

The Democratic Process

Promises and Challenges



The Democratic Process: Promises and Challenges

A resource guide produced for the
Democracy Education Exchange Project (DEEP)

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Constitutional Rights Foundation-Chicago • Constitutional Rights Foundation-Los Angeles
Council of Chief State School Officers
Social Science Education Consortium • Street Law, Inc.

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The Authoritarian Politics of Central Asia

by Daniel C. Waugh, The University of Washington (Seattle)

The current U.S. State Department assessments of human rights practices in the Central Asian countries introduce the respective reports as follows:

- Turkmenistan is a one-party state dominated by its president and his closest advisers, who continue to exercise power in a Soviet-era authoritarian style despite Constitutional provisions nominally establishing a democratic system.
- Tajikistan is ruled by an authoritarian regime that has established some nominally democratic institutions.
- Uzbekistan is an authoritarian state with limited civil rights.
- The Constitution of Kazakhstan concentrates power in the presidency . . . [and] permits the president to dominate the legislature and judiciary, as well as regional and local governments.
- Although the 1993 Constitution defines the form of government [in Kyrgyzstan] as a democratic republic, President Askar Akayev dominates the Government . . . The executive branch dominates the judiciary, and the Government used judicial proceedings against prominent political opposition and independent media figures in numerous instances.

Indeed, there is little in the history of Central Asia since 1991 to suggest that democratic values and institutions will emerge there in the foreseeable future. None of the Central Asian states has enjoyed much of a public process, which might lead to resolution of the "value tensions" seen as inherent in any democratic system. The priorities of Central Asian governments dictate that there be no meaningful democratization—we are not even talking here of "varieties of a democratic experience." If this blunt assessment comes as a shock, it does so only because of the wishful thinking in the West about what kind of political and social systems might emerge after the Soviet demise. To the degree that there was once any hope that even a single one of the Central Asian states might develop democratically, sad to say, such hopes are now dwindling, although some still feel that Kyrgyzstan might "make it" without having a revolution to bring about a change in regime. To understand what may seem to be an overly gloomy assessment, we need to consider first what these still-young countries inherited from their experience as parts of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union.



Independence Square, Kiev

Even in an age when democracies were still rather new and democratic ideals not widely shared throughout the world, the Russian Empire was behind the democratic curve. Only when forced to at the beginning of the twentieth century did the Russian Emperor grant a constitution and a modicum of parliamentary government, and then he fought to limit its powers and to retain as much authoritarian control as possible. The ancient regime fell in 1917 not because of any widespread popular commitment to democratic principles but because of the failures of government, failures that in part might legitimately be attributed to its unwillingness to allow for the development of meaningful political participation. The pressures of modern war were too great for an empire with an "underdeveloped" economy, a huge gulf separating rich and poor, and incompetent political leadership. Without World War I Russia might have gradually developed meaningful parliamentary democracy. However, the war prevented that from happening and exacerbated social unrest, which played into the hands of a dedicated but small group of revolutionaries. Nothing in the Imperial Russian experience could have meaningfully served as the basis for development of dem-

ocratic institutions under a new regime that gave lip service to democratic principles, but in fact imposed centralized, one-party control (this was known as "democratic centralism").

The rhetoric "evil empire" substantially oversimplifies the complexity of the Soviet experience. Yet there can be no question but that the Soviet political system was totally at odds with western (in particular, American) concepts of democracy. As in the case of the post-Soviet states, there developed some of the external trappings of democracy—a constitution proclaiming to guarantee basic human rights, an extensive body of law and a court system, and various levels of elected organs of government. Until Mikhail Gorbachev, no opposition to centrally determined policies was tolerated, and key decisions were made by the upper echelons of the single, legal, Communist Party. While at the lower levels elected councils (soviets) had some meaningful input into the implementation of government policies, they were only a façade of "constitutional" government. Elections offered no choice of candidates and served merely as a mechanism for affirmation of the regime's claim to legitimacy. This is not to say that local and even national political figures could

or would invariably ignore what were perceived as the needs of ordinary people. However, to the degree that such needs were met, it was not because of anything resembling meaningful political participation. The interests of state, if not purely private interests of the political elite, always ranked ahead of the interests of the commonwealth. In the first instance, the career patterns of those who rose through the political ranks in this system would guarantee that they defend the status quo, their own positions, and those who benefited most directly from their patronage. It is clear that in practice statute law trumped higher law, the commonwealth was not served and freedoms were not protected. Insofar as diversity was encouraged, this was not as a matter of principle, but as a calculated means of ultimately achieving uniformity in society. There was nothing in the Soviet system, as it became entrenched under Stalin beginning in the late 1920s, that could have provided an understanding of democracy and laid the basis for the genuine development of democratic institutions in the event that the Soviet system collapsed. True, as recent and often controversial scholarship has shown, behind the façade of monolithic and harsh politics, Soviet citizens often did develop strategies for defending their private and, on the local level, collective interests. However, such strategies had nothing to do with lofty democratic ideals but rather were simply defensive mechanisms for survival.

