

On the possibility of achieving a historic compromise in Uzbekistan for its sustainable development

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Table of content

Guiding principles	2
Realism	2
Ambition	5
Compromise between factors of realism and ambition	6
Comparing with the current state of affairs.....	8

I have long been thinking about the need to develop a conceptual model of the statehood and development of Uzbekistan, the country in which I was born, grew up and was formed as a citizen and a personality. I also think that the conclusions I have come to and will present below are to some extent relevant to Uzbekistan's neighboring countries in the post-Soviet Central Asia, given their common Soviet legacy and the similarities of the current ruling regimes.

The question is why do we need such a conceptual model of development? First of all, without such a vision of the country's best strategy for its development, no planning is possible. A good action plan is based on a good strategy, and the latter is on the conceptual model that is most suitable for a given country.

So far, I have not seen in Uzbekistan any initiatives of elaborating such a development model, despite the government having several academic and research institutes and think tanks at its disposal for such an endeavor. Perhaps, such kinds of documents have been prepared by these institutions under the stamp "for official use", but not for the public and open discussion, to stimulate public thought,

and collect feedbacks which would allow optimizing the country's development strategy. However, we are not talking about declarative documents in the spirit of "New Uzbekistan", "Third Renaissance", or "a country with a great future", but about a doctrine suitable for practical application. Neither we are talking about road maps that were prepared for particular sectors of the economy, for instance, a roadmap for renewable energy, or the development of the cotton textile industry.

For such a strategy to be practically suitable, it must be based on the analysis of the real situation, current trends and challenges facing the country. We are talking about a need for an analytical document that would honestly and objectively assess the current state of affairs in the country, its real opportunities and factors, without taking into account any development model that hangs in the air, because does not correspond with reality, or, in contrary, is too much confined to this reality and not ambitious enough to ensure the country's development.

The model proposed below is only my first estimate and, by definition, may need further refinement, taking into account feedback from the expert community.

Guiding principles

First of all, let us touch upon the principles and imperatives one needs to meet when developing the development model. In my opinion, this model should combine two extremes - **realism** and, at the same time, **ambition**.

Realism means that, as was noted above, development goals should take into account realities, first of all, the current condition of society and social institutions, as well as the existing barriers to the development of the country, as well as the real chances the country has in this respect.

Ambition means the need to set goals taking into account the existing successful or unsuccessful experiences of other countries and the corresponding world trends, that is, to set these goals to a certain extent above the bar that would be allowed by the state of affairs in the country. Without adopting such ambitious goals, development is impossible, as any development implies periodical transitions to qualitatively new stages of state's and society's evolution, that would require overcoming the status quo from time to time.

Let us elaborate more on each of these two principles.

Realism

First of all, we should take into account the fact that according to several criteria Uzbekistan belongs to the category of Third World countries. What do I mean by that? Despite some social progress that was achieved during the Soviet period, especially in the fields of welfare, education and the elimination of illiteracy, according to other criteria, it is impossible to classify the country as a developed society and even as a transition economy.

First, labor productivity, expressed in terms of GDP per capita, remains at a very low level. According to this indicator, the country is lagging behind even many Third World countries. This is due to the backwardness of Uzbekistan in the fields of technologies, state and corporate governance, ineffective economic policy, incompetence and government corruption.

Secondly, the quality of education in the country remains at a very low level, both in school and higher education. Achievements in this area are rather rare. Moreover, due to the economic backwardness of the country, many university graduates are forced to earn a living by working not in their speciality. The example of large-scale labor migration to the Russian Federation and other countries is indicative: the overwhelming majority of those labor migrants are employed there as low-skilled labor, even though some of these migrants are graduated from colleges and universities.

The backward professional structure of employment, in turn, contributes to the preservation of the patriarchal structure of the family as a social institution. I wrote about this, that is, about how labor migration, on the one hand, allows Uzbek families to meet ends, and on the other, contributes to the preservation of the patriarchal organization of family and respective life orientations, in my article published in 2013.¹

In turn, the patriarchal nature of family contributes to the preservation of the socially conservative worldview of a significant part of the Uzbek population, which, to a certain extent, explains the significant degree of its religiosity and tendency to succumb to the influence of religious figures distinguished by ultra-conservative and even extremist views.

