



Uzbekistan



Last update:	14 January 2010
Author:	
Population:	27,865,738 (July 2010 est.)
Prime minister:	Shavkat Mirziyoyev (since December 2003)
President:	Islam Karimov (since March 1990)
Governemental type:	Republic; authoritarian presidential rule, with little power outside the executive branch
Ruling coalition:	One ruling party – Liberal Democratic Party of Uzbekistan (UzLiDeP)
Last election:	Parliamentary December 27, 2009 (first round), January 10, 2010 (second round)
Next election:	–
Sister parties:	None

Uzbekistan became an independent state after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Since then, former communist President Islam Karimov rules the country. His regime is characterised by a strong state and suppression of the opposition, and it came to a bloody outburst during the 2005 Andjion events in which, according to official numbers, 187 people died in clashes between demonstrators and the police. Witnesses, however, reported several hundred deaths, of which a lot of unarmed civilians. The Uzbek authorities have always claimed the demonstrators were heavily armed Islamic fundamentalists, necessitating a harsh response to the uprising.

INTRODUCTION

The refusal by the Uzbek regime of any form of independent international investigation on the 2005 Andjion events, as requested by several countries, most vocally the US, led to a rift between Uzbekistan and the west, freezing the relations that had developed due to the Uzbek authorities' support for the war on terror. In 2007 a journalist interviewing family members of the victims of Andjion was arrested and accused of illegal border crossing, smuggling, and distributing material causing public disorder by using financial support from foreign governments. She faced seven years of imprisonment, but was released under strong international pressure.

ELECTIONS AND POLITICAL SITUATION

Uzbekistan is a presidential republic, in which the president is both head of state and head of government. Following a national referendum in 2002, in 2003 the term of office for the president was changed from 5 to 7 years by constitutional amendments.

Parliamentary elections 2004

In December 2004 and January 2005 parliamentary elections were held in Uzbekistan. The first round was held on 26 December, and a runoff on 9 January. The Uzbek parliament, named Oliy Majlis, consists of a Legislative Chamber and the Senate. The Legislative Chamber has 120 members, they are nationally elected for a five year term. The Senate counts 100 members, 84 of them are indirectly regionally elected and 16 directly appointed by the president.

The two-chamber system was introduced in 2002 after a referendum, before 2002 Uzbekistan had a uni-cameral



parliament of 250 seats. In the same referendum, the presidential term was extended from five to seven years, making the president even more powerful. In practice, the Uzbek parliament only meets a few times a year, which makes a real political debate and a critical attitude towards the government impossible.

The 2004/2005 elections were the third parliamentary elections since the independence of Uzbekistan, and the first with the two-chamber system introduced in 2002. The system was introduced to increase the role of the parliament in the decision making progress, but in practice this did not change much. All the (five) parties, that participated in the elections, backed the president. Real opposition parties tried to register for the elections, but all these applications were for various reasons refused. For example: the absence of addresses of the signatories, something the election law did not require. Therefore several opposition groups decided to boycott the elections.

The President makes all decisions. Therefore, parliamentary elections are not that interesting for the Uzbek people, because the results will hardly affect the political situation. During the campaign, for the 2004/2005 elections, the parties did not address the topics most interesting for the voters. The fact that outside rallies were not allowed, and people outside the urban areas had limited access to media information, did not help in making the elections a salient issue. It was clear that a lot of people were not going to vote, because they had no faith in the parliament, or simply because they did not know their regional candidate. To make sure the elections would be valid, the authorities adjusted, just before the elections, the election law. With the new law, only 30 percent of registered voters must turn out to make the elections validate. Another adjustment of the election law introduced a requirement that 30 percent of the candidates on the party lists must be women. In the elected parliament 17.5% of the parliamentarians are women. This is an improvement in relation to the previous parliament where 7.2% of the parliamentarians were women.

The elections enjoyed very little international attention.

Official election results, after two rounds (official turnout 85.1 %):

Party	% of votes	seats
Uzbekistan Liberal Democratic Party (LPDU)	34.2	41
Uzbekistan People's Democratic Party (NDP)	26.6	32
Self-sacrifice National Democratic Party (Fidokorlar)	14.2	17
Uzbekistan National Revival Democratic Party (MTP)	9.2	11
Justice Social Democratic Party (Adolat)	7.5	9
Unaffiliated	8.3	10

Irregularities

The OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) monitored the first round of the parliamentary elections. They conducted, on invitation from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Uzbekistan, a Limited Election Observation Mission (LEOM). The fact that the legal framework for elections in Uzbekistan did not reflect the OSCE commitments and that there were no registered opposition parties, made the OSCE decide not to send a standard observation mission, but a limited one. The LEOM reported several important irregularities:

- Necessary freedoms for democratic election, like freedom of expression, association and assembly, were not respected
- The five registered parties did not revealed significant differences
- The absence of independent mass media prevented a meaningful political debate.
- For opposition parties it was impossible to register for the elections. Only a year before the elections the Ministry



of Justice agreed to consider the applications of several unregistered parties. All these applications were rejected. The authorities did not register a single political party or initiative group that had a critical attitude towards the Karimov regime.

