Leadership Succession in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan: Between Stability and Instability

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Abstract

In some countries, the death of an authoritarian leader raises concerns among political scientists, analysts and political decision-makers about subsequent instability. Informal mechanisms for regime change are seldom in place. Two recent transitions in Central Asia—Turkmenistan in 2006 and Uzbekistan in 2016—have shown that authority can be transferred calmly and peacefully. This paper examines the reasons for the stable transition process—and the factors governing it—in the two territories. It is my contention that three principal conditions have to be met in order to make the changeover relatively smooth: a lack of viable opponents, a narrow circle of people with real power and a common interest in maintaining stability, and a clearly designated new leader at the moment when the death of the incumbent is officially announced. At the same time, despite some similarities between the Turkmen and Uzbek cases, substantial differences also existed, making these two experiences—like other instances—case-specific and not necessarily applicable to other states in the region and beyond.

Keywords

Turkmenistan – Uzbekistan – transition – leadership succession – authoritarian regime – personality cults

Introduction

The death of the first president of Uzbekistan was officially announced on September 2, 2016, after several days of waiting and apparent intra-elite

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discussion about the distribution of power that would follow. During the interim period, analysts from all over the world speculated about the ongoing processes of transition in Uzbekistan, often drawing comparisons with other Central Asian countries, particularly Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan.[1] The cases of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan both demonstrate that the impending and feared demise of longstanding dictatorial leaders need not translate into chaosor even instability.

The literature on authoritarian regime transition in various parts of the world often focuses on regime change—that is, a structural shift from one system to another (typically the transformation from an authoritarian or totalitarian political system toward more democratic rule). Such studies were particularly prevalent in the 1980s and 1990s, which saw liberalization and democratization in Latin America,[2] Africa,[3] and the former Soviet Union. Huntington even proposed the notion of a third wave of democracy.[4]

The process of succession and the question of the continuity or discontinuity of regimes, meanwhile, remains an under-researched topic in the scholarly literature. I use Calvert's definition of political succession as "the way in which political power passes, or is transferred, from one individual, government or regime to another."[5] In authoritarian regimes, succession can follow three main trajectories: institutional/legal transfer according to prearranged regulations (constitution, elections, customary law, and/or political tradition); personal designation by the outgoing ruler (and subsequent legitimization by means of legal acts); and non-compliance with any such norms.[6] In the Soviet and

1 R. Isaacs, "Charismatic Routinization and Problems of Post-Charisma Succession in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan," *Studies of Transition States and Societies,* 7, no. 1 (2015): 57–76; L. Anceschi, "Death, Power, and Politics in Post-Karimov Central Asia," *Central Asian Survey Virtual Issue* (2016), www.tandf.co.uk/journals/pdf/2_Anceschi_final_220916.pdf (accessed November 22, 2016); T. Ambrosio, "Leadership Succession in Kazakhstan and Uzbeki- stan: Regime Survival after Nazarbayev and Karimov," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, 17, no. 1 (2005): 49–67.

2 J. Mahoney, "Path-Dependent Explanations of Regime Change: Central America in Comparative Perspective," *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 36, no. 1 (2001): 111–41.

3 P.T. Robinson, "Democratization: Understanding the Relationship between Regime Change and the Culture of Politics," *African Studies Review,* 37, no. 1 (1994): 39–68.

4 S.P. Huntington, "Democracy's Third Wave," *Journal of Democracy*, 2, no. 2 (1991): 12–34.

5 P. Calvert (ed.), *The Process of Political Succession* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1987), 1.

6 R.H. Jackson and C.G. Rosberg, *Personal Rule in Black Africa: Prince, Autocrat, Prophet, Tyrant* (Berkeley-Los Angeles-London: University of California Press, 1982), 70–71; J. Brownlee, "Hereditary Succession in Modern Autocracies," *World Politics*, 59, no. 4 (2007): 595–628; J.H. Herz, "The Problem of Successorship in Dictatorial Regimes: A Study in Comparative Law and Institutions," *The Journal of Politics*, 14, no. 1 (1952): 30.