The country, of course, has its middle, fairly educated class, a part of the population that not only has higher education, but also works on their speciality and has a sufficiently high living standard, above the level when families simply make ends meet, and high enough to at least sometimes allow themselves to travel to other countries, either for tourist or their work and profession related purposes. In terms of value orientations, representatives of this class, especially if they are employed in the sphere of Western foreign investment and are familiar with the relevant technologies and corporate culture, as well as included in professional and social networks that include their Western partners, are much less exposed to the influence of social conservatism and more influenced by the liberal value system. The problem, however, is that in Uzbekistan the stratum of this class is extremely small and is present mainly in the capital and in a few of the largest cities. In the provinces, especially in rural areas and small towns, due to the backwardness of their socio-professional and respective employment structure, the presence and influence of this middle class are insignificant.

For these reasons, it is difficult to expect that liberal values will become widespread in Uzbek society in the near future. This, in turn, has respective implications for the political culture and the system of

¹ Alisher Ilkhamov. Labour Migration and the Ritual Economy of the Uzbek Extended Family, *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, 138 (2013), 259-284.

governance that has taken root in the country, as well as the way how the ruling regime treats and communicates with the population. To a certain extent, this reality explains the phenomenon of authoritarian rule. The latter is fueled by the patriarchal family organization and the corresponding socio-conservative orientations of a significant part of society. By the way, a certain part of the Uzbek dissident community in exile, including those residing in the West, has been also affected by these socially conservative sentiments. Thus apart from the narrow stratum of the middle, professional class in Uzbekistan there are not many people so far in Uzbekistan that could become the driving force of evolution towards the assimilation of values and norms of liberal democracy.

Does this mean that the formation of a democratic system has no prospects in Uzbekistan? Not really, but one should probably be understood that the process of this formation can take quite a long period and go along with the growth of the middle, professional class. However, this long-term process could be speeded-up by the above-mentioned ambition of setting development goals that the ruling regime could embrace and adopt. I will explain below what is meant by this ambition factor.

But first of all, we should note some examples of how the Third World countries, also being underdeveloped from a socio-economic point of view, still occupy a much higher position on the liberal democracy index compared to Uzbekistan. Take for example two following countries in the developing world, one with a majority and the other with a large ratio of the Muslim population - Indonesia and India. Both of these countries far outperform Uzbekistan on the Liberal Democracy Index, scoring 0.43 and 0.36 respectively versus Uzbekistan's 0.09.² Interestingly, both of them yield to Uzbekistan on the Education Index with scores of 0.65 and 0.555 against 0.729 respectively.³ Yet, in terms of the level of economic development, represented by the indicator of GDP per capita, Indonesia is more than twice ahead of Uzbekistan - \$4,691 against \$2,071. In India, the values of this indicator are just slightly higher than in Uzbekistan - \$ 2,543.⁴

Apart from the factors of education and economic development historical legacy also plays a role here, affecting the current state of affairs, including the status of liberal values in a given society. In Uzbekistan, as in most of post-Soviet republics, the socio-political culture has been greatly affected by the Soviet totalitarian past, which is manifested in the weakness of civil society, and the readiness of a significant part of the population to bow and submit to authoritarian leaders. These relationships between state and society to a certain extent reproduce the relations within the patriarchal family, where the father has the power to make decisions to a greater extent than the rest of the family members. Even a significant part of the middle class is influenced by this authoritarian-patriarchal political culture.

