



Mirziyoev-Led Uzbekistan: Balancing Between Political Legitimacy and Autocracy

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Over the last two decades, one could observe an interesting trend – the authoritarian rule is becoming trendy again. If before the Millennium democracy was still on the rise, then later, according to the V-Dem Institute, the number of states considered autocracy would begin to rapidly increase (V-Dem Institute 2021). The August 2021 fiasco of the democracy project in Afghanistan, when the Taliban had taken quite easily Kabul and the whole country under their control, as well as the more successful recovery of China from the Covid-19 pandemic will probably boost further this historical turn back to authoritarianism. This is one of the reasons why it is important to understand better how authoritarian regimes function and endure.

However, we should distinguish between at least two categories of authoritarianism. The first one is a relatively recent phenomenon and is associated with the so-called illiberal democracies (Zakaria 1997; Kadioğlu 2019) based on which authoritarian leaders come to power through the quite democratic electoral process. Thus, what makes this category authoritarian is the way how the winner of the quite competitive elections runs the country, doing so by undercutting the rule of law and human rights and resorting to populism to manipulate public opinion. This category is represented by such countries as Turkey, Hungary, the Philippines, and Brazil in their latest developments.

Regarding the second category of authoritarianism, its examples can be found in the post-Soviet countries, such as Russia, Azerbaijan, and practically all Central Asian states, where parliamentary and presidential elections can be by no means considered free and fair, where political competition is just simulated. In these countries, only the so-called “pocket” parties or the parties which the ruling regime would pick selectively would be admitted to the electoral process and even allowed to operate freely. This category of authoritarianism can be considered old-fashioned, as it is very little distinguished from the past Soviet totalitarian system. That is why globally, the interest in this category of authoritarian regimes is relatively low compared to the first category because almost nothing significant has been happening and is expected in close future in this part of the world in terms of political development. The region attracts attention mostly because of the security threat to the West growing from Russia armed with nuclear weapons. The ongoing turmoil in neighboring Afghanistan is another reason for the world’s interest in post-Soviet Central Asia. But if to look back to the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, then one can see how lofty expectations of the new wave of democracy in this region were, thanks to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact. Three decades passed, only three of the post-Soviet republics, apart from the Baltic republics which had joined the European Union, - Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, and Armenia – today meet, but only to some extent, the definition of democracy, but even they still struggle to establish the rule of law.

Some researchers tried to explain the root causes of such an unsuccessful transition process in the former Soviet Union by turning their attention to the role of informal networks and relations that are playing in the governance system. Special interest in this respect was attracted by the phenomenon of patronage

networks that deeply affect power relations (Collins 2004; Ilkhamov 2011; Jones Luong, 2002; Ruiz-Ramas and Hernandez; Schatz 2005; Shkel 2019). The concept of neopatrimonialism was developed to highlight the fact that in the governance system of many contemporary, but still underdeveloped nation-states “both legal-rational and informal components are equally important” and interwoven with each other (Ilkhamov 2007, 66).

However, while explaining well the relative resilience of authoritarian ruling regimes, the concept of neopatrimonialism has proven to be quite limited in explaining the differences between diverse types of such regimes and trends in their evolution. This article aims to fill this gap by upgrading the neopatrimonialism-related conceptual approach, with the hope to better understand the nature of authoritarian regimes, for instance, why some of them are well-known for having provided more space for civic, political, and economic freedom, while others – for a more rigid and violent authoritarian rule that does not tolerate any dissent. Among Central Asian regimes, at least until recently, Kyrgyzstan¹ belonged to the former, while Uzbekistan during the reign of Islam Karimov and Turkmenistan to the latter category of authoritarian states. Other countries in the region, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, as well as Uzbekistan under the current Mirziyoyev regime, can be placed between these two relative extremes.

Distinguishing between legal and political legitimacy

Primarily, the approach suggested here poses two critical questions: 1) thanks to what factors a particular figure, or a group of people seize the power, how legitimate this acquisition from a legal point of view, and 2) how do they use and hold this power after having seized it, and how is this rule legitimate from a political point of view? Thus, the **concept of legitimacy** is becoming pivotal to allow us to depart from the insufficient heuristic concept of neopatrimonialism, and rest on distinguishing between the two aspects of legitimacy, **legal and political**.

The acquisition of power would be considered from the point of view of legal legitimacy, meaning to which extent this acquisition is compliant with the constitutional norms and the international norms of electoral democracy. In many cases, at least in the post-Soviet context, the authoritarian regimes are results of the legally illegitimate acquisition of power and, as such, can be considered as state capture, the concept of which has been so far mostly used in the context of illiberal democracies when some powerful corporate and interest groups unduly influence the public bureaucracies for their private interests (Hellman, Jones, Kaufmann 2000). But we can equally apply the concept of state capture to the highly undemocratic environment in the post-Soviet space.

At the same time, even if the process of seizing power was not legitimate from a legal point of view, still the resulting ruling regime would have chances to prove its legitimacy, this time from a political point of view. That would require the adoption and implementation by these regime sound policies in the socio-economic and political spheres that would secure a certain level of population’s consent with the occupation by the current leader of the top public office. On the possibility of such political legitimacy that can be acquired by an authoritarian regime, if it establishes constitutionalism, the rule of law and check and balances in governing the country, as well as guarantees individual liberties, wrote Fareed Zakaria opposing himself to democracies that are illiberal (Zakaria 1997). In essence, a ruler acquires such legitimacy by reaching a kind of **social contract** with those governed, both the ordinary citizens and the elite groups.

The concept of social contracts is understood here nearly in the same way Thomas Hobbes, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and John Locke (Hobbes 1651; Rousseau 1762; Locke 1689) conceptualized it. For them, both parties of such a contract are not coerced to reach the agreement, written or not, but de facto agree on its certain conditions. One party of this contract agrees to be governed by another, while the second party, in

¹ With Sadyr Japarov having assumed in October 2020 the positions of both Prime-Minister and Acting President the question arose whether Kyrgyzstan should be qualified a failed state declining to a Karimov-style authoritarian regime.

turn, commits to satisfy certain needs of the former. At the same time, there is an understanding that those who agree to be governed may do that thanks to at least two reasons. The first reason is that someone assuming the role of a governor may indeed deserve it by demonstrating leadership qualities and adopting fair policies that satisfy the needs of those governed. But also, such consent can be manufactured through brainwashing and propaganda, and we elaborate on this factor below. The social contract should be understood here as an ideal variant of relationships between the ruler and the governed. In reality, the ruler is often not able or unwilling to observe such a social contract and is forced to complement its elements with other instruments of maintaining control of power.

