

Party Time in Uzbekistan

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New party says it advocates liberal democracy, but looks like previous government-sponsored groups.

Critics of Uzbekistan's record on democratic progress will have been surprised to learn that a new political party espousing liberal democratic values has appeared. But a cursory look at the new party suggests that it is less than it seems.

The Liberal Democratic Party of Uzbekistan held its founding congress in the capital Tashkent. The 300 participants elected one of the country's top bankers, Qobiljon Tashmatov, as chairman, and approved an ambitious programme of political and economic reform.

Tashmatov's position as head of Pakhtabank, a bank that is technically commercial but in practice very much under state control, suggests that this is not a radical new opposition party.

That impression is strengthened by the fact that earlier this autumn, Uzbek president Islam Karimov met the party's founders to give them his blessing. He himself came up with the party's official title, the Movement of Entrepreneurs and Businessmen - Liberal Democratic Party. He went on to issue the party with a set of goals that it should pursue.

Establishing new political parties has become something of a habit for the authorities in recent years. The idea that democratic initiatives should be designed top down by the ruling authorities is problematic - at best, ordering people to set up political parties has proved ineffective in Uzbekistan. At worst, critics say it is a sham, deliberately designed to fool the international community that at long last political changes are afoot.

Two true opposition parties, Birlik and Erk, were hounded from public life in the early Nineties. Their leaders are in exile and their members are excluded from politics. In recent month both groups have made moves to re-establish themselves legally inside Uzbekistan, to date without success.

The main government party, the People's Democratic Party - in fact the old Communist Party of Uzbekistan, of which Karimov was once head - continues to dominate parliament. But in 1995 a new party called Adolat (Justice) - which confusingly took the same name as a banned Islamic group - appeared, with official sanction and encouragement. It was followed a few months later by Milli Tiklanish (National Revival), and by Fidokorlar (the Self-Sacrificers) in 1999, which swallowed up another quasi-party along the way.

None of these parties has made much of a showing even as vehicles for government policy, although all have been furnished with a state-funded newspaper. Analysts told IWPR that although Karimov's government can count on the loyalty of these older groups, it realises that they carry no weight among ordinary Uzbeks and that their support in the general election due next year might do it more harm than good

As Karimov told the Liberal Democrat founders, "A political force... that lives by fine-sounding slogans and popular appeals alone will eventually be defeated and lose the trust of the people."

When the new party appeared, one of the theories that began circulating in Tashkent was that it was another attempt to create a political vehicle for the authorities - only this time to do it properly.

IWPR understands that officials have twin objectives for the Liberal Democrats - to make it into the main player in the parliamentary election, and to draw support from Birlik and Erk as they attempt to re-emerge.

From next year, Uzbekistan will move from a single-chamber parliament to a bicameral system. Many of the regional governors, ministry officials and other establishment figures who hold seats in the assembly will be kicked upstairs to the new senate.

The plan is to use the Liberal Democrats to fill many of the seats in the lower house, analysts say. The old parties such as Adolat will play a minor role but will not be killed off altogether, so as to show that Uzbekistan continues to have a multi-party system.

One possible defect in the plan is that much the same scenario is repeated every time a new Uzbek party is manufactured. Most recently, Fidokorlar, created on Karimov's orders prior to elections in 1999, was heralded as a real sea-change, but fell into obscurity when the government forgot about it as soon as the ballot was over. Some observers believe that the new party may follow the same route.

Like its predecessors, the Liberal Democrats have been assigned a political profile. But if Milli Tiklanish represented scholars and intellectuals, and Fidokorlar stood for the interests of a mix of artists, businessmen and young people, the new party's business orientation is much more clearly defined.

Having Pakhtabank's boss as chairman will lend the party some weight. And the Liberal Democrats say they aim to represent the middle classes - businessmen, private farmers, and white-collar workers. This is a relatively affluent constituency by Uzbek standards, and analysts say it is a calculated choice by the authorities. Much of the population is impoverished, they say, and people are more likely to have confidence in a group with the resources to improve their welfare than in empty promises or patriotic slogans.

The party's business background gives it another practical advantage, analysts say, since the government will not have to pay for its election campaign as it has done for the other loyalist parties.

Independent sociologist Bahodir Musaev is sceptical about the new party's prospects. He told IWPR that it is a sign that officials recognise the need for new blood, but he warned that it will only have a hope of becoming an effective party if it distances itself from the president's administration.

"The Uzbekistan authorities have completely lost the people's trust, and the dissatisfaction of the people is becoming plain," he said. "Without a constructive secular opposition, the state will collapse in Uzbekistan. I hope that the authorities understand this, and that they are guided by this in creating the party."

The head of the Erk party inside Uzbekistan, Atanazar Arifov, was more critical. "It is not a party, it is a trade union of entrepreneurs," he said. "They say they will protect the interests of entrepreneurs, and not fight for power. They have no political goals, and no clear political programme."

Arifov believes the party is entirely a government creation and will never become an opposition force.

"Karimov does not want to have opposition parties. But it is pointless to create new parties of power because, however many of them there are, they are still just one party, with one set of policies - the policies of Islam Karimov," he said.

The Liberal Democrats will now have to seek official registration as a political party. It is not believed many obstacles will be put in their path - unlike the problems that Birlik and Erk have faced.

The party has been joined by two more which are in the process of setting themselves up. The Party of Agrarians and Entrepreneurs is led by Marat Zahidov, who heads a human rights organisation regarded by many as a government-sanctioned group. The other party also has an agricultural slant: Ozod Dehkan - the Free Farmers' Party - held its first meeting on November 15.

Observers doubt that either will take an anti-government line.

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