

## How Western Disengagement Enabled Uzbekistan’s “Spring” and How to Keep it Going

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Edward Schatz<sup>1</sup>  
*University of Toronto*

Much has changed in Uzbekistan since December 2016, when Shavkat Mirziyoyev was elected president following the death of long-time dictator Islam Karimov. Prisoners have been released en masse; entrenched national elites have been shaken from their complacency; corrupt officials have been relieved of their duties, with some now facing prosecution; the role of the security services in everyday life has been diminished; prominent opposition figures and journalists have returned from exile; independent journalists have re-emerged with a new vigor; and important economic reforms have been initiated. Change is in its early stage, but this Uzbek “spring” feels like a breath of fresh air.

How can we explain this sudden embrace of a rapid reform agenda? My contention is that Uzbekistan’s case reveals a deep irony. While Western analysts typically assume that reform materializes because of successful outside pressure, in this case it was precisely Western disengagement that opened the door for change to begin. Recognizing this fact helps us to think carefully about what productive re-engagement with Uzbekistan might look like.

### **Expectations Upended**

Many of our staple analytical methods had led us to expect something different. Approaches that focus on bottom-up pressure would have noted that a civil society decimated from years of repression, particularly after the 2005 Andijan massacre, was in no position to exert pressure for change. Indeed, there were extremely few street protests or other kinds of visible opposition to the regime. Approaches that consider intra-elite rifts between hardliners and reformers would have highlighted that, notwithstanding personality differences in the elite, there was no clear pro-reform faction per se before Mirziyoyev’s election in December 2016. Just as the 2006 death of

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<sup>1</sup> [Edward Schatz](#) is Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Toronto.

the first president of neighboring Turkmenistan initially brought hope that quickly died down under the weight of resurgent authoritarianism, the expectation was that the elite in Uzbekistan would coalesce around a new authoritarian president with minimal appetite for reform.

More macro-structural approaches similarly gave us reason to expect little. Uzbekistan's neighbors were, by degree, also authoritarian and generally supportive of the status quo, fearing that reform would devolve into instability.<sup>2</sup> On a more global scale, the United States and Europe had retreated from efforts to influence the domestic politics of the region, leaving Uzbekistan to the geopolitical influence of China and Russia, two giants with their different yet equally authoritarian agendas. Finally, the Gordian knot of water, energy, and agriculture, which had kept Uzbekistan overreliant on cotton cultivation at great cost to its economic development and relationships with neighboring states, seemed impossible to untie.

Even a purely voluntarist approach centered on Mirziyoyev's personality would have given scant reason to expect change. While the specifics of his relationship to Karimov are not well known, the fact that Mirziyoyev was Karimov's prime minister from 2003 until the latter's death supported an assumption that he shared Karimov's basic authoritarian values and political inclinations. Indeed, Mirziyoyev headed the government during the 2005 Andijan massacre, the single event that most cemented Uzbekistan's authoritarian rule through 2016. In short, it seemed fair to assume that Mirziyoyev viewed reform as a source of danger rather than as a font of opportunity.

### **The Origins of Tashkent's Reform Push**

How should we explain this rapid turn of events? Let us first ask what precisely we seek to explain. The reforms to date are indeed remarkable. The Uzbek *som*, now convertible, has seen its value align with that of the former black market. This makes possible a myriad of global interactions—from finance to tourism to education—that would have been complex and risky otherwise. The Uzbek cotton industry is being reorganized, including a widely praised and radical [attempt](#) to eliminate forced labor, and its dominant social and economic role cut down to size. Uzbekistan has engaged in active [diplomacy](#) with its neighbors, bringing goodwill and the prospect for radically [reshaped](#) interstate interactions.

Yet, it is crucial that we calibrate appropriately. Given where Uzbekistan was in 2016, the most remarkable aspect of the reforms is that they started in the first place. The reality is that the reforms are partial and indeterminate. If we compare them *not* to the essential political stasis under Karimov but rather to the extent of possible reforms that

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<sup>2</sup> On the role of geography, see: Jeffrey S. Kopstein and David A. Reilly, "[Geographic Diffusion and the Transformation of the Postcommunist World](#)," *World Politics*, October 2000.

lie ahead, we see that many of the changes are “low-hanging fruit” that require neither much technical know-how nor a particularly thorough understanding of the complexities of policymaking. Thus, making the *som* convertible was notable for the political will required to enact it, but it was merely a first step toward integrating Uzbekistan’s economy into global flows. Similarly, declaring the elimination of child and other forced labor also required impressive determination, to the extent that it amounted to an admission that existing practices (that Mirziyoyev had presided over as prime minister) were morally and socially retrograde. But it was likewise the first step toward building a more humane, just, and free economy.

