

The New President's Men: Motivations Behind the Change of Stance of Uzbekistan Concerning the Construction of the Rogun Dam

Frédéric Maranda-Bouchard¹



President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev Attending a Meeting. Photo from en.kremlin.ru

Abstract

Once a never-ending standoff between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, the construction of the Rogun dam went ahead with the approval of all involved actors despite the little amount of concessions made by Tajikistan. This change in position is closely linked with the rise to power of Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, but the motivations behind such change are still unclear. This paper argues that domestic politics, and more precisely changes in the ruling coalition, motivated Mirziyoyev to allow Tajikistan

to go forward with the building of the dam. This can be seen with the simultaneous downfall of veteran powerful officials and their replacement with ones more likely to show loyalty to the new president.

Started in 1976, the Rogun dam, which was necessary for energy security in Tajikistan,¹ was abruptly stopped when the Soviet regime collapsed in 1991.² Since then, efforts to complete what is to become the largest dam in the world with its 335 meters³ have been trumped by the opposition of Tajikistan's more powerful neighbour:

¹ Frédéric Maranda-Bouchard works at the Centre for European, Russian & Eurasian Studies at the University of Toronto, in Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

Uzbekistan.⁴ Nevertheless, things changed abruptly in 2016 following the death of the isolationist Uzbek president Islam Karimov. The takeover by his prime minister, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, allowed for swift changes in the internal and external politics of the country that allowed the project of the Rogun dam to be fast-tracked with Tashkent's benediction.⁵

While everyone seems to agree that, aside from technical issues such as funding, the decisive element allowing for the project to go forward was the leadership transition in Uzbekistan, less research exists on the reasoning behind such policy change. Indeed, while many of Mirziyoyev's politics have obvious advantages for the country or its regime, the approval of the dam, and many other hydraulic projects in the Aral Sea basin,⁶ is more puzzling. This is because it implies large-scale economic and security risks for Uzbekistan as it may cut its access to fresh water. So why did Uzbekistan drop its opposition to the construction of the Rogun dam?

Two possible motivations quickly come to mind. As part of a regime transition, such a move could be part of a shift in power within the government. Meanwhile, Mirziyoyev could simply be trying to minimize the negative effects of the dam's construction as the erection of the infrastructure was about to begin. Such demonstration faces significant limits; the answers most likely have few paper trails to follow, and deliberation and negotiations most probably took place away from public scrutiny. Nevertheless, based on our knowledge of the agreements made between the Uzbek and Tajik governments, the lack of concern on security issues seems to point at the former explanation.

However, many other elements invite us to see this policy change as a redistribution of power within Uzbekistan's ruling coalition. Coincidentally, the officials that lost the most power with the enactment of this policy are Mirziyoyev's former rivals. Meanwhile, this power was redistributed to actors more likely to support the new president. This particularly applies to long-time foreign affairs minister Abdulaziz Komilov, who has a rocky relation with Karimov and shares 'clan ties' with Mirziyoyev.⁷

Literature Review

The strategic importance of the Rogun dam relates to the concept of hydro-hegemony. Menga claims that hydro-hegemony, defined as the state control over a hydro-basin,⁸ contains three forms of the power structure: material, bargaining, and ideational. The first is the capacity to force compliance of the other actors present in the basin, the second refers to the capacity to control the negotiation process, and the last is the control on how the issue will be framed.⁹ This combination of 'hard' – material – and 'soft' – bargaining and ideational – powers allows such hegemon to display 'smart power.'¹⁰ However, this also implies that tactics undermining those powers, such as seeking international support, can diminish the power of a state over its hydro-basin.¹¹ Therefore, the main target of a hydro-hegemon is to maintain the *status quo* in the power distribution around its basin.¹²

The alternative explanation relates to coalition politics. In their popularization work on this subject, Bueno de Mesquita and Smith argue that changes in the ruling coalition that elevated a leader to power is not only possible but that "[politicians] are very ready and eager to reduce coalition size."¹³ They also mention the importance of keeping coalition members replaceable¹⁴ and to restructure such coalition once one rises to power.¹⁵ In more academic terms, this implies that authoritarian leaders gain more power over their coalition with time. Thus comes the need to replace non-loyalists early to survive the weakest period of their reign in order to purge independent-minded members once the shuffle comes to its end and capacity for rebellion is thwarted. This is especially true if the rise to power was contested.¹⁶ Therefore, the more replaceable, and to some limits replaced, coalition members are, the safer the regime.¹⁷ The instability of leaders who share power with influential coalition members was observed as far back as Machiavelli,¹⁸ and its implication on modern authoritarian survival has already been pointed out by Svoblik.¹⁹

