No Surprises Expected in Uzbek Election Campaign

Although a range of parties and political movements will nominate candidates for the forthcoming parliamentary election in Uzbekistan, there will be little to differentiate them and not much aggressive campaigning, NBCentralAsia observers say.

On October 1, political parties began the process of collecting the 40,000 signatures they need in support of candidates. The deadline for submitting the list of signatures is October 18.

The election to the Oli Majlis or lower house of parliament is set for December 27. There are 150 seats, 135 of them filled by parties while the remaining 15 automatically go to the Ecological Movement of Uzbekistan, a body set up in August 2008.

Four political parties are officially registered in Uzbekistan. The People’s Democratic Party of Uzbekistan was President Islam Karimov’s original political vehicle in the post-independence period of the early Nineties, and was effectively the old Soviet-era Communist party reshaped to suit the new nation-building project. Karimov subsequently sanctioned the creation of other parties and appeared to switch his favour from one to the other. The result, after some changes and merges, is the current Adolat (Justice) Social Democratic Party, the Milliy Tiklanish (National Revival) National Democratic Party, and the Liberal Democratic Party/Movement of Entrepreneurs and Businessmen. All four have seats in parliament.

The real opposition – the Erk and Birlik parties and the Birdamlik movement – has no legal recognition, and most of its leading figures are in exile abroad.

Dilorom Iskhakova, the head of Birdamlik within Uzbekistan, rules out the possibility of real competition during the forthcoming election campaign.

“This is not an election, but a selection of parliamentarians who will suit Islam Karimov,” said Iskhakova. “A file on each candidate drops on his desk, and only when he gives his approval can the candidate be nominated.”

Experts say voters will not have any real choice, as they will be choosing among parties that are all pro-government, have more or less the same programme, and can offer little of substance to voters.

“The political parties are puppets. so they can’t properly compete for the seats in the parliament as they’re dependent on the ruling party,” said Tashpulat Yoldashev, an Uzbek political analyst based abroad. “In all other countries, parties get their support from certain segments of society, whereas ours don’t. The partiesto whatever they’re told.”

A foreign expert on Uzbek politics who is based in Tashkent and did not want to be named, noted that legislation on political parties passed last year theoretically allows for pluralism. In reality, though, nothing has changed – parties are pro-government parties, and any coalition-building takes place at the behest of the authorities.
“Under these circumstances, they are not competitive,” he said.

Bakhtiyor Ergashev, a political analyst at the Centre for Economic Studies in Tashkent, disagrees with such criticism and says it is wrong to describe the various parties as puppets.

“We have strong parties, each with its own programme and its own unique and easily recognisable image, and as a result we have a more effective and genuinely powerful parliament,” he said.

and argues that the reason they appear similar is that they reflect the current mood in Uzbekistan and opt for constructive cooperation rather than conflict.

“The mild rivalry between the parties, which is not always visible, reflects a situation in which various social groups are founded on a common system of values,” he said. “The parties are operating in a society that faces serious domestic and external threats and challenges.”

Shuhrat Ghaniyev, who heads the Humanities and Law Centre in the western city of Bukhara, believes this election campaign could throw up a new type of candidate, younger but not necessarily better since they have been shaped by years in which there was no real political opposition.

“This time, we will get a higher class of [person in the] political establishment, with a clear understanding of black and white PR, well-orchestrated election campaigns, and an even greater degree of cynicism and remoteness from the people,” he said.

(NBCentralAsia is an IWPR-funded project to create a multilingual news analysis and comment service for Central Asia, drawing on the expertise of a broad range of political observers across the region. The project ran from August 2006 to September 2007, covering all five regional states. With new funding, the service has resumed, covering Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.)

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