By the 1980s, after a long period of economic stagnation, the Soviet system was in crisis. Communist Party First Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev came to power determined to revivify and save the system, but not to change it in any fundamental way. The surprising result of his policies of *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (restructuring) was to unleash forces which would break up the Soviet Union. The late 1980s saw strikes and demonstrations, and the beginnings of legal, public criticism of the regime and its policies. The pace with which democratic movements developed varied considerably. The Baltic

"Republics" of the Soviet Union (Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia) had in fact some memory of western democracy from their brief period of independence following World War I. Thus they were among the first to develop serious independence movements and have continued to set an example for the development of democratic institutions in the post-Soviet world. In contrast, the Central Asian republics were artificial national constructs of the Soviet regime and had never previously experienced independence in territory contiguous with their Soviet republic boundaries. As a result they only reluctantly seized the opportunity for independence and a decade after they achieved it are far from having democratic institutions. True, a democratic past as a nation is not necessarily a prerequisite for or guarantee of a democratic future, but having such a past could help a great deal.

Our examination of the case of Central Asia will begin with an overview of political developments since 1991 in each of the five countries—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. Then we will synthesize some of the reasons for the failure of democratization and, in conclusion, suggest the principal challenges for the future. Our focus will be on the first three of these countries—the ones of greatest interest to Americans and for the lessons they may teach about the obstacles to democratic development in the region.

KAZAKHSTAN

Considerations of geopolitics, demographics and economic resources are very relevant to an understanding of the politics and societies of the countries of Central Asia. Kazakhstan, the largest of the Central Asian states, is blessed with abundant natural resources (most notably vast petroleum reserves), and shares a long border with Russia. In certain respects, the situation of Kazakhstan is unique, primarily because the titular ethnic group, Kazakhs, at the time of independence constituted less than half the population, being outnumbered by

Russians, Ukrainians and several other ethno-linguistic groups. Kazakhstan was an excellent example of a Soviet republic that was largely an artificial creation: encompassing a region once largely inhabited by Kazakhs or other nomadic peoples who spoke Turkic languages, this area, even well before the Bolshevik Revolution, had come to include large numbers of non-Kazakhs—farmers, miners, and small but growing numbers of urban workers. While some sense of what might constitute Kazakh identity had begun to develop among a few Kazakh intellectuals prior to 1917, the Soviet regime was responsible for institutionalizing a sense of Kazakh cultural nationhood, something to which the non-Kazakhs in Kazakhstan could not be expected to subscribe. Non-Kazakhs tended to adopt the typical colonizers' view of the "natives" and saw no reason to learn the Kazakh language. In fact, the development of the Soviet education system in the republic meant that many educated Kazakhs forgot their own tongue or in most circumstances chose to use the commonly understood language, Russian. Other aspects of Kazakh tradition—

notably their nomadic lifestyle—were viewed as having no place in the modernizing Soviet world, but the process of "modernization" and "sovietization" was not intended to create a sense of community and loyalty to Kazakhstan, as opposed to some sense of belonging to the larger Soviet community and polity.

That Kazakhs resented Russian political and economic hegemony became clear in 1986. The appointment that year of a Russian official as head of the Communist Party in Kazakhstan provoked serious popular protests in the Kazakh capital, Alma Ata. This should not be taken as a sign that government officials could rule only with the consent of the governed, but was at least an indication that popular discontent might well need to be taken into account if the government was to rule effectively. The prime minister of the Kazakh republic at the time was a rising star in the Soviet political elite, Nursultan Nazarbayev, a Kazakh who would be appointed to the key post of Communist Party First Secretary in 1989 and assumed the republic presidency in 1990, and through uncontested "elections" and other maneuvering since, has ensured that he will be president for life. Nazarbayev's career is typical of that of most current Central Asian leaders. He was a Soviet-era bureaucrat who seized the opportunity to consolidate his rule in undemocratic ways and ensure that genuine political pluralism would not emerge.

Some analysts remind us of the difficult situation Nazarbayev has faced precisely because of the ethnic division of the population of Kazakhstan. In his first years in power he seems to have entertained the idea that Kazakhstan would really be better off not as an independent country but rather reunited (or at least closely federated) with some kind of rejuvenated Soviet Union. The danger seemed to be that the northern, primarily non-Kazakh areas of the country would either be annexed by or attempt to split off and join Russia. One of the primary tasks Nazarbayev faced was "nation-building" in a country that had no sense of national unity. For

VIEWPOINTS ON:

KAZAKHSTAN

Nothing much has changed - I've just got older. Five years ago I was unemployed. Then everything got sorted out, and I'm doing the job I was trained for. Were it not for help from my children, things would be harder. A builder's salary now is insufficient to cover expenses and costs. But the thing that is extremely annoying is the lawlessness on the streets and the chaos in state structures. The bureaucrats don't have time for anyone but themselves and lining their own pockets.

