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Karimov's Dilemma

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Scientists look for ways to prolong life; rulers of some countries seek ways to extend their power. As yet, scientists haven’t found any truly effective ways to prolong life, nor have dictators found a way to prolong their rule. Since these two are interdependent, finding an elixir of eternal life is the key to the rulers’ dilemma. In both pre- and post-independence Uzbekistan, rulers strove for both, but death always stood in their way. In Soviet Uzbekistan, leaders usually stayed in power until a higher authority or death removed them. History is repeating itself once again.

Islam Karimov was put in power in 1989 by then USSR President Mikhail Gorbachev. Since Gorbachev left power, Boris Yel’tsin, the first President of Russia, has had the courage to step down; Georgia’s President Eduard Shevardnadze has permitted Mikheil Saakashvili peacefully to take over the country’s leadership; Askar Akayev, Kyrgyzstan’s long-time ruler, resigned rather than spill his own people’s blood when thousands of demonstrators demanded his resignation; and death removed Turkmenistan’s President-for-life Saparmurat Niyazov from the scene. But Uzbekistan’s President Islam Karimov has continued to prolong his hold on power.

1995 was the first time Karimov’s hold was extended, when a national referendum prolonged his presidency for an additional five years; the second time occurred in 2002, when a second referendum changed the presidential term of office from five to seven years, thus giving Karimov an extra two years in power. The parliament’s decision to hold the next elections on December 23, 2007, instead of in January 2007 (when
Karimov’s seven year term officially was supposed to end) added one additional year to his presidency. So all in all, by the end of 2007, Islam Karimov will have ruled eight years beyond the period allowed by the Constitution. However, even the legality of his two regular presidential terms could be questioned, due to his tight grip on the country and his control over the judicial and legislative systems. Uzbekistan’s first presidential elections were followed by student unrest in Tashkent in 1992 and Karimov’s only opponent, Muhammad Salih, was forced to depart the country. During the second presidential elections, Karimov’s only opponent, Abdulhafiz Jalolov, announced on camera at the ballot-box that he was giving his vote to the incumbent president, thereby ignoring the will of the nearly five percent (according to official figures) of the electorate that voted for Jalolov.

December 23 is approaching fast, but in Uzbekistan there are no preparations for the ballot or an election campaign. Although the parliament set the date for elections in 2002, people still are not sure that they will actually take place. Everyone is humbly awaiting Karimov’s announcement or even a mention of the next ballot. Karimov’s words weigh heavier than laws in Uzbekistan. For any other politician even to hint at the possibility of elections would be taken as a challenge to Karimov’s legitimacy.

In some of the countries with which Uzbekistan has love-hate relationships, such as the US and Russia, public discussion of elections is normal. In the United States, which turned from a strategic friend into a foe of Uzbekistan, no one questions the possibility of elections or their date; they just happen. Scores of candidates have begun their campaign almost two years prior to the next US presidential elections. It is odd that the head of the mightiest country in the world is not the mightiest man in the country; on the contrary, the head of the one of the poorest countries is more powerful than President Bush.

In less democratic Russia, which replaced the United States as Uzbekistan’s strategic ally, it is perfectly acceptable to ask President Vladimir Putin two years before the elections whether or not he plans to remain in office. He won’t run from the question,
although his answer should not be taken seriously. He may change his mind at any time.

In Uzbekistan, no one knows when the elections will take place and no one dares to ask. As Russian journalist Arkadiy Dubnov says, Uzbekistan is experiencing a constitutional crisis. (1) The law simultaneously forbids and allows Karimov to remain in power. It sets the presidential term at a period of seven years, which was to end in January 2007, and at the same time allows an outgoing president to remain in office until a new one is elected and sworn in. No branch of the government can fix this irregularity because even the lawmakers’ position is shaky: they can’t impeach the president – the Constitution makes no provision for it – but the president can dissolve parliament. In a country that is rated among the worst human rights abusers by Freedom House, the US Department of State, the European Union and several other international human rights organizations, and where torture was recorded as systemic by the UN Rapporteur on Torture, losing a deputy’s mandate is the least painful option.

Many in Uzbekistan are waiting for new elections in the hope that they will bring change to a country where, in the absence of foreign investments, the economy is producing nothing but inflation statistics; the population is getting poorer; hundreds of thousands of men are forced to migrate to Russia, Kazakhstan or other countries in hope of finding a better job and a better life; and devout Muslims, independent journalists and political activists are persecuted. Elections are awaited eagerly outside of Uzbekistan, as well. The United States, the European Union, and many international organizations and companies see them as an opportunity to normalize their relations with Uzbekistan under a new leadership.

