

The stage-managed elections in Uzbekistan

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On 27 October, parliamentary and local elections were held in Uzbekistan. The ruling Uzbekistan Liberal Democratic Party won the election for the Legislative Chamber, the lower house of parliament, with 34.7% of the vote, securing 64 out of 150 seats. Other parties that gained seats in parliament include the Uzbekistan National Revival Democratic Party (18.8%, 14 seats), the People's Democratic Party of Uzbekistan (17.1%, 13 seats), the Adolat Social Democratic Party (16.2%, 12 seats), and the Ecological Party (13.1%, 10 seats). None of these parties represent genuine opposition. No protests, tensions, or other disturbances were observed throughout the electoral process.

The OSCE mission, which, along with other organisations, monitored the elections, concluded that they failed to meet international standards. The mission pointed to systemic restrictions on freedom of association, assembly, and speech, a lack of genuine competition (such as political debate and criticism of the authorities), and numerous irregularities in the electoral process (including multiple voting and breaches of ballot secrecy). On a positive note, steps have been taken towards electoral reform, and female representation on candidate lists has increased to 40%.

The elections demonstrate that Uzbekistan has failed to create conditions for genuine democratisation of either the electoral or political system. At the same time, the effort the government made to prepare for the vote (including legal and organisational changes), its openness to international observers despite their anticipated criticism, and the broader context of transformation occurring within the country are all signs of a highly dynamic situation, continuously testing the limits of reform. On the other hand, Uzbekistan is thus demonstrating that it will pursue its own terms of cooperation with the West and will insist that its political system be respected.

Commentary

- **Uzbekistan is an authoritarian state where democratic institutions and mechanisms are largely superficial.** It was classified as such in the 2023 *Democracy Index* by the EIU, ranking 149th out of 167 countries, notably higher than Belarus. The elections confirm that this regime will not tolerate genuine political competition or public participation in politics. The country lacks not only the essential pillars of democracy, such as free press, but also any significant social drive for real political liberalisation. Despite these fundamental shortcomings, the system has become significantly less repressive under Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who has served as Uzbekistan's president since 2016, compared to the regime of Islam Karimov (1989–2016). A visible sign of this regime's softening is the

expansion of individual freedoms.

- **Though undemocratic, elections are nonetheless an important part of the systemic adjustments underway in Uzbekistan.** Mirziyoyev's reforms aim to modernise the state apparatus and economy, as well as to effectively channel the significant social energy stemming from such factors as rapid population growth (with an average age under 29) and rising public aspirations. In light of this, elections provide an opportunity to mobilise and activate local and regional structures, assess and promote new personnel to strengthen control over the apparatus and local dynamics, and ultimately improve societal management. Furthermore, broad exposure to foreign observers and their assessments offers Uzbekistan an opportunity to project itself, if not as an emerging democracy, then at least as a nation open to the world and committed to reform.
- **One of the main challenges for the government is channelling public sentiments, given the population's growing significance and aspirations.** The fear of unrest, whether social or political (primarily due to Islamic radicalism and internal tensions among local elites), has been a persistent concern throughout modern Uzbekistan's history. This fear was substantiated in 2022, when protests in Nukus were violently suppressed. The government has responded to these challenges with economic liberalisation, thereby raising hopes of improved living standards (GDP growth in 2023 reached 6%), while also maintaining a strong control apparatus. The regime has also made efforts to consolidate society around the state as a historical, national, and territorial entity, to better manage public sentiment on issues such as environmental concerns. The government has likewise emphasised its commitment to ensuring citizens' individual rights and adopting a socially inclusive approach while engaging in rhetorical political liberalisation. These goals were reflected in the extensive constitutional reform (see '[A constitution for "the New Uzbekistan"](#)') and in the slogans used by all parties throughout the campaign.
- **The peaceful and smooth election process does not necessarily indicate the success of the Uzbek government's policies.** Stability and genuine public mandate for the political leadership stem from citizens' focus on improving their material standard of living, amid political apathy. Should Uzbekistan's economy continue to grow and modernise without external destabilising factors, this state of affairs could persist for the coming years. However, it remains unclear how successful efforts to professionalise the state apparatus have been and how effectively this apparatus can respond to social challenges.