

# Rebranding a Kleptocratic State: Reputation Laundering in Uzbekistan

by Kristian Lasslett and Dilmira Matyakubova  
Professor and PhD Researcher, respectively,  
Ulster University



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*The government of Uzbekistan—a state with a history of gross human rights violations and kleptocratic leaders—is eager to rebrand itself as market-friendly and transparently-governed under its new President, Shavkat Mirziyoyev. It has recruited and organized a vast international lobby of public relations, media, and business officials to assist with this task. Ironically, the restoration of market confidence through an international “hearts and minds” campaign is opening up new opportunities for kleptocratic wealth management strategies and entrenching a modernizing form of authoritarian politics. Uzbekistan’s significant ongoing human rights, corruption, and governance issues are being relegated to the margins of international concern given growing opportunities for profit in the country’s economic opening. Meanwhile, civil society and citizen journalists who uncover corruption and abuse of power in Uzbekistan face enduring state persecution.*

**W**hen former Uzbekistani President Islam Karimov passed away in September 2016, he left behind a pariah state associated with systematic human rights abuses, the repression of civil and political rights, widespread grand-corruption, and a political environment inimical to an open and competitive market.<sup>1</sup> His successor, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, has established a ruling circle that is younger and more commercially literate. This regime has also nurtured an ambition to calibrate Uzbekistan’s political and market infrastructure with international economic structures more effectively, through privatization, liberalization of markets, financialization, and the introduction of certain business-oriented governance reforms.

This effort has not only required changes in policy and regulation, but a deliberate and global campaign that seeks to rewire international perceptions of Uzbekistan by directing attention toward economic reform and away from significant human rights, corruption, and governance issues. The aim is to rebrand the Mirziyoyev regime as a safe pair of hands committed to economic stability and free-market mechanisms.

There is evidence that this rebranding campaign, and the technical reforms it champions, is gradually facilitating Uzbekistan’s enhanced integration into liberalized international regimes of trade and capital flows. However, there is also a growing body of investigative reporting that suggests the emerging opportunities this effort has created is being curated by the authoritarian state for the benefit of kleptocratic elites, entrenching a new nexus between an illiberal state-corporate apparatus in Uzbekistan and liberalized global capitalism.

### **The Rebranding Campaign**

Uzbekistan’s rebranding campaign strategy is set out explicitly in President Mirziyoyev’s draft *Concept on Strengthening the Positive Image of Uzbekistan in an International Arena*.<sup>2</sup> The policy

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plan assigns projects to a wide range of government agencies. Collectively, this effort is designed to present and promote to the world a “New Uzbekistan” that is a flourishing, open democracy committed to optimizing the legal and administrative environment for business and investment.<sup>3</sup> Notably, the rebranding blueprint places an emphasis on building public support for this narrative among an international coalition of business, media, nongovernmental, academic, public relations, and multilateral agencies.

True to the blueprint, an influential network of international actors has joined Tashkent's rebranding effort despite overwhelming evidence of kleptocracy and grand corruption in Uzbekistan. This coalition is lending the authoritarian regime significant cultural, social, and reputational capital on a global scale. Officials from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD),<sup>4</sup> the United Nations,<sup>5</sup> World Bank,<sup>6</sup> the International Labour Organization,<sup>7</sup> U.S. and European embassies,<sup>8</sup> international equity funds, fintech firms, and investment firms have all been prepared to vouch for the regime's supposed democratic and free-market credentials at high profile, public fora.

This coalition of international actors and media savvy domestic policy leaders has formed a formidable lobby that rebrands Uzbekistan aggressively at investor conferences, workshops, multilateral fora, and other press or social media settings. They are also aided by sleek public relations agencies, such as Xenophon Strategies (U.S.),<sup>9</sup> Cometis AG (Germany),<sup>10</sup> and Corporate Communications International (U.K.)<sup>11</sup> that help organize and polish this coalition's claims and, by extension, aid in its reputation laundering efforts.