-Alexander He, 55, builder



Kazakhstan to develop the basis for a harmonious multi-ethnic future would require, however, that the non-Kazakh population see its interests served by a government in which it played a meaningful role. That has not in fact happened, as Kazakhs dominate the key positions in the government, and real power lies increasingly in the hands of Nazarbayev and his family. Some see in Kazakh politics the influence of the traditional clan structures that antedate the Russian incorporation of Kazakhstan. To the extent that this is true, non-Kazakhs can never have a meaningful place in the system: whereas once it was the Russians who dictated to the Kazakhs, the situation has now been reversed. One consequence of the inability of the government to build the basis for multi-ethnic loyalty is that non-Kazakhs have been leaving the country in large numbers, taking with them some of the educated expertise that is vital for economic development. Where they once were a minority, Kazakhs now form a bare majority in their country, and the balance is continuing to shift in their favor.

In the period between 1990, when partly contested republic elections were held to the national soviet, and 1995, when Nazarbayev dissolved the parliament, there was some evidence of incipient political pluralism. Relatively unfettered political debate was possible, and some potential candidates for the presidency began to emerge. The turning point came in 1995. When the parliament became too obstructionist for Nazarbayev's taste, he dissolved it and ruled by decree for the better part of a year. He also insti-

tuted a new constitution and managed by referendum to extend his presidential term by another five years. The new constitution, which is still in place, reserves for the president political powers that for all intents deprive the parliament of any meaningful role in decisions and appointments. Even though several political parties formed in

the run-up to the presidential election in January 1999, most were, in effect, the creations of the regime. The control of the media largely by members of the president's family has meant that opposition candidates really have no effective means to compete against government candidates. In the past two years, the government has moved against any political figures that

might constitute a threat to the regime, using what now has become the typical tactic of indicting them for corruption or other malfeasance. Surely this is a good example of the pot calling the kettle black, but with the force of the police and judicial apparatus to back up the accusation.

As things currently stand, the political picture in Kazakhstan is bleak by any standards of democracy. The president rules as an autocrat; there is no end to his term in sight, given the fact he is in a position to manipulate the constitution pretty much at will. In the judgment of western observers, the elections that have been held were unfairly contested. The Kazakh media, while still showing surprising signs of vigor, have experienced a steady erosion of their independence. Self-censorship is the norm, the president's family or those close to him control all the major media outlets, and journalists

VIEWPOINTS ON:

UKRAINE

I remember as a child I really thought: "How good that I live in the USSR, the best country in the world!" And now that great country is no more. Even the economy is in tatters. I used to try to sell things at the market, although I have higher education and am a music teacher. Thankfully my husband has now found a good job, so I can stay at home for now with my baby.

-Svetlana, housewife, Kiev





Lavra Monastery, Kiev

whose criticism touches a nerve are silenced. Prosecutors and courts abuse libel laws as a means of silencing alternative views. In short, there is nothing resembling genuine public process and debate. One recent news article raised the possibility that the Nazarbayev regime may have begun to alienate a combination of business and political interests to such a degree that opposition forces will coalesce, but so far that is only speculation.

A key factor in this gloomy picture is the control of economic resources, which in the case of Kazakhstan are substantial. In the first instance this means oil, but there are also valuable mineral resources. Kazakhstan has actively been courted by the international community because of the oil and has benefited from substantial foreign investment. However, contracts

have often been arbitrarily torn up and the fees required to obtain them siphoned into the pockets and foreign bank accounts of the ruling elite rather than being used to address the very serious social and economic problems facing the great majority of the Kazakh population. Only gradually has the Kazakh government taken seriously the necessity of establishing, at least in the commercial sphere, a reliable juridical framework to encourage economic development and investment. However, so far that effort has not extended to creating transparency in many kinds of economic transactions. Political controls may be ensuring stability (the argument is that without authoritarian politics the sprawling country might disintegrate along ethnic or regional lines) but it is a stability designed to protect the interests of the few. Genuine democratization and the relative chaos of democratic politics would not be in the interests of the Kazakh elite. Unfortunately the same picture can be found in most of the other Central Asian states.

