

## **BACKGROUND**

The Republic of Uzbekistan recently held the Parliamentary elections to replace the existing unicameral *Oliy Majlis* (Parliament) with a bicameral structure. This was a major political development in the modern history of Uzbekistan. Previously, the *Oliy Majlis* institutionalized the Supreme Court and institutions of presidency and *hokims* (Local administrators) under the Constitution. Uzbekistan's gradual political development strategy reflects processes inherent in the considered levels of its political culture and relevant changing phases. Within a framework of geopolitics, this article explains the gradual political development strategies adapted by some new Republics of the former Soviet Union, particularly Uzbekistan with a focus on political culture and its relevance to the gradual political development, hence implications of political reform over the Parliamentary Elections held on December 26, 2004.

Ever since independence in 1991, like other newly established republics of the former Soviet Union (FSU), the government of Uzbekistan under President Islam Karimov focused upon the search for an appropriate model of socio-economic and political development. The processes of nation and state-building have never been so easy, particularly amid the ongoing socio-economic transitions region-wide and a major post-Cold War structural transition within the international system itself, ranging in-between the bipolar, multipolar and unipolar world systems. While the economic and political transitions became a priority for all, some states under their own socio-political culture and unique regional geopolitical circumstances, particularly ramifications of the ongoing civil wars in the neighborhood chose to adapt a relatively slow, but gradual political development strategy. Internal and regional security aspects were thus prioritized to accompany transformation, as seems to be the case in Uzbekistan. The Uzbek leadership was more concerned about educating their public first, before introducing new political reforms. Geographical proximity with Europe led FSUs in Baltic and other Salvic regions to engage in a relatively faster transition process, but given the landlocked status of Central Asia, its leadership realized that an effective socio-political reformation would be possible only with unlocking of the region through alternate routes of transportation hence with considerable levels of economic stability. Regional security environment thus played a very important role in adapted schemes of transitions. Even the Kyrgyz Republic felt the need to slow down its relatively faster transition process in order to balance between the domestic realities and regional geopolitical complexities.

Like other Central Asian states, Uzbekistan appears to be cautious about the speed of socio-political transformation, yet it is trying not to ignore the reformation trends in the world community. The Uzbek argument about gradual political reform rests upon the following three arguments: first, the leadership wants to educate the public before any new political reform is introduced; secondly, the leadership wants assurance that the regional security environment is supportive in terms of democratization; and thirdly it seems to be waiting for the opportunity being connected worldwide through alternate routes of transportation, which according to the Uzbek perceptions is a necessary condition in the nation and state-building process. Uzbekistan's gradual transition strategy thus does not discard democratization, but is associated with the processes of domestic and regional political

socialization. Most Central Asian leaders, appear to balance their political realism by responding simultaneously to the demands of the international community and attempts to engage in political modernization, albeit within the parameters of their own geopolitical location and domestic circumstances. Uzbeks, like rest of Central Asia, cautiously observe the political developments in other parts of FSU and learn from their own unique experiences. Recently, President Karimov explained that the Parliamentary elections of 2004 have been a school of learning for Uzbekistan, indicating about the reformation strategy through learning from experience.

Learning from the post-Soviet transitional crises in Caucasus, Tajikistan and Russia, the leadership of Uzbekistan prioritized national security matters focusing upon a gradual yet orderly transition. Economically, Uzbek leadership appears impressed by the development models of China and Singapore. Politically it is attracted to the western styled secular democracy. The new states without a previous history of competing political parties have to cultivate a new political culture, which evolves over time to compliment the democracy building with calculated checks and balances to ensure peaceful processes of societal change. The post-independence unicameral parliament in Uzbekistan was responsible to introduce political reform in stages. The nature of terrorist activities of a fundamentalist kind could have derailed the secularly oriented evolutionary reform path in Uzbekistan, however, the government was able to survive such hurdles and the Oliy Majlis went ahead with the major Parliamentary reform and elections.