² Liberal Democracy, 2021 (V-Dem Index), <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/liberal-democracy>

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Education_Index, data of 2019

⁴ IMF data of 2022, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_GDP_\(nominal\)_per_capita](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_GDP_(nominal)_per_capita)

Ambition

By ambition, I mean the readiness to take decisions in adopting, to a certain extent, the norms of liberal democracy that are not yet fully supported by the existing value orientations in society and the corresponding political culture, but without which the prospects of the country's development remain under question. One should be clear that a significant proportion of the population would welcome electoral democracy based on real political competition and the right of political opposition to participate in elections. However, a much smaller proportion would fully accept the values of a full range of individual freedoms and human rights, including minority rights, freedoms and rights that are the cornerstone of liberal democracy. In fact, the population would be happy to embrace some freedoms and rights, but not all of them. Some would not fully accept the rights of women for professional self-realization, some would reject the rights of ethnic minorities, and the majority would dismiss the rights of sexual minorities. A significant part of society that is influenced by values of social conservatism is prone to rather strict regulation of the private life of citizens, for example, in accordance with the canons of Fiqh⁵ and Sharia. This combination of democratic orientations in the political sphere with conservatism in the social, as well as in the private and family spheres, creates the phenomenon of illiberal democracy which can be observed in many countries, especially in the Third World.

The factor of ambition requires understanding and accepting the fact that economically the most successful were and remain countries that once adopted the values of liberal democracy and still adhere to them to one degree or another. This effect the liberal social culture has had on the formation of modern developed states was also noted by Max Weber, who in his work "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism" pointed to the role of an individual work ethic that was encouraged by Puritanism and also was a sign of disappearing the need for external compulsion to work. Deirdre N. McCloskey and Art Carden in their work "Leave Me Alone and I'll Make You Rich: How the Bourgeois Deal Enriched the World", published this year, 2022, noted that economic development was achieved in countries considered developed today thanks to the affirmation in them of the values and norms of liberalism and freedom.

These achievements of the countries that embarked on the path of liberal democracy prompt us to consider this as a model of development any underdeveloped country aspiring to achieve the same should follow. That would be that ambition I talk about here. In other words, the ambitious task for Uzbekistan would be to find ways to instill similar liberal values in the socially conservative society of Uzbekistan as an indispensable condition for successful socio-economic development. Is that possible in the conditions of nowadays Uzbekistan?

⁵ Fiqh is the body of Islamic law, which once, in the Middle Ages, was quite progressive, but in the modern realities can be hardly considered as a factor supporting development goals.

Of course, the top-down imposition of values of any kind on society is unproductive and simply impossible. By and large, the adoption of these values by society can be only the result of a natural historical process. This process is inevitable but can be completed in both longer and shorter periods. What the government can do to speed up this process is to create favorable conditions for growth and a higher role in the state and society for the middle educated class, which, for a number of reasons, is more receptive to liberal values than other segments of the population.

If the political leadership is interested in the socio-economic development of the country, then it should stop seeing liberal values as a threat and, conversely, create additional conditions for their adoption by society. This implies attracting foreign investments from the countries of liberal democracy, developing the education system according to their standards, better conditions for the spheres of science and culture, a system of meritocracy, accountable government and following international human rights law.

Compromise between factors of realism and ambition

It becomes apparent that for the country's sustainable development it is necessary to compromise between the principle of realism and the need to adopt ambitious goals. Each of these two factors has its logic.

In terms of stakeholders, the compromise can be seen as between the ruling elite, the mainstream part of society, and the middle and business classes. I admit that parts, small or significant, of each of these groups, are committed to Uzbekistan's democratic transformation, but its middle and a part of the business classes make the main social base for democratization. The purpose of this compromise is, on the one hand, to conform to the current state of society, with its authoritarian and socio-conservative orientations, and on the other hand, they understand that without going beyond the vicious circle of this inert reality, it is impossible to count on the country's dynamic development. At the same time, we must agree that compromises are permissible in some areas and unacceptable in others.

