited the same tendency, which was represented as necessary for the maintenance of national stability. Neighboring Tajikistan, which suffered a crippling civil war that led to the deaths of more than 40,000 people, stood as a constant reminder of the danger posed by internal conflict and unchecked centrifugal forces.

The potential for volatility in post-Soviet Uzbekistan was high, given the way in which the Soviet government had delineated Uzbekistan's borders back in the 1920s. Not only were there ethnic Uzbeks in every neighboring country who had just been demoted to the status of second-rate citizens but Uzbekistan itself was both the largest and ethnically most homogeneous state in central Asia. Until the new Uzbek state began to emerge, it was the memory of centralized Communist Party control that informed many policies of new governments in the region,

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[1] Kathleen Collins, *Clan Politics and Regime Transition in Central Asia*, Cambridge University Press, June 25, 2009, pp. 162-163.

including Uzbekistan. In some respects, President Karimov's single-minded focus on consolidating control can be seen as a way to stabilize the newly-independent Uzbek state. Much the same was done by President Nazarbayev in Kazakhstan, who faced an even more dispersed and ethnically diverse population spread over six-times more territory. President Karimov's priority was to preserve and stabilize the state as a unified territory under the rubric of Uzbek nationhood. His single-mindedness made it possible for Uzbekistan to develop relatively peacefully amidst a maelstrom of change in the region and in the entirety of the former Soviet space.

With the firm establishment of presidential control over the republic and its institutions of governance in the 1990s, a somewhat predictable and rigorous political structure took hold. A prominent feature of this structure were political parties that had been unabashedly created "from above," by the state itself. In spite of their modest origins, the parties were able to carve out their individual identities and remain competitive with each other, albeit in a limited and contained field of play.[2] The carefully nurtured four pro-presidential parties led to a largely compliant Oliy Majlis, although that parliamentary body did manage to generate some differences in policy direction, if not ideology.

The semi-independent development of Uzbek political parties accelerated with the appointment of Mirziyoyev as prime minister in 2003. The economy, trade, employment, environment, foreign policy, and domestic development were all growing concerns in the early 2000s. Non-governmental civic advocacy was stifled, however, by new laws that curbed the access of such groups to foreign funding. In spite of this, citizen-based advocacy organizations remained an important part of Uzbekistani society in the 2000s, though with less diversity than a decade hence.

The roots of the present transformation led by President Mirziyoyev are to be found in the years of his prime-ministership (2003-2016). The period saw some

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[2] S. Frederick Starr, *Clans, Authoritarian Rulers and Parliaments in Central Asia*, Washington: CACI & SRSP Silk Road Paper, June 2006. (http://silkroadstudies.org/publications/silkroad-papers-and-monographs/item/13102)

easing of regulations on non-governmental organizations and the resumption of banned party congresses (Erk party), along with diversification of political parties, all of which remained pro-presidential, and the addition of the Ecological Movement to the list of legal political parties in 2008. The rapidly evolving situation at present provides hope for a true blossoming of representative governance through various state programs, including direct local elections, announced by Mirziyoyev. As with any set of decrees or state programs, however, the litmus test will be in the actual implementation of each program and in its impact on society. Regional experience is at best mixed. Early hopes of liberalization in Turkmenistan after 2007 largely faded. Kyrgyzstan, with its parliamentary-based political system, robust civic activity and relatively open media, exhibits a more positive trend, though that neighboring country, too, may be reverting to a more controlled presidential state.[3]

[3] Jacob Zenn, "Kyrgyzstan's Election Controversy: Cause for Concern?", *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, November 9, 2017. (http://cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13481)

The December 2016 Special Presidential Election

The passing of long-time President Islam Karimov on September 2, 2016, triggered the first presidential succession process in the history of independent Uzbekistan. According to Article 96 of the Uzbek Constitution, the Chair of the Senate is to assume the role of acting president for a period of three months until an election can be held to determine a successor. In this case, the responsibility fell to Nigmatilla Yuldashev, who quickly disavowed the post at a joint session of the Oliy Majlis on September 8, on the basis of inexperience. Instead he urged that the then-Prime Minister Mirziyoyev be named acting president, suggesting that the Prime Minister would better ensure continuity and stability during the interim period until the election.[4] The parliament approved Yuldashev's recommendation and named Mirziyoyev Acting President for three months.[5]

Mirziyoyev took the reins of power on September 8, 2016 and, speaking in presidential tones, began laying out his vision for the country's development as he campaigned for the special presidential election set for December 4, 2016. He moved quickly to secure interim presidential authority and position himself as a pseudo-incumbent candidate to run in the December election, with full access to and use of government-controlled media and other state administrative resources, perhaps seizing the initiative to out-maneuver potential political rivals in the process.

The transition was fairly seamless, in spite of initial worries in some foreign quarters that Karimov's passing would create a succession dilemma that could

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[4] Neil MacFarquhar, "With Uzbekistan's Ruler Gravely Ill, Questions Arise on Succession", *New York Times*, August 29, 2016. (https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/30/world/asia/uzbekistan-president-islam-karimov.html)

[5] This technically sidestepped the constitution, but it was not the first time that the document had been sidestepped concerning presidential power, as President Karimov's election to a third and fourth term in office was also criticized for violating the spirit if not the letter of the constitution.

lead to the de-stabilization of the country. Many Uzbeks wanted change, while others assumed that the naming of Mirziyoyev as Acting President was an affirmation of continuity.

Mirziyoyev immediately began calling for greater openness in society, inclusivity, and accountability on the part of public officials, themes that would soon form the core of his Action Strategy and Program for reform (discussed below). During the campaign, Mirziyoyev promised to continue on many fronts while at the same time forcing state bureaucrats and local leaders to be more responsive to the people's concerns and establishing a public hotline directly to the president. Mirziyoyev's platform focused mainly on economic issues, e.g. the protection of private enterprise and the promotion of foreign investment. He also pledged to reform the relationship between elected officials and voters, and overall to build civic engagement though reforms in government and education.[6]

Mirziyoyev was nominated by the Liberal Democratic Party. His three opponents were longtime functionaries of the three-other registered, parliamentary parties. Khotam Ketmonov of the People's Democratic Party focused on social equality and the rights of disabled citizens. Narimon Umarov of the Social Democratic Party "Adolat" campaigned on the issue of education and the application of modern technologies to government; and Sarvar Otamuradov of the Democratic Party *Milliy Tiklanish* used his campaign to promote patriotism, focusing on the idea of "national renewal" and greater national self-awareness.

At the end of a three-month campaign period, a special presidential election was held on December 4, 2016. The OSCE had been invited to monitor the elections to the Legislative Chamber of the Oliy Majlis in 2014 and the regularly-scheduled presidential election of 2015. Uzbekistan now invited OSCE to monitor the special presidential election. A total of 193 short term observers from 32 countries were deployed by the OSCE/ODIHR mission to observe the election. Their final report noted that Uzbekistan's legal framework did not accord in some areas with

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[6] "Uzbekistan: President Opens Online Complaints Box", *Eurasianet*, September 26, 2016. (https://eurasianet.org/s/uzbekistan-president-opens-online-complaints-box)

international standards for democratic elections.[7] At the same time, it described the election campaign as "moderately visible." This was a step up from previous campaigns, as challengers to Mirziyoyev were able to "convey campaign messages to the general population in ways that were not possible in elections under Karimov."[8] Television updates began with reports about the various candidates' campaigns instead of only focusing on Mirziyoyev, compared to the past when they would have largely been ignored. The recognition of an opposition and presenting the vote as a competitive exercise, with talk of liberalization of the economy, reforming the justice system and developing a professional parliament served to "strengthen the legitimacy" of the post-Karimov system in a way that suggested modernization, populism and most of all, stability. Overall, the OSCE recognized the Central Election Commission's efforts to organize as transparent a process of voting as possible.

Mr. Mirziyoyev's many years as Prime Minister assured that he was well-known across the country. Nonetheless, thanks to decrees Mirziyoyev had himself signed as Acting President, all four candidates had equal access to television and billboards and stated their positions directly. The state-controlled media made genuine attempts to promote education and awareness of the special presidential election, with more-or-less equal coverage of the candidates provided as well as media reports on the voter education and motivation campaigns conducted by public associations receiving state support (including youth and women's organizations). A CEC-enforced provision allowed each candidate sufficient airtime and space within national and regional state media free of charge. Each candidate was "granted approximately one hour of free airtime on two national state TV channels daily, and a total of approximately eight hours per candidate on 13 regional broadcasters; the daily free print advertisement space was

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[7] OSCE/ODIHR, *"Republic of Uzbekistan, Early Presidential Election, 4 December 2016"* Warsaw: OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report, March 21, 2017.

[8] "Uzbekistan: Snap Election Revises Script While Following Old Rules", *Eurasianet*, November 28, 2016. (https://eurasianet.org/s/uzbekistan-snap-election-revises-script-while-following-old-rules)

uniformly distributed in five national and in 30 regional newspapers."[9] Candidates could also purchase airtime or advertising space on an equal basis. Another positive sign of the efforts to promote inclusivity during the election was the use of civic education programs through the media aimed at encouraging women's turnout, a campaign augmented by efforts of Mahallas and other government-controlled civic advocacy groups.

Turnout for the election was relatively low, compared with previous elections, for which voting had been seen as compulsory. The results were announced by the Central Election Commission of Uzbekistan on December 9, 2016. Of 20,461,805 voters a total of 17,951,667 or 87.73 percent voted. The results were the following:[10]

- Sarvar Otamuradov (Democratic Party *Milliy Tiklanish*) - 421,055 or 2.35%;
- Shavkat Mirziyoyev (Liberal Democratic Party) - 15,906,724 or 88.61%;
- Khotam Ketmonov (People's Democratic Party) - 669,187 or 3.73%;
- Narimon Umarov ("Adolat" Social Democratic Party) - 619,972 or 3.46%.

The power of the presidential office was and is all-pervasive in Uzbekistan. Mirziyoyev was himself a symbol of continuity and stability in that post and in the country. Yet the public received his explicit promise of a new day dawning very positively. His well-established public persona, combined with his electoral victory, thus addressed directly both the public's hope for stability and continuity and its visceral sense that fundamental changes were needed.

Many young journalists, supported by less outspoken mentors, covered the elections with unprecedented enthusiasm. A modern press center was set up at a downtown hotel in Tashkent through which media gained information and filed

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[9] OSCE/ODIHR, *"Republic of Uzbekistan, Early Presidential Election, 4 December 2016,"* p. 15. (http://www.osce.org/office-for-democratic-institutions-and-human-rights/elections/uzbekistan/306451?download=true).

[10] Central Election Commission, "Оглашены итоги президентских выборов", December 9, 2016. (http://www.elections.uz/ru/events/current_topics/45262/)

reports. Young journalists competed to catch the interviews and statements of local and international public figures regarding the election. In the process they gained valuable experience and became more self-confident as professionals.[11]

In spite of the built-in advantages that Mr. Mirziyoyev enjoyed during the campaign, including use of state media and administrative resources, there was a genuine sense of competition. While there were no candidate debates, there were nevertheless campaign posters from all four candidates adorning billboards throughout Tashkent and other major cities and towns across the country, with regulations on equal campaign advertising strictly enforced. Candidates met with constituents in officially-sanctioned if somewhat scripted public meetings. In spite of a spirit of openness, none of the candidates challenged the viewpoints or policy recommendations of his rivals.