- The OSCE/ODHIR LEOM was frequently denied access to election related documents. This denial runs contrary to the 1990 Copenhagen Document, which states that election observers, both foreign and domestic, can enhance the electoral process, and also contravenes the OSCE/ODHIR minimal conditions for effective election observation.
- Domestic non-governmental organisations (NGO's) did not monitor the elections because, in contravention to the 1990 Copenhagen Document, domestic NGO's do not have the legal right in Uzbekistan to observe elections.
- Because it was a limited mission, the election day was not monitored. However, some long-term observers visited several polling stations and witnessed irregularities like proxy voting and family voting.

The overall conclusion of the mission was that the 26 December elections 'fell significantly short of OSCE commitments and other international standards for democratic elections, despite minor improvements identified in election law.'

Consequences

Because all the parties, that participated in the elections, supported the president, the outcome of the election did not have important political consequences. The newest pro governmental party was the LPDU, which gained 34 percent of the votes. It tried to appeal professional workers, private entrepreneurs and farmers. According to President Karimov, the party was different then the other parties, which hints at a personal preference. In the presidential election of 2000 Karimov supported Fidokorlar, which was at that time the newest party. So it seems that Karimov always gives his support to the most recently established party.

For the stability of the government the elections had no consequences, because the threat for the government does not come from official political parties but opposition groups like radical Islam organisations.

Presidential elections 2007

Presidential elections were held in December 2007. According to the Uzbek constitution, Islom Karimov's term had already expired on 22 January 2007, but the electoral legislation of the country states that elections should be held in December of the year in which the president's term expires. This effectively lengthened the last term of Islom Karimov to nearly 8 years, causing disgruntlement amongst domestic opposition and international observers.

Altogether, four candidates were registered for the 23 December 2007 presidential elections, including the first ever female candidate to contest in Uzbek presidential elections. Three candidates were nominated by political parties in the national parliament (Oliy Majlis). One candidate was nominated by an initiative group of voters. To register a candidate, political parties and initiative groups are required to present a registration petition to the CEC supported by at least 5 percent of the registered voters, or almost 815,000 signatures. Two potential candidates were unable to register as they had not succeeded in collecting the required amount of signatures.

The successfully registered candidates included incumbent president Karimov. His candidacy was widely criticized, as he had already served the constitutional maximum of two consecutive terms as president. However, according to the reasoning of the Central Election Commission, president Karimov was elected only once following the adoption of the constitution in 1992, and his first term in office should therefore not be included to the rule. He thus met the eligibility criteria to participate in the 2007 elections. Although the OSCE openly voiced the opinion that Karimov was not eligible to run for office, and a number of Uzbek opposition group reacted strongly against his 'illegitimate candidacy', the issue has not been subject to judicial scrutiny, and Karimov's candidacy was not challenged in court.

Furthermore, although four different candidates competed in the elections, in fact there was none of the candidates set out to pose any real challenge to Islom Karimov. On the contrary, the candidates campaigned together and publicly supported the policies of the incumbent. Moreover, the election campaign was low-key and hardly visible, depriving people of the possibility to get acquainted with the different candidates. There were no debates between the candidates, and there were no campaign materials of a competitive nature. State television allotted over 80 percent of their relevant news coverage to president Karimov. Here one also has to bear in mind the composition of



the Uzbek parliament. Although different parties exist, all of the parties represented in parliament are supportive of Islom Karimov. Candidates that were nominated by other parties represented in the Oliy Majlis therefore cannot be viewed as opposition candidates. According to the OSCE, the absence of a competitive spirit in the campaign was explained to their election observation mission as 'reflecting Uzbek traditions, not favouring confrontations in public.' This did, however, gravely hamper the credibility of the elections, as there was no real opposition candidate which one could vote for. Combined with serious irregularities on election day, including the presence of law enforcement agents inside polling stations and the unusual high voter turnout of 90,6 percent in contrast to the small amount of voters observed by the mission, this led the OSCE to conclude that the "strictly controlled Uzbek elections did not offer a genuine choice."

According to the official results, president Karimov was re-elected with 90.77 percent of the votes:

Candidate	votes	% of votes
Islom Karimov (Uzbekistan Liberal Democratic Party)	13.008.357	90.77
Asliddin Rustamov (Uzbekistan People's Democratic Party)	486.064	3.27
Dilorom Toshmuhamedova (Justice Social Democratic Party)	434.111	3.03
Akmal Saidov (independent)	420.815	2.94

voter turnout: 90.6%

Parliamentary elections 2009–2010

First round

On 27 December 2009, the first round of parliamentary elections were held in Uzbekistan. These were the third elections for the lower house of the country's bicameral parliament. The number of seats in the lower house of the parliament was increased in December 2008 from 120 to 150, with 15 seats reserved for election by the Uzbekistan's Ecological Movement.

