

The Politics, Power, and Religion of Uzbekistan in Central Asia

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Uzbekistan is a strategic interest for the U.S. in a volatile region. Islam in Uzbekistan is somewhat of a paradox. It is not an overtly religious country, but Islam holds significant cultural and social value. Fanatical Islamic groups with ties to al Qaeda exist but their level of strength and influence is debatable. President Karimov has held onto power through fixed elections and a systematic method of undermining the power of his subordinates and the legislature. The underlying question begs to be asked: If other post-Soviet states can throw off the yoke of bad government, why can't the Uzbeks?

Introduction

Nations and regions in transition almost always make for an interesting study. This assumption is no different with the nation of Uzbekistan and the region of Central Asia. The purpose of this study is not to examine the current literature or to create a statistical analysis of a specific topic, but to provide an in depth introduction to the country and region as well as provide a theoretical framework that will hopefully help to explain the country better.

Uzbekistan can be described as a nepotistic authoritarian state with shades of democratic practices. Just two decades ago the entire region was a part of the Soviet empire, which ultimately collapsed. Most countries in Central Asia, including Uzbekistan, are still ruled by the same persons who assumed leadership after independence was achieved. Uzbek President Islam Karimov has consolidated and strengthened his hold on power over the entire fifteen year period of Uzbek independence. Within the past four years the region has been deemed a strategic necessity for the United States for use in the war against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan that began in the fall of 2001 and in the global War on Terror. One of the largest air bases used in that war was located in Uzbekistan.

Uzbekistan is located in the middle of the Central Asian region. It shares borders with all of its Central Asian neighbors: Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan to the north and to the east; Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Afghanistan to the south. Most of the country consists of arid steppes and plains. The capital, Tashkent, is located in the eastern part of the country which is close to the border with Kazakhstan to the north. Agriculture is a staple of the economy and a comprehensive irrigation system ensures the farming areas are supplied with water. Although it lacks the oil and natural gas producing power of regional neighbors Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan or Russia, its reserves are growing as exploration continues. Uzbekistan is Central Asia's most populous country and the U.S. and Russia are constantly jockeying for position and influence in the region. Influence in Tashkent can translate into influence throughout the entire region.

Current Political and Social State of Affairs

President Islam Karimov has been in power since 1990, just before the collapse of the Soviet Union. The most recent confirmation of his power was in 2002 when he won a referendum to extend his presidential term from 5 to 7 years with 91% of the vote.¹ He also won re-election in the year 2000 with a similar percentage of the ballots cast. Neither of the two ballots has been

deemed credible by any outside human-rights group. A report on the most recent set of elections in 2004 by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe indicates that each of the five parties that participated in the election pledged loyalty to Karimov's regime. Four other political parties that had filed for representation on the ballot had not been allowed to participate because their public positions were anti-Karimov. The fraudulent voting patterns and corrupt electoral system exemplify the authoritarian tendencies of the Uzbek government. It is widely accepted that a free press and free speech does not truly exist in the country despite being protected and guaranteed by the Uzbek constitution.

Nowhere has this recently been more evident than in the massacre of protestors in Andijan, Uzbekistan in the spring of 2005. The protests began when militants stormed a prison and freed 23 businessmen who were on trial for being members of Akramiya, an offshoot of the outlawed Islamic organization Hizb-ut-Tahrir that has been accused of being involved in terror attacks that struck Tashkent in the spring of 2004.² The militants then seized a local administration building and captured 70 hostages while thousands of demonstrators began to gather in Bobur Square on May 13, 2005.³ The protestors who gathered in the eastern city of Andijan demanded a free vote as well as a general increase in the quality of economic and political rights. Uzbek soldiers and security forces fired on the group, killing an estimated 750-1,000 civilians. Reports from the scene indicate that the crowd was fired upon indiscriminately and the victims included women and children. Upwards of 200 people were killed in Pakthbad, a border town near Kyrgyzstan, while trying to escape the violence.⁴ Some Uzbeks are still refugees in Kyrgyzstan. That situation has subsequently strained Uzbek-Kyrgyz relations.