In authoritarian regimes, the reliance on the military to maintain power is described by Svoblik as *brinkmanship* behavior, which implies increased vulnerability. This is because of the increased capacity of the military to take

control of the state from the leader. Despite those drawbacks, such behavior still occurs due to the need for repression to maintain the leader's rule. The risk is particularly true regarding intelligence services for their ability to proceed through background channels while on duty.²⁰

In Uzbekistan, political 'clans' are not based on lineage, but on geographic locations such as the province of origin. Therefore, they are now more akin to "subregional networks,"²¹ but clan identity can still be enlarged by marriage. Furthermore, coalitions within the Uzbek regime are formed on a clan rather than ideological basis. This is due to the power associated by having members of one's clan in power as they can then distribute resources to other members since rigid patronage systems are anchored in the clan system.²² The balance between clans is essential to maintain power,²³ but not all clans need inclusion in the ruling coalition.

Such exclusions can prevent prosperity from reaching members of those groups.²⁴ In Uzbekistan, two major clans, Tashkent and Samarkand, and their subsidiary clans are in power. In contrast, the like of the powerful Fergana clan and the more regional Khorezm, Kashkadarya, Surkhandarya, and Karakalpakstan clans are the ones mostly excluded.²⁵ Other networking links such as professional relations can still be used to rise in the hierarchy. However, clan ties stay a major factor in position attribution. This is because they are less likely to be subject to membership changes than other networks and implies common membership to multiple networks.²⁶

Puzzle

There is an argument to be made that the Uzbek government greenlighted the Rogun dam due to its recognizing it was a losing fight since the project did have support from foreign actors. The Russian firm RusAl and then the Italian Salini Impregilo received the contract to begin the construction.²⁷ This would have indicate a failure for Uzbekistan to maintain ideational power over the Rogun dam issue. However, this stance does not take into account the apparent lack of significant concessions made by the government of

Tajikistan. One significant example is the dam's height; the proposed height of the infrastructure is still dangerously tall due to its geological position as its foundation will be at risk in case of earthquakes.²⁸ The reason for this height, on top of symbolic reasons,²⁹ is that it allows for better control of the flow of the river, and, therefore, increased power for its owner.³⁰ This is despite Uzbekistan maintaining substantial bargaining and material power over Tajikistan.³¹

Once Karimov died, and Mirziyoyev rose to power, the Uzbek government, in a surprise move, stopped issuing threats over announcements of developments and even the launching of the project.³² Following a few days of silence, the foreign minister Abdulaziz Komilov, who previously had to defend the government's non-negotiable position,³³ announced that it would instead support the building of this long-delayed project.³⁴

If the dam is so dangerous for Uzbekistan's security interests and its Tajik counterpart has made so few concessions, then the mystery of the motivations behind such move stays whole.

The Dam as a Flagbearer for the Security Apparatus

With the onset of independence in Central Asia, the region's fragile balance on water allocation collapsed with the implementation of international borders between the newly independent republics. The region found itself with two different patterns for its newly independent states. Either they were upstream and controlled water access or downstream and controlled fossil fuel reserves.³⁵ Both of them are essential for the other as water is not only an essential need of every human but also in high demand in the downstream countries' cotton fields.³⁶ Karimov, in a manner typical of the foreign relations he would engage in during the next few decades, addressed the situation by taking control of the dams at Uzbekistan's border, in contradiction with international laws.³⁷ One had to wait for the rise of Mirziyoyev for agreements to be made in which the upstream republics regain control of their infrastructure in exchange for highly favorable rates for Uzbekistan on their outputs.³⁸

