

**COMMISSION ON
SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE**

**237 FORD HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING
WASHINGTON, DC 20515**

(202) 225-1901

**THE REFERENDUM ON INDEPENDENCE
AND
PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION
IN
UZBEKISTAN**

December 29, 1991

**Tashkent and Samarkand
Uzbekistan**

**Prepared by the Staff
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SUMMARY

Uzbekistan held a referendum on independence and its first direct, contested presidential election on December 29, 1991. According to the republic's Central Election Commission, over 98 percent of voters cast ballots for independence, and -- more important -- 86 percent voted for Islam Karimov as president. Karimov, former head of Uzbekistan's Communist Party (now renamed the People's-Democratic Party) defeated Muhammad Salih, poet, non-Communist Party deputy to the republic's Supreme Soviet and chairman of the opposition party *Erk*.

Salih complained that he could not compete fairly with Karimov, who enjoyed the natural advantages of incumbency, controlled the media, and whose supporters manipulated the entire apparatus of voting and vote counting. Salih said he knew he had no chance of winning, given the uneven odds, but he ran in order to show that someone could challenge the entrenched regime.

Abdurrahim Pulatov, Chairman of the Popular Front movement *Birlik* ("Unity"), tried to enter the race but could not. Officials argued that Pulatov could not gather the necessary votes to gain registration as a candidate; Pulatov claimed the authorities deliberately kept him from running by passing a complicated election law, which they then made even more restrictive and arbitrary in its implementation to ensure his exclusion. The evidence supports his interpretation.

Uzbekistan's referendum on independence was a mere formality, given the dissolution of the USSR. Karimov's victory in a direct, two-candidate election signaled significant progress compared to the republic's previous practices and relative to other Central Asian republics, most of which did not hold contested presidential elections. But Karimov's advantages over Salih in the campaign, the exclusion of Pulatov, and the prevalence of old voting habits, both among voters and polling station officials, indicate that much remains to be done before Uzbekistan attains Western and CSCE notions of political pluralism and electoral probity.

Uzbekistan has gained admission to the CSCE, and will shortly also join the United Nations. The republic's position within the Commonwealth of Independent States is less clear, as the definition and future of the CIS are themselves murky. Domestically, Uzbekistan's leaders face a growing challenge from opposition forces, democratic and undemocratic, while painfully aware that any attempt at fundamental economic reform threatens to increase societal discontent.

Two Helsinki Commission staffers observed Uzbekistan's referendum and presidential election, at the invitation of the republic's Supreme Soviet. They spent four days in Tashkent, the capital, and also traveled to Samarkand, to interview spokesmen of unofficial movements about the election and the general political situation in Uzbekistan.

BACKGROUND

Demography: Uzbekistan's 20 million residents make it the third most populous of the former Soviet republics and the most populous Central Asian republic. Uzbeks comprise about 70 percent of the population, and are the most numerous Asian people in the former Soviet Union. Over 8 percent of the population are Russians, most of whom live in the capital, Tashkent. Other Central Asians make up 10 percent, with Tatars, Germans, Koreans and others constituting the remainder.

History: Before the Russian Empire colonized the region in the 19th century, Central Asia was ruled for centuries by a succession of various emirs, khans and princes. Most prominent was Tamerlane, who conquered a vast empire in the 14th century and built his capital at Samarkand, which still contains some of the finest examples of Islamic architecture. At the time of the Russian conquest, there were three separate, autonomously ruled territories in the region: an Emirate centered in the city of Bukhara, and two Khanates centered in Khiva and Kokand. Today's Republic of Uzbekistan encompasses parts of the territory of all three of these entities. At the turn of the century, a reform movement encompassing religion, politics and culture developed in Central Asia, led by Muslim (mainly Tatar) intellectuals. However, during the Bolshevik Revolution and Civil War, the battle between largely Uzbek anti-Bolshevik groups and largely Russian pro-Bolshevik forces was decided by the Red Army, which ultimately took control of Central Asia. The Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic came into existence in October 1924.

Economy and Environment: Uzbekistan's economy is largely agricultural and cotton is the dominant crop. The Kremlin's determination to make the Soviet Union self-sufficient in cotton led planners to set aside a high percentage of the land in all Central Asian republics to cotton. Today, nearly 75 percent of the arable land in Uzbekistan serves this purpose, and the republic supplied over 60 percent of the former Soviet Union's cotton.

The excessive planting of this one crop, known as the "monoculture" system, has come to represent for all Central Asians, and particularly the Uzbeks, Russian domination and exploitation of their economy and livelihood. Cotton-growing demands considerable amounts of water and Uzbekistan's largely desert terrain required extensive irrigation schemes that have led, over decades, to the virtual depletion of the Aral Sea, formerly the fourth largest inland body of water in the world and the primary source of water for all of Central Asia. Since 1960 the sea has lost 65 percent of its original contents and has shrunk to 40 percent of its initial size.

