

Elections in Uzbekistan: consolidation of the Mirziyoyev regime

Marcin Popławski

On 9 July, the incumbent Shavkat Mirziyoyev won the early presidential election in Uzbekistan. According to the official results, he received 87% of the vote. He defeated three other candidates, none of whom were widely known to the public (and did not receive more than 5% support). The turnout was 79.8%. The OSCE observer mission, in a critical statement, reported serious irregularities on the day of the vote and systemic failings in freedom of assembly, association and expression, among other issues.

Mirziyoyev has been part of Uzbekistan's core political elite since 2003, when President Islam Karimov nominated him as prime minister. In September 2016, after Karimov's death, he took over as head of state, and on 14 December of the same year he won the presidential election. As part of the post-Karimov 'thaw', the socio-political system was liberalised in a selective and top-down fashion: for example, state repression was reduced. Mirziyoyev also inspired Uzbekistan's policy of opening up to the outside world in order to attract investment and modernise the economy. In this way, he gained relative public acceptance and improved the country's image abroad. The current elections are part of a political cycle, announced by the president in December 2022, which is intended to improve state governance by reforming all branches of government. So far, as part of this process, the number of government departments and agencies has been reduced from 61 to 28; this included a reduction in the number of ministries to 21. In addition, in January 2023, the number of civil servants was reduced by 24% (i.e. by more than 17,000 posts) on the basis of a decree issued by Mirziyoyev.

Commentary

- Considering the authoritarian model of power in Uzbekistan, the elections bore no signs of real political competition. They were a ritualistic spectacle designed to test the efficiency and loyalty of the state apparatus and to give Mirziyoyev formal legitimacy (both internally and externally) to continue his rule. In this sense, they proceeded in an exemplary manner and achieved their objectives. The decision to hold them ahead of time (they took place in the middle of Mirziyoyev's second term, after his re-election in 2021) was linked to a wide-ranging amendment to the constitution (approved in a referendum on 30 April this year) which allows the head of state to seek re-election (twice, i.e. for the third and fourth time), while also extending the president's term of office from five to seven years. Thus, he will potentially be able to remain in office until 2037, when he will be 79 years old. Snap parliamentary elections now seem likely, as this

would be one of the next steps in the managed renewal of the system.

- The elections went off smoothly and calmly from the point of the ruling elite; that will strengthen the president's position in the light of the regional consequences of the war in Ukraine. These include a push from Russia to take control over Uzbekistan's natural gas sector and transmission infrastructure. In June this year Tashkent decided to enter into a contract with Gazprom to purchase crude for its own use; the two-year contract to import 2.8 bcm of crude annually will come into effect on 1 October this year. Uzbekistan is moving away from its role as a gas exporter due to declining production and increasing domestic demand; this poses a potential problem in its relations with China, which wants to keep importing Uzbek gas. Meanwhile Tashkent has stepped up dialogue with the West, although in doing so it has to contend with increased US and EU pressure to comply with the Western sanctions regime against Russia. Uzbekistan has so far benefited from the Western strictures as it is profiting from re-exporting goods onto the Russian market (its exports to Russia increased by 46.8 per cent year-on-year in 2022, to more than \$3 billion). That poses a challenge to the reinvigorated political and economic dialogue it has been holding with the West since last year.
- At the domestic level, we should expect a further gradual liberalisation of the system. This will not translate into democratisation, but it does include elements of controlled dialogue between the authorities and society. In particular, this involves the de-escalation of social tensions and the continuation of Uzbekistan's diplomatic and economic opening up to the world. As part of this top-down 'thaw', the state's migration strategy is being changed, which was confirmed when Mirziyoyev made it one of the themes of the election campaign. The new approach involves promoting migration to destinations such as the UK and EU countries, especially Germany and Central Europe; these places are less popular and not as 'traditional', compared to Russia, Kazakhstan or Turkey. The government has declared that it will encourage Uzbek citizens to travel abroad for work (including by financing the purchase of air tickets) and spread the best possible opinion of the Uzbek people abroad. One reason for this is the growing demographic pressure in this, the most populous country of Central Asia (currently around 36 million inhabitants), which translates into government initiatives to reform the labour market and the education system. It also fits into Mirziyoyev's programme of reforms, intended as a response to concerns about the country's rising socio-demographic challenges. These reforms are aimed at creating better living conditions for and enriching the general public while maintaining strong authoritarian control even at the level of local community life.