What made this choice for change possible? What permitted those with power and privilege (i.e., those with much to lose and apparently little to gain) to embrace top-down reform? While a full account will have to wait for future historians, we might ask: what enabled Mirziyoyev to view reform as an opportunity, rather than a threat? One of the central factors permitting such a shift was Western disengagement from the region. While the West typically views its involvement as promoting a reform agenda and therefore would expect its withdrawal to encourage authoritarian retrenchment, in fact in this instance Western disengagement helped to make reform a “safe” proposition for the Uzbek regime.

In one sense, the Uzbek elite already had little to fear. The system under Karimov had already decimated the political opposition, with myriad figures behind bars or in exile and the rest of the population deeply disinclined to engage politically. Scholarly literature on authoritarian responses to color revolutions suggests that regimes may resist reform, for fear that any political openings created during such a process could become uncontrollable. By contrast, in Uzbekistan to the moment of this writing, a fast-moving and capable Mirziyoyev has been able to remain far ahead of an erstwhile demobilized state and society. He could proceed unconcerned about whatever social forces might be unleashed.

But this was unlikely to be enough. It is worth remembering how much the geopolitical context has shifted in the past 7-10 years. Reacting to the color revolutions in the early 2000s and to the Arab uprisings and ensuing tumult in 2010-11, authoritarian leaders in the post-Soviet space had become hostile to even the whiff of reform. Since then, much has changed globally. Washington drew down its troop levels in Afghanistan from a peak of 100,000 in 2010 to fewer than 9,000 in 2018. Russia became far more assertive in foreign policy, invading and occupying parts of Ukraine in 2014, and from 2015 inserting itself actively into the Syrian civil war. For its part, China’s quiet expansion accelerated, with Beijing announcing its “One Belt, One Road” initiative in 2013 that facilitated massive lending to, building in, and trade with Central Asia.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> On China’s role, see: Marlene Laruelle and Sebastien Peyrouse, [\*The Chinese Question in Central Asia: Domestic Order, Social Change, and the Chinese Factor\*](#), Hurst Publishers, October 2012.

These geopolitical changes made reform a “thinkable” proposition. Thus, while in the past, Russia and China likely preferred a status quo Uzbekistan to avoid even the possibility of instability, today both great powers stand to benefit from increased openness in trade, especially if they enjoy privileged access to Uzbek markets and raw materials. Similarly, whereas in the past marketization assumed a transition to laissez-faire capitalism in its purer forms, today Tashkent need not fear that the state will lose its guiding role under a highly managed capitalism. Finally, whereas in the past, an economic transition presupposed a significant and simultaneous political transition to liberal democracy, today Tashkent may use the rhetoric of “democracy,” but there is no reason to believe that it seeks to create the kind of institutionalized political openness found in Western societies.

In the end, there is a deep irony that the West’s withdrawal opened a window for top-down change. After all, Western states and INGOs both dangle carrots and wield sticks precisely because they assume that they are indispensable for reform to occur. The Uzbek case suggests an alternative possibility – that a closed authoritarian regime could feel “safe” in the *absence* of Western involvement and therefore could seek to initiate change on its own.

### **How Far Will This Go?**

To date, Tashkent’s reforms appear to enjoy broad popular support, but reforms inevitably shift the political terrain, creating new “winners” and “losers.” If his long-term political survival and breakneck, top-down reform are any indication of his acumen, Mirziyoyev should serve ably and continue to push reforms for a long time. Yet, the skills that make one effective behind the scenes in an authoritarian context may differ from those that enable success in a relatively more liberal political milieu. We simply do not know how well Mirziyoyev will contend with the industrial groups, financial groups, foreign interests, industrial lobbies, regional elites, clan-based networks, and other political and economic formations that will inevitably mobilize their resources and their disparate ultimate visions to influence policy.

We also do not know how well Mirziyoyev will manage scandal. If the 1990s reforms elsewhere in the socialist bloc are any indication, we should not expect Tashkent’s top-down process to be free of relationships perceived to be corrupt and outcomes perceived to be fundamentally unjust. Perhaps Uzbekistan will escape such a fate, but in the event that a scandal were to implicate members of the presidential team, how would Mirziyoyev react? Would he scuttle the rest of the reform process to preserve power and privilege?

Finally, while there appears to be a new consensus—especially in Uzbekistan’s neighborhood but to a degree across the globe—on the desirability of “market authoritarianism,” we must not fall prey to assumptions about a new “end of history.”

