



Reports

Uzbekistan's New Parliament: Real Reform or Just the Will of the 'President's Men'?

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Elections in Uzbekistan [Getty]

Abstract:

The first meeting of the Senate of Uzbekistan’s Oliy Majlis took place in Tashkent January 22, 2020 to carry out its functions for the new term until 21 December 2024. In his keynote speech, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev congratulated the senators on this high status, while the new council includes representatives from diverse professional fields. He also argued it was “imperative to strengthen the role of the Upper House of Oliy Majlis in delivering an atmosphere of the irreconcilable fight against corruption and crime in general in society, as well as boost control over the activities of government bodies aimed at enhancing the role of women in society.”

In Uzbekistan, political parties are traditionally seen to serve a symbolic function with their main mission being to mobilize and maintain support for a strong presidential system. Harnessing popular support for the poll could be seen as a crucial step in Mirziyoyev’s strategy of building support in the run up to the next presidential elections, which will be due in Uzbekistan in 2021. This aim will remain a higher priority compared to the pursuit of political transformation, which could allow the new parliament evolve as an autonomous institution and the democracy to mature.

This first part of this paper explains the significance of the parliamentary elections held in Uzbekistan on 22 December 2019. The second part brings to the readers’ attention a range

of reactions and responses on how the campaign, polling and outcome was seen by voters, party representatives and election observers. The third and final part of the report will conclude with the findings and recommendations of the observers in addition to some projections of how the conduct and outcome of the election may affect the future course of the country's politics.

Profile of Uzbekistan's New Parliament: 2019-2024

Voters in Uzbekistan went to the polls to elect its 150 deputies from 750 contestants to the Legislative Chamber and local councils December 22, 2019, according to the majority system. Some 10,200 polling stations have been established across the country to facilitate the election of 150 deputies to the legislative chamber and local councils. To win, the candidate needed to score more than 50% plus one vote in his constituency. No candidate fetched that number to win 22 seats, while controversies erupted about the claimed irregularities to raise the need a second round of voting is marked for 5 January 2020. (1)

These were the first parliamentary elections held since Shavkat Mirziyoyev secured a win in the December 2016 presidential election by claiming 88.6% of the vote, and was sworn in December 14, 2016. The government has pledged to ensure that the elections were free and fair. These are the sixth elections since Uzbekistan's independence in 1991.

Reconstructing the Nation's Image

On the Election Day, official media showed President Mirziyoyev as an accessible, affable and affectionate person freely mixing with voters and their families outside the polling station. Alexander Vorobyov, of Moscow's Oriental Studies Institute, noticed the Uzbekistan's authorities' claims of promoting openness, were aimed at improving the country's political image and economic ratings and the investment climate for making the country attractive for the investors. (2)

The local political parties were allowed, for the first time, to participate in televised debates. Official sources went an extra mile to remind and publicize the updated voters lists, use of better technology and to secure good organization of the logistical arrangements at the polling centres as noticeable features of the 2019 elections. Under the newly-enforced

Election Code “the number of women should be at least 30% of the total number of candidates nominated by a political party”. All these measures were pitched as positive trends in the development of the political system of Uzbekistan, which the authorities hoped to become more open in future.

The December 2019 parliamentary polls were pitched as an election that would make society open and progressive under a new leader. Each vote was interpreted to reflect support for the president's course of action and credit of trust in future polity. Although a part of the electorate developed some interest, however, a majority did not spot much diversity of what the parties stood for. With a comparative approach to competitive political systems, political parties have to win the support of voters. In Uzbekistan, the opposite was true: several registered parties felt relaxed, and the electorate served their needs. Opposition parties, who strongly rejected the government policies, were not particularly tolerated. There was no real opposition for almost all three decades of independence in Uzbekistan.

Despite much claims about a new image and new politics of opening up, Human Rights Watch (HRW) noticed President Mirziyoyev's initiative has "failed to convey the spirit of reforms to voters."⁽³⁾ HRW's statement concluded Uzbekistan's political system has maintained the "authoritarian" legacy. However under former President Islam Karimov who ruled from September 1, 1991 till his death September 2, 2016, independent and opposition candidates were not allowed to run for election. Current President Mirziyoyev, has pledged to open up the country by liberalizing the economic and political spheres. Yet, diverse political events happening recently “simply displayed an excessive dose of self-congratulatory slogans with obscure ideas appearing rather outdated for the occasion,” Akrom Mirkhalikov, an engineer, stated at a polling station in the capital, Tashkent.⁽⁴⁾

Five political parties were represented on the ballots: Party for National Revival, People's Democratic Party (PDPU), Movement of Entrepreneurs and Business People, Social Democratic Party Adolat (Justice) and the Ecological Party. The Liberal Democratic Party of Uzbekistan (UzLiDep), led by president Mirziyoyev is certain to consolidate his political tenure for the next five years. In Uzbekistan, political parties are traditionally seen to serve a symbolic function with a main mission to mobilize and maintain support for a strong presidential system.



