

Uzbek President Reins In Security Service

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Once-mighty intelligence agency weakened by a serious shake-up.

Uzbek president Shavkat Mirziyoyev has launched a major reorganisation of the powerful National Security Service (SNB) in what appears to be the most ambitious series of reforms since he took power in December 2016.

In mid-March, Mirziyoyev issued a decree slashing the powers of an intelligence agency long seen as a repressive secret police - a month after the resignation of formidable chairman Rustam Inoyatov, who had headed the SNB since 1995.

Mirziyoyev's decree transferred responsibility for a range of issues, including the security of state institutions, from SNB to the Interior Ministry (MVD) as of April 1. Other tasks, including building and maintaining security installations, will be transferred to the ministry of defence. The SNB was also renamed the State Security Service (GSB).

The president made clear that what he described as the "unjustified expansion" of the agency's authority would end. In the past, "any local issue could be seen as a national security threat. This reorganisation will draw the attention of the agency to the real state-level threats".

The decree also specifies that the intelligence agencies must "strictly uphold people's rights, freedoms and legitimate interests" as well as protecting the state from external and internal threats.

Although the SNB is a large agency with numerous departments throughout the country and an extensive agent network abroad, Mirziyoyev said that its centralised control had "contributed to unjustified intervention in all spheres of the activities of state authorities".

The resignation of the the SNB's head was particularly significant as Inoyatov was one of Uzbekistan's most powerful officials during the regime of former president Islam Karimov, who died in September 2016. He has now become a presidential adviser and senator of the upper house of the Uzbek parliament, which ensures immunity from criminal prosecution.

Some of his subordinates have not been so fortunate since the dawn of the Mirziyoyev era. In August 2017, local media outlets reported that the SNB's first deputy chair, Shukhrat Gulyamov, was sentenced to life by the supreme court and fined more than a billion US dollars on charges of money laundering, arms and drugs trading and bribery.

The legal fate of two other deputies and a dozen high-ranking officials of the central office and regional departments, who all resigned, are unknown.

Ikhtiyor Abdullaev, prosecutor general of Uzbekistan since 2015, took over from Inoyatov as chairman of the State Security Service.

At recent meetings with residents of Surkhandarya and Bukhara in southern Uzbekistan, the president explained that during his previous tenure as prime minister he had learned that SNB chiefs mistreated local officials and entrepreneurs by initiating fake criminal cases against them and imprisoning them.

"No one ever gave them such powers, they did it themselves," he said. "We'll tighten control to re-establish justice. No state has such dishonest officers with so many powers," Mirziyoyev told activists in Bukhara, according to the Uzbekistan-based Radio Liberty.

"Many of them will be held liable. Now they will sing another song. Many of them haven't been in the places [prisons] where they have put many other people," the president said.

Uzbekistan has a dismal human rights record, and the SNB has been seen as responsible for the arrest and torture of hundreds of ordinary citizens as well as activists and religious figures.

Karimov had rejected all criticisms from the human rights community, justifying his extreme measures as a necessity to combat terrorism and extremists.

After taking office, Mirziyoyev made no specific comment on past violations, but noted that the authorities needed to serve the citizens and treat them fairly. Some convicted politicians and human rights defenders have since been released.

“The National Security Service as one of the state power structures should operate according to the principle, “It’s not the people who benefit the state authorities, but the state authorities who benefit the people,” - which is now the guidance for all ministries and agencies in the republic,” Mirziyoyev said on January 31 at the meeting of special service officers where Inoyatov’s resignation was announced.

Shukhrat Ganiev, director of the Humanitarian Legal Centre in the Uzbek town of Bukhara, said that the president was really trying to change the SNB.

“I still believe it is the president’s sincere intention to reform the intelligence agencies. The situation has become so tense that it would have caused social problems had the structure been left as it was,” he said, adding that prosecutions of journalists and human rights activists had reduced significantly.

“The establishment of a checks and balances system would be the best warranty against the SNB turning into an uncontrollable monster. That’s where we need independent media outlets, and independent judiciary and parliament. These three structures would ...ensure systematic and irreversible reforms in Uzbekistan,” Ganiev concluded.

But Nadezhda Ataeva, an Uzbek activist based in France and head of the Human Rights in Central Asia association, said that Inoyatov should not have been given effective immunity.

“There have been cases of the attempted murder of Uzbek nationals residing abroad. The SNB is the organiser of such crimes. All cases of political and religious persecution should be highlighted and the new authorities should review them, because all the oppressed are still on the SNB’s black list, even those who have completed their sentences,” Ataeva told IWPR.

Andrei Grozin, a Russian expert on Central Asia, said that the president’s actions would continue to “undercut the influence of SNB and diminish the total control it used to have over all security, society and business structures”.

During the Karimov era, he explained, the SNB and the interior ministry competed for both power and the president’s favour. Following the 2005 Andijan massacre, when Uzbek security forces opened fire on a crowd of demonstrators in the eastern city and killed hundreds of people, the interior ministry was castigated for its handling of events and the SNB gained supremacy.

“I believe the president has set himself a task- to return to the previous system that used to be before the Andijan events, that is, when there was absolutely no dominating power-wielding centre, and when various [power] groups competed with each other, primarily, the MVD and SNB,” Grozin said.

Then there is the Executive Protective Service, responsible for the security of senior figures including the president, prime minister and speaker, which Grozin noted was currently headed by Mirziyoyev’s son-in-law and said could become a “significant pole of influence”.

He also said that rather than falling out of favour, Inoyatov might be being positioned for another important role. The two men had previously been allies.

“I am not sure that Inoyatov was removed despite his wish,” he continued. “It might have been a behind-the-scenes process when two major figures agreed on their further actions.”

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