Mirziyoyev's use of social media during the campaign was noteworthy. He garnered significant attention through a Facebook page that showcased some of the issues resolved by state institutions on behalf of citizens, blurring the lines between the candidate and use of state resources. Although local officials participated in all four candidates' events on the campaign trail, this was particularly true of Mirziyoyev's campaign rallies. As much as Mirziyoyev stressed open dialogue during the campaign, however, the voters were nonetheless excluded from genuine political debate, which hampered their ability to make an informed choice.

The Acting President had an advantage in that the media openly reported on his activities without considering them part of the campaign, thus complicating the distinction between candidate and state. The fact that he was portrayed by state media as the only candidate who could guarantee continuity and, seemingly, carry out the policies set out by Karimov, gave him an insurmountable advantage. Other candidates were generally presented as parliamentarians, not political leaders. This is not to take away from Mirziyoyev's own policy ideas. It is

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[11] Mjuša Sever, *Judicial and Governance Reforms in Mirziyoyev's Uzbekistan*, Washington/Stockholm: CACI & SRSP Silk Road Paper, March 2018, p. 41-43. (http://silkroadstudies.org/publications/silkroad-papers-and-monographs/item/13282l)

inarguable that the Acting President delivered a more dynamic campaign message overall, and that his message included concrete proposals on implementing his ideas. Mirziyoyev constantly underscored the notion that government serves the people first and foremost, and suggested boldly that certain segments of the government had ill-served the people--including the National Security Service. He campaigned on the principle that government must be made accountable to and representative of the citizens through elected officials and public institutions at the national, regional and local levels; and he made clear his view that civic activism through electoral and civil society channels was the key to gaining control over wayward bureaucrats.

Mirziyoyev's decisive victory was no doubt aided by his long experience in the role of Karimov's Prime Minister, though as would be quickly discovered, the promise of continuity was to be realized more in post-Karimov stability than in the continuation of his policies. Arguing that the times called for it and that the very success of previous policies had made it possible, the incoming president would quickly take steps to reinvent the relationship between citizens and the state in Uzbekistan.

Reinventing Government: The State Serving its Citizens

Mirziyoyev campaigned on the principle of government serving the people, a novelty in the experience of independent Uzbekistan or most other post-Soviet countries, with a greater degree of openness and transparency. He indicated that this would involve direct communication between government officials and citizens through electronic channels, social media, and fora such as town halls and public meetings. He moved quickly to make local government more accountable through the expansion of direct elections and encouraged citizen groups to monitor the work of local and national administration.

The programs set in place were the first step to creating a mandate as well as a legal basis for such changes. A next step was to provide the information and motivation for citizens to play a more active role in governance through voting, volunteerism, political work, and civic activism. A further key step has been to make the political and social landscape conducive to the changes envisioned through the Program, Action Strategy, and other initiatives. This entails controlling institutions and stripping away practices that kept in place the old, top-down system of control and gradually loosening regulations that discouraged the expression of alternative viewpoints or prohibited the questioning of authority. How such objectives are ultimately manifested, and at what tempo, and with what success, will be the criteria by which the success of Mirziyoyev's efforts will ultimately be judged.

The Program to Reform the Judicial and Legal System

In October 2016, the then-interim president issued a decree guaranteeing the rights and freedoms of citizens. Known formally as the "Decree on Measures to Further Reform the Judicial and Legal System," it included an action plan known

as "The Program" which proposes amendments to the Uzbek constitution, criminal code, civil code, and other legislation in order to protect the rights of citizens. A related "Law on Openness" guaranteed transparency on the part of government agencies in their interactions with citizens, media, and citizens' groups.[12] Mirziyoyev further signed additional legislation guaranteeing social services to seniors, persons with disabilities and other at-risk groups through a greater role of government and partnership with independent civil society and private business. All these moves presuppose the civic sector as a partner in delivering services, as well as in ensuring that government is responsive and accountable. Judicial Reforms are analyzed in detail in Mjuša Sever's *Silk Road Paper* published in parallel with this study.[13]

The Action Strategy

On February 7, 2017, Mirziyoyev approved a major program, the "Action Strategy on Five Priority Areas of the Country's Development for 2017-2021" (hereafter known as the "Action Strategy)." The adoption of the Action Strategy was proceeded by extensive public consultations. Further, it mandates that a special commission be created to carry out its provisions. Members include Prime Minister Abdulla Aripov and other senior cabinet members and parliamentarians. Critical to the adoption of the Action Strategy has been the element of public vetting and input, something largely overlooked by the former administration when formulating policy initiatives. The goal was to transform government into an active and responsible custodian of the public good. To attain this, it was imperative for the Mirziyoyev government to receive the public's candid input on the Strategy's goals and the processes by which it expected to achieve them.

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[12] "Civic Freedom Monitor: Uzbekistan", The International Center for Non-Profit Law, November 7, 2017. (http://www.icnl.org/research/monitor/uzbekistan.html)

[13] Sever, *Judicial and Governance Reforms in Mirziyoyev's Uzbekistan.*

Through television, radio, social media, internet sites, and newspapers, as well as through public meetings, citizens had an opportunity to share their thoughts and concerns on the Action Strategy. The number of people involved in the discussion of the Action Strategy (excluding television and radio audiences) reached to a total of 3,206,571. The government also created a portal through which citizens could comment on provisions of the Strategy, a channel that elicited over 1,300 responses, comments, and proposals.[14]

The Action Strategy includes the promise that "the timely and effective implementation of the Action Strategy shall be the top priority of all government bodies and their officials."[15] The five priority areas of the Action Strategy are:

- Improving the system of state and public construction
- Ensuring the rule of law and further reforming the judicial system
- Economic development and liberalization
- Development of the social sphere
- Promoting security, inter-ethnic harmony, and religious tolerance, and the implementation of a balanced, mutually beneficial and constructive foreign policy

Each priority area contains numerous sub-objectives which, if fully implemented, will fundamentally transform the relationship between Uzbekistan's government and its people, and elevate independent civic advocacy organizations and informal institutions, such as Mahallas, to the status of partners of the government.

For example, under the goal of ***Improving the System of State and Public Construction,*** Mirziyoyev underscored the need to "Further strengthen the role of the Oliy Majlis and political parties in deepening the democratic reforms and modernization of the country" as well as "Develop[ing] the political system,

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[14] Embassy of Uzbekistan to the United States, December 2017.

[15] "Uzbekistan's Development Strategy for 2017-2021 has been adopted following public consultation," *Tashkent Times*, February 8, 2018. (http://tashkenttimes.uz/national/541-uzbekistan-s-development-strategy-for-2017-2021-has-been-adopted-following-discussion)

strengthen the role of political parties in public life and society, formation of true political competition among them." Civil society development is prominently mentioned, as is transparency in the work of governmental bodies, improving the sharing of information through the media, the decentralization and reform of public administration, the introduction of e-governance, and the improvement of public-private partnerships. All of these objectives are bold, but none can be quickly achieved in the short term. Indeed, they cannot be advanced without a deeper commitment at all the obvious levels of government, including less visible ones such as the security services. The retirement of Rustam Inoyatov from the State Security Services on January 31, 2018 clears a major hurdle to the implementation of the reforms, though several, albeit lesser, roadblocks will continue to test the reform process.

The Action Strategy also endeavors to ***Ensure the Rule of Law and Further Reforming the Judicial System*** through "ensuring true independence of the judiciary, increasing the authority of courts, [and] democratization and improving the judicial system," all of which are fundamental prerequisites to Mirziyoyev's larger reform agenda, which must extend to the reform of the criminal justice system. In a speech in December 2017, President Mirziyoyev heavily criticized the office of the Prosecutor General. Citizens of Uzbekistan welcomed the president's remarks, especially human rights advocates who had experienced arrests and long detentions with little judicial process. The release of 2,700 detainees in December was proof of the President's pledge to pardon many prisoners, though this did not necessarily extend to those accused of committing political crimes. The Action Strategy also prioritizes the protection of citizens' rights under the Rule of Law section, "improving the legal culture and legal awareness of the population, organizing effective cooperation between government bodies and civic advocacy institutions, the mass media in this field." Measures to engender public confidence in the courts and enhance the legal profession in the courts all signified the President's tacit admission that the legal system had long been deeply flawed and was viewed by the public with contempt. Public confidence in Uzbekistan's judicial structures will not be

generated overnight. But as Mjuša Sever explains in her *Silk Road Paper* published in parallel with this study, a start has been made.

A third key sector of reform addressed by the Action Strategy is ***Economic Development and Liberalization.*** This is clearly a sector in which any improvements, or failure to improve, will directly and tangibly impact the populace at large. In short, Mirziyoyev pledged in the Action Strategy, a "continuing of institutional and structural reforms aimed at reducing the state's presence in the economy, further strengthening the protection of rights and priority role for private property, [and] encouraging the development of small business and private entrepreneurship." The approach is aimed as well at "reducing the state's role in the regulation of social and economic development, the decentralization and democratization of the public administrative system, the expansion of public-private partnerships, [and] the enhancement of the role of non-governmental organizations and local authorities."

A fourth area of priority outlined in the Action Strategy is ***Development of the Social Sphere***, which focuses on the provision of services to citizens. Among objectives enumerated under this heading a "consistent increase in real income and job creation, improving social security and the health care system, enhancing the socio-political activity of women, the development of education and science, and the improvement of the state's youth policy." The Action Strategy seeks to advance democratic reforms and the development of an independent civil society that is "dedicated to homeland." In a bow to generational realities it calls for the education of "spiritually and intellectually developed and independently-thinking youth." The new president sees this as essential in order to counter the appeal of outside groups and forces and to reduce the out-migration of young people in search of employment.

Persons aged 24 and younger comprise over 42 percent of Uzbekistan's population, an astounding figure that only continues to grow, and Mirziyoyev's efforts to promote lasting change will depend heavily on his success in engaging youth in that process. As discussed below, he has promoted this in the political sphere through the creation of certain youth associations and other politically-affiliated entities. But given the rapid growth of the youthful cohort of the

population, the spread of unemployment and underemployment in that group, and the potential attraction of religious-based non-state actors, this issue will pose to the government a formidable challenge for years to come.

In order to achieve the kind of social development envisioned by the Action Plan Mirziyoyev will need to allow the organic development of new political relationships not guided by, or dependent upon, the state. Within this framework, women's equal participation must be guaranteed. There are bound to be calls for gender quotas in parliament or for party lists in a system of electing deputies based on proportional representation. Others will doubtless ask that independent candidates be allowed to compete in local and national elections, with full guarantees of a level playing field. The long-term success of the Action Plan will hinge in part on how the government responds to such proposals.

The fifth area of the Action Strategy's focus is ***Promoting Security, Inter-ethnic Harmony and Religious Tolerance, and Implementation of Balanced, Mutually-beneficial and Constructive Foreign Policy.*** The Action Strategy calls for prioritization "in the field of security, religious tolerance and inter-ethnic harmony." Specifically stated objectives include "strengthening the independence and sovereignty of the state, further strengthening the place and role of the country as a full subject of international relations, joining the ranks of developed democratic states, and the creation of a belt of security, stability and good neighborliness around Uzbekistan." As discussed in detail by Richard Weitz's in his *Silk Road Paper* on the topic, this amounts to a new foreign policy imperative both within the region and in the world, generally.[16] Manifestations of the approach can already be seen in the rapprochement with neighboring Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, overcoming years of mistrust and adversarial relations. An opportunity exists for Uzbekistan to reassert a leadership role in the

[16] Richard Weitz, *Uzbekistan's New Foreign Policy: Change and Continuity under New Leadership,* Washington/Stockholm: CACI & SRSP *Silk Road Paper*, January 2018. (http://silkroadstudies.org/publications/silkroad-papers-and-monographs/item/13273)

Central Asian region. Legal and financial reforms and a broader commitment to human rights may also attract needed investment from the West.

