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**THE MODERNIZATION JOURNEY OF NEW UZBEKISTAN:
BALANCING DOMESTIC REFORM AND DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION**

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Since 2016, Uzbekistan has entered a transformative period often referred to as the era of New Uzbekistan. This article analyzes the comprehensive modernization process initiated under the leadership of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev. The transition from the isolationist policies of the previous administration to a model based on openness and transparency represents a major shift in the country's development. By examining the 2022-2026 Development Strategy and the Digital Uzbekistan-2030 program, this paper explores how administrative reforms, economic liberalization, and technological advancements are reshaping the state-society relationship. The study also highlights the growing role of soft power and digital governance as essential tools for national progress. While challenges such as bureaucratic resistance and cybersecurity threats remain, the evidence suggests that Uzbekistan is successfully building a secular, democratic state based on the rule of law. Ultimately, the modernization journey is turning Uzbekistan into a more competitive and human-centric society in the heart of Eurasia.

Uzbekistan is currently undergoing one of the most significant social and political transformations in its post-Soviet history. For twenty-five years, the country followed a stern and isolationist path under its first president, Islam Karimov. However, his death in September 2016 opened up new possibilities for development (Laruelle, 2017). The new leadership, headed by Shavkat Mirziyoyev, immediately proposed significant changes to the way the country is governed. This new approach is characterized by a shift toward liberalization, transparency, and a renewed focus on the needs of the citizens. Instead of a highly personalized political style, the government is now promoting a more collegial and open environment (Laruelle, 2017). This article examines the internal modernization of Uzbekistan, focusing on how domestic reforms and digital strategies are working together to create a modern state.

The Transition to New Uzbekistan The shift from the Karimov era to the Mirziyoyev era was not just a change in leadership but a change in the entire model of development. Safoev (2022) notes that over the past few years, Uzbekistan has undergone a radical change that is felt most by the younger generation. The state has moved away from a monopoly of power and is now working on a new principle: man-society-state (Safoev, 2022). This principle puts human dignity at the center of all government activities. To implement these ideas, the government adopted the New Uzbekistan Development Strategy for 2022-2026. This strategy identifies seven priority areas, including the development of civil society and the rule of law (Safoev, 2022). By focusing on these fundamental issues, Uzbekistan is attempting to build a sustainable and inclusive society that can adapt to the challenges of the 21st century.

Administrative and Economic Liberalization One of the first signs of modernization was the government's focus on solving the daily problems of the people. To achieve this, the government created a virtual cabinet where citizens could share their concerns and expect a response (Laruelle, 2017). This was a major step in making the state more accountable to its people. In addition to administrative changes, economic liberalization has been a top priority. The government has worked to decrease the administrative burden on small businesses by reducing audits and audits from the fiscal police (Laruelle, 2017). Furthermore, the reform of the national currency and the efforts to ensure its convertibility have been essential for attracting foreign investors (Laruelle, 2017). These reforms are designed to stimulate local trade and integrate Uzbekistan into the global economy, moving away from the stagnation of the past.

Digital Uzbekistan-2030 Strategy Modernization in the 21st century is impossible without the widespread use of information technology. Recognizing this, the

government approved the Digital Uzbekistan-2030 strategy in 2020 (Nematullayev, 2022). The goal of this strategy is to digitally transform all sectors of life, including public administration, education, and healthcare. For example, between 2020 and 2022, the level of internet connection in settlements was expected to rise from 78% to 95% (Nematullayev, 2022). The government has already laid over 118,000 kilometers of fiber-optic lines to provide high-speed communication (Axmatov, 2022). Today, citizens can access about 300 types of public services through the my.gov.uz portal (Axmatov, 2022). This digitalization not only makes the government more efficient but also reduces opportunities for corruption by making processes more transparent.

The Power of Image and Soft Power As Uzbekistan modernizes its internal structures, it is also focusing on how it is perceived by the rest of the world. Saidazimkhujayeva (2022) argues that a country's international image is a strategic resource that helps defend national interests. Since 2017, Uzbekistan has actively worked to improve its position in global rankings and indices. For instance, in the 2021 Rule of Law Index, Uzbekistan rose by 14 positions (Saidazimkhujayeva, 2022). The country is also using tourism and cultural branding to enhance its soft power. Cities like Khiva and Bukhara have been declared cultural capitals of the Turkic and Islamic worlds, respectively (Saidazimkhujayeva, 2022). By opening up to the world and promoting its rich cultural heritage, Uzbekistan is attracting more investment and tourism, which further supports its domestic modernization.

Modernization and Social Change Modernization is not just about technology or economics; it is also about changing the social fabric of the country. The new leadership is encouraging a New Renaissance, which emphasizes education and the role of the younger generation as a driving force for change (Safoev, 2022). Reforms in the education system and the labor market are providing young people with more opportunities for promotion and success (Safoev, 2022). Additionally, the role of women in society is evolving. In the post-Soviet period, women have moved from being workers in the Soviet system to becoming entrepreneurs and social actors (Laruelle, 2017). Female religious leaders, known as otinlar, are also playing a key role in shaping their communities and modifying the perception of public and private spaces (Laruelle, 2017). These changes show that modernization is reaching all levels of Uzbek society.

Challenges to the Modernization Path Despite the clear progress, the modernization journey faces several obstacles. Some scholars point out that the system of governance still faces deep-seated challenges related to the state-society social contract (Laruelle, 2017). There are concerns that the security services, which have

historically held significant power, may resist reforms that threaten their influence (Laruelle, 2017). For example, reforms related to currency convertibility and freedom of travel have sometimes been delayed or modified due to pressure from these services (Laruelle, 2017). Furthermore, the rapid digitalization of the country has introduced new risks. Cybersecurity has become a vital issue, as the number of incidents against state websites has increased significantly (Nematullayev, 2022). Uzbekistan is often ranked as one of the least cyber-secure countries, which means it must invest heavily in protecting its digital infrastructure (Nematullayev, 2022).

Reframing National Identity The modernization of Uzbekistan also involves a reinterpretation of the national biography. Laruelle (2017) notes that the state is crafting a grand narrative that makes the independent state born in 1991 the natural result of millennia of history. This meta-narrative helps to legitimize the current leadership and create a sense of national unity. Part of this narrative involves reclaiming the region's role as an international crossroads (Safoev, 2022). By focusing on the traditions of Creativity, Entrepreneurship, and Openness, the government is trying to build an identity that is both modern and rooted in ancient history (Safoev, 2022). This balance between the past and the future is a key characteristic of the modernization process in Uzbekistan.

Conclusion In conclusion, Uzbekistan has made remarkable strides in its journey toward modernization since 2016. The transition to the New Uzbekistan model has brought about significant improvements in administrative transparency, economic liberalization, and digital governance. By prioritizing the principle of human dignity and investing in the younger generation, the country is building a more resilient and inclusive society. The successful implementation of the Digital Uzbekistan-2030 strategy and the active use of soft power are positioning the nation as a modern player in the international arena. While challenges like bureaucratic resistance and cybersecurity threats persist, the overall trend is one of positive and irreversible change. Ultimately, the modernization of Uzbekistan is not just about economic growth; it is about creating a state that serves its people and contributes to the stability and prosperity of the entire region.

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