

THE INEXORABLE DRIVE FOR SOCIO-POLITICAL REFORMS IN UZBEKISTAN UNDER PRESIDENT MIRZIYOYEV: DRAWING SOME PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS

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Uzbekistan's reform agenda's fresh and rather sudden trajectory focusing on political and socio-economic development brought a welcome surprise to much of the international community in 2016. Newly elected President, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, rapidly initiated policies based upon the principles of pragmatism and transparency — a shift well received by foreign governments, international organizations, and citizens alike and viewed as a watershed change in a country largely closed to the outside world since independence was obtained in 1991. A new vision of what will define Uzbekistan for future generations emerged, new horizons that will bring long-sought-after potential and opportunities to its people.¹

President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's first significant step has been to abandon the system of governance in place for 25 years and put into place a five-year reform agenda — known as the Action Strategy², to ensure the development of Uzbekistan.

The Action Strategy seeks to ameliorate the challenges faced in our citizens' day-to-day lives through five principal avenues of growth in Uzbekistan: We seek the Government's better representation through a servant-leader model attuned to the grievances of all levels of Uzbek

¹ Political scientist Matthias Dornfeld's article "New image of Uzbekistan: openness and readiness for cooperation" https://berliner-telegraph.de/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Berliner-Telegraph_12.2020_2_printer_druck_compressed.pdf

² On the Action Strategy for the further development of the Republic of Uzbekistan <https://lex.uz/acts/-3107036> and <https://strategy.uz/index.php>

Society. We actively and transparently attempt innovative solutions to endemic issues facing Uzbekistan. We encourage effective dialogue with civil society institutions. We instill the inviolable importance of Human Rights in our Society.³ We work to engage other nations as peers through diplomatic exchange and provide international organizations a warm welcome to Uzbekistan. Through increased dialogue on a level playing field with other nations, we believe that a greater impetus for reform will prevail by forming a balanced system of cooperation and strategic partnerships.⁴

The initiative itself reflects the character of Shavkat Mirziyoyev's leadership style. From the very first days of his presidency, he took to the regions where he understood the most egregious issues facing the country reside. He demonstratively refused Potemkin village-style visits, where predetermined facilities and families await his arrival. He veered from "the route" and instead chose random streets, random mahallas to visit. To his security units' chagrin, he sought crowded places, the places where real people collected to conduct their day-to-day business. He boldly pressed among the crowds in bazaars, markets, shopping centers to listen to their grievances. He held impromptu discussions where he could see the legitimate issues of genuine people with his own eyes. From that discourse, he also sought to quickly resolve those issues, proving to people his intent to be held accountable.⁵

From those early interactions, he created an entirely new institution, perhaps in the history of the region — the Virtual and Peoples Receptions of the President — was established to serve the interests of the people, to

³ See also web site of The Permanent Mission of the Republic of Uzbekistan to the United Nations on "JUDICIAL AND LEGAL REFORM IN UZBEKISTAN: 10 IMPORTANT STEPS IN 2020" <https://www.un.int/uzbekistan/news/judicial-and-legal-reform-uzbekistan-10-important-steps-2020>

⁴ See also Caspian Policy Center's website on "Friendly Cooperation with Central Asian States – A Priority Direction of Uzbekistan's Foreign Policy" <https://www.caspianpolicy.org/friendly-cooperation-with-central-asian-states-a-priority-direction-of-uzbekistans-foreign-policy/>

⁵ Shavkat Mirziyoyev: I came to your mahalla to find out the real situation and alleviate people's suffering <https://president.uz/oz/lists/view/4142>

communicate directly with them, to identify and address the critical problems and needs of the population. These structures have now become a valuable metric for evaluating the effectiveness of the administration of public services. We can collect and measure local problems through this portal, identify the most pressing issues, and increase accountability among government agencies and public servants to Society. The People's Receptions provides direct communication with all regions, all districts, and all cities in the country, no matter how distant, no matter how small. Rapid resolution of local problems, reduction of shortcomings among government programs and services, protection of individuals and legal entities' rights and interests remain at the forefront of our efforts to provide this avenue for anonymous feedback.

A prime example of this program's success is that in 2017 the Virtual and Public Receptions received more than 1.4 million requests from individuals and legal entities to address various concerns. Beginning in 2019, the President's People's Receptions initiated a more proactive program through government employees approaching the aggrieved through grassroots, door-to-door engagement, thus attaching a face to problems they identify and then resolve.⁶ These figures remained about the same throughout 2020—with 1.2 million requests. As a result of information gleaned through the Presidential Virtual Reception and the President's People's Reception, 752 were either relieved of duty or prosecuted under Uzbekistan's laws.⁷ Furthermore, People's receptions are now authorized to audit government agencies' activities, provide recommendations, and propose disciplinary action — to include the dismissal of officials who violate the law.

