REFORMING WITHOUT RUPTURE? UZBEKISTAN UNDER SHAVKAT MIRZIYOYEV

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Bruno Quadros e Quadros[1]

Abstract

This paper examines whether the reforms implemented under Uzbekistani President Shavkat Mirziyoyev since 2016 constitute a rupture with the authoritarian legacy of Islam Karimov (1991–2016). It first analyzes the structural features of Uzbekistani political culture—clan-based allegiances, paternalism, authoritarianism, retraditionalization, and the Islamic factor—which have historically constrained political change. The study then assesses the Karimov era, characterized by a highly securitized authoritarian regime, economic dirigisme, and foreign policy isolationism. Finally, it evaluates Mirziyoyev's reform agenda, highlighting significant economic liberalization and a marked reorientation of foreign policy toward regional cooperation and global engagement, alongside persistent limits to political liberalization. Constitutional reforms, legal restrictions on freedom of expression, and episodes of coercive repression underscore the continuity of authoritarian governance. The paper concludes that Uzbekistan's recent trajectory reflects not a democratic rupture but a process of authoritarian adaptation, in which socioeconomic progress and diplomatic openness coexist with the preservation of the regime's core political foundations.

Keywords: Uzbekistan. Authoritarianism. Political reform. Political culture. Central Asia.

1 Brazilian career diplomat, holds an MA from the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO). ORCID: 0000-0003-2466-0081.

REFORMA SEM RUPTURA? O UZBEQUISTÃO SOB O GOVERNO DE SHAVKAT MIRZIYOYEV

Resumo

Este artigo examina se as reformas implementadas pelo presidente do Uzbequistão, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, desde 2016 constituem uma ruptura com o legado autoritário de Islam Karimov (1991-2016). Em primeiro lugar, analisa as características estruturais da cultura política do Uzbequistão — alianças baseadas em clãs, paternalismo, autoritarismo, retradicionalização e o fator islâmico — que historicamente limitaram a mudança política. Em seguida, o estudo avalia a era Karimov, caracterizada por um regime autoritário altamente securitizado, dirigismo econômico e isolacionismo na política externa. Por fim, avalia a agenda de reformas de Mirziyoyev, destacando uma significativa liberalização econômica e uma marcante reorientação da política externa em direção à cooperação regional e ao engajamento global, ao lado de limites persistentes à liberalização política. Reformas constitucionais, restrições legais à liberdade de expressão e episódios de repressão coercitiva ressaltam a continuidade da governança autoritária. O artigo conclui que a trajetória recente do Uzbequistão reflete não uma ruptura democrática, mas um processo de adaptação autoritária, no qual o progresso socioeconômico e a abertura diplomática coexistem com a preservação dos fundamentos políticos centrais do regime.

Palavras-chave: Uzbequistão. Autoritarismo. Reforma política. Cultura política. Ásia Central.

¿REFORMA SIN RUPTURA? UZBEKISTÁN BAJO EL MANDATO DE SHAVKAT MIRZIYOYEV

Resumen

Este artículo examina si las reformas implementadas bajo el mandato del presidente de Uzbekistán, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, desde 2016 constituyen una ruptura con el legado autoritario de Islam Karimov (1991–2016). En primer lugar, analiza las características estructurales de la cultura política uzbeka —las alianzas basadas en clanes, el paternalismo, el autoritarismo, la retradicionalización y el factor islámico— que históricamente han limitado el cambio político. A continuación, el estudio evalúa la era de Karimov, caracterizada por un régimen autoritario altamente securitizado, el dirigismo económico y el aislacionismo en política exterior. Por último, evalúa la agenda de reformas de Mirziyoyev, destacando una importante liberalización económica y una marcada reorientación de la política exterior hacia la cooperación regional y la participación global, junto con límites persistentes a la liberalización política. Las reformas constitucionales, las restricciones legales a la libertad de expresión y los episodios de represión coercitiva subrayan la continuidad de la gobernanza autoritaria. El artículo concluye que la trayectoria reciente de Uzbekistán no refleja una ruptura democrática, sino un proceso de adaptación autoritaria, en el que el progreso socioeconómico y la apertura diplomática coexisten con la preservación de los fundamentos políticos centrales del régimen.

