

The War on Terrorism in Central Asia and the Cause of Democratic Reform

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Since the attacks of 11 September and the emergence of a U.S. security partnership with several of the states of the Central Asian region, there has been much speculation about what this means for the prospects of democratic reform in all five of those countries. If the first ten months are any indication of future developments, the increased U.S. presence is unlikely to change the trajectories of political developments in the region.

With the opening of U.S. bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan and the granting of more limited U.S. landing rights in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, there is legitimate reason for concern that leaders in Washington and other Western capitals may be more reluctant to hold the states of the region to democratic norms, for fear of the political uncertainty it could cause. After all, as it is sometimes crudely put, better to deal with the devil you know than the one you don't.

That argument, however, is very dangerous and lets the Central Asian leaders off the hook much too easily. In the case of Uzbekistan, closer cooperation with the United States is making the regime at least experiment with limited democratic reform. But in other parts of the region, the relatively hands-off U.S. policy, which offers criticism with little follow-through, is leading the "devils" we know to become more resistant to democratic reforms. This in turn seems likely to exacerbate the security risks that the states could pose to their neighbors in the future.

The power void and collapse of civil society that made Afghanistan an attractive environment for the al-Qaeda network took years to develop and promoted instability in neighboring states. Cleaning out the remains of the terror network in Afghanistan gives the Central Asian states a chance for a brighter future but in itself does not eliminate or even substantially minimize the dangers from their own internally generated security risks. To minimize such risks, the United States should work harder to hold these states to democratic norms. That is the best way

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to advance U.S. national security interests, especially over the medium and long term, and it is the best way for the states to secure their long-term survival.

In Washington, it is too commonly argued that the people of Central Asia should not be expected to develop democratic political systems, that they are unable to sustain democratic institutions because of their history, or that it is too soon in their history of statehood to expect them to develop democratic norms. Ten years may seem a short time in the life of a nation, but is shorter for the rulers than for those they rule. The latter need to retain the hope that things will improve, either in their lifetime or that of their children. Those born in the Soviet Union were raised on a diet of “deferred gratification” and are reluctant to be fed a new version of the old dietary staple by the communist-era bosses who run their now independent states. Those born after communism are likely to have even less patience.

Although independence may indefinitely benefit the ruling classes, over time ordinary citizens are likely to see independence as something of a trick. For them, the only real difference in their lives is a change in psychological status and the ephemeral benefits that that provides. But the perceived psychological empowerment is diminishing with time. Those who live in a country must feel some sort of stake in its future or, failing that, must believe that it is realistic to hold out hope for themselves or their children.

Developments in Central Asia are becoming increasingly reminiscent of the decolonization process that occurred in parts of sub-Saharan Africa, where a number of states have spent the past forty years sliding backward from the levels of development that their populations enjoyed at the time of independence or immediately afterward. Central Asian leaders love to argue that it took over two hundred years for the United States to develop its democratic form of government and that U.S. policymakers must be more patient with them. It is true that every nation has to evolve democratic or participatory political institutions that are suited to its own cultural and historical background. That evolution is often a slow and messy process. However, to endure, political systems should be based in large part on the prevailing democratic norms and on a basic respect for and observance of human rights.

Now, more than ever before, we live in a global information era, and people throughout Central Asia are aware of the political values of that global culture and don't want to be excluded from them. Of course, governments can be established on principles that violate those norms and frighten their citizens into submission. But there could be a high cost for persecuting human rights activists in Central Asia. If those who hold to democratic political values are forced underground, it will be that much more difficult to create stable secular societies in that part of the world, not to mention democratic ones.

Of course, the history of Central Asia has many nondemocratic and authoritarian episodes in it, as do the histories of most people. It smacks of racism, though, to argue that a people is rendered by its history unfit for democracy, and such an argument is usually convenient for those who do not wish to share power.

The Central Asian states were no more or less likely to become democratic

than the other post-Soviet states (excepting the three republics in the Baltic region, which had histories of independent statehood between the First and Second World Wars). A core group of democratic activists developed in each of the Central Asian republics during the late 1980s and early 1990s, in response to the political changes introduced by Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev.