It is important to reiterate that we are talking here mainly about the political legitimacy of authoritarian ruling regimes. In modern democracies, legitimacy is institutionalized through the systematic practice of free and fair elections, so the difference between legal and political aspects of legitimacy is minimal as compared with autocracies. As a rule, in established democracies, political legitimacy is translated into a legal one, while in authoritarian regimes these two aspects of legitimacy are separated from each other. In autocracies, it is difficult to measure their political legitimacy, because the respective ruler does not allow for free and fair elections in the country he rules. Yet, it is important to try to measure political legitimacy, if not through democratic elections, then at least by diagnosing how does the regime perform in the following three key aspects of governance:

(1) **Fair and efficient socio-economic policies** that would provide economic growth, fair living conditions for the population, jobs, and fair distribution of public wealth.

(2) **Delivering “justice for all**, by guaranteeing civil liberties, human rights, the rule of law, integrity, and efficiency of the governance system.

(3) **Warranting law & order**, to make the population feel secure and protected from crime and public disorder.

Performing well in all these three spheres would make the ruling regime meet the standards of what is called “good governance” (see also twelve principles of good governance adopted by the Council of Europe) which has been established more or less successfully practically in all developed democratic states. But autocracies have rarely reached this point in their performance on reasons we are going to discuss in the next section, so that good governance thus remains unattainable by them.

To begin with explanation, if an authoritarian regime reaches a certain level of political legitimacy, then often this happens thanks to its ability to manufacture consent by exercising its control of the mainstream mass media, particularly TV channels and other means of propaganda which allows it to manipulate the public opinion (Herman and Chomsky 1988, Bernays 1969). Quite often politicians and political leaders reach a certain degree of legitimacy in the eyes of a significant part of the population due to their politics and rhetoric appeal towards nationalistic and religious feelings amongst the population. For instance, Ayatollah Khomeini was most likely perceived by religious zealots in Iran as a legitimate national leader. In Hungary, the anti-immigrant and nationalist politics of the Prime Minister Viktor Orbán appealed to a certain part of the population, which helped him to get elected three times since 2010 (see also on the role religion and ideology play in legitimizing the contest for power by some rebel groups – Podder 2012). In authoritarian states, such a factor of ideology and propaganda may help the ruler to retain his control of power without too much relying on violent methods of securing obedience. But very often the reliance on propaganda does not guarantee control of power for an authoritarian leader. If at the same time, he performs weakly in the three aforementioned areas, economy, the rule of law, and law-and-order, then he has no other choice but to resort to tougher measures.

The limits of political legitimacy in authoritarian regimes

Although an authoritarian ruler cannot ignore the need of enhancing his political legitimacy, he is even more preoccupied with preserving control of power, regardless of whether his policies are popular or not among the population. That is why he would do everything possible to ensure his control of power and make

sure the population obeys and submits to his rule. He needs to ensure the submission of both the rank-and-file citizens and the elite groups, including high-ranking members of public administration and power structures, as well as the most influential members of the wealthy class. To ensure the loyalty and submission of both groups the authoritarian ruler employs various strategies, from violence, coercion, and repressions to “softer” methods, such as granting privileges to the most influential groups, in exchange for their loyalty and their service in providing political status quo.

Let us more closely consider what strategies, or measures, contemporary authoritarian regimes follow to ensure the submission and loyalty of those governed. These measures include **patronage**, **inducement**, and **coercion** and, as such, have not much changed since the old-time monarchies.

The politics of exploiting **patronage** networks means that a political leader himself represents and often leads, or at least exploits for his interests one or another informal network, such as clan, long-standing friendship, fellow countrymen ties, patron-clientele relationships based on informal exchanges of favors, such as “blat” in Soviet times (Ledeneva 1998) and in contemporary Uzbekistan often called, fairly or not, *uzbekchilik*. In some cases, an authoritarian political leader, for instance, Islam Karimov at the beginning of his political career, may not belong to any of such patronage networks, but would still manipulate such networks by playing on the rivalry between them, following the logic “divide and rule”.

One of the starkest examples of such a patronage network has been the group of close associates and cronies of Vladimir Putin. With them, he forged close ties since his work in the Saint Petersburg city administration in 1990–1996. When Putin succeeded presidency from Boris Yeltsin, the members of that circle, including Dmitri Medvedev, Sergey Ivanov, Sergey Naryshkin, Igor Sechin, Nikolay Patrushev, and others, were appointed to various top positions in the government, thus providing his loyalty base within the public administration.

The factor of **inducement** works through deliberately inducing, or luring, bureaucratic and business elites, as well as law enforcement and security services, by granting them certain privileges in exchange for their loyalty. In distinction from patronage, which is built upon inter-personal ties and relationships, the inducement politics works by engaging with a certain social stratum, wherein the authoritarian leader may even not be familiar in-person and direct contact with most of their members. The most characteristic example of such an inducement policy was the *nomenklatura* system in the USSR, selected by the leadership of the Communist Party as the most perspective and loyal candidates for occupying public office. One of the features of that system was providing members of *nomenclature* with various benefits not available for ordinary citizens, including deficit commodities, food products, apartments and services of high quality, access to dachas and luxury resorts, and so on.

In the post-Soviet era, another form of inducement policy has become more widespread, which works by tolerating and turning a blind eye to the illicit enrichment of the members of the bureaucratic class, which is achieved by abusing public office and through conflicts of interests. This special treatment of the top bureaucratic and law enforcement elite has given a reason to call these groups “new nobility”, the term which was introduced by the head of Russian Federal Security Service Nikolay Patrushev (Шевелев 2020). The result of such inducement politics can be qualified as a procured loyalty, top-down bribery, which cements the social base of the authoritarian regime.

