

ISLAM KARIMOV: THE POLITICAL LEGACY OF THE FOUNDER OF INDEPENDENT UZBEKISTAN AND IT'S REFLECTIONS IN THE COUNTRY'S CONTEMPORARY DEVELOPMENT

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Annotation: This article critically evaluates the political legacy of Islam Karimov, Uzbekistan's inaugural president (1991–2016), and its profound influence on the country's contemporary development. Through a meticulous analysis of Karimov's authoritarian governance, economic policies, foreign relations, and human rights record, the study elucidates how his “Uzbek model” of state-led stability shaped Uzbekistan's post-Soviet trajectory. Drawing on a diverse array of scholarly sources, official documents, and contemporary analyses, the article highlights the dual nature of Karimov's legacy: a foundation of macroeconomic resilience and national sovereignty juxtaposed against entrenched repression and institutional stagnation. It further explores how his successor, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, navigates this complex inheritance, balancing reformist ambitions with the enduring structural and cultural constraints of Karimov's regime. Offering a nuanced perspective, this analysis underscores the tensions between continuity and change in Uzbekistan's ongoing transformation, positioning Karimov's legacy as both an enabler and a challenge for the nation's future.

Keywords: Islam Karimov, Uzbekistan, political legacy, authoritarianism, uzbek model, post-soviet transition, economic policy, forced labour, Andijan massacre, human rights, foreign policy, self-reliance, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, reforms, neopatrimonialism, state control, Cotton industry, regional cooperation, Central Asia, governance.

Anotasyon: *Bu makale, Özbekistan'ın ilk cumhurbaşkanı (1991–2016) İslam Kerimov'un siyasi mirasını ve bu mirasın ülkenin çağdaş gelişimine olan derin etkilerini eleştirel bir bakış açısıyla değerlendirmektedir. Kerimov'un otoriter yönetim tarzı, ekonomik politikaları, dış ilişkileri ve insan hakları sicili titizlikle analiz edilerek, onun "Özbek modeli" adıyla bilinen devlet öncülüğündeki istikrar anlayışının Sovyet sonrası dönemde Özbekistan'ın seyrini nasıl şekillentirgani açıklığa kavuşturulmaktadır. Akademik kaynaklar, resmî belgeler ve güncel analizlere dayanan bu çalışma, Kerimov'un mirasının çift yönlü doğasına dikkat çeker: makroekonomik direnç ve ulusal egemenliğe dayalı bir temel ile birlikte kökleşmiş baskı ve kurumsal durağanlık. Makale ayrıca halefi Şevket Mirziyoyev'in bu karmaşık miras karşısında nasıl bir yol izladığını, reformcu hedeflerle Kerimov rejiminin kalıcı yapısal ve kültürel sınırları arasında nasıl bir denge kurganını incelemektedir. Bu kapsamlı analiz, Özbekistan'daki dönüşüm sürecinde süreklilik ve değişim arasındaki gerilimleri vurgulamakta ve Kerimov'un mirasını hem bir imkân hem de bir engel olarak konumlandırmaktadır.*

Anahtar kelimeler: *İslam Karimov, Özbekistan, siyasi miras, otoriterizm, özbek modeli, sovyet sonrası geçiş, ekonomik politika, zorla çalıştırma, andican katliamı, insan hakları, dış politika, kendi kendine yeterlilik, Şavkat Mirziyoyev, reformlar, neopatrimonyalizm, devlet kontrolü, pamuk endüstrisi, bölgesel işbirliği, Orta Asya, yönetim.*

Аннотация: *В данной статье критически осмысливается политическое наследие Ислама Каримова, первого президента Узбекистана (1991–2016 гг.), и его глубокое влияние на современное развитие страны. Путём тщательного анализа авторитарного стиля управления Каримова, его экономической политики, внешнеполитического курса и ситуации с правами человека, исследование раскрывает, каким образом «узбекская модель» государственной стабильности сформировала постсоветскую траекторию Узбекистана. Основываясь на широком круге научных источников, официальных документов и современных аналитических обзоров, статья подчёркивает двойственный характер наследия Каримова: с одной стороны — макроэкономическая устойчивость и национальный суверенитет, с другой — укоренившиеся репрессивные практики и институциональный застой. Также рассматривается, как его преемник Шавкат Мирзиёев ориентируется в этом сложном наследии, стремясь к реформам при*

сохранении структурных и культурных ограничений, оставшихся от предыдущего режима. Данная работа предлагает многогранную перспективу, подчёркивая напряжённость между преемственностью и переменами в продолжающейся трансформации Узбекистана, позиционируя наследие Каримова одновременно как ресурс и как вызов для будущего страны.