post-Soviet world, transition patterns were highly institutionalized, anchored within the Politburo and the Central Committee in Moscow as well as the particular Soviet republic involved.7 In several cases, post-Soviet authoritarian leadership succession was carried out in the same institutionalized manner, the Putin–Medvedev tandem in 2008–2012 being a case in point.8 Dynastic succession was effectively orchestrated in Azerbaijan in 2003 before and after the death of the first post-independence leader.9 Successful designation occurred in Russia in 1999–2000, when outgoing president Boris Yeltsin clearly announced Vladimir Putin as his prospective replacement. In several countries, hereditary rule or successor-grooming was instituted, but was halted at the initial stage following riots or a coup (for instance, Kyrgyzstan under Askar Akaev and Kurmanbek Bakiev; and Moldova under Vladimir Voronin). The process of hereditary grooming is currently most visible in Tajikistan, Kazakh- stan and Belarus. In none of these cases have the institutions and mechanisms for leadership succession and power transfer been created. With respect to Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, we tend to speak of personalist regimes with few, if any, formal rules for power succession.10 The current leaders of these countries have not selected, designated, groomed, or unambiguously pointed to any potential "crown prince."

The scholarly literature tends to evaluate authoritarian regime succession within Weberian concepts of charismatic leaders11 and signals the potential for instability after the death of the incumbent.12 As Hoffman13 points out in

7 P. Frank, "Political Succession in the Soviet Union: Building a Power Base," in P. Calvert (ed.), *The Process of Political Succession* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1987), 92–94.

8 R. Sakwa, *The Crisis of Russian Democracy: The Dual State, Factionalism and the Medvedev Succession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 263–301.

9 V. Guseinov, "Aliev posle Alieva: Nasledovanie vlasti kak sposob ee uderzhaniia," Nezavisi- maia gazeta," March 19, 2004; F. Guliyev, "Post-Soviet Azerbaijan: Transition to Sultanistic Semiauthoritarianism? An Attempt at Conceptualization," *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, 13, no. 3 (2005): 415; S. Radnitz, "Oil in the Family: Managing Presidential Succession in Azerbaijan," *Democratization*, 19, no. 1 (2012): 60–77.

10 E. Frantz and E. Stein, "Comparative Leadership in Non-Democracies," in L. Helms (ed.), *Comparative Political Leadership* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 302–3.

11 M. Weber, *On Charisma and Institution Building,* ed. S.N. Eisenstadt (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 55af.

12 Frantz and Stein, "Comparative Leadership," 299; M.W. Švolík, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 199.

13 B. Hoffmann, "Charismatic Authority and Leadership Change: Lessons from Cuba's Post-Fidel Succession," *International Political Science* Review, 30, no. 3 (2009): 229–48.

the case of post-Castro Cuba and Hughes and May14 indicate in their research on sub-Saharan Africa, authority can be transferred smoothly even when the leader passing on the baton has ruled for an extended period of time (more than 50 years in the case of Fidel Castro) and in the absence of succession mechanisms. Isaacs proposed a charismatic concept of succession for both Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.15 He maintained that succession in Uzbekistan would occur as a result of regime supporters' designation of power only afterthe death of the leader.

Based on data from interviews, as well as official and opposition media in the states under study, this text focuses on the factors enabling a smooth transition from one centralized system to another in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. In both countries, the short interim period that came immediately after the leader's death is given particular attention; these few days of transition have to be considered decisive in shaping further developments. I suggest that four conditions need to be fulfilled to occasion a successful transfer of control in authoritarian regimes after the death of a charismatic leader.

Firstly, a narrow elite with real and ultimate decision-making power— along with a consensus as to how power should be designated—is essential for maintaining the stability this group desires. The presence of other nexuses of power—and other potential leaders—poses the threat of instability. As such, this elite prefers informal transition to formal constitutional mechanisms, since the former allows succession to be decided "behind the scenes" by a small group of powerful individuals. Secondly, the new leader is named right after the announcement of the previous president's death, leaving no room for discussion of the designated successor's legitimacy or the emergence of other potential successors. Thirdly, the lack of rivals removes the possibility of even a hypothetical challenge to the regime and its new leader. Finally, the consensus of external players also plays an important (albeit not always crucial) role. If outside powers were to support different candidates or groupings or, over time, shift their support to another power center within the country, the situation might be transformed into a contest between adversarial parties.

