

Uzbekistan's Feuding Family Elite

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Row sheds light on hidden power struggles as presidential election approaches.

Months of conflict within the family of Uzbek president Islam Karimov has revealed a struggle for succession that would normally be hidden beneath the surface, analysts say.

The furore around the president's daughter Gulnara Karimova, much of it taking place on Twitter, indicates that an influential group around security service chief Rustam Inoyatov may be edging ahead in the power struggle.

Gulnara Karimova has figured in international investigations into bank accounts and commercial activities for some time, but the story really took off when her sister Lola Tillaeva-Karimova, Uzbekistan's UNESCO ambassador, gave an interview to the BBC World Service's Uzbek Service in September that was revealingly frank, at least for a normally closed ruling elite. Gulnara's name has frequently come up as a possible successor to her father, but Lola said the chances of this happening were slim.

The elder sister hit back at Lola in an interview for the Turkish daily *Hürriyet* in December, describing her and her husband Timur Tillaev of mounting a campaign against her at the instigation of the National Security Service or SNB.

A frequent Twitter user, Gulnara Karimova posted accusations against her sister, her mother, and Inoyatov and other SNB staff. Normally untouchable, the security agency found itself accused of using defamatory reports to erode President Karimov's confidence in his daughter. Gulnara also carried updates on staff members at her various ventures who she said had been arbitrarily detained by the SNB.

In Uzbekistan, Karimova's businesses, TV and radio stations, and charitable foundation were closed down, ostensibly after tax inspections.

Many analyst believe the campaign against Karimova could not have happened unless her father sanctioned it. The social media warfare came at a time when Uzbekistan's ruling elite were already feeling the heat from investigations conducted by European officials, one involving alleged money-laundering in Switzerland and another concerning claims that the Swedish-Finnish telecoms firm TeliaSonera paid money to an offshore account in exchange for access to Uzbekistan's mobile phone market.

Gulnara has denied allegations that she was linked to firms implicated in these transactions, but the fact that her name came up in the investigations risked putting the president's family in a bad light, making her a liability.

According to Tashpulat Yuldashev, a political commentator from Uzbekistan now living in the United States, the SNB may also have informed the president that Gulnara was hinting at presidential ambitions on Twitter.

"The SNB - instructed to do so by Karimov - began by closing down her empire. Then it told Karimov of her political ambitions, her claim to the throne. So it was Inoyatov who shook things up and then escalated matters," Yuldashev said.

He underlined that the public row put paid to any plans Gulnara might have had to run for president.

"Karimov's nature is such that no one gets to discuss the succession with him," he added.

In the interview Gulnara gave to *Hürriyet* in December, she denied having any desire to become head of state.

The bigger picture, according to Yuldashev, is one of rivalries between elite factions engaged in a "struggle for influence".

A Tashkent-based political analyst who asked to remain anonymous agreed with this view, arguing that Inoyatov's group appeared to be hoping that placed under enough pressure, Gulnara would make a fatal error that would knock her out as a contender.

"They outsmarted Gulnara, so now everything depends on who they want as their candidate in the forthcoming battle for Karimov's throne," he added.

From the outside, post-Soviet Uzbekistan looks like a monolithic authoritarian system with Karimov at the top. A more accurate picture is one where different political factions vie for attention and power, and come

in and out of favour. The president, meanwhile, stays in charge by adeptly playing one group off against another.

Commonly but wrongly described as “clans”, these groups are generally rooted in a particular region of this large country.

Inoyatov and his allies are from Tashkent, although the anonymous expert interviewed for this report argues that there are two factions here rather than one. There is the security-agency faction around Inoyatov, and a technocratic group including Prime Minister Shavqat Mirzoev and his deputy Rustam Azimov.

“They [technocrats] have substantial administrative resources, although they can hardly compete with the SNB group,” he said

Separate or not, Inoyatov’s faction wields considerable clout, since the SNB has much the same position and fearful reputation as its predecessor, the Soviet KGB.

The faction recently scored a coup by securing control of the SNB’s rival, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, which controls the uniformed police. According to Yuldashev, the appointment of Adham Ahmedbaev as minister is a sign of Inoyatov’s growing influence.

Ahmedbaev is a Tashkent man, while his predecessor Bahodir Matlubov, who officially retired, was associated with the “Samarkand group”. Matlubov had inherited the post from another Samarkand figure, Zokirjon Almatov.

Yuldashev also noted the departure in October of Akhat Nosirov as head of the elite presidential security service. This bodyguard unit reports to the president, not the SNB. However, its new head is Rovshanbek Shamshiev, previously Inoyatov’s second in command.

Sergei Yezhkov, editor-in-chief of Uzmanon, an online news agency in Tashkent, has a different take on the importance of factions. He dismisses talk of a warring factions and says that in reality, there is only one centre of power – President Karimov himself.

“There are no political forces here,” Yezhkov said. “There are people who carry out the will of one individual. They will continue to do so.”

Another political analyst in Tashkent, Farhod Tolipov, says the current situation is hard to read. But with a presidential election slated for 2015, and before that parliamentary polls that could show the way things are going, the succession process might start in earnest in 2014.

“Of course it isn’t going to be a democratic change of leadership. But there are going to be shifts, and this is likely to happen as this summer approaches,” Tolipov said.

Karimov will be 77 by the time of the next election, and much speculation surrounds whether he will wish to stand again. He does not discuss the matter himself, nor is it a topic for the state-run media. He has run Uzbekistan since the late Soviet period, and has been re-elected several times over, engineering extra terms by changing the constitution.

Although Uzbekistan’s parliament merely exists to rubber-stamp Karimov’s decisions, the 2014 election is significant because of the post of chairman of the Senate, the upper chamber.

Whoever gets that job is constitutionally empowered to take over from the president should he die or become incapacitated. It is an interim position that lasts as long as it takes to hold an election, but any faction with serious ambitions to secure the presidency would need to have their person in situ as Senate leader to smooth the way.

Yuldashev does not predict an overt challenge, but believes that Inoyatov’s group may already be seeking to ease Karimov out.

Uzbekistan’s economy is in poor shape and social problems are becoming increasingly hard to conceal.

“Uzbekistan is going to face difficulties getting through the next winter, as the economy is in absolute tatters. Everyone knows this; Karimov is well aware of it and that’s why he tells blatant lies,” Yuldashev said, referring to a speech the president gave in January in which he compared economic performance in 2013 not with the previous year, but with 2000.

He pointed to a number of protests that have taken place around the country in the last couple of months. These were small but were still a rarity for Uzbekistan. Even more surprisingly, the demonstrators were not rounded up and jailed, but had their demands met – supplies of gas and electricity were restored. Yuldashev sees this light-handed approach as significant.

“At the moment, the SNB and the interior ministry aren’t even investigating these protests,” he said. “It’s almost as if they are waiting for people to rise up.”

Inga Sikorskaya is IWPR’s Uzbekistan editor.

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