Palabras clave: Uzbekistán. Autoritarismo. Reforma política. Cultura política. Asia Central.

Introduction

This paper aims to discuss to what extent the current reforms under Uzbekistani President Shavkat Mirziyoyev (2016–onwards) represent a rupture regarding the legacy of Islam Karimov (1991–2016), whose rule was commonly described as a "full-on dictatorship" (Hale 2014, 242), a "patronal presidentialism" or a "full authoritarian regime" (Levitsky and Way 2010, 6–7).

To reach this goal, I propose the following structure of this analytical paper:

(i.) In Section 1, I examine the main features of Uzbekistani political culture;
(ii.) In Section 2, I look into the highlights of the 25-year rule of Islam Karimov;
(iii.) In Section 3, I explore the reforms brought by Shavkat Mirziyoyev; and
(iv.) Conclusion will contain the final remarks.

1. Uzbekistani political culture

Uzbekistani political culture's main features, together with so-called "oriental" values such as hierarchy, respect for authority and seniority, and desire for social order (Spechler and Spechler 2010, 163), can be described as the following:

(i.) Clan-based allegiances;
(ii.) Paternalism;
(iii.) Authoritarianism;
(iv.) Retraditionalization; and the
(v.) Islamic factor.

Historically, since the times of the emirates and khanates, the territory of present-day Uzbekistan fell to the local elites of the two largest and politically important cities, Tashkent and Samarkand, thus developing region-based clans. Soviet efforts to balance the Tashkent-Samarkand condominium by propping up the Ferghana and Khorezm clans were not successful (Starr 2006, 7–8).

The paternalistic traditions in Uzbekistani politics are based on "hierarchical type of social relationship, clientelism and traditional type of political loyalty" (Koldunova 2016, 151) and can be defined as:

> […] neo-patrimonial, with personal networks centred on political leaders serving as the key element of political process. The prefix neo- implies that the mentioned networks can be formed not only on the basis of traditional relationships (clan, kinship, family, region) but also on a rational basis as well (business, resource redistribution, etc.) (Koldunova 2016, 147).

Authoritarianism is an integral feature of Uzbekistan's traditional political culture (Naumkin 2006, 135). It is derived from:

(i.) the absence of previous experience of fair elections;
(ii.) the prevalence of the political discourse of stability rather than of radical change due to the turmoil of the civil war in Tajikistan and Afghanistan;
(iii.) the lack of strong grass-roots national movements which could "potentially breed a political culture of protest" (Koldunova 2016, 146) such as those that mushroomed in the Baltic countries and the Caucasus (Akbarzadeh 1996, 23); and
(iv.) the preservation of the single-pyramid systems and preexisting dominant patronal networks inherited from the Soviet period (Hale 2014, 162–163).

The retraditionalization endured by Uzbekistan and several Central Asian states was a response to social security systems disrupted after the collapse of the Soviet Union and replaced by solidarity or traditional groups, the extended family, and the *mahalla* (community neighborhood) (Koldunova 2016, 145–146, 151). Another dimension of this process is the promotion of ancient roots to foster a national identity. In the case of Uzbekistan, it meant the cult of Amir Timur (Tamerlane) (1336–1405) (Starr 2006, 13) and Alisher Navoi (1441–1501).

Islam is a *sine qua non* of national identity in Uzbekistan (Hanks 1994, 318). Nevertheless, the rise of radical Islam made the government very suspicious of religious activities and determined the evolution of Karimov's political regime (Koldunova 2016, 155), who used the jihadist threat to suppress the opposition. On the one hand, factors such as "poverty, unemployment, authoritarianism, the closed nature of society, suppression, appalling corruption, and the lack of any opportunities for protest" present opportunities for the radicalization of disaffected Uzbekistanis (Naumkin 2006, 134). On the other hand, some scholars argue that the historically entrenched Hanafi–Maturidi Islamic tradition of Central Asia, deeply influenced by Sufi practices, has contributed

to societal resistance against puritan and literalist interpretations of Islam, including Wahhabi and broader Salafi currents (Khalid 2007, 84–116).

