

Regime-Building through Controlled Opening New Authoritarianism in Post-Karimov Uzbekistan

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Abstract This article aims to locate the version of authoritarianism developing in post-Karimov Uzbekistan to current debates on the emergence of new forms of authoritarian governance within and beyond post-Soviet Eurasia. To this end, the article re-evaluates Shavkat Mirziyoyev's policies in light of authoritarian modernisation theory, revealing how the ultimate end of the process of political change currently at play in Uzbekistan is connected with an upgrading of local authoritarian practices rather than to the liberalisation of the domestic political landscape.

Keywords Uzbekistan. Authoritarianism. Leadership transition.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 The Uzbek Spring and Its Many Frosts. – 3 Globalising Uzbek Authoritarianism. – 4 Refreshing Uzbekistan's Authoritarian Image. – 5 Concluding Remarks: What is New in Uzbek Authoritarianism?

1 Introduction

On 27 August 2016, the sudden death of Islam Karimov set into motion an intricate process of power transfer that culminated, on 8 September, in the interim appointment of Shavkat M. Mirziyoyev's to the helm of the Uzbek republic. Shortly after (4 December), a largely staged election converted his temporary presidency into a fully-fledged leadership. This vote formally concluded the seemingly interminable Karimov era, at the end of which Uzbek-



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istan had receded into a position of international isolation, *quasi*-total economic autarky, and political stagnation.

Much has been written about the policy innovation drive that has defined the new regime's first two years in power. Hailed as the dawn of a new era (Imamova 2018), in which structural changes are apparently revolutionising the nature of Uzbek politics (Bowyer 2018; Marszewski 2018) and presented, not without hyperbole, as one of the most significant political processes currently at play across the globe (Starr, Cornell 2018), Mirziyoyev's reformist agenda is more realistically defined as a sustained experiment in authoritarian modernisation, understood here in the terms framed by Gel'man and Starodubstev, who postulated the possibility of engaging in targeted, meaningful reforms even in persistently non-democratic *milieux* (Gel'man, Starodubstev 2016, 114).

The modernisation path followed by Mirziyoyev is to all intents and purposes adjusting Uzbekistan's non-democratic politics to specific patterns of authoritarian upgrade emerged and consolidated across the Middle East (Heydemann 2007) and Central Asia (Schatz 2008, 2009). Most immediately, this latter proposition highlights the significant work of authoritarian learning (Hall, Ambrosio 2017) that seems to be underpinning the conceptualisation of post-Karimov policies and strategies. At a wider level, the political processes instigated by Mirziyoyev and his associates point to a wider evolution in Uzbek authoritarianism.

The process of authoritarian modernisation¹ currently unfolding in Uzbekistan has to be seen as a regime-orchestrated passage between *old* and *new* forms of authoritarianism. As a mechanism of authoritarian *update*, the modernisation of Uzbek authoritarianism is designed to bring local non-democratic practices in line with global authoritarian trends.

It is Mirziyoyev's failure to bring to the surface even the most elementary form of political liberalisation that ultimately qualifies the nature of the transition completed in Uzbekistan across August-September 2016. As the 'interval between one political regime and another' (O'Donnell et al. 1986, 6), the post-Karimov transition constituted a performative process sanctioning the passage between different forms of authoritarianism, rather than a mechanism intending to lift the quality of Uzbek governance. This transition modified both the inner core and the outer manifestation of Uzbek authoritarianism, replacing the autarchic, isolationist postures of the Karimov era with the more dynamic, globalised form of non-democratic politics put into practice by Shavkat Mirziyoyev and his associates.

¹ For more on the rationale behind Uzbekistan's modernisation drive, see Anceschi 2018.

To all intents and purposes, Mirziyoyev's modernisation drive has revolved around two intersecting ends: the facilitation of the regime's efforts to gather support through the delivery of viable economic policies, and the comprehensive re-branding of Uzbekistan, its policies and its leadership. The politics of persuasion remain therefore central to both prongs inscribed in this drive. On the one hand, the regime is trying to convince ordinary Uzbeks that the delivery of economic wealth is sufficient to temporarily quieten, and ideally postpone indefinitely, their demands for enhanced social and political rights. On the other hand, Mirziyoyev's propagandistic strategies are seeking to persuade international observers and prospective foreign partners that the new Uzbek regime is substantially different from its predecessor, inasmuch as it presides over a globalising, relatively large economy that is slowly opening up to foreign collaboration.