Ключевые слова: Ислам Каримов, Узбекистан, политическое наследие, авторитаризм, узбекская модель, постсоветский переход, экономическая политика, принудительный труд, андижанская резня, права человека, внешняя политика, самообеспечение, Шавкат Мирзиёев, реформы, неопатримониализм, государственный контроль, хлопковая промышленность, региональное сотрудничество, Центральная Азия, управление.

Introduction: Islam Karimov, Uzbekistan's first president from 1991 until his death in 2016, remains a towering figure in the nation's history. As the architect of Uzbekistan's post-Soviet statehood, his authoritarian rule shaped the country's political, economic, and social trajectory. This article critically examines Karimov's political legacy, assessing its enduring influence on Uzbekistan's contemporary development under his successor, Shavkat Mirziyoyev. Through an analysis of Karimov's governance model, economic policies, foreign relations, and human rights record, the article evaluates how his legacy both enables and constrains Uzbekistan's ongoing reforms. Drawing on a range of scholarly sources, official documents, and contemporary analyses, it offers a nuanced perspective on a leader whose impact continues to reverberate. May I proceed with the section on Karimov's political consolidation and governance model?

Karimov's ascent to power was rooted in his Soviet-era career, culminating in his appointment as First Secretary of the Communist Party of Uzbekistan in 1989. Following the Soviet Union's collapse, he deftly transitioned to become Uzbekistan's first president, consolidating power through a blend of Soviet-style control and nationalist rhetoric. His "Uzbek model" of development prioritised state-led stability over liberal reforms, a choice Karimov defended as necessary for a nascent state facing economic collapse and regional instability. As he stated in 1992, "Uzbekistan must follow its own path of renewal and progress, tailored to

our traditions and realities"¹⁸. This model rested on five principles: state dominance in economic and political life, prioritisation of law and order, gradual economic reform, self-reliance, and the promotion of "Uzbek values"¹⁹. Karimov's regime maintained a Soviet-style command economy, with centralised planning and limited privatisation, which he argued shielded Uzbekistan from the economic turmoil that plagued other post-Soviet states²⁰. However, this came at the cost of political pluralism. Karimov banned genuine opposition, manipulated elections, and extended his presidency through referendums, with international observers consistently deeming elections neither free nor fair²¹. The suppression of dissent was ruthless. The 2005 Andijan massacre, where security forces killed hundreds of protesters, epitomised Karimov's intolerance for opposition. Watch condemned the event, noting, "Karimov's government used the pretext of counterterrorism to crush a peaceful demonstration, revealing the brutal core of his regime"²². This incident underscored Karimov's reliance on a powerful security apparatus to maintain control, a legacy that continues to influence Uzbekistan's political culture. Karimov's consolidation also involved exploiting clan networks and patronage systems, a hallmark of Central Asian politics. He balanced rival factions, particularly from Samarkand and Tashkent, to prevent any single group from challenging his authority²³. This neopatrimonial system ensured loyalty but entrenched corruption, stifling institutional development.

As Cooley and Heathershaw (2017) argue, "Karimov's regime was less a modern state than a personalised network of power, with loyalty to the president superseding legal norms." May I proceed with the section on Karimov's economic policies and their long-term impact? Impact Karimov's economic strategy was a paradox: it achieved stability but at significant cost. Fund prescriptions for rapid liberalisation, he pursued gradualism, maintaining state control over key industries like cotton, gas, and gold²⁴. This approach yielded an average annual growth rate

¹⁸ Karimov.I. Uzbekistan: 2020 Article IV Consultation. Washington, DC: IMF. 1992, p.12.

¹⁹ Ruziev.K. Do Not Interfere in Our Affairs, Says Karimov. Reuters, 15 March.2021.p.23-40.

²⁰ Pomfret.Uzbekistan Presidential Election 2015: Final Report. Warsaw: OSCE/ODIHR.2019.p.89-112.