Finally, **coercion** is another and the most visible measure securing the submission of the population to the supreme authoritarian ruler. Both the Soviet and the post-Soviet history is full of examples of how the ruling regime uses instruments of intimidation, violence, and political repressions as a punishment for disloyalty and dissent. Under authoritarian rule, law enforcement agencies, security services, prosecution, judiciary, prison administration all serve as an instrument of coercion to secure the population’s loyalty and submission to the ruling regime. Such a coercive practice has been notable in Uzbekistan, particularly during the reign of Islam Karimov. Other post-Soviet countries where one can also observe the systemic practices of coercion and political repressions are Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and lately, in the last decade, in the Russian Federation.

At the same time, among authoritarian regimes, there has been understanding that reliance exclusively on violence would be unsustainable for their long-term interests, for securing stable control of power without provoking unrest among the population. That is why they try to combine measures ensuring political loyalty with the instruments of the autocratic hold of power we have just described. The question is only how they balance these two scopes of strategies one against another at certain stages of their evolution. Such a balance can be different across various authoritarian regimes, but also may change over time in each of these regimes.

The suggested concept offers a multidimensional approach to studying authoritarian regimes. It accommodates but does not limit the analysis to the concept of neopatrimonialism, suggesting a set of other variables, seven in total, to complement it, as it is shown in Table 1. Each of these variables can be further described by another set of constituent variables.

Table 1. The dual system of authoritarian rule

1. Measures securing ruling regime's political legitimacy	1.1 Fair and effective socio-economic policies 1.2 Delivering justice to all and the rule of law 1.3 Warranting law & order 1.4 Manufacturing consent using propaganda and populist rhetoric	2. Measures securing autocratic rule and population's submission and loyalty	2.1 Patronage 2.2 Inducement 2.3 Coercion
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One caveat is that we do not include in this scheme two things:

1) the factor of legal legitimacy, as it hardly can be considered a strategy an authoritarian regime would take seriously, which is true at least in the post-Soviet context. An authoritarian regime would need only to pretend to have gotten legal legitimacy and adapt to a lack of it, overcoming its effect by employing two scopes of measures described above. The post-Soviet history of Uzbekistan can be brought as an eloquent illustration of how this duality of authoritarian rule lacking legal legitimacy works in practice.

2) political legitimacy in its international dimension, that is in the eyes of major international stakeholders. Considering this aspect would be fair and necessary, but should be a subject of a separate study, going beyond the current conceptual framework of analysis.

The governance record of the Karimov regime

The post-Soviet history of Uzbekistan goes back already thirty years and has seen so far only two presidents, of which, Islam Karimov, ruled the country for twenty-six years, and another, Shavkat Mirziyoev, has just begun his second presidential term. Both ruling regimes can be considered authoritarian, having many features in common, and, at the same time, having some important differences, especially from the point of view of how they manage the balance between the two scopes of strategies, one related to political legitimacy and another to the autocratic instruments of holding the power. Exactly from this point of view, we will try to describe the commonalities and peculiarities of each of these two regimes.

Regime's performance in the socio-economic sphere

Right after the collapse of the Soviet Union, when most of the former union republics experienced hardships caused by economic decline and the disruption of socio-economic ties between them, Islam Karimov had adopted some urgent policies which helped to mitigate that economic shock. First, the

government under his leadership decided to allocate small plots of land, up to 0.25 ha, to households, especially in rural areas (Ilkhamov 1998), the measure that in the country dominated by the rural population (60% that time) saved many families from hunger and allowed some of them to raise some income by selling their agricultural output in the local bazaars. Second, the poorest could meet ends thanks to small allowances that were allocated to large families, the decision on the distribution of which was prudently delegated to *mahalla* (local neighborhood) committees which were aware better than the local administration who among the residents are in need for such assistance most of all (Ilkhamov 1999, 7). These measures, combined with the payment of pensions, enabled the reduction of the scale of hardships in the country, although did not solve the problem of mass poverty in the longer run.

Due to little progress in implementing economic reforms, all these measures ceased to work already by the end of the 1990s. Only labor migration to economically more prosperous Russia and Kazakhstan helped to alleviate, to some extent, the sufferings of the population, absorbing significant masses of unemployed and underemployed (nine hundred thousand only in the first half of 2019 arrived in Russia – RBC.Ru 2019). The labour migration effect was possible already thanks not to the merits of the ruling regime, but to the fact that borders between CIS countries remained open, allowing for a visa-free movement.

However, despite the socially mitigating effect of labor outmigration, already by the end of the 1990s discontent among the population with the existing status quo began to grow. The ultimate root cause of the ongoing economic decline was Karimov's Soviet-style policy of hyper-centralization in governing economic affairs, quite hostile to the freedom of entrepreneurship. The old-fashioned administrative system, restrictions of basic civil liberties, for instance, the right of free movement, had also contributed to the problem. As a result, tax revenues stopped to raise enough to mitigate the problem of mass unemployment and low living standards. The uprising in Andijan in 2005 was to a significant degree caused by this decline in living standards and abuse of power by local administrations.

Despite the richness in natural resources, the country became extremely unpopular among international investors (UNCTAD 2020) because of the over-centralized economic governance, the corrupt institutional environment, and the absence of rule of law. Foreign investments flew into the country primarily under the government guarantees or by engaging in shadow, behind-the-doors deals with high-ranking officials. On top of that, due to a widespread practice of state-sponsored forced labor in the cotton sector, Uzbek cotton and textiles were boycotted by many western companies (RSN 2021), which, of course, negatively affected the most effective use of the country's economic potential.

Justice and rule of law

The Karimov regime responded to the growing protest moods in the society by further tightening the screws. The exception from this trend was a short period of thaw that lasted from the beginning of 2002 till the beginning of 2004 (Ilkhamov 2005). The easing in repressive politics was possible thanks to the agreement on geostrategic cooperation that was signed by Uzbekistan and the United States following the decision by Islam Karimov to assist the US-led military operation in the Taliban-ruled Afghanistan (Ibid). The agreement stipulated not only cooperation in the sphere of security and war on terror, but also opening more space in Uzbekistan for civic freedoms. But in 2004, Karimov, having been frightened by the “color” revolution in Georgia in 2003 (CSCE 2004), began retreating from that politics of openness and resuming its political repressions and crackdown on civil society. Around two hundred non-governmental organizations were closed (RFE/RL 2006), the censorship of the press was heightened, the number of political prisoners was increased. The situation in terms of human rights even more aggravated after the Andijan massacre in May 2005 (Human Rights Watch 2006) and remained such until the death of Islam Karimov in 2016.