The unrelenting pursue of economic growth is to all intents and purposes meant to compensate the legitimacy deficit intrinsic to Uzbekistan's second-generation presidency. At the same time, it is underpinned by the regime's understanding that, in Uzbekistan's immediate neighbourhood, economic autarchy unequivocally failed, as confirmed by the severe economic crisis currently experienced by Turkmenistan, Central Asia's most isolated economy. Critical to the achievement of economic growth is the attraction of foreign investment, an end pursued through a combination of actual policies and image-making strategies presenting Uzbekistan as an opening, globalising market.

This article is committed to grant equal analytical relevance to both prongs of Uzbekistan's authoritarian modernisation drive, outlining the contours of the composite authoritarian agenda underpinning Mirziyoyev's economic opening and his image-making strategies. The upgrade and update work required to modernise Uzbek authoritarianism involved the introduction of softer authoritarian strategies, accompanied by the preservation of harder power technologies that were perfected during the Karimov years. The Mirziyoyev regime protected the effectiveness of this latter range of authoritarian tools by ensuring a fundamental consistency between pre- and post-transition political practices. And it's precisely upon Mirziyoyev's scarce commitment to improve Uzbekistan's authoritarian governance that this paper centres its initial attention.

2 The Uzbek Spring and Its Many Frosts

A lukewarm commitment to political liberalisation saturated the speech that Sh. M. Mirziyoyev delivered at his presidential inauguration in December 2016.² The speech reproduced with some regularity – 17 times over approximately 7000 words of text – a number of intersecting tropes linked to reforms and change. The liberalisation of the Uzbek political landscape, however, was addressed directly in only one passage, namely that which acknowledged, rather paradoxically, the degree of democratisation achieved during the Karimov years. In this speech – the first milestone of his presidency – Mirziyoyev failed to articulate a vision of liberalisation centred on the pluralism gap affecting at the time the Uzbek political landscape. Rather, he equated, in thoroughly reductionist terms, the achievement of political liberalisation to the enhancement of the government’s transparency in its dealings with the population. This latter proposition has to be seen as a policy blueprint for the continuation of his presidency.

The new regime confined its political reform agenda to policy measures increasing the accountability of state institutions and regime members *vis-à-vis* the wider population. This end was pursued through the penetration of Mirziyoyev loyalists in Uzbekistan’s extensive *prokuratura* system (Ozodlik Radiosy 2018), the introduction of far-reaching purges in the security services (Putz 2017), and the launch of well-publicised anti-corruption campaigns permeated by markedly populist undertones (Najibullah, Eshanova 2018). One of the most popular slogans³ of the Mirziyoyev years is purportedly calling to revert the power relations between state structures and ordinary Uzbeks, to exert in turn a tangible influence on the ‘levels and quality of life’ (UzA 2019) of the wider population.

The last two paragraphs have highlighted an important inconsistency in Mirziyoyev’s attempts to deal with the question of anteriority in Uzbek authoritarianism. For expediency reasons, the current Uzbek president is denouncing some aspects of the Karimovist system while refusing to openly condemn his predecessor. Policy discontinuity with prior practices is therefore limited to the economic realm.

² For the full text: ‘Address by Shavkat Mirziyoyev at the joint session of the Chambers of Oliy Majlis dedicated to a Solemn Ceremony of Assuming the Post of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan’ (URL <https://www.un.int/uzbekistan/news/address-shavkat-mirziyoyev-joint-session-chambers-oliy-majlis-dedicated-solemn-ceremony>, accessed on 2019-11-16). All direct and indirect quotes of the document made in this article are extracted from the above source.

³ Не народ служит государственным органам, а государственные органы должны служить народу (It is not the people who serve the government institutions but the government institutions that should serve the people).

No new, truly independent political party has been established since Mirziyoyev's accession to power, and there is no clear roadmap to inject a modicum of fairness into the parliamentary election scheduled for December 2019, which is therefore expected to take place in the same skewed field that regulated the competition for the 2016 presidential vote.

