

Uzbek president Islam Karimov's failure to appear at the congress of his Liberal Democratic Party last month has given rise to renewed speculation about his health.

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Karimov, 77, has ruled the country since 1989 and is expected to be returned to office in a presidential election set for March 29.

But persistent rumours about his health continue. In late January, citing anonymous sources, the opposition People's Movement of Uzbekistan reported that Karimov had lapsed into a coma but later recovered.

Andrei Grozin, head of the Central Asia department at the Institute for Countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States in Moscow, spoke to IWPR's Timur Toktonaliev about the implications of this reported health crisis, and how the struggle for succession might shape up.

How credible are these stories about Karimov being ill?

The Uzbek opposition often says that Islam Karimov is about to die, and that he has one foot in the grave. These reports first emerged in 2003, then in 2005 and in 2009. Prior to the latest reports, there were rumours in 2013. None of these reports has been confirmed, so it's quite possible it is just unconfirmed rumour this time, too.

But on the other hand, judging by what we currently know, the situation is fairly serious. Islam Karimov is an elderly man. Seventy-seven is an advanced age and it's clear he has health issues.

I was very surprised that Karimov was absent from the February 6 congress of Uzbekistan's Liberal Democratic Party, when it nominated him as a candidate for the forthcoming election. And this was despite his appearance being publicised by the official media - the Uzbek state broadcaster and news agencies. Everyone was waiting for him, but he didn't appear.... The only logical cause is the state of his health, because I cannot believe that [he] wouldn't come to such an important event just because he did not want to.

What about reports that this was made up by members of his entourage?

Yes, sometimes the National Security Service (SNB) does resort to circulating rumours. But to put out such information in a situation like this, on the eve of an imminent presidential election would harm Karimov rather than benefit as a president going into an election campaign.

Rumours like this are usually spread to distract public attention from various problems. It's a method practiced not only in Uzbekistan; the authorities in neighbouring Kazakhstan often resort to tactics like this. But right now I can't see any serious problems that seriously threaten Uzbekistan in the foreseeable future.

Since Karimov's re-election is the desired outcome, it is logical to assume that just before

the election he will be scheduled to appear at all kinds of events – opening new buildings, cutting the tape, giving speeches, being seen frequently on television – to demonstrate that the president is in good physical shape.

In the context of electioneering, projecting that kind of image is undoubtedly a lot better than having an image of someone who disappears off the scene just before his re-election.

How is Karimov's state of health viewed outside the country, particularly in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakstan?

Much more attention is being paid to Karimov's health than that of Saparmurat Niazov [ex-president of Turkmenistan who died in 2006], probably because he is much older than Niyazov was and has more health issues. That's one thing.

Second, in the eyes of the Uzbek people, Karimov is a guarantee of stability; whether this reflects reality is a different question altogether. But in the public mind, maintaining the country's stability, preventing infighting among the elite during any transition of power, and preventing something akin to the civil war that took place in Tajikistan all depend on the health of the president.

What might happen in the event of his death?

There are two main scenarios, one catastrophic and the other more low-key.

In the first scenario, the death of Karimov, the pillar and founder of Uzbekistan's political system, would result in a power struggle between various clans, or rather the financial and industrial elite factions in Uzbekistan. This struggle might take various forms, including conflict – using the Islamic factor, exploiting regional and separatist issues, and assassinating rivals.

The second scenario is based on the Turkmen experience. Following the death of Turkmenbashi [title used by Niazov], Arkadag [his successor Gurbanguly Berdymuhammedov] appeared on the scene. The Uzbek ruling elite have everything to lose everything, and they are very pragmatic people. So they will do everything possible to avoid conflict and will come to some kind of agreement among themselves.

I am inclined to believe in the latter scenario, because the external players are similarly interested in preventing Uzbekistan exploding, and they will try to influence the elite groupings. None of the contenders for the president's job, whether it is [deputy prime minister] Rustam Azimov, [prime minister] Shavkat Mirzayev or someone else, can afford to ignore the outside players – Russia, China and the West. Each will be seeking support from elite groups inside the country and also from outside sponsors. External political support is a foundation on which the next leader will be able to consolidate power. So the elites will try not to let things get as far as serious conflict, and will come to terms somehow.

In addition, they are all aware of recent events in Ukraine and realise that in the post-Soviet world, any political system is quite fragile. If one elite faction takes harsh action, if it crosses the line and take steps that could ultimately lead to a serious conflict or a civil war

like in Tajikistan, it will be stopped, either by domestic forces or from the outside.

Do you think negotiations are already under way for this second scenario?

That's very difficult to say because Uzbekistan is a very closed country compared with Kyrgyzstan and even with Kazakhstan, where it's possible to track and evaluate developments within the elite.

Through sheer inertia, there is still talk about this or that clan in Uzbekistan, and that if a minister is originally from the capital, he is automatically part of the Tashkent city or regional clan. In reality, that is a very simplistic view.

In the 1990s, it was possible to delineate the Samarkand clan and its component parts, the Namangan clan, the Andijan clan, to count up the representatives of each and conclude that they reflected the interests of that clan.