## **INSTITUTIONAL AND ELECTORAL ACTIVITIES**

The emergence of democratically oriented political parties in Uzbekistan was initially based on freedom of expression. However, early liberalism that helped evolve *Erk* (Freedom) and *Birlik* (Unity) parties, in fact miscalculated geopolitics, hence the political culture and the environment it operates within. Hence the need to balance the rights and responsibilities of citizens in a democratic society. According to both official and non-official perceptions of the Uzbek political culture, democratization must not mean chaos. Nevertheless, the *Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan* (IMU) openly advocated the formation of a theocratic state against the constitutional spirit of secularism. Ramifications of the Afghanistan crisis, particularly the terrorist attacks in 1999 and 2004 in Tashkent imposed corrective restrictions on democratically oriented mutually tolerant behavior. *Ozod Dehqonlar* (Free Peasants) party of peasants allied themselves with *Erk* and *Birlik*, while other regionally based parties such as *Adolat* (Justice), *Fidokorlar* (Patriots), *Miliy Tiklanish* (National Renaissance), *Liberal-Democratic Party* and the *People's Democratic Party* managed to grow, despite inter-party as well as the tolerable differences with the government. These parties refined themselves either alone or by mergers with other groups and saw the utility of political coalition with the government despite perceptual divide. Opposition parties formed immediately after the collapse of Soviet Union in many cases gradually lost public appeal in Uzbekistan by failing to explain the objectives of a responsible democracy. By the time the Parliamentary elections 2004 were planned, leaders of *Birlik* and *Erk* were already based overseas. Their party structures within Uzbekistan could not muster much public support, amid the competition with five other relatively new political parties. *Erk*, *Birlik* and *Ozod Dehqonlar* could not gather the required 8% signatures of registered voters to demonstrate their public support bases for registration as qualified parties under the article 23 of election laws. Under these circumstances, the *Oliy Majlis* announced the establishment of the Central Election Commission (CEC) to prepare for the Parliamentary elections. CEC started its work in March 2004. The Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan requires that the Parliamentary

elections be held on the last Sunday of December, hence the day of December 26, 2004 came in order.

The new rules of electoral conduct were designed to respond to the criticism of Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) over national referendum for an extension on presidential office term conducted in January 2002. OSCE, among other things largely focused upon the lack of voter education, women participation and information related to the reasons for election and the individual, collective and mass media behavior and conduct. CEC acknowledged OSCE and recommended to *Oliy Majlis* to incorporate these suggestions into electoral laws to ensure a fair and transparent election. It particularly focused upon the educational awareness campaign for both eligible and non-eligible voters.

The bicameral House of Representatives was envisaged by *Oliy Majlis*, which amended the Constitution on July 22, 2002 to enshrine this new institutional development by year 2005. The Central Election Commission, as an independent apolitical body under the Constitution, supported by autonomous institutions and regions supervised the election process. The outgoing *Oliy Majlis* decided that the lower house -the legislative chamber- consist of 120 seats, while the upper house - Senate- have 100 seats with 6 senators from each region. The President was authorized to appoint 16 members from artisans, professionals and other less represented or non-vocal individuals/groups for an overall representative balance in society. The December 26 elections aimed to institutionalize this major political development in Uzbekistan's democratic evolution. For the first time, the people of Uzbekistan were to exercise their right to elect a new *Oliy Majlis* with two chambers. Constitutional changes regarding the distribution of political power between the executive and legislative bodies and between the offices of President and Prime Minister were coupled with a nationwide public awareness campaign to educate the nation about the newly introduced structural reforms, the rights and duties of citizens as well as the role of mass media in modernizing societies. The government of Uzbekistan earnestly responded to international apprehensions about political transition by striving toward a broad-based public participation and fair electoral processes. Although many international non-governmental organizations do not acknowledge these efforts, constant fears about activist extremism spreading throughout the region and relevant security concerns in Uzbekistan, however, make many such international apprehensions appear somewhat contradictory.