No élite lustration is taking place in post-Karimov Uzbekistan, where there has been no systematic regime effort to denounce the violence of the past. The Mirziyoyev regime freed a limited number of political prisoners,⁴ and readmitted a restricted range of international human rights advocates⁵ and foreign media outlets (Voice of America Press Release 2018) to work in the country. Failure to engage with the abuses of the Karimov years has furthermore prevented any attempt at post-transitional reconciliation. The establishment of a new relationship of trust between the state and some sectors of the population is therefore not linked to post-transitional political reforms, as its fulcrum has been shifted onto the conclusion of a new social pact between the regime in Tashkent and ordinary Uzbeks. At a time at which Turkmenistan has re-written its social energy contract (Anceschi 2017a), and Kazakhstan launched a pay-out programme to quell rising social tensions (Stronsky 2019), Mirziyoyev's preoccupation for social stability represents a power technology aligning Uzbekistan to the current Central Asian praxis.

Concerted efforts to improve the social mobility prospects for ordinary Uzbeks, as remarked by Rafael Sattarov (2019), sit at the very core of this strategy: the Mirziyoyev dream is articulated through promises of economic wealth and better life prospects, as clearly remarked by the president in September 2017, during his first address to the UN General Assembly.⁶ Reformist emphasis on the economy sets Uzbekistan on the path traced by Nursultan Nazarbaev in neighbouring Kazakhstan, where the mantra *сначала экономика, потом*

4 Between September 2016 and November 2018, the Uzbek government released more than 35 political prisoners, as reported by Human Rights Watch in: 'Uzbekistan: Release and rehabilitate political prisoners', URL <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/11/17/uzbekistan-release-and-rehabilitate-political-prisoners> (2019-11-18).

5 In December 2018, the Uzbek government hosted the annual meeting of the Asian Human Rights Forum, which included the participation of HR advocates from across the continent and beyond. Mirziyoyev's opening speech can be consulted at URL <http://www.uzbekembassy.in/shavkat-mirziyoyev-we-will-continue-our-partnership-with-human-rights-organizations> (2019-11-18).

6 This speech, which reiterated the centrality of economic liberalisation in the Uzbek reform agenda, explicitly linked prosperity with regime stability, stating that: "the richer the people are - the stronger shall be the state". For the full text, see: 'Address by H.E. Mr. Shavkat Mirziyoyev, the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan at the UNGA-72', available at URL https://www.un.int/uzbekistan/statements_speeches/address-he-mr-shavkat-mirziyoyev-president-republic-uzbekistan-unga-72 (2019-11-18).

политика (economic first, politics later) underpinned the policy agenda of the local regime for much of the post-Soviet era.

The operationalisation of post-Karimov authoritarianism is therefore entrenched in the regime's substantial indifference for the design and eventual implementation of democratic norms and practices. Mirziyoyev's authoritarian modernisation path is interpreting the political monopoly established by his predecessor as a viable launching pad for a comprehensive revision of the strategies of economic management available to the regime in Tashkent. The next few paragraphs outline with greater precision the economic facet of Mirziyoyev's authoritarian agenda.

3 Globalising Uzbek Authoritarianism

Islam Karimov's protracted twilight grounded to a halt the Uzbek decision-making praxis, convincing the domestic population and the international community that a change of leadership represented the only vehicle to introduce much needed social, political and economic change in Uzbekistan. Noah Tucker's 'zero hour' (Tucker 2016) parallel offers therefore a telling turn of phrase to characterise the significant expectations surrounding the passing of the long-term Uzbek leader.

Mirziyoyev interpreted selectively these calls for change, focusing on the introduction of reforms pursuing the globalisation of the Uzbek economy. In this context, the regime traced two main trajectories for its plans to open Uzbekistan's economy. On the one hand, it sought the restoration of regional linkages arbitrarily interrupted in the Karimov years; on the other, it meant to transform Uzbekistan into an attractive destination for capital investment originating in both Europe and Asia.