Background for Transition

In both Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, informal structures played a more significant role than formal institutions (parliament, government, constitutional,

14 A. Hughes and R. May, "The Politics of Succession in Black Africa," *Third World Quarterly*, 10, no. 1 (1988): 5–7.

15 Isaacs, "Charismatic Routinization."

and other legal enactments) on the eve of transition.16 The decision-making processes in both countries were in the hands of several influential groups that were fighting to maintain their power through informal mechanisms.17 All the contributing factors (formal institutions, bureaucracy, social networking, etc.) worked together within the decision-making processes of the two countries.18 On the eve of first president Turkmenbashi's death, Turkmenistan was a highly centralized state. Real power was concentrated in the hands of the president, who was supported by his closest subordinates. President Turkmenbashi physically eliminated any challengers, even potential ones, and established his own rules. His fear that power might be wrested from him by any other Turkmen family meant that the most prominent individuals were purged, using fabricated accusations and dossiers from the Prosecutor General, among other approaches.19 This was particularly true in the case of some of the leading Ahal-Teke elite, whose base in Ashgabat could—the president claimed—pose a threat to his position. Members of the Ahal-Teke tribe had increased their influence in the country and Turkmenbashi felt the need to deal with their potential discontent. However, as an orphan himself, Turkmenbashi distrusted most of the Turkmens of his acquaintance.20 Consequently, Russians and other non-Turkmens (and also non-Ahal-Teke citizens) became the main figures in his administration.21 These individuals were responsible mostly for financial affairs and managing the ideological image of both the president and the nation; they represented no challenge to Turkmenbashi. Power structures (such as the Ministry of the Interior and the Presidential Guard) were the most conspicuous state organs controlled by Turkmens. At the end of 2006, their leaders

16 K. Collins, *Clan Politics and Regime Transition in Central Asia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

17 S. Horák, "The Elite in Post-Soviet and Post-Niyazow Turkmenistan: Does Political Culture Form a Leader?" *Demokratizatsiya*, 20, no. 4 (2012): 371–85; A. Ilkhamov, "Neopatrimonialism, Interest Groups and Patronage Networks: The Impasses of the Governance System in Uzbekistan," *Central Asian Survey*, 26, no. 1 (2007): 65–84.

18 "The Politics of Decision Making in Central Asia," Chatham House Seminar Summary, June 11, 2009, https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/public/Research/Russia%20and%20Eurasia/110609summary.pdf (accessed December 8, 2016), 16–17.

19 S. Horák, "Rumbles in the Turkmen Elite," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 8, no. 9 (2006): 5–6.

20 A. Kuliyev, "Turkmenskaia elita—vzgliad iznutri," *Tsentral'noaziatskii tolstyi zhurnal* (2001), http://www.ctaj.elcat.kg/tolstyi/a/a063.htm (accessed December 8, 2016); author's interview with Avdy Kuliyev, Moscow, 1999.

21 S. Peyrouse, *Turkmenistan: Strategies of Power, Dilemmas of Development* (London: Routledge, 2015), 74.

were almost exclusively of non-Ahal-Teke origin, and as such, they were unable to gain support from within the Ashgabat elite.22 The most important figure among them was considered to be Akmurat Rejepov, the head of the Presidential Guard. It seems that after the death of Turkmenbashi (whether natural or not), he was the one to orchestrate the transition process and the rise of Berdymuhammedov, the long-standing Health Minister and the only representative of the Ahal-Tekes in the president's inner circle.23

The case of Uzbekistan was more complicated, since it involved a broader elite, more power groups, and existing institutional rules.24 Traditionally, the most influential members of the Uzbek elite were recruited from the regions of Samarkand-Bukhara, Tashkent and Ferghana, while representatives from Surkhandariya and Kashkaradiya (Surkash, for short) and Khorezm held mostly marginal positions in the central organs. Along with Samarkand, the Jizzakh region was highly favored under Sharaf Rashidov, the long-term First Secretary of the Communist Party of Uzbekistan (1958–1983), who grew up in the region.25 Rashidov and, later, Islam Karimov were able to manipulate cadres in order to maintain equilibrium within the elite while simultaneously increasing their own power and—in the case of post-independence Uzbekistan—that of the leader's family. In independent Uzbekistan, Karimov created a delicate system of checks and balances among the leading groupings, with himself at the top of the pyramid as the ultimate arbiter. Although regional affiliation was not the only factor in Uzbekistan's cadre policy,26 fellow Samarkandis occupied key positions in the state, including that of prime minister (held by Shavkat Mirziyoyev since 2003), and power structures, such as the National Security Service/SNB (even if the organ's head, Rustam Inoyatov, is not himself from Samarkand). In recent years, Tashkent elites have been in charge of the economy (Rustam Azimov) and foreign policy (Abdulaziz Komilov). The Tashkent group, however, lost its long-standing leader, Timur Alimov, in 2013. Ferghanis,