Concerning the construction of new dams, the Karimov regime was vehemently opposed to any new project, perceiving them as a threat to the agricultural output of the country.³⁹ He even went so far as to hint his willingness to declare war on Tajikistan if they were to go forward with its dam projects, including Rogun.⁴⁰ These behaviors go against conventional wisdom, which argues that military conflicts over water are unlikely as the resource is considered “too important to fight over.”⁴¹ This is also where the security apparatus of Uzbekistan managed to gain some power. Covert operations have been taking place along commercial routes in Uzbekistan. We do not know for sure who engaged in those activities, and the Uzbek government blames unidentified terrorist groups.⁴² Nevertheless, the convenience of such actions, since the destroyed railroad was the only one capable to bring construction materials to Rogun,⁴³ has led the Tajik authorities, as well as observers, to suggest the implication of the Uzbek intelligence services.⁴⁴

Such concessions mean that Uzbekistan is handing over part of its security guarantees to Tajikistan, a former rival. Such a trust bond between states is not particularly rare. Tajikistan itself used the Russian military for most of its internal security for years.⁴⁵ However, such arrangements make more sense if done between two long-time allies, which is not the case with the countries involved with the Rogun dam.

The Downfall of Old Centers of Power

Under Karimov, two ministries were the epicenter of power within Uzbekistan: economy and security.⁴⁶ As seen earlier, the dam was a staple of Uzbek security concerns, and the resolution of the conflict is a serious blow to the power of the *Davlat Xavfsizlik Xizmati* (DXX), the intelligence agency. Such conflict could make a severe dent in the power of former DXX, then named *Milliy Xavfsizlik Xizmati* (MXX), director Rustam Inoyatov and his allies in those departments. Meanwhile, by opening the Uzbek market to foreign actors, Mirziyoyev most probably endangered the interest of the economic elite who owes their power to Rustam Azimov. Azimov, the longtime finance minister, gained significant power with his clan ties in both Tashkent and the Fergana. Furthermore, while he was leading the federal bank, his

control over investments allowed him to develop his own patronage network.⁴⁷ The replacements of Inoyatov, as well as Azimov, who were once qualified by analysts as *triumvirs* with Mirziyoyev,⁴⁸ matches what is expected during coalition reshuffling.

Inoyatov’s case, which is more relevant to this text, started shortly after Mirziyoyev’s rise to power and did not attack directly powerful leaders. The first victims within the security apparatus were peripheral figures such as Interior Minister Adham Ahmadboyev, replaced by Abdusalom Azizov, a regional politician working in Mirziyoyev’s native Jizzakh Province.⁴⁹ That same Azizov was quickly promoted to minister of Defense after the firing of Qobul Berdiyev. Another regional politician without a prior nationwide office, Po’lat Bobojonov, was promoted to replace Azizov.⁵⁰ Only then, Mirziyoyev was able to replace Inoyatov, and only with another Karimov coalition member: Ixtiyor Abdullayev.⁵¹ The reasons for this choice are still unclear. However, the hardliner reputation of Inoyatov made his replacement an imperative. Meanwhile, Abdullayev was ready to implement some changes wanted by the new president which significantly weakened the position.⁵²

This and his acceptability by Karimov loyalists might have been sufficient for Mirziyoyev as the weakening of the position would make the new director more replaceable in subsequent cabinet reshuffling. Significantly weaker than Inoyatov, Abdullayev was whether unwilling or unable to prevent policy shifts such as the Uzbek position on Rogun that would be introduced soon after.⁵³ He was then quickly fired and replaced by the same Azizov, replaced at the Ministry of Defense by Bahodir Qurbonov, who was a local politician from the Tashkent Province,⁵⁴ which could be interpreted as a gesture toward the Tashkent clan. Furthermore, suspected of building a strong patronage system of his own, Abdullayev was arrested in company of high-ranking officials at the DXX and the General Prosecutor office, which he led before taking the DXX leadership position.⁵⁵ This series of arrestations also affected the formerly Azimov-led Ministry of Finance.⁵⁶

The Rise of New Centers of Power

New sectors gained prominence during the Mirziyoyev presidency. This includes the communication industry, empowered by the limited liberalization of the media and less susceptible to foreign competition brought by Mirziyoyev's economic reforms. However, more importantly, it was an industry loyal to the new prime minister, Abdulla Oripov, whose previous dismissal⁵⁷ hints at conflict with Karimov loyalists. It is, however, unlikely that such a niche sector would be able to replace the old economic elites by itself. However, more interesting to this paper is the new approach to Uzbekistan's security, done via foreign cooperation. The various diplomatic projects opened by the Mirziyoyev regime perhaps significantly reinforce the Ministry of Foreign Affairs led by Abdulaziz Komilov. This is supported by the recent rise to prominence from regional roles of all current high-level security officials. Therefore, they are less likely to have an extensive loyal clientelist base. The most prominent amongst them is Abdusalom Azizov, whose profile increased significantly by associating with Mirziyoyev after holding office in his native province.