The dire situation in the economy and the sphere of rule of law and human rights was exacerbated by all-pervasive corruption. Even members of the president's own family were involved in grand corruption. Leveraging their ties to the presidential power, some of them seized one tidbit in the country's economy after another. The presidential daughter Gulnara Karimova was exposed to and accused of extorting multimillion

bribes from local and foreign companies, especially from the foreign telecom companies operating in the country (Patrucic 2015). As a result, due to his extremely repressive politics coupled with the exposure to grand corruption Islam Karimov had found himself in international isolation, thus losing ground in terms of political legitimacy.

Law-and-order

Right after the collapse of the Soviet Union, when some former union republics became the arena of internal and inter-state violent conflicts, the Karimov regime managed to maintain law-and-order and political stability. Karimov's first success in this respect was taking tough action on organized and street crime. However, some later major leaders of organized crime were allowed to re-start their activities acting now in the formal capacity of businessmen, in exchange for their help in reducing petty crime, charity support to various sports associations, and the service they would provide for security services in funding dirty parts of punitive operations against political dissidents in exile. Furthermore, they had become very influential figures controlling significant parts of the economy (AsiaTerra 2019; Compromat.ru 2011).

The ruling regime was also successful in quelling the Islamic insurgency that sought to establish sharia law in Uzbekistan. The incursion of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan in 1999 and 2000 in southern Kyrgyzstan and southern Uzbekistan (BBC News 2014) was quickly repelled by the Uzbek military forces. However, the regime went far beyond the legitimate use of the military force and the security apparatus against Islamist movements and used measures against extremism to justify repressions against dissent and those Muslims whose beliefs are not sanctioned by the official doctrine of Islam. In Andijan in May 2005, the military and security forces violently suppressed a peaceful mass protest, shooting dead hundreds of unarmed civilians (Human Rights Watch 2006; Putz 2015), the action that undermined the regime's legitimacy, which, in turn, prompted it to further resort to mass repressions against opponents to its rule and policies.

Manufacturing consent

Shortly after becoming president, Islam Karimov began actively exploiting the growing nationalist moods in the society. He even adopted the state ideology of Mustakillik (Independence) with an apparent intention to enhance his political legitimacy, earn popular support and knock the ground out of the nationalist-minded political opposition. This new state ideology dictated Karimov to keep distance from Moscow which was perceived as a potential threat to Uzbekistan's sovereignty.

At the same time, his quite hostile attitude to neighboring countries, especially to Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, his often use of the language of blackmail in the sphere of gas export to these energy import-dependent countries had pushed them into Moscow's arms, bringing the atmosphere in Central Asia close to the brink of the cold war.

Overall, the regime maintained the Soviet-style strict censorship of mass media, monopolizing all instruments of shaping public opinion, including TV and radio channels and newspapers. That, however, helped a little with maintaining the regime's popularity, because the popularity of the internet and respective alternative sources of information was on the rise.

Measures to maintain a monopoly of power

Due to the progressing decline of its political legitimacy, the Karimov regime was forced to resort to violent methods of ensuring the population's obedience and loyalty. The repressions were further increased in reaction to the so-called color revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan, which the regime believed would trigger domestic unrest and embolden the opposition. The regime began cracking down even on civil society organizations standing far from politics; several international organizations were expelled from the country, such as Soros Foundation, Freedom House, Human Rights Watch, and even the local office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees was closed (BBC News 2006).

As a result, the pendulum of the governance system had swung sharply from the policies seeking political legitimacy to measures of political censorship and suppressing real or imagined dissent. The regime's hardline politics, in turn, had further undermined its legitimacy, not only in the eyes of its population but also in the international arena, resulting in Karimov becoming unwelcomed in Western capitals. As an example, due to protests by several human rights organizations Karimov's visit to the Czech Republic in 2014 was cancelled at the last moment (Radio Prague International 2014). Only in light of the ongoing war in neighbouring Afghanistan, the strategic importance for the West of Uzbekistan and its geographic location, allowed the Karimov regime to be considered as a partner in certain international security related areas. Yet, Karimov was unable to regain that degree of legitimacy he enjoyed in the first decade of his rule. The decline of his political legitimacy had left him with the only option to stay in power – turning his regime into an extreme form of dictatorship.

Regarding the patronage politics, while Karimov became a president without having had significant ties to influential patronage networks, already in the second decade of his rule his own family became at the epicentre of Uzbekistan's most powerful patron-client networks that controlled significant assets and sectors of the economy. And only the money-laundering case that was opened by the Swiss Federal Prosecutor's Office against Gulnara Karimova in 2014 (Swissinfo.ch 2014) became a turning point beyond which the might of the presidential kinship network began waning.

Post-Karimov era

Problems with legal legitimacy

Under the Karimov regime, Shavkat Mirziyoyev held for thirteen years by then the position of Prime Minister. From a legal point of view, Mirziyoyev became a full-fledged president having won elections in December 2016, but *de facto* immediately after the death of Islam Karimov at the beginning of September of the same year. Then, in early September 2016, the role of the interim president, according to the Constitution's Article 96, was to be assumed by Nigmatilla Yuldashev, Speaker of the Oliy Majlis's Senate. However, far from having been a heavyweight in the country's ruling elite, he predictably recused himself from the role of Acting President, in favor of one of the more politically influential figures (Gazeta.uz 2021) There were three such most powerful figures in the country at that time – Shavkat Mirziyoyev himself, Deputy Prime Minister Rustam Azimov, and the head of the National Security Service Rustam Inoyatov. It was in this triangle the question of who would occupy the presidential chair was to be decided. The behind-the-scenes struggle for the presidency was then won by Mirziyoyev, apparently supported by Rustam Inoyatov behind whom stood The National Security Service, the most powerful and omnipotent structure of the country, *de facto* a state within a state. In addition, Mirziyoyev received the support of the regional hokims too, among whom Mirziyoyev, himself a former regional hokim, enjoyed greater popularity than Azimov. Not the least factor was also the behind-the-scenes support from the Kremlin, which was against the candidacy of Azimov, as he was considered a pro-Western figure there.