The Uzbek government put the number of dead at around 170. Conflicting accounts from the government and from eyewitnesses prevent naming the exact amount.⁵ Several reports have been filed by independent agencies, including Human Rights Watch, and a theme of official suppression of information by the Uzbek government emerges. Countless interviews from eyewitnesses and journalists who attempted to cover the story on the day of the shootings and in subsequent days and weeks showed that border patrols and police forces provided stiff resistance that made it hard for civilians and journalists to leave the area. A reporter from the British newspaper *The Independent* described the following incident: "[we] made two attempts to bypass the checkpoints around the city" but its reporter "was briefly threatened with detention and then escorted to the nearby city of Namangan, under the guard of a man who identified himself as a police colonel."⁶ Physical threats were also evident. A foreign journalist who was accompanied by a local Uzbek

paraphrases a police officer in the following quote: "They are foreigners, and you are a local, you probably understand what may happen [to you]. You all have thirty minutes to leave the city; otherwise, we are not responsible for your safety."⁷ The stories go on to describe film, cameras, cell phones and laptop computers either being confiscated or having their contents removed. Foreign journalists were largely not permitted into the country after the events transpired and extensive efforts were made to prevent any journalist or eyewitness from telling their version of the shootings.

The following months were characterized by a major disinformation campaign undertaken by the Uzbek government to discredit the voices of Andijan. The general theme of the campaign was to blame the violence on Islamic extremists or to characterize the witnesses as living "a big lie or a wild dream."⁸ Just a few days after the shootings, the Uzbek Prosecutor-General claimed in a news conference that "only terrorists were liquidated by government forces" as well as foreign fighters.⁹ State-owned media outlets aired a "documentary" in late July that depicted the events as being perpetrated by Islamic militants. Fake victims were interviewed and fake perpetrators were shown giving confessions.¹⁰ This documentary was played ad-nauseum on state-controlled Uzbek television.

The lack of basic rights does not only affect political protestors and dissidents. Muslims who attempt to practice their faith outside of official state controls can find themselves persecuted, jailed, or worse. It was estimated that in the years leading up to 2003 that a total of 6,500 people were imprisoned in Uzbekistan as political or religious prisoners.¹¹ Much of this activity has been justified because of the state struggle against the Islamic Movement for Uzbekistan, a well-known terror organization with ties to the Taliban that was guilty of terrorist bombings in Tashkent in 1998. The Uzbek government has used this conflict as an excuse to aggressively pursue the political opposition and to increase its control over religious activity. Uzbekistan's former chief mufti, Muhammed Sadik, has recently been allowed to return to his home country following eight years in exile but his activities are closely watched. He says: "There is no room for the development of moderate, non-state controlled Islam [in Uzbekistan] today."¹²

Human Rights Watch has compiled several reports over the years concerning political and religious persecution in many countries, including Uzbekistan. A cursory review of the reports confirms extreme cases of systemic torture and unjust imprisonment of innocent people randomly accused of crimes and of religious fundamentalism. I was not fully aware of the scale of the human rights abuses before completing research for this report. President Karimov has had several opportunities to condemn torture: before a summit

of the European Reconstruction and Development Bank in Tashkent in 2004 as well as after the shootings in Andijan in May 2005: he has refused to do so.