Even now, despite the repression that they have faced, throughout Central Asia a committed group of activists remain eager to see democratic development move forward. Nowhere is this more true than in Kyrgyzstan, where the informal political organization movement is much more firmly entrenched and widely dispersed than anywhere else in the region; these people have kept almost

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unremitting pressure on the government to introduce political reforms. No country can be written off, as the growth of political opposition in Turkmenistan over the past eight months makes clear. There are also important lessons that people in neighboring states can draw from the relative success of power-sharing relationships in Tajik-

istan, which is now experiencing a degree of political and economic recovery after several years of civil war.

The current level of political stability, or the illusion of it, could be short-lived if the region’s rulers fail to create safety valves in their societies—political institutions at the national and/or local level that create opportunities for ordinary citizens to become political stakeholders. This is particularly important given that the process of economic reform has had very uneven effects across society, leaving many more people feeling aggrieved than empowered.

Well before the attacks of 11 September, the leaders of the Central Asian states championed stability over democratization and political reform. None of those men either obtained, or has retained, power through free and fair elections, although all but Niyazov of Turkmenistan have competed in some form of a “contested” election. Central Asia’s leaders have frequently argued against political liberalization by citing the risks posed by the region’s religious revival and the increased popularity of radical Islamic groups, which might be further empowered by a more open political process.

The Tajik civil war remains a traumatic event for Central Asia’s leaders, and it could be a harbinger of events to come in the region. Uzbek fears, in particular, date from the time of the Tajik civil war in the early 1990s. These fears were compounded as the situation deteriorated in Afghanistan, which was a source of seditious ideas, arms, and narcotics even before the Taliban took power and allowed the al-Qaeda network to establish a training ground for international terrorism.

The disorder in Afghanistan complicated the process of state-building throughout Central Asia, but policies in Uzbekistan were most shaped by the developments in Afghanistan, especially after a series of bombs exploded in the capital city of Tashkent in February 1999. The Uzbek government was determined that IMU (Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan) militants, whom it blamed for the explosions, should never be able to enter their country at will, and Uzbek government officials recognized that the training that the IMU was receiving in Afghanistan was transforming the nature of the Islamic threat confronting the regime.

This further hardened the Uzbek government's determination to both delineate and defend its national boundaries (which were mined in some areas inhabited by Tajiks and Kyrgyz). The Kazakhs and Kyrgyz also began to better protect their borders (although they did not mine them). The Uzbek actions had a destabilizing effect throughout Central Asia and further disrupted commerce and social relations generally.

During the U.S. bombing of Afghanistan, many of the IMU camps were destroyed, and IMU leader Juma Namangani was reported killed, although his body was never found. However, all of Central Asia's leaders are warning of the possibility of new IMU incursions; should they occur, not only the regimes but the cause of democratic reform will be further imperiled.

First to be sacrificed would be the fledgling democratic reforms in Uzbekistan. The Karimov regime has agreed in principle to support political reforms as part of the strategic partnership framework, promising "to further intensify the democratic transformation of its society politically and economically." In return, the United States government promised to provide the Uzbeks with assistance designed to create a genuine multiparty system, an independent media, and an independent judiciary.

Most of these reforms remain for the future. The Uzbek government has made a lot of promises about what it will do at a later date, including the election of a bicameral legislature in 2004. The president, though, did extend his term to 2007 through the use of referendum. The government has promised to eliminate formal press censorship, has registered at least one previously banned human rights group, and has made other small symbolic steps showing the Uzbek government's commitment to introducing rule by law, including prosecuting police officials for the use of excessive force in interrogating accused religious extremists.