Parliamentary elections in Uzbekistan provided the largest eligible voter population in Central Asia, approximately 14 million of Uzbekistan's nearly 25 million total population, the opportunity to cast vote (Approx. 11 million are under age 18). Citizens aged 18 and over, with 5 years inland residency were constitutionally eligible to vote through secret ballots (Parliamentary contest age is 25 years minimum) for both *Oliy Majlis* and *Kengashes* (Councils) of people's deputies at regional, district and city levels. The article 23 of Elections Law encouraged political parties and/or independent contestants without criminal record with substantial support by the voter initiating groups including party membership at the district level (8% of voters) to contest and register with the offices of the Ministry of Justice in the districts. Military and security apparatus personnel were declared ineligible. Political parties and independents were encouraged to reapply, if their applications did not meet the constitutionally defined registration standards in the first application. Registered political parties in Uzbekistan included (in alphabetical order) *Adolat*, *Fidokorlar*, *Miliy Tiklanish*, *Liberal-Democratic Party* and the *People 's Democratic Party*. The application by the opposition *Birlik* party was initially rejected. Reportedly *Birlik* was given additional chances to

reapply, albeit without success due to the minimally required number of party membership to establish its support base and for party's advocacy of dual citizenship, a subject that contradicts with clauses in the Constitution. Associated politician based overseas privately confirmed the relatively small number of membership in *Birlik* and *Erk*, assuming that some party members may be able to contest elections as independents.

The new electoral laws required that candidates must win at least 33% of the registered vote to be declared successful, barring which another election would be held. Senate elections were scheduled within 3 months after those to the lower house. Parties and individuals were prohibited from receiving donations. The CEC received funds for electoral expenses allocated by the national government to distribute among contestants, both parties and independents for their personal campaign organization. The CEC was assigned to ensure that all contestants received television campaigning time appropriately. The most important aspect was the three months long (September-November) nationwide political education campaign to inform the public about the nature of the new bicameral House of Legislation and its role in the prospects, problems and processes of democratic transformation. Many national and international scholars specializing in political reform were invited to address the planned political education seminars. The idea of educational campaign was to dispel the previously held international concern about the lack of public information on political reform. CEC enthusiastically planned and executed the Parliamentary elections anticipating a rewarding satisfaction. While some international groups criticized the electoral process for one or another reason and appeared indecisive about sending observers, CEC on her own invited independent international observers from almost all over the world to monitor the elections process. However, the major step forward in terms of political development is that Uzbekistan's gradual political development strategy reflected processes inherent in the considered levels of its political culture and relevant changing phases

### **ELECTORAL CONDUCT AND INTERNATIONAL OBSERVERS**

On December 26, 2004 due to the second round of elections in Ukraine attracting worldwide attention, Parliamentary election in Uzbekistan was a modestly covered event internationally and that was limited to preconceived notions. World media projection about lower voter turn out did not materialize. Independent foreign observers witnessed large crowds of eligible voters exercising their votes through secret ballot. Besides, the CIS Observer Mission with some 68 delegates was in Uzbekistan to observe the elections. CEC on its own invited approximately 185 independent observers worldwide. Since the electoral preparations began in March 2004, OSCE first decided not to send any observers; then resolved to send a Limited Observation Mission (LOM) of 21 members at the last minute, approximately two weeks before the election, which was restricted to only five districts and that was before December 26, but not on the election day. LOM's absence from the polls on the election day together with a formal statement by OSCE about the conduct of election led to controversies about the rejection of opposition party participation. Independent foreign observers however, witnessed a well-planned and executed electoral process. Nevertheless, the OSCE/LOM acknowledged improvements in the electoral process, but concluded it did not meet the OSCE standards. Most reports on the election nevertheless failed to note that these elections demonstrated the gradual and controlled evolution of Uzbekistan's political system. As illustrated by the developing individual identities of the five other pro-government parties, Uzbekistan may not have complied with OSCE standards totally, but is moving in the direction of a more liberal and

pluralistic system.