⁶ On measures to further improve the system of dealing with population problems
<https://lex.uz/docs/4166958>

⁷ How many applications were received by the Presidential People's Reception in 2020?
<https://yuz.uz/news/2020-yilda-prezident-xalq-qabulxonalariga-1-milliondan-ortiq-murojaat-kelib-tushgan>

Meanwhile, over the past couple of years, government agencies have also established their virtual portals to receive appeals, applications, and complaints from citizens affected by their activities. This development allows them to respond to issues promptly, but it also provides accountability within their organization. Officials at all levels now take the same grassroots approach to governance — work among their constituents so that they can identify early shortcomings in their organization. Thus, we believe this innovative system will improve the quality of life among the citizens of Uzbekistan. It also allows them to understand the effects of reform on the people and, on this basis, adjust their activities accordingly.⁸

Furthermore, Uzbekistan has formed a series of ongoing public group councils who receive the President's administration members to air any issues. From heads of ministries to individual departments, from governors of regions to mayors of cities and districts, from the capitol to the outlying regions, these receptions in 2020 alone numbered 19,000. In total, this effort resolved 124,000 issues, affecting 120,000 people.⁹

Reforms in Uzbekistan have now meant that leadership each designates an issue of particular concern as the focus for that year's Action Strategy. Policies are then formed within the State Program to confront those issue/s. We must note that problems raised by the population form the basis of that year's reform agenda. We review not only the feedback provided directly through the virtual portal but also from civil society institutions, non-governmental organizations, and critical media and social media networks. We then submit the suggested project for public discussion. Only after considering the viewpoints, suggestions, and

⁸ Websites of government bodies https://gov.uz/uz/pages/government_sites

⁹ The appeals and proposals submitted to the public receptions serve as the basis for main projects and programs. New Uzbekistan newspaper, January 5, 2021, issue №2.

<http://online.anyflip.com/brpug/atkd/mobile/index.html>

recommendations from average citizens and local and international experts alike do we adopt and implement the final program.¹⁰

With special pride, we note that the international community recognizes a renewed Uzbekistan: the development of the peoples' constitutional right to freedom of thought, speech, and religion, and the right to seek and impart information have advanced considerably over the past four years.¹¹ The President has insisted that we open previously 'closed doors' on public administrative bodies' activities. As a result of this transparency, an 'open space' has emerged for the population to, without fear of retribution, air their grievances on the day's critical issues.¹² The Head-of-State himself regularly peruses social media networks, national and foreign media, and other information platforms to remain mindful of the public concerns that face the Society he has a hand in shaping.

Over the past four years, social media remained the bedrock of accountability in Uzbekistan. Problems faced by Society, notably corruption or malfeasance by public servants, are depicted on dozens of social media channels, and it is not uncommon for those posts to lead to disciplinary actions or dismissal of that official.¹³

Radical change to an authoritarian political system presents many challenges. To affect change, the increased engagement by a once dormant political elite, the practice of democratic principles, and the creation of a positive image of the state through a complete reform of its public administration are essential. History provides us many inspiring

¹⁰ Conclusions in figures: Public discussions of the draft State Program <https://strategy.uz/index.php?news=119&lang=uz>

¹¹ Freedom of speech goes hand in hand with issues of sustainable development. <https://yuz.uz/news/soz-erkinligi-barqaror-taragqiyot-masalalariga-hamnafas>

¹² Justice Minister: Some officials do not like those who demand, criticize, videotape the issue and make it public. <https://uza.uz/uz/posts/adliya-vaziri-ayrim-mansabdorlar-a-ini-talab-ilgan-tan-id-il-19-06-2020>

¹³ Our people need gas, and many of them are paying for it honestly and on time - Shavkat Mirziyoyev. <https://review.uz/oz/post/xalqimizga-gaz-kerak-ularning-kopchiligi-buning-uchun-tolovlarni-oz-vaqtida-halol-qilib-tolab-kelmogda-shavkat-mirziyoyev>

models where these elements came together to actualize the actual development of a nation. These examples have also compelled Shavkat Mirziyoyev to demonstrate the necessary leadership to alter the rigid views of officials and the general public.

Admittedly, there has been slow progress among the political elite to answer the call to the President's demand for them to evolve past outdated modes of governance, not to mention for them to pay heed to the methods and styles of leadership exhibited by the global community. Of course, this leadership gap speaks to the challenges we face in developing mature public servants to fit the bill of what we require. Therefore, in some cases, we must openly admit that we have faced setbacks in implementing reforms.