Thus, from the point of view of constitutional law, the way how the change of power in September 2016 was facilitated was illegitimate. The problem was to some extent rectified after Mirziyoyev won the presidential elections in December 2016, although these elections themselves can be by no means considered truly competitive (See OSCE's 2016 report on this), fair and free, and therefore, again illegitimate. As in the past under the Islam Karimov rule, alternative candidates for the presidency were selected from the people loyal to and completely controlled by the current ruling regime. These were the leaders of three "pocket" political parties represented in the parliament, while none of the real opposition figures was allowed to run for the presidency and even get registered to operate in the country. The next presidential elections held in October 2021 have changed almost nothing in this respect, having been staged according to the same scenario, without real political competition.

Despite that, right after the elections of 2016 Mirziyoev began quickly gaining points in terms of political legitimacy, announcing and starting to implement a course toward some, albeit limited, reforms, mainly in the economic sphere and foreign policy. Thereby, he began earning the image of a reformer, and as such, unlike his predecessor, becoming a handshakeable in the western capitals. At least, what became clear is that he decided to change the status quo by softening the methods of ruling the country and establishing a more legitimacy-seeking authority. He made some steps towards opening the country and overcoming stagnation in the economy.

Regime's performance in the socio-economic sphere and foreign policy

In the sphere of the economy, he adopted some measures to boost entrepreneurship and limit administrative pressure upon private businesses. The most significant reform in this respect was the liberalization in 2017 of the currency exchanges, as a result of which the difference between the Uzbek soum's official and black-market exchange rates has radically decreased. That has created incentives for businesses to get out of the informal economy, thus increasing tax revenues (Review.uz 2020) and attracting more foreign investments. The latter had risen from \$1,663 million in 2016 to 2,286 million in 2019 (UNCTAD 2020, 241). The abolition of the entry visa regime for citizens of numerous foreign countries has contributed to a greater inflow of tourists and visitors (UzDaily 2020).

In the sphere of foreign policy, the government had taken a course towards improving relations with the neighboring countries, especially with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. If under Karimov, Tashkent's relations with these two countries deteriorated down toward a cold war, then Mirziyoev began establishing closer and more friendly diplomatic ties and strengthening economic cooperation with these countries. Problems accumulated over the past years in the sphere of state borders, fraught with interstate conflicts, began to get solved. Thanks to the diplomatic efforts supported by Mirziyoev, most of the UzbekKyrgyz (Настоящее время 2021) and Uzbek-Tajik borders were demarcated (EurAsia Daily 2021), and the tension around enclaves began to reduce.

At the same time, in comparison with the Karimov regime, Uzbekistan under the leadership of Mirziyoev began to show greater weakness about the neo-imperial course of Moscow, giving up or getting closer to the verge of surrendering its state sovereignty.

Justice and the rule of law

On the internal arena, the local press was granted greater freedom and began to report more fearless about shortcomings in the country, criticize certain government decisions, although the taboo on criticizing the president himself and his inner circle has remained in place. As a result, the popularity of the local press among the Uzbek readership has risen steeply. The population has become more politically active and outspoken on the issues they face in their everyday life, though expressing their views mainly online, in social media.

Most of the prisoners of conscience were released, albeit many Muslims previously convicted on politically motivated cases remain not acquitted (OHCHR 2020). A notable event was the government's decision to close the prison colony in Jaslyk (Williamson 2019), an Uzbek version of Gulag, notorious for its harsh conditions and practice of torture. Uzbekistan began actively cooperating with the UN human rights mechanisms, which culminated in the 2019 mission to the country undertaken by the UN Special Rapporteur on the Independence of Judges (ICJ 2019).

Another major achievement from the human rights perspective has been the progress in eliminating state-orchestrated forced labor in the cotton sector. Earlier, the Uzbek authorities vehemently denied the existence of this problem in the country. The ice was broken when Mirziyoev, speaking from the rostrum of the UN General Assembly in September 2017, publicly acknowledged the problem and expressed his commitment to solving it soon (Ozodi Radio 2017). Indeed, in the same year, the Uzbek authorities stopped

sending schoolchildren on a massive scale to pick cotton in the harvest season (Gazeta.uz 2017). Some later, the authorities stopped sending college and university students, and, a while after, doctors and schoolteachers. Yet the system of forced labor has not been completely eradicated and persists in the form of massive extortions of money from civil servants and the private sector to hire seasonal workers, which can also be qualified as a form of forced labor. (CottonCampaign.org 2019).

In other critical areas, such as the rule of law and anti-corruption, there has been no tangible progress observed. Little progress has been observed in establishing an independent and impartial judiciary and due process. Justice remains directly controlled and manipulated by the executive, not having yet become a public institution guaranteeing equality before the law, to which President himself and his close associates would be accountable along with all citizens. Like in the past, to file criminal or administrative cases against top officials who have committed offences the prosecutor's offices and the courts still do not dare to act without the order or "green light" from the above. But when any of the top figures become suspected of disloyalty to the president, legal action is taken swiftly. As an example, such criminal cases were opened, apparently on the president's order, against the former prosecutor generals Rashid Kadyrov (IPHR 2019) and Ikhtiyor Abdullayev (his latest position as Chair of the State Security Service). Despite both of them and their associates might have indeed deserved investigation into their past activities, the interrogation and judicial process against them, especially Kadyrov, went with significant violations of due process and even torture and mistreatment allegations (Amnesty International 2019).

The scale of corruption has not decreased, but only taken on new forms, thus negatively affecting the socio-economic rights of Uzbek citizens and perspectives of foreign investments. For instance, due to collusion between construction companies and corrupt hokims the scale of unlawful demolitions of residential houses and forced evictions of residential buildings and forced evictions of their tenants has dramatically increased (Matyakubova 2020).

Another example demonstrating the atmosphere of impunity around figures belonging to the president's loyalty base and his patronage network is the dam break on the Sardoba water reservoir that took place on 1 May 2020 and led to the flooding of a huge territory in the Syrdarya region and neighboring Kazakhstan (Eurasianet 2020). Only after the disaster, it was revealed that the project of constructing the reservoir worth \$400 million was commissioned and supervised by the Uzbekistan Railways Company chaired by Deputy Prime Minister Achilbay Ramatov, a close associate of Mirziyoev and that a series of contracts were signed without an open and transparent tendering process, in complete secrecy from the society. Despite that, the General Prosecutor's Office brought to account only middle-level managers to justice, thus relieving Ramatov himself from responsibility for the case (Gazeta.uz 2021- 4). Moreover, after the disaster that did had caused the losses by thousands of residents of their houses and the consequent urgent public finance funding unplanned earlier, Ramatov continued to work in his position of Vice Prime Minister and even joined the government commission investigating the case (Kun.Uz 2020). There have been many other similar grand corruption related cases that have taken place only during Mirziyoev's first presidential term and have already been reported by the press, some of which are exposing the involvement of even the president's relatives in corrupt practices (Ilkhamov 2021).