Uzbek Televised Campaigns (Catherine Putz)

In the new parliament, seats have been distributed across the spectrum relatively evenly – ranging from the notionally free-marketing, entrepreneurial ethos of UzLiDeP to the more obvious left-of-center Adolat and the People’s Democratic Party. (5)

Uzbekistan's previous parliamentary elections were heavily staged events with predictable outcomes, and were practically non-events. (6) Absence of alternates and lack of competition both contributed to keep voters interest to a minimum low. Hence the latest round of election were noted to offer little diversity and even lesser competition as aptly summed up by an observer: “We have five parties, but in fact it’s like one party divided into five components,” he said. “It’s going to take some time — 10, 50 or maybe up to 100 years — for a real democratic parliament with opposition in it.” (7) Voters expressed sceptical reviews, and many of them did not a clear idea of the candidates’ profiles and platforms. Despite the extensive marketing work and debates before the elections, the programs of the candidates were similar and voters could not make much distinction. This reality derives from the fact that almost all parties, charters and programs were identical, like a photocopy, in terms of their similarities. (8)

Not many observers were sure whether the contesting parties adequately highlighted the distinct and diverse features of their political manifestos. “Although as a whole all parties are part of the ruling system, yet but a token level of debating was maintained” aimed to emanate a semblance of political activity”, according to Dmitry Badovsky, who observed the election campaign as head of the Russian Institute for Social, Economic and Political Studies. Similarly, Uzbek historian Bakhtiyor Alimjanov pointed out the political parties, which took place in the elections, “have almost no distinct identity and they have not even learned to use populist rhetoric” for mobilizing the masses to win them over to their side. (9)

Election 2019

PARLIAMENT OF UZBEKISTAN

The highest state representative body - the Oliy Majlis of the Republic of Uzbekistan

YUKSALISH
NATIONWIDE MOVEMENT

CONSISTS OF TWO CHAMBERS:

LEGISLATIVE CHAMBER

Consist - **150** deputies

Elected on the basis of universal, equal and direct suffrage by secret ballot in territorial single-member constituencies on a multi-party basis.

SENATE

Consist - **100** deputies

Six people are elected from the Republic of Karakalpakstan, regions and the city of Tashkent by secret ballot at the respective joint meetings of deputies of the Jokarga Kenes of the Republic of Karakalpakstan. Kengashes of regions and districts and cities from among these deputies

Length of term - 5 years

16 members of the Senate are appointed by the President

ONE AND THE SAME PERSON CANNOT BE SIMULTANEOUSLY A DEPUTY OF THE LEGISLATIVE CHAMBER AND A MEMBER OF THE SENATE OF THE OLIY MAJLIS OF THE REPUBLIC OF UZBEKISTAN.

WHO CAN BECOME A DEPUTY

Requirements for candidates for deputies of the Legislative Chamber of the Oliy Majlis:

- Citizenship of the Republic of Uzbekistan
- Age - not younger than 25 years
- Permanent residence in Uzbekistan for at least 5 years

NOT ELIGIBLE FOR REGISTRATION BY CANDIDATES FOR DEPUTIES

- Citizens with an outstanding or unexpunged conviction for serious or especially serious crimes
- military personnel of the Armed Forces, employees of the State Security Service, other paramilitary units
- Professional ministers of religious organizations and associations

Political parties have the right to nominate candidates for deputies.

Parliament of Uzbekistan (Getty)

