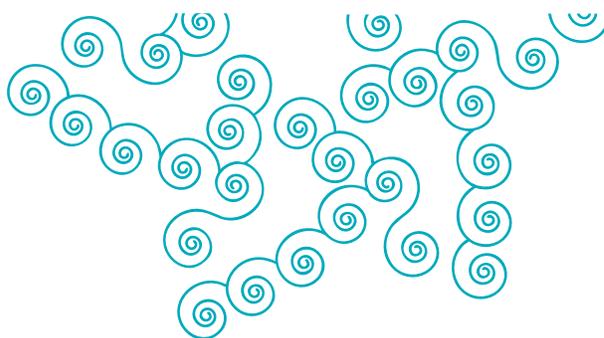


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Post-Soviet transformations and The contemporary history of Uzbekistan

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Key Points

- The president plays a crucial role in the political system of Uzbekistan, but its status has changed and some responsibilities have been transferred to the Government and the Parliament.
- Political parties slowly but gradually have become an integral part of Uzbekistan's social and political life. However, their success depends on their modernization and the overall political liberalization of the country.
- The next prime minister will be nominated by the political party which has secured the greatest number of deputy seats in elections to the legislative chamber. The parliament now has the right to express a vote of no-confidence in regard to the prime minister.
- The mahallas function as a kind of self-government of citizens at the local level. At the same time, mahalla activity is tightly bound with local public authorities.
- More than 6,000 NGOs are registered in Uzbekistan. In spite of some achievements they experience difficulties in defining their sector of activities and they are undermined by a lack of professionalism and difficult relations with state institutions.
- The study of contemporary history is a relatively new trend in Uzbekistan's historical scholarship. This discipline did not exist in the Soviet period, and does not have a clear methodology and needs to develop interdisciplinary and comparative approaches.

The Paradoxical Soviet Experience

The political borders and organizational structures of the contemporary Central Asian republics inclusive of Uzbekistan were created by the Soviets during the “national delimitation” period from 1924 to 1936 that divided the region into several new ethno-linguistically based units. Still today, interpreting national delimitation is one of the most contentious issues in Central Asian historiography.¹

the general educational level of the population rose steadily and the number of qualified specialists also increased considerably. However, such positive changes were fragmentary and were no guarantee of quality. Moreover, language policy saw the imposition of the Russian language—in 1940 the Cyrillic alphabet was introduced by decree—as a tool that served to destroy national consciousness and the national spirit. Measures to raise Russian to the status of official state language further limited opportunities for developing national languages.³

The president plays a crucial role in the political system of Uzbekistan and his constitutional rights are extensive

From the 1920s until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Central Asian republics were confronted by political, social, economic, and cultural transformations which brought about both positive and negative changes. Industrialization was among one of the more positive aspects of Soviet policy in Central Asia. From the 1960s to the beginning of the 1980s, dozens of large industrial plants were built and industrial production expanded. Like other republics, those of Central Asia made a significant contribution to the USSR's industrialization and strengthened their own economic development, in spite of remaining, for the most part, exporters of raw materials.² Such was the case of Uzbekistan, for instance, which had more than 1,500 industrial enterprises, engineering, chemical, construction, light industry, and agro-industrial complexes in operation as of 1985. This industrialization reinforced “Socialist internationalization,” that is, the Soviet policy of artificially increasing the multinational mix—from voluntary to forced migration—of the union republics.

A second positive aspect of Soviet rule was the considerable attention devoted to education, which increased significantly the level of literacy among Central Asians. Soviet educational policy saw the establishment of thousands of high schools and dozens of universities in Central Asia. In Uzbekistan, for example, there were more than 9,000 high schools, and the number of institutes and universities numbered 42 by 1985. As a result,

During the period of the Soviet Union, the Central Asian republics were officially considered to be sovereign. Indeed, from 1944 onwards they received the right to establish diplomatic representations in foreign relations. These rights were guaranteed by relevant articles of the USSR and republican constitutions. However, the Central Asian republics were not involved in direct foreign relations: all international contacts were established only with Moscow's permission and under its strict control. In spite of this, Uzbekistan received a privileged status in that it was promoted as an actor by Moscow in its foreign policy toward Asian countries, particularly India, Iran, Afghanistan, and several Islamic countries in the Middle East.