But the main question is not what the elections will bring, but, to repeat, whether elections will ever take place. Only one man holds the answer to this question: Islam Karimov.
Meanwhile, we can only speculate about various existing scenarios. He can’t use economic development and inflated government figures as an indication of the effectiveness of his rule or as a justification to govern longer - economically, Uzbekistan is far behind neighboring Kazakhstan, although the official figures do not reflect reality. Nor can Karimov use the notion that he is a just ruler in order to prolong his presidency. His ruthless policy against his own people, culminating in the May 2005 massacre of nearly a thousand people in Andijan is well-known. Karimov also cannot use the justification that he has protected the country from a civil war and from religious radicalism. Even the economies of neighboring post-civil war Tajikistan and post-Taliban Afghanistan are growing at a more rapid pace than Uzbekistan’s. Nonetheless, Karimov will try to stay in power. Arkadiy Dubnov says that Karimov can’t imagine someone else ruling the country or being president. (2)

Let us consider some of Karimov’s options, including what his best strategy for exiting the presidency might be (although what is best for Karimov is not always best for Uzbekistan):

1) Karimov holds another referendum and amends the constitution to allow himself a third term as president, thus prolonging his power for another seven years. He will be criticized for that in the West, but when hasn’t he been criticized? The Uzbek people won’t protest; they are used to Karimov’s political maneuverings and expect nothing less. After the brutal suppression of the Andijan protest, which had no political or religious agenda, the Uzbek people have no stomach for another mass protest. Mironov in Russia and politicians in some regions are lobbying for Putin’s third term. If their strategy works and Putin “accepts the people’s will” and changes Russia’s constitution, it will give Karimov an excuse to do the same and/or to allow the Uzbek parliament to “persuade” him to remain in office for a third term. This would save Karimov from at least some criticism, since it would establish a precedent for him. So it may be that Karimov is waiting to see what happens in Russia’s succession process before he makes his move.
2) Karimov reforms the power structure of the government and diminishes the power of the president. He installs a loyal supporter as president and himself becomes either Prime Minister or Senate Chairman, with greater authority than the new president.

3) Karimov puts his daughter, Gulnara Karimova, who turns 35 this year (this is the minimum age requirement for the presidency established in Uzbekistan’s constitution), in charge of the country, just as late President Geydar Aliyev of Azerbaijan made his son Ilkham his successor. The presidential elections will be criticized, but the possibility of replacing Karimov with a young female president may be exciting and promising to some in the West and may help to soften their criticism. Whether or not Karimov can convince the elite to accept such a scenario is another matter.

4) Karimov chooses to follow the “Yel’tsin/Putin scenario,” according to which he retires and installs someone with strong leadership skills and loyalty to himself in the presidency. As many analysts have pointed out and as reality shows, Karimov has trust issues. It is highly unlikely that he would grant someone else so much power and undertake the risk that his successor might slip out from under his control.

When considering all these and other scenarios, it is important to keep in mind Karimov’s main motives. They are the same as every authoritarian ruler’s: security guarantees for himself and his family, immunity from prosecution, certain powers and the safety of his and his family’s wealth.

Which scenario can best provide these results for Karimov? Which scenario is likely to take place and which scenario would make the most sense for Karimov and his family?

Most likely he will stay in power, because there is no need for him to step down: there is no pressure for him to do so from inside the country, so why should he rely on an “Uzbek Putin” to keep his promise to Karimov, once he has been handed full control of the country? From outside Uzbekistan, Karimov doesn’t have any pressure to step down either: the absence of normal relations with the United States and the European
Union shields him, just as Turkmenistan’s neutrality guarded Niyazov from outside criticism.

In a BBC interview, Rafik Sayfullin, a well-known Uzbek political scientist related to the Karimov regime, advocates Karimov’s stay in power: “He needs to finish grand projects he started himself…they take time,” says Sayfullin. (3) The Uzbek expert also tries to justify a prolongation of Karimov’s stay in power with references to the practices of other Central Asian leaders like Imomali Rakhmonov of Tajikistan and the late Saparmurat Niyazov of Turkmenistan, both of whom extended their presidencies. In 2004, a handful of Uzbek parliament deputies called for giving Karimov a life-time presidency, however, the president himself modestly turned down the initiative.

In a recent article for a major state newspaper in Uzbekistan, Sayfullin spoke in favor of improving relations with the West. He reiterated Tashkent’s desire for détente in the BBC interview, (4) as well, even though the Uzbek government has shown no real signs of rapprochement with the West, continuing its persecution of NGO leaders, independent journalists and human rights activists. But even if Karimov does want better relations with the West, he would probably use détente mainly to lessen criticism of—or perhaps for the West to ignore altogether—his decision to prolong his rule.

