

# Uzbekistan: an unlikely hero

Business



The small Central Asian country of Uzbekistan may seem unimportant to many Americans, but it currently holds an important key to general peace and stability within the region, and ultimately the world. Although Uzbekistan has a terrifying number of human rights violations, the nation is an economic stronghold and should be made top priority by organizations like The United Nations, Human Rights Watch, Eurasian Economic Union and leaders from many major nations. Uzbekistan could easily be made into a model nation for other states that seem to suffer with the same issues the Uzbekistani Government has been attempting to overcome for years. By making the nation of Uzbekistan an international priority, I believe that Uzbekistan- given global investment, domestic stability, and human rights improvements- could serve as a model for Western, democratic government in Asia.

Islam Karimov is a name that would send chills down any Uzbeks' spine. In 1991 Karimov was a notorious dictator who took over a few years prior to Uzbekistan's independence. Karimov was known for sending assassins to kill political rivals and personal enemies. At the peak of his reign, Karimov had established systematic torture in his judicial system and had taken over the press, killing hundreds of journalists who dared to speak out against him. In articles 29 and 67 of the Uzbek Constitution, censorship and suppression of the media is illegal.

But, Karimov directly disobeyed these articles. In 2005, Karimov faced off with protesters in Andjan, who were peacefully picketing against the government. On May 13 of that same year Karimov ordered troops to go and disperse the protesters, resulting in the death of 400-500 citizens. This was a tipping point for the United Nations; after the Andjian Massacre the United

Nations reduced funding to the Uzbekistani Government. Karimov also faced criticism for his human rights violations and religious restrictions from the United States, a previous ally.

After Karimov's death in September of 2016, minor domestic improvements were made. Although the newest president, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, no longer puts people in jail for peeling carrots incorrectly, forced labor, executions, and oppression of the press are still frequent occurrences. This is largely due to the legacy that Karimov left during his dictatorship. The European Union, United Nations, and United States have largely turned a blind eye to these horrors and crimes. Without the help from these outside organizations, there is no way that Uzbekistan will improve, and consequently, the world won't improve. Uzbekistan is a bridge, located near Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, China, and Turkmenistan.

All five of these countries are notorious for having serious human rights violations; most notably, torture, media oppression, and violations against women and children. By improving civil rights conditions in Uzbekistan, other countries will follow suit, making similar improvements. Since the death of Karimov, The United Nations has paid more attention to Uzbekistan's many human rights violations. In May of 2017, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, The UN High Commissioner For Human Rights, called for a more concrete backing of human rights. Mirziyoyev has made innovative legislation including improvements in public administration, more protection for at risk and vulnerable people, and a more liberal economy.

The United Nations concern is that these legal guidelines will only act as frameworks for plans, and not make any productive change. Hussein believes that no progress will be made until Uzbekistan accepts criticism and allows for political prisoners to be released. Mirziyoyev has been a true leader in fronting major improvements for human rights in Central Asia. After the election, Kyrgyzstan has increased their stance on improving human rights, even with their extreme economic downturn. But, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan have shaped constitutions and cults that make human rights violations boom in both nations. It is up to Uzbekistan to model this and to lead Central Asia into a region that is respectful of human rights.

Tajikistan and Turkmenistan suffer from extreme human rights violations. The leader of Tajikistan intensified his personality cult, while in Turkmenistan the " president" recently declared himself dictator. With more time and more improvements in Uzbekistan, gradual help will impact both Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. In 2014, Uzbekistan increased their manual cotton production in spite of pressure to stop using manual labor. As the second largest cotton producing country, this was quite a shock and led to various countries, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan included, to model their economic plans after Uzbekistan's. Obviously, there should be a major difference between human rights and making profit.

Yet if the United Nations were to set an economic incentive, there would be a high probability of troubled nations following Uzbekistan on the human rights front. By improving conditions in Uzbekistan, other nations will be encouraged to also take human rights more seriously. With support from the United Nations, countries who generally have no interest in human rights will

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at least want to try passing new legislation, even if it is only for the economic gain. Even if it fails, it may encourage people to stand up, just like many Uzbek journalists have. When the people take action, change will always come.

Economically, Uzbekistan is a stronghold in Central Asia. Compared to many Western nations, Uzbekistan is extremely poor, it is a relatively wealthy nation in Central Asia. It's neighbor, Kazakhstan, currently makes the most gross pay, but their main export is oil. Without oil as an export, Kazakhstan would lose roughly 60% of it's income. As the world slowly shifts towards green energy, the use for oil is gradually becoming less relevant.

Although the cotton industry is not going away, the Uzbeks have their fair share of economic trouble lingering on the horizon: desertification. The overfarmed land on the steppes of Uzbekistan is cause for much concern. As cotton is their main export, the land drying out will end the cotton industry for Uzbekistan. Yet this is a double edged sword. The cotton industry forces thousands of educated Uzbeks to pause their lives to pick cotton for months in the fall, causing for mass upsets in service based jobs.

Unfortunately, their entire economy is based on this failing industry that destroys citizens' lives. With both Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan economy's doomed to failure, action must be taken to continually make improvements to their human rights records; but it will require that Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan work together, for the best interest of both nations. With Kazakhstan's oil based economy, an agreement could be made that Uzbekistan can power the picking of cotton with machines using

Kazakhstan's oil. They will continue to share the Syr Darya, a river that acts as a major water resource for both countries. By industrializing Uzbekistan's cotton industry, human rights abuses will decrease and more service based jobs will be filled, thus increasing quality of life. Unfortunately, this solution only covers the forced manual picking of cotton.

With help from the United Nations and other organizations, Uzbekistan could learn to add a diversification of crops to their farms. 10% of Uzbekistan is cultivated, leaving them with two options, move their farms or expand and start farming more crops. By farming different crops, the soil will become more diverse and help combat the looming desertification. Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan will have to work together if they want to remain economically sound in the coming years. Uzbekistan may have its problems, but there is hope.

The steps that Shavkat Mirziyoyev has taken early in his presidency have laid a groundwork for really positive improvement. Uzbekistan may have had a rough start, but a lot is being done to change that. Uzbekistan can act as a great model for other nations, showing that change can be made despite a nation's history. With help from the United Nations and other organizations, Uzbekistan has potential to set a standard in Central Asia and generally improve people's lives. Uzbekistan is landlocked, between other countries known for their numerous violations of human rights.

It also acts as a bridge between the Middle East and Asia, primarily because of the Silk Road. By making Uzbekistan a strong force in human rights, many good changes will come about in Central Asia and hopefully, the Middle East.