In the Gorbachev period (1985-91), Central Asia saw the birth of national movements which expressed demands for national-democratic reforms and cultural sovereignty. Different political and social groups emerged which focused on the restoration of national culture and statehood. Of particular importance in the period 1989-90⁴ was the elevation of the Central Asian languages to the status of state languages, the drafting of measures aimed at resolving the most important national economic problems—such as cotton monoculture in agriculture—and reinstating national traditions and customs. Perestroika gave rise to hopes for a way out

of the systemic crisis. Gorbachev and his supporters started to cut back the power of the *nomenklatura* elite, allowed relative pluralism in political and economic life, and proclaimed a “new thinking” in foreign policy. However, perestroika, only half-heartedly pursued, failed to come to grips with the fundamental issues. In short, there was little progressive change in the political sphere while the socio-economic conditions of Central Asian societies worsened.

Uzbekistan” was adopted just a few days later.

After the disintegration of the USSR, reforming the Soviet political system became one of the most pressing tasks for the new Central Asian republics. As in many post-Soviet countries, Uzbekistan’s drift toward post-post soviet transformation moves forward slowly whilst the country proclaims the creation of a democratic society based on universal values taking into account the particularities of its national culture and historical traditions As Rue and Ruy pointed

Political parties slowly but gradually have become an integral part of Uzbekistan’s social and political life. However, their success depends on their modernization, and above all the overall political liberalization of the country

Independence and the Creation of a New Political System

The 1980s in the Soviet Union was a period of systemic demise, aggravated ethnic tensions, and socio-economic crisis. In March 1990, in view of further reforming the Union, the first secretary of the CPSU Central Committee Mikhail Gorbachev was elected President of the USSR. In the same month, and first among the Union republics, Uzbekistan elected Islam Karimov as president through a vote in the Supreme Council of the UzSSR. In June 1990 the Declaration of Independence of the Republic proclaimed Uzbekistan’s sovereign right to build an independent state. Trying to establish a proper foreign policy, Islam Karimov visited India on August 17-19, 1991, where he met with President R. Vankataraman and Prime Minister Narasimha Rao. At the same time, Mikhail Gorbachev was being forcibly removed from office by a conservative putchist group. When Karimov returned to Tashkent, he was met not only by official protocol but also by generals sent from Moscow. The coup failed and the Constitutional Law “On State Independence of the Republic of

out, the paternalistic nature of political culture in Asia is characterized by dependence on authority, overcoming of open conflicts, and an emphasis on stability.⁵ Moreover, several years or decades of transition may be necessary to pave the way for a more democratic system. Redemption from totalitarianism demands immense efforts and incremental advancement. As stated by Martha Brill Olcott, “such a whole complex system is quite slow to be transformed.”⁶

Nevertheless, in the space of two decades of independence, Uzbekistan has created the legal basis for the functioning of the legislative, executive, and judicial branches. The legislative branch is represented by the national parliament (*Oliy Majlis*) and local bodies of the representative power (*Kengashes*). The 2002 referendum led to the establishment of a two-chamber parliament. The creation of an upper chamber, the Senate, as the representative body uniting the deputies of territorial subjects, consists of 100 members, 16 of whom are appointed by the president while the remaining 84 seats are occupied by representatives of the oblasts (province), districts, and city legislative councils. Six deputies from each of the 12 oblasts, from Tashkent city, and Karakalpakstan has allowed the *Oliy Majlis*

to maintain a direct connection with the regions, and to represent and protect their interests. Essential changes have also been made in regard to electoral legislation. According to these changes, candidates for the legislative chamber are put up by political parties and groups of voters and candidates to the local Kengash. A 30 percent quota of women in political parties has been introduced in nominating candidates. The number of deputy seats has increased from 120 to 150—of which 135 deputies are elected from political parties while the remaining 15 deputy

system of the country. Following this, in March 2011, the legislative chamber and the Senate of the Oliy Majlis approved the law “On Introducing Amendments to Certain Articles of the Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan.” According to the new changes, a prime ministerial candidate will be nominated by the political party which has secured the greatest number of deputy seats in elections to the legislative chamber; or by several political parties that have received an equal allocation of deputy seats. The parliament now has the right