At first glance, Komilov is as an odd choice for Mirziyoyev to reinforce. He is a long-serving leader in both major clans of the country, Samarkand⁵⁸ and Tashkent, the latter being a trait he shares with Azimov.⁵⁹ He also helped Karimov's rise to power⁶⁰ and served at different positions in foreign relations during the integrity of Uzbekistan's independence period, where he is in charge.⁶¹ However, his journey under Karimov is more akin to an actor who could not be excluded from power as the two came into conflict on several occasions.⁶²

Such conflicts centered not around Komilov's clan, but his marriage's clan. His wife, Gulnora Rashidova, is the daughter of the influential Uzbek Communist Party leader during the Brezhnev era: Sharof Rashidov.⁶³ Rashidov's clan, which originates in the province of Jizzakh,⁶⁴ was 'purged' during the early days of the Karimov regime. Few *Jizzaxlik* rose to preeminence during the decades to come, with one notable exception: Prime Minister turned President Shavkat Mirziyoyev.⁶⁵ Through clan ties, particularly his marriage, Komilov became the most likely member of the old guard to espouse loyalty to the new president.

Therefore, an expansion of the role of foreign affairs, such as normalization of the multiple severed ties with neighboring countries, and an end to the isolationist stand of the country⁶⁶ are in the interest of Mirziyoyev's power strengthening.

Furthermore, handing significant bargaining and material power to Tajikistan allows the country to hinder any attempts to replace Mirziyoyev by a new government hostile to Tajik interests in regard to Rogun. This power is given by the lack of demand for concessions on the dam's height. This is because the last stage of the construction allows for the Tajik state to have total control over the flow of the Amu-Darya, a fact that is known by the Uzbek regime and was the main driver of its opposition.⁶⁷

However, this leaves the security apparatus in the hands of newcomers such as Azizov. This action could be seen with suspicion by some since the sector is seen as essential for regime security in Uzbekistan.⁶⁸ However, Komilov's security background as a former leader of the Uzbek KGB⁶⁹ could lead to him coordinating the new appointees brought to exclude Inoyatov from preeminence. Also, while keeping expertise amongst the powerful members of the coalition, domestic policies introduced by Mirziyoyev, which are significantly less repressive than his predecessor's, is consistent with a reduction of reliance on the security apparatus as described by Svulik.⁷⁰ The absence of such a shift would have left Mirziyoyev particularly vulnerable as "[a] key factor [of an Uzbek statesmen's success] will be whether the president or Mirziyaev can ensure that the MVD [Ministry of Interior] and SNB [security services] remain loyal."⁷¹

In addition, it is important to acknowledge that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was already involved in the water disputes before those shifts.⁷² However, by normalizing relations, the subject now tilts more toward foreign exchange than covert operations.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the loosening of Tashkent's objections toward the Rogun dam has improved Uzbekistan's relation with its neighbors. However, such a move is also based on the political interests of the regime. The sudden acceptance of the project without advantageous concessions toward Uzbekistan demonstrates a desire to nullify the power that it gave to some factions in the regime, especially the security sector. Such motivation matches the reshuffling of cabinet positions that was seen in this sector in the months preceding the move to allow Rogun to be built.

This change allowed for new individuals who will owe their whole political career to Mirziyoyev to rise to power. However, members of the old guard kept a representative in the cabinet who himself gained significant power with those changes: Abdulaziz

Komilov. Yet, Komilov shares clan ties with Mirziyoyev and did not owe his career to Karimov, making him a more enticing partner for the new president.

Obviously, since the topic is still ongoing and information is limited, it is still subject to developments that could either strengthen or hinder claims made in this article. Cabinet changes happen all the time, and frequent renewal of the elite are often recommended in authoritarian regimes⁷³. Therefore, it will be necessary to revisit this subject in the future in order to reanalyze the evolution of elite relations in the country and especially whether the relation between Komilov and Mirziyoyev will continue to grow or the newfound power of Komilov will be seen as a threat by the new president, leading to a conflict.

