

Post-Charismatic Leadership Transition in Central Asia: A Comparative Study of Kazakhstan (Tokayev) and Uzbekistan (Mirziyoyev)

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the transition of post-charismatic leadership in Central Asia region, focusing on Kazakhstan under President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev and Uzbekistan under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev. After periods of strong personal charisma exercised by the rulers of Nursultan Nazarbayev and Islam Karimov, both countries entered the stage of political adaptation when attempts were made to make the government system institutionalized without destabilizing the regime. By means of qualitative comparison and with the use of Max Weber's notions of routinization of charismatic authority, the study analyzes the reformist trends and changes in the foreign policy priorities of both states. The outcomes of the study reveal that Uzbekistan is characterized by the presence of greater reformist trends and involvement in regional politics, whereas in Kazakhstan the processes of power consolidation can be observed in a more measured manner.

Keywords: *Post-charismatic leadership; leadership succession; Central Asia; Kazakhstan; Uzbekistan; Routinization of charisma*

INTRODUCTION

The leadership successions that have taken place in the wake of the demise of Soviet influence in Central Asia have seldom led to deep structural shifts in governance. Instead of providing an opportunity for the emergence of democratic systems, the successions that came after the reign of long-serving presidents like Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan and Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan can be better understood as strategies adopted by the regimes in power to survive through adaptation. The empirical research indicates that the transition at the upper levels of power is unlikely to disrupt the political system because of the continuity of presidential rule (Blackmoon, 2021).

In terms of theory, post-charismatic succession can be viewed through the prism of Max Weber's "The Routinization Of Charisma" concept. It refers to the transformation of charismatic power into institutionalized rule-

making (Isaacs, 2015). This model seems to fit well for the case of Uzbekistan's transition from one leader to another. While Shavkat Mirziyoyev introduced some economic reforms and took a more outward-looking approach to foreign policy, he did not give up control over executive power (Kelkitli, 2022; Öztopal & Sarıkaya, 2023). The same can be observed in Kazakhstan, where Kassym-Jomart Tokayev succeeded his predecessor while implementing institutional continuity with cautious reforms (Blackmoon, 2021). Thus, succession appears to serve as a tool for reconfiguration rather than dismantling the current power system.

While there has been an array of previous research offering detailed analysis of the two countries separately, approaches involving a comparative perspective in the context of post-charismatic transition have been scarce. This study attempts to bridge this gap by analyzing the role that the process of succession in leadership plays in the regime consolidation and institutional adaptation in Central Asia region.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The succession of leaders in post-Soviet states is examined under the concept of charisma and institutional transformation. According to Isaacs (2015), the routinization of charisma refers to the point when the legitimacy gained through a certain charismatic person must be shifted to institutional legitimacy to ensure the survival of the political system. Tokbaeva (2021) also notes that the post-Charismatic period tends to encourage the development of managerial approaches rather than any structural changes. As evidenced by Prianto (2023), charismatic leadership in the sense of Weber gradually turns into rational-legal type during the political transition. Overall, based on the presented research, one can say that the succession of leaders in a personalistic regime is associated with a reconfiguration of source of legitimacy and power within the institutional setting rather than democratization.

Based on several studies conducted on the topic of Uzbekistan, it can be seen that there is a change in the country's diplomatic approach due to the change in leadership. According to Öztopal & Sarıkaya (2023), this change in the foreign policy of the country is caused by the shift in the leadership within the country. As pointed out by Kelkitli (2022), although there is an increase in the openness of the region, it does not necessarily affect the dominance of the executive branch of the government. Furthermore, Rakhimov (2025) highlights Uzbekistan's use of economic diplomacy to strengthen its regional position, indicating that the leadership transition plays a greater role in driving strategic repositioning than systemic changes toward liberalization.

With regard to comparative analysis, Blackmon (2021) shows how the political processes following Karimov's and Nazarbayev's rule in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan took place in a well-controlled institutional context where reforms occurred simultaneously with regime continuation. Kazhenova (2024) points to the essential role played by leadership in defining the trajectory of regional integration, further corroborating the idea of how succession processes affect both internal politics and foreign policies. However, to focus exclusively on the results of their foreign policy processes. Comparative analysis that views the two cases as part of post-charismatic transitions remains underdeveloped and allows room for further research.