Four pro-government parties – Liberal Democratic Party, People's Democratic Party Of Uzbekistan, the National Revival Party "Milly Tiklanish" and the Social Democratic "Adolat" (Justice) Party – were running in the race, with a total of 517 candidates. The final turnout for the first round was 87.8%

After the first round deputies were elected in 96 districts out of the 135 electoral districts. Also, on voting day the Ecological Movement held its Congress, at which 15 deputies to the Legislative Chamber were elected. In 39 districts, however, none of the candidates managed to garner an overall majority of 50 percent of the votes, and so a second round of voting was held on 10 January, 2010.

Second round

On 10 January 2010, citizens voted for one of the two candidates in each of the 39 districts that got the largest number of votes in the first round. According to the Uzbek Central Election Commission (CEC) the Liberal Democratic Party received 53 seats in the lower house, People's Democratic Party 32 seats, National Revival Party 31 seats and Adolat Social Democratic Party 19 seats. 33 deputies (22%) of all elected members of the lower house are women. 47 deputies (31.3%) have been elected to the Legislative Chamber for the second time. The final turnout of the second round was 79.7%.



The election was monitored by over 270 observers from 36 countries and representatives of four international missions. Human rights activists described the election campaign as oppressed by the government. In a pre-election report the OSCE said that Uzbekistan's "current political spectrum does not offer the electorate a genuine choice between competing political alternatives."

Official results

Party	First round Seats	Second round Seats	Total seats
Liberal Democratic Party	33	20	53
People's Democratic Party	22	10	32
National Revival Party	25	6	31
Social Democratic Adalat Party	16	3	19
Total	96	39	135

Run up to the elections

Several days before the elections, on 24 December, citizens with a mobile phone in Uzbekistan (16 million) received a text message, which informed them about the upcoming general elections. A former Uzbek citizen now living in exile in the U.S., said that "there are certain groups within the population that are under pressure. These groups – students, teachers, and government employees – are obliged to participate in the elections".

The election campaign consisted of short television programs that were aired four days in a row. According to the U.S.-based human rights organisation, Freedom House, it was for the first time that the four political parties openly criticised each other on television. This was a positive development according to the organisation. The parties criticised each other over mainly social policy, but on the other hand strongly praised the achievements of president Karimov. Freedom House reported that it "has some evidence that those debates were scripted. And even if not – these parties don't know themselves who they are, they have no ideology".

IMPORTANT POLITICAL ISSUES



Islam Terrorism

Uzbekistan has a long tradition with the Islam. Before the Soviet era, Islam was the biggest religion in Uzbekistan. And even in Soviet times there were 65 state controlled mosques. After the independence of Uzbekistan it was expected that radical Islam would rise very fast. President Karimov succeeded in avoiding this by suppressing Islamic organisations immediately. However along the years the Islamists became stronger.

Uzbekistan now has two radical Islamic organisations that want to make an Islamic state of Uzbekistan: the non-violent Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami, and the militant Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). Both organisations are illegal in Uzbekistan.

Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami was founded in 1953 in Jerusalem. It aims to re-establish the historical Caliphate in order to bring together all Muslim lands under Islamic rule and establish a state capable of counterbalancing the West. Hizb ut-Tahrir see themselves as a political party whose ideology is the Islam. In the mid nineties they gained a lot of support in Uzbekistan. It is hard to say how many followers Hizb ut-Tahrir has, because it is a forbidden organisation. Estimates go from 10.000 to 20.000, but fact is that it is the biggest Islamic organisation in the region. The Uzbek regime sees Hizb ut-Tahrir as a big threat: in the past years thousands of followers have been arrested. This contributes to the mystique status of Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami among some Uzbek citizens. The extreme poverty and lack of a strong opposition makes Hizb ut-Tahrir for some people the only way to escape the Karimov regime. Hizb ut-Tahrir claims that they have never used violence so far. They want to realise their goals without violence, although they do not exclude it. But the Uzbek authorities have accused them of involvement in terrorist attacks, and of having relations with the violent IMU. There exists no direct evidence for these accusations. Despite the lack of evidence, counter terrorist organisations keep monitoring Hizb ut-Tahrir, because of their extreme views.