The sea's shrinkage has resulted in environmental devastation and, along with the overuse of dangerous chemical pesticides, has dramatically lowered the health standards of Uzbekistan's very large rural population (nearly 60 percent of the total). As elsewhere in the former USSR in the late 1980s, environmental degradation had profound political

Karimov, former head of the republic's former Communist Party, had been elected president of Uzbekistan by the Communist Party-dominated Supreme Soviet in March 1990. After Boris Yeltsin banned the Communist Party in the wake of the failed August 1991 coup, other republics did the same, including Uzbekistan, whose leaders subsequently created the People's-Democratic Party. Karimov heads the party, which, along with Uzbekistan's trade unions, nominated him in the December 29 election.

The presidential election appears to have had several purposes: to put Karimov on the same plane as other presidents of former Soviet republics who had won popular elections, which would strengthen his position in his dealings with them; to consolidate his position inside Uzbekistan vis-a-vis potential rivals, as well as other established institutions of power, such as the remnants of the Communist Party and, to a lesser degree, the legislature; and, to enhance Karimov's authority and legitimacy through a victory in a contested election, which would appeal to Western states and could justify Karimov's claim to enjoy popular support in the face of the growing influence of Uzbekistan's opposition.

Opposition: Uzbekistan's largest opposition group is the movement *Birlik*, founded in May 1989. The movement emerged from a series of rallies and demonstrations whose participants demanded environmental protection, greater sovereignty for Uzbekistan and that Uzbek be made the republic's state language. *Birlik's* supporters have ranged across the political spectrum, from social democrats to more nationalist-oriented groups. Its leading founders included Abdurrahim Pulatov, Muhammad Salih and Shukhrat Ismatullaev. Pulatov, the current co-chairman, is a computer scientist from Tashkent.

One year later, several *Birlik* leaders, including Salih, broke away and created their own political party "*Erk*" ("will" or "freedom"). They cited disagreement over methods as the cause of the split, suggesting that *Birlik's* tactics were unnecessarily confrontational, but personal differences among them -- which persist -- almost certainly were an important factor. Both organizations maintained similar goals, however, including the development of a pluralist and secular democratic system in Uzbekistan and a mixed economy.

Erk won registration in September 1991. The authorities registered *Birlik* in November 1991, and only as a movement, not as a party (see below). But while *Erk* and *Birlik* were allowed to organize, they have not been free to maneuver. Opposition leaders have complained from the beginning of their inability to gain access to the media, under state and (until September 1991) Communist Party control. The police closed *Birlik's* headquarters, a small two-room office, in spring 1991 and the movement has since had to operate out of one room at the Uzbek Writers' Union. Its leaders endure frequent harassment, such as temporary detention and fines. Demonstrations, the main type of protest open to opposition groups, have virtually been banned since 1989, though unofficial rallies have occurred sporadically.

Karimov: The incumbent president declared that Uzbekistan would determine its own fate, develop independent ties with foreign countries, and control its own resources for the good of its citizens, whose spiritual regeneration was an important policy goal. Karimov called for guaranteed freedom of conscience and the equality of all republic residents, including their civil rights, as well as respect for their national languages, culture and traditions. He assured voters that Uzbekistan would maintain harmonious relations with all the states of the Commonwealth.

The program promised full economic freedom for industries and other businesses, along with "equal opportunities for all forms of ownership," i.e., private property. But Karimov pointedly stressed the need for "discipline and order," stability and civil peace as Uzbekistan introduced a market economy.

Salih: The challenger, as opposed to emphasizing stability, urged the complete, non-violent transformation of the political and economic system of Uzbekistan. Salih advocated separating the legislative, executive and judicial branches of power, and creating a system of local authorities who would be elected by popular vote in multi-party elections. He offered specific guarantees for freedom of conscience, speech, the press, assembly and movement. Salih pointedly called for returning expropriated mosques and churches to believers and defending their rights. He described as an "absolute priority" the defense of personal freedom, declaring the inviolability of personal freedom, dwelling, property, and the privacy of citizens' mail and telephones.

Salih also proclaimed his unequivocal support for the introduction of a market economy. He backed the equality of private and other forms of ownership, and the removal of all barriers to business and enterprise.

The Candidates' Relative Strength and Prospects

It is unclear how much support Karimov, Salih and *Birlik* and its leaders have in Uzbekistan. There are no public opinion surveys and no free media in which to discuss this issue. Nor are opposition groups free to organize and hold rallies and demonstrations. On the other hand, the incumbent was well known to the electorate, and however discontented people may be with deteriorating living standards, Karimov had exclusive control of patronage possibilities and he and his program represented the familiar in a sea of troubling unknowns to a largely traditional populace, accustomed to strongman rule from the top. In this light, the election could have offered a means of determining the level of popular backing for the incumbent president and his rivals. For reasons outlined below, however, the campaign, balloting and results did not really do so, except by implication.