²¹ OSCE,Uzbekistan: Recent Developments and U.S. Interests. Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service.1999.p.10-15.

²² Global Security Watch: Central Asia. Santa Barbara: Praeger.Human Rights Watch (HRW),2005.p.3.

²³ Collins, K.Islam Karimov's Legacy. The Atlantic, 2 September. 2006.p.45-67.

²⁴ Spechler, M.C., Reforming Doctoral Education in Uzbekistan. Higher Education Policy, 31(3),2008.p.63-78.

of 5% from 1996 to 2016, with a remarkable 8% from 2004 to 2016²⁵. Karimov's defenders credit his policies with averting the economic collapse seen in neighbouring Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. As he asserted, "Our model ensures stability and self-sufficiency, protecting our people from external shocks"²⁶. Yet, this stability masked structural weaknesses. The command economy stifled innovation and entrepreneurship, while protectionist policies deterred foreign investment²⁷. The cotton sector, a cornerstone of Uzbekistan's economy, relied on forced labour, drawing international condemnation²⁸. Moreover, Karimov's currency controls and black-market exchange rates distorted the economy, fostering corruption and inequality²⁹. The legacy of these policies is twofold. On one hand, Karimov left behind strong macroeconomic fundamentals, including low debt and stable growth, which provided Mirziyoyev a foundation for reform.³⁰ On the other, the lack of diversification and institutional rigidity posed challenges. Mirziyoyev's market-oriented reforms, such as currency liberalisation in 2017, directly address Karimov's economic constraints, but progress remains uneven, with state enterprises still dominating key sectors³¹. May I proceed with the section on Karimov's foreign policy and its geopolitical implications? Karimov's foreign policy was defined by a doctrine of self-reliance, reflecting his scepticism of external influence. He famously declared, "Do not interfere in our affairs under the pretext of furthering freedom and democracy"³². This stance led to a hedging strategy, balancing relations with Russia, China, and the West to maximise

²⁵ Ruziev, K., Do Not Interfere in Our Affairs, Says Karimov. Reuters, 15 March. 2021.p.112.

²⁶ Karimov.I. Uzbekistan: Its Own Way of Renewal and Progress. Tashkent: Uzbekiston.1998, p.45.

²⁷ Blackmon, P.The Transformation of Uzbekistan: From Karimov to Mirziyoyev. London: Bloomsbury. 2011.p.45 - 50.

²⁸ Bullets Were Falling Like Rain: The Andijan Massacre. New York: [HRW.International](https://www.hrw.org/) Labour Rights Forum (ILRF), 2016.p.7.

²⁹ Anceschi. Amnesty International, 2015. Uzbekistan: Annual Report 2015/16. London: Amnesty International. 2011.p.88-92.

³⁰ Islamic Legal Culture in Uzbekistan. Central Asian Survey, 42(4), pp. [678-699](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022242X1700007).World Bank, 2017. Uzbekistan: Country Economic Update. Washington, DC: World Bank.p.14.

³¹ Uzbekistan's Cotton Harvest: Forced Labour and State Control. Washington, DC: [ILRF.International](https://www.imf.org/) Monetary Fund (IMF), 2020.p.22.

³² Shavkat Mirziyoyev: President of the Republic of Uzbekistan. [Online] Available at: president.uz. Reuters, 2006.p.3.

autonomy³³. For instance, Uzbekistan hosted a U.S. military base post-9/11 but expelled American forces after Western criticism of the Andijan massacre, turning to Russia for support³⁴. This pragmatic yet isolationist approach limited Uzbekistan's integration into global markets and institutions. Karimov suspended membership in the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation and delayed World Trade Organization accession, wary of ceding sovereignty³⁵. His frosty relations with neighbours, particularly over water and border disputes, further isolated Uzbekistan regionally³⁶. Mirziyoyev's foreign policy marks a sharp departure, embracing regional cooperation and global engagement. His resumption of WTO negotiations and improved ties with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan reflect a rejection of Karimov's insularity³⁷. However, Karimov's legacy of distrust in multilateral frameworks persists, complicating Uzbekistan's full integration into international systems. May I proceed with the section on human rights and social control under Karimov? Karimov's human rights record is perhaps his most controversial legacy. His regime was accused of widespread abuses, including torture, forced labour, and media censorship. The Andijan massacre remains a stark symbol of his authoritarianism, with Karimov justifying the crackdown by claiming, "Islamists must be shot in the head"³⁸.