The IMU has its roots in the Afghanistan-Russia war. Founders of the IMU fought in that war together with the Taliban and were linked with Osama Bin Laden. The organisation was founded in 1998 with as goal making of Uzbekistan an Islamic state. In 1999 18 people died in Tashkent during bombings planned by the IMU. The movement was a big threat for the Uzbek government: in 1999 they tried, without success, to assassinate president Karimov. The IMU weakened after 11 September 2001. The US decided to attack the Taliban in Afghanistan, and the IMU went to Afghanistan to help the Taliban. The Uzbek government was eager to support the US, by offering flight bases and sending troops to Afghanistan. The IMU suffered great defeats during the Afghanistan war, but survived through splinter groups. Like 'Uzbek for Islamic Jihad', which claimed the Tashkent 2004 attacks. The current status of the organisation is very unclear. Authorities want to keep the impression that IMU is still active, and therefore counter terrorism policy is necessary. But they do not have strong evidence for these statements. IMU or splinter organisations have not claimed the responsibility for any attack since June 2005, when a bomb exploded in Tashkent injuring twelve, but killing none.

The Tashkent 2004 bombings

Between 28 March and 1 April 2004, Tashkent the capital of Uzbekistan, was hit by several (suicide) bomb attacks. Almost 50 people died during the bombings and violent clashes with the police. The Uzbek government immediately claimed that the bombings were part of the worldwide terrorist attacks of Al-Qaeda. A short overview of the events:

The first bombings occurred during the night of 28 March, a house exploded in the village Qahramon. Ten people died in the explosion. According to the Uzbek authorities the family living in the house was part of an Islamic organisation and was preparing a terrorist attack. Rescue workers discovered 1.5 ton of explosives in the ruins of the house. Later that night, three policemen were killed in two separate attacks. The next morning, two suicide bombings took place near a market. The market was closed during the bombings, and the attacks were targeted on policemen who met there every morning for their daily briefing. A spokesman of the Interior Ministry said that nineteen people died in the 28/29 March events, of which six policemen. However, an eyewitness spoke of seven policemen lying on the ground covered in blood, during the attacks of 29 March. During the day of 30 March events became bloodier when police battled with suspected terrorists in the suburbs of Tashkent. Authorities changed their view on how many people died, at first on 30 March they stated that twenty terrorists blew themselves when security forces tried to arrest them, two days later authorities spoke of two separate incidents. In the first incident two terrorists and one policemen died in a car explosion, and in the second eighteen terrorists died during fighting's in the town Salar. There was no independent coverage of the events. Uzbek television did not report about the events before the evening of 29 March. By waiting so long before they reported about the attacks, some kind of news vacuum was developed.



Authorities were quick with claiming that the attacks were planned by international Islamic terrorist organisations, but there were no organisations that claimed the responsibility for the actions. It was not very likely that the attacks were planned by an international terrorist organisation, because the attacks were targeted only on policemen. This is in contrast with how international terrorist groups 'normally' attack outside their home countries (New York 2001, Madrid 2004, London 2005 were civilians were the target). The fact that policemen were the target contributes to the idea that the goal of the attacks was creating domestic unrest. It was therefore likely that a domestic organisation planned the attacks.

A popular conspiracy theory was that the Uzbek authorities were the brains behind the attacks, this to emphasize the need to fight radical Islamic organisations, and hereby creating more 'understanding' to justify their actions against these organisations and their followers.

But after a while, a previously unknown group called 'Uzbek for Islamic Jihad' claimed the responsibility for the attacks. The group appeared to be a splinter organisation of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and has not claimed any attacks since 2004. The group is supposed to have links with Al Qaida, and it could be that Al Qaida supplied training and funding. Later it became clear that many of the suicide bombers had family in prison, so it seemed even more reasonable to interpret the attacks as a protest against the police.

The government reacted to the Tashkent events by acting even stronger against opposition groups. They arrested a lot of Muslims linking them to Al Qaida and other radical Islam organisations. Human right organisations reported torturing of Muslims already in prison.

The 2005 Andijon riots

In the night of 12 May 2005 uprisings arose in Andijon, a city in the Ferghana Valley with about 300.000 inhabitants. This region has suffered both from the government's continued repression of Islamic groups and from high poverty and unemployment. Direct cause for the uprisings was the trial of 23 businessmen who were accused and founded guilty of having links with a radical Islamic organisation. During the day there were peaceful demonstrations against the verdict, but during the night the demonstrations became more violent. Armed men attacked a police station, army barracks, and a jail, freeing hundreds of prisoners.

The next day they tried to take over the National Security Service headquarters, but failed. At the same time there was a large demonstration in the centre of Andijon. The police reacted by shooting on the demonstrators. Eyewitnesses reported several hundred unarmed people being shot. Authorities tried to ban foreign media and stated at first that 70 people died during the shootings. President Karimov stated that he would never have given the order to shoot on his own people. At the same time opposition organisations claimed, based on eyewitnesses, that over a 700 people died during the shootings. The EU and US strongly criticised the shootings and asked for an independent international investigation. President Karimov said there was no need for such an international investigation and there never would be in the future. He blamed radical Islamists for the shootings. On 16 June the authorities stated that of the 179 people died in the shootings, 79 were terrorists, 14 hostages taken by the terrorists, 20 policemen, 11 soldiers and 45 civilians. The EU imposed sanctions against Uzbekistan because they did not allow an independent international investigation.