The thematic field of contemporary history studies is still relatively narrow, with limited critical approaches

seats in the legislative chamber are given to the deputies elected from the Ecological Movement of Uzbekistan; this following the importance and growing urgency of environmental issues in the country.

The president plays a crucial role in the political system of Uzbekistan and his constitutional rights are extensive. Among the many hats that he wears, he acts as the guarantor of respect for the Constitution, represents Uzbekistan in international relations, concludes and observes the signing of international agreements and contracts, and is supreme commander in chief of the armed forces. However, some changes have taken place. While up to 2003 the president was simultaneously Chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers, this is no longer the case, a change which can be seen as a way of further balancing powers in state bodies. The next presidential election in Uzbekistan is expected to take place at the beginning of 2015 with leaders of the various political parties all being potential candidates for president office.

In November 2010 President Islam Karimov presented and outlined the “Concept of Intensifying Democratic Reform and Development of Civil Society in Uzbekistan” at the joint session of the Uzbek parliament. He proposed several changes in the legislative system for the transformation of the political

to express a vote of no-confidence in regard to the prime minister. This new regulation decreases the role of the president in forming and managing the executive authority and has introduced a more balanced distribution of powers between the three branches. These changes will facilitate the creation of the legislative bases for further deepening reform of the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government, strengthen the role of the parliament in the state and political system, support conditions for further increasing of the role of political parties in the formation of executive bodies, implement parliamentary control over their activities, as well as significantly increase political and inter-party competition.

One of the key priorities of the democratization process is the consistent reforming of the judicial-legal system. The structure of the judicial power of the Republic of Uzbekistan includes the Constitutional, Supreme, and Higher Economic Courts, the Supreme and Economic Courts of the Republic of Karakalpakstan, as well as the oblast, district, and city courts. In January 2008, Uzbekistan abolished the law on capital punishment and replaced it with lifelong imprisonment (or at least long terms of imprisonment) for two kinds of crimes: intentional homicide under aggravating circumstances and terrorism. In 2008,

furthermore, habeas corpus was introduced, that is the civil right to obtain a writ of habeas corpus as protection against illegal imprisonment, thereby transferring the right of giving sanction for taking into custody as pre-trial restrictions from the public prosecutor to courts. Future liberalization of the judicial system will depend on how effectively the rule of law is implemented.

Forming Civil Society and its Challenges

Establishing a civil society is a process that has been fraught with difficulties in the political, economic, ideological, and geopolitical transformations of post-Soviet Uzbekistan. External influences and domestic factors such as ethnic and religious tensions also contribute to making this formation more challenging or potentially risky.

A multi-party system is important for the growth of civil society. In Uzbekistan new social movements and parties began to form during perestroika and after independence, especially in the 1990s, which included: Erk, Birlik, the People's Democratic Party, Vatan tarakkiyoti (Fatherland Progress), the Social Democratic Party Adolat (Justice), Milliy tiklanish (National Revival), and the National-Democratic Party Fidokor (Patriot). In 2000 Fidokor and Vatan tarakkiyoti merged, while in 2003, the Liberal-Democratic Party of Uzbekistan, representative of a new class of entrepreneurs and businessmen, held leading positions in the parliament. The Constitutional law "On Strengthening the Role of Political Parties in Renovation and Further Democratization of Public Administration and Country Modernization" was adopted in 2006. An Ecological Movement was founded in 2008 but it has not become yet a powerful political party following the example of the Green parties in European countries. Political parties slowly but gradually have become an integral part of Uzbekistan's social and political life. However, their success depends in many respects on themselves, their modernization, their activities

and effectiveness, and above all the overall political liberalization of the country.