This international rebranding offensive appears to have been successful in removing the stigma associated with Uzbekistan's recent history—or what is framed as “the past.” Regime figures often cite the award of *the Economist's* coveted “country of the year” title to Uzbekistan in 2019 as an example of the campaign's success.<sup>12</sup> Uzbekistan is also rising steadily upward in certain key indexes targeted by the regime. For example, in the 2020 World Bank Doing Business Report, Uzbekistan was ranked one of the “top 20 business climate improvers.”<sup>13</sup> The rapid international thaw is allowing Uzbekistan to make inroads into new international capital and commodity markets in ways that would have been improbable under Karimov.

The international press, select academic centers, and business groups have also joined international organizations in offering their praise and support to the Mirziyoyev regime.<sup>14</sup> The *Financial Times* (FT), for example, celebrated Uzbekistan's achievements in a recent special report, published in the lead-up to the Uzbekistan Economic Forum 2021—a major government-sponsored investor conference—of which the FT was designated an official media partner.<sup>15</sup> The FT's Moscow and Central Asia reporter, Nastassia Astrasheuskaya, portrayed authoritarianism as a thing of the past when she wrote, “Since Shavkat Mirziyoyev took power as president in 2016, the *previously* authoritarian Central Asian country has been on a path to reform . . . Five years on, the president is up for re-election in October and widely expected to win a second term” (emphasis added by the authors).<sup>16</sup> Astrasheuskaya continued, “experts agree that early reforms . . . have been effective . . . Uzbekistan seems to have won back investor trust.”

### Turning a Blind Eye to Human Rights, Civil Society, and Corruption

Discussion of Uzbekistan's efforts to attract international investment often pays only minimal, superficial attention to issues such as human rights, civil and political freedoms, the persecution of independent activists, the suppression of civil society, and grand corruption. A 2018 *New York Times* editorial is illustrative: "[W]ith democracy in retreat across much of the former Soviet empire and elsewhere in the world, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's efforts bear watching and deserve support. . . . He had long served the dictator [Karimov] as prime minister and was widely expected to maintain his despotic system. Yet he has unexpectedly taken a very different, and so far, positive, path."<sup>17</sup>

Serious red flags that evince Uzbekistani elites' use of authoritarian state power for private gain are ignored or discounted. For example, business groups tied to the presidential family directly have expanded at an exponential rate through preferential commercial relationships with the state or state-owned entities.<sup>18</sup> Private commercial banks continue to be operated by politically exposed persons, shadowy oligarchs, and, perhaps most worryingly, individuals implicated in money laundering and corruption scandals.<sup>19</sup> Offshore companies with opaque business practices have seized the country's lucrative hydrocarbons sector. Major contracts awarded through public procurement exercises continue to go to politically exposed entities,<sup>20</sup> while direct awards (i.e., without tender) take place without public account being made of the relevant decision.<sup>21</sup>

Even the government's premiere initiatives have been impacted. The privatization of the cotton sector, for instance, has become a conduit for local groups tied to organized crime and international groups laundering the proceeds of financial fraud.<sup>22</sup>

The financial origins of an urban centerpiece for the Mirziyoyev government's reform effort, the much-celebrated US\$1 billion Tashkent City development, were traced back through opaque offshore shell entities to corporate groups founded by the Mayor of Tashkent (whose business interests have prospered from city contracts and awards),<sup>23</sup> and a murky network of investors with criminal ties.<sup>24</sup> These examples are only a few of many that have exposed the endemic corruption and kleptocracy that blights Uzbekistan's recent development and business ventures.<sup>25</sup>

### Challenges to Uncovering Kleptocracy

Airbrushing kleptocratic dynamics from the public conversation is a pragmatic choice for institutional actors looking to deepen economic and diplomatic ties with Uzbekistan's outward looking political elite. Nevertheless, for anyone concerned about democracy, human rights, and equality in Uzbekistan, the intricate details of who wields power, how power is applied, and who are the economic beneficiaries of its application, is a matter of burning importance. Concrete evidence from credible media reports and civil society investigations is needed.

Uzbekistan's elite, however, are experts in corporate, commercial, and political camouflage.<sup>26</sup> The secretive ownership structures in which vested interests operate, and the opaque

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commercial devices through which the nation's wealth is allocated carefully to key political power brokers and their allies, are structured in a way that is extremely time consuming to unpack—and often impossible given elites' ability to hoard their wealth abroad and conceal basic financial and ownership information from the public (see Figure 1 in Appendix).

