One-Man Rule in Uzbekistan

A Perspective from Within the Regime

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Editor's Note: Uzbek President Islam Karimov, who rules essentially as a dictator, has effectively silenced opponents by using strict government controls and by widely publicized abductions and beatings of leading dissidents. Nevertheless there remains a strong undercurrent of opposition, even within Uzbekistan's ruling elites. The following article is written exclusively for Demokratizatsiya *by a high-ranking Uzbek official who, for his professional and personal safety, must remain anonymous. The article is often unclear and contradictory, and does not embrace liberal democratic ideals. However, it remains an important piece of current critical literature from within the Uzbek government.*

On 20 June 1989, the former first secretary of the Communist Party's Kashkadarinsky *Obkom* Committee, Islam Karimov, became the new leader of Uzbekistan. Certainly nobody could have foreseen that this ambitious man would become the first president of his republic and would enthusiastically continue the disintegration of the USSR started by his colleagues in Russia.

Encouraged by Gorbachev's perestroika, Karimov has initiated many changes in the past four years which would have taken decades under previous conditions. He is a representative of a new generation of pragmatic Soviet leaders who have no ties to their old comrades and their practices of totalitarian rule. His unusual mix of character combines the radicalism of a rigorous reformer and the conservative caution of an administrator. Karimov's strong will and cautious actions have earned him an especially wide popularity that his forerunners, Inamshon Usmankhodzhayev and Rafik Nishanov, never enjoyed by comparison.

The smooth transition of Uzbekistan to a new postcommunist state is indisputably a personal accomplishment. The peaceful course of transition which followed allowed Karimov to confidently run against a candidate of the opposition party, Erk, at the first presidential elections held in 1991. His young rival, poet Mohammed Salikh, proved himself to be a serious candidate, gaining 1.2 million votes. Though he succeeded in beating Karimov in one district, he lost the presidential mandate, which gave Karimov 86 percent of the vote.

C is a high-ranking official in Uzbekistan who wrote this article with the condition of anonymity.

Since his election, Karimov has had to face up to the realities resulting from the previous decades of Soviet rule. Uzbekistan is still importing over 60 percent of raw materials as well as production machinery, consumer goods and foodstuffs from the western and central parts of the former USSR. Poor living standards and a low national income have subsequently resulted from this one-sided economy and a deficit budget. The bulk of the population is agrarian and native Uzbek. Slavs, who are concentrated in the cities, make up 10 percent of the population.

Despite decades of cruel enforcement of atheism, Islam began to rise after 1985. Not only has it become an important socio-political force, it has also sought to fill a spiritual vacuum which has emerged from the dissolution of the USSR. The resulting combination of economic malaise and a heterogeneous population has caused a very specific situation. In this respect, Uzbekistan strongly differs not only from Russia, but from Kazakhstan, where more than half of the population is Russian; and from Kyrgyzstan as well, where the position of Islam is weaker. Perhaps this is why President Karimov's style is perceived to be more "Eastern" than those of Presidents Nursultan Nazarbayev and Askar Akayev. But in evaluating Karimov's actions (as with those of any other politician), one shouldn't judge him for his commitment to radical economic reform but, more importantly, for his ability to analyze the situation in Uzbekistan and act accordingly.

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Presently, Karimov is at the nucleus of the Uzbek political system, personally embodying more than the former, all-mighty Central Committee and its politburo ever did. Then, the Kremlin, the Soviet Communist Party in Moscow and a number of supervising services exerted power over the Uzbek state. But now, Karimov alone controls an administration which represents a population of 22 million. Inside sources say that not a single issue or question passes without Karimov's personal decision. Even members of the local press report directly to the head of state. No other leader in the republic enjoys such power. "Perhaps, there are some authoritarian elements in my activities," Karimov admitted in one interview. "I could explain it only by the following: In certain periods of history, during the establishment of a sovereign state, especially during a time of transition from one system to another, strong executive power is required. It is necessary to avoid bloodshed and reaction, to maintain inter-ethnic and civil peace and stability. If you like, it is also needed to move towards democracy," he continued.

