

Uzbekistan President Islam Karimov dies

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Uzbekistan President Islam Abduganiyevich Karimov, one of the longest-standing ex-Soviet heads of state, died on Friday, September 2 at the age of 78. Under the constitution, Nigmatilla Yuldashev, head of the upper house of parliament, was to become the acting president until elections are held. However, on Thursday, Yuldashev declined to assume the office, allowing Prime Minister Shavkat Mirziyoyev to take over instead.

According to Russian media outlet *IA Regnum*, Yuldashev explained his decision to step down by saying that he “does not have sufficient experience in managing a state, and it would be better to consider the question of the candidacy of the country’s Prime Minister Mirziyoyev in the interests of the people.” A unanimous vote of both houses of parliament approved Mirziyoyev’s appointment, and members of all parliamentary political parties spoke out in favor of him.

Elections are to be held within three months. A Facebook page on the election campaign indicates three candidates: Mirziyoyev, Yuldashev, and Deputy Prime Minister Rustam Azimov.

Uzbekistan, a former Soviet republic, borders on Afghanistan and is located between China and the Caspian Sea. The Central Asia–China gas pipeline, which supplies China from Turkmenistan, passes through it. Because of its geostrategic location, the country also has the potential, if the necessary infrastructure is built, to supply gas to Europe and thereby reduce the region’s dependence on Russian supplies.

On September 2, both US President Barack Obama and Russian President Vladimir Putin issued statements on Karimov’s death. Obama’s remarks conspicuously lack the word “condolences” or any other vocabulary ordinarily associated with mourning, instead asserting that the “United States reaffirms its support for the people of Uzbekistan.”

United States Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Central Asia Daniel Rosenblum visited Uzbekistan on September 5, but, according to press reports, met only with his counterparts at the Uzbekistan Ministry of

Foreign Affairs, including Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Komilov.

Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev attended Karimov’s funeral on Saturday. Putin went to Samarkand and laid a bouquet of roses on the dead autocrat’s grave on September 6. While there, he met with Mirziyoyev, prior to the announcement of Mirziyoyev’s appointment as president.

Karimov was an emblematic representative of the corrupt Soviet bureaucracy, which utilized its position during the restoration of capitalism to acquire vast power and privileges in the post-Soviet world. Presiding over an impoverished society in which the World Bank estimated in 2010 that less than half of the working-age population was employed, Karimov maintained his rule with the use of brute force and by maneuvering between the United States and Russia.

Having begun his career as a design engineer, he eventually became an economic policy bureaucrat, serving as the republic’s finance minister in 1983, chairman of the Uzbek state planning agency in 1986, and First Secretary of the Uzbekistan Communist Party Central Committee in 1989.

In 1990, the Supreme Soviet of the Uzbek SSR elected Karimov as its first President. After initially speaking out against the proposed dissolution of the Soviet Union, in August 1991 he declared Uzbek independence. Soon afterwards, the Uzbekistan Communist Party broke away from the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and reestablished itself as the People’s Democratic Party of Uzbekistan, of which Karimov became chairman.

Shortly thereafter he vastly expanded Uzbekistan’s security services, as part of the consolidation of his political power. Having pardoned a whole number of Uzbek officials convicted of corruption in the 1980s, he was able to solidify his relations with powerful regional clans that function as a sort of unofficial aristocracy in the country.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union on December 26, 1991 and the holding of national elections three days

later, Karimov worked to destroy his political opponents. On January 16, he ordered security forces to fire upon an opposition demonstration called in support of Karimov's rival in the recent elections, the poet Muhammad Salih. Since then, the Uzbekistan government has prevented the emergence of any lawful challenger, although there remain powerful local clans as well as religious organizations in the country that have a long and complicated history of relations with the government. Over the course of his rule, Karimov was reelected on numerous occasions with super-majorities in elections determined to be undemocratic by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

In 2001, Karimov became a key participant in Washington's "War on Terror." His ongoing campaign against Islamic fundamentalism in Uzbekistan was the basis of a budding relationship between his government and the White House. A permanent United States military base, which was used for operations in neighboring Afghanistan, was established in Karshi-Khanabad. It hosted over 1,500 US troops.

In 2005, however, Karimov executed a turn in Uzbekistan's foreign policy. In May of that year, a protest erupted in the city of Andijan, located in the country's east. The government squelched the demonstration with violence, resulting in deaths ranging in estimate from 187 to 1,500. Initially blaming the unrest on Islamic fundamentalists, Tashkent identified a relationship between the Andijan protests and the US-sponsored "color revolutions" that had recently brought down governments in Georgia, Ukraine, and neighboring Kyrgyzstan.

Shifting its orientation more towards Moscow, Karimov's government demanded that the US close its base in Karshi-Khanabad within 180 days. Uzbekistan expanded its participation in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), established by Russia, China, and four of the Central Asian states in 2001. The country also expanded its economic ties with Russia, including the signing of deals with Russian energy giants Gazprom and Lukoil for the development of oil and gas reserves located on the Ustyurt Plateau.

In January 2006, Uzbekistan became a member of the Eurasian Economic Community (EAEC), a regional organization of ex-Soviet states aimed at economic integration, in which Russia played the leading role. In June of the same year, the country rejoined the Russia-dominated military alliance of post-Soviet states, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which it

had left in 1999.

In response, Western governments and their supporters intensified their hypocritical denunciations of human rights violations in Uzbekistan. The European Union (EU) imposed sanctions on the country.

Despite the Uzbekistan government's efforts to restrict public access to information, reports by Human Rights Watch, the UN Human Rights Council, and other nongovernmental organizations have exposed systematic torture by police and security forces in Uzbekistan, the virtual ban on oppositional political organizations, official and unofficial media censorship, restrictions on religious freedoms, harassment and intimidation of human rights activists, child labor, and compulsory labor. According to the reports, all of this was going on long before 2005—that is, when Tashkent was in alliance with Washington.

With the election of US President Obama and the partial lifting of EU sanctions in autumn 2008, Karimov rebalanced his foreign policy orientation back toward the United States. Uzbekistan left the EAEC and once again became a transit point for NATO materiel into Afghanistan. Karimov refused to ratify the treaty establishing the CSTO's Collective Rapid Reaction Forces in June 2009, and the country left the CSTO a second time in 2012.

Still, the United States has yet to reestablish a military base in Uzbekistan. Nor did Karimov's government support the ongoing US-led information and economic war against Russia. As a new leadership takes shape, that government's attitude toward the US-Russia standoff will attract heightened attention.



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