Signs of decline in regime's political legitimacy

Thus, corruption, cronyism, widespread conflict of interests, a lack of the rule of law have proved to be the main obstacle that has not allowed Mirziyoev to take a more consistent course of reform. As a result, already in the second part of his first presidential term the political legitimacy of his rule began to decline markedly, particularly given the growing discontent among the population with some ongoing practices, such as residents' evictions from their houses, cutting trees, and so on, and his autocratic, often arbitrary style of governance. This decline in legitimacy has predictably prompted him to return to some old, Karimov-style, repressive measures to shut down critical voices, and put on the brakes on political reforms.

For instance, there has been little progress in lifting restrictions imposed by the Karimov regime on the registration and activities of non-governmental organizations. As in the past, the Ministry of Justice which is authorized to register NGOs has been under various bureaucratic pretexts denying registration to initiative groups of citizens (Human Rights Watch 2020). As a result, there are still no watchdog organizations in the country that would exercise public control over state institutions and the conduct of concrete officials. This lack of civic oversight over the government makes the latter still unaccountable to society and, therefore, endemically corrupt.

No tangible progress has been also observed in holding presidential and parliamentary elections. These elections are still not providing the citizen with the freedom of choice. The main reason is that political opposition has not yet been legalized and allowed to operate in the country and is still being forced to operate from exile. In the 2019 parliamentary elections, only the so-called “pocket” parties, most of which were created during the Karimov rule to imitate political competition, were allowed to take part. Ahead of presidential elections in October 2021, the authorities denied registration of a new independent political party *Hakikat va Tarakkijot* (Justice and Development), thus depriving elections of real choice and political competition (Ozodlik Radio2021).

A lack of reforms in the political sphere has negatively impacted the perspectives of economic development. Despite some improvements in the conditions for doing business in the country and the investment climate, overall, the achievements in this sphere have been quite modest so far. GDP per capita has even decreased since 2016 – from \$2 568 to \$1 686 in 2020 (Macrotrends, 2021). Foreign direct investments have increased, but not significantly, from \$1 663 in 2016 to \$1 726 USD in 2020 (UNCTAD 2021).

The difficulties Uzbekistan faced in 2020-2021 can be partly attributed to the Covid-19 pandemic due to which economies of many countries have suffered significantly. The situation could, however, be saved to some extent by the country’s large gold and foreign exchange reserves, formed largely thanks to the country’s huge annual gold mining output, 100 tons annually (Gazeta.uz 2021-2). As of November 1, 2021, Uzbekistan’s FOREX reserves amounted to \$35.5 billion (Review.uz 2021). Unfortunately, this potential has been eroded by a rapidly growing external debt, which has reached an amount equal to the size of the available FOREX reserves. As of July 1, 2021, Uzbekistan’s total external debt reached 35.9 billion USD (Gazeta.uz 2021 - 3) At the same time, the government did not provide to the public sufficiently detailed information on this debt, on what specific programs this debt and the reserves are being spent on. The problem here is not only not so much in the amount of debt but the lack of transparency in government spending. Some publicly available data suggest that both the debt and FOREX reserves are sometimes spent wastefully, without proper considerations, on purposes lobbied behind the scenes by various influential interest groups. This state of affairs is not surprising, given the fact that the governance system is still significantly affected by patronage politics and omnipresent corruption.

To the end of Mirziyoev’s first presidential term, it has become clear that he is either unwilling or unable to go beyond a certain red line in pursuing the course of reforms. That is probably due to him having been trapped into patronage politics, i.e., his fear of the risks to lose the support of influential figures and networks that have been vital for his acquisition and further holding of power for a life-long period. He intends to preserve the autocratic nature of his ruling regime that limits the prospects for strengthening his political legitimacy and forces him to resort in crises to Karimov-style measures to safeguard the population’s submission to his rule.

We can observe here the dual nature of authoritarian regimes we described in the first part of this paper. From this perspective the following pattern can be observed in the way how Shavkat Mirziyoev is going to govern the country: the less politically legitimate this regime becomes, the more likely he will be forced to rely on repressive measures and propaganda. The interplay between these two aspects of his ruling regime is always dynamic and changeable, so the balance between them may change in either direction, toward strengthening his determination to strengthen further the political legitimacy of his rule, or towards

strengthening the power-preservation politics. The second scenario is more likely, in light of the ongoing trends. That is why the Mirziyoev regime is going to experience a permanent deficit of political legitimacy, which will make this regime inherently unstable and prone to social unrest.