Constitution

This historic period of transition to which Karimov referred will take some time. Karimov's recently adopted Uzbek Constitution indicates a slow movement towards democracy, ensuring presidential powers equal to those of an absolute monarch. His powers include the right to appoint and fire the prime minister and his deputies, the prosecutor general, and the Cabinet. His status of commander-in-chief awards him with the highest military rank, and enables him to grant amnesty and pardon. The president of Uzbekistan does not need to ask Parliament for extra powers should the need arise. These powers are completely authorized in the Constitution, including the power to dissolve the Supreme Soviet. The president can establish and manage the executive apparatus and he can also create and eliminate departments.

Only with the approval by the head of state can the Supreme Soviet elect its chairman, members of the Constitutional Court, the highest economic court, as well as the chairman of the Central Bank. Also, it was recently enacted that judges of district and regional courts are to be appointed by the president rather than elected by their constituencies. The president can also appoint or fire *khakimi* (the heads of the executive and representative powers of the capital Tashkent and its district), though firing them requires the approval by the local soviet. The first and possibly the last *khakim,* Tashkent Mayor Adkham Fazylbekov, was elected by direct secret ballot. There is a constitutional provision which states that "In the case of violation of law or actions discrediting the honor and dignity of the *khakim,"* the president is allowed to punish or pardon administration heads according to the wishes of the provinces. Thus the president can use this authority to weaken local political leaders. Also, the Constitution ensures that former presidents are not completely powerless, as it stipulates that all former Uzbek heads of state are appointed as Constitutional Court members for life.

The only way the president can resign is through a medical emergency. Health reasons must be confirmed by a state medical commission which is formed by the country's legislature. If the president is found to be incapable of fulfilling his duties, an extraordinary session of Parliament can elect an acting president from among the deputies' corps. In this case, new national elections are to be held within three months.

The national Parliament is the top legislative power. The Supreme Soviet or Oly Mazhlis, as it is supposed to be called now, has come under considerable changes since its election.

The present core of popularly elected representatives was formed by the former Communist Party apparatus. By timidly trying to attract attention to themselves, claiming to have understood "democracy," these blind sheep fell into the Hall of Deputies by mistake of the *apparatchiki* or the *nomenklatura.* The end result was that the representatives were kicked out by the Supreme

Soviet itself or "recalled" by the electorate. It is clear now that the reduction of the deputies by more than two-thirds, from 500 to 150, will allow the president to choose the representatives more selectively.

It is worth noting that when the Constitution was being adopted, the Parliament's chairman, upon observing the poll tally which included an opposition vote, immediately said, "The computer is not working correctly, that is a mistake. The Constitution has been adopted unanimously." A new proposed electoral law will remove the present corps of deputies almost a year earlier than expected.

The Party of Power

There is no doubt that in coming to power, Karimov clearly realized that the former Communist Party apparatus would become the strongest opponent to his ambitious ideas but it would have been unrealistic to eliminate the powerful Party and state apparatus at once. However, the Party, now renamed the People's Democratic Party, has been persistent in changing its identity. It claims to be a parliamentary party, rejecting all previous sins. In furthering his reforms, Islam Karimov has been undertaking a steady nationalization of Party property. Administrative structures are also being turned over to the state. Previously owned Party buildings are becoming state property one after another. As more and more power slowly but surely shifts away from the Party and towards the president, the government and *khokimiyati* (local authorities), previous worries about the People's Democratic Party have been assuaged.

One sure sign of a turnaround is the elimination of all the names connected to the Communist past. Perhaps to avoid an anti-democratic appearance, Lenin's monument in the court of the presidential building was urgently removed on the eve of then-Secretary of State James Baker's visit to Uzbekistan. Also, the rhetoric in the speeches of the Uzbek president often parallels that of his Russian colleagues.

To understand Uzbekistan's political pirouettes, it is worth noting that the draft of the Constitution contained the provision that the president had to give up any party membership. A meeting of the active members of the People's Democratic Party warned the president that if he left the party which led him to an electoral victory, he would lose political support and social influence. However, there is reason to believe that it was not the maneuvers of the featureless and decaying successor to the Communist Party that caused Karimov to change his mind. It was rather Yeltsin's example: appearing entirely alone in front of the Russian Congress of People's Deputies without political backing. It is possible that Karimov purposely moved to put the provision forbidding party membership in the Constitution. He must have guessed that the Party would not have pressured him to do so. The Party after all needs him more than he needs the Party.