"who has a wealth of experience working with people, who is competent in economic matters, who is well oriented to the situation in the republic and in society and who has shown himself to be an unshakable defender of internationalism....Ask your mothers and fathers if they have not felt the effects of the actions and care of Islam Abduganievich [Karimov, who] is in his rightful place and there is no alternative to him..."

This same article concludes with an illuminating appeal to Karimov, urging that he not allow "ultra-democratization, ultra-glasnost....create a powerful presidential council that can assuredly keep control of the situation. Strong authority and mighty executive power are necessary...Don't allow our capital, Tashkent, to be turned into a second Moscow, where anarchy, crime and constant demonstrations reign."

The December 26, 1991 issue of *Vecherniy Tashkent*, the main Tashkent newspaper, contained letters from pensioners, who wrote:

Life is not easy these days. It is difficult for us even to go out for bread...We decided to write to say that we are not without protection. Islam Abduganievich is working to protect us, the pensioners, lonely and sick people. We thank him for relieving the lot of poor people, those with large families, war veterans and laborers. The benefits that we have in obtaining apartments, travelling on city transport--this is his doing....We wish Islam Karimov success in his service for the good of the people."

The Uzbek-language press carried similar encomiums about Karimov. A December 28 article in *Khalq Sozi* (People's Word) on Karimov's meeting with voters concluded by stating that those who attended the meeting unanimously invited all Tashkent voters to vote for Karimov. In contrast to these laudatory statements and expressions of gratitude to Karimov, Muhammad Salih received virtually no mention in the newspapers read by Commission staff.

REGISTERING CANDIDATES: A critically important aspect of Uzbekistan's presidential election were the law's provisions on registering candidates nominated by social organizations. In view of the ensuing controversy over this issue between the authorities and *Birlik*, it is worth examining the law and its implementation in detail.

Registered political parties could nominate candidates without any supporting signatures. The two candidates nominated by political parties -- Karimov (by the People's Democratic Party) and Muhammad Salih (*Erk*) were registered on November 25.

Social movements, however, needed 60,000 signatures to register a candidate. This distinction between parties and movements set Uzbekistan apart from the Baltic States and

LOCAL OBSERVERS: The law authorized observers from registered social movements and political parties to monitor the voting and the vote count. They needed only a document from the organization they represented to enter polling stations, which they could visit without any warning.

FOREIGN OBSERVERS: Uzbekistan's Supreme Soviet invited foreign observers to the December 29 balloting. Observers came from Malaysia, Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Estonia and Turkey, in addition to Helsinki Commission staff. Surprisingly, there were no Western reporters present -- they were probably all in Minsk, for the meeting that weekend of the heads of Commonwealth states.

Protests

CEC chairman Akhmedov asserted there were no major protests against campaign procedures. But Uzbekistan's presidential election evoked strong protests and claims of unfairness, both from the candidate who succeeded in getting registered, Muhammad Salih, leader of *Erk*, and from the would-be candidate, Abdurrahim Pulatov, chairman of *Birlik*.

Erk issued a statement detailing complaints about the campaign and the voting. These included: the failure to include representatives of *Erk* and other opposition parties in electoral commissions on all levels; the assistance rendered to Karimov by election officials, who impeded Salih's efforts to meet with voters and rarely distributed his materials; the preference shown to Karimov in republic media, which aired his speeches and meetings with voters, but which, in the 40 days of the campaign, granted Salih only 15 minutes on television -- of which censors cut two minutes.

Erk further charged that the republic media -- even though censorship has officially been abolished in Uzbekistan -- refused to print any information about violations of the election law or criticism of the government, while heavily censoring *Erk's* newspaper. *Erk* also complained about the piddling financial resources assigned to Salih's campaign, despite the CEC's obligation to distribute funds to candidates equally. The movement's spokesmen acknowledged that Karimov, as republic leader, would enjoy the advantages of incumbency and said they did not object if the media portrayed him in his presidential duties, but, they said, "most of the information in the media is about him."

As for the balloting and vote count, *Erk* contended that polling stations had received 20-30 percent more ballots than needed, and, to make the point, handed Commission staff a large stack of ballots, which, they said, their supporters had swiped from a polling place. *Erk* alleged that election officials everywhere allowed people to vote for others, while in some polling stations, they refused entry to *Erk's* observers and occasionally ejected them by force. As a result, *Erk* and other opposition groups could not observe the vote count, which, Salih maintained, had been thoroughly falsified. Some of his lieutenants from the Ferghana Valley related that they had to negotiate with

As a result of the December 29 voting, Uzbekistan and its president are now on an equal plane with other former Soviet republics and their presidents as the newly constituted Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) struggles to develop an identity. Uzbekistan's role in the CIS depends, of course, on whether, how long and in what form it survives, but the republic's leaders, given their economic woes, probably favor remaining part of some Commonwealth as an independent member. They may, however, join other Central Asian republics in a regional union if membership in the CIS offers more disadvantages than benefits. At home, meanwhile, Karimov can claim to have won a popular mandate for his stated policies of reform and stability.