METHODOLOGY

This study is based on the qualitative methodology utilizing the descriptive-analytical approaches to analyze the processes of post-charismatic leadership transition in Central Asia region. In terms of the units of analysis, it is suggested to concentrate on the accumulation of power by the executives in post-succession periods in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. The analysis will be conducted through the comparative analysis of two case studies of Kazakhstan (Kassym-Jomart Tokayev) and Uzbekistan (Shavkat Mirziyoyev), which occurred after the periods of their presidents' Nazarbayev and Karimov.

The study employs a structured comparative framework founded on the logic of "most similar systems". Such an approach was adopted since the chosen countries are quite similar in terms of being former Soviet states with presidential rule, established under the regime of personalism in their political systems. This particular feature provides grounds for examining the specific changes in institutional development, elite turnover, and policies adopted during the period of leadership change. Temporally, the study is confined to 2016-2024 (Uzbekistan) and 2019-2024 (Kazakhstan).

Data for this study were gathered by means of a systematic review of twelve open-access academic articles and policy studies on the subject of leadership transition, resilience of authoritarian regimes, and governance reforms. Only open-access material is employed in this study to allow for transparency. The analysis was carried out through the use of qualitative content analysis and thematic coding. Every piece of material was analyzed and coded according to four categories, which are institutional reforms, elite rearrangements, the construction of legitimacy, and changes in foreign policy.

This study does not seek to evaluate the successes of the process of democratization but instead seeks to explore the mechanism through which regimes adapt in a post-charismatic environment. By systematically comparing cases, this study provides a contextual understanding of how leadership succession serves as an institution for stabilizing executive power in Central Asia. The weakness of this study includes the use of secondary sources and lack of interviews, preventing any form of validation by the elites directly involved. However, this does not affect the logic of the analysis.

DISCUSSION

Succession as Controlled Elite Pact Configuration

The change in leadership in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan in 2016 and 2019 respectively was not an illustration of systemic change but rather indicated a reshuffle of elite relations in a controlled environment. According to the principles discussed by Max Weber on the routinization of charisma (Isaacs, 2015), the departure of Karimov and Nazarbayev demanded a transformation of charismatic authority into the institutionalized form. However, this institutionalization did not involve dismantling the existing patronal networks but rather indicated a reorganization of their power balance.

Geddes, Wright, and Frantz (2014) note that personalist regimes experience their highest vulnerability during succession. Nazarbayev's regime was successfully continued because of his orderly transfer of power. The early stage of presidency of Kassym-Jomart Tokayev was determined by the rules of elite bargain and not the formation of new power configurations (Blackmon, 2021). The elite reshuffle after the January events of 2022 proved to be not very effective and could not indicate any changes.

In Uzbekistan, a similar course of events was observed; however, it has been carried out with greater determination in the restructuring of the elite. The changeovers in the security sector, led by President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, resulted in the dismissal of several influential persons and the establishment of a network of supporters, thereby indicating a shift in alignment rather than disintegration (Kelkitli, 2022). As a result, succession was used not so much as a tool for elite rotation as one for elite consolidation.

Patronal Presidentialism and Adaptive Institutional Reform.

Hale (2015), however, suggests that the patronal presidentialism framework accounts for why a shift in the leader does not imply an institutional shift. Under the patronal regime type, the exercise of power involves the informal networks embedded within formal structures. Hence, reforming the institutions would transform the institutional façade but leave the power dynamics intact.

The constitutional amendments in Kazakhstan, alongside attempts to distinguish oneself from Nursultan Nazarbayev post-2022, are representative of adaptive authoritarianism as developed by Lucan A. Way (2005). While Kassym-Jomart Tokayev was able to assert his power, there is little room left for institutional diversity.

Compared to Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan appears to be taking a more active stance on reforms, but still follows the same structure of continuity. The factors like administrative reforms, economic sector opening, and the fight against corruption have led to increased governance effectiveness, not followed by decentralization of power (Öztopal & Sarıkaya, 2023). According to Tokbaeva (2021), the post-charismatic period will eventually develop into managerial consolidation, which involves a shift from charisma-based legitimacy to technocracy-based legitimacy. The reforms initiated by Shavkat Mirziyoyev confirm the idea of managerial rationalization without political democratization.