Global politics has too many moving parts, and today's apparent consensus about market authoritarianism could easily erode if the economic performance of some of those states begins to flag. If that occurs, the pressures and opportunities emanating from Tashkent's neighbors will consequently shift.

In sum, Tashkent's reforms are impressive and surprising. Although they are unlikely to be reversed, nor are there guarantees of how far they will go. What will it take to ensure that the momentum continues?

### **Policy Recommendations**

Should the West simply get out of the way of Tashkent's initiatives? Most of the choices are in indeed Tashkent's hands,<sup>4</sup> but for the West, all of the foregoing leads to two "don't's" and two "do's."

First, the West must avoid politicizing Uzbekistan's reform progress. Borne of Tashkent's own initiative, these reforms will be seriously endangered if Western actors begin to threaten or to moralize. We know from much research that the United States in particular has immense symbolic power across the globe; if a domestic process in the public eye becomes associated—wrongly or rightly, for worse or for better—with the United States, it becomes politically charged. A politicized environment is one that will complicate efforts for effective reform.

Second, the West should not assume that Tashkent shares Western ideas about the ultimate endpoint for reforms. In conversations in February in Tashkent, I was deeply impressed with how much those in official and semi-official capacities sought to learn from Western examples. In this sense, reports of the death of the West's soft power are greatly exaggerated. At the same time, individuals were keen to emphasize that Uzbekistan's version of "democracy" is ultimately different from Western versions. To be sure, reform over the medium term is unlikely to result in democracy by most standard definitions of the term, but it will go further if the West remains pragmatic and keeps Uzbekistan in the proverbial driver's seat.

Because of this, the West should seek—without coercion or heavy-handed rhetoric—to engage its Central Asian counterparts, encourage reforms by stressing their value to Central Asia in particular, and enable reforms by providing know-how and financial support when requested. This means reiterating the value of, for example, meeting human rights obligations under international treaties that Uzbekistan has signed, without turning a blind eye to any such abuses committed by the West's "strategic partners." This means underscoring the benefit to Uzbekistan of a more open economy

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<sup>4</sup> For a perspective that emphasizes the agency of Central Asian regimes, see: Alexander Cooley, [\*Great Games, Local Rules: The New Power Contest in Central Asia\*](#), Oxford University Press, 2012.

and polity, without insisting that openness must bring preferential access or other palpable benefit to Western actors. This means sharing various Western experiences in specific policy areas and helping to make available knowledge to Uzbek counterparts, without assuming that the latter are passive recipients of Western wisdom or operate from a position of ignorance.

Second, the West should identify specific areas where its examples are not just instructive but in fact welcome in Tashkent. For example, many Western states have highly developed, effective, and efficient bureaucracies and could easily share their management and public administration know-how with Uzbek counterparts. With the United States in particular losing some of its allure as a destination for foreign students (particularly those from Muslim-majority countries), other Western states would be wise to [pursue opportunities](#) for educational exchange and training.<sup>5</sup> While there is nothing wrong (and perhaps much that would be welcome) with Uzbek students studying in Shanghai, St. Petersburg, or Singapore, we should not assume that Uzbeks have an inherent preference for non-democracies. In fact, conversations in February with university administrators and students confirmed their deep interest in spending time in the West. Finally, Western governments with effective social welfare provisions should make available their experiences in combining a robust capitalism with a basic moral commitment to human dignity. After all, Tashkent continually trumpets its obligation to produce morally sound public policy, and this is something to build upon rather than fight against.

## **Conclusion**

The Tashkent “spring” is real and has the potential to reshape not just Uzbekistan but the Central Asian region and much broader swathes of Eurasia. Now is the time for productive Western engagement in the region to ensure that these reforms maintain their momentum. Yet, it is important to carefully calibrate Western involvement to encourage and enable reforms while keeping Tashkent squarely in charge. A softer, more persistent touch than we typically saw Western states use in the 1990s and the 2000s is the best path toward the positive outcomes that the region so needs.

Uzbekistan’s semi-awakening is also not a trivial development for Western states. If it produces a prosperous, more open and globally integrated Uzbekistan, with better governance and good relations with its neighbors, it could become a welcome, positive model of development for states like Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran. Uzbekistan stands a fighting chance of becoming the standard-bearer of human development that Soviet authorities claimed it was during the socialist period. It is extremely early in the process and key challenges lie ahead, but the signs so far are deeply encouraging.

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<sup>5</sup> See: Sebastien Peyrouse, [“How to Strengthen Western Engagement in Central Asia: Spotlight on EU Education Assistance in Uzbekistan,”](#) PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 524, April 2018.

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