

For Karimov, the personal was always political

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The death of Islam Karimov, Uzbekistan's president, marks the end of one of the world's most ruthless dictatorships. Karimov reportedly tortured dissidents, incarcerated thousands of political prisoners and maintained airtight control over the Central Asian state's media and social spaces.

But he was also a master at leveraging the geopolitical agendas of outsiders for his personal benefit. Over decades, his rule exposed the contradictions of western policy and revealed the hard limits of western attempts to promote reforms in Central Asia.

Since becoming president in 1991, Karimov pursued Uzbekistan's foreign policy as an extension of his highly personalistic and unchecked personal rule. He zealously promoted Uzbekistan's sovereignty and autonomy and remained deeply suspicious of the value of military alliances and regional economic organisations. He cultivated relations with Washington, Moscow and Beijing, actively playing these suitors off against one another.

Karimov's uncompromising internal crackdown against Islamic militants was vindicated following the events of 9/11, when the US, with Russia's initial approval, established a military base in the south of the country to support its campaign in neighbouring Afghanistan. Karimov became Washington's close security and intelligence partner, while the US provided Uzbekistan with hundreds of millions of dollars that further strengthened his coercive apparatus.

Contrary to the hopes of many western policymakers, this security cooperation did not lead to gradual liberalisation but rather emboldened Karimov to become even more ruthless. Tensions came to a head in May 2005 when in the wake of the Colour Revolutions that swept Kremlin-friendly post-Soviet rulers out of office, Karimov became convinced that the west was determined to topple him. When protesters took to the streets of the eastern city of Andijon, Karimov initiated

a crackdown of the like not seen since Tiananmen square, as hundreds of protesters were mowed down by the open fire of Uzbek security services.

Karimov fiercely resisted calls for an international inquiry into those events and was infuriated by western criticism (in contrast to Russia and China, which strongly backed him). Weeks later, the Uzbek government formally evicted the US from its military facility and Uzbekistan joined the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). But for Karimov such geopolitical shifts were always temporary – in 2012, much to Moscow's irritation, he quit the organisation.

In the aftermath of Andijon, Karimov expelled most outside NGOs, such as Freedom House and the Open Society Foundation. Within a year, all of the other Central Asian countries followed suit in enacting tough new restrictions on civil society and the media; western organisations were no longer just political nuisances, but were rebranded as destabilising threats. Russia's president Vladimir Putin opportunistically used this backlash to try and draw regimes back into Moscow's orbit.

Western efforts to cooperate with Karimov also highlighted the west's own double standards and moral compromises. In 2005 it was revealed that the CIA, in cooperation with Uzbek security forces, had operated black sites and extraordinary renditions within the country. After Andijon the State Department the Pentagon were at odds over how much to criticise Uzbekistan, while In Europe, the adoption of even a mild slate of sanctions by the EU ignited an intense broader debate over whether Brussels should act as a strategic or normative foreign policy actor. Germany, concerned about preserving access to a military base at Termez, was the leading proponent of keeping a constructive relationship and led the effort to rescind the sanctions.

Meanwhile, in 2008 the US once again pursued security cooperation with Tashkent to establish a logistical network to supply troops in Afghanistan through Central Asia. Once operational, Karimov threatened US planners with disrupting supply lines should political criticism become too vocal, while Uzbek state-run companies repeatedly hiked transit fees and extracted informal payments. In 2010, under the guise of a new bilateral partnership, Washington lifted restrictions on providing military assistance to Tashkent, while in 2015 it announced the transfer of 300 military vehicles to Tashkent.

Finally, as Karimov's Uzbekistan became an exemplar of internal political repression and economic autarky, Karimov's security services exported repression globally and his cosmopolitan family members pursued personal profit. Uzbek security services actively cooperate with Russian counterparts to monitor and forcibly return Uzbek migrants and political opponents, while Uzbek security services have been implicated in extraterritorial assassination attempts of regime critics

from neighbouring Kyrgyzstan all the way to Sweden.

Overseas, Karimov's younger daughter Lola, who serves as Uzbekistan's Ambassador to Unesco, in Paris unsuccessfully sued a French newspaper for referring to her as the "Dictator's Daughter". His oldest daughter, Gulnara, was implicated in several international investigations involving telecommunications-related corruption scandals. The negative international publicity surrounding Gulnara became so intense that in 2014 she was placed under house arrest in Tashkent.

Speculation in international media is rife about the volatility of the upcoming succession – long-serving prime minister Shaukat Mirziyoyev appears to be positioned to take over. But Karimov's enduring legacy is to leave his successors and neighbours a comprehensive playbook on how to uncompromisingly wield power on all fronts.

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