As I have argued elsewhere (Anceschi 2017b, 2019), Mirziyoyev's Central Asia policy has to be seen as the most remarkable component in the entire reformist agenda carried out since the leadership change in Tashkent, mostly as it advanced the interest of the Uzbek élites while bringing substantial benefits to the lives of the many Central Asians residing in the Uzbek borderlands.⁷ Uzbekistan's adoption of a positive regional posture re-launched Central Asian regionalism by re-establishing grassroots connectivity through the re-opening of border posts, the re-instatement of transport routes, and the facilita-

⁷ 'Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan Dream of Surge in Trade and Freer Borders', *Eurasianet*, 23 March 2017; 'Uzbekistan, Tajikistan: As the Karimov wall crumbles, families reunite', *Eurasianet*, 27 March 2018; N. Djanibekova, 'Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan shuttle trade booms, but for how long?', *Eurasianet*, 18 July 2018.

tion of people-to-people linkages across neighbouring Central Asian states. The economic impact of these measures was closely related to the kickstarting of Uzbekistan's economic collaboration with its regional neighbours, and the reconstruction of formal and informal commercial activities in border areas.

Mirziyoyev's regionalist input encapsulates at the same time the essence of the authoritarian upgrade process at play in post-Karimov Uzbekistan. The current regime has abandoned isolationist policies typifying *old* authoritarian methods, providing the wider population with tangible indicators that change is ultimately unfolding. This degree of change was however introduced while non-democratic practices persisted across Uzbekistan, as economic reforms were enforced by presidential decree, overlooking collective decision-making and minimising the input of provincial and local communities.

This latter proposition identifies a second visible idiosyncrasy underpinning Uzbekistan's passage between new and old forms of authoritarianism, one which that does bring to the fore a series of pathways leading to the medium-term re-personalisation of Uzbekistan's politics and policies.

The introduction of extensive reforms pursued specific power technologies connected with the popular legitimation of Uzbekistan's second-generation leader. These technologies responded in full to the new leadership's positionality *vis-à-vis* the personalistic power configuration of the Karimovist milieu, in which top cadres, including long-term PM Mirziyoyev, were confined to play backdrop roles to the regime leader. The central élite position that he occupied at the time of his predecessor's death provided Mirziyoyev with unencumbered access to Uzbekistan's decision-making mechanisms immediately after his accession to power. This access became indispensable to address the popularity deficit imposed on him by the power personalisation practices of the Karimov era. To this end, Mirziyoyev engaged in incessant travel and pursued an unrelenting policy drive during the very early stages of his presidency. The new leader's energetic approach was visibly juxtaposed with the immobility of his predecessor, confirming internationally that significant change was definitely underway in Uzbekistan after the passing of its first president.

The popularisation of the new leader's policies - a practice largely absent from Karimov's authoritarian playbook, which focused instead on the glorification of the president's personality (March 2002) - is another indicator pointing out to the emergence of softer forms of authoritarianism in post-transition Uzbekistan. The political imperative to popularise the new president's persona has nevertheless instigated a perverse mechanism of authoritarian re-personalisation, in which Mirziyoyev is represented - and, most notably, perceived by the élites as such - as the only force behind policy revision and implementation. The long-term implications of this mechanism unveil the

precariousness intrinsic to Uzbekistan's authoritarian update: the structural viability of personalised decision-making is inextricably linked to the leader's individual capacities and their evolving agendas, making the return of policy stagnation a potential pitfall at the onset of every new regime evolution phase.

This latter proposition suggests that Mirziyoyev's work of authoritarian upgrade and update ought not to be regarded as an irreversible process. The implementation of softer authoritarian strategies and the introduction of a combination of both *new* and *old* forms of non-democratic practices at the core of the Uzbek governance system have defined the initial stages of regime evolution, but there is no absolute certainty about their future relevance *vis-à-vis* Uzbekistan's authoritarian politics. Central Asian authoritarianism is not a static phenomenon: the regional regimes have revised their authoritarian playbooks with regularity, adding new sets of power technologies to be implemented at domestic and international level. The combination of ageing leadership and personalism, for instance, has usually led to stagnation, as demonstrated by Turkmenistan under Niyazov (2002-2006), Kazakhstan under Nazarbaev (2011-March 2019) and Uzbekistan under Karimov. If Mirziyoyev is pursuing the re-personalisation of Uzbek politics – as early indicators are indeed suggesting – then there is no significant reason to argue that, in the long-term, his regime will constitute the exception to this norm.

