

UZBEKISTAN

## 'Virtual Election' Seeks To Give Uzbeks Real Choice

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RFE/RL's Uzbek Service



Critics say that the upcoming Uzbek presidential poll won't offer voters any real choice and that current incumbent Islam Karimov's reelection is practically a foregone conclusion.

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Members of Uzbekistan's opposition in exile, highly skeptical that Uzbekistan's upcoming presidential race will be a fair one, are creating an alternative reality by holding a virtual election online.

**Eleven candidates** have registered with the Virtual Election Commission, providing a host of alternatives that real voters in Uzbekistan won't see on election day on March 29.

Few of the virtual candidates, most of whom are opposition or civil-society activists, are household names.

Among them is **Bahodir Choriev**, who represents the officially unregistered Birdamlik (Unity) party. Choriev established Birdamlik while living in exile in the United States after fleeing Uzbekistan in 2004. His father, Hasan Choriev, was a human rights activist who died in the spring of 2014 after serving time in prison on questionable charges.

Dilshodzhon Usmanov, who registered as an independent, is the son of prominent businessman Rustam Usmonov, the founder of the first private bank in Uzbekistan (Rustambank).

Mirakhmat Muminov is an independent who resides in the United States, as does fellow independent Mokhira Ortikova. From exile in Russia comes Usman Baratov, who represents the Uzbek diaspora organization Vatandosh (Compatriot).

Three of the four candidates running in the actual election, Akmal Saidov, Hotamzhon Ketmonov, and Narimon Umarov, were entered into the online race as well, Virtual Election Commission spokesman and independent journalist Ulugbek Bakirov told RFE/RL's Uzbek Service. Although they did not register for the alternative vote, they were selected because they had not run previously for office in Uzbekistan.

Spokesman Bakirov has said registered candidates will hold various debates ahead of the vote.



Uzbek president Islam Karimov

A glaring omission is Islam Karimov, Uzbekistan's aging and long-serving strongman president whose reelection on March 29 nearly goes without saying. He was kept off the list, according to organizers of the virtual vote, because he violated the constitution by serving more than two terms in office.

Also missing were members of the old guard whose names have been mentioned as possible successors to Karimov, such as Prime Minister Shavkat Mirziyoev and Finance Minister Rustam Azimov.

Gulnara Karimova, the [fallen daughter of the president](#), also failed to make the cut.

In announcing the need for holding the virtual poll, organizers cited the lack of transparency in Uzbek elections and the absence of a diverse pool of candidates, including opposition members and civil society activists.

To qualify to serve as the virtual president of Uzbekistan, candidates must be at least 35 years of age, have good command of Uzbek, have been born in either Soviet Uzbekistan or the Republic of Uzbekistan, and forced to leave the country for political or other reasons.

Written by Michael Scollon, based on reporting by RFE/RL's Uzbek Service

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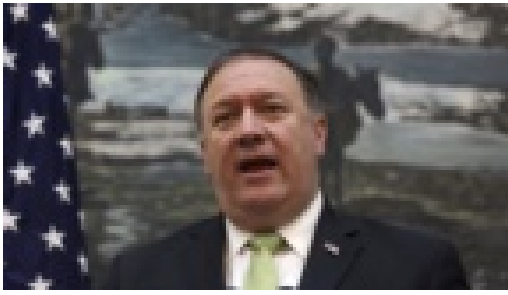


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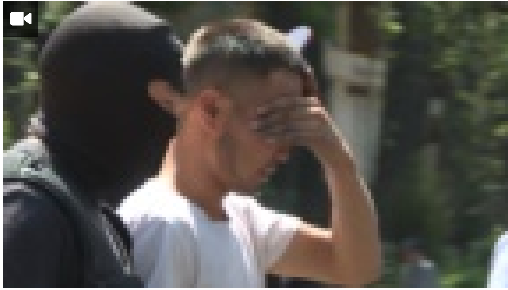


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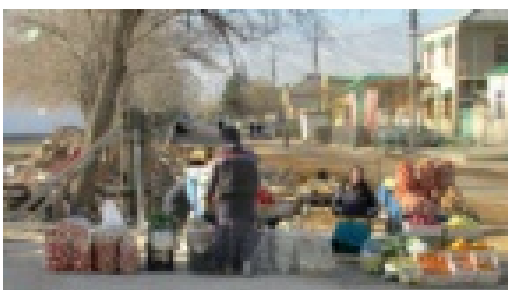
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