The following is where compromise is not permissible:

1. These are civil liberties and rights, such as freedom of speech, assembly and association, as well as the rights of ethnic and religious minorities. One can accept for the time being that the country is ruled by an authoritarian leader, but only if he is a sufficiently enlightened ruler and does not rule the country with an "iron fist", through mass repressions, as it was under the previous president Islam Karimov.
2. These are, of course, economic freedoms, and in this respect, Lee Kuan Yew, the former authoritarian ruler of Singapore, is quite popular in our region and can be considered a model ruler for the time being. But one should understand that under him the country experienced an "economic miracle" largely thanks to his liberal policies and not only in the sphere of economy. Not everyone

knows that according to the liberal democracy index, Singapore has a score of 0.33, which is significantly ahead of all Central Asian countries.⁶

3. This is the principle of the rule of law, without which it is impossible to fulfill the two above conditions. Without it, corruption and abuse of power will flourish, which will derail any prospects for attracting foreign investment and, in general, the country's economic development. Rule of law, in turn, dictates the principle of equality of all, including members of the ruling elite, before the law, and this condition cannot be achieved without the independence of the judiciary.

History shows that at least in some countries that have achieved the greatest success to date, the rule of law was established long before the democratic transition. For a positive example, one can refer to Magna Carta, a kind of prototype of the constitution, which was adopted in 1215, when Great Britain was still ruled by an absolute monarchy and laid the foundation for the rule of law in this country. Similarly, in the 19th century, long before democracy was established in Germany, a fairly independent judicial system was established that became the cornerstone of the rule of law in the country.

That means that, in principle, the establishment of the rule of law is possible even under an authoritarian governance system, which is proved by the practice of past centuries. In the conditions of nowadays Uzbekistan, the autocratic system of power has taken root, which does not tolerate any accountability of the government to the society and the law. Therefore, the task of establishing the rule of law will be very difficult to establish without the political will of the country's leadership. Otherwise, it will be impossible to achieve a social contract that would push the country to dynamic development.

All of the above three factors of development on which compromise is not acceptable (economic and civil liberties and rights, as well as the rule of law) are mutually conditional and do not work in isolation from each other. Civil liberties cannot be guaranteed without independent justice, and vice versa. Economic liberalism, on the other hand, creates favorable conditions for both, and itself, in turn, is guaranteed by these two factors.

Now let's look at where a compromise is still possible.

In the political sphere, the compromise would imply allowing the authoritarian rule of the current president to run for an additional presidential term, on top of the two ending in 2026, however, under the following mandatory conditions:

(a) Beyond the third term, the president shall not seek to extend his presidential powers. His continued presidency would dramatically increase the crisis of his power leading to the growth of mass discontent and its brutal suppression, akin to what happened in Andijan 2005 or in Almaty January 2022. This would undermine the stability in the country and the prospects for its sustainable development, for the sake of which this compromise is proposed. Moreover, the attempt by Mirziyoyev to establish his

⁶ *Liberal Democracy*, 2021 (V-Dem Index), <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/liberal-democracy>

lifelong rule will prompt him to restore the worst forms of authoritarianism, a scenario we are already witnessing in the Russian Federation over the last several years.

b) A system of checks and balances should be provided that would reduce the very likely risks of abuse of power by the president. Those three points mentioned above on which compromise is not permissible would ensure such a system, albeit not completely, as a full-fledged check and balance system would also require division of powers, that is free and fair parliamentary and presidential elections, the condition which will unlikely be fully met in coming several years.

It should be noted that the proposed compromise has not yet been reached, primarily because the judiciary in Uzbekistan is still not independent and de facto controlled by the executive and presidential branches, and citizens do not have sufficient freedoms of speech, assembly and association. Moreover, in July this year, we witnessed a brutal suppression by the Uzbek law enforcement and the National Guard of mostly peaceful protests in Karakalpakstan, as a result of which, according to official data, 21, and according to other sources, 77 people were killed, and hundreds of citizens were injured. These protests echo the tragedy of Andijan in May 2005, when government troops also shot down a largely peaceful demonstration of citizens, killing at least five hundred people. However, the brutal measures to restore the order in Karakalpakstan have not yet led to the restoration of the repressive model of rule known under Islam Karimov, which leaves some hope that the compromise proposed above is still achievable.