Even if these significant barriers were overcome, activists, writers, and researchers who seek to uncover these corrupt networks and hold elites accountable still face significant risk, especially when one considers the resources at the Uzbekistani state's disposal to discourage activism, including its feared security services. Those who speak out on corruption and other unlawful activities are persecuted and even arrested on fabricated charges such as defamation, extortion, or distributing false information.<sup>27</sup> The sophisticated censorship of internet usage,<sup>28</sup> covert monitoring of communications, and the recent legal reforms making it a crime to defame the President, disrespect the state, or call for "mass disturbances" online, all indicate further repression is likely.<sup>29</sup>

International jurisdictions play a complex and important role in sustaining repressive authoritarian regimes and kleptocratic elites. For example, expert consultations from leading global law firms, financial institutions, and multinational accountancy corporations support the murky commercial structures through which wealth is looted and monopolized, perpetuating this regime of theft and corruption that is hidden from public view.

### Recommendations

To combat this dynamic in Uzbekistan, which is part of a broader struggle of confronting authoritarian politics, there are immediate and practical steps that can be taken, including improving transparency, strengthening and protecting civil society, and documenting the enabling role of international actors and institutions.

**Improve transparency surrounding corporate and commercial activity.** Significant shortcomings in transparency that allow corporate and commercial structures to be camouflaged in Uzbekistan need to be documented, exposed, and challenged. For example, some of the largest commercial transactions in Uzbekistan are engineered through opaque offshore structures registered in secrecy jurisdictions, such as Cyprus, Hong Kong, Singapore, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, Turkey, the United States, and the United Arab Emirates. Furthermore, even where ventures are pursued through locally incorporated entities, Uzbekistan's register of legal entities only makes limited corporate details available, with no capability to store historical filings or confirm beneficial ownership information.

Critical reforms that could address these significant transparency gaps, include a register of beneficial owners for all corporate entities and a register of interests for senior state officials. It is also important to break the widespread use of power of attorney or trust agreements, which allow politically exposed persons (PEPs) to hide behind proxies. Such transparency reforms would have the additional benefit of bringing Uzbekistan into alignment with international anti-money laundering and counter-terrorism financing benchmarks. In tandem with these efforts, there is a need for civil society to build a public intelligence database of PEPs that would permit the more rapid identification of issues such as conflicts of interest.

Civil society and investigative journalists should continue to make proactive use of freedom of information (FOI) laws in Uzbekistan and approach all relevant government and private sector organizations for comment on irregular transactions or opaque financing structures. It is critical to document the responses to FOI requests and requests for comment publicly so an evidence-based track record of such investigative work and government responses (or lack thereof) is established—particularly when it comes to more sensitive topics like grand corruption.

**Support and protect civil society actors investigating kleptocracy.** Civil society actors need support to build capacity for conducting story-driven investigations into corruption using multimedia to maximize the public accessibility of findings. Training and capacity building should include methods for enhancing the personal security of investigators and their sources, in addition to sharing expertise that can strengthen financial and commercial literacy. There is also a need for rigorous open-data resources. For example, civil society investigators could scrape market and governmental data and then make it machine readable in open-source intelligence databases with complex search functionality. Doing so will help create a more open environment where different parts of civil society can use the enriched flow of information to map and expose abuses of power.

Investigative stories should prioritize content centering on themes for which there is an emergent social movement in Uzbekistan, such as forced eviction and forced labor to heighten the potential for information to be incorporated into advocacy campaigns. They ought to also document, expose, and challenge the state surveillance and repression of civil society that discourages such investigations from taking place. It is paramount to protect all journalists and ensure they can engage in this work without risk of reprisal.

Investigative stories should be released in multiple content forms designed for specific target audiences, ranging from the general public to the anti-money laundering community. There have been multimedia videos published for the Uzbekistani public that garner well over one million views when shared through social media channels.<sup>30</sup> Civil society and investigative journalists should also report findings to responsible domestic agencies in Uzbekistan as well as to international complaint mechanisms for follow up and report publicly on any action taken—or inaction.