The embedment of Uzbekistan's economy into global financial structures and networks represents a second important chapter in Mirziyoyev's agenda of economic opening. In this context, the prior regime managed to navigate the precarious balance between the preservation of an essentially autarchic economic outlook and the insertion of the Uzbek élites in global kleptocratic networks (Cooley, Heathershaw 2017, 112-133). While there is no substantive evidence about the persistence of such opaque practices in post-Karimov Uzbekistan, the new regime has registered a certain interest in strengthening its ties with foreign oligarchic groups (Sattarov 2019), potentially instigating a peculiar version of international authoritarian sponsorship (Tansey 2016), extended in this case by Russian interest groups formed by ethnic Uzbek businessmen who are deliberately bolstering a new authoritarian leadership in Tashkent. Across the former Soviet Union, however, oligarchic modernisation has systematically failed to eventuate: Mirziyoyev's apparent closeness with Usmanov and other oligarchs is therefore likely to invite actors pursuing monopolistic agendas to play a part in Uzbekistan's economic landscape, skewing as a consequence the balance of future patterns of economic growth.

So far as wider economic choices, the Mirziyoyev regime has unequivocally abandoned the isolationism that defined Uzbekistan's foreign economic relations in the latter part of the Karimov era. In this

context, Mirziyoyev's two flagship policies have focused on the introduction of measures ensuring full convertibility of the *som* (Rapoza 2017), and the launch, in February 2019, of the first dollar bonds issued by the Uzbek central bank (Martin 2019). These practices are not intrinsically authoritarian; their introduction, however, seems to suggest that the current Uzbek regime has adopted new sets of political economy strategies to expand the spatiality of Uzbek authoritarianism (Lewis 2005), pursuing the establishment of a new, potentially illiberal, space wherein Uzbekistan's domestic markets intersect with transnational capital and financial transactions.

Whatever the scope of the new regime's economic reforms or their long-term end, the optics of Uzbekistan's present economic dynamism are however stunning, and contrast very sharply with the immobility of the last decade. The international perception of Uzbekistan, its governance and its economic appeal are matters of central concern for the new regime, which, in another departure from prior practices, is constantly preoccupied about the external representation of developments internal to Uzbekistan. Image-making - the core issue to be tackled in the paper's next segment - has in this sense surfaced as a most critical component of the new form of authoritarianism promoted by the leadership in Tashkent.

4 Refreshing Uzbekistan's Authoritarian Image

While there is relatively robust evidence pointing to the increasing relevance occupied by strategies of persuasion and framing⁸ in the Uzbek authoritarian playbook, the Mirziyoyev regime is yet to engage in a comprehensive process of nation (re-)branding.⁹ Until the time of writing, the range of regime symbols constructed internally and communicated externally by the Uzbek propaganda has not expanded from those consolidated in the Karimov years (Marat 2009, 1131-2).

The most evident attempt at modifying the representation of regime-led initiatives has been therefore channelled through a concerted, and methodically implemented, strategy of authoritarian framing, intended here as the rendering of "events or occurrences [...] to organize experience and guide action" (Benford; Snow 2000, 614). Beyond the local population, these narratives targeted international businessmen, foreign tourists and the global political community with the ultimate view to alter their respective perceptions of the

⁸ This distinction is advanced in Schatz; Maltseva 2012.

⁹ Nadia Kaneva (2011, 118) describes nation branding as a "compendium of discourses and practices aimed at reconstituting nationhood through marketing and branding paradigms".

multifaceted processes at play in Uzbekistan since the demise of Islam Karimov.

Mirziyoyev's authoritarian framing is articulated around a linear yet powerful message: Uzbekistan is an open country, where travel is safe and business is (relatively) easy to conduct, while remaining a reliable partner for neighbouring states and more distant actors. The regime engaged in a sustained policy drive to support these narratives: the introduction of a visa-free regimen for travellers from over 70 countries (Putz 2019), the removal of legislative hurdles blocking foreign access to the Uzbek economy,¹⁰ and Mirziyoyev's entanglement with regional and international leaders are clear indicators that change introduced in Uzbekistan is not cosmetic, and that there is a more substantive dimension to the articulation of the regime's authoritarian frames.

