

# Leadership Succession in Uzbekistan

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## Background

On August 28, 2016, Uzbekistan announced its President, Islam Karimov, had been hospitalized, but officials gave few details about his condition. On September 2 after a week of conflicting reports, the government [confirmed that Karimov had died](#) and the following day a [funeral was held in his hometown](#) of Samarkand.

The 78-year-old Karimov served as Uzbekistan's only President from the time of its independence from the former Soviet Union in 1991. Prior to his death, his deteriorating health caused [observers to](#) speculate about the insular country's process for choosing a new leader. Family relationships and clan dynamics play a significant role in the country's political structure. [A disputed succession](#) for the powerful office of President could affect the domestic stability of Uzbekistan and have broader implications for U.S. interests throughout the region.

## Politics in Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan has a highly authoritarian and personality-driven political system. Although the country has both presidential and parliamentary elections, they are not generally considered free or fair. Uzbekistan has no significant opposition groups, and fundamental political freedoms such as the right of assembly, expression, and free association are strictly curtailed.

Uzbekistan's clan rivalries are central to the country's political dynamics. [Some observers have suggested](#) that in recent years, a power struggle has been playing out between a clan centered on the capital, Tashkent, and the Samarkand clan, which dominates the west of the country. [Other observers have suggested that](#) control over powerful institutions such as the military and security services is more critical in determining the outcome of a succession struggle.

## Succession Process

An actual succession decision will likely take place via private, informal processes. [Article 96 of Uzbekistan's constitution](#), however, lays out a formal procedure to designate an acting President, whose duties include holding general elections within three months.

In case the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan fail to exercise his duties, the Chairman of the Senate of the Oliy Majlis of the Republic of Uzbekistan shall be vested with acting duties and powers by holding election of President of the country within three months...

In accordance with the constitution, Senate chair Nigmatilla Yuldashev [stepped into the role of acting president](#) upon Karimov's death. He is, however, [not widely seen as a likely long-term successor](#).

## Possible Successors

Potential successors include at least four key figures, including Prime Minister Shavkat Mirziyayev, Finance Minister Rustam Azimov, National Security Service Chief Rustam Inoyatov, and President Karimov's daughter Lola Karimova-Tillyayeva.

### Prime Minister

Shavkat Mirziyayev is [said to be well-disposed toward Russia](#), which could suggest a possible departure from Karimov's policies of reducing Russian influence in Uzbekistan. In mid-2016, several employees of Uzbekistan's automotive industry, said to have links to Mirziyayev, were [reportedly detained by security personnel](#). [Some analysts have suggested](#) that these detentions represented a move against Mirziyayev by security chief Rustam Inoyatov.

### Finance Minister

Rustam Azimov has held economic and finance-related positions for many years and is thought of as [relatively technocratic](#). He currently works as Uzbekistan governor for the [European Bank for Reconstruction and Development](#), one of the two main regional multilateral development banks, and he [may be the most economically liberal](#) of the potential successors.

### Security Chief

Rustam Inoyatov is head of the National Security Service (SNB). Inoyatov has appeared, at least in the past, to [oppose the advancement](#) of Prime Minister Mirziyayev. He is also suspected of being [behind efforts](#) to undermine Karimov's eldest daughter Gulnara, once seen as a possible successor (see below). Some sources suggest that he is [unlikely to become president himself](#), but any successor will need Inoyatov's support—he has been referred to by news outlets as a "[kingmaker](#)."

### Karimov Daughters

Karimov has no sons. [Some observers consider](#) President Karimov's younger daughter Lola to be a possible successor. She currently [manages two children's charity organizations](#) and serves as Uzbekistan's ambassador to UNESCO. Until 2013, Karimov's elder daughter Gulnara was considered a possible successor, despite reports of her deep unpopularity. After being [placed under house arrest](#) in connection with a [far-reaching telecommunications industry corruption scandal](#), she is [no longer considered a viable candidate](#). [Lola said in a 2013 media interview](#) that she had not spoken to her sister in over a decade. Gulnara [reportedly did not attend](#) her father's funeral.

## Questions for Congress

### Terrorism and Regional Stability

The State Department notes that given its geographic location and large population, Uzbekistan [plays an important role](#)

in U.S. efforts to promote regional economic integration and stability. Uzbekistan officials have expressed concern about the growth of extremism [within its borders](#) and [in the region](#).

## Security Assistance

In January 2015, Uzbekistan received over [300 Mine Resistant Ambush Protected \(MRAP\) vehicles](#) through the Excess Defense Articles (EDA) program to support the country's counterterrorism and counternarcotics efforts. Additionally, for [FY2015 the State Department reported](#) \$507,000 spent on International Military Education and Training (IMET), \$740,000 spent on International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement (INCLE), and \$540,000 spent on Nonproliferation, Antiterrorism, Demining, and Related Programs (NADR).

In recent years, Congress has modified the conditions on U.S. State Department security assistance to Uzbekistan. Omnibus Appropriations for FY2003 ([P.L. 108-7](#)) required that the Secretary of State certify that Uzbekistan was making substantial progress in meeting commitments to promote democracy and respect human rights, though the legislation allowed for a waiver on national security grounds. Subsequent appropriations legislation retained these conditions, with some modifications, through FY2015 ([P.L. 113-235](#)). The only specific condition related to the provision of aid to Uzbekistan in the FY2016 appropriations legislation is a notification requirement ([P.L. 114-113](#)).

## Additional Concerns

Congress may also consider the following:

- What will be the implications of a new national leader (or potentially protracted succession crisis) for U.S. counterterrorism (CT) and countering violent extremism (CVE) cooperation with Uzbekistan, including along Uzbekistan's border with Afghanistan?
- How will Russian and Chinese influence in the region change with new leadership or a succession crisis? What are the implications for U.S. interests and policy?
- How will succession affect prospects for greater economic liberalization? Does this carry implications for U.S. involvement in trade, investment, and regional economic integration?