Even if only partially realized in practice, the many measures outlined in the Action Strategy have the potential to move Uzbekistan decisively towards the status of a progressive, forward-looking leader in the region with an unprecedented focus on social, economic, and political development. Progress will require many bold initiatives, not least for the state to work closely with citizens' organizations, media, private business, educators, regional leaders and representatives of traditionally-marginalized populations.

On December 28, 2017, President Mirziyoyev declared 2018 as the *Year of Entrepreneurship, Innovative Ideas and Technologies,* and signed an order to prepare a 2018 state program to implement the Action Strategy. In doing so, the president mandated that the program be undertaken "through direct dialogue with the people, taking into account the public opinion," leading to measures "based on the outcomes of direct dialogue with the people."[17] While not entirely clear what form these consultations will take, Mirziyoyev has been at the forefront of the effort to promote regular, electronic communication between citizens and government, including the creation of a citizens' portal through which to submit feedback to legislators on "issues of importance" to the country. It is presumed that the independent civic sector will play a key role in this process as a check-and-balance mechanism.

The "Concept" of Administrative Reform

On September 8, 2017, President Mirziyoyev signed a Decree "On the approval of the concept of administrative reform in the Republic of Uzbekistan" (hereafter "The Concept"). Its intent is to produce an effective and transparent system of public administration capable of protecting the rights of citizens and bolstering Uzbekistan's economic competitiveness globally. The president's decree defined

[17] "2018 State Program to Seek Public Input", *Tashkent Times*, December 29, 2017. (http://tashkenttimes.uz/national/1879-draft-2018-state-program-to-be-posted-for-public-consultation)

six areas in which these goals are to be achieved, among which are "the improvement of the institutional, organizational, and legal framework of the executive authorities' activities" and "the formation of an effective system of professional civil service, [and] the introduction of effective mechanisms to combat corruption in the system of executive authorities."[18]

Under the six goals are sub-objectives which call for the creation of the "legal and institutional framework for social and public-private partnerships aimed at ensuring broad participation of NGOs and businesses in addressing issues of social and economic development."

The Concept demands a critical and public review of the actions of over one hundred state administrative and economic bodies in order to assess their strategies and effectiveness. Previously, such analyses would only have been carried out behind closed doors, with hope for reform limited to the replacement of department heads. Instead, the Concept's "roadmap" envisions this to take place through the creation of an oversight commission and a series of working groups that will report their findings and recommendations to the Ministry of Justice. In other words, here again we are witnessing an unprecedented system of checks on the work of those branches of the state apparatus charged with planning and implementing administrative and economic policy.

The Concept alludes to the dysfunctionality of the existing public-private partnerships. It argues that current policy places an unsustainable burden on the state institutions to resolve social problems while marginalizing independent civic organizations and private businesses, which should be natural allies in that endeavor. The six major reform areas contain provisions to empower non-governmental organizations as part of the strengthening of a symbiotic relationship with state bodies. Provisions include the transfer of "certain government functions to the subjects of social control" (i.e., private and civic advocacy organizations) as well as the bolstering of the framework "for social and

[18] Ibid.

public-private partnerships aimed at ensuring broad participation of NGOs and businesses in addressing issues of social and economic development."[19]

The Concept was developed with the participation of more than 500 people – scientists, practitioners, experts from international organizations and representatives of independent civic advocacy organizations based in Uzbekistan. As in the case of the Action Strategy, the government worked to solicit participation from the general public in order to present the Concept and receive critical feedback on its further development and implementation. To this end, a special working group was created that included representatives of state bodies and both public and international organizations. In the summer of 2017, this working group held meetings and seminars with representatives of government and the civil sector. Based on the results of these discussions, it revised a number of provisions, and those amendments were included in the final draft of the Concept. The regular meetings and roundtables which this group held while the Concept was being formulated are expected to continue as the Concept is operationalized on a national level.

On September 14, 2017, the Oliy Majlis approved amendments to the Law on the Guarantees of the Activities of non-governmental, non-profit organizations (NNOs) and the Law on Social Partnerships entered into force. The amendments allow governmental bodies to provide state contracts dealing with social issues to NGOs, making clear that such contracts will be funded out of non-governmental budgetary sources, thus allowing a measure of independence for participating non-governmental organizations.

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[19] "Civic Freedom Monitor: Uzbekistan", The International Center for Non-Profit Law, November 7, 2017. (http://www.icnl.org/research/monitor/uzbekistan.html)

Civic Participation and Politics: Elections and Political Parties

The ability of voters to elect their leaders at all levels of government in a competitive and inclusive process is a fundamental right of citizens living in a democracy or a country undergoing democratic transition. Elections in Uzbekistan since independence have not always met that criterion. Either political competition has been limited or muted, the elections process "guided" from above, or representatives to local or national governments were simply appointed by the executive branch. Independent candidates could not contest parliamentary elections,[20] and domestic civic organizations could not independently monitor them.[21] Under the previous administration, one half of the members of the Oliy Majlis (the Senate, or upper house of parliament) were elected indirectly, while in the lower house (Legislative Chamber) only certain members were directly elected, while fifteen seats were automatically allocated to the Ecological Movement. This arrangement does not live up to the OSCE's 1990 Copenhagen Document, which states that at least one half of a national legislature (if bi-cameral) must be directly elected. In November, 2017, Mirziyoyev announced that the 15-seat quota for the Ecological Movement in the Legislative Chamber would be abolished, requiring the party to compete for seats in parliament. This move will bring Uzbekistan's parliament in line with the Copenhagen Document.

Local mayors have historically been appointed and local Gengeshes (legislatures) chosen indirectly. There are now moves afoot to have local officials elected directly. Direct elections to the Tashkent city Gengesh were held in December

[20] OSC/ODIHR, p. 12.
[21] Ibid., p. 16.

2017. However, for now Uzbekistan remains distant from a multi-party political system with full participation of all electoral stakeholders and with a serious opposition as well.

To better understand the current situation with regard to elections and electoral participation it is important to examine the pre-existing structure of elected posts and the electoral system in Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan is divided into twelve provinces (*Wiloyats*), one autonomous republic (the Autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan), 156 regions, and 123 cities. Local government has historically had little power vis-à-vis the strong central government in Tashkent. The chief executive position of each Wiloyat and of the city of Tashkent is the *Khokim* or governor, who is appointed by the president. The presidential appointment of the Khokim to serve a five-year term, must be confirmed by the Gengeshes (local legislatures elected through popular vote), though this has long been a perfunctory process. The regional Khokims, in turn, nominate the Khokims (mayors) of towns and districts. The Khokim exercises extensive executive power, with responsibility to "guarantee law and order, resolve the issues of economic and social development, form the local budget, etc."[22] They have been held personally responsible for their decisions and for the actions of bodies subordinate to them. Mirziyoyev has indicated he would like the Khokims (both Wiloyat governors and city mayors) to be elected directly by the people, and has proposed for such a system to be phased in.

The Structure of Government and Administration of Elections

Uzbekistan has a three-tiered system for managing elections that is led by the 18 members of the Central Election Commission (CEC), among whom are three women. Depending on whether it is a parliamentary or presidential election, there will be 135 District Election Commissions (one for every majoritarian candidate election for parliament) or 14 District Election Commissions comprised of 12 Wiloyat (territorial) Election Commissions (including Tashkent city and the

[22] "Political Structure", Consulate General of Uzbekistan in New York. (https://www.uzbekconsulny.org/consulate/index.php/en/en-about-uzbekistan/en-political-structure)

Autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan) and upwards of 9,000 Precinct Election Commissions, again dependent upon the type of election being held. There are also 44 polling stations in 36 foreign countries for out-of-country voters. The CEC is a permanent body, while DECs and PECs are formed for each election. Sixteen members of the CEC, including two women, were appointed for an indefinite term by parliament, based on proposals from regional councils.[23]

The CEC forms the DECs from nominees selected by the deputies of city and regional Gengeshes. DECs in turn form PECs based on nominations from the Gengeshes, who themselves receive recommendations and nominations from mahallas. Members of political parties, candidates and candidate proxies cannot serve on election commissions. The only qualification for membership in PECs is past performance in the work of election management bodies (EMBs). This is different from other former Soviet countries, some of which have adopted the practice of allowing political parties to occupy places on election commissions at all levels based on the size of their parliamentary delegations. This is rationalized because it is thought to increase trust in the EMBs and promote transparency.

PEC members in Uzbekistan, were often drawn from local mahallas or school staffs, workers, since both frequently doubled as polling stations. This practice calls into question their impartiality. Perhaps President Mirziyoyev will weigh the cost of "professional" EMBs which may be beholden to the government (at least on a local level to powerful Khokims, mahalla heads or school directors), versus the cost of EMBs populated in part by representatives of political parties, including those in opposition, in order to promote transparency. Such a move, coupled with allowing non-partisan domestic election monitors to gain unrestricted freedom beyond specified limits inside the polling stations, would be a clear sign that the new president wants to bolster confidence in elections as a key element of democratic participation.

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[23] "Election Observation Mission Final Report, Early Presidential Election – December 4, 2016, Republic of Uzbekistan," OSCE/ODIHR, Warsaw, March 21, 2017, pp. 6-7.

Other positive moves were made during the 2016 special presidential election, possibly to signal that the electoral process is moving towards greater inclusivity. As noted, the CEC passed a regulation that supports the participation of disabled persons in elections; it also began printing some ballots in Braille.[24] To be sure, there were problems with ballot secrecy that cannot be glossed over, including the official marking of designated early ballots, but the effort to include some traditionally marginalized and disenfranchised populations in the voting process was commendable. What further electoral reform measures Mirziyoyev will recommend to the Oliy Majlis remains to be seen but many hope they will further improve electoral competition, voter participation, and inclusivity.

In order to stand for election, candidates need to be nominated by political parties. In each constituency, at least 33 percent of the electorate must participate for the poll to be valid and candidates are declared elected if they obtain more than 50 percent of the votes cast. Should one of these conditions not be met, a second round of elections takes place between the two leading candidates; a simple majority then suffices. In the 2015 parliamentary elections, four parties with a total of 535 candidates contested the elections, including a number of representatives of national minorities. There are currently 24 women in the Legislative Chamber of the Oliy Majlis and 17 in the Senate. According to the law, at least 30 percent of the candidates proposed by each party must be women.

The system of elections in Uzbekistan is not wholly or substantially different from that of other countries of the former Soviet Union, bar the three Baltic states. Moreover, it has yet to be reformed in a manner that would encourage genuine political competition and the representativeness of elected MPs. An expansion of political competition through registration of true opposition parties as well as allowing independent candidates to run for local and national office would be a clear sign of the government's intention to expand the playing field. Another would be to allow independent advocacy organizations to monitor the voting and governance process, which could extend to tracking the sources of political party

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[24] OSCE/ODIHR, "Election Observation Mission Final Report, Early Presidential Election – December 4, 2016, Republic of Uzbekistan," p. 7.

finances and to following up on the resolution of electoral disputes, two functions now performed exclusively by the Central Election Commission. Opening these processes to public scrutiny would be a positive and welcome move.

The development of new political parties and the re-registration of previously existing ones, could be yet another step forward. The political climate has not as yet opened to the degree that this is possible, though choosing members of the Legislative Chamber through direct elections would be a good starting point. International groups concerned with electoral processes would also consider allowing the nomination of candidates for local and national offices by civic groups as well as political parties as another positive step.