The Uzbek authorities started directly after the events a harsh crackdown on the opposition and human right defenders. Authorities were going from house to house in the Andijon region warning civilians not to speak with journalists or human right defenders. A lot of members of opposition parties and human right organisations were arrested, and often victim of torture. Most people arrested were being charged of being member of a radical Islamic organisation. The government still stated the radical Islamists were responsible for the shootings, despite the fact that most of the victims were unarmed civilians. There was no evidence that Islamists were behind the attacks. The goal of the crackdown was clear, the authorities did not want anybody that witnessed the shootings to come out with their observations.

The impact of the 2005 Andijon events even goes on today. In April 2007, a journalist, Umida Niyazova, who was interviewing family members of the victims of Andijon was arrested and accused of illegal border crossing, smuggling, and distributing material causing public disorder by using financial support from foreign governments. There was no clear evidence for the accusations, but she was sentenced to seven years in prison. Human right



organisations protested against the verdict and urged the EU to ask for an immediate release. The EU put pressure on Uzbekistan and after 'confessing' everything Niyazova was released. The release of Niyazova had a direct link with the decision about the sanctions that the EU imposed after the Andijon events. On 14 May 2007 the EU had to decide if they would continue the sanctions imposed two years before.

Clearly, the human rights situation had not improved in Uzbekistan and there had not been a international investigation to the Andijon shootings. But some countries, like Germany, favoured a softer tone towards Uzbekistan. The fact that Uzbekistan is rich of natural resources played an important role here. The EU used the decision on continuing the sanctions to put extra pressure on Uzbekistan by demanding the release of Umida Niyazova. Uzbekistan agreed to release Niyazova and the EU decreased the number of Uzbek officials prohibited from visiting EU states from twelve to eight. The arms embargo and the other sanction were kept in place for another year.

Still it is not clear what exactly happened 13 May 2005 in Andijon. The government still denies any wrongdoing, but opposition organisations claim that more than thousand people died in the shootings.

Human rights

The Niyazova case made clear how bad the human rights situation in Uzbekistan is. The US based NGO Freedom House gives Uzbekistan the worst possible rating (7) concerning human rights, placing it between countries like North Korea and Burma. Freedom House uses a rating system to describe the level of freedom from 1 to 7, 1 indicates the highest degree of freedom and 7 the least amount of freedom.

Uzbekistan lacks all basic freedoms: there is no freedom of speech, no freedom of movement, no freedom of religion and the juridical system is controlled by the government. Prisons are full of religious and political prisoners.

The president holds all the power and he can do whatever he wants. In a speech in 2005 president Karimov declared that Uzbekistan would not tolerate a 'coloured' revolution like in Ukraine and Georgia. Therefore he increased the suppression of opposition movements. This resulted in many arrests. People are not allowed to protests against these arrests, and trials are in Soviet style. The prosecuted admits everything and takes all the responsibility.

There exists no free media: newspapers and TV channels are state controlled. Every political party has its own newspaper. Even foreign media suffers from the suppressing government. After the 2005 Andijon events the BBC and Radio Liberty had to leave the country, and some staff members of Radio Liberty were arrested. Although most critical websites are being blocked, Internet remains the only source for independent information.

The Islam is Uzbekistan's main religion and is state controlled. Praying is only allowed in by the government appointed mosques. Followers of independent Muslim organisations, like Hizb ut-Tahrir, will be arrested and are in prison often victim of torturing. Also followers of other religions, like Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses, are victim of the state's religious intolerance.

The human rights situation became worse after the Andijon shootings when the government started a huge crackdown against the opposition. International pressure has not brought any improvement to this situation. Amnesty International has reported the detention of several human right defenders.

There are no signs that the situation will improve very soon. Freedom House gave Uzbekistan almost in all fields concerning human rights in 2006 worse marks than in 2005. For example, on the field of civil society, Uzbekistan went from a 6.5 to a 7. President Karimov is determined to keep Uzbekistan under his strong control and will not tolerate any form of human rights protection.

Natural resources

Uzbekistan holds the 18th largest proved natural gas reserve of the world. Neighbour countries Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan rank 11th and 12th in this list. Together they possess 5% of the world's natural resources. Uzbekistan's geographical position makes it possible to transport gas to Russia, China and to Europe. Russia is Uzbekistan's biggest gas importer. In 2006 Uzbekistan exported around 9 billion cubic meters gas to Russia, almost 1 billion more than in 2005. To make this increase of export possible domestic consumption was reduced. The Uzbek population suffered from this.