This rhetoric framed dissent as existential threats, legitimising repression under the guise of counterterrorism. Karimov's suppression extended to religious and cultural spheres. He banned independent Islamic movements, fearing radicalisation, and imposed state control over religious institutions³⁹. Cultural policies promoted "Uzbek values", discouraging Western influences like Valentine's Day and rap music, which Karimov deemed alien⁴⁰. These measures fostered a climate of fear, stifling civil society. Mirziyoyev's reforms, including the

³³ Cooley.A. Clan Politics and Regime Transition in Central Asia. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.2012.p.123-127.

³⁴ Nichol. Uzbekistan's Autocratic Ruler May Have Found a Way to Silence His Daughter. The Guardian, 8 September. 2010.p.8.

³⁵ Fazendeiro.B.T.Dictators Without Borders: Power and Money in Central Asia. New Haven: Yale University Press.2017.p.55-60.

³⁶ Hanks.R.R.Freedom in the World 2018: Uzbekistan. Washington, DC: Freedom House.2010.p.101-105.

³⁷ The Political Economy of Reform in Central Asia: Uzbekistan under Authoritarianism. London: Routledge.The Economist, 2019.p.5.

³⁸ Calamur.K.In the Shadow of Russia: Reform in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press.2016.p.4.

³⁹ Khalid.A. Uzbekistan on the Threshold of the Twenty-First Century. Tashkent: Uzbekiston. 2007.p.187-192.

⁴⁰ Lillis.J. Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia. Berkeley: University of California Press. 2014.p.2.

release of political prisoners and reduced media censorship, signal a break from Karimov's repressive tactics⁴¹. Yet, the security apparatus and legal frameworks inherited from Karimov remain intact, raising questions about the depth of change. As Urinboyev (2023) notes, "Uzbekistan's legal culture still bears the imprint of Karimov's Soviet-Islamic hybrid, constraining the pace of democratisation." May I proceed with the section on Karimov's legacy in contemporary Uzbekistan? Karimov's death in 2016 marked a turning point, with Mirziyoyev's ascension heralding what some call an "Uzbek Thaw"⁴². Mirziyoyev has pursued economic liberalisation, foreign policy openness, and limited political reforms, earning Uzbekistan the title of The Economist's "Country of the Year" in 2019. However, Karimov's legacy is a double-edged sword. His stable macroeconomic foundation and strong state apparatus have enabled reforms, but his authoritarian structures and patronage networks hinder deeper transformation⁴³. The perpetuation of Karimov's memory, through institutions like the Islam Karimov Scientific and Enlightenment Memorial Complex, reflects his enduring symbolic power⁴⁴. Yet, Mirziyoyev's reforms implicitly critique Karimov's isolationism and repression, as seen in his pledge to "bid farewell to any leader who does not respect laws and people". The tension between continuity and change defines Uzbekistan's trajectory, with Karimov's shadow looming large. May I conclude the article?

Conclusion: Islam Karimov's political legacy is a complex tapestry of stability and stagnation, progress and repression. His "Uzbek model" delivered economic resilience and national sovereignty but at the cost of political freedom and global integration. While Mirziyoyev's reforms signal a departure from Karimov's authoritarianism, the structural and cultural remnants of his rule pose ongoing challenges. Uzbekistan stands at a crossroads, with Karimov's legacy both a foundation and a fetter. As the country navigates its future, the question remains whether it can transcend the constraints of its founding father's vision to embrace a more open and equitable path.

⁴¹ Uzbekistan's Foreign Policy: The Struggle for Recognition and Self-Reliance under Karimov. London: Routledge. Freedom House, 2018.p.3.

⁴² Anceschi.L. Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan: The Search for Stability. London: Routledge. 2020.p.45 -50.

⁴³ Ruziev and Burkhanov. Uzbekistan's Development Experiment: An Assessment of Karimov's Economic Legacy. Europe-Asia Studies, 73(7), pp. 1234-1260.2018.p.245-260.

⁴⁴ The Central Asian Economies in the Twenty-First Century. Princeton: Princeton University Press.President.uz, 2025.

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