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² Païvar Tchorchanbiev, "Les conséquences de l'ère soviétique au Tadjikistan," *Novastran*, last modified February 28, 2018. <https://www.novastan.org/fr/tadjikistan/les-consequences-de-lere-sovietique-au-tadjikistan/>.

³ "Tajikistan's Rogun: Building the world's tallest dam," *BBC*, last modified November 13, 2016. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-37929367>; Hilary Kramer, "Tajikistan's Rogun Dam to Be the big Game-Changer," *HuffPost*, last modified December 6, 2017. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/tajikistans-rogun-dam-to-b_3070932; "Tajikistan launches first phase of hydro power station dam, set to become world's largest (VIDEO)," *Russia Today*, last modified November 16, 2018. <https://www.rt.com/news/444211-tajikistan-largest-world-dam/>.

⁴ Casey Michel, "Tajikistan's Rogun Dam Rankles Uzbekistan," *The Diplomat*, last modified July 21, 2016. <https://thediplomat.com/2016/07/tajikistans-rogun-dam-rankles-uzbekistan/>; Catherine Putz, "Tajikistan's Rogun Dam Begins Operations," *The Diplomat*, last modified November 20, 2018. <https://thediplomat.com/2018/11/tajikistans-megadam-rogun-begins-operations/>.

⁵ Catherine Putz, "Tajikistan's Rogun Dam Begins Operations," *The Diplomat*, last modified November 20, 2018. <https://thediplomat.com/2018/11/tajikistans-megadam-rogun-begins-operations/>.

⁶ Maud Sampo-du Cray, "Cinq conflits sur l'eau en Asie centrale," *Novastan*, last modified January 25, 2018. <https://www.novastan.org/fr/kirghizstan/cinq-conflits-autour-de-leau-en-asie-centrale/>.

⁷ Kathleen Collins, *Clan Politics and Regime Transition in Central Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006):263; Slavomír Horák, "Leadership Succession in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan: Between Stability and Instability," *Central Asian Affairs* 5 (2018): 6.

⁸ Filippo Menga, *Power and Water in Central Asia* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 11.

⁹ *Ibid*, 37-39.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 30.

¹¹ Kai Weigerich, "Hydro-hegemony in the Amu Darya Basin," *Water Policy* 10, No. 2 (2008): 81; Menga, *Power and Water in Central Asia*, 39-40.

¹² Menga, *Power and Water in Central Asia*, 37.

¹³ Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Alistair Smith, *The Dictator's Handbook: Why Bad Behavior is Almost Always Good Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011), 39.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 61.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 73-74.

¹⁶ Milan W. Svoblik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 61-65.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 81.

¹⁸ Machiavel, *Le Prince et autres textes*, trans. Paul Veyne (Paris : Éditions Gallimard, 1980 [1513]), 50-54.

¹⁹ Svoblik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*, 78-79.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 126-133; 201.

- ²¹ Collins, *Clan Politics and Regime Transition in Central Asia*, 254.
- ²² Ibid, 31-36.
- ²³ Ibid, 50-51.
- ²⁴ Edward Schatz, *Modern Clan Politics: The Power of "Blood" in Kazakhstan and Beyond* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2004), 103.
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- ⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 276.
- ⁶⁶ Denis Borisov and Evgenii Savkovich, “International Policy of Uzbekistan in the Period of Shavkat Mirziyoyev’s Term – Strategy and Practice,” (paper presented at 47th International Scientific Conference on Economic and Social Development, Prague, November 2019), 67-68.
- ⁶⁷ Menga, *Power and Water in Central Asia*, 86.
- ⁶⁸ Collins, *Clan Politics and Regime Transition in Central Asia*, 277.
- ⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 263.
- ⁷⁰ Svolik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*, 126.
- ⁷¹ Collins, *Clan Politics and Regime Transition in Central Asia*, 277. The MVD being the Ministry of the Interior, and the SNB being the Russian-language acronym for the DXX, then MXX. Mirziyoyev’s name is also translated using the Russian spelling.
- ⁷² Menga, *Power and Water in Central Asia*, 81.
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