Opposition

In the beginning, Karimov proved his adherence to political pluralism. Not only did he refuse to obstruct it but he even favored forming new political organizations such as Birlik ("Unity"). Back then, Birlik was even successfully challenging the strength of the Uzbek Communist Party apparatus.

Birlik's championing for making Uzbek the official state language, its advocacy of ecological cleanups as well as its opposition to the Uzbek dependency on one crop, cotton, gained the party a reputation as a formidable opposition force. Birlik supporters who emerged at the start of perestroika failed however, to mobilize into a serious political movement. But having outgrown the romantic image of an illegal organization, Birlik members were too quick to divide and criticize any intellectual discrepancies among themselves. Soon, students and intellectuals began leaving the movement, fearful of its leaders' "extremism." By that time, Karimov banned street gatherings and demonstrations, driving the movement into the provincial culture houses where it became isolated from public affairs.

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Clamoring for popular support, Birlik clumsily dashed from advocating primitive nationalism to the protection of the rights of the Russian minority. The climax of this farce came when it pleaded with the Russian government not to ratify the Treaty of Friendship with Uzbekistan. For the past one or two years, dying public interest in Birlik has been compounded with scandals connected to its founder, Abdurakhim Pulatov and some of his associates. This was aided artificially and accidentally with the help of the mass media abroad. Ignorant about the movement, the international media erroneously compared the opposition party with the powerful people's fronts and Sajudis of the Baltic republics and Rukh of Ukraine.

Birlik's statements supporting Tajik fundamentalists, its attempt to play the same game on Uzbek soil and its numerous attacks against Karimov had their consequences. Lacking popular support and without an institutional basis, it was not surprising that a number of legal proceedings came up against the Birlik leadership. Patience ran out when Pulatov's younger brother Abdumannap, a former assistant professor in Tashkent University, made a speech against Karimov. Legal proceedings began in April 1992. He was charged in contempt of the president and was arrested with the help of Kyrgyzstan's Ministry of Internal Affairs. Along with Pulatov, the leaders of Birlik's Bukhara and Tashkent divisions were taken under custody. The resolve of the Tashkent authorities has not been shaken either by the conference on human rights held in Bishkek or more recently, by the reaction

of Kyrgyz President Akayev, who fired the Ministry of Internal Affairs official responsible for the Pulatov arrest and who has spoken out on behalf of Uzbek democrats.

The leaders of the movement nonetheless avoided imprisonment when Karimov graciously issued immediate amnesty. The movement, though, is unlikely to re-emerge in the near future. Co-chairman Shukhrat Ismatullayev's promise to continue his work underground has negatively affected the movement's membership. According to new Uzbek laws, Birlik's activities could be qualified as unconstitutional, and many of its tired members could hardly afford to indulge in additional risks.

The liquidation of Birlik has been quietly accepted in Uzbekistan, but hardly the same thing could be said about some Moscow newspapers and, strange as it may seem, the American embassy. A world economy and diplomacy expert at Tashkent University, who wishes to remain anonymous, is puzzled by the American reaction. "If the U.S. is concerned about human rights in Uzbekistan, they are looking in the wrong place, far from where the situation is really crying out," he said. "It is impossible to convince even those who absolutely reject Karimov's authoritarian way of governing that the ambitious and nationalist radicals in Birlik are the benefactors of harmony and stability." Many now share the opinion that the American embassy acted in vain sending notes concerning Birlik to the Foreign Ministry of Uzbekistan. This was a mistake, because now the Uzbek ruling circles have the idea that the Americans are not interested in the stability of Central Asia, since in their opinion the U.S. has attempted to isolate Karimov and put him at odds with other leaders of the Commonwealth of Independent States.

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The end of Birlik clearly points to the unstable position of another opposition organization, the democratic Erk Party. Its leaders have been careless in protesting against Karimov's method of rule. While it is true that the Uzbek president's actions have little in common with democratic systems, one has to admit that the Tashkent opposition forces are not exactly British Labourites.

The only serious opposition party now in Tashkent is Vatan Tarrakiet ("Progress of the Motherland"), which formally calls itself a constructive opposition. This party has a liberal and nationalistic orientation, and unites the practically minded members of Birlik and Erk. It publishes a newspaper, has headquarters and tries to play grand scale politics within limits. Its leadership, however, is all coopted by Karimov. The Party's chairman, the poet Usman Azimov, is the president's counsellor on youth political problems. The general secretary of the Party is also a member of the

presidential *apparat*. Vatan Tarrakiet intends to play the role of both partner and rival to the People's Democratic Party in a rather simple game called a "multi-party system."