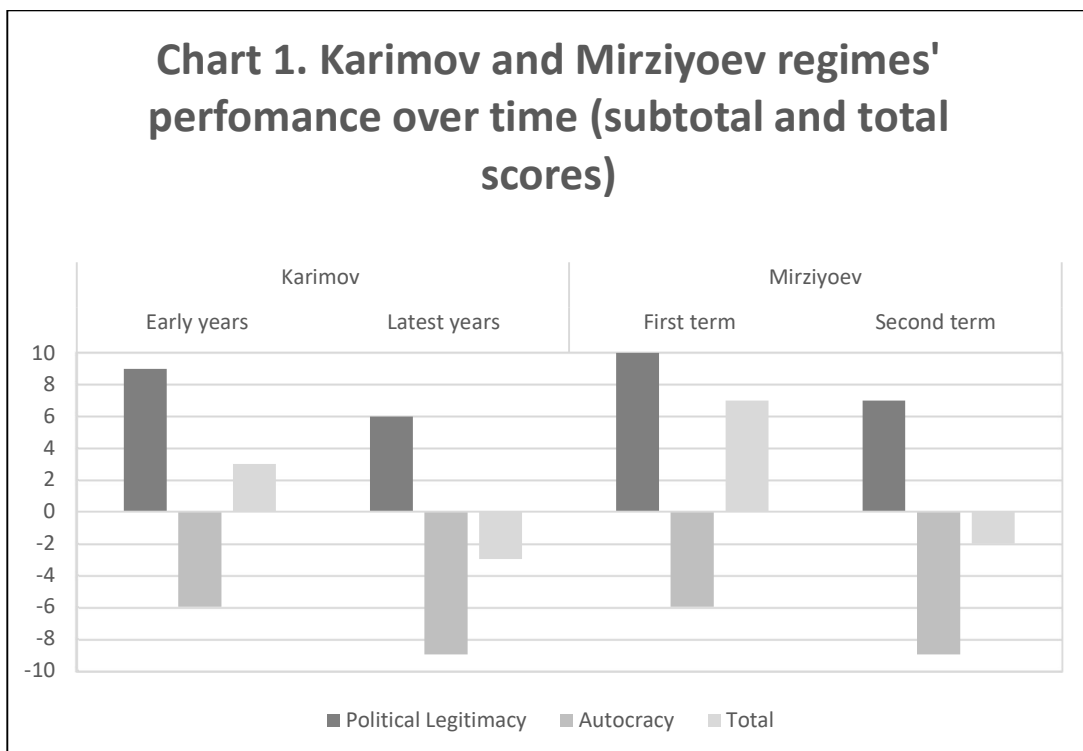
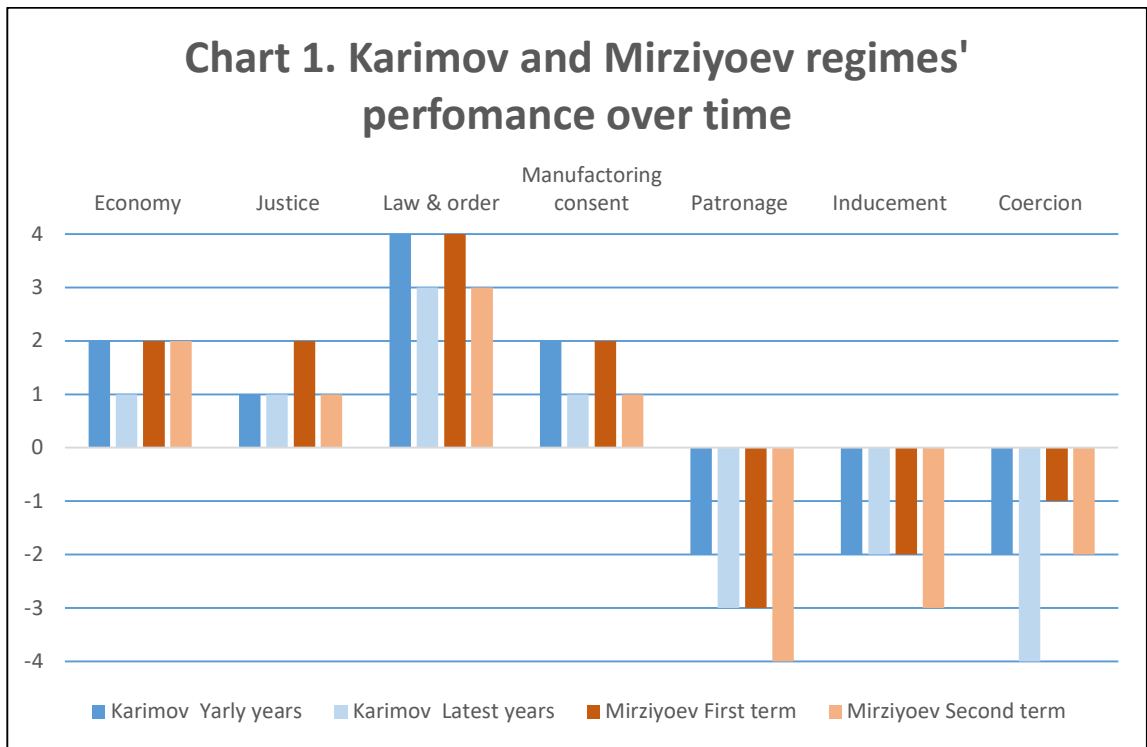
Comparing two ruling regimes

Notwithstanding the observed decline of political legitimacy, the Mirziyoev regime remains softer and less violent, more supportive of economic freedoms, and more open to a dialogue with international institutions, compared to the Karimov one. The way the current regime operates, trying to balance between the agendas of political legitimacy and autocratic rule, makes it increasingly akin to the governance systems that have been already established in Kazakhstan and the Russian Federation. One can see here similarities in terms of how all three regimes combine an authoritarian rule with economic freedom, elements of meritocracy, and even provide some, although limited, space for civil liberties. This kind of authoritarian regime tends only occasionally to opt for violent measures, making them principally different from the Karimov-style system of governance. To understand better this difference, it is important to juxtapose them according to all seven indicators we considered above of how authoritarian regimes perform in different periods of their evolution. For better clarity, we will resort to quantitative measurement in this comparative analysis, as it is shown in Table 2, as well as in Charts 1 and 2. In this measurement, we assign scores 1 to 5 to the variables constituting the factor of political legitimacy, and -1 to -5 to the variables describing autocratic power-preservation politics. All assigned scores are provisional, reflecting the author's view, and, therefore, subject to further discussion and validation.

Table 2. Quantitative estimation of comparison between two regimes

Constituent features of the ruling regime	Karimov regime		Mirziyoev regime	
	Early years	Latest years	First presidential term	Second presidential term *)
1. Measures ensuring regime's political legitimacy	9	6	10	7
1.1 Socio-economic policies	2	1	2	2
1.2 Rule of law	1	1	2	1
1.3 Securing law-and-order	4	3	4	3
1.4 Manufacturing consent	2	1	2	1
2. Instruments of power-preservation politics	-6	-9	-6	-9
2.1 Patronage	-2	-3	-3	-4
2.2 Inducement	-2	-2	-2	-3
2.3 Coercion	-2	-4	-1	-2
Overall (resulting) score	3	-3	7	-2

*) This column presents provisional figures reflecting and projecting to the future the observed trends during Mirziyoev's first presidential term analyzed in this article (see below).



Let us consider arguments we considered when assigning this or that score to each of the considered regimes per each of the seven variables we use in the comparative analysis.