As a response to such active and passive resistance, we have implemented policies to assure that officials will not attempt to undermine this new stage reform by holding them legally responsible for the neglect of duty or malfeasance. We adhere to strict program management norms to assure the timely implementation of laws and other normative legal acts adopted for the state's welfare and development. In particular, ministers, governors, and other leaders who "do not pull their carts" are held accountable by the head of state — often in a public forum to maintain transparency.¹⁴

In recent years we have seen the rise of greater checks and balances between the Oliy Majlis (Parliament) and the executive branch of Government. Oliy Majlis now exercises a stronger voice on foreign and domestic policy, thus assuring our reform agenda's success. One notable change has been the codification of procedures to approve candidates appointed to government positions by the Legislative Chamber of Oliy Majlis and through the President's endorsement.

¹⁴ How many applications were received by the Presidential People's Reception in 2020?
<https://yuz.uz/news/2020-yilda-prezident-xalq-qabulxonalariga-1-milliondan-ortiq-murojaat-kelib-tushgan>

Furthermore, those public servants responsible for the Action Plan that falls within their purview must present regular status reports to both the Oliy Majlis chambers and the relevant committees, providing ongoing updates on their progress. On a regional level, heads of regional, district, and city government agencies also receive approval through the corresponding Councils of People's Deputies, also demonstrating the same accountability measures every quarter as mentioned above at the national level.¹⁵

In building a new Uzbekistan, one can observe an entirely new approach to inter-religious and inter-confessional tolerance. At present, there are a total of 2,281 religious organizations and 16 religious denominations in Uzbekistan. There are 2,097 Muslim, 167 Christian organizations, 8 Jewish communities, six Baha'i societies, 1 Krishna community, a Buddhist temple, and the Inter-confessional Bible Society of Uzbekistan.¹⁶ The culmination of this trend towards the freedom of religion was adopting a special resolution now known as "Enlightenment and Religious Tolerance" promulgated by President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, September 2017 at the 72nd session of the UN General Assembly.

All UN member states unanimously supported the Republic of Uzbekistan's draft document during the plenary session of the UN General Assembly on December 12, 2018.¹⁷ The resolution called for access to education for all, thus putting us well on the path to eliminating illiteracy and furthering capacity building through education. The document also called for a society built upon "tolerance and mutual respect, religious freedom, and protection of the rights for the adherents of all faiths against discrimination."¹⁸

¹⁵ Summary 2019: The role of the chambers of the Oliy Majlis and political parties has been further strengthened. <https://strategy.uz/index.php?news=769>

¹⁶ The list of religious organizations. <https://religions.uz/pages/view?id=68>

¹⁷ Religious tolerance in Uzbekistan <https://strategy.uz/index.php?news=1014>

¹⁸ The UN General Assembly adopted a resolution developed by Uzbekistan.

<https://www.gazeta.uz/uz/2018/12/%2013/bmt-rezolyutsiya>

Uzbekistan currently boasts several educational institutions dedicated to the study of religion: The International Islamic Academy of Uzbekistan, Tashkent Islamic Institute named after Imam Bukhari, Mir Arab Madrasa, School of Hadith Studies, ten madrassas, including two dedicated to women's education, Tashkent Russian Orthodox Seminary, and the Tashkent Christian Seminary. The first four of these institutions are accredited Institutions of Higher Education.¹⁹

We currently have under development the Center of Islamic Civilization in Tashkent, where we envision a multi-purpose institution that will form an accredited educational institution dedicated to the scholarly study of Islam. We will bring together a fund of mixed-media holdings, most notably: a library that holds archival materials comprised of ancient manuscripts, lithographs surveying the broad range of scientific and religious schools, archeological pieces from the region, as well as an array of digital media providing increased accessibility to all of those interested.

The Center's overarching theme will be to understand further the broad survey of great thinkers and scholars who form Uzbekistan's rich heritage. We hope to host events in a 300-seat conference hall where local scholars can better interface with the international community, thus enriching our intellectual exchange.