The oldest traditional institute of self-autonomy in Uzbekistan, the *mahalla*, functions as a kind of self-government of citizens at the local level. At the same time, mahalla activity is tightly bound with local public authorities. Mahallas carry out various forms of public control, give targeted support to the poor, participate in the organization of public services and amenities, and are involved in the education of the youth. If the country counts officially around 10,000 self-government institutions, mahallas as well as political parties are still largely financed by the state. In the long term, financial support from the state should be reduced and civil society institutions should become more self-sufficient.

Non-governmental organizations (NGO) are also an important element in building a democratic state and civil society, the first of which appeared in Uzbekistan at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s. In 1988, for instance, the Republican Children's Fund was established, in 1991 the Association of Business Women of Uzbekistan (*Tadbirkor ayol*), and in 1992 the Ecosan Foundation. Moreover, in regard to human rights, the country has an ombudsman—the parliamentary representative on human rights, who is a government appointee charged with investigating complaints by private persons against the government—, a National Center on Human Rights, the Institute of Public Opinion, and the Institute of Current Legislation Monitoring. But while more than 6,000 NGOs are registered in Uzbekistan, many of them continue to be undermined by a lack of professionalism, experience difficulties in defining their sector of activities, and have difficult relations with state institutions.

Among other challenges faced by Uzbekistan's civil society is the issue of religion. While the state officially pronounces secularism, there has been a revival of religion in public life and the "rediscovery" of national traditions forbidden in the Soviet period. As of today the country counts over 2,200 religious organizations grouping together some 16 different confessions. Of these organizations 2,046 are Muslim (92

percent of the total number), 165 are Christian, 8 Jewish, and 6 of the Baha'i faith; there is also a society of Krishna worshippers and one Buddhist temple. Nevertheless, for Uzbekistan as for its neighbors, the risk of religious extremism and, to a lesser extent, of inter-confessional tensions is important, and has pushed the country to view cautiously those movements prone to proselytizing.

Studying Uzbekistan's contemporary history

In such a context studying Uzbekistan's contemporary history is both crucial to understand how society evolves and a challenge as historians are themselves citizens engaged in the same cultural, political, and social processes as their fellow citizens.

Given the need for a comprehensive study of modern history, a presidential resolution was ratified in January 2012 "On [the] establishment of the Public Council on contemporary history of Uzbekistan under the Ministry of Higher and Secondary Special Education," which also saw the creation of the working body of the Public Council, the Coordination and Methodology Center. The Public Council and Center has been tasked with studying the recent history of Uzbekistan, based on the principles of historicism and objectivity, avoiding unilateral approaches and dogmatism in assessing the past and present of the Uzbekistani people. It will contribute to building a new educational and scientific literature on the contemporary history of Uzbekistan.

The study of contemporary history is a relatively new trend in Uzbekistan's historical scholarship. This discipline did not exist in the Soviet period, and does not have a clear methodology or peer-reference system. The thematic field is still relatively narrow, with limited critical approaches. To overcome this limitation, therefore, it should encompass the disciplines of history, political science, international relations, economics, sociology, psychology, and anthropology, as well as be integrally linked

with the evolution of current social sciences abroad and need to develop interdisciplinary and comparative approaches.

Conclusions

The experience of the last two decades testifies to the difficult process of forming a democracy and civil society in Uzbekistan. Reforming the political system is inseparably linked with processes of democratic innovation within society itself, and which also necessitates a profound modernization and better integration into a globalized world. As in other spheres of life, the study of contemporary history is just one element among many others that needs to be developed, not least through the adoption of more critical approaches informed by new theories and methodologies and international cooperation. It is only in thus doing that the deep transformations Uzbek society has undergone in the last two decades can really be measured and assessed.

Endnotes

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