

Another Parliamentary Election in Uzbekistan: Still No Genuine Choice for Voters

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28 October, 2024

On October 27, Uzbekistan held another parliamentary election, along with elections to local councils called *kengashes*. Before delving into the results, it is important to understand the country's political and governance system and the role of parliament within it.

Under the previous president, Islam Karimov, who ruled Uzbekistan from 1990 to 2016, the regime was openly dictatorial, as noted by American political scientist Henry Hale.¹ However, with the ascendance of Shavkat Mirziyoyev, the regime has softened somewhat, entering a period of reforms. Despite these reforms fostering greater openness than before, they have not sufficiently moved the country away from autocracy toward genuine democratization.

While there has been limited progress in human rights and economic freedoms, Uzbekistan still lacks a real separation of powers and the rule of law. Although the constitution declares the separation of powers and independence of the parliament and judiciary from the president, both institutions remain under the control of presidential power, just as they were under Karimov.

The Oliy Majlis, Uzbekistan's parliament, has more than one party represented compared to Soviet times, but these parties function as "pocket" parties, effectively making the entire parliament a "pocket" institution with no independent voice. This system persists because the president still maintains exclusive control over the security agencies, including the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the State Security Service, the National Guard, and the Armed Forces, ready to use them to suppress any dissent that may threaten his authority.

Real political opposition is not permitted in the country. It was only once allowed to operate in the country, when the Erk Party briefly operated before being completely suppressed by the Karimov regime and its leader was forced to flee and seek refuge abroad. While attempts to establish opposition parties arise occasionally, they are often denied registration, and leaders often face harsh repression, including fabricated court cases leading to imprisonment. Consequently, many opposition leaders are now in exile, as political refugees in several Western countries. The recently formed Truth and Progress

party, led by economist Khidirnazar Allakulov, is still struggling to get registered or permitted to participate in elections.

Despite some, though little progress in human rights, particularly regarding gender issues and media freedom, the last few years have seen no progress and even some regression with regard to separation of powers. Until 2019, Uzbekistan operated under a majoritarian electoral system, where elections were determined solely by single-mandate constituencies. The previous version of the Law on Elections to the Oliy Majlis, valid by 2019, allowed candidates to be nominated by both registered parties and citizen initiative groups. While this theoretically opened the door for independent candidates, the law imposed a nearly impossible requirement: initiative groups had to collect at least eight percent of the signatures from the total number of voters in the constituency, proportionally distributed across neighbourhoods.²

But this, let it be purely formal, right for initiative groups to nominate candidates was removed in subsequent versions of the law, including the current Electoral Code adopted in May 2023. Now, only political parties can nominate candidates, and those nomination signatures must comprise at least one percent of the total number of voters in the country,³ a task that is nearly impossible without relying on significant administrative resources.

In November 2023, the Oliy Majlis adopted a law transitioning from a majoritarian to a mixed majoritarian-proportional electoral system. This law stipulates that 75 deputies of the lower house of parliament will be elected in single-mandate constituencies, while the remaining 75 will be elected based on proportional representation from party lists.⁴

Additionally, the new version of the Constitution, adopted in 2023, has stripped the parliament of key powers, such as approving appointments for the Prime Minister, Cabinet members, Prosecutor General, and the head of the State Security Service.⁵ While these powers were largely formal due to the absence of real political opposition present in the parliament, the language change from “approve” (in Uzbek - *tasdiqlash*) to “endorse” (in Uzbek - *maqullash*) significantly alters the nature of the process. “Endorse” implies merely supporting the president’s decisions, rather than exercising independent authority.

Overall, the legislative changes from 2019 and 2023 have not substantially transformed the parliamentary election system, aside from introducing a 30% quota for women in parliament. However, these women are likely to be selected based on loyalty to the government and will unlikely represent an independent voice in parliament.

A few words about the parliamentary parties themselves. There are five of them: the Liberal Democratic Party, the *Milliy Tiklanish* (National Revival) Party, the Social Democratic Party, the People’s Democratic Party (formerly the local branch of Communist Party), and the Ecological Party. In the 2019 elections, they received 53, 36, 24, 22, and 15 seats in the Legislative Chamber, respectively.⁶

Since 2002, Uzbekistan has had a bicameral parliament. In addition to the lower house, local councils (*kengashes*), which will be also elected on October 27, will take part in updating the Senate. Previously, 84 senators were elected by regional *kengashes*, including the Parliament of Karakalpakstan and the Tashkent Council, while 16 were appointed by the president. A law passed on January 19 this year reduced the Senate to 65 members, with 54 elected by *kengashes* and nine appointed by the president.⁷ This change

does little to alter the power dynamics, as the president appoints regional *khokims* (governors), who, in turn, exert authority over government bodies in their jurisdictions.