In tandem with the Center's creation has been the reconceptualization of methods to counter religious extremism and terrorism in Uzbekistan. Our primary focus now pivots towards active engagement with at-risk communities while raising awareness of extremist views' dangers among our citizens. We base our core philosophy on the noble value of "Enlightenment against Ignorance." Most noteworthy, in September 2018, we released from criminal liability citizens of the Republic of Uzbekistan we lost to the false promises of terrorism, extremism, and membership in banned organizations and groups. According to the guiding document, citizens who had previously strayed from the right path, and demonstrated

¹⁹ Religious tolerance in Uzbekistan. <https://strategy.uz/index.php?news=1014>

sincere repentance for their actions, were provided with the opportunity to return to their families as long as they fulfilled the spiritual and moral obligations demanded by Society.²⁰ The first step in the deradicalization of individuals caught within the web of religious extremist movements is granting them amnesty.

Under the personal initiative of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, the plan for humanitarian habilitation known as "Mehr," or Mercy, has four stages. This process has brought verifiable proof that such a program can play a significant role in healing a painful aspect of Uzbekistan's Civil Society. Our deradicalization framework has so far brought life-altering change to hundreds of Uzbek citizens, including women and children, who went abroad under the false allure of foreign ideas. Many lost spouses or parents to tragedy and remained alone in the world. We managed to repatriate them to their homeland through humanitarian flights from Afghanistan and Syria. Our data shows that from Syria, we returned 220 individuals in 2019 and 98 in 2020. From Afghanistan, we returned 24 individuals in 2021.²¹

Every effort has been made in welcoming our citizens home. We have provided significant support in making sure they return to a healthy and peaceful life while adapting to a new environment. In addition to reissuing them new passports, birth certificates, and other necessary documents—often taken from them when trafficked abroad — we give them every opportunity to build a new life for themselves. Many of these victims have been lost to inhospitable environments, undergoing constant existential crises, often for years, that many of us, who take our lives for granted, would find unimaginable. We seek through Mehr to help them recover their

²⁰ Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan No. PF-5542 "On improving the procedure for exemption from criminal liability of citizens of the Republic of Uzbekistan who has lost their way in the structure of terrorist, extremist or other prohibited organizations and groups".

<https://lex.uz/docs/3911773>

²¹ As part of Operation Mehr-3, 98 women and children were brought from Syria

https://www.uza.uz/uz/posts/mehr-3-operaciyasi-doirasida-suriyadan-98-nafar-yurtdoshimiz-ayollar-va-bolalar-olib-kelindi_192694; Operation Mehr-4 <https://iiv.uz/uz/news/mehr-4-operatsiyasi>

health in well-equipped facilities, with all the amenities to a stable life. Professional specialists provide medical care and support for mental health issues. Children are placed in preschools, secondary schools, while women are provided with employment.

At the same time, several international human rights organizations have welcomed and applauded the release of dozens of political prisoners²² over the past four years and the presidential decree to close the Jaslyk colony in Karakalpakstan, a place of extreme cruelty.²³

In turn, we must note that those imprisoned, pardoned, and released for political and religious motives receive the necessary assistance from the state to regain their former lives. We work with them on a routine basis to ensure their transition back into a life of freedom.²⁴

Of course, the fundamental value underpinning these policies is renewing the public's interest in civic ownership. We must form among them the sense that they hold the impetus for change in their Society. Through engaging citizens in public discourse, through effective cooperation between Government and public organizations, we hope to form a vibrant civil society in the new Uzbekistan, thus assuring our reforms' effectiveness. We also emphasize the development of the ethic of civic ownership as a means to create a symbiosis between non-governmental organizations and the citizens they serve. We hope to strengthen our citizens' engagement on all issues both within the personal and public domains. We seek to improve the mechanisms between public and private partnerships. Through these aims, we hope to establish a systematic

²² Uzbekistan 2018 Human Rights Report https://uz.usembassy.gov/uz/country-reports-on-human-rights-practices-for-2018-uzbekistan-uz/?_ga=2.20542129.845036367.1614850533-1761186197.1614850533

²³ Uzbekistan 2019 Human Rights Report <https://uz.usembassy.gov/uz/2019-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices-uzbekistan-uz/>

²⁴ Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan No. PF-5542 "On improving the procedure for exemption from criminal liability of citizens of the Republic of Uzbekistan who has lost their way in the structure of terrorist, extremist or other prohibited organizations and groups". <https://lex.uz/docs/3911773>

dialogue between civil and social institutions. We believe in the idea that Society should be the initiator and impetus of reforms in Uzbekistan.