All things considered, there is real opposition to Karimov in Uzbekistan. It lacks organization and is full of contradictions but it is weighty and invisible. The most surprising thing is that the president himself is forming the opposition by his authoritarian methods. Perhaps his most serious opposition in the future may come not from external elements, but from his own government—from a group tired of Karimov's total monopoly on power. According to Tashkent media and statements by local officials, nobody but Karimov is responsible for finances, foreign affairs, industry, and culture. So where are his team players? The president is surrounded by groups of people who offer no criticism whatsoever, that do nothing but applaud his every thought and idea no matter how outrageous it may be, and who, by the way, happen to come, with few exceptions, from the Communist Party *apparat* of the past. This is the Brezhnev-like environment of the president.

Tajik Syndrome

The president of Uzbekistan must have been the first Central Asian leader to realize, upon watching Tajikistan, what can result from the combination of democracy, Islam, and the short-sightedness of the Communist Party apparatus—a recipe for the Party's loss of influence amid calls for democratic change.

In his populist desire to be loved, especially by the Muslim native population, Karimov himself broke all the Communist locks previously prohibiting religion and retaining the forces of Islam. From 1989 to early 1992, many religious organizations were actually registered. According to official statistics, more than five thousand new mosques were opened in Uzbekistan, but the actual number is anybody's guess since they have been mushrooming from day to day. In some mosques, tens of thousands of parishioners gather for Friday prayer, and traffic is stopped in several districts due to prayer.

Already three years ago the mufti issued an order requiring Koran education in primary schools. As a result, mass teaching of Arabic and religious rituals have developed in many state schools and on TV. Presently, there are ten ecclesiastical colleges and an Islamic institute in Uzbekistan, and the construction of an Islamic University has begun. Amidst all this, Tashkent has become a desirable target for religious "propagandists" from Saudi Arabia, Libya, Iran and other Muslim countries.

There is pressure for the government to actively change secular forms of governing to Islam. Young clergymen are less educated and thus, keen to radical decisions. These so-called fundamentalists are aggressively pushing aside the old ecclesiastical guard which has been discredited for its collabora-

tion with the Communists in the past. Pure theological disputes are secondary to political concerns being raised daily by believers and the clergy. A majority of the population is illiterate peasants and poor merchants. Many more are unemployed young people who lack even a minimal understanding of political culture and problems connected with Islamic fundamentalism. But many of them have been convinced that only an Islamic state can both provide social justice and settle the problems shaking the country.

It is probable that Uzbekistan would have already taken this course if it had not been for the drastic example in neighboring Tajikistan, where Muslims left the mosques to take power temporarily—unleashing a cruel civil war. Karimov was sensitive enough to realize the danger and thus sharply changed his policy towards religion. Since last spring he has been agitating world opinion, warning of a possible spread of the Tajik conflict over the whole region. Such a danger can be explained by the peculiar configuration of different ethnic groups in Central Asia. According to the 1989 census, there were more than 1.2 million Uzbeks in Tajikistan and about one million Tajiks in Uzbekistan. A little provocation by a small extremist group is enough to unleash an ethnic war at this point, spilling the conflict between Russia, Tajikistan and Afghanistan into Uzbekistan.

The explosive situation in the Fergana Valley (which covers parts of both Tajikistan and Uzbekistan) inspired Karimov to take resolute action to curb the power of the religious elements. In the traditional religious center of Namangan, combat-like units were being formed at the mosques. They were well-organized, not numerous but disciplined strong men who know Eastern fighting techniques. Under the name of Adolat ("Justice"), they took on the functions of police, prosecutor, courts, and all the bodies trying to represent the structures of legal justice. At first the authorities turned a blind eye, and left such tyrants to terrorize parts of the population. But recently some extreme advocates of *sharia,* or Islamic law, who were guilty of torturing and killing, were taken prisoners and Adolat was resolutely dismissed. However, it would be naïve to think that the structures calling themselves the Islamic Renaissance Party, who were registered in Moscow by a famous Moscow democrat, Iliya Zaslavsky, would vanish into thin air. Forced to go into hiding, they are quite able to reappear into the streets in some tragic moment as we have seen in Tajikistan.