However, the Uzbek government's policy toward religion remains largely unchanged, and the government is unrelenting in its attack on the Hizb-ut Tahrir, Central Asia's most popular radical Islamic group, which has vowed to create an Islamic caliphate in the region through peaceful means. The Uzbek government is behaving much as did its Soviet predecessors, believing that it can dampen the fires of religious fervor through state regulation of religious practice and pushing extremist groups underground through its efforts. Given Uzbekistan's current demographic and social situation, the potential for new recruits remains high. Nearly 40 percent of the country's population is under fourteen, and the same demographic pattern is repeated throughout the region.

The proceeds of Central Asia's burgeoning drug trade, which is being revital-

ized by the current harvest of poppies in Afghanistan, have helped fund militant Islamic groups that have proliferated in Uzbekistan and throughout Central Asia. The largest of these, the Hizb-ut Tahrir, calls for believers to unite and return Islam to the purity of its founding through the creation of a new caliphate. It is outlawed everywhere but in Turkmenistan, where it seems to lack a significant presence.

Following massive arrests, adherents of the movement have gone underground in Uzbekistan, but their numbers are increasing in the border regions of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, particularly among unemployed youth who are paid to distribute the movement's religious tracts. Membership is on the rise in Tajikistan as well, and people in all these countries are poised to descend on Uzbekistan if any opportunity to do so appears.

Although radical Islamists don't pose any particular threat there, the situation in Turkmenistan is most troubling. That country's president, Saparmurad Niyazov, is determined to carve out a model of political and economic development that is supposedly in keeping with national cultural specificities but in reality largely focuses on making a secular religion or cult around the person of the country's first president.

All throughout the region, though, failures of state-building are creating future security risks. Whereas a few years ago the situation in Afghanistan could be blamed as a root source, the current crisis in political institution-building is very much a product of decisions made in the national capitals themselves. It would be a very large mistake on the part of the governments in the region to assume that the growing U.S. security presence in the region will shield them from the consequences of their decisions.

The honeymoon period associated with independence is coming to an end. Notwithstanding the civil war in Tajikistan, the situation in Central Asia has been far more peaceful over the past decade than many observers initially anticipated. However, as the region's leaders age and tire, the frustration of their politically isolated and, in some cases, increasingly impoverished populations seems sure to grow.

Governments in states such as Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, which had initially given at least limited endorsement to the ideals of democratic reform, are now sharply restricting the freedom of action of their citizens and are eliminating any meaningful role political opposition groups can play. As a result, people in both countries are growing more frustrated by the increasing social and economic inequalities that now characterize their societies and by the diminishing opportunities to express their dissatisfaction through legal channels in the existing political system. This is especially true of members of the elite, including those with aspirations for power, and those who simply expected to play an economic or political role in their societies.

In recent months, we have seen signs of restiveness in several Central Asian countries. The situation in Turkmenistan is most unexpected. There is little prospect of even symbolic change in Turkmenistan as long as Niyazov remains in office, and this is mobilizing at least part of the Turkmen elite. As Stalin did,

Niyazov fears disloyalty on the part of his government, rotates state officials in and out of office with regularity, and unleashes the full savagery of the president's power on those who have been dismissed. A good example is the campaign against Niyazov's former security chief, Muhammad Nazarov, dismissed in March 2002, charged in May 2002, and convicted in July 2002 of "premeditated murder, procurement of women, abuse of power, bribe-taking, illegal arrests, the manufacture and sale of counterfeit documents, seals, stamps and blank forms, embezzlement and the abuse of power," for which he was sentenced to twenty-five years in prison.

Turkmenistan's government has been almost inflexible on issues of political and economic reform. Moreover, those who formally break with Niyazov, such as former foreign minister Boris Sheikmuradov (who resigned from his post as Turkmenistan's ambassador to China in October 2001), have a price put on their head. Since going into the opposition, Sheikmuradov has formed a political party, the People's Democratic Movement of Turkmenistan, which manages a very active Web site.

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The current opposition group in Turkmenistan has much greater energy, and hence potential, than earlier opposition efforts in Turkmenistan, which included a small group of prodemocracy activists known as Azadliq (Freedom) that was organized during the Gorbachev reforms, and the United Turkmen Opposition, which was formed in Russia by Turkmenistan's first foreign minister, Abdi Kuliev, and former oil and natural gas minister Nazar Suyunov. Unlike the earlier two groups, Sheikmuradov's movement seems to be picking up support over time.