Why shouldn’t Karimov stay?

The sudden death of President Niyazov of Turkmenistan in December 2006 should have been a signal to Karimov that even life-time billionaire presidents can’t avoid fate. Niyazov’s death, however, did not affect his family’s security because they have been living apart for some time – his wife and daughter are in London and his son is somewhere in Europe. Like Stalin, Niyazov wasn’t attached to his family. President Karimov, on the contrary, has two daughters and two grandchildren (one named after himself) and cares very much about his family, their future and their financial stability. Therefore, it is in his interest to plan his departure in such a way that the security and wealth of his family are protected. Gulnara Karimova allegedly has taken over major
businesses in Uzbekistan that were previously controlled by members of the elite and
the mafia.

A new leader, even one handpicked by Karimov, at some point might be tempted to
break ties with the latter, in order to improve his international image and legitimacy.
Although Karimov might not face Saddam Hussein’s or Nicolae Ceausescu’s fate, even
for his brutal suppression of the Andijan demonstration in May 2005, or for allowing his
daughter to violate the status-quo, such as it was, in Uzbekistan’s business world,
nevertheless he might not feel secure in his own country.

Karimov’s clinging to power at any cost may cause his image as the first president of
Uzbekistan to deteriorate even further in the eyes of history, but how many leaders take
the long view? How many leaders of authoritarian regimes are concerned about the
question of how history will judge them? Islam Karimov is not like Kyrgyzstan’s former
president Askar Akayev or Georgia’s ex-leader Eduard Shevardnadze, who refrained
from using force against their own people, even when their personal power was at
stake. Karimov is not even very similar to Kazakhstan’s President Nursultan Nazarbaev,
whose multi-vectored foreign policy and successful economic reform have earned him a
greater degree of respect overseas, as well as inside his own country. Nor is Karimov
like Azerbaijan’s late president Geydar Aliyev; he doesn’t have a son to replace him. His
eldest daughter, Gulnara Karimova, may be his only hope.

However, most regional experts do not count her as a potential candidate, because she
is a young female who has not been active in politics. Alexei Malashenko of the Moscow
Center of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace says Karimov should have
begun preparing the country for her presidency years ago. He gives the example of
Azerbaijan, where the late Geydar Aliyev named his son, Ilkham, as his successor two
years before his own death. In any case, in a country that has conservative views on
women’s position in society, Uzbekistan’s elite would not tolerate a female boss. (5)
The Soviet history books used to praise Uzbekistan for its transition from feudalism to socialism – skipping capitalism. With the Soviet Union and socialism gone, but political reform still at a halt, and with a centrally managed economy and uncertainty over what system Uzbekistan is in now, it is obvious that some elements of feudalism have returned. Such a system has produced only a few female leaders, and even they have held nominal positions. Besides, as some observers note, Gulnara Karimova has not given her father sufficient reason for him to want to make her a president. She has been behind some business projects, started a cultural and youth forum and also has recorded a pop music cd. Apart from a little diplomatic experience in the Consulate-General in New York and at the Uzbek embassy in Moscow, she has no political experience, unlike the Kazakh president’s eldest daughter, Dariga, who, in 2004 formed her own political party, which then merged with the president’s “Otan” party two years later. Nor has Gulnara Karimova shown herself to be much of a political scholar, even though she reportedly holds a doctorate in political science – she has not published a single economic or political research article.

In his interview with the BBC, Rafik Sayfullin denies Gulnara’s ambitions for the presidency, but in politics “no” doesn’t mean “never;” it just means “not now.” (6)

Gulnara is the only hope for the continuation of the Karimov dynasty. His youngest daughter, Lola, is too young to be president. Since both daughters are divorced and there is no other male family member, besides Karimov (and his little grandson), he has no other choice. By bringing her to power now, he could spend the rest of his life supporting and educating her, helping to strengthen her position among the elite, and protecting her from those who are not happy with her business activities. Once in power, Gulnara could form her own team by eventually getting rid of the old guard and hiring young development-oriented professionals, who are not related directly to the present elite. It is possible that the West would welcome such a change – a young, female, English-speaking, secular president in a Muslim country. Despite being Karimov’s daughter, Gulnara will never be a second Islam Karimov. Improving relations with the
West would earn her even more international popularity. What Karimov’s status and position would be under Gulnara’s presidency is up to him.

It is with thoughts such as these that Karimov now may be struggling; very soon he will have to make his decision, and make that decision known to the country and to the international community. Since the elixir of eternal life has not yet been found, to be or not to be is not the question for Karimov. To stay or to leave is Karimov’s dilemma.

**Source Notes:**
(2) Ibid.
(4) Ibid.
(6) Ibid.

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