22 Horák, "The Elite."

23 D. Ó'Beacháin and A. Polese (eds.), *The Colour Revolutions in the Former Soviet Republics: Successes and Failures* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 231; author's interview with opposition leader, Prague, 2016.

24 "The Politics of Decision Making in Central Asia," 18.

25 D. Carlisle, "The Uzbek Power Elite: Politburo and Secretariat (1938–83)," *Central Asian Survey,* 5, no. 3–4 (1986): 91–132; M.-B.M. Malikov, "Uzbekistan: A View from the Opposition," *Problems of Post-Communism*, 42, no. 2 (1995): 19–23; Yury Fedorov, "Uzbekistan: Clans, Succession, and Stability," *Security Index: A Russian Journal on International Security*, 18, no. 2 (2012): 39–54.

26 İ. Tunçer-Kılavuz, "Political and Social Networks in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan: 'Clan', Region and Beyond," *Central Asian Survey*, 28, no. 3 (2009): 323–34.

meanwhile, were mostly sidelined within the main authority structures, particularly after the 2005 Andijan events, while other regions went almost unrepresented. Special attention was given to control over the Karakalpak elite in order to prevent any threat of separatistism in an autonomous republic inclined toward brotherhood with Kazakhstan and Russia.

At the end of the Karimov period (in 2016), the most influential regional informal groups in Uzbekistan were mainly Samarkandis and Tashkentis. When Karimov died, he left behind a surprisingly narrow elite with decision-making authority, with the Samarkandis and the SNB the most formidable among them.27 The accession of Shavkat Mirziyoyev, informal head of the Samarkandis, seems to have been a logical result of their supremacy. However, Tashkent groups, with their control over finance, limited Samarkand power and created a system in which (in contrast to Turkmenistan) no informal political force had complete dominance, while at the same time no one was interested in disrupting the balance of informal structures in the country.

In sum, the elite context in Turkmenistan at the time of the president's death was the outcome of the leader's large-scale purges and elimination within a relatively small band of cohorts, whereas in Uzbekistan the transition process was based on a system of continuous checks and balances among several groups, with a substantial role played by the president and his family (at least until the end of the first decade of this century). However, as a result, the highest echelons of the elite in both countries were primarily occupied by a few influential figures around the president.

Transition Period

In both Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, the deaths of the presidents came relatively suddenly, although there had been speculation about their health for some time. In the case of President Turkmenbashi, his heart problems were public knowledge long before his death. However, conjecture and rumors about the possible assassination of the old ruler spread immediately after his death was announced. With respect to Uzbekistan, there had been some speculation about Karimov's health in the international media.28 His last significant health

27 A. Malashenko, *Exploring Uzbekistan's Potential Transition* (Moscow: Carnegie Center, 2014), http://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP_Uzbekistan_web_Eng2014.pdf (accessed December 10, 2016), 4–5.

28 "Prezident Karimov uzhe dve nedeli ne pokazyvaetsia na publike," *Fergananews.com*, February 12, 2015, http://www.fergananews.com/news/23077.

scare seems to have occurred prior to the 2015 election, when the president disappeared from all official Uzbek press and tv reports for several weeks. (Prior to this, his regular appearances had constituted a substantial share of daily news coverage, as was likewise the case with his counterpart in Turkmenistan).