2. Governance under Islam Karimov (1991–2016)

A Brezhnevite *apparatchik*, economic technocrat, and former first secretary of the Uzbek section of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), Islam Karimov managed to keep the party machine relatively intact after independence, which helped him preserve power as Uzbekistan's first president (Hale 2014, 164).

The 25-year rule of Islam Karimov can be characterized by authoritarianism, the securitization of public policy with stability as an overarching priority, autarchic economic management, and an isolationist foreign policy, with disputes with its Central Asian neighbors (Asiryan 2019).

Karimov was first elected as president of Uzbekistan in 1991 in the only genuine electoral contest against the moderate nationalist poet Mohammed Solih. In 1995, his term was extended by referendum to 2000, when he was reelected. A referendum in 2002 and a constitutional change in 2003 extended presidential terms from five to seven years (Hale 2014, 243). Karimov was reelected in 2007 and 2015. In all elections, Karimov obtained more than 85% of the votes.

The government banned secular political organizations such as Erk and Birlik and also Islamist groups like Hizb-ut-Tahrir (Spechler and Spechler 2010, 163) and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) (Murtazashvili 2012, 87) and built a party system centered on five pro-government parties, each contemplating different policies and sectors of the society:

(i.) the Democratic National Revival Party (Milliy Tiklanish), with a nationalist path, championing national unity and appealing to government officials, older civic leaders, and the moderate Sunni Muslim majority;

(ii.) the Fidorkorlar or National Democratic Party, targeting the progressive *intelligentsia* and supporting openness and free markets;

(iii.) the People's Democratic Party (XDP), as the defender of social welfare programs, appealing to poorer farmers, the urban lower middle class, retirees, and former Communists;

(iv.) the Adolat or Justice Social Democratic Party, with more moderate left-centrist solutions; and

(v.) the Liberal Democratic Party (UzLiDeP), having young businessmen in the major urban centers as its main constituents (Starr 2006, 24).

The Karimov era was characterized by systematic repression (Hale 2014, 243) and a much criticized human rights record. The parliament had no true opposition parties, religious activity was kept under the watchful eye of the National Security Service (SNB), the press and electronic media were strictly censored (Spechler and Spechler 2010, 162–163), *mahallas* were tightly controlled (Murtazashvili 2012, 89), and torture and forced labor in the cotton fields were widespread.

Jennifer Murtazashvili gives three reasons for the absence of a "colored revolution" in Karimov's Uzbekistan:

(i.) a relatively strong economic performance, with a policy of economic redistribution, state subsidies, and social policies;
(ii.) state capacity to repress revolutionary aspirations; and
(iii.) government co-optation of local institutions, such as *mahallas* (Murtazashvili 2012, 78–79).

According to Henry Hale, the repression had two effects on Karimov's ability to rule:

(i.) no "lame-duck syndrome" associated with electoral processes; and
(ii.) reduced opportunities for elites to use elections or mass protests against the incumbent president (Hale 2014, 243–244).

Uzbekistan inherited from the Soviet period a relatively diversified economy by Central Asian standards. Economic management under Karimov followed a protectionist, dirigiste, and socially-oriented path. Its main traits were:

(i.) heavy taxation of the country's main exports (cotton, gold, and natural gas);
(ii.) high social expenditures (Spechler and Spechler 2010, 160);
(iii.) price controls and subsidies on essential goods and services;
(iv.) low level of income inequality (Murtazashvili 2012, 86); and
(v.) a gradualist approach to liberal reforms (Naumkin 2006, 128).

Islam Karimov's foreign policy was fundamentally shaped by isolationism and a securitized worldview (Hale 2014; Naumkin 2006). Although Uzbekistan attracted sustained interest from major powers due to its geopolitical position and natural gas reserves, Karimov consistently maintained a posture of strategic distance, remaining deeply suspicious both of Russia's post-imperial ambitions in Central Asia and of Western, particularly U.S.-led, democracy-promotion agendas (Olcott 2005; Khalid 2007).

This outlook translated into a selective and defensive engagement with multilateral institutions. A notable illustration of this stance was Karimov's public criticism of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in 1999, which he accused of overemphasizing human rights concerns at the expense of regional security priorities (Karimov, quoted in Hale 2014, 164). Framing instability in Central Asia primarily through the prism of the Afghan conflict, Karimov argued that ongoing war in Afghanistan constituted the principal threat to peace, security, and democratic development in neighboring states, thereby justifying a foreign policy centered on regime security and resistance to external normative pressure (Naumkin 2006). It was precisely this concern that prompted Uzbekistan to allow American forces to use the Karshi-Khanabad airbase for their operations in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2005.

3. Reforms under Shavkat Mirziyoyev (2016–onwards)

A member of the Samarkand clan like Karimov, Shavkat Mirziyoyev managed to win the succession struggle against powerful rivals like the former head of the SNB Rustam Inoyatov, the former Finance Minister Rustam Azimov, and Gulnara Karimova, the controversial daughter of the late president (Hale 2014, 245).

The rise of Shavkat Mirziyoyev to power in 2016 meant some measure of reform and liberalization in domestic issues with a more modern and technocratic approach to policymaking, aimed at ameliorating the economic situation. In terms of foreign policy, it meant more proclivity to compromise with its Central Asian neighbors and openness to the outside world, in contrast with Islam Karimov's (1991–2016) policies of autarchy and isolationism (Asiryan 2019).

In 2018, Mirziyoyev announced his ambitious package of reforms in several sectors:

(i.) currency liberalization, with the Uzbek som (UZS) submitted to a free currency conversion;
(ii.) tax reform;
(iii.) reform of state-owned companies;
(iv.) simplification of business conditions;
(v.) higher salaries for employees of universities and research institutes;
(vi.) updated legislation to fight against corruption; and
(vii.) administrative reform; among others (Spot 2018).

Despite the reformist discourse that has accompanied President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's tenure, political liberalization in Uzbekistan has remained limited and marked by significant contradictions. While Mirziyoyev pledged in 2020 to decriminalize defamation, this commitment has not been fulfilled; on the contrary, a new legal provision adopted in March 2021 criminalized insulting the president online, an offense broader in scope than defamation and one that further restricts freedom of expression (Human Rights Watch 2024).

Similarly ambivalent signals emerged from the constitutional reform approved by referendum in April 2023. Although the revised constitution introduced progressive language by proclaiming Uzbekistan a "social welfare state," it simultaneously entrenched a conservative ideological orientation through the explicit protection of "traditional family values." Most controversially, the reform extended presidential terms from five to seven years and annulled the counting of previous mandates (Uzbekistan 1992), effectively allowing Mirziyoyev to remain in power until 2037.

These institutional changes occurred against the backdrop of political repression, most notably the violent protests in the Republic of Karakalpakstan in July 2022, triggered by proposals to abolish the region's semi-autonomous status. The unrest led to a month-long state of emergency, dozens of deaths, hundreds of injuries, and mass arrests. While the subsequent decision to preserve Karakalpakstan's autonomous status helped ensure a peaceful constitutional referendum in 2023, with high voter turnout, the episode underscored the persistence of coercive practices on the ground (Human Rights Watch 2022).

Under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan's reformist momentum has extended decisively into foreign policy, marking a clear departure from the isolationism of the Karimov era. Relations with neighboring Central Asian states have improved substantially, particularly with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, following years of tension driven by border disputes, migration issues, and water management. Mirziyoyev institutionalized a more active diplomatic posture through frequent state visits, including the first presidential visits to Bishkek since 2000 and to Dushanbe since independence, in 2017 and 2018 respectively, alongside the resumption of regular commercial flights between Tashkent and Dushanbe after a 25-year hiatus.

Beyond the immediate neighborhood, Uzbekistan has played a more constructive role in the Afghan peace process, deepened ties with major global and regional partners—including the United States, Russia, the European Union, China, South Korea, Turkey, and India—and pursued a more assertive strategy to attract foreign investment and expand its presence in international

organizations. This outward-oriented approach also includes renewed efforts toward accession to the World Trade Organization and closer engagement with the Eurasian Economic Union, where Uzbekistan obtained observer status in 2020.

Tashkent has played a leading role in hosting the first-ever European Union–Central Asia summit in Samarkand in April 2025, elevating ties with the EU through a strategic partnership and major investment initiatives aimed at infrastructure, connectivity, and sustainable development (Counsil of the European Union 2025). The country has also signed an Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the European Union and deepened diplomatic and economic relations with global powers including the United States and China, positioning Uzbekistan as a strategic Eurasian hub. Meanwhile, Uzbekistan is pursuing accession to the World Trade Organization in 2026 (WTO 2025).

Conclusion

This paper aimed at examining whether the current liberalizing reforms under Uzbekistani President Shavkat Mirziyoyev (2016–onwards) represent a rupture with the legacy of Islam Karimov (1991–2016). An analysis of the reforms indicates an emphasis on the economic aspects more than on political liberalization or institutional redrawing. Nonetheless, those reforms mean that the Uzbekistan elites have updated their worldview away from the securitized approach under Karimov towards an interdependent and win-win perspective on economic and diplomatic matters.

Economic reforms combined with very careful political liberalization show that the Uzbekistani elites favor the experience (deemed "successful" by them) of technocratic dirigiste states such as China, Singapore, and South Korea. In this context, boosting economic growth takes precedence over liberalizing the political landscape. It does not mean, however, that an improved economic environment may encourage the government to take further steps to soften the authoritarian features of political life in Uzbekistan.

Uzbekistan's recent trajectory can be more precisely assessed through international indicators that allow for a comparison between the final years of the Karimov era (2016–2017) and the consolidation of Mirziyoyev's presidency by 2025, revealing tangible social progress and modest institutional improvements alongside the persistence of authoritarian governance.

On the socioeconomic front, the Human Development Index (HDI) published by UNDP shows a moderately positive trend. In 2016, the last year of Islam Karimov's rule, Uzbekistan recorded an HDI score of 0.714, below the global average (0.735). By 2025, under Mirziyoyev, the index had risen to 0.740, still trailing the world average (0.756), but reflecting steady improvements in income, education, and life expectancy. This progress mirrors the government's prioritization of economic reforms, controlled openness to foreign investment, and the expansion of social policies, albeit without full convergence toward higher international development standards (Human Development Reports, n.d.).

In contrast, advances in the realm of civil and political liberties have been far more limited and largely incremental. The Press Freedom Index compiled by Reporters Without Borders (RSF) indicates a modest improvement: Uzbekistan's score moved from 38.85 in 2016, when it ranked 166th out of 180 countries, to 35.24 in 2025, reaching 148th place. Despite this relative gain, the country remains among those with heavily constrained media environments, characterized by legal restrictions, self-censorship, and selective repression of journalists and bloggers critical of the authorities, underscoring the narrowly circumscribed nature of informational openness (RSF 2025).

This assessment is reinforced by data from Freedom House. In 2017, Uzbekistan scored only 3 out of 100 in the Freedom in the World index and was classified as "Not Free." By 2025, the score had increased to 12/100, yet the country retained the same classification. The numerical improvement reflects limited adjustments—such as greater administrative predictability and minor procedural liberalization—rather than a structural transformation of the political system. Consistently, the *Nations in Transit* report continues to categorize Uzbekistan as a "consolidated authoritarian regime," indicating the enduring dominance of the executive branch, the absence of meaningful political competition, weak judicial independence, and insufficient guarantees of political rights (Freedom House, n.d.).

Taken together, these indicators suggest that under Mirziyoyev Uzbekistan has experienced genuine socioeconomic gains and pragmatic international opening, accompanied by carefully managed and constrained political reforms. In contrast to Karimov's rigid and isolationist authoritarianism, the current period is defined less by rupture than by authoritarian adaptation, in which improvements in human development and economic governance coexist with the preservation of the regime's core political foundations.

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