A recent law passed on September 20, 2024, prohibits *khokims* from being heads of corresponding *kengashes*,⁸ which may weaken their power slightly. However, the effectiveness of this change remains uncertain, depending on the election of local representatives. As of now, there is little political competition at the local level.

Interestingly, Pulat Akhunov, one of the leaders of the opposition party "Birlik", currently residing in Sweden, attempted to persuade Uzbek authorities to permit opposition parties in local elections, but to no avail.

So, what do the results of the elections to the Legislative Chamber reveal this time? As anticipated, there were no significant changes, regarding its formation. According to the results announced by the Central Electoral Commission (CEC) on October 28, the Liberal Democratic Party won 64 of the 150 seats, or 42.7%, slightly strengthening its majority in the Legislative Chamber, *Milliy Tiklanish* - 29 (19.3%), *Adolat* - 21 (14%), the People's Democratic Party - 20 (13%) and the Ecological Party - 16 seats (10.7%).⁹ Thus, the quantitative ratio between the party factions remained essentially unchanged, almost the same as it was after the previous elections.

The CEC also reported a voter turnout of 74.72% among registered voters.¹⁰ While this figure appears more credible than the inflated statistics often cited by extremely authoritarian regimes, it still seems unrealistically high, as it does not reflect the lack of public discussion about the elections in society, social media, and even in the press about the upcoming elections and the positions of the parties admitted to them. These elections went almost unnoticed by the Uzbek society, since many citizens have long had the view that parliamentary elections in Uzbekistan, like the Oliy Majlis itself, practically do not decide anything independently. Only once on the eve of the elections, debates between the party leaders were broadcast on TV.¹¹ They tried to reflect in their speeches the political profile and mandate of their parties and even expressed criticism on some issues. However, this criticism did not target the central government and the president.

During the elections, no exit polls were conducted, and monitoring groups from independent non-governmental organizations and citizens' initiative groups were not on duty at polling stations. This is due to the fact that such organizations face insurmountable difficulties in obtaining registration with the authorities. Therefore, assessing the reliability of the election results announced by the CEC remains challenging.

However, the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) Election Observation Mission was present in the country, though its contingent was limited to about 60 members, which likely hindered its ability to evaluate the voting process at all polling stations. Nonetheless, the mission assessed these elections as technically well-organized, but lacking genuine choice for voters due to the exclusion of real opposition from the electoral process.¹²

At the same time, the distribution of seats in the Legislative Chamber between the parties, which was apparently decided in advance, behind closed doors in the highest echelons of power, looks symbolic, demonstrating the general course the country's leadership has chosen. This arrangement signals the government's strategic priorities: a commitment to liberal reforms, though primarily in the economic sphere, while also promoting national

values. Other priorities, such as social protection for citizens and environmental concerns, remain secondary, despite being in place in the government's agenda.

References:

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- ¹ Hale, Henry. *Patronal Politics: Eurasian Regime Dynamics in Comparative Perspective*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015. pp. 242-243
 - ² See: <https://lex.uz/acts/70553>
 - ³ See: <https://lex.uz/acts/70553>
 - ⁴ See: <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2023/11/25/mixed-electoral-system/>
 - ⁵ Uzbekiston Respublikasi Konstitutsii konkunining loyikhasi (Uzbek version), <https://meningkonstitutsiyam.uz/uz.pdf>; Draft Constitutional Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan (Russian version), <https://meningkonstitutsiyam.uz/rus.pdf>
 - ⁶ See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2019%E2%80%932020_Uzbek_parliamentary_election
 - ⁷ See: https://uza.uz/ru/posts/informaciya-o-sorok-devyatom-plenarnom-zasedanii-senata-oliy-mazhlisa-respubliki-uzbekistan_559317
 - ⁸ See: <https://lex.uz/ru/pdfs/7162476>
 - ⁹ Gazeta.uz, October 28, 2024, <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2024/10/28/parties/>
 - ¹⁰ Gazeta.uz, October 28, 2024, <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2024/10/28/votes/>
 - ¹¹ Gazeta.uz, October 27, 2024, <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2024/09/27/debates/>
 - ¹² OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, October 28, 2024, <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/579385>