

Political crisis in Uzbekistan

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In Uzbekistan, a campaign against the business and media empire of the president's daughter Gulnara Karimova has been underway for several weeks. Karimova, who until recently had been regarded as the Uzbek president's heir apparent, has seen the television and radio channels she controls closed down. Moreover, she has been prevented from travelling abroad. Karimova has close political and business ties her cousin Akbarali Abdullaev who controls the Fergana Valley economy and the management of the Fergana refinery, and who has been arrested (which accidentally exacerbated Uzbekistan's petroleum shortage). The Uzbek prosecution authorities have also launched an audit at the Uzbekistan Culture and Art Forum, an organisation which Karimova has been using for her business and cultural activities, and have frozen the Forum's banking accounts. The person behind the attack is probably the chief of the Uzbek National Security Service (SNB) Rustam Inoyatov. The campaign is presumably taking place with the approval of President Islam Karimov, who is concerned about the presidential ambitions demonstrated by his daughter and her moves to make the conflicts shaking the presidential family public and to smear his image.

Commentary

- Uzbekistan is an authoritarian state that has been governed for more than 20 years by President Islam Karimov. Karimov has created a regime founded on a small number of influential persons who hold top state offices and control different sectors of the economy (including Inoyatov or Gulnara Karimova), buttressed by total control of the public by the secret services. Because of the president's advanced years (he was born in 1938), his deteriorating health and the absence of formal political mechanisms, the prospective succession of power currently represents the most serious challenge faced by Uzbekistan.
- The recent unprecedented events in Uzbekistan (conflicts within the elite, including in the presidential family, had never been publicised to such an extent) have seriously harmed the president's image and indicate that the system built by Karimov is gradually disintegrating (and that the president is in fact probably losing control of the situation). They also show that the manoeuvres for succession are well underway and that Karimov probably has no plans for the transfer of power, which is acting as a catalyst to the rivalry among the main players: Rustam Inoyatov, the prime minister Shavkat Mirziyoyev, the deputy prime minister and minister for finance Rustam Azimov, and Gulnara Karimova,

who will probably find herself in a losing position.

- Despite colossal social and economic problems, the stability and repressive nature of the regime have until now guaranteed internal peace in Uzbekistan. However, the worsening conflicts in the elite may trigger social upheaval. It is also possible that the warring factions will seek to exploit internal factors (such as the people's discontent) or external factors relations (the tense Uzbek-Kyrgyz) to strengthen their respective positions. Given Uzbekistan's central geopolitical position and the size of its population, destabilisation of the country's internal situation could seriously affect stability in Central Asia as a whole.

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