Not nowadays; it's a lot complicated. Take, for example, Rustam Azimov, who comes from the Tashkent "nomenklatura" and holds liberal views on the economy. That does not mean he is the leader or even a major representative of the Tashkent clan. It isn't like that at all, as the gradations have been eroded.

I think that Uzbekistan is now moving away from strict divisions along regional lines. It's a lot more complex. Marriages and business deals take intra-elite divisions to a different level, where it is no longer purely regional, but based on teams, common interests, doing business together, and aligning against someone else. That is how the elites in Kazakhstan and Russia divide up. In other words, it has evolved.

At the same time, it is unclear what the situation is on the inside, which makes it really hard to say what is going on, who is friends with whom, and who is against whom.

What are the chances of the Islamic radicals whom Karimov has been fighting for the last two decades?

I think that an underground Islamic opposition exists. But the country is highly authoritarian, social networks are strictly controlled through the system of "mahallas" [neighbourhood committees], and volunteer helpers [informers]. Everyone informs on everyone else. In that sense, the SNB does a very effective job.

So there is an underground, but I think it's in very poor shape inside Uzbekistan. Everyone who could do so left Uzbekistan in the 1990s and moved either to Afghanistan, to areas that are now controlled by Islamic State, or somewhere else. So people who are ready to take up the struggle and fight for an ideology cannot last long in Uzbekistan as they are identified and put behind bars.

In theory, this underground opposition could be spurred into action, but it could not do so without some strong external catalyst. It may be a bit more important than the secular opposition, but that has been completely routed and has no chance of making itself and its views known.

Could groups outside Uzbekistan like Islamic State support this underground

force?

Yes, I think, they could, but it isn't imminent. In theory, they could be waiting for the right moment, for example, a transition of power, assuming that doesn't happen according to the second scenario where elite groups strike a deal and agree a successor with minimal implications for the country. But if it's the first scenario and there is a sudden crisis... things could get out of hand and it could be like the peak of the Tajik conflict in 1991-92, tipping into civil war, but still fundamentally a power struggle between clan groupings and regions. In a situation like that, a clan grouping that is on the losing side, or is trying to bolster its position through the Islamic factor, might seek support from Islamic State.

The prevailing view among analysts, in Moscow at least, is that they [current elite groups] will be able to come to terms so as to protect themselves, their businesses, and the political system in which they flourish, and that they will find a clone of Karimov. But there isn't a 100 per cent guarantee that common sense will win out over the desire to destroy one's rivals, seize their businesses and drive them off the political scene.

I would say that Uzbekistan's neighbours should hope for the best but prepare for the worst. If something like that happens, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan will bear the brunt as the weakest and least well-protected countries.

How capable is Karimov of continuing as head of state?

Karimov has aged visibly in the last five years, although not as catastrophically as the Uzbek opposition pretends. The circle of people who are close to him is shrinking. Compared with the 1990s, those who have the president's ear and can tell him things are of a lesser calibre than the old elite figures. They are less influential and have fewer resources. They may have more money than the old insiders, but they have significantly less influence. All these people are younger than Karimov. They are the second and third generations of the ruling elite. They are not Karimov's equals in many respects - they know that and he knows it. They cannot influence his decisions. They can provide him with information that favours themselves, but they cannot influence things. Karimov decides everything himself.

It is clear even now that the next president of Uzbekistan, whoever that might be, will be a weaker figure....That will create a mood of uncertainty, with a weak president surrounded by figures who are just as weak but who are ambitious.

Karimov could theoretically appoint anyone he wants as president. But the problem is that he knows his successor must satisfy two requirements. On the one hand, he has to be absolutely loyal to Karimov and guarantee him a place in history, and protection for his family and its interests. In other words, be what Vladimir Putin was to Russia's first president, Boris Yeltsin.

The second criterion is the ability to hang on to power without Karimov.

However, Karimov will only agree to hand over power at the very last moment, when he is no longer be able to rule the country, control the elite, and maintain the right kinds of

partnerships with the world's major centres of power. Right now, Karimov does not see a need to make that move and hand over power to someone else.

Might one expect some kind of reform process in an Uzbekistan without Karimov?

If you remember Turkmenistan in 2006-2007, there was a lot of talk of a young, progressive leader [Berdymuhammedov] who was going to embark on reforms. Some things did change in the area of social policy, but they have hardly been spectacular.... I think [Uzbekistan] will be similar to Turkmenistan.

There probably won't be reforms or a move away from the economic model of state capitalism, since the interests of all the elite groups are tied into that system. Why chop off the branch you are sitting on? They and all their many relatives are doing very well out of it. So it is unlikely there will be any fundamental change to the basic legislation that underpins the political and economic systems.

I think it will be a bit like Turkmenistan. Some kind of liberalisation, perhaps, but neither fundamental nor wide-ranging.

Andrei Grozin was interviewed by Timur Toktonaliev, IWPR Kyrgyzstan editor



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