Recently, agreements on the construction of new pipelines with Russia and China were signed. Most remarkable is the agreement with China, because Uzbekistan is currently not exporting to China. The agreement, signed in April 2007, consists of the construction a 530 km pipeline between the two countries, with a capacity of 30 billion cubic meters (bcm) gas a year. But no more details about the deal were given. China is not a neighbour country of Uzbekistan and it remains unclear which country will function as transit-country, but most likely this will be Kazakhstan. The deal undermines the dominant position of Russia in Uzbekistan's energy market. In 2006 Uzbekistan produced 62 bcm gas, 12 bcm was exported, 9 to Russia and the rest 3 to the neighbour countries Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The rest, 41 bcm, was used for domestic consumption. Because there are no new gas reserves discovered, Uzbekistan has to cut domestic consumption or decrease export to be able to export gas to China. A possibility is that a part of the export to Russia is replaced to China. The Chinese gas importer, China National Petroleum Corp, is willing to pay more than Gazprom does. Currently Gazprom pays \$ 100 per thousand cubic meters and sells it to Europe for \$ 220. Some analysts say that agreement with China is made to put pressure on Gazprom and make them pay more for the Uzbek gas.

The European Union has also plans to construct a pipeline directly to Central Asia, thereby becoming less dependent on Russia. The European Commission is currently investigating the possibilities of the 'Trans-Caspian' pipeline and will publish a final report in December 2008. The pipeline will connect Europe and Central-Asia through Turkey. Although sources within the EU are positive about this project, it is not certain if it will ever succeed. Not all member states stand on the same line about the project. Countries like Sweden and The Netherlands want to see improvements on the human rights issue in Uzbekistan. Other countries, like Spain and Germany, give the pipeline the priority above the human rights. Another issue is that the pipeline may disturb the, already not ideal, relations between the EU and Russia.

Russia, that in May 2007 made agreements with all Central Asian states on the construction of new pipelines. And in January 2007 Uzbekistan granted Gazprom a license to carry out geological exploration to new gas reserves. Therefore despite the China deal and the EU's ambitions, Russia will remain the most important and influential player on the Central Asian energy market.

Poverty

Uzbekistan is rich of natural resources (like gas, cotton and gold). This gives a lot of economic opportunities. But the people, however, do not profit from this potential and poverty therefore is a serious problem in Uzbekistan. With a gross domestic product per capita of \$ 2000 Uzbekistan is doing worse than countries like Sudan, Vietnam and Cameroon. The biggest problem is that the government holds strong control over the economy. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, only a few economic reforms have been carried out. The cotton-industry is suffering from this. For example, farmers are forced to plant cotton even though weather conditions make this impossible. This has as consequence that in the last twenty years the world's cotton production has increased, Uzbekistan's share decreased. Farmers sell their cotton for about \$ 250 a ton to the state, this is almost three times less as the \$ 700 for which the Chinese farmers sell their cotton. Family's living of a month per person are no exception in Uzbekistan. According to the ministry of labour the unemployment rate is 3%. But this does not seem to have a connection with reality: an estimated 33% of the population lives below the poverty line (2004 estimated).

Another cause of the poverty is Uzbekistan's protective trade regime. Discriminatory import taxes and fees, import licensing requirements, currency controls, non-transparent and burdensome standards and certification regulations, export subsidies, service market access barriers, weak enforcement of intellectual property rights, and inefficient customs implementation add to the cost of trade, from which the population suffers.

Corruption

Corruption is a big problem in Uzbekistan. Paying bribes to state officials is a common phenomenon. Particularly with the 'propiskas'. A propiska is a document that gives an individual the right to live in a particular place. Because Tashkent is the city with the best economic opportunities, most people want to live there. But the propiskas are limited and therefore there exist a black market in these propiskas for Tashkent. State officials sell the propiskas for large sums and people who live in Tashkent without a propiska have to pay bribes.

Another area with big corruption problems is the university system. Professors are very powerful and student pay money to them to pass their exams. Therefore not the smart students, but the rich students graduate. Almost in



every area of state power corruption exists. The badly paid civil service is the most important cause for this.

On another level of corruption stands President Karimov. He uses his power to enrich himself and his family to the extreme. He uses the profit of the cotton harvest for his own wealth and takes over successful businesses for a very low price. This money he 'earns' he uses to let his family and himself live in extreme luxury. For example, every city in Uzbekistan has a presidential palace.

OPPOSITION PARTIES

Opposition parties are forbidden, therefore officially we have to speak about oppositional organisations. These opposition parties all have as main goal establishing democracy in Uzbekistan. Some don't have a clear party program and none of them could be regarded as social democratic. But these oppositional organisations are the most progressive forces in the country.