UZBEKISTAN

With the largest population of any Central Asian state (some 25 million) and its strategic location in the south-central part of the region, Uzbekistan is considered by some analysts potentially the most important politically of all these states. Unfortunately, its recent political history is strikingly similar to that of Kazakhstan. Authoritarian rule in Uzbekistan has been the norm right from the moment of independence, and by most accounts, its regime is the more repressive of the two. Uzbekistan was another case where on the eve of the disintegration of the Soviet Union, dictates from Moscow provoked the disaffection of at least some in the distant republic. In the Uzbek case, the issue was the arrest of the local party leader on corruption charges stemming from

falsification of the figures for the cotton harvest. As required by Moscow's dictates regarding economic planning, cotton was the principal economic contribution of Uzbekistan to the rest of the Soviet Union. Clearly by the late Soviet period, Uzbek leaders and intellectuals had begun to support policies and ideas aimed at carving out some modicum of meaningful autonomy, at least culturally, from the dictates of Moscow. So there was a basis of incipient dissatisfaction on which independence might be built, even though for ordinary Uzbeks there probably was no articulated sense of national identity.

In contrast to Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan is culturally more homogeneous—about 80 percent of the population being Uzbek and a significant percentage Tajik, linguistically different but sharing some of the same cultural values. Without the artificial boundaries erected by the Soviet regime between the Tajiks and Uzbeks, there would undoubtedly have been an even more pronounced sense of sharing in a common culture based to a considerable degree on Central Asian traditions. Ironically, in areas where Tajiks (speaking a language very close to Persian) and Uzbeks (speaking a Turkic language) do not know each other's tongue, the medium of communication is generally Russian, something that is likely to cease being the case with the maturing of the younger generation.

Like Nazarbayev, Islam Karimov, the president of Uzbekistan since independence, simply assumed his new position on the strength of his being first secretary of the Uzbek Communist Party. And like Nazarbayev, he was hesitant to seize the opportunity for independence until he was certain which way power would fall at the time of the August 1991 coup attempt against Gorbachev. Not being faced with the same challenges of location and demographics, as was Nazarbayev, Karimov could more readily use independence to consolidate his power rapidly. At the time of Uzbek independence, the Birlik (Unity) movement, an incipient political party with rather wide backing, had already devel-

oped, its platform advocating political reform and greater government efforts to deal with the ecological and economic problems of Uzbekistan. From the very start of his regime, though, Karimov did all he could to undermine Birlik, first encouraging a split in its ranks, recognizing the splinter Erk (Freedom) group as a legal political party, but then squeezing it out of any meaningful political role. The leaders of both Birlik and Erk were soon forced to flee the country, and by 1993 organized political opposition became impossible. Only recently, the Uzbek government tried to have the Erk leader deported from Europe to face trial at home and a predictable imprisonment. The Uzbek internal security apparatus is pervasive, and especially since an unsuccessful attempt to assassinate Karimov in 1999, has stepped up its repression of even the most harmless potential opposition.

As in the case of Kazakhstan, the Uzbek president has manipulated the constitution and elections to extend his term in office into the indefinite future and reserve full authority to make all key political decisions and appointments. There has been some discussion of changing the formal parliamentary structure from unicameral to bicameral, ostensibly to broaden representation and make parliament more effective. However, such a change would have no impact on political decision-making. As in the Kazakh case, the control of regional governments by presidential appointees guarantees that local elections will return the candidates the government wants. We do not always know the details or real significance of traditional clan or regional loyalties in the working of Uzbek politics. Yet it seems clear that, as in the Kazakh case, they play a role. Just as clearly, clan or regional politics have nothing to do with democracy, as we would understand it, since they do not mean that ordinary people have any input into the political process.

From the very beginning of his regime, Karimov's rationale for authoritarian control has been to maintain the stability necessary to ensure badly needed economic growth. Thus, he has

looked to the model of authoritarian regimes in Asia that have had some success in promoting economic development while at the same time resisting political change. Increasingly the Karimov regime has been seen as the main threat to its control the revival of Islam within Uzbekistan and the threat of "militant" Islam from without. In events such as the 1999 bombing in Tashkent, the government has found it convenient to blame "Islamists," even though some observers suspect the perpetrators were potential rivals within the government. Areas such as the Ferghana Valley in Eastern Uzbekistan have been the ones most receptive to a revival of conservative Islamic values, but the government response has been to arrest or (it is assumed) do away with local religious leaders who have become too popular. The American "War on Terrorism" has provided a convenient excuse for Karimov to crack down even more harshly on potential dissidents or leaders of popular movements.

True, not all the targets of Uzbek government action are necessarily harmless to an avowedly secular regime determined to maintain stability. The militant Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), with links to the Taliban and al-Qaeda, has as its goal the violent overthrow of the Uzbek government. The group seems to be small and may have been substantially undermined by losses during its involvement in the recent Afghan war, but it has been able to exploit the porous borders in the mountains south of the Ferghana Valley to create some instability. A potentially more formidable Islamic movement is the transnational Hizb-ut-Tahrir ("Party of Islamic Liberation"), which

claims to support only peaceful change but proclaims its goal to be the establishment of an Islamic caliphate. It too has a base in the Ferghana Valley, although it also has supporters in adjoining areