

Uzbekistan: A 'dress rehearsal' for a succession crisis?

Marek Matusiak, Uzbekistan: Próba generalna kryzysu sukcesyjnego?

According to anecdotal evidence, which cannot be confirmed, but also have not been officially denied, the President of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov, suffered a severe heart attack on 19 March. Although Karimov resumed his duties, his health problems have contributed to the exacerbation of competition among the power elite for an optimal position in the struggle to succeed the 75-year-old president. According to anecdotal evidence, which cannot be confirmed, but also – very importantly – have not been officially denied, the President of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov, who has ruled the country since 1989, suffered a severe heart attack on 19 March. There was even speculation that he had died (there was no sign of activity from the president for over a week after the alleged heart attack). Although Karimov resumed his duties (he paid an official visit to Moscow on 15-16 April), his health problems have contributed to the exacerbation of competition among the power elite for an optimal position in the struggle to succeed the 75-year-old president. This has mainly been manifested in backstage battles (firstly within the security service), but also in the allegations, made by the President's eldest daughter Gulnara, of corruption among the main contenders in the battle for power. The whole situation has once again confirmed Karimov's central and indispensable role in Uzbekistan's political system, and revealed the absence of any agreed scenarios for succession within the ruling elite. In the absence of any mutual consent among the elite, Karimov's sudden death or inability to perform his presidential duties would provoke a relentless struggle for his inheritance, using all resources available (even potentially including the use of security agencies and criminal groups). There is also the question of the role of the general public in Uzbekistan, which at present is subject to brutal repression, and has no influence on the country's political system. If a crisis of power develops, not only could the rivals in the struggle for power make instrumental use of social support, but also – given the likelihood that in such a scenario, the repressive apparatus will weaken – uncontrolled popular risings could take place, whose scale and intensity after almost a quarter-century of repressive dictatorship would be very difficult to predict. It should be noted that due to Uzbekistan's central location, and its having the largest population in Central Asia, any possible destabilisation of the situation there is bound to have repercussions in all the neighbouring countries.

The nature of the state

Uzbekistan is an authoritarian state which is regularly classified among the world's most repressive and corrupt countries. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, its political system has been based on total power over the country, centred in the hands of President Islam Karimov and the ruling elites who depend on him. The elites, which are engaged in a bitter internal struggle for power and financial resources, consist of state officials, businessmen and occasionally even underworld bosses. Aside from its very powerful and effective systems of control and repression, the Uzbek state is weak. In fact, there are no state institutions designed for purposes other than serving the regime's particular interests, and if a crisis arises, they are unlikely to outlast this regime. The legacy of Soviet-era state administration – which in the absence of other state building patterns did provide a certain state-stabilising potential in other countries in the region – has largely been lost as a result of Karimov's severe anti-Russian policy since 1991, and the subsequent emigration of much of the Slavic population. These processes have not been accompanied by any significant reform of state institutions over the past two decades.

At the same time, the government's extremely repressive policies and permanent surveillance of its own citizens have not only paralysed any independent social activity, but also contributed to the destruction of the traditional institutions of Uzbek society (such as the nationalisation, i.e. the *de facto* absorption into the security apparatus, of the *mahalla*, the traditional self-government system of the urban communities). The government controls society with the help of repression and legalised injustice (as exemplified by the arbitrary confiscation of citizens' property, or the mass sterilisation of women in hospitals immediately after childbirth). Another major challenge is the dismal economic situation in the country, as evidenced by occasional signs of public discontent, despite repression.

There is thus a real danger that if the authority and effectiveness of the existing presidential power centre erodes, the current socio-political order will collapse in an uncontrolled manner. One example of such a scenario on a local scale was the events in Andijan (2005), when the local population protested against the injustice of the state and broke out some arrested local community leaders from prison, to which the authorities responded by massacring civilians.

Uzbekistan's regional importance

The country of Uzbekistan is crucial to the stability of the region: it is the only one which borders all the other Central Asian states; it has the greatest demographic potential, and along with Kazakhstan has the only real military potential. On the other hand, in the event of internal instability, it has great potential for adversely affecting the neighbouring countries, for reasons including the following: the presence of Uzbek minorities in all the neighbouring countries; the weakness of national borders; and along with the Tajiks the strongest traditions of radical Islam in the region.

Uzbekistan is also critically important to the existing powers in the region. Despite all the weaknesses, it is in fact seen as a relatively stable state (as long as Karimov is alive) and, as such, constitutes one of the pillars of the fragile regional order. From Washington's

perspective, despite the openly repressive government in Tashkent, Uzbekistan is an important country in the context of the Afghanistan operation: it favours the US presence in the region and is willing to co-operate with Washington (despite the exorbitant financial conditions it has set); it provides land access to Afghanistan for the coalition forces, and is also a potential withdrawal route for them. In addition, under Karimov's rule, Uzbekistan is secure enough to be a stabilising factor in Afghanistan itself (it provides electricity supplies and the most convenient land transport routes), and it also constitutes one element of a buffer zone around it for the period after the American withdrawal. For Russia too, despite its difficult bilateral relations with Tashkent, Uzbekistan's stability is an important part of the buffer zone around Afghanistan. For China in turn, Uzbekistan is principally a major country for gas transit from Turkmenistan, and secondarily an important element of the regional order in Central Asia, bordering as it does with the province of Xinjiang, which is sensitive for Beijing because of its separatist tradition. In this situation, any serious destabilisation of Uzbekistan's internal situation is almost certain to negatively affect not only the internal situation in the neighbouring countries and the stability of the region as a whole, but also to strike hard at the interests of the major powers.

Forecasts

Uzbekistan's political system is extremely non-transparent, and maximally restricts access to information about the internal situation, especially within the power elite. In addition, the divisions among the elite themselves are fluid and subject to *ad hoc* tactical alliances. According to available knowledge, the main players vying for power are: Shavkat Mirziyoyev (who has been Prime Minister since 2003), Rustam Azimov (the first deputy prime minister in charge of economic affairs, who has been in the government since 1998), and Gulnara Karimova, the elder of the President's two daughters (she is officially Uzbekistan's representative to the United Nations in Geneva, but informally controls a number of the Uzbek economy's most lucrative assets). Now, judging from recent personnel changes in the security services (which are of key importance in Uzbekistan's situation), Azimov's seems the strongest candidacy, and his recent moves include accompanying the president on a recent trip to Moscow. None of the contenders for power appear strong enough to keep ahead of their opponents independently in a power struggle, and then to neutralise them so they could not take revenge. From the perspective of the Uzbek elites and the stability of the country (and therefore their own interests), the optimal scenario would be to agree upon a division of powers among themselves, but this scenario seems very unlikely. This lack of agreement may lead to total war among the elites, a weakening of the central government, and possible social revolt, which would most likely be completely uncontrolled, and could take on distinctly Islamist features. Although Islam as such is subjected to very harsh repression, in the absence of a secular opposition, in the current situation it constitutes the sole ideological alternative to the regime. It seems that given the withdrawal of Western forces from Afghanistan (bringing about the possible destabilisation of the country and the region), the Islamic factor will become increasingly important.