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Uzbekistan: the new president's consolidation of power

Józef Lang

On 2nd May Uzbekistan's interior minister Abdusalom Azizov announced that President Shavkat Mirziyoyev had decided that control of the Uzbek internal troops would be placed in the hands of the Uzbek Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA). From 2006 the internal troops were subordinate to the National Security Service (SNB), led by Rustam Inoyatov, which is Uzbekistan's most important security service. Previously they had been under the control of the MIA.

The internal troops play a key role in Uzbekistan's internal security system. The troops are composed of five brigades and a special battalion 'Bars', and comprise a total of approximately 20,000 personnel. They are tasked with quelling unrest and social protests, among other duties. Following a bloody suppression of mass protests in Andijan in 2005 (where, according to various sources, between 800 and 1,500 people were killed), the SNB took control of the troops following a struggle for influence within the state apparatus.

Commentary

- Uzbekistan is the most authoritarian state in central Asia. After President Islam Karimov, who was continuously in power from 1990 until his death in 2016, the then prime minister Shavkat Mirziyoyev formally came to power. His position has been based above all on support from Rustam Inoyatov, the influential head of the SNB, who was informally the second most important person in the country. Despite cosmetic changes intended to produce the illusion of a thaw on the internal political scene, Mirziyoyev has continued Karimov's politics. In external relations the new president has introduced new solutions; this has led to the normalisation of relations with Uzbekistan's neighbours.
- Transferring control of the internal troops from the SNB to the MIA is a sign of President Mirziyoyev's progressing consolidation of power. Until now he had not only failed purge the state apparatus but had in fact preserved the status quo. For example, his main political rival, the first deputy prime minister Rustam Azimov has kept his position despite the changes in the government—this points to Mirziyoyev's weakness. Depriving the SNB of the control of such a significant unit as the internal troops and transferring it to the MIA, which is led by Mirziyoyev's client (Azizov was appointed minister in January 2017) is a vital step towards Mirziyoyev's political emancipation from SNB head Inoyatov and to him genuinely consolidating power. It will also lead to weakening Inoyatov's ascendancy.

- However, the process for Mirziyoyev to consolidate power is not complete—emancipation from the SNB and Inoyatov is only the first stage. The strengthening of power will eventually be achieved after Inoyatov has been removed from office. Additionally, there are a host of other informal groups of interests in Uzbekistan which Mirziyoyev currently only partially controls, at best. Curbing their influence will probably be a peaceful process; it cannot, however, be completely ruled out that it will lead to serious friction in the Uzbek elite. The internal situation appears to be the greatest challenge for President Mirziyoyev. There are many unresolved issues and social tensions in Uzbekistan which have so far been frozen by using authoritarian methods. At present the country's social and economic situation is considerably deteriorating due to a fall in remittances from Uzbek economic migrants in Russia. This may present a potential risk to Uzbekistan's stability.