The formal method laid down for regime succession involved the transfer of power to the head of the Turkmen *Majlis* (parliament) and the leader of the Senate, the upper chamber of the Uzbekistan parliament, respectively. In both cases, these positions were occupied by *pro forma* figures who had no access to the real decision-making process. Ovezgeldy Ataev in Turkmenistan had occasionally been mentioned in the Turkmen official press, mostly for his endless congratulations of the president; otherwise, he was rather unknown. Ataev had been promoted to the position with the personal backing of Saparmurat Turkmenbashi.29 However, within a few hours after Turkmenbashi's death was announced, Ataev was arrested on fabricated accusations.30 According to some unconfirmed reports, he had insisted on clear procedures for new elections and had supported Murad Niyazov, the son of the late president, as a potential candidate for head of state.31 If this information is at least partially accurate, Ataev had made himself redundant and even a threat to the ruling elite; as such, he was immediately and calmly eliminated. Real power was concentrated in the hands of the newly established State Security Council, a body that had no legal basis at the time. The *Halk Maslahaty*, the highest legislative body in Turkmenistan, adopted *post facto* changes to the constitution,32 thereby legitimizing all the steps taken informally after Turkmenbashi's death. The *Halk Maslahaty* also unanimously approved a law on the election of a new president in order to validate the transition process. Such a law had not previously existed. In other words, the Turkmen legal framework was only vaguely prepared for any kind of presidential changeover. The transfer of power bypassed the constitution, most likely because of personal disharmony within the new elite combined with the need to expel an inconvenient legal successor(Ovezgeldy Ataev).

29 S. Turkmenbashi, "Rabotat' pomnia o glavnom—v interesakh naroda," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, February 7, 2005.

30 "Vneocherednoe zasedanie Medzhlisa Turkmenistana," *Neitral'nyi Turkmenistan*, Decem- ber 22, 2006.

31 A. Mogilevskii, "Politicheskii krizis narastaet," *Turkmenskaya iskra*, August 10, 2007, http://www.tm-iskra.org/20/07/Berdymuh_2.htm (accessed October 7, 2007).

32 S. Horák and J. Šír, *Dismantling Totalitarianism? Turkmenistan Under Berdimuhamedow* (Stockholm-Washington: Institute for Security and Development Policy-Central Asia and The Caucasus Institute, 2009), 19–21.

In the sphere of Turkmenistan's informal politics, Gurbanguly Berdymuhammedov was the most powerful Ahal-Teke within Turkmenbaşhi's inner circle of elites. Other members were not rooted in Ashgabat or the surrounding region, complicating their chances of legitimizing themselves with Ahal-Teke elites. Their control of the situation in the center would therefore have been limited should one of them have become head of state. It is also likely that Berdymuhammedov had been keeping a close eye on his predecessor's physical condition, and his control over this information, as well as the timing of the official death announcement, might well have been significant. In addition, it is possible that other, more influential personalities within this elite group underestimated Berdymuhammedov's standing and considered his presence in the inner circle a necessary concession to the Ahal-Teke tribe. Furthermore, it seems that some kind of deal was concluded between Berdymuhammedov and other members of the group, though this agreement was apparently bro- ken after the designated leader stabilized his position. This confluence of fac- tors contributed to the rise of Berdymuhammedov as the undisputed head of Turkmenistan.

The events in Uzbekistan, on the other hand, did not call for any sudden change to the constitution. According to its statutes, the power of a president who died in office passed to the head of the Senate, in this case Nigmatullo Yuldoshev, although his name had rarely appeared in the official press other than in connection with ceremonial duties.33 Yuldoshev was, however, characterized as a competent lawyer: he had held the positions of Minister of Justice and General Prosecutor.34 Although he was not formally invited to take control in Uzbekistan as interim president, no political force in the country officially denied his right to do so or challenged his position, at least in the week be- tween the death of the president and Yuldoshev's resignation as temporary head of state. The real transfer of power, however, took place on October 8, 2016, when Yuldoshev relinquished his political position in favor of the officially designated leader, Shavkat Mirziyoyev. It would appear that Yuldoshev understood that any insistence on his legal rights and duties might lead to his swift demise. Shavkat Mirziyoyev, by contrast, was part of the informal succession process, although it would appear that no decision was made without the approval of the SNB—or rather its head, Rustam Inoyatov. In all, it took several

33 "Provody olimpiitsev i paralimpiitsev v Tashkente," *Gazeta.uz*, July 21, 2016, https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2016/07/21/delegates/ (accessed November 16, 2016).

34 "Parlament trekh iuristov. Olii Madzhlis nechnet real'no razrabatyvat' zakony?" *Fergananews.org*, February 20, 2015, http://www.fergananews.com/articles/8418 (accessed November 16, 2016).

days of negotiations behind closed doors to reach agreement on a suitable successor to Karimov.

Adherence to a relatively legal form of transition in Uzbekistan represents the most important difference between power transfer procedures in the two countries. In the long term, however, the process by which the presidency is immediately transferred becomes largely irrelevant. Real legitimization is effected through elections, and Turkmenistan's president is now respected as the official representative of his country regardless of the transition mechanism.

By excluding or minimizing the constitutional guidelines governing transition, a narrow elite was, as already mentioned, able to determine whom the new leader would be within several hours or days. In both cases, the decision was, in hindsight, understandable and even predictable.

Key Factors of a Successful Transition

Whereas in Turkmenistan the choice of Turkmenbashi's successor could be considered a kind of lottery, Uzbekistan's newly-designated leader, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, had been a focus of analysts' attention long before Karimov's death.35 Yet even here, the decision as to who would be appointed president was made by a relatively small number of people, despite the existence of a much broader and more complex elite structure. The long-time prime minister, Mirziyoyev was an acceptable candidate with a strong position within the elite and backing from the SNB, the most powerful organization in Uzbekistan. In this sense, the selection and legitimization of the new Uzbek leader required the arrangement of fewer niceties than was the case with the basically unknown Health Minister in Turkmenistan.

In addition, the new president's personality and competence for the task at hand must also be noted. Even in the interim period between the designation of the leader and his formal legitimization through elections, his personality and innate ability to consolidate his position within the country were key to maintaining stability. In this context, stabilization, pragmatically speaking, includes: 1) the elimination of potential challengers and rivals; and 2) the creation of the new leader's ideology (although the promotion of this ideology might follow distinct trajectories in the two countries). The starting position of the new leaders within their respective systems and their inherent charisma differed substantially at the beginning of the presidential mandate. Unlike Gurbanguly Berdymuhammedov in Turkmenistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev had

35 Ambrosio, "Leadership Succession"; Anceschi, "Death, Power, and Politics."

exerted strong influence even before the death of his predecessor. The new president of Uzbekistan also had to consider the support of a broader elite, as well as the presence of a strong security services network, which were not considerations for Turkmenistan's new leader.

In both countries, the unequivocal announcement of the new appointee eliminated speculation about potential political disputes, at least for the first few months after the succession. In the subsequent elections, there was now a clear favorite, with some other candidates added as staffage, an approach that completed the legitimization of the new leader.

The smooth regime transitions enjoyed by Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan were also made possible by the absence of a competing political force. Opposition parties were strictly prohibited and labeled terrorists—or at least anti-constitutional. Committed individuals from civil society and independent intellectuals advocating reform were almost invisible in the public debate.36 The lack of any viable challenge among the higher political echelons and the weakness of civil society substantially reduced the risk of instability during the transition period and ensured that the process remained strictly under the control of a narrow elite group in both countries.

Although opposition exiles from Turkmenistan were politically active after the death of Turkmenbashi in 2006, they were unable to put forward a presidential candidate, nor even allowed to return to the country.37 Their inability to mount a meaningful campaign led to a sharp decrease in political involvement other than demonstrations,38 presence at diplomatic forums,39 and monitoring of human rights violations. Like its counterpart in Turkmenistan, the Uzbek opposition does not hold substantial sway in the country. Moreover, opposition parties have little chance of gaining popularity, faced as they are with a barrage of hostile propaganda and the image of the president as the guarantor of stability and peace.40 Members of resistance movements—actual or alleged—are subject to persecution, and leaders of opposition parties-in- exile are not allowed to return home.

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36 M.N. Amutabi and S.W. Nasong'o, *Regime Change and Succession Politics in Africa: Five Decades of Misrule* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 14–15.

37 V. Panfilova, "V Ashkhabade—vremennaia vlast'," *Gundogar.org*, January 17, 2007, http://www.gundogar.org/?02430437530000000000000011000000 (accessed December 12, 2016).

38 V. Volkov, "Turkmenskaia oppozitsiia namerena protestovat' v Prage," *Gundogar.org*, May 5, 2009, http://www.gundogar.org/?02430477910000000000000011000000 (accessed December 11, 2016).

39 Such as the OSCE.

40 "Uzbekistan: In Transition," *Crisis Group Europe and Central Asia Briefing* no. 82 (Bishkek-Brussels, 2016), 5–6.

Opposition personalities and parties (most of which are located outside the country) would have posed little threat to the calm, stable transfer of power. Internal candidates and groups, however, might have presented a more serious challenge to the chosen successor. As such, internal rivals and enemies had to be eliminated or at least barred from participating in the transition process. The fate of the former presidential families is illustrative of this approach. In neither country was a member of the late leader's family considered a possible successor, although outside analysts had not entirely excluded this scenario in the case of Uzbekistan. Deprived of the support and protection of the father- leader, they disappeared even from any kind of role in policymaking.

The reasons for this differed between the two countries. In Turkmenistan, Niyazov's son had never possessed any real power, despite having some business interests in Ashgabat. Moreover, contrary to Azerbaijan, there was no mechanism for an intra-familial transfer of leadership.41 In fact, Turkmenbashi never mentioned his family in a political context. The new president and his family quickly deprived Murad Niyazov of his assets within Turkmenistan and access to his father‘s accounts.42 Once he was securely installed, Berdymuhammedov was also able to take control of Niyazov's main accounts abroad.

In neighboring Uzbekistan, a combination of local business, security and political groupings had long since ruled out the possibility of either of Karimov's daughters taking up the reins of power. Furthermore, his daughter Gulnara's involvement in the commercial life of the country had affected the family's interests to such an extent that Islam Karimov was forced to strip her of her assets and put her under house arrest in 2013.43 Since Karimov's death, her name has never been mentioned by Shavkat Mirziyoyev; there were unconfirmed rumors that she had been murdered. Other family members, such as Karimov's wife and younger daughter, played a role in the ceremonial aspect of the transition, participating in the funeral arrangements and receiving the condolences of several external representatives. They were, however, completely excluded from the succession process. Their recent announcement that they have created a charity fund, coupled with their broader involvement in charitable activities, fully accords with their eventual place in Uzbek affairs. It is likely that the family has agreed to no longer engage in the political life of the

41 Radnitz, "Oil in the Family."

42 P. Khamidova, "Tri generala," *Asia-Plus*, August 14, 2007, http://www.ariana.su/?S=1.0708 142258 (accessed December 10, 2016); A. Korbut and V. Loskutov, "Dvadtsat' let posle Turkmenbashi," *VPK News*, August 8, 2007, http://vpk-news.ru/articles/3695 (accessed December 9, 2016).

43 Malashenko, *Exploring Uzbekistan's Potential Transition*, 5–10.

country in exchange for an uncertain guarantee of immunity and protection. In any event, shortly after Karimov's death, the enterprises that had belonged to his younger daughter came under attack.44 As in Turkmenistan, the assets of the Karimov family—the domestic ones, at least—have been transferred into the hands of the new leader's entourage. The appropriation of holdings abroad would be more problematic; the new leadership might be inclined to turn a blind eye to them, should the family be prepared to forego any claim to their business interests within Uzbekistan.

Finally, in both cases (though for different reasons), external powers' acceptance of the succession contributed to the peaceful transition from one leader to another. Some voices within the political elite of Western countries had long criticized the political system and raised concerns about human rights violations, and the demise of the incumbent head of state was seen in some quarters as an opportunity for democratization. In the case of Turkmenistan, at least, this approach was also taken among opposition parties in exile. The Uzbek opposition based abroad, on the other hand, did not take advantage of the situation to propagate democratic ideals.

The West's reaction could have been the greatest challenge to the legitimization of a new leader. For the most part, however, Western political elites were—and remain—primarily interested in peaceful regime transition, leading them to support the succession process. Other major players, especially Russia and China, were likewise guided by their desire for a smooth changeover, the continued stability of local systems, and the maintenance of the mutual cooperation established under the former leaders. Although some shifts in the foreign policy of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have been observed since the succession, the general "party line" has not changed. Unlike in Syria, out- side powers have not, by and large, interfered in the internal affairs of either country.

Conclusions

The transfers of power in both Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan contribute evidence to the theoretical debate over authoritarian regime transition from one leader to another. The empirical part of the study demonstrated that even if the expected mechanisms of transition do not exist in a country's formal or

44 "Uzbekistan posle Karimova: Razdel 'biznesa' sem'i pokoinogo prezidenta uzhe nachalsya," *Fergananews.org*, September 8, 2016, http://www.fergananews.com/articles/9088 (accessed December 8, 2016).

informal politics, the process can take place calmly as long as the conditions mentioned in the introduction are fulfilled.

Firstly, the new leader was carefully selected from the elite group that formed the former president's innermost circle. The informal mandate of the decisive group was unanimous on the final selection, as well as strong enough to implement it. The new leaders in both Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan were far from the Weberian ideal type of a charismatic leader and they were not able to match the aura of their predecessors ("founders of the state," "peacemakers," "fathers of the nation"). However, we can in a sense consider them "disciples of the system and the previous leader."45 Both new leaders grew up in the political culture set up by their predecessors and were therefore selected as guaran- tors of that political system.

Secondly, although the decision-making mechanisms were "black-boxed," the announcement of the new leader was relatively quick and straightforward, leaving no room for any speculation. The elite consensus that instability should be avoided and the authoritarian path maintained drove the decision of whom the successor should be in each country. Formal legitimization through the elections of February 2007 (Turkmenistan) and December 2016 (Uzbekistan) merely confirmed this consensus.

Thirdly, there was no alternative power center or opposition capable of challenging the legitimacy of the newly-designated president. The new leader was accepted by internal power groups, as well as by external players.

Finally, external actors' interest in stability became a guarantee of non-interference. Unlike in Syria or Libya, authoritarianism and the designated leader were considered the means of securing stability. As such, external actors exerted less sway over the leadership transition than they might have been expected to. The continuity of regime stability became the most important factor for outside players.

This leads me to the conclusion that the scholarly literature should reexamine the notion that leadership succession is a source of instability in authoritarian regimes. Contrary to expectations, we have to accept that the process may take a peaceful and quiet form, even without formal rules and without any prospect that the system will be transformed. At the same time, the existence of succession mechanisms does not alone ensure a smooth transition process. The four conditions analyzed above are fundamental determinants of this path. Breaking even one of them could disrupt the power balance and jeopardize the smooth enthronement of the new leader, as we observed in Tajikistan in the early 1990s, when the country's leadership was divided over

45 R.C. Tucker, "The Theory of Charismatic Leadership," *Daedalus*, 97, no. 3 (1968): 735.

how power should be distributed going forward. The recent cases of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, meanwhile, can be chalked up as successes of leadership succession. Although it is hard to predict the future of the region, the other countries in the region with firm authoritarian systems—and here I am thinking particularly of Kazakhstan—currently possess all the traits necessary to navigate the process in a similar way (elite consensus and will to implement the decision, expected clear and relatively quick decision as to whom the next leader should be, a lack of alternatives to the regime, and external players' approach). Despite some cosmetic changes to the regime, such as reversing some of the previous leaders' most controversial measures, and the removal or demotion of several individuals who pose the greatest potential threat to the new leader's power, the nature of the system remains intact. These "reforms" were—and are—designed for both internal and external consumption and serve to transform a newly-designated president into a Weberian charismatic leader whose position cannot be questioned.

From a longer-term perspective, a calm leadership succession does not exclude the threat of future discord. The stability of the system can unravel as a result of even small changes within the elite (Tajikistan in the 1990s with the outbreak of civil war), external intervention (Syria after 2011), or the manifestation of leader weakness (as Uzbek and Turkmen leaders perceived events in neighboring Kyrgyzstan in 2005 and 2010 or in Ukraine in 2004 and 2013–2014). Despite similar factors leading to successful leader change in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, and other apparent resemblances, we have also to bear in mind that the transition process is, in fact, the result of a unique set of circumstances, including the distribution of power within a country at the moment of a leader's death. Thus, it is possible to apply the factors of successful transition to other authoritarian regimes within and outside the region, but the local context—and the degree to which these four factors are present in any given case—must be taken into account.