Some news reports and commentaries have suggested that Uzbekistan's close post-9/11 ties with the West and the United States caused human rights and religious rights issues to be swept under the rug. This claim is made on the assumption that the West and the United States would rather look the other way when political and religious prisoners are taken or when protestors are gunned down because it will make the relationship easier to manage. Human rights groups have been openly warning against this result since shortly after the attacks of September 11. This debate is not up to me or up to this paper to decide or to carry on. It is worth noting that U.S.-Uzbek relations have currently become frozen after the U.S. halted military aid following the Andijan shootings in May and the Uzbek government subsequently evicted the U.S. from their base in southern Uzbekistan that has been used in the Afghanistan war for the past four years.¹³

By all accounts the current domestic political situation is grim and heavily controlled. The Uzbek government and President Karimov control most aspects of people's lives from the state-controlled media to state controls on the practice of religion. People who venture outside of those state controls risk imprisonment, torture and possibly death. Elections are a sham and Karimov is most likely in the process of grooming his own successor to carry on his political legacy. The democratic 'revolutions' of Kyrgyzstan and Georgia give some hope for reform in the future for Uzbekistan. A democratization chart compiled by Freedom House takes the following into account while rating the level of freedom: the electoral process, civil society, independent media and governance ratings: It concludes that Uzbekistan is one of the most entrenched and corrupt regime in Central Asia, second only to Turkmenistan.¹⁴

Historical Influences and Current Events

The collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990's was instrumental in shaping the present state of Uzbekistan from its borders and its leaders. In 1990 the Communist Party of Uzbekistan declared economic and political sovereignty and Karimov became its President.¹⁵ Karimov initially supported the coup against Gorbachev in Moscow and declared Uzbekistan independent in September of 1991. He was re-elected shortly afterwards in elections that featured no meaningful opposition party and were the first elections of the newly independent Uzbekistan.¹⁶ Islamist political groups were active at the time, particularly in the fertile Ferghana valley in the east. Mohamed Yusuf,

the mufti of Tashkent, was working with international Muslim groups in an attempt to establish religious education and to make the clergy independent of political authority. He was in direct conflict with the governmental Committee of Religious Affairs and his efforts were subsequently neutralized.¹⁷

The early 1990's saw Karimov establish his power by systematically eliminating any rivals in government or eliminating the power that would normally emanate from rival political offices. For instance: the position of vice-president was emptied of its power and the tenant of that office subsequently resigned and was kept under surveillance for years: Opposition members of parliament were either forced from office or forced to regurgitate the Karimov party line: Most prominent Muslim leaders and groups were neutralized and the Directorate of Religious Affairs assumed the position of muftiyyah, which effectively gave control over official religious leadership in the country to the government.¹⁸

The shrewdest move of all may have come after Karimov's consolidation of power was complete. He allowed opposition groups to become more vocal and to assume governmental posts that were already sapped of power. The Adolat Social Democratic Party and the National Revival Democratic party were created in the Supreme Assembly as token opposition parties.¹⁹ This superficial move looked good to outside observers but no real difference was made. The most powerful opposition party, Erk, however, remained outlawed and lengthy prison sentences were handed out to its leaders. Some political prisoners were issued pardons and several opposition parties were established.²⁰ By that point, Karimov already had such a firm hold on power that he could forge election results. To point out another example of compromised election results, this time from 1995, a referendum in March of that year to extend Karimov's term until 2000 passed with a 99% vote in approval.²¹

Karimov is currently worried that non-governmental organizations (NGO's) funded by foreign governments, most notably that of the United States, are attempting to oust him from power. International pressure for election, human rights and market reforms in Uzbekistan are a large part of Karimov's paranoia. His regime is unstable and he seems to be aware of that fact. This is so because Uzbekistan is managed through regional centers by political elites who are organized by 'clans' and who feel no loyalty to anyone outside of their geographic area and no real personal loyalty to Karimov.²² As a result, no unified policy making is attempted and Karimov must walk a tightrope around the respective regional managers in order to keep the system coordinated enough to consolidate his own power and to keep the country running. The clan system and its volatile nature is another potential area of weakness for Karimov. He needs to be able to keep control of the clans and to

have them not act autonomously. He has chosen to deal with the clans in this manner instead of move against them with force.