There have been disturbing developments in Kyrgyzstan as well. Although President Askar Akaev promises that he will step down when his term expires, the range of acceptable political activity narrowed during the first half of 2002. In what definitely had the feel of an official cover-up, Kyrgyz legislator Azimbek Beknazarov was arrested in January 2002 and charged with exceeding his official powers seven years earlier, when he was an investigator in the Toktogul regional prosecutor's office. Beknazarov, who was chairman of the Jogorku Kenesh (parliament) Committee on Judicial and Legal Affairs, had been a very vocal critic of the Akaev government's negotiated border with China, in which the Kyrgyz ceded over a hundred thousand hectares of previously disputed territory to Chinese control, and he had called for Akaev's impeachment.

The trial of Beknazarov led to peaceful demonstrations in his hometown of Dzhellabad in March 2002, which were broken up by the police, leaving seven dead. A month later, one of the demonstrators died of a stroke during a hunger

strike. The district administrator of the village where the demonstrations occurred, Aksu, was fired by President Akaev almost immediately, despite repeated protestations by the state secretary and the minister of interior, who maintained that the police opened fire in self-defense. The border treaty with China and the fate of Beknazarov and the pro-Beknazarov demonstrators became a cause célèbre in Kyrgyzstan, and in May 2002 it led to the resignation of the prime minister and his government.

Throughout summer 2002 President Akaev has tried to open a dialogue with the country's increasingly unified political opposition, but the continued imprisonment of former vice president Feliks Kulov, now head of the Ar Narmys Party, remains another political sore point. Despite U.S. and OSCE pressure, Kulov, whose family now lives in exile, was convicted in May 2002 of three separate charges of embezzlement and sentenced to serve a ten-year term, concurrent with a previous seven-year sentence for abuse of an official position. Kulov was also barred from holding office for three years following his release.

Ideally, the United States and the OSCE would work with the current Kyrgyz government to help it find ways to increase public confidence through the release of Kulov, the creation of a broader coalition, and so on. If Akaev is able to finish his term, there is a very good chance that the country will hold an election that is at least somewhat free and fair, providing an important example for the rest of the region. One hopes that that would have some influence on both Kazakhstan's and Uzbekistan's rulers. Despite the fact that Kazakhstan's president, Nursultan Nazarbaev, has continued to provide strong rhetorical support for the need for democratization in Kazakhstan, actions by him and by the country's senior officials provide little evidence that the country's leaders are seriously committed to democratic reform.

A group of key reformers left the Kazakh government in November and formed a political movement called Democratic Choice, in part because of a spat with the president over one of his sons-in-law, Rakhat Aliev, who lost a number of his business holdings and was sent out of the country to serve as Kazakhstan's ambassador to Austria and the OSCE. The Democratic Choice movement itself proved relatively short-lived, as two of its organizers, Mukhtar Ablyazov and Gaklimzhan Shakiyenov, former akim of Pavlodar Oblast, were arrested for various forms of malfeasance; Ablyazov has already been sentenced to six years in prison, and Shakiyenov was on trial at the time that this article was written. Two other organizers, former first deputy prime minister Uraz Zhandosov and Alikhan Beymanov, created the Ak Zhol (White way) Party, but it has yet to be demonstrated that this is a credible and independent opposition force.

Although these developments do not in and of themselves change the face of political life in the region, they do show that the alliance with the United States has done little to make the region's leaders feel compelled to introduce democratic reforms in their societies. Partly they feel that they are largely able to get away with whatever behavior they want—that there will be neither internal nor external consequences for “misbehaving.” They unfortunately seem to be right—the international community appears willing to sit back quietly and

let these men do as they wish, especially since the priorities of the United States in particular currently lie elsewhere—but international inactivity is not synonymous with indefinite local acquiescence. Over the past several years, the region's leaders have begun to age and, in some cases, become noticeably frail, but the pace of political institutional development has simultaneously slowed in virtually every country in the region.