On December 26, 2004 official figures registered approximately 85% of the 14.32 million registered voters in Uzbekistan voting to elect the 120-member Legislative Chamber of the reformed bicameral *Oliy Majlis* and *Kengashes* (Councils). A total of 527 candidates from different parties filed applications. The opposition parties *Birlik*, *Erk* and *Ozod* were unable to participate in the election, having been barred in accordance with article 23 of the Central Election Commission Election Laws for failing to provide signatures of at least 8% of the registered voters in districts contested to demonstrate an essential voter support base. Before the election day, they announced a boycott. The CEC had disqualified candidates, arguing they filed applications with false signatures. However 517 candidates from five political parties, independents and in coalition with the ruling *Liberal Democratic Party* contested the elections.

The OSCE office in Tashkent claimed that the CEC denied it access to registration documentation related to approximately two-thirds of nominated candidates from opposition initiative groups, who were unable to contest. In spite of this significant setback, other evidence from the electoral process since March 2004 suggests attempts at limited government dialogue with the opposition. The *Birlik*, *Irak* and *Ozod* opposition parties were officially permitted to stage public demonstrations outside the U.S. Embassy and OSCE office on November 26 and December 1, 2004 respectively. In the Uzbek context, this was a novel development.

On Election Day, foreign observers wanting to exchange notes with OSCE monitors found the LOM invisible at the polling stations.

However, discussions among the international observers from 35 countries (68 of which were from CIS countries) confirmed a feeling that the brief OSCE statement focused on its limited pre-election day opposition activities and less on the nine-month long overall electoral process and the actual polls on election day. The relative absence of the LOM at the polling stations, and the speed of the OSCE press release the very next day, led to speculations among observers that the OSCE statement may have been prepared by its Tashkent office alone without involving the LOM. In the same spirit, a BBC broadcast on the morning of Election Day predicted "a lower voter turnout because of the rejection of opposition party candidates" before voting had even begun. Yet at numerous polling stations, independent foreign observers present at the polling stations witnessed crowds lining up to cast ballots.

Three separate groups of international observers offered opinions and impressions on the conduct of the elections on December 27, 2004. The CIS observers' group was led by Vladimir Rushailo, and predictably lauded the process and called elections free and transparent by international norms in a press conference. Rushailo only admitted to minor problems and claimed OSCE officials agreed with the CIS observers group's conclusions. Secondly, a statement issued by Ambassador Lubomir Kopaj, head of the OSCE's LOM acknowledged that the mandated 30% quota for women in the House of Legislation was a significant development. However, he criticized the elections for not being democratic by OSCE standards, citing the lack of "political pluralism by blocking opposition parties from contest and depriving voters from genuine choice". This statement acknowledged the limited scope of LOM to operate only in five electoral districts selected a week prior to election, but not on the polling day. The third category was a group of independent foreign observers who were personally present at polling stations in large numbers. They were not asked for a joint public press statement. Their common opinion is hence impossible to establish, though most consulted by this author were impressed by the professionalism in actually carrying out the elections.

Comparatively speaking, the CIS mission's credibility suffers from its record in earlier elections, seeming to be soft-hearted in monitoring, perhaps given similarities in political culture among the various CIS countries. The strength of OSCE statement was its acknowledgment of some major developments, particularly on women participation. Yet its greatest weakness was the inadequate scope of the LOM, which had not been able to observe the entire electoral process. The CEC has yet to comment on the OSCE's statement that it denied the OSCE access to registration information.