Oliy Majlis (Parliament)

Parliamentary elections in Uzbekistan are regulated by the Constitution, the Law on Elections to the Oliy Majlis (Election Law), and several other laws including those governing the work of the Central Election Commission, the Law on political parties and their financing, and the criminal code.[25] Elections in Uzbekistan have historically been among the least competitive in Central Asia, both for the seats in the Legislative Chamber and for the office of President.

Elections to Uzbekistan's bi-cameral parliament, the Oliy Majlis, are held every five years for both the lower house (Legislative Chamber) and the upper house (Senate). Only party-affiliated candidates are allowed to run. In 135 electoral districts members of the Legislative Chamber are directly elected by voters in a first-past-the-post majoritarian system. Changes in the election law in 2008 (subsequently rescinded) reserved fifteen seats for the Ecological Movement of Uzbekistan. Of the fifteen seats, fourteen were chosen at a national party congress and represent each of the 12 Wiloyats, Karakalpakstan and Tashkent city branches. One additional member was chosen from the Executive Committee of the Central Council of the Ecological Movement.

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[25] "Limited Election Observation Mission Final Report, Parliamentary Elections – December 21, 2014, Republic of Uzbekistan," OSCE/ODIHR, Warsaw, February 24, 2015, p. 6.

The Senate is comprised of 100 members, 84 of whom are indirectly elected, by 14 regional Gengeshes (councils) representing the 12 Wiloyats, Karakalpakstan and Tashkent city, as well as 16 who are presidential appointees.[26]

Office of President and Prime Minister

Uzbekistan has a two-round system for presidential elections. A president can be elected in the first round provided a minimum of 33 percent of eligible voters participate. In this case, the winner needs to receive a simple majority to be elected president. This has been the case in every Uzbek presidential election to date, in which none of the five presidential votes has needed to go to a second round. In the event a run-off or second round would be necessary, however, between the two leading candidates with the most votes from the first round, the candidate who receives more votes is considered elected. There is no turnout requirement in the second round. Karimov won decisively in presidential elections held in 1991, 2000, 2007 and 2015, and Mirziyoyev similarly prevailed in 2016 with a large percentage of the vote. While Karimov faced only one other opponent in the 1991 and 2000 elections, four candidates competed for the office in 2007, 2015 and 2016. None aside from Karimov (or Mirziyoyev in 2016) garnered more than five percent aside from Muhammad Salih of the Erk Party (12.5 percent) in the first presidential election in 1991.

The Constitution of Uzbekistan allowed a maximum of two consecutive presidential terms for the same person. In a constitutional referendum conducted in 1995, the president's term of office was extended until 2000. A second referendum held in 2002 changed the term of office from five to seven years. This extension was applied to Karimov's existing mandate, which extended his term of office to 2007. The Central Election Commission ruled that Karimov was formally elected under the constitution (adopted in 1992) one time, in 2000, allowing him to run in 2007.[27] His subsequent electoral campaigns, for what amounted to third and fourth terms, were not challenged in court, and Karimov

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[26] "The Senate – Upper Chamber of the Parliament of Uzbekistan." (http://senat.uz/en/senate/index.html)

[27] OSCE/ODIHR, "Republic of Uzbekistan, Early Presidential Election, 4 December 2016," p.4.

was elected four times. In 2011, the presidential term of office was changed back to five years from seven, where it remains at present. Another key legal change was enacted in 2008 whereby independent candidates were no longer allowed to run for the office of president, meaning only party-nominated candidates were eligible and thus restricting potential opposition candidates.[28]

The Law on Election of the President (PEL), the Law on the Central Election Commission (Law on the CEC), the Law on Guarantees of Suffrage to Citizens (Law on Suffrage) and several other legal acts govern presidential elections. The fact that provisions on the electoral process are dispersed throughout these laws and CEC resolutions greatly complicates any clear understanding of the process.

While there have always been multiple candidates running for the presidency, it remains the case that essentially only one candidate has ever had a reasonable chance of prevailing – such were the advantages enjoyed by Mr. Karimov and his successor. The 2007 presidential election, which included four candidates, was typical, as the three candidates nominally running against the president all supported him. As one Western commentary noted, "There are no debates between candidates and no campaign materials of a competitive nature, which has been explained by Uzbek traditions not favoring confrontational election campaigns."[29]

Constitutional changes of 2014, sought to redistribute power between the parliament and the executive, granting more decision-making power and control over the executive to the Oliy Majlis. While far from turning the country into a parliamentary republic such as constitutional changes intended in Kyrgyzstan, Georgia or Armenia, the changes sought to evolve the country from a top-heavy, centrally-run presidential regime to a state with more diffusion of decision-making (after nearly 25 years with Karimov as the unquestioned leader). The changes sought formally to balance power between the executive, legislative and

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[28] Ibid. p.5.
[29] Human Rights Watch, "Uzbekistan: No Real Choice in Presidential Elections," December 20, 2007. (https://www.hrw.org/news/2007/12/20/uzbekistan-no-real-choice-presidential-elections)

judicial branches, further "democratizing the state power system."[30] The draft law was submitted to parliament based on Karimov's initiative.

Furthermore, the changes were made prior to the 2014 elections to the Oliy Majlis, setting the stage for the elections to assume unprecedented relevancy and a reasonable competition between the five (pro-government) registered political parties. The trend of transferring power began earlier, when in 2011, a particularly important constitutional change was made granting the majority party in parliament the responsibility of nominating the prime minster. The Liberal Democratic Party took exactly this action after the 2014 elections via winning the largest number of seats (52). The party promptly nominated incumbent Prime Minister Mirziyoyev, who then had to be approved by over half of the deputies in the Legislative Chamber of the parliament. The president previously had the responsibility of nominating the Prime Minister. Under the changes, the Prime Minister would also see some presidential power and duties transfer to him. The constitutional amendments had as their stated intent "to strengthen the role of political parties…in setting priorities for the country's economic and social spheres."[31] The measures were intended to foster inter-party competition between the legally-registered political parties in setting priorities for the economic, social and political direction of the country, including reforms. It was felt as well that the constitutional changes would "promote the development of civil society and eliminate the concentration of power in one hand."[32]

Governors, Mayors and Regional/Local Councils

As noted above, local government in Uzbekistan consists of several structures through which presidential power is realized. The Councils of the People's

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[30] "Uzbek Parliament adopts amendments to Constitution", Agora – Portal for Parliamentary Development, March 31, 2014. (https://www.agora-parl.org/news/uzbek-parliament-adopts-amendments-constitution)

[31] Umida Hashimova, "Are Recent Constitutional Changes in Uzbekistan Related to Successor Issue?", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, March 28, 2014. (https://jamestown.org/program/are-recent-constitutional-changes-in-uzbekistan-related-to-successor-issue/)

[32] Hashimova, "Are Recent Constitutional Changes in Uzbekistan Related to Successor Issue?"

Deputies and Khokims (governors and mayors), nominated by the president and confirmed by the Gengeshes, comprise the basis of the government in the Wiloyats, districts and towns across the country. Since independence Khokims have been relied upon to "guarantee law and order, resolve the issues of economic and social development, form the local budget" and "perform their functions based on the principle of undivided authority."[33] As unelected positions, however, Khokims were not directly accountable to the local populations who were most affected by their decisions. Under former President Karimov, only the president was legally authorized to appoint and remove governors and mayors. Karimov made a regular habit of attending meetings of regional assemblies throughout the country expressly to appoint as well as remove local officials.[34]

In December 2016, the newly elected President Mirziyoyev proposed to make governors and mayors directly elected by the people. In August 2017, the code on local and regional elections was amended by decree to allow for the direct election of Khokims of Wiloyats and the city of Tashkent, and set the date for Tashkent city elections, which took place on December 24, 2017.[35]

Recognizing the lack of accountability in the work of local leaders and the need to develop a new class of professional public servants, the President represented the proposed measure of direct elections as a way to connect government with the population. The move was also a blunt admission that local bureaucrats had been bogged down with implementing orders from Tashkent rather than putting their constituents' needs first. As Mirziyoyev put it in a speech to the nation, "To

[33] "Political Structure: Constitution and Government", Embassy of Uzbekistan to the United States. (https://www.uzbekistan.org/uzbekistan/political/)
[34] "Uzbekistan Touts Possible Direct Gubernatorial Elections," *Eurasianet*, December 8, 2016. (http://www.eurasianet.org/node/81606)
[35] "Закон Республики Узбекистан 'О выборах в районные Кенгаши народных депутатов города Ташкента,'" August 15, 2017. (http://www.elections.uz/ru/events/legislation/45602/)

defend the interests of the people, you must in the first-place talk to the people, and better understand their concerns, aspirations, life problems and needs."[36]

The need for better communication between governors and the governed became evident to the future president as he toured the country during the 2016 campaign. This reality led to the section of the Action Strategy addressing local governance, which specifically addresses "Reforming the Governance System" and "Improving the Public Management System" as a priority. Also contemplated at the time and ultimately included in the Strategy were changes to the presidential administration and executive office, which fell under the same set of reform priorities.

In the coming months and years, one can expect further substantive changes to local and regional government, with the likelihood of many new faces in positions of authority, all of them popularly elected for the first time in Uzbekistan's independent statehood. The new leaders will have to be closely watched to determine whether they are acting on behalf of citizens or are drawn back into regional or local loyalty networks. In the end, direct local elections are a necessary but not sufficient condition for progress: the elections also need to be professionally and fairly administered at all levels – particularly the often-compromised District and Precinct Election Commissions. They must also be scrutinized by active, independent NGO monitors. The CEC has not heretofore accredited such persons, instead accrediting only party-affiliated observers and candidate proxies. As with all the proclamations, decrees, and projects announced by President Mirziyoyev, confirmation that genuine change has occurred will come only through careful evaluation and monitoring over time.

Parliamentary Elections

On January 28, 2005 the Uzbek parliament, or Oliy Majlis, entered a new era with the establishment of bicameral chambers. Elections to both chambers took place on December 21, 2014. There are today four political parties, all of whose deputies

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[36] "Uzbekistan Touts Possible Direct Gubernatorial Elections," *Eurasianet*, December 8, 2016

are directly elected. As mentioned above, fifteen seats in the lower chamber were granted automatically to the Ecological Movement, but the rest of 135 deputies are directly elected from the single member constituencies, using a two-round system. Out of these 135, 113 were won by candidates in the first round, and the remaining 22 seats were filled in the run-off on January 4, 2015. Members of the lower chamber are elected for five years.[37]

The 2014 elections to the Legislative Chamber of the Oliy Majlis resulted in the parliament's present makeup, with 52 seats occupied by the Liberal Democratic Party, 36 by the National Democratic Revival Party, 27 by the People's Democratic Party, 20 by the Justice Social Democratic Party, and 15 seats allocated to the Ecological Movement of Uzbekistan.