One of the biggest provocations that Karimov provides for opposition groups and potential revolutionaries is his state control of Islam; which he perceives as his biggest internal threat; and the methods he uses to exert that control. Only state-licensed clerics are allowed to publicly practice their religion.²³ This allows Karimov to control the content of religious gatherings and to ensure that only messages that are moderate and friendly to the regime are published and sermonized. He has even gone so far as to crack down on outwardly peaceful Muslim clerics and groups who have never preached violence. These measures were taken because they do not strictly adhere to criteria decided upon by the state.

A recent study concluded that "Western analysts and the excluded opposition parties [contend that]... Uzbekistan's economic conditions and the repressive tactics of the Karimov regime have awakened resentment far beyond the sector of the country's population sympathetic to Islamic revolution."²⁴ An example of this is found in the bazaar culture of Uzbekistan in the autumn of 2004. Civil unrest was evident when bazaar traders refused to enforce restrictions on imports and clashed with police on a number of occasions in different locations resulting, in one case, in police cars being burned. Last winter, a group of legally blind women openly protested the living conditions in their hostel in which they lived. The conditions did not afford necessities such as heat or running water. Police arrested a school principal a few days later because he refused to allow his students to be sent to cotton plantations to work as unpaid laborers. An analysis by the International Crisis Group asserts that "The government is still in control... there's just a sense that they're not sure how to react, the sense of political instability has risen."²⁵

If this turns out to be accurate, the Andijan massacre may not lead to a full-fledged revolt or revolution but it may begin to weaken Karimov's hold on power in the minds of the Uzbek people. It will be revealing to watch the ongoing trials of the fifteen men who are accused of committing and inciting the massacre in Andijan²⁶ as a protest against the deteriorating economic and social conditions in Uzbekistan. A local Uzbek human rights group has alleged that torture was used to elicit confessions. One of the defendants has been quoted in the courtroom as saying: "Foreign journalists advised us to do that following the example of Georgia, Ukraine and Krygyzstan...we started to shoot and kill hostages and some peaceful people and then soldiers shot back."²⁷ The defendants also confessed that they are Islamic revolutionaries who attempted to act and dress in a secular manner in order to receive support from outside groups. The testimony is consistent with government contentions

that the massacre was caused by Islamic revolutionaries who took advantage of the presence of especially that of international journalists and the U.S.

Recent evidence has been found that the Uzbek government is in the midst of orchestrating these trials and coercing testimony that matches the elaborate story that it has concocted to distribute the blame for the government-sponsored mass killings. The government has detained thousands of suspects since the attacks occurred in May and has "threatened or severely beaten many of those detained in order to coerce them to confess to belonging to extremist religious organizations and bearing arms while participating in the May 13 protest" according to a new Human Rights Watch report titled "Burying the Truth: Uzbekistan Rewrites the Story of the Andijan Massacre."²⁸ The fifteen men on trial are also accused of accepting hundreds of thousands of dollars from international sources and an extremist Islamic group, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, to fund their 'attempt' to overthrow the government.²⁹

The current trial and the fabrication behind it should not alarm any watcher of Central Asia and Uzbekistan. The situation reflects stereotypes of leaders of Central Asia and of President Karimov in particular: an elaborate cover-up of internationally recognized facts, the use of torture and coercion, accusations of plots to overthrow the government and blaming an Islamic extremist group. At times, Karimov tries to hide behind the U.S.-led war on terror to justify his actions and to claim that he is battling terrorist groups. This is rarely the case as is evidenced in the intricate cover-up of a protest gone horribly wrong.

Some media editorials at the time wondered aloud as to whether this would be the beginning of a revolution in Uzbekistan similar to the uprisings in Georgia and Ukraine. No evidence has emerged to suggest the contention that a revolution is on the way or that Karimov's reign is coming to an end. He has used the event to play the United States and Russia against each other as they continue their unofficial struggle for power and influence in Central Asia. There was, and still is, international pressure on the U.S. to impose sanctions on Karimov. To date, no official sanctions have been declared but the relationship has started to turn for the worse. Russia has issued blanket statements in support of Uzbekistan's 'fight against terror.'³⁰ Recently, the militaries of the two countries have performed drills together for the first time since Uzbekistan's independence in 1991.³¹

Uzbekistan is currently leaning towards Russia and away from the United States. The Uzbeks grew close to the U.S. in the fall of 2001 after the U.S. launched a war in neighboring Afghanistan. The U.S. used bases in Uzbekistan as staging areas and increased military aid to that country as Russia jealously

looked on. Since the Andijan massacre, U.S. military funding to Uzbekistan has been cut and the U.S. has been evicted from its airbase. Russia is using the deterioration of the situation to assert influence in a region and in a country that they have traditionally thought of as their own backyard. I expect this trend to continue, possibly until the U.S. and Uzbekistan rediscover mutual goals and purposes.

A Theory for Uzbekistan

James Scott provides a unique approach to the study of peasants and the periphery in *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*. The basis for his explanation of peasant life begins with the notion of the peasant as a drowning man. In his example the man has water up to his mouth and nose and a mere ripple can mean death. Such is the life of a subsistence peasant. Crop cycles rely on a delicate balance and too much or too little rain can end in starvation for a peasant family. Landlords may raise taxes or rents which could result in too much of the crop being taken away and can end in starvation. Peasants developed what Scott calls a 'Moral Economy'. Roughly speaking, it entails the creation of a community-based system that revolves around the right of survival. Everyone has a right to mere survival, thus everyone in the community should help those peasants who were unlucky, had their rents raised, etc. Those who help a family in one particular year should expect the same assistance if misfortune befalls them in a different year.

The peasant who rebelled or revolted did not do so to demand equal rights or representation, according to Scott. It was rare for peasants to revolt because of the ripple effect. A situation that gets out of hand or that doesn't result in a full harvest can trigger the ripple that can put him under. The peasant knows he is exploited: He speaks out only when the exploitation is getting out of hand because any further demands or requests could result in the ultimate ripple. The peasant cannot participate in a full rebellion because that would surely cause the ultimate ripple for an entire community and section of population.

I feel that Scott presents an excellent theory for dealing with peasant-based societies. I also feel that his theory can be extrapolated to deal with any country that has a strong central leadership, but also a vibrant society underneath that is aching to break out of its oppression. Scott mostly writes about his moral economy of the peasant and about agricultural subsistence. I believe that Uzbekistan is suffering from a lack of political subsistence. Andijan was the ripple and the people may be just one ripple away from drowning.

Corruption, direct oppression by the government, and the indirect

oppression by the clan leaders have led to the current state of political and economic affairs. The people are not necessarily at a literal subsistence level, and economically speaking they are struggling and matters could be made better. In a political sense, they are certainly on the edge of survival.

Comparatively, other nations that have been in a similar situation to Uzbekistan have fared better. The former Soviet states of Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan (Kyrgyz Republic) have all experienced various levels of political revolutions with some degree of success over the past few years. The Kyrgyz Republic may be the most comparable to Uzbekistan because of its ethnic make-up and geographical location. The Kyrgyz Republic experienced a revolution this past year forcing their leader to give up his office and flee the country in the face of mounting protests.³² The transition there has been controversial and strained at times because of indecision among opposition parties, and the direction that the country will take is still uncertain.³³ The point is that the Kyrgyz people took the first step and rid themselves of their leader.

The former leader of the Kyrgyz Republic, President Akayev, experienced a rise to power similar to that of Islam Karimov in Uzbekistan. Akayev was first elected in 1990 in an election that was far from perfect or legitimate. Via referendum he introduced several constitutional reforms to secure and expand his own power in the 1990's. He did this in response to a legislature that was less than fully cooperative to his whims. He lowered the number of 'elected' representatives in the legislature to 75, a manageable number that he could easily influence.³⁴ In this respect he went further than Karimov. Whereas Karimov established his own opposition parties, Akayev simply shrank the size of legislatures that he had to deal with. The Kyrgyz Republic was actually more closed off to the outside world under Soviet rule and it was less ready to adopt western-style reforms after independence. The clan system is even more entrenched than it is in Uzbekistan.³⁵ The patronage-clan support-mutual assistance triangle operates in a similar manner to that of Uzbekistan. Akayev produced his own synthetic clan from which to garner power from and also to appear more legitimate.

The question then begs to be asked: if the Kyrgyz Republic, with a similar background in history, clans and authoritarianism, can mount a moderately successful revolution, why can't the people of Uzbekistan do the same against Islam Karimov? A major difference between the two leaders lies in their responses to threats to their power. Karimov's response to the popular protests in eastern Uzbekistan has already been reviewed. Akayev faced similar popular protests in his country this past March. The protestors used jailed opposition leaders and Akayev critics as their focal point and freed the most

outspoken of those, former Akayev administration member Felix Kulov.³⁶ When faced with these escalating protests and calls for his exit, Akayev did just that. First, he went underground for a few days and then he appeared in Moscow where he officially tendered his resignation in early April, 2005.³⁷ Could Karimov's willingness to suppress protest with brute force when Akayev decided to flee be the reason that Uzbekistan has not experienced a revolution? We will have to look at the state of the opposition at the time of the protests.

The general state of political opposition in Uzbekistan is weak. Many of the political parties were created by Karimov to simulate an actual opposition. An analyst at Eurasianet, a think-tank devoted to reporting on and analyzing events in Central Asia and the Caucasus, put the situation bluntly: "Three democratically oriented political movements are presently active in Uzbekistan – Birlik, Erk and Ozod Dekhkonlar. But experts, and even party leaders themselves, openly admit that no democratically oriented force is currently in position to assume power and preserve stability. "The opposition is weak and divided," Polat said. "This is the harsh reality."³⁸ It is clear that whatever legitimate opposition groups exist in Uzbekistan, they do not yet feel confident enough and are not able to become effective. Even if they were effective in removing Karimov, it is not clear who or what entity could successfully fill in the leadership void. None of these parties was allowed to register on the ballots for the parliamentary elections in December 2004. Speculation abounds in Uzbek circles that the best hope for active reform in the country lies with international pressure on Karimov and international involvement in democratization aid.

Similarly, the Kyrgyz opposition parties did not have a realistic chance of a fair election in the parliament in February 2005 (which sparked the protests that resulted in Akayev's fleeing the country in March) but they were much more active than their counterparts in Uzbekistan. Competition among the opposition parties is strong, suggesting that they are engaged and waiting for the opportunity to assume power, even though the competition weakened the overall goal of ousting Akayev. Some opposition parties were threatening mass protests if the February elections were not fair and Akayev had laid the groundwork for possible retaliation by alluding to them as terrorist groups only a few months earlier.³⁹ Kyrgyz student groups issued statements praising the role of students in Ukraine's 'orange' revolution and Georgia's 'rose' revolution and advocated a more active role for students in Kyrgyz politics.⁴⁰ Akayev responded by raising the rate of student scholarships. The fact that there were two different types of opposition parties, mainstream and peripheral, and that Akayev was attempting to buy off student groups before the election suggests a stronger and more vibrant under and above ground opposition to the Kyrgyz

leadership that what we've seen in Uzbekistan.

When looking at all of the evidence that has been presented, the conclusion can be drawn that two main differences can be seen between these two Central Asian states. The opposition in Kyrgyzstan was more vibrant and omnipresent than the opposition in Uzbekistan before the respective protests in the spring of 2005. The leader of Kyrgyzstan, for lack of a better term, seemed more 'squeamish' than the leader of Uzbekistan when dealing with protests that were sparked by flawed elections and that involved the liberation of political prisoners. One leader fled to Moscow and the other opened fire into a crowd of his own people.

Notes

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