If we talk about the social and private spheres of citizens' life, one of the key questions is how the issue of the rights of sexual minorities, very complex and socially sensitive in Uzbekistan, should be addressed. On the one hand, one should take into account the fact that a majority of the Uzbek population remains strongly influenced by socially conservative norms and values. On the other hand, if the country wants to eventually join the world of liberal democracy, it is necessary to change the status quo in this matter. Compromise is also necessary here, and it would require the decriminalization of homosexual relations, by removing respective chapters from the Criminal Code. The authorities and society should understand that no one is given the right to interfere in a person's private life, including in his sexual relations, unless these relationships are not realized through coercion and violence. The compromise would only mean that these sexual relations do not go beyond the private sphere to the public one, for example, in the form of gay parades and appropriate symbols designed for the public, not to mention the legalization of same-sex marriage. Maintaining a certain taboo on the public aspects of self-expression in this sphere would be that compromise which is possible with the socially conservative majority of the population in Uzbekistan.

Comparing with the current state of affairs

How does the current ruling regime meet the above requirements and conditions of the proposed compromise? Let's go through their entire list and assess their compliance with the actual state of affairs on a ten-point scale, where 10 means maximum compliance and 1 means minimum.

1. Authoritarian rule, limited to only the next third presidential term – 3 points. I give this low rating because I am not sure that the current president will agree to resign even after this additional term expires. If it does not agree to leave the post, then a historic compromise will not be reached, and the country will most likely face the restoration of the worst form of autocracy in the spirit of the current Putin regime.

2. Prevention of the abuse of power by the ruling elite, which implies the independence of the judiciary and a full set of anti-corruption mechanisms - 3 points. Again, the low score here is due to the high likelihood that the president will lack the political will and determination to abandon his control of the judiciary and ensure the equality of all, including himself, before the law. There are serious fears that he will still prefer to remain above the law, for fear of losing control of power.

3. Civil rights and freedoms, primarily freedom of speech, assembly and association, as well as the rights of ethnic minorities - 4 points, I note certain progress in a certain part of these rights and freedoms after Mirziyoev had assumed power. However, significant restrictions on freedom of association remain in the country. Also, after the brutal suppression of citizens' protests in Karakalpakstan in July 2022, the situation around the rights of ethnic minorities looks deteriorated significantly.

4. Rights of women and sexual minorities. I would estimate the state of affairs in this area at 4 points, taking into account, on the one hand, the preservation in the Criminal Code of articles on punishment for sodomy, and on the other, some, albeit small, progress in terms of respecting women's rights, about which even the president's daughter showed some care.

5. Finally, I would estimate the situation with economic freedom and property rights at 5 points. Again, on the one hand, it is clear that the government is trying to support private entrepreneurship, to remove unnecessary barriers to business. On the other hand, in practice farmers in the cotton sector are still deprived of land rights, suffering from the dictates of local district administration and the monopoly of the so-called cotton-textile clusters which dictate their interests to the farmers and ignore the interests and rights of the latter. On top of that, the increase in illegal demolitions of personal homes over the past few years is still a serious problem undermining the institution of private property.

All these quantitative estimates, of course, are the result of the author's personal opinion and can be the subject of discussion and appropriate adjustment. But one thing is clear: on each of the five conditions, the proposed compromise is still far from being reached.

The question, of course, is whether this historic compromise is even possible. I still have doubts about this, given what kind of dictator the current president was a disciple of and what legacy he received from him in terms of the governance system. Nevertheless, the chance of reaching the compromise cannot be completely ruled out. If this chance is not realized in the foreseeable future, say, within the next ten years, then the prospects for dynamic development in Uzbekistan will be close to zero. Then,

for a long historical period, the country will be destined to remain in the category of Third World countries, without serious chances to get out of the state of socio-economic backwardness. So the country and its leadership are faced with a choice of which way to choose - to stay locked into this backward condition or still try to catch up with at least middle-developed countries.