[37] "15 января состоялось заседание Центральной избирательной комиссии Республики Узбекистан. Вел заседание председатель комиссии М.Абдусаломов," Central Election Commission, January 15, 2015; (http://www.elections.uz/m_ru/events/current_topics/4124/) "Проходят выборы членов Сената", Central Election Commission, January 13, 2015; (http://elections.uz/ru/events/current_topics/4101/) and "Выступление председателя Центральной избирательной комиссии Республики Узбекистан М.Абдусаломова на пресс-конференции, посвященной предварительным итогам выборов в Законодательную палату Олий Мажлиса Республики Узбекистан," Central Elections Commission, December 22, 2014. (http://elections.uz/ru/events/current_topics/3865/)

Political Parties

The political system in Uzbekistan was long among the least reformed in the region, more static in its development than all its Central Asian neighbors bar Turkmenistan. Today Uzbekistan features a semi-presidential system with an exceptionally strong executive and weak parliament. The five parties represented in the bi-cameral Oliy Majlis all supported former president Karimov and today support his successor, President Mirziyoyev. However, their level of activity has been quite high, with real debate and discussion on internal policies becoming steadily more frequent. None of them has mounted initiatives that challenge the prevailing system of government. But it is more than likely that under Mirziyoyev's Action Strategy Parliament is likely to develop into a setting for healthy debate and discussion, with expanded powers for "resolving the most important objectives of internal and foreign policies and for implementing parliamentary control over the executive."[38] The Strategy will also encourage an expanded role for political parties across the entire country. It is likely that genuine competition among parties will emerge, and in a way that will lead to better policy-making and the overall strengthening of Uzbekistan's political culture.

There has been little or no discussion to date of the possibility that, at some point, parties might emerge aspiring to constitute a true opposition. This cannot be ruled out because any of the existing five parties could feel freer in the future to embrace platforms that do not have executive approval, or because entirely new parties could emerge. In any case, this would be an evolutionary process and is not likely to arise overnight. The ability of a new party both to gain legal standing

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[38] "Uzbekistan's Development Strategy for 2017-2021 has been adopted following public consultation," *Tashkent Times*, February 8, 2017. (http://tashkenttimes.uz/national/541-uzbekistan-s-development-strategy-for-2017-2021-has-been-adopted-following-discussion)

and to define its policies and methods in ways that conform to the culture of the Oliy Majlis will be a kind of litmus test for those portions of the Action Strategy that pertain to political parties.

Status of Political Parties at the National and Local Level

With the weakening of the Soviet system and collapse of communism, several social movements and proto-political parties began to form in Uzbekistan. Though a radical departure from a one-party state, they reflected the growth of various strains of civic awareness and advocacy. Among the aspiring new parties in independent Uzbekistan were Erk, Birlik, the Fatherland Progress party, Adolat (Social Democratic Party), the People's Democratic Party, Party of National Revival, and the National Democratic Party Fidorkorlar. Of these, the People's Democratic Party would emerge a dominating and all-powerful political force without any genuine opposition. The rise of a new group of entrepreneurs and social activists led many in the West to believe that Uzbekistan was becoming a multi-party state embracing democratic principles. However, as the Karimov government consolidated power and focused above all on preserving the sovereignty of an independent state, this dream faded.

Besides Karimov's own party, the two groups that came closest to establishing themselves as independent entities were Erk and Birlik. Since the history of these proto-parties has yet to be written, we are left with contradictory interpretations of their brief lives. On the one side are Western organizations and analysts who perceived them as promising enterprises that might have succeed had it not been for what they considered the repressive government in Tashkent. On the other side are Uzbeks and foreign analysts who argue that these movements still bore the deep marks of Soviet thinking, were often undemocratic in their internal life and had no program either for protecting the economy or for preserving an independent Uzbekistan in the face of serious foreign and domestic threats.

Erk's leader Mohammed Salih was the sole candidate to oppose Karimov in the presidential election of December, 1991, and likely received more than the 12.7 percent of the vote officially announced by the Central Election Commission.

However, only a month before these elections an Islamist uprising and attempted putsch in the city of Namangan put the entire country on edge. Karimov, who actually went to meet with the insurgents, concluded that this and such other centrifugal currents as the new political parties could break the fragile social peace in Uzbekistan and wreck the country's chances of becoming a viable sovereignty. Erk continued to hold party congresses through 1993, when Salih was re-elected party chairman, but by then he was in exile.

After a ten-year respite Erk again held a congress in 2003 and again elected Salih as chairman. Erk had recently led public demonstrations calling for more political openness, but it was itself riven by internal conflicts. The Karimov government allowed the congress to play out with minimal interference. As one scholar noted at the time, "The detained demonstrators were released and, what is more, the outlawed party's congress was held with only slight interruptions by security structures."[39] Whether this signaled the beginning of a more restrained attitude towards political opposition is debatable, though the timing of the events roughly corresponds with Shavkat Mirziyoyev's formal appointment as Prime Minister. At the same time, however, the government in 2005 also expelled or restricted the work of several international NGOs,[40] a trend that was reversed only after Mr. Mirziyoyev became president.

It is worth noting that only a year later the Oliy Majlis adopted a new law strengthening the role of political parties in the country's political life, though only the state-supported Ecological Movement of Uzbekistan was registered in its aftermath, joining the other four pro-presidential, previously registered parties. While the law gave parties a new legitimacy, it did not lead to the rise of new political competitors.

The government had unabashedly "seeded" the new political parties from above in the hope of launching a cautious evolutionary process that would diversify

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[39] Erica Marat, "The ERK Protest Sets Out a Precedent for Karimov to Revise Relations with Political Opposition," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, November 5, 2003. (http://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/8513)

[40] Human Rights Watch, "Uzbekistan: Events of 2005." (https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2006/country-chapters/uzbekistan)

discussions of policy issues while carefully maintaining a balance among the competing parties. Future historians will determine the extent to which Prime Minister Mirziyoyev helped shape this unusual, gradualistic program for developing political parties. But it is certainly consistent with his later actions.

President Karimov initially favored the National Democratic Party Fidorkorlar, which championed market reforms and an open society, over the former Communist Party, the People's Democratic Party. The upstart Liberal Democratic Party (also known as the "Movement of Entrepreneurs and Businessmen") then made significant strides in pursuit of economic reform, in the process drawing Karimov's praise and support.[41] The parties benefitted, at least initially, from international assistance in organization and platform development as well as contact with European-based parties pursuing similar goals. The challenge was to figure out how to launch and advance a concrete platform within the relatively narrow political space provided, and in a way that did not overtly challenge the overall direction set by President Karimov.

Over the decade 2006-2016, the four (later five) legal political parties were able to develop their identities, establish regional branches, prompt policy debates, raise funds, and behave as "regular" parties, albeit in a more restrictive environment than in Europe. Given Uzbekistan's brief history as an independent state this was indeed noteworthy. The parties have established organizations and gained campaign experience by competing in parliamentary elections, and have honed their legislative skills by serving in parliament for nearly two decades.

It is sometimes difficult to distinguish the programs of the political parties, since their programs, for the most part, remain general and lack specifics. On July 12, 2017 President Mirziyoyev, in an address to the legislative chamber, harshly criticized the political parties for inactivity and for being disconnected from the electorate. He stated that "any political party can be considered a political force

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[41] Starr, *Clans, Authoritarian Rulers and Parliaments in Central Asia*, pp. 23-24.

only when it is in step with the times."[42] This accurately reflected how the political parties have actually been perceived among the population. He prodded deputies from political parties to get out of their offices and travel around the country to meet people, especially the youth, hear their concerns and come back with proposals on how to resolve the problems identified by citizens. He urged them to analyze proposed legislation and propose improvements. The President also suggested that political parties make connect with foreign counterparts, which had been the norm up until the mid-1990s but in more recent years had been seen in a more negative light.

Mirziyoyev's comments brought results. Parliamentarians have regularly visited rural areas, where they have appeared in live talk shows, used social media, participated in focus groups, and tried overall to become more connected with their constituents. However, there is still a long way to go in order to achieve a strong, multiparty system that accepts and encourages diversity of platforms and programs, as well as not perceiving opposing policies as anathema to the state.

The late 2016 decree announcing the direct elections of municipal councils and then of Khokims may hasten this process. This will doubtlessly offer new prospects for political parties as well but it will be for the post-independence generation[43] to energize existing parties and create new ones.

Expanded competition among the five legally-registered political parties is likely to stimulate them to refine their platforms, redouble efforts to support gender equality and inclusion, engage more of the country's young and future voters, and seek diversity within their ranks. The emergence of a more open political system that embraces freedom of speech, association and assembly will offer an opportunity for all political actors to flourish. The direct election of local Gengesh

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[42] "Президент отметил пассивность политических партий и депутатского корпуса," anhor.uz, July 13, 2017. (https://anhor.uz/news/prezident-otmetil-passivnosty-politicheskih-partiy-i-deputatskogo-korpusa) and ""Мирзиёев указал на недостатки каждой политической партии, uz24.uz. (http://uz24.uz/politics/mirziyoev-ukazal-na-nedostatki-kazhdoy-politicheskoy-partii)

[43] Citizens 24 years of age or younger comprise over 42% of the Uzbekistan's 29.7 million population. (https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/uz.html)

members, as took place in Tashkent late in 2017, is a positive step in this direction, as would be the direct election of governors of the Wiloyats and urban mayors. With the next elections to the Oliy Majlis scheduled for the autumn of 2019, it will be necessary to accelerate the implementation of reforms and encouragement of political competition if President Mirziyoyev' goals for the country's political development are to be realized.

Rethinking the Parliament

While four pro-presidential parties dominate the political landscape, there were some under-the-radar developments which moved the needle of democratization to a degree in the 2000s and 2010s. For those political parties who were able to legally register, conduct their activities and compete in elections, there was a discernible though measured movement towards democratization during the period in which Mirziyoyev served as Prime Minister. During this time a "step-by-step" approach was pursued, with the overriding interest remaining the stability of the country, at the expense of significant change. Although President Karimov was reticent about opening up the political system, and inherently distrustful of the motivations of political opposition (as well as pro-presidential parties in parliament), Prime Minister Mirziyoyev was more supportive to modernization of the systems of government and political competition. Prior to the 2014 legislative elections, the majority party in parliament was given the right to nominate the Prime Minister. Further legislative amendments, together with improvements in election administration and procedures were undertaken, and during the late 2000s and into the 2010s, more and more younger candidates were nominated by political parties to run for office, which was seen as "contributing to strengthening the role of political parties and the parliament, and creating the potential for a more competitive political climate."[44] They also established branches in the Wiloyats and had regular communication with other political parties and parliaments in Europe, Eurasia and south and east Asia. These parties,

[44] "Limited Election Observation Mission Final Report, Parliamentary Elections – December 21, 2014, Republic of Uzbekistan," OSCE/ODIHR, Warsaw, February 24, 2015, p. 1.

while pro-presidential, nevertheless behaved like "normal" political parties in terms of their membership recruitment, fundraising, rivalries, battle for influence within the parliament, and spirited discussion on several key issues facing the country such as labor migration, unemployment, water resource management, the environment, pension, taxes, etc. Some of the thornier topics such as human rights may have been off limits, but nor was the discussion and debate in the halls of the Oliy Majlis uneventful or unproductive.

In the 2014 parliamentary elections, the four political parties nominated candidates for all 135 available seats. There were no independent candidates allowed, as all candidates running for an MP seats must be members of a political party. Overall the CEC registered 535 candidates, including 170 women (31.8 percent) and a number of representatives of national minority groups. All four parties nominated mostly new candidates who tended to be 10 to 15 years younger than the incumbent members of parliament, of whom roughly 20 percent were up for reelection. The inclination to nominate younger candidates was presented by the Uzbek authorities as "another step" towards strengthening the role of the political parties and the parliament.[45] Indeed, nominating younger members serves the parties' interests as well as that of the voters, brings new energy, and appeals to a younger segment of the electorate which may otherwise be apathetic to the election process. It also signaled a much overdue transition from senior party apparatchiks to a more open-minded party rank-and-file that is well-versed in electronic communications and free of the standards of the Soviet past. Though in some ways the standards of political behavior in Uzbekistan may be highly structured, the fact that multiple parties can exist in the same space is at least a step towards multi-party democracy, even if they all generally support the president. That said, the Action Strategy launched by Mirziyoyev has already been attracting young people to political causes, and it could lead the five official parties as well as perhaps new parties or re-registered, formerly banned parties, in some new directions that test the loosening control of the regime over political life in the country. A wave of new ideas and initiatives

[45] Ibid.

would seem to be in order; the four competitive political parties were, in the words of former president Karimov, "so similar [he] sometimes could not tell the difference between them."[46]

In addition, on December 22, 2017 in a live, televised nationwide speech made before the combined houses of the Oliy Majlis, the first such ever made by a president of Uzbekistan, President Mirziyoyev called into question the 15-seat quota reserved for the Ecological Movement, stating: "For the sake of political competition I call upon you to give up providing fifteen guaranteed seats to the Ecological Movement in the Legislative Chamber."[47] The comment was delivered amidst a wide-ranging list of priorities outlined for 2018, including a major decentralization program, through which local directors of education, tax, financial and other authorities would be appointed by Khokims and not by the central government in Tashkent. With an eye towards making government more accountable, the president also announced he would create an online portal to solicit feedback from citizens so they "can express their opinion on important issues."[48] He pointed out that this would oblige members of parliament to consider citizens' input when preparing legislation.

The direct legislation of all 150 members of the Legislative Chamber, if accompanied by a willingness to register new parties, the introduction of a mixed or parallel voting system with a low threshold, and the encouragement of open party lists, this move could indeed lead to more openness and competition in elections to the lower house. The OSCE (of which Uzbekistan is a member) would welcome these steps, as in all likelihood would citizens, political parties, and public officials in Uzbekistan. All would see them as ways to increase the

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[46] "Uzbek Political Parties Form New Bloc", *RFE/RL*, March 14, 2015. (https://www.rferl.org/a/uzbekistan-political-parties-bloc-democratic-forces/26901168.html)
[47] "Highlights of President Mirziyoyev's address to the Parliament," *Tashkent Times*, December 22, 2017. (http://tashkenttimes.uz/national/1852-highlights-of-president-mirziyoyev-s-address-to-the-parliament)
[48] Ibid.

legitimacy of the parliament as a check on executive power and enhance overall credibility of governance in the country.

A rebirth of political competition is a key objective of the Action Strategy envisioned by President Mirziyoyev. Once the officially-registered parties take the opportunity of greater political openness to pursue bolder strategies of inclusion and address challenging issues, including human rights and development, and if the political spectrum continues to diversify with the registration of new parties on the scene, then it can be said that the Strategy is having a demonstrable effect in increasing public policy dialogue. For any party, be it oppositional or pro-government, its success in a competitive system depends greatly on its ability to organize, develop coherent and well-researched platform initiatives, conduct effective communication and outreach to recruit and retain active party members. Success will depend perhaps most importantly of all on the overall political liberalization of the country. The Strategy would appear to provide the framework, and early returns indicate that new political and social movements are constituting.

Evolving Citizen Participation in Uzbekistan

The first hundred or so NGOs in Uzbekistan appeared late in the Soviet era and during the first years of independence, but by the end of the century they had proliferated to approximately 2,500, not counting newly opened offices of international NGOs. The first laws regulating non-profit organizations appeared during the 1990s. From 2000 to 2005, the sector continued to grow, with NGOs working in the area of human rights and other sectors. After 2005, the central government itself began organizing and funding nominally "non-governmental organizations," which competed with independent groups for resources and influence. During the last year of the Karimov presidency, nearly 8,500 NGOs were operating in the country, but with very few of them in the human rights sector, thanks mainly to regulatory barriers and controls on foreign funding. Under the new administration independent civic activism and rights-based watchdog groups again began to flourish, encouraged by changes proposed by President Mirziyoyev himself in his Action Strategy.[49]

NGO Conditions in the first Twenty-Five Years of Independence

As in most of the other former Soviet republics, civic awareness and non-governmental organizational development was uncertain and tepid in Uzbekistan after independence in 1991. Civil law nominally acknowledged and protected civil society organizations but such groups frequently fell under suspicion and were subject to administrative measures. Those organizations advancing human rights, access to information, and media freedom were particularly subject to such pressures. Many NGOs registered by the Ministry of

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[49] "NGOs in Uzbekistan's New Environment: Will There be a Stimulus for Development?" Central Asia Bureau for Analytical Reporting (CABAR.asia), November 7, 2016, p. 4.

Justice during the 1990s and early 2000s, including international entities supported by the U.S. and European governments and private foundations, were subsequently de-registered and closed down. When re-registration became possible, many Uzbek NGOs were unable to navigate the re-registration process due to red tape and ever more stringent regulations. The net effect was to further erode the civil sector. Subsequent court decisions and rigorous tax inspections in 1911, led to the closure of remaining rights advocacy NGOs. Uzbekistan's moves against civil society organizations mirrored a regional pattern initiated by Russia that weakened the civil sector and stymied all potential political opposition.

The mid-2010s saw some softening of official attitudes towards independent civic groups. Supported by Prime Minister Mirziyoyev, in 2013 President Karimov adopted a "Decree on Additional Measures to Promote the Development of Civil Society Institutions," which eased the registration process for NGOs and reduced registration fees. The decree also reduced arbitrariness by adding steps the government had to take in order legally to dissolve NGOs.

It is significant that President Karimov, in a State Policy Document, formally acknowledged the important role played by civil society organizations in Uzbekistan.[50] His successor in office, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, contributed heavily to this document, and would in turn further develop and expand it. This document also led to the drafting of new laws on social partnership, social control, and transparency in government activities, all of which had the explicit goal of bolstering citizen participation in the civil sector and promote more public-private partnerships. At the same time, in 2014, the Oliy Majlis began providing 7 billion som annually to NGOs on a competitive basis.[51] The fact that a third of all grants went to government-organized NGOs, or "GONGOs," diluted the impact of this initiative. GONGOs had risen to prominence as a counterweight to

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[50] Authorized Person of the Oliy Majlis of the Republic of Uzbekistan (Ombudsman), "The Concept of Administrative Reform in the Republic of Uzbekistan is Approved", September 9, 2017. (http://www.ombudsman.uz/en/press_center/news/uzbekistan/the-concept-of-administrative-reform-in-the-republic-of-uzbekistan-is-approved/)

[51] "Civic Freedom Monitor: Uzbekistan", The International Center for Non-Profit Law, November 7, 2017. (http://www.icnl.org/research/monitor/uzbekistan.html) At the official conversion rate, this amounted to over $3 million.

the independent NGO sector in Uzbekistan. Because the line between NGOs and GONGOs was blurred, perhaps intentionally, international donors had difficulty discerning which was which.

Contradictory government policies would continue to hamper civic advocacy groups. On the one hand, the government came increasingly to appreciate the contribution of NGOs, but on the other, it restricted the ability of NGOs to receive foreign funding and subjected them to detailed audits.

During his lengthy tenure in office, President Karimov prioritized sovereignty as the primary goal, with social peace and a productive economy as keys to its achievement. By the early years of the new millennium it was increasingly clear that these objectives had been achieved. But it was also evident that the cost of this otherwise successful transition had been burgeoning bureaucratization, corruption, and severe limits on civic activism and NGOs. The appointment of Mirziyoyev in 2003, occurred as these circumstances were becoming obvious to all. Certain changes had already been instituted in the regimen affecting NGOs but the pace of reform—if not its visibility-- increased thereafter. Therefore, it came as a surprise to many (especially foreign observers) when during the 2016 presidential campaign, Mirziyoyev declared his strong support for removing impediments to the development of NGOs. However, to a considerable degree, the emergence of NGOs as a priority had been an evolutionary process, with roots going back more than a decade. What was important about the fresh round of NGO reforms instituted during and after 2017, is that they arose from a relatively strong economy rather than in response to crisis, and from a mood of confidence rather than despair.

Civil Society under Mirziyoyev: An Ally, not Adversary

Following President Karimov's passing, his successor aggressively pursued a new strategy with regard to the NGO sector. This was manifested in numerous legislative amendments and initiatives to ease the ability of NGOs to operate in the country. Since Mirziyoyev took office as Interim President in September 2016, 685 local civic advocacy organizations have successfully registered with the

Ministry of Justice, more than an 8 percent increase. These represent a variety of social causes, the most numerous being in the area of "legal strengthening of democratic institutions."[52] (228 organizations) Over 200 of the newly-registered organizations support veterans or promote agricultural initiatives.

An overarching goal of the President's "Program" and the "Action Strategy" is to root out corruption and inefficiency at the local and national levels of government. The translation of written objectives into demonstrable action has proceeded apace, as local administrators from a multitude of governmental departments have been called to answer for their actions in a very public way, resulting in presidential chastisements and numerous officials being sacked for a variety of offenses. After Mirziyoyev criticized the performance of the Ministry of Finance, it fired 562 officials on December 23, 2017. The president vowed to continue to identify low performers at all levels, including newly-appointed Minister of Finance Jamshid Kuchkarov himself, and demanded that improvements be made within a month.[53] In his televised state-of-the-nation address of December 22, 2017 President Mirziyoyev denounced officials who use vulgar language when speaking to their subordinates or ordinary citizens. Four days later the mayor of Andijan was fined 5 million soms ($640) for publicly insulting several people. This was believed to be the first instance since Uzbekistan gained independence in 1991 in which an official was punished for insulting an ordinary citizen.[54] These moves put officials at all levels of government on notice and confirm that Mirziyoyev is serious about his pledge to make government accountable to the people.

On September 8, 2017, President Mirziyoyev signed the Law on Distribution and Ensuring Access to Legal Information, which guarantees free access to legal information and clarifies the responsibility of the Parliament, Cabinet of

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[52] Embassy of the Republic of Uzbekistan, December 2017.

[53] "Hundreds Fired from Uzbek Finance Ministry After President's Criticism", *RFE/RL*, December 27, 2017. (https://www.rferl.org/a/uzbekistan-finance-ministry-mass-firing-after-president-criticism/28942439.html)

[54] "Uzbek Official Fined for Insulting Teachers in Public," *RFE/RL*, December 27, 2017. (https://www.rferl.org/a/uzbekistan-official-fined-for-insulting-teachers-in-public/28941513.html)

Ministers, and other governmental bodies to disseminate legal information. It also enjoins local self-governing bodies and NGOs to assist governmental bodies in this process. Further, amendments to the Law on Guarantees of the Activities of NGOs and the Law on Social Partnerships adopted a week later enable governmental bodies to extend state contracts to NGOs and fund them from non-governmental sources.

More than 9,000 NGOs are presently registered in Uzbekistan. In spite of recent improvements,[55] many NGOs working in the political sector, or which previously received foreign funding, continue to experience difficulties in their day-to-day operations. NGOs working in the social and economic sectors have been quicker to feel the changes brought about by the Mirziyoyev administration, while human rights groups continue to experience problems with registration and the implementation of projects. There are hopeful signs, however, and semi-independent umbrella groups supporting women's rights, persons with disabilities and environmental issues appear to be operating more openly than in the past. At the same time, bodies such as the governmental National Association of Non-Governmental and Non-profit Organizations (NANNOUZ) continue to provide support and cover to small NGOs around the country.[56]

The long-standing requirement to obtain an exit visa to exit the country legally had long been seen as a restriction on critics of the government and would-be opposition leaders. It is reported that this is to be ended by 2019. Censorship of the internet will also be relaxed, which will expand citizens' access to alternative news and viewpoints. Such measures suggest that the Uzbek government is prepared to give up much of its control over the flow of information in order to develop a modern and forward-looking society of the twenty-first century.

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[55] Communications from NGO representatives in Uzbekistan. See also Mirzokhid Rakhimov, "Post-Soviet Transformations and the Contemporary History of Uzbekistan," Uzbekistan Initiative Papers, No. 14, March 2014, p. 5.

[56] Human Rights Watch, "Uzbekistan: A Year into New Presidency, Cautious Hope for Change, "October 25, 2017. (https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/10/25/uzbekistan-year-new-presidency-cautious-hope-change)

It is notable that in February 2017, the government itself established an NGO to coordinate the activities and implementation of the Strategy. The organization, unambiguously named the Action Strategy Center, will "consolidate efforts for the effective organization of expert and public discussions, in-depth studies, and implementation of measures stipulated by the Action Strategy, as well as assure the active involvement of representatives of civil society institutions, experts, and other stakeholders in the processes of democratization and modernization of the country."[57] This entity is to receive funds from the state budget and also from other national organizations, donors, and international sources.

Improving Two-Way Communication with Citizens

As detailed in Mjuša Sever's *Silk Road Paper*, the Mirziyoyev administration has actively reached out to citizens in the regions by setting up an unprecedented set of "Presidential Reception Centers" across the country. This extensive network is tasked to respond to grievances from individual citizens. One heretofore highly critical international lobby group concludes that they have already "proven effective in addressing everyday social, communal, and practical issues of citizens" that had been long neglected or disregarded under the previous administration.[58] Communication with the public at large has increased as well, with governmental officials at all levels making extensive use of social media. Typically, Minister of Interior Pulat Bobojonov maintains an active Facebook profile.

President Mirziyoyev's election has built on the public's expanded use of on-line social networks and used them to enable officials to interact virtually with the public. The President himself uses Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and the mobile messenger Telegram.[59] In addition, "Virtual Reception Rooms" have become one of the main mechanisms of dialogue between citizens and the president. Through these online, virtual "rooms," any citizen of the country has an opportunity to send a question, statement, or opinion directly to President

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[57] Human Rights Watch, "Uzbekistan: A Year into New Presidency, Cautious Hope for Change."
[58] Ibid.
[59] Embassy of the Republic of Uzbekistan to the United States, December 2017.

Mirziyoyev. Furthermore, by the end of 2017 nearly all governmental agencies had launched their own "virtual reception room" portals. 96.7 percent of all ministries and departments now maintain official websites and 114 governmental agencies maintain their own electronic portals, 79 percent of which have mobile versions.[60] Given the explosion of smartphone usage, particularly among those under the age of 30, the use of mobile communication will become ever more important in the coming years.

From the time of its launch in December 2016, a new channel – Uzbekistan 24 – has broadcast news twenty-four hours each day. While the new government has gone to great lengths to increase access to information from official sources, much remains to be done with respect to information generally. Public access to the internet and international sources of information (including television) remain a challenge, and private media still face impediments.

Peaceful demonstrations can be considered yet another form of communication between citizens and their governments. However, the bloody events following the armed uprising in Andijan in 2005, caused the government of Uzbekistan to restrict severely all public demonstrations.[61] In the current, more confident, era those constraints have now been somewhat relaxed. In the same vein, public discussion of human rights and other sensitive topics has expanded, and non-governmental organizations such as the Human Rights Alliance have been able to hold peaceful public rallies.[62] Although conditions have eased somewhat, the civic sector still operates under serious constraints. Domestic NGOs no longer need to get permission from the Ministry of Justice to conduct each project, but they still need to inform the Ministry a month in advance of planned activities. Domestic and foreign NGOs have easier access to the banking system but the

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[60] Embassy of the Republic of Uzbekistan to the United States, December 2017. They no longer require specific and express permission from the Ministry to conduct the proposed project initiative.
[61] Jeffry Hartman, *The May 2005 Andijan Uprising: What We Know*, Washington/Stockholm: CACI & SRSP Silk Road Paper, May 2016. (https://silkroadstudies.org/publications/silkroad-papers-and-monographs/item/13204)
[62] Human Rights Watch, "Uzbekistan: A Year into New Presidency, Cautious Hope for Change. "

Grant Commission, a non-transparent governmental body, still has the power of surveillance over bank accounts and must still approve the use of funds by local NGOs. However, with changes in the National Security Service scheduled to take place in early 2018, perhaps this will yet change. Under any circumstances, further discussions of this and other matters concerning non-governmental organizations are forthcoming.

Youth as the Key to Uzbekistan's Future

As a growing majority of the population, youth and young adults under thirty years of age will inevitably play a critical role in transforming Uzbekistan's social and political landscape. A forthcoming *Silk Road Paper* considers the allure of radical Islamist ideologies to some members of this group and the government's response.[63] Let us note here that the Action Strategy prioritizes education as the cornerstone of the government's approach to the rising generation, calling for greater standardization of basic education and for gender equality. Uzbekistan's youth will also benefit from the current drive to include civic education and participatory democracy as part of the national school curriculum. It is expected that economic growth and training provided by the country's four-hundred vocational-technical "colleges" will go far towards creating the new jobs that are so urgently needed. These are also the cornerstones of the government's program to reduce radicalization among Uzbekistan's youth. As it is, radicalization seems to occur mainly among Uzbek guest workers in Russia, not those who stayed home.[64] Indeed, the overwhelming majority of fighters from Central Asia in conflict zones like Syria were radicalized outside of Central Asia, not in their

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[63] Svante E. Cornell and Jacob Zenn, *Religion and the Secular State in Uzbekistan*, Washington/Stockholm: CACI & SRSP, April 2018. (forthcoming) (https://silkroadstudies.org/publications/silkroad-papers-and-monographs/item/13285)

[64] Joanna Paraszczuk, "Most Uzbeks Fighting for IS Came from Russia, Theologian Claims", *RFE/RL*, March 24, 2015; (http://www.rferl.org/content/most-uzbeks-fighting-for-is-came-from-russia-theologian-claims/26918165.html) Noah Tucker, *Central Asian Involvement in the Conflict in Syria and Iraq: Drivers and Responses*, USAID and MDI, 2015. (https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1866/CVE_CentralAsiansSyriaIraq.pdf); Ryskeldi Satke and Marta Ter," Are Central Asian migrants in Russia a recruiting ground for Islamic State?" European Council on Foreign Relations, July 27, 2015. (http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_are_central_asian_migrants_in_russia_3080). See also

home countries.[65] Acknowledging this, President Mirziyoyev nonetheless used a speech before the United Nations to argue that the provision of education and opportunities for young people is a global demand, and not purely national. Beyond these points, he has consistently underscored the need for tolerance, and calls for communicating what he calls "the truly humanistic essence of Islam" both to young people and the world at large, where intolerance of Muslims is growing."[66] However, President Mirziyoyev has yet to stress the importance of a secular state with secular laws and courts as a *sine qua non* for a humane and open civic culture.

The Karimov administration combined youth development with support for the national idea, expecting the two programs to counteract the power of "regionally-based patronage networks."[67] He instituted the "Kamolot" youth program to advance these aims. The country's five legally-registered political parties and its institutions of higher education, including the new Islamic University, were also enlisted as means for nurturing the loyalty of young Uzbekistani citizens.[68] But without vigorous economic growth and job creation the impact of all these efforts remained limited.

President Mirziyoyev's Action Strategy speaks of "the upbringing of physically healthy, spiritually and intellectually developed and independent-minded youth, dedicated to homeland [and] with solid life views, whose social activity is

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Svante E. Cornell, "Central Asia is not a Breeding Ground of Radicalization", *Diplomat*, November 15, 2017. (https://thediplomat.com/2017/11/central-asia-is-not-a-breeding-ground-for-radicalization/); Leon Aron, "The Coming of the Russian Jihad, Part I", War on the Rocks, September 23, 2016. (https://warontherocks.com/2016/09/the-coming-of-the-russian-jihad-part-i/)

[66] "Uzbekistan's Mirziyoev Vows Focus on Bringing Prosperity, Improving Rights," *RFE/RL*, September 20, 2017. (https://www.rferl.org/a/uzbek-president-mirziyoev-vows-focus-bringing-prosperity-improving-rights/28745630.html)

[67] Eric McGlinchey, "Regeneration or Degeneration? Youth Mobilization and the Future of Uzbek Politics," Conference paper prepared for the National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR), June 2006, p. 2. (http://www.nbr.org/Downloads/pdfs/PSA/Uzk_Conf06_McGlinchey.pdf); McGlinchey, "Searching for Kamalot: Political Patronage and Youth Politics in Uzbekistan," *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 61 no. 7, September 2009. (http://mcglinchey.gmu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/McGlinchey_Kamalot.pdf)

[68] This issue is discussed in detail in a Cornell and Zenn, *Religion and the Secular State in Uzbekistan.*

promoted by democratic reforms and the development of civil society." To this end the government dissolved the *Kamolot* youth organization and replaced it with a new Union of Youth of Uzbekistan which seeks to promote the role of youth in politics.[69] Eight percent of all taxes paid by small business will go to this body[70] and its leader has been designated an official advisor to President Mirziyoyev.

On youth issues, the Mirziyoyev government has passed three laws, one decree and four presidential resolutions, as well as twelve resolutions of the Cabinet of Ministers.[71] A further decree established the Institute for the Study of Youth Problems and Future Personnel Training to address the issue of youth employment. In September, 2016, Acting President Mirziyoyev consolidated all legal aspects of youth policy under one legislative act and recognized the role of civic advocacy groups in addressing youth issues. Then, in July, 2017, he boldly appointed 22-year old Alisher Sadullayev Deputy Minister of Education.[72]

Recognizing and Empowering Marginalized Populations

Persons with disabilities in Uzbekistan had been a neglected and under-served constituency since independence. But on August 1, 2017, the new government issued a proposal aimed at "radically improving the system of state support for the disabled."[73] Uzbekistan is a signatory (since 2009) to the United Nations Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and is now working in tandem with a national body comprised of disabled persons' organizations to ratify the measure as part of a Joint Commission. This Commission studies the needs of persons with disabilities and designs options to enfranchise them socially and politically. The work of the Commission is enhanced by the

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[69] Maksim Yeniseyev, "Uzbekistan launches youth policy to fight terrorism, foster opportunities", *Caravanserai*, July 27, 2017.
(http://central.asia- news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2017/07/27/feature-01)
[70] Yeniseyev, "Uzbekistan launches youth policy."
[71] Embassy of the Republic of Uzbekistan to the United States, December 2017.
[72] "Uzbekistan: 22-Year Old Named Deputy Education Minister", *Eurasianet*, July 4, 2017.
(https://eurasianet.org/s/uzbekistan-22-year-old-named-deputy-education-minister)
[73] "Measures to Support People with Disabilities Approved," *Uzreport*, August 2, 2017.
(https://uzreport.news/society/measures-to-support-people-with-disabilities-approved)

participation of the Chairman of the National Association of Non-Governmental Non-Profit Organizations of Uzbekistan and the chairman of the Board of the Society of Disabled Persons of Uzbekistan.