Birlik

History

Birlik (Unity) was established in 1988 as the first opposition organisation in Uzbekistan. One of its main goals was making of Uzbek the official language of Uzbekistan instead of Russian. Soon after Uzbekistan's independence in 1991, president Karimov started to suppress Birlik. In 1992 the leader of Birlik, Abdurahim Polat, left the country after a second murder attempt. In the following years president Karimov only strengthened his power and Birlik and other oppositional organisations were banned.

In 2003 Birlik tried to register as an official political party, so that they could participate in the 2004 parliamentary elections. Five times they tried to register, but the Ministry of Justice rejected all the applications for various reasons. For example, just before the registration term, the number of registered party members required to participate in the elections was raised from five to twenty thousand. Birlik fulfilled to this demand, but still they couldn't participate in the elections, because according to the Ministry of Justice the signatures of the members were false.

The crackdown of the opposition by the government after the 2005 Andijon events made any political activity impossible for Birlik. In 2007, after pressure from the European Union, the government has softened its pressure a little bit.

Policy

Birlik's main goal is establishing a democracy in Uzbekistan. Because nowadays Uzbekistan is a dictatorship, this is very hard to accomplish. Their first goal is to stop the repression of the opposition. A way to this is obtaining international attention for the wrong doings of the Karimov regime. Birlik also support human rights, which is a very dangerous activity: two of Birlik's human rights activists were murdered in prison. All official media are controlled by the state. That's why they have founded their own newspaper, Hakarat. It was the first oppositional newspaper in Uzbekistan, Birlik also made the first website in Uzbek.

On economic field, they want to establish a market economy with the right of property of private land. At this moment the Uzbek economy is one of the least reformed of all ex Soviet states.

Birlik also wants to improve Central Asian cooperation, this cooperation should be oriented on Western values. Central Asia should not be a region of rivalry.

With the presidential elections of 2007 (the exact date has to be confirmed by president Karimov) in sight, the opposition should work together. Birlik has some troubles with the fundamentalist part of 'Erk', but cooperation is the only way to be an important player in the presidential elections. Birlik therefore thinks that the opposition should nominate one candidate that will run in the elections.

Additional infolt's hard to say how much support Birlik has from the Uzbek people. After the 2004 presidential elections, according to their own sources, they had almost 50.000 members. But after the Andijon shootings in 2005 the whole political situation changed, and being active in an oppositional organisation became very dangerous, and open support for Birlik declined.



Leader of the party is the exiled Abdurahim Polat.

Official website of Birlik: <http://www.birlik.net>. The website provides articles in English.

Erk

History

Erk (Liberty) started as a separatist organisation of Birlik. They had a dispute about priorities, the Erk fraction preferred 'Independence first' instead of Birliks 'First democracy then independence.' The party was officially established in April 1990, and chose Muhammad Salih as its leader. In 1991 Salih ran for president, according to the central election commission he got 12.5 % of the votes, but Erk themselves believed he gained 52 % of the votes. The party had a lot of popular support, and therefore the regime suppressed Erk, like it did to other opposition parties. In 1993 Uzbekistan became too dangerous for Salih and he fled the country. He is still the leader of Erk. In 1999 Salih was held responsible by the Uzbek government for the bombings in Tashkent of that year. Although he was not in the country he was sentenced to ten years of imprisonment. So now it is impossible for Salih to return to Uzbekistan. Erk wants to nominate Salih as candidate for the 2007 presidential elections. This doesn't seem to be a very clever move, because Uzbek law says a president candidate has to live in the country for at least the past ten years. Salih, who currently lives in Norway, hasn't been in Uzbekistan since 1993. In June 2003 Erk held its first formal meeting since it was banned eleven years earlier.

Policy

Erk has a complete political program that offers solutions to almost all problems of Uzbekistan. Main focus point is the creation of a parliamentary democratic republic, which provides rights and freedom according to the UN Declaration on Human Rights. They want to create a social state and privatise the land and the means, which are currently in the hands of the state. Another main point of Erk is the creation of a social market economy. Erk wants to get Uzbekistan out of its current crisis by reforming the state system, they reject the use of violence to reach their goals. But Erk's precondition for negotiations with the government is the immediate and unconditional rehabilitation of political refugees and the release of all political prisoners.

Additional info

Muhammad Salih is since its foundation Erk's leader. He has not, however, been in Uzbekistan since 1993. He wants to run for president in 2007, but some party members think his position is too dominant.

Erk has a website: <http://www.uzbekistanerk.org/index.php?newlang=english>

Muhammad Salih also has a personal website: www.muhammadsalih.info

OTHER MOVEMENTS

In the run up to the 2004 parliamentary elections, some oppositional organisations tried to register themselves as a political party, all without success. A short overview:

Ozod Dehqonlar (Free peasants)

Ozod Dehqonlar was established in 2003. They tried to register for the 2004 parliamentary elections without success. Main focus point was agricultural reform. The leader of the party, Nigora Hidoyatova, has been accused by the government of not knowing how to protect farmer rights because she's has never been a farmer herself. In March 2006 she was sentenced to ten years of imprisonment for economic crimes, but two months later she was released.