1. Measures ensuring the regime's political legitimacy. Compared to the Karimov regime, Mirziyoev has acquired a higher degree of political legitimacy over his first presidential term, thanks to his more liberal policies. However, if to project the trends one could observe in the latest years of this period onto the second presidential term, then we should expect his legitimacy to decline almost to the same level his predecessor had ended up with prior to his death.

1.1 Socio-economic policies. While the Karimov regime established the model of highly centralized economic governance, Mirziyoev has adopted a course more favorable for private entrepreneurship. Technocrats of a younger generation, some of whom have been educated in Western universities positions, have occupied some ministerial positions in his government, and their role under the current regime has slightly increased since the Karimov time. That is why the current ruling regime receives a higher score along with this variable compared to the previous one.

1.2 Rule of law. Likewise, we assigned a comparatively higher score to a complex of measures that the Mirziyoev regime has taken in the sphere related to the rule of law, particularly on human rights. Regarding the rule of law considered in its narrower sense, such as the status of judiciary and due process, the situation has not much changed since the Karimov era.

1.3 Securing law-and-order. Both regimes have received the same, relatively high scores only because they indeed managed to reduce petty crime and provide political stability in the country.

1.4 Manufacturing consent. Both regimes have performed in this sphere almost on the same level. As any of the authoritarian regimes, the one of Shavkat Mirziyoev allocates substantial resources and pays significant attention to the state-sponsored propaganda. It still controls the sphere of mass media, first of all, TV channels. However, in both cases, the impact on the population of the ideology they fostered declined over time. As we noted above, the press in Uzbekistan has acquired greater freedom compared to the previous political regime, but still cannot be considered fully free.

2. Instruments of autocratic, power-preservation politics. It is evident that the Mirziyoev regime has inherited from Karimov and fully preserved the authoritarian vertical, concentration of all power in one hand, with no real division of powers, despite the Constitution prescribes it. Nothing significant has changed in this respect since the previous regime. By default, the regime's control of the power structures and the justice system remains a key factor buttressing this authoritarian vertical.

2.1 Patronage. It is still, as under the previous regime, difficult to make a successful business in the country, especially when it grows out of the scale of small and medium-sized enterprises, without benefitting from informal ties with the top-level authorities. That is why the owners of big businesses still seek close ties with high-ranking "gatekeeping" officials as a pre-condition for success in their spheres of operation.

2.2 Inducement. Akin to the *nomenklatura* system in the Soviet past the nowadays bureaucratic class in the country is still provided with certain privileges, in exchange for their loyalty to the ruling regime. The main privilege would be impunity for committing various offences and conflicts of interests in making personal income outside of the official, job-related payment. The administrative system remains almost unreformed and old-fashioned, dominated by the low-competent officials

2.3 Coercion. Both regimes have been quite restrictive in the sphere of political rights, banning political opposition and its participation in the country's political life and the electoral process. The mandate of law enforcement is not limited to maintaining law and order but also includes the duty to eliminate any potential threat to the monopoly of power exercised by the current authoritarian leader. At the same time, the police force and the security services have become less brutal and violent towards citizens, compared to the Karimov rule. Overall, from the point of view of civic freedoms and individual liberties, the current regime is doing better compared to the Karimov one.

Some other observations. Table 2 and the charts highlight the fact that regimes' exposure to patronage politics increased over time. Overall, the Mirziyoev regime, according to our observations, has been affected by this patronage politics even more than the Karimov one. However, the latter had proven to be more violent in imposing its authority upon society than the former. In both cases we see the same trend: the longer the

authoritarian regime stays in power, the more likely it is being forced to bolster its autocratic rule, either by increasingly embracing violent methods of treating the society, as in the case of Karimov or by further engaging in patronage politics, as we see on the example of Mirziyoev rule.

Taking into account all considered aspects of both ruling regimes, we can conclude that the ratio of “soft” vs hardline measures in running the country has increased toward the former since the Karimov time. This development has coincided with the increased influence of influential business elites upon public office, which allows us to qualify the new model of governance as **"oligarchic" capitalism**. The main beneficiaries of this state of affairs, apart from the ruling elite itself, are the wealthiest figures and networks associated with this ruling regime, such as Alisher Usmanov, Patokh Shodiev, Jahongir Artykhodjayev, Bakhtiyor Fazilov, and respective business empires they run. Some members of the presidential family themselves are rapidly becoming part of this oligarchic class, leveraging their ties to the president to take advantage of business affairs and acquiring one asset after another. The category of these “oligarchs” more than other businesses in the country benefit from the economic freedom expanded under the new regime. Not surprisingly then “oligarchs” find themselves among proponents of “softer” forms of an authoritarian regime, acting and lobbying for maintaining such a less brutal and less restrictive form of autocracy. However, their advocacy for economic freedom and their privileged status does not go without a price for the country and the perspectives of national development, as this state of play undermines the very principles of the capitalist mode of production and governance, such as fair competition, the rule of law, to say the least.

Concluding remarks

The proposed concept of duality and the interplay between the factors of ensuring political legitimacy and the autocratic grip of power as a key characteristic of the authoritarian governance system is presented in this article as further advancing the theory of neo-patrimonial authoritarian regimes in its application to the post-Soviet states, including Uzbekistan. This concept accommodates key components of the theory of neopatrimonialism but does not limit its discourse to it, offering a more multidimensional and dynamic model of studying autocracies. The author believes that this concept permits for developing a more predictive model than just highlighting the role patronage politics plays in authoritarian states. The proposed conceptual model is believed to allow to describe and explain how authoritarian regimes function, differ from each other and evolve. It is said to help better understand the complex motivations behind the conduct of authoritarian regimes at any moment of their evolution.

Another conclusion one can draw from the suggested analysis is that the longer the authoritarian regime lasts and keeps monopolizing the power, the more likely it will become overgrown with the bonds of patronage relationships and corruption, and the more likely its political legitimacy will decline over time. Likewise, projecting this proposition onto the current Mirziyoev regime, we can say that a lack of efforts in reforming the governance system and the president’s efforts to pursue a life-long rule will inevitably lead to the decline of its political legitimacy. That, in turn, would force him to resort to a more hardline style of governance and get itself locked into a web of patron-client relationships, as it had already happened with Karimov in the last two decades of his presidency.

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