The present work to empower persons with disabilities builds upon an improved partnership between Disabled Persons Organizations (DPOs) and the government including the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection and members of parliament dating to 2014, when strategies on implementing the CRPD were invigorated through direct discussions and joint planning brokered by the UN. Uzbek DPOs working to promote the rights and interests of persons with disabilities have collaborated with government partners on a multi-year National Action Plan. This is part of the ratification process by the Oliy Majlis, with the expectation that eventual ratification will strengthen the protection of rights and empower people with disabilities living in Uzbekistan.[74] DPOs will work as well with representatives of the Ministry of Health, Ministry of National Education, Ministry of Higher and Secondary Special Education, and Ministry of employment and Labor Relations to set priorities and strategic direction to improve the lives of persons living with disabilities.

Regarding the situation of sexual minorities living in Uzbekistan, as is the case in many Muslim-majority countries, Uzbekistan's laws criminalize homosexuality. Though the Action Strategy seeks to promote the equality of all before the law, it has as yet to extend its reach into this sensitive area. That being said, the government has warned against the posting on the internet of "vigilante" videos directed against suspected LGBT individuals, but it has not followed up on this general warning with more concrete measures.

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[74] "The role of NGOs in preparation for the ratification and implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities," United Nations Development Program, May 15, 2014. (http://www.uz.undp.org/content/uzbekistan/en/home/presscenter/pressreleases/2014/05/15/the-role-of-ngos-in-preparation-for-the-ratification-and-implementation-of-the-un-convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities-discussed-during-the-roundtable-.html)

The Role of Mahallas and Civic Organizations

An important distinctive feature of Uzbekistan's polity are the Mahallas, community-based associations that have long played a role in championing the activities and interests of neighborhoods and micro-regions. The salaries of key Mahalla officers are funded by the state and the Mahallas have also become formal dispensers of certain social services. While the law considers them fully independent, Mahallas are nonetheless part of Uzbekistan's governance system. Besides this, they gain in importance because of the central role they play in the planning of weddings and funerals, mediating disputes among neighbors, and dispensing aid to the less fortunate.

Mahallas in many respects appear to be local charities, but their ability to make legally binding decisions means that they are not traditional civic organizations. The fact that so much of the work of Mahallas is linked with local government means that the line between the two can easily become blurred.[75] In fact, NGOs working in Uzbekistan have found that coordinating with the Mahallas can be as challenging as coordinating with the local government.

Notwithstanding these complexities, Mahallas are, and will continue to be, an important element in the implementation of the country's reform agenda. They will have a say on subjects as diverse as youth education, the battle against corruption, the extension of legal rights to underserved populations, civic training, and the protection of civil comity. And because they mediate between continuity and change, they will serve as informal transformers between state and society and diverse parts of society itself. Over recent decades many Uzbeks, including officials and academics, have predicted that the country's Mahallas would soon be phased out and merged into the system of local government. So far President Mirziyoyev has shown them every mark of respect and has proceeded on the assumption that they will continue to play a worthy role.

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[75] "NGOs in Uzbekistan's New Environment: Will There be a Stimulus for Development?" Central Asia Bureau for Analytical Reporting (CABAR.asia), November 7, 2016, p. 4.

Whether the rise of other forms of voluntary associations will demote them *de facto* to a lesser status remains to be seen.

International Aspect of Uzbekistan's Political Reforms

President Mirziyoyev has demonstrated a commitment to revisiting Uzbekistan's human rights record on an international scale. One key step in this regard was the invitation extended to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, to visit Uzbekistan, which he did in May, 2017. Hussein's visit to Tashkent was the first by a UN high commissioner for human rights. Concluding his time there, he cited "certain positive developments," including a new stage of reforms for the flourishing of civic advocacy in Uzbekistan, as well as the Action Strategy's assurances of toleration and religious freedom.[76] In his remarks, the high commissioner urged authorities to "allow a strong, vibrant, and dynamic civil society and media to operate without fear of repression or reprisal, and to release political prisoners as soon as possible."[77]

Soon after Hussein's visit, the Uzbek government announced it would allow a permanent representative of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to be based in Tashkent, though no decision has yet been taken allowing 13 additional UN Human Rights Officers to enter Uzbekistan. In June, 2017, UN Secretary General António Guterres visited Uzbekistan to discuss sustainable development and regional security issues.[78] While the visit was planned as part of a larger tour of Central Asia, the atmosphere was decidedly more positive than during the visit of his predecessor, Ban Ki-Moon, to the country in June 2015.

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[76] Human Rights Watch, "Uzbekistan: UN Official Calls for Rights Reforms," May 13, 2017. (https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/05/13/uzbekistan-un-official-calls-rights-reforms)
[77] Ibid.
[78] "UN Secretary-General paid an official visit to Uzbekistan," *CAREC*, June 12, 2017. (climate.carececo.org/eng/news/generalnyy-sekretar-oon-posetil-s-ofitsialnym-vizitom-uzbekistan/)

During his 2017 speech at the United Nations, President Mirziyoyev also invited the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Ahmed Shaheed, to assess efforts underway under the Action Strategy to address religious freedoms. Shaheed visited Uzbekistan the following month, spending eleven days reviewing the situation and discussing with the President, government officials, and members of the civic sector, on the development of legislation in freedom of conscience and religious organizations. Shaheed applauded reforms allowing the development of independent NGOs in Uzbekistan and provisions of the Action Strategy regarding religious freedom. He concluded that these reforms "could be a turning point in Uzbekistan's development, if the moves are implemented systematically."[79] The Special Rapporteur then noted that Uzbekistan faces many human rights challenges and will require sustained commitment to make the right to freedom of religion and belief a reality.

Following these visits Brigitte Dufour, Director of the International Partnership for Human Rights, wrote that "the proof of change is when we start seeing all wrongfully imprisoned activists released from prison, UN human rights monitors and human rights organizations able to visit the country, an end to forced labor, and independent civil society and media able to function without harassment."[80] In a sign that Uzbekistan's new administration is indeed serious about pursuing a stronger human rights policy, in his September 2017 speech at the United Nations, President Mirziyoyev pledged to "focus his government on bringing greater prosperity and human rights to his nation and the Central Asian region." He affirmed that his goal was to build "a democratic state and a just society" in which "human interests come first."[81] During the UN plenary, Mirziyoyev also mentioned that many individual cases of detention of persons in custody were under review. In a sign that the president was indeed serious about the issue of

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[79] "UN Expert Tells Uzbekistan Religions 'Not A Threat'", *RFE/RL*, October 12, 2017. (https://www.rferl.org/a/uzbelistan-freedom-religion-shaheed-un/28790512.html)

[80] "Uzbekistan: UN Official Calls for Rights Reforms."

[81] "Uzbekistan's Mirziyoev Vows Focus on Bringing Prosperity, Improving Rights," *RFE/RL*, September 20, 2017. ("https://www.rferl.org/a/uzbek-president-mirziyoev-vows-focus-bringing-prosperity-improving-rights/28745630.html)

political prisoners, on December 7, 2017, he signed a decree pardoning 2,700 prisoners, the largest such mass pardoning in the country's history. The move was timed to coincide with the 25th anniversary of the adoption of Uzbekistan's first post-Soviet Constitution.[82] Over the preceding year many political prisoners and convicts have had their cases reviewed, with several amnestied, as per the goals of the Action Strategy. Many of those convicted on terrorism conspiracy charges had their cases re-considered, and after a period of education and rehabilitation were released. In the past, these individuals might have spent years in prison without the possibility of amnesty.

Many political dissidents remain incarcerated, and it is incumbent on the Mirziyoyev government to review these cases in an expeditious manner. Even before the mass amnesty, the government had released long-held political prisoners, among them journalists, opposition politicians, and human rights defenders. Meanwhile, a further journalist and author were arrested and sentenced. Like it or not, an aura of suspicion hangs over such cases, and will continue to do so until the Mirziyoyev government acknowledges the issue of political prisoners.[83]

Nevertheless, the new administration, as part of the Action Strategy, has definitely prioritized judicial reform. Furthermore, in February, 2017, a new governmental body was created to appoint and track judges in lower-level courts. The Supreme Judicial Council has been granted extensive powers, including to supervise and as necessary discipline and dismiss judges working in lower-level courts.[84] In addition, a measure of August, 2017, empowered the Ombudsman for Human Rights to assist citizens in their various legal cases. The Ombudsman also acquired the authority to take cases to the Constitutional Court, a significant step

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[82] "Uzbek President Mirziyoev Pardons 2,700 Convicts with Decree," *RFE/RL*, September 7, 2017. (https://www.rferl.org/a/uzbekistan-mirzyoev-amnesty-2700/28902611.html)

[83] Human Rights Watch," Uzbekistan: A Year into New Presidency, Cautious Hope for Change."

[84] Ibid.

not previously possible. Funding for the officer of the Ombudsman has also been increased.

Conclusions

The past year-plus has been an exceptionally eventful one for Uzbekistan and its new president, Shavkat Mirziyoyev. One year into his presidency he has launched numerous initiatives to change fundamentally how the government interacts with citizens. The "Strategy", "Action Plan" and separate decrees are already transforming the country's political makeup in the direction of responsive and accountable public institutions and an expanded world of voluntary organizations. The proposal to hold direct elections for local leaders is a positive step, as are newly instituted measures for holding elected leaders accountable to voters. The reforms also extend to expanding the political spectrum. But this will be a longer-term process, the success of which will turn on whether true opposition candidates and parties are able to register and compete for office at all levels.

The involuntary retirement of longtime National Security Services' chief Rustam Inoyatov was surely carefully planned but has been seen universally as a startling development.[85] Assuming (as most observers do) that Mr. Inoyatov was a major impediment to the president's aggressive reform agenda, his departure cleared the way for Mirziyoyev to proceed with greater confidence. The fact that the ageing Inoyatov was given a face-saving appointment to the Senate may well have allayed the possibility of his mounting a countermove, or of his friends and partisans from doing so. With the most formidable potential impediment removed from the scene, the president has cleared the way—for the time being at least-- to advance political reform without being battered by head winds from a significant political rival.

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[85] Bruce Pannier, "Majlis Podcast: With Uzbek Security Chief Out, Mirziyoev Loses Last Obstacle To Reform", *RFE/RL*, February 4, 2018. (https://www.rferl.org/a/majlis-podcast-uzbekistan-after-inoyatov/29017532.html)

Among the tasks still to be faced are those which implement reforms of local government, promote accountability and transparency, implement direct elections for regional and local Khokims, encourage Mahallas to cooperate with local government, and follow through on the democratization program, as set forth in the Action Plan. None of these tasks will be simple or short-term. Both active and passive resistance can be predicted. Note that the National Security Service and the Finance Ministry both initially resisted a number of key reforms, and may have sought to check the President's efforts. Such incidents may be signs of possible future concerns.

Even if all key figures continue to firmly support the new president, implementing the governance reforms proposed by Mirziyoyev will pose a formidable challenge. Besides the structural changes, they call for fundamental shifts in the political culture and even the mentality of ordinary Uzbeks. Public passivity and inertia can delay or derail reforms at many levels, as can the exercise of too much or too little force from above. This will be all the more complex when it is done in the context of the new president's stated goal of broadening the political spectrum and promoting greater diversity of opinion.

During his first year in office President Mirziyoyev expended immense efforts to make the government more responsive and accountable to the electorate. The progress that has been achieved is impressive by any measure. All the same, to quote Thomas Ambrosio, one must understand that "a lesson of twenty-five years of post-Soviet political development [in Central Asia] is that regimes are not just the ruler. They are systems — powerful people, networks, and informal rules — that treat the ruling regime favorably. Changing this won't come easily."[86]

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[86] Thomas Ambrosio, "Leadership succession in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan: Regime Survival after Nazarbayev and Karimov", *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, vol. 17 no. 1, 2015, 49-67.

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