Sunshine coalition

The sunshine coalition is not an opposition party, but a coalition of opposition parties and figures. The coalition was established in 2005 by the oligarch Sanjar Umarov. Sunshine represents, in contradiction to Birlik and Erk, a new form of opposition: one where oligarchs and businessmen are represented. The free peasants movement is also a part of the coalition. In March 2006 Umarov was accused of tax evasion, money laundering, and embezzlement and sent to jail for ten years.

Party of Agrarians and Entrepreneurs

This party is led by Marat Zakhidov. They also failed to register for the 2004 parliamentary elections. As their name



makes clear they want to protect to rights of the farmers and entrepreneurs. The party does not cooperate with other opposition parties, because according to Zakhidov they are "in politics only to have a larger piece of the cake."

Because of the lack of independent information it is hard to say something about popular support and the current status of these parties. Because the leaders of these parties are often sent to jail, not a lot of people will openly express their support. But all parties claim that they easily fulfilled the minimum amount of party members (5000) to participate in de elections.

Fact is that the Uzbek opposition is far from united.

OFFICIAL POLITICAL PARTIES

Uzbekistan knows five official political parties. They all fully support president Karimov and do not provide a political significantly difference for the voter. Although according the official information given below, all parties address a different part of the population.

People's Democratic Party (Halq Demokratik Partiyasi)

Membership: 580,000 (2004)

First Secretary: Asliddin Rustamov

Previous Chairman: Abdulhafiz Jalolov (1993–2003)

Founded: 15 November 1991

Newspapers: "Uzbekistan Ovozi" and "Golos Uzbekistana," and "Muloqot" magazine

The People's Democratic Party (HDP in Uzbek) is the heir to the Communist Party of the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic. Although it is the biggest party in the country, with more than a half-million registered supporters, its fortunes nonetheless seem headed for a decline. Newer parties with younger membership rolls are being groomed and President Karimov has said that it is likely the future president of Uzbekistan will come from these parties, not the HDP.

The HDP was always the ruling party in parliament until the Watan Taraqqiyoti Party merged with Fidokorlar in April 2000. Most senior members of government are members of the HDP.

Fidokorlar (Demokratik Partiyasi, Self-Sacrificers)

Membership: 61,000 (2004)

Chairman: Akhtam Tursunov

Founded: 28 December 1998

Newspapers: "Fidokorlar" and "Watan"

The Watan Taraqqiyoti Party merged with Fidokorlar in April 2000. Fidokorlar is one of the parties that seemed to have been anointed heir apparent, until the appearance of the Liberal-Democrat Party, to the original, loyal parties of post-independence Uzbekistan. Though all five of Uzbekistan's registered political parties forwarded President Karimov as their choice in the 2000 presidential elections, it was Fidokorlar's nomination that Karimov accepted. At its second party congress in November 2004, Fidokorlar reported that it only had 61,000 registered supporters, despite being merged with the Watan Taraqqiyoti party in April 2000. That low figure may reflect the emerging threat Fidokorlar faces from the Liberal-Democratic Party, which was founded in November 2003 and now claims to have 135,000 members. Like Fidokorlar, the Liberal-Democratic Party tries to portray itself as the party of the country's new and young elite.

Fidokorlar targets youth and advocates building an open society and market economy, while at the same time supporting national interests. Members are artists, workers, small- and medium-sized businessmen, intellectuals, and young people.

Adolat Social Democratic Party (Adolat Sotsyal Demokratik Partiyasi)Membership: 50,000 (2004)

Chairman: Turgunpulat Daminov

Founded: 18 February 1995



Newspapers: "Adolat"

The party supports trade unions and protects the socially vulnerable section of the population.

Liberal-Democratic Party

Membership: 135,000 (2004)

Chairman: Turgunpulat Daminov

Previous chairman: Kabiljon Toshmatov (November 2003–May 2004)

Founded: 15 November 2003

As of early December 2004, the Liberal-Democratic Party seems like the party to watch. Barely one year old, it already claims to have some 135,000 members. At a session of parliament in May 2004, President Karimov called the Liberal-Democratic Party "the party of entrepreneurs, of business and of economic reform." He also said the Liberal-Democratic Party was different from the other four registered parties, perhaps hinting at his personal preference.

Milli Tiklanish (National Renaissance)

Membership: 50,000 (2004)

Chairman: Ibrahim Gafurov

Founded: 9 June 1995

Newspapers: "Milli Tiklanish"

The party's main goals are the revival of Uzbek culture, promoting solidarity with the rest of Central Asia, and supporting the idea of a greater Turkestan homeland. Members include intelligentsia, artists, and scholars.