Interestingly, the rise of Uzbekistan's profile in mainstream global media relied upon analytical depictions that remain very closely aligned to the regime's preferred framing,¹¹ indicating that these new frames, ultimately, have encountered some success beyond the Uzbek borders. Internally, these narratives are instrumental to enhance the population's compliance with the new rules imposed by the regime, hence modifying in not insignificant fashion the political culture of post-Karimov Uzbekistan. Limitations imposed on Social Science field research in Uzbekistan have so far impeded any rigorous effort to assess the success encountered by these narratives; anecdotal evidence, however, seem to confirm that certain segments of the population (younger and more educated) are receptive of this specific line of authoritarian framing.

The politics of persuasion of the current Uzbek regime represents perhaps the area wherein Mirziyoyev's work of authoritarian update and upgrade emerged most visibly. While noting the leadership's unprecedented preoccupation with how Uzbekistan is perceived externally, this article identified a parabolic evolution in how softer authoritarian strategies have contributed to increase regime stability internally. The Karimov regime put a premium on establishing a composite brand for Uzbekistan, recurring to historical symbols and cultural specificities. Its more aggressive outlook limited - and altogether obliterated in the latter part of the Karimov era - the relevance of authoritarian framing, as the population compliance with

10 An interesting case in this context is represented by the re-invigoration of the Tashkent Stock Exchange, as indicated in: M. van Loon, "Uzbekistan's bourse is open for business", *BNE Intellinews*, 26 November 2018.

11 See, for instance, the *Financial Times*' video feature "How Uzbekistan is opening up to foreign investment" at URL <https://www.ft.com/video/e89f7d59-c811-48f7-a47b-e722d898b72e> (2019-11-18), and the long article "Uzbekistan unbound", authored by Ben Bland for the March 2019 issue of the *Business Traveller Magazine* (pp. 24-7).

regime rules was ensured by increasingly brutal repression. Mirziyoyev and his associates did not endeavour to re-brand Uzbekistan: their focus has been fixated instead on repackaging the image of the regime ruling over the Uzbek state.

This latter proposition mirrors the analytical distinction advanced earlier on: the current leadership, at least for the time being, continues to regard the rhetorical promotion of Uzbekistan's policies as more important than the glorification of the president who formulated and implemented them. This specific process may have a constrained temporality, as it may pertain to this initial phase of regime evolution, in which the ruling élites has calculated that positive internal and external reception of its policies are indeed necessary to carry out their authoritarian agendas.

5 Concluding Remarks: What is New in Uzbek Authoritarianism?

This article has suggested that there is indeed a significant work of authoritarian upgrade and update at play in post-Karimov Uzbekistan, identifying economic reform as the leadership's preferred measure to carry out an extensive process of authoritarian modernisation. From the establishment of a globalised financial sector to the entry of foreign oligarchs into the Uzbek economy, Mirziyoyev and his associates are creating new spaces in which to pursue their agenda of regime maintenance, and ultimately sustain local authoritarianism through practices operating beyond the Uzbek state.

There are two main conclusions that this paper intends to put forward to its readership. To begin with, Mirziyoyev's authoritarian modernisation does not have to be seen as a linear process of update and upgrade. Rather, it is shaping up as a calculated opening, seeking medium-term economic growth while postponing to a later date the liberalisation of Uzbek politics. A selective opening responds more directly to the logic of authoritarian preservation that has dominated Central Asian politics throughout the post-Soviet era, insofar as it softens authoritarianism in policy areas perceived to be crucial to the stability of a consolidating leadership, and ensures the continuation of more repressive methods in other sectors considered less relevant for the delivery of the (authoritarian) social contract put forward by the current regime.

As a consequence, Mirziyoyev's non-democratic politics and policies are aligning with some rapidity to the norm established by Central Asia's more sophisticated authoritarian systems, and Kazakhstan more in particular. There are many parallels between the recent evolution of Uzbek authoritarianism and the governance practices and power technologies that defined the Kazakhstani authoritarian prac-

tices of the early 2000s, when the Nazarbaev regime began to deliver some economic prosperity while simultaneously hardening many of its domestic policies. This latter proposition identifies the second main conclusion of this paper, remarking that Uzbekistan's calculated opening and the partial softening of its authoritarian practices may be temporary, connected as they are to priorities and agenda of a regime ensemble that is still trying to consolidate its control onto power. As Central Asia's authoritarianism has so far featured very specific temporalities, this period of authoritarian modernisation may be just a phase in the long-term evolution of Uzbekistan's non-democratic praxis.

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