The OSCE's statements reflect a simplistic view of the contestants in the election, especially of the five parties that were indeed allowed to contest the election. The OSCE and international media have routinely dismissed these parties simply because of their cordial relations with the ruling party. However, particularly in societies where a political party culture is nascent and only gradually evolving, these parties cannot be simply dismissed citing lack of pluralism. Although at their creation, these parties may have had little separate identity, they have since developed into political parties with different characters and ideological bases, indeed establishing their own contacts with like-minded political movements in the west and elsewhere. Although this does not amount to the creation of a western-type multi-party democracy, it does allow voters a modicum of choice and signifies the gradual political evolution taking place in Uzbekistan.

Moreover, results of the first round of elections refute claims by some critics that the ruling party interfered in the process to gain an overall majority seats. Results demonstrated that the *Liberal Democratic Party* won a majority of votes, but that was restricted to 34.3 percent vote. The *Popular (People's) Democratic Party* came next with 23.4 percent. The *Fidakorlar* won 18 seats, the *Milliy Tiklanish* 11, and *Adolat* 10 seats. This reflects a trend in evolutionary pluralism in a political sense. The end result of election demands that the *Liberal Democratic Party* would have to rely on coalition strategy to maintain status quo. Coalition strategy is commonly practiced among all states including the advanced democratic societies. Uzbekistan's experience reflects a major political development in transition societies.

A full-fledged observer mission with active participation at polling stations and possible mutual exchange of thoughts between OSCE/ LOM and independent foreign observers could have helped to clarify these critical issues.

## CONCLUSIONS

OSCE criticism of the referendum held in 2002 was a major impetus for introducing the electoral laws that have been applied since then and the pre-election political education and awareness campaign. Interaction with voters at polling stations and common folks in city markets, who voted early before opening shops, enabled independent observers to conclude that elections were conducted in an orderly manner within the gradually reforming operating levels of political culture in Uzbekistan. Meetings with officials and local experts suggested that a simultaneous creation of relatively liberal think tanks working together with parliamentary reform and gradually liberalizing electoral processes reflected a commitment towards gradual political development. These approaches were stated especially by representatives of the Center for Political Studies, a liberal think-tank at the University of World Economy and Diplomacy in Tashkent, which considered Uzbekistan would learn more from the OSCE's constructive criticism.

Uzbekistan's elections may not have been conducted at the standards established by the OSCE. Yet different political cultures cannot be judged uniformly outside their operating domains. Comparing Uzbekistan's elections with West European elections is unlikely to provide contextually correct conclusions. A deeper understanding of regional realities indicates that the

elections were a step forward in the electoral process, hence forming part of a gradual approach toward the creation of pluralism. Despite the controversy over the rejection of opposition parties, the December 26 elections introduced different Aftab Kazipolitical parties with their own identities, notwithstanding their coalition with the ruling party, and a commendable electoral management.

Leaders of nearly 95 percent literate Central Asia, irrespective of their Soviet past, are the founding fathers of their new nation-states. They seem to visualize formidable plans for the economic and political development, with great care taken to consider the unique realities of their own socio-political cultures. The majority of the regional states have so far effectively avoided the eruption of societal conflicts, which otherwise have marred much of the former USSR. A well-planned strategy of gradual political development could prove to be the answer to modernization in regions experiencing serious geopolitical stress. Meanwhile, faster strategies of political transformation have experienced serious backlash, not least in the nearby Caucasus. There is good reason to argue that the pace of broad-based political reform in Central Asia could be increased, if the region was assisted to cope with the problem of its landlocked position, for example through alternate routes of economic and political communication. Amid pressures of a slowly stabilizing economy and waves of region-wide militant extremism, the processes of political reform in Uzbekistan appear genuine. Uzbekistan has successfully carried out the electoral process to the surprise of many independent international observers in spite of the geopolitical obstacles in its path.

The Parliamentary elections were well organized and transparent, hence a substantial step forward in the democratic transition, which legitimize Uzbekistan's strategy of gradual political development amid the tortuous processes of nation-state-building and complex geopolitical and strategic transitions not only in Central Asia, but worldwide.