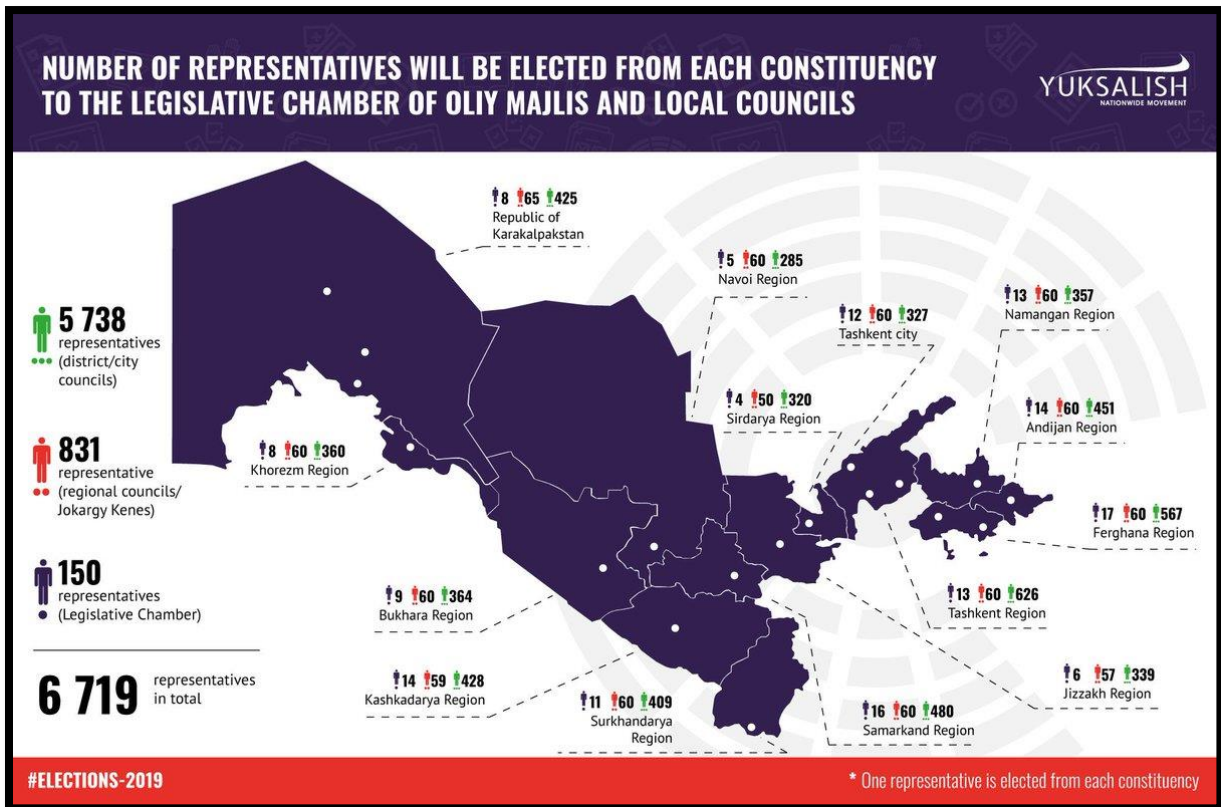
It has become a popular mantra that the Uzbek political parties have become indistinguishable from each other. Public commentator Arkady Dubnov explains the reason that members of all current parties are the product of the incubator, which existed under the

previous regime, and served as 'decorative elements of an authoritarian political system'. Today under Mirziyoyev, representatives of these parties are allowed to articulate some ideas concerning the foreign policy directions of Uzbekistan - for example, the opinion towards Uzbekistan's possible joining of the Eurasian Economic Union. There is widespread belief that such discussion among the parties is controlled from above. Voicing diverse views among the parties is "very beneficial for the political system of Uzbekistan. They reflect the divergent moods i.e. doubts, objections etc. on matters including the EAEU issue which the authorities are not prepared to voice themselves." (10)

The leadership's preferred mode of operation is evident from looking at prominent positions in the Mirziyoyev's staff held by his two sons-in-law, Oybek Tursunov, who is the current head of presidential administration while the younger son-in-law, Otabek Umarov is the head of the presidential security services.

Lack lustre

Uzbek Political parties, whose programs differ little from each other, did not fight for votes. The struggle was practically invisible, except for the clumsy attempts of individual candidates to attract attention. Peter Leonard, of the Central Asia Editor for Eurasia net, argues politics itself seems to be lifeless in the country. One of the reasons is that there is no vigorous political activity usually inherent in the political systems, which are competitive in Uzbekistan. According to some insiders, there are reasons for such political stagnation. The Uzbek political game takes place in a completely controlled space. There is almost no open contestation, even though the parties claim to be different from each other. Even in matters when parties could take competing positions, they always appear restrained and tend to find common ground. Abdurahmon Tashanov, head of Tashkent's Human Rights organization, Ezgulik, explains, "Political pluralism is one feature which is missing - This is not an election. It's just a kind of political exercise". Those who strongly reject government policies are not much encouraged. In Uzbekistan for almost all three decades of independence, there was no real opposition. (11)



Elections and Communities in Uzbekistan (Getty)

Public expectations appear to have been held at a low bar. The emergence of new faces in the Legislature Council to be pitched as ‘new blood’ to imply changes, whereas in reality “there is an expectation that this election will only bring into power a new generation of parliamentarians, not wholesale reform that includes a genuine opposition.”(12) George Tsetereteli, president of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly stated the elections promised "a great opportunity to try these reforms". However, the new elections were indicative of the fact that Uzbek leadership focused on mere political rhetoric.

Some political observers have pointed out neither the authorities, nor the voting population, had clear vision for pursuing genuine democratic reforms and modernization. According to a critical blogger, many may recall that in the past repeated claims were made about Uzbekistan going through the processes of deepening and expanding democratic reforms, liberalization, not forgetting to add all this with one gem, namely the capacious concept that in Uzbekistan there exists and successfully functions a "reformer state". (13)

In a recent survey conducted by Uz-Report TV channel, about 95% of those surveyed said they had not known their deputy in the parliament. The political parties nominated 750 candidates. A breakdown of the profile of the candidates shows that almost a third of them

are teachers, followed by 19 percent economics experts and education, 12 percent doctors, 9 percent engineers, 7 percent lawyers, whereas there are 2 percent candidates only as entrepreneurs or independent businessmen. There was absence of well-informed political figures who could have a new voice and bring a fresh narrative to the political discourse. Not many Uzbek people were hopeful of meaningful or substantial diversity in the country's body politic.

Much Symbolism, Less Substance

Many Uzbek voters remain cynical about the December 22 ballots, which could not pave the way toward real political reform. Sceptics and supporters alike are unsure whether the new legislators would manage to take up their tasks independently without interference. Alisher Kadyrov, head of Milliy Tiklanish, stated that this year's elections were very different from the past, and reflected a lack of trust in the political parties and their candidates. He argued "it is necessary to take this into account and correctly understand that the fact that the fact that voters do not trust us is our own fault". (14)

Other commentators point out the sad reality that the political parties were all part of the past, and had no clear idea about what will help to create a new Uzbekistan – a frequent slogan that has lost its momentum. No party has presented its specific strategy for modernization. All present parties rely on provisions from the state budget, not from contributions by party members and sponsors. There were no independent candidates at all. So, there was not enough trust in the parties either. And as a result – there was a lower turnout in the elections. (15)

Still, these political parties had access to television as the main platform of election campaigns. The elections, held under the slogan “New Uzbekistan – New Elections”, constituted an important milestone in what the president has termed an ‘irreversible modernisation and democratisation process’. Harnessing popular support for the poll could be seen as a crucial step in Mirziyoyev’s strategy of support building in the run up to the next presidential elections which are due in Uzbekistan in 2021. That aim will remain a higher priority as compared to bringing political transformation which could allow the new parliament evolve as an autonomous institution and the democracy to mature. (16)



11th plenary meeting of the Uzbekistan's Senate in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, Aug. 24, 2017 (Getty)

Outlook

About 30 percent of all members of the new parliament were seeking re-election; whereas 65 percent of the candidates nominated by parties run for the first time. This indicator can be seen as a departure from the old set of legislators. Representatives of the International Association for Strategic Studies, who observed the elections in Uzbekistan, have voiced hope that an open and transparent election process, based on public dialogue, is likely to lead to the election of a parliament. It could possibly enjoy trust, respect and authority from the Uzbek public and foreign observers alike. Such a development “in turn, will provide the international community, including the global investment community, with the formation of a government of Uzbekistan, which is trusted by its electorate, responsible to voters. It will also create a climate in which Uzbekistan can play an increasingly significant leadership role in the critical geopolitical and economic space of Central Asia”. (17)

Peter Stano, EU Spokesperson for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, acknowledged the fact that efforts made for improving election laws show a meaningful step forward in offering the people of Uzbekistan a democratic choice over the future direction of their country. He highlighted the need for further investment in the democratic process in Uzbekistan before elections could truly be described as fair and free. Creating and defending a space for

meaningful public debate, including the opposition voices, to establish a sustainable environment in which reforms can be implemented, is crucial and brings real benefits for the country and its people, said the EU spokesperson in Brussels.(18)



OSCE election monitors in Uzbekistan (Tashkent Times)

To overcome the limited range of political options, there remains a need to address factors, which disallowed the opportunity for elections to serve as a contest between distinct political viewpoints and narrowed the choice available to voters. Those who monitored the conduct of the December 22 elections in Uzbekistan suggest that if reforms are accompanied by more opportunities for grass root civic initiatives it may then demonstrate genuine competition.

According to the OSCE Observers Mission, the rules regulating the campaign were still restrictive, and needed to be relaxed so that the range of political options does not remain limited. Although the administration of elections is being modernized, the polling process too needs to become even more transparent to scrutiny. The condition that campaigning and candidates' election spending must be taken out of allocated public funding proved insufficient for candidates to pay for additional visibility beyond their free coverage in the media, limiting the voter outreach capacity. (19)

About the Author

Zaki Shaikh has a doctorate in Mass Communications and have worked with Universities in three Central Asian States. He has made contributions to several media outlets in Europe.

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