As already noted, there are some hopeful signs. President Karimov is at least talking about the need for a timetable for political reform, after years of maintaining that Uzbekistan would go its own way. President Akaev has been signaling that he doesn't plan to press for further constitutional modifications to enable him to continue to run for re-election. However, the Kyrgyz president must still make determined steps to free up the political process and create new institutions for elite recruitment.

In Kyrgyzstan, there have also been some very positive discussions about turning more control over to popularly elected local governments. This would have enormous benefits, creating new arenas of competition throughout the country and reducing the expectations of the central government. It would also serve as a model and potential spur to reforms throughout the region.

The negative trends are even stronger than the positive ones. Many in Central Asia are watching with interest efforts by Azerbaijan's President Heydar Aliiev to designate his son, Ilham, as his heir. Some in Kyrgyzstan still fear that President Akaev will also try to arrange a transfer of power to one of his children. More likely still is the prospect that Nursultan Nazarbaev in Kazakhstan will groom a daughter or a son-in-law as his successor.

Efforts to reinstate some sort of modern-day princely system are very dangerous. Over the past five years, Central Asia's leaders have been honing their "winner-take-all" philosophy. But the societies that they rule are complex, filled with citizens who are reluctant to lose the benefits that they are used to enjoying and with former political and economic stakeholders who are used to being accommodated. Throughout Central Asia, members of the elite from disfavored clans and families have been sitting by, waiting for the opportunity to grasp more economic and political power. As institutions to ensure a peaceful transfer of power do not exist, there is no foundation on which they can rest their hopes.

In the absence of a civil society, there are few secular political institutions around which opposition can coalesce. Islam, especially the mosque and the *medresseh*, is becoming a more attractive organizational center for ethnic Kyrgyz as well as ethnic Uzbeks, and it is very difficult to restrict popular access to it. As a result, the advocacy of Islamic goals can be useful for both the regime's supporters and its detractors. Everything depends on the rules of the game, and these are still in flux.

The challenge posed by Islam remains particularly acute in Uzbekistan. Islam is deeply rooted in many parts of the country, and the precedent of competition between Islamic fundamentalists, modernists, and Islamic conservatives is well established. All three traditions withstood the vicissitudes of Soviet rule. Some of today's radical groups have their roots in an anti-Russian uprising that occurred

in the Ferghana Valley in 1898, and a few of the leaders have even studied with a “holy man” who witnessed the revolt as a young child and who—much to Soviet displeasure—survived to a very old age. This revival easily reaches into Kyrgyzstan, through the Ferghana Valley. Throughout the region, governments mistakenly believe that religion and the development of Islam can be managed by the state, and that governments are competent enough to influence the social evolution of society.

The Central Asian elite, of course, is not formally against Islam, but it is very wary of revivalist or fundamentalist Islam and people who are eager to live by “the exact teachings of the book.” What they want is to keep these republics as secular states and to prevent devout Muslims from forcing all of their coreligionists into public observance of the faith. Even in Kyrgyzstan, pressure on secular elements to conform to religious precepts is strong.

The relationship of religion to mass belief is much more complex and interactive than the region’s leaders credit it with being. Though the governments of Central Asia are in no position to regulate the religious beliefs of the masses, they may exert their influence on social processes. But in trying to do so, these governments could inadvertently trigger social explosions. It is for this reason that Central Asia’s governments must once again broaden the political sphere available to most ordinary citizens to include a host of secular alternatives. For without this, the country has no real safety valve to use to release social pressure.

Political liberalization alone is not the answer. The region’s social pressure cooker must be dealt with more directly as well, through programs that will effectively help alleviate the region’s poverty, through nationally based economic projects, and through an effort to capitalize on the potential of a Central Asian regional market. Economic reform will create a new and more persistent group of claimants for the extension of rule of law into the political sphere, as well, and the kind of popular support base that is necessary for sustaining democratic political developments over the long haul.