Therefore, it can be stated that there are different intensities of reforms in both countries, yet their structural implications remain similar.

Reconstructing Legitimacy : From Charisma to Performance-Based Authority

Legitimacy needs to be acquired through new procedures. When Nursultan Nazarbayev governed, legitimacy was built upon the symbolic representation of national development and persuasive authoritarianism (Schatz & Maltseva, 2012). Conversely, since Kassym-Jomart Tokayev who does not have the same charismatic appeal, has become president, he has moved away from his predecessors' strategies by focusing on procedures and economic performance.

In Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, too, has sought to move away from charismatic sources of legitimacy toward performance-based legitimacy. Economic diplomacy, openness, and modernization became the key components of the narrative (Rakhimov, 2025). As Prianto (2024) explains, the Weberian transition from charismatic to legal-rational authority does not necessarily mean less executive power. Instead, legality can be employed as an instrument of consolidation, not restraint.

However, the key difference between these two cases is in intensity: While Uzbekistan moves in a more progressive direction, legitimizing their approach discursively, Kazakhstan focuses on stability and adaptation. Still, in both examples, executive authority remains the organizing principle.

Foreign Policy Repositioning as a Tool of Domestic Stabilization

Alterations in foreign policy have also revealed the regime's adaptation practices. According to Kazhenova (2024), the influence of the leadership on the process of regional integration is substantial. During the reign of Shavkat Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan has made adjustments from its isolationist tendencies towards greater involvement in regional processes by enhancing regional collaboration and connectivity within Central Asia (Kelkitli, 2022). This move not only demonstrates the regime's adaptability but also contributes to its legitimacy by projecting its leadership regionally.

On the other hand, Kazakhstan pursues a multi-vector foreign policy approach under Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, managing relations with different countries while indicating minor reforms (Blackmon, 2021). In both cases, alterations in foreign policies shared a common trend of adaptation to strengthen the regime. Therefore, foreign policy indicate adaptive practices by the regimes to sustain themselves instead of democratizing the regimes.

Comparative Synthesis: Managed Transformation Without Democratic Breakthrough

Through the lenses of elite reconfiguration, institutional restructuring, legitimacy rebuilding, and foreign policy changes, recurrent patterns emerge. Successions in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are manifestations of deliberate change but not of a move towards democracy.

While Uzbekistan demonstrates greater intensity in the reforming processes in the economic and international relations domains, Kazakhstan has shown a conservative trend of consolidation, especially after the crisis of 2022. However, common structural patterns can be observed in both cases: the establishment of authority without undermining the presidential supremacy. This study contributes to the body of literature by bringing into the analysis the concepts of Weberian routinization, patronal presidentialism, and authoritarian adaptation in a comparative perspective. Instead of viewing post-charismatic successions in Central Asia region as the beginning of an era of open political transformation, it should be seen as a period that preserves power structures' integrity.

The decline in charisma does not lead to any shifts in the distribution of authority; it only implies the reconfiguration of the power networks, legitimization sources, and foreign orientation, yet preserving the presidential basis.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study demonstrates that leadership transition in the countries of interest should be seen as a process of strategic adaptation of regimes, as well as certain institutional changes, but not a fundamental democratic transformation. The dynamics of reforms and active involvement in the region by Uzbekistan under Shavkat Mirziyoyev have been clearly demonstrated in the area of economic diplomacy. Meanwhile, Kazakhstan under Kassym-Jomart Tokayev has adopted a gradual model of power consolidation against internal challenges. Processes associated with the idea of routinization of charisma have moved the source of legitimacy from individual personalities to technocracy, leaving in place networks built up over years. The end of the charismatic period in the political career of the founding fathers of their nations does not bring about any change in the system of power, while presidentialism continues to be the core element of political dynamics. In order to further develop the analysis, future studies should consider the collection of first-

hand information from the interviews of elites to provide a direct confirmation of any changes in terms of internal power structures. At the same time, the international community could consider focusing on institutional accountability as an indicator in evaluating the actions taken to ensure stable development of the region.

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