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It is not a secret that local Uzbek fundamentalists, seen several times at the demonstrations in Shokhidon Square in Dushanbe, planned for the Tajik tragedy to be nothing more than a prelude to further bloodshed. It is also known that the most radical *vakhabiti* or fundamentalists were not opposed

to using Dushanbe as target practice for further action—perhaps in Tashkent and other Uzbek centers. In any case, a successful attempt to capture an administration building in Namangan has already taken place. Only through exhaustive talks and compromises by the authorities was massive bloodshed avoided.

However, neither the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), the United Nations nor Russia, where Karimov has appealed, are reacting to the danger of serious conflict in Central Asia. Moreover, Western and Russian mass media have done a lot to camouflage Islamic fundamentalism as "Islamic democracy"—giving the opponents of the former Tajik Communist leader Rakhmon Nabiyev much-needed moral support. The mayor of St. Petersburg, Anatoly Sobchak; the academic Yevgeny Velikhov, and other democratic Russian figures who were in Dushanbe on the eve of the tragic events never noticed the danger of fundamentalism. The ensuing turn of events showed the price of their blindness. A short victory for the "Demo-Islamists" in Tajikistan translated into tens of thousands wounded, hundreds of thousands of refugees and a billion dollars in economic damage. It took enormous efforts to stop the spread of the Tajik tragedy into Uzbekistan but the threat of fundamentalism has yet to be eliminated.

There is critical appraisal of Karimov's authoritarianism regarding the ethnic situation. But it fits the vital needs of the republic and the region. As far as the political restrictions are concerned, they really exist in Uzbekistan, but tomorrow they may seem like paradise to post-Soviet radical democrats who would be forced to compare between Karimov and the realities of other states living under an Iranian-like Islamic state. What about Uzbeks: can they be satisfied with the perspectives? Some probably can, but not everybody. That is why over the issue of Islamization, society will be tragically split and the escalation of ethnic and civil disturbances will be nearly inevitable.

The Russian Problem

The Tajik lesson made it necessary to improve the ideological line. Karimov's vocabulary, therefore, has been enriched with new words. In May 1993, he said at a Supreme Soviet session, "The most important problem for us is to create an independent national ideology and put it into practice." The basis of this national ideology already has been laid down. Its cornerstone is a famous thesis on the flourishing of Uzbekistan in the distant past and on its colonial existence after the Russian conquest: "Not only our independence, but our language, religion and spirit were on the verge of disappearance. Neither the tsarist government nor the politicians of the Red Empire wanted the people of Turkestan to really develop. Numerous natural resources, fertile land, favorable climate, hospitable and hard-working people; for 130 years we have drained the cup of wealth nearly to the end and into

the colonies." These words were written by professors from Tashkent University, which was, by the way, the first school of higher education set up in the region by Lenin's decree in 1920.

Anti-Russian feelings have never been strong in Uzbekistan. There are no discriminatory laws on citizenship, language and education, as there are in the Baltic republics. However, despite denial by the authorities, the Russian-speaking population has been uncomfortable because of Uzbekistan's new status as an independent state. Many Russians feel direct or indirect hostility by the nationalist sections of the native population and even discrimination. Russians are actually being pushed from the top ruling echelon, and many others even from the middle and bottom of the administration are also being pushed out. Last year, a Russian applying to a university had a very minuscule chance at being admitted. Under the disappearing rhetorical statements on the importance of international harmony, Russians show a growing desire to leave Uzbekistan. The aviation plant in Tashkent, the largest such facility in the former USSR, however, remains unperturbed. If it were not for the fact that people of such top skills are not really required in the other aviation plants at Ulyanovsk, Samara, and Voronezh, there is no doubt that the bulk of the citizens of European origin would leave the country. But where to? Russia does not really care about her erstwhile co-patriots. Nevertheless, the exodus is not decreasing. By the end of 1991, besides Jews, Crimean Tatars, Turks and Germans, the number of Russian-speaking citizens decreased by more than a half a million. The amount of people who left the country in 1992 and in the first half of 1993 is unknown because statistics are confidential.