**Document the enabling role of international actors.** The efforts of international actors who maintain commercial relationships with corporate entities that exhibit serious red flags such as political exposure, conflicts of interests, human rights abuses, or ties to organized crime must also be documented, exposed, and confronted. In those instances where international businesses have a responsibility to detect and manage these risks proactively, due to anti-money laundering legislation among other reasons, there is an opportunity to leverage such regulation. Such action can take place in two ways: First by producing credible public content on the risk environment in Uzbekistan that, for example, documents major business groups with political exposure or ties to unsavory business practices. Making this information public record and identifiable through web searches, alerts the entire global anti-money laundering and due diligence communities to facts they ought to take into account (or ignore

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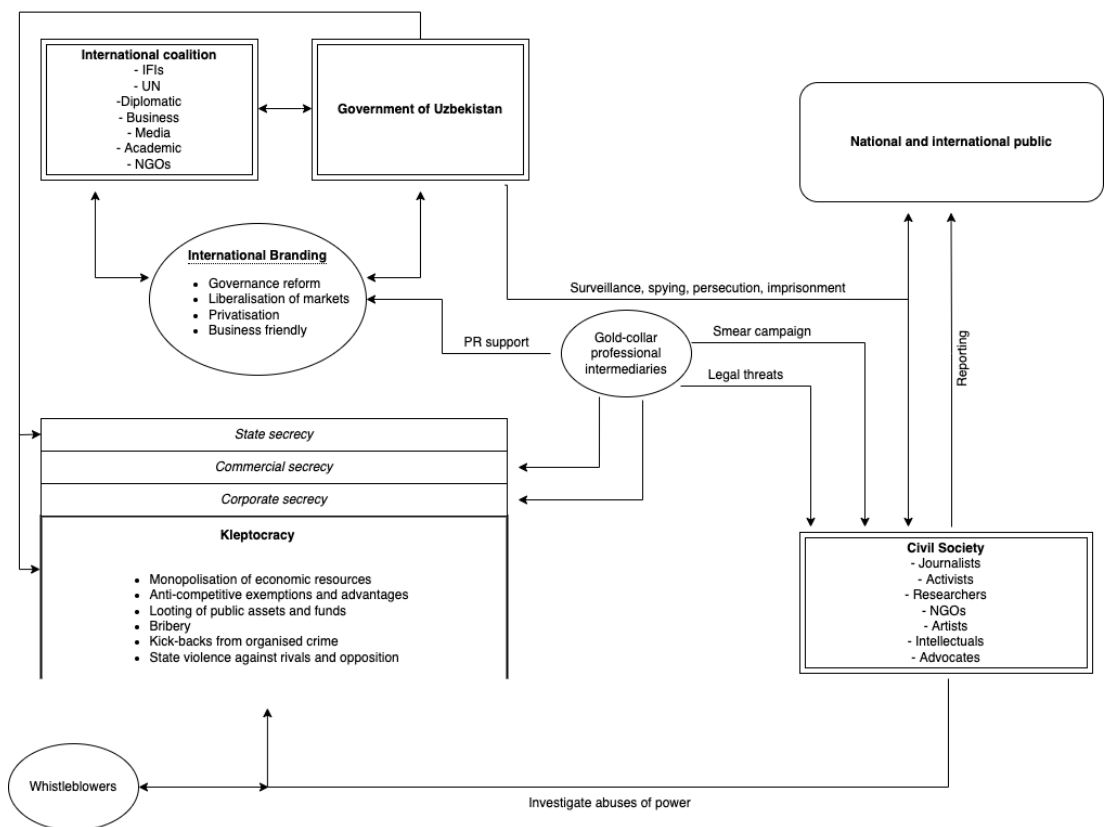
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at their own risk). Second, where there is evidence that a financial institution or law firm has onboarded a high-risk client linked to illicit activity in Uzbekistan, data on this client can be provided to the company's compliance officer and the relevant industry regulator.

Even in instances where there is no formal legal obligation for a company or international institution to avoid high-risk relationships, there may be a reputational cost. Indeed, international financial institutions such as the EBRD, World Bank, and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) have invested considerable symbolic capital in verifying the authenticity of the reforms in Uzbekistan. Where there is evidence that this recognition has led to relaxed risk-management procedures, for example in loan oversight, it is critical that such cases are brought to the attention of their own anti-corruption bodies and Board of Directors, in addition to the wider public.

## Appendix

### Uzbekistan's Complex Ecosystem of Reputation Laundering



## Endnotes

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