Domestic Politics: Supreme Soviet Chairman Yuldashev said that enhanced presidential power would not lead to weakening of the republic's parliament. Nor, he added, would conflict between the executive and legislative branch be permitted, since "the people would suffer." It seems, therefore, that Karimov intends to formulate and implement policy in collaboration with the legislators who originally elected him president in 1990. The concept that conflicts between political institutions, as opposed to intra-institutional conflict, are a natural feature of democracy has apparently not yet made much headway among Uzbekistan's leaders, or people.

One important question facing Uzbekistan -- and most other former Soviet republics -- is whether to hold new parliamentary elections. The Baltic States and all Soviet republics elected new parliaments in 1990 under conditions of Communist Party dominance, which often created bloated legislatures, many of whose deputies are at best ambivalent about the political and economic reforms now underway. More reformist, or more capable, deputies are now needed. Besides, elected leaders may seek scapegoats for economic hardships endured by their constituents.

Pulatov told Commission staff that should there be new parliamentary elections, *Birlik* would pull out all the stops to prevent its exclusion, since influence on the legislature would be a "matter of life and death." Any attempt to exclude *Birlik* from a parliamentary election could therefore lead to serious disturbances.

Alternatively, Karimov could consider a "cleaner," simpler (and cheaper) approach by copying Azerbaijani president Ayaz Mutalibov. Rather than hold new elections, Mutalibov simply cut a deal with the opposition Popular Front. The result was a small (50-member) legislature, half of whose members were Mutalibov backers, the other half were chosen by the Popular Front.

Karimov may, however, do neither, preferring to keep the opposition excluded from power and not risking an unpredictable election. Still, if falling living standards produce widespread discontent, Karimov could be pressured into concessions or might decide to share the blame and responsibility with the opposition. This could also be one way of keeping the banned Islamic Renaissance Party out of the open political arena -- which

Inter-Ethnic Relations: Supreme Soviet Chairman Yuldashev told observers that representatives of over 100 nations live in Uzbekistan and that "inter-ethnic problems never existed here." But the massacres of Meskhetian Turks by Uzbeks in the Ferghana Valley in June 1989 were only the most horrific and large-scale recent evidence of inter-ethnic tension in the republic.

Helsinki Commission staff spoke at length with Russians in Tashkent who expressed deep fear and concerns about living in independent Uzbekistan. Russians have been leaving the republic for several years in ever-larger numbers. This demographic phenomenon has serious economic implications, as departing Russians take with them badly needed technical-managerial skills, which are even more critical if Uzbekistan must survive as an independent state in the world community. But miserable economic conditions everywhere in the former USSR dampen any welcome migrants might encounter in Russia or other possible areas of destination; sometimes their houses have reportedly been burned by local residents resentful of new consumers chasing scarce food and goods. This unpleasant reality could weaken the drive to emigrate; but on the other hand, Russians (or other former Soviet citizens of European origin) living in Uzbekistan have grown accustomed to a certain privileged status. If they want, or feel they have, to remain in the republic, they will have to adapt to changed circumstances.

One such adaptation concerns language. Many Uzbeks resent the subordination of their language to Russian in their own republic for so long. With Uzbek now the state language, non-Uzbek speakers must develop a sufficient fluency in the language to feel comfortable and to allay their concerns about their economic prospects (and their childrens') in an Uzbek-speaking republic.

Russians (or other former Soviet citizens of European origin) also are concerned about the threat of growing Islamic influence in Uzbekistan. If Islam does gain political power in the republic, tensions between Uzbeks and Slavs, with attendant increased emigration of the latter, will probably rise. And if aggrieved Russians stream into Russia from Uzbekistan, relations between these two republics could be affected.

Foreign Policy: Commission staff met with Uzbekistan's Foreign Minister, Shahlo Mahmudova (who has since been replaced). She expressed gratification at U.S. recognition of Uzbekistan but voiced the hope that the development of diplomatic relations would accelerate. Mahmudova stressed that Uzbekistan would not isolate itself, but would strive for good and mutually beneficial relations with all countries. Uzbekistan needs "economic help and contacts," she said, "without interference in our internal affairs." She pledged, however, the government's commitment to human rights.

Uzbekistan, and the other underdeveloped Central Asian republics, have long depended on subsidies from the Soviet "center" and if only for economic reasons, will certainly want to retain close economic ties with CIS republics. At the same time, the