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The laws on the quick implantation of Uzbek as the state language were populist, not well thought-out and truly damaged presidential authority. A considerable section of the Uzbek intellectuals who received their educations in Russia and who cannot imagine their lives apart from Russia and the Russian language are also concerned. This is due to the fact that the languages of modern science, philosophy, education and culture are European languages, and in the former USSR, Russian.

The Economy

The weak point of all the states formed out of the ruins of the USSR is the economy. Each republic has inherited a kind of dysfunctional one-industry economy. Karimov's caution in carrying out economic reforms is not mocked. As he prefers the tactics of small steps, he is in no hurry to destroy the old system. His tactics have already brought about real progress; as the

result of gradual personal plot allocations (as in China), the food market is more saturated than in any other republic of the former USSR. According to Russian experts, an Uzbek ruble has twice as much purchasing power as a Russian ruble. In his politics, the president of Uzbekistan is taking into consideration that the republic has not lost its peasantry and conservatism typical of the Central Asian region as a whole, and it will not allow itself to be stripped of old traditions in a short period of time.

At the same time, it would also be wrong to deny any movement to a market economy. Like the other republics of Central Asia, Uzbekistan has the peculiarities of a centuries-old economy and culture. Privatization of scarce water resources as well as that of the few lands suitable for farming and cattle breeding is out of the question. Central Asia is ready to accept market reforms in other ways than those being practiced in the European parts of the former USSR.

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Economic chaos in Russia is extremely harmful to the economic health of Uzbekistan. This is not only due to the sharp financial problems of the ruble zone, but also because 65 percent of Uzbek trade is with the Russian Federation. Russia exports 10 million tons of oil products and a lot of grain in exchange for rubles. But Uzbekistan cannot export as much as it imports, and the resulting deficits have crippled the country. Until the export matter is solved, the Uzbek economy will have no future. Regional integration with more advanced states such as Pakistan and Turkey so far has been limited to rhetoric. Many people, however, still speak of the times when Turkestan was an entire region and was a part of a powerful state. The nostalgia to restore this integrity is strong.

And What About Democracy?

Let us pose this question in conclusion. The credo and activities of many Uzbek democrats and Karimov's opponents such as Pulatov can be qualified as extremely radical. But it is radicalism under the conditions of extreme disadvantage in Central Asia that is really threatening. The fact is that in the neighborhood is Tajikistan, where a civil war is being waged, fed by munitions and instructions from Russia and Afghanistan. Let us be realistic: this war was provoked by the "democratic" opposition which did not accept the result of the presidential elections and attempted to get rid of Rakhmon Nabiyev. The events connected with Nabiyev's resignation cannot be defined as a revolution, as the analogous events in Georgia against Gamsakhurdia and in Azerbaijan before Elchibey. This was a routine armed coup eventually causing never-ending conflicts and complete state disintegration.

For Uzbekistan, which borders on Tajikistan, and where six of eleven areas are overpopulated and face problems of unemployment, the effects of a too rapid transformation would create a catalyst for social unrest. People often express nostalgia for the blessed Brezhnev times when there was no democracy and no wars.

Karimov's Communist past is one of the main concerns of the democrats. They call him a Communist chameleon and call Uzbekistan the last stronghold of totalitarianism in the former USSR. Though this is true, which of the present post-Soviet leaders has escaped these kinds of accusations? Boris Yeltsin? Leonid Kravchuk? Perhaps Eduard Shevardnadze? Or how about even the pristine Askar Akayev, who was the only Central Asian leader not previously connected with the Communist Party hierarchy? Without discrediting political liberties, it can be argued that society must be prepared adequately to accept them. This may be achieved in two ways; by a long process of enlightenment and also by extensive economic reforms. The examples of other countries such as Singapore, Taiwan and Malaysia prove this to have worked. But on the other side we have India, Bangladesh and some countries in Latin America where democratic liberties have brought neither peace nor economic prosperity.

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The enormous level of economic changes in Russia being pushed by the democrats does not fit the slow pace of Uzbek society. Perhaps the political style of Islam Karimov, who does not even bother to deny the "authoritarian elements" in his actions, is really the only formula that can work in Uzbekistan in this transitional period. These very actions, moreover, are the result of complex social forces that do not always understand what tolerance and democracy really mean. To interfere with this balance means to undermine a certain political stability. Without it, any economic reforms and consequently, democracy, are impossible.