Admittedly, although there are currently approximately 10,000 non-governmental and non-profit organizations in Uzbekistan,²⁵ most of them have not found their place and role in Society — their activities have shown little success. Many of these organizations, whose purpose is to assure citizen participation in the reform process through self-governing civil society bodies, including the media, are sorely lacking in modern methodology and standards. In particular, most civil society institutions hold the legal authority to public hearings related to government agencies' activities and their associated government officials yet rarely practice this norm.²⁶

It is well known that we support the development of infrastructure to strengthen NGOs in the capitols and the regions — including building home offices to house these independent organizations responsible for building Civil Society. We offer technical assistance and training to gain the necessary legal expertise to compete in national and international grant competitions. We facilitate contact between our local NGOs and international organizations to further the aims of their charter. NGOs serve to balance the values of equality, mutual responsibility, and accountability between individuals, Society, and the state, thus determining the quality of social justice in our nation. We are and will do everything in our power to assure their success.

As a result of these measures, the activities of civil society institutions are slowly growing. We should note that last year, in the context of the pandemic, the work carried out by NGOs in the fight against the

²⁵ Portal of NGOs of the Ministry of Justice. <http://e-ngo.uz/>

²⁶ On the support of NGOs in the state program... https://uza.uz/uz/posts/davlat-dasturida-nntlarni-gollab-quvvatlash-xususida_240877

coronavirus through charity and public assistance campaigns had a direct impact on the health of our citizens.²⁷

Uzbekistan is systematically working to implement the international standards and obligations that guide the protection of Human Rights—a significant focus of our legislative branch is to intensify cooperation with international human rights organizations. Uzbekistan is now party to more than 80 international human rights instruments, including six major United Nations treaties and four optional protocols. We regularly submit implementation reports to the UN Human Rights Council and treaty committees.

At the same time, our adoption of a long-term strategy on Human Rights will contribute to the effective development and implementation of state policies surrounding this critical area of development. The fundamental ethic of Human Rights and freedoms, the further strengthening of the country's image in the international arena remains a core aim of our reform agenda.²⁸

At the same time, in the context of the world's complex geopolitical framework, the coronavirus pandemic, and the global economic crisis, Uzbekistan is actively pursuing an open and pragmatic foreign policy. As a result of these solid efforts to gain credibility in the international arena, Uzbekistan was elected a UN Human Rights Council member for the first time in its history. The U.S. State Department's removal of Uzbekistan from the list of "countries under special surveillance" in the field of religious freedom is also a recognition of large-scale democratic reforms.²⁹

²⁷ During the pandemic, the Generosity and Support Fund distributed about 105 billion soums in cash to needy families <https://obfm.uz/uz/news/2020/09/22/pandemiya-davrida-saxovat-va-komak-jamgarmasi-ehtiyojmand-oilalarga-qariyb-105-milliard-som-naqd-pul-targatdi>

²⁸ Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan "On approval of the National Strategy of the Republic of Uzbekistan on human rights". <https://lex.uz/docs/-4872355>

²⁹ In the Address of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev to the Oliy Majlis <http://www.uzbekembassy.in>

Positive developments in the fight against forced labor in Uzbekistan began in 2018. The Government has strengthened its resolve to reverse the long-held practice of forced labor. Accordingly, the Ministry of Employment and Labor Relations has launched a hotline 200-06-01 and a special telegram bot network @mehnathuquqbot, which protects citizens' labor rights.³⁰

As a result of implementing preventive and organizational measures to combat human trafficking and forced labor, in 2019, crimes related to human trafficking decreased by 22%. We imposed administrative fines on 259 traffickers and 56 officials who withheld salaries while maintaining poor working conditions.³¹

Without a doubt, along with the achievements in ensuring Uzbekistan's reforms' effectiveness, we still face many decades-long challenges. Many issues still need to be addressed. We will confront them and mitigate them step-by-step, and, as President Mirziyoyev stated, the democratic process will not go back.

With this in mind, we intend to build upon the fundamental values and ideas that Uzbekistan will engage in a democratic process where we uphold a form of Government that operates through the "... consent of the People ". We will seek to build a Government that serves the People, not the People as servants of the Government. We seek to instill in our public servants a model of "servant leadership" to actualize an immediate, positive change in their daily lives—not tomorrow, not some distant future, or as some unrealized hope, but today. These values are of particular importance to

³⁰ Malaysia wants to study Uzbekistan's experience in eliminating forced labor and child labor. <https://mehnat.uz/uz/news/malayziya-uzbekistonning-mazhburiy-mehnat-va-bolalar-mehnatiga-barham-berish-buyicha-tazhribasini-urganmoqchi#>

³¹ A meeting of the National Commission for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings and Forced Labor was held <https://www.gazeta.uz/uz/2020/06/17/human-trafficking/>

us. They guide us towards a full realization of human rights and freedoms in the country.³²

³² Shavkat Mirziyoyev: Our brave and courageous people have always been loyal to the path of independence they have chosen. <https://president.uz/uz/lists/view/2845>