Uzbek Political Reforms Merely for Effect

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President Islam Karimov has announced what looks like a major change to the way Uzbekistan is governed by giving substantial new powers to parliament.

In a speech to parliamentarians on November 12, Karimov said the political party with the most seats in the legislature would get to nominate a prime minister. Currently, that appointment is made by the president himself.

Farhod Tolipov, a leading political analyst in Tashkent, spoke to NBCentralAsia about what the change was likely to mean in practice.

NBCentralAsia: What, in your view, is the reason for this initiative by President Karimov?

Farhod Tolipov: Since the early years of independence, the political process in Uzbekistan has gone along dual tracks – de jure and de facto. De jure, the system looks fairly strong and substantial, and is subject to changes – among them the latest proposed amendments to the constitution.

Yet de facto, things are different. When it comes to implementation, our laws are often far removed from the realities of life, and are ignored anyway.

A few years ago, for example, the president said that political parties would be allowed to form a parliamentary opposition. Yet we haven't seen any faction emerge as an independent opposition.

At the time, many people wondered whether the change would lead to the political and social environment becoming more liberal, and it did look like that might happen. The reality, though, is that nothing changed.

NBCentralAsia: Why do you think members of parliament don't use this right? What's stopping them?

Tolipov: It's the gulf between de jure and de facto. We can pass laws that meet international rules and democratic standards, but can we implement them in practice? We know that countries like Uzbekistan, parliaments are fairly weak when it comes to independent activity by their members. So whatever their rights on paper, members of parliament are inert, dependent and incapable of expressing different opinions.

NBCentralAsia: The constitutional amendments will oblige parliamentarians to exercise their right to nominate a prime minister, since no one else will do it.

Tolipov: That isn't quite the case. In Uzbekistan, the process will be cunningly designed so that de jure, it looks like parliamentarians are nominating the prime minister, but this will be preceded by a negotiating process that takes place within the inner circle, shielded from public view. It's a system that's been tried and tested in the years since independent.

Thus, any legislative changes run up against the same problem – the need to reform the way the system works in practice, in order to create an independent parliament. So it's a half-measure.

On the other hand, this kind of change can lead the average citizen to believe this is how democracy works. President Karimov said as much in his speech – "this is a feature of every democracy in the world".

Such messages are instructive in nature, rather than being intended to be put into practice. In time, society will start to discover how a democratic process is really supposed to work.

NBCentralAsia: What do you mean?

Tolipov: First, it is apparent that de jure, we have to adhere to democratic standards, so new laws have to conform to this.

Second, it's clear that initiatives like this are also designed for their international impact. Uzbekistan is showing the world that it's making progress and pursuing reforms.

It may be that under a future leadership, though not this one, we will have the legislative foundations and strength of public opinion we need to promote greater democracy. Under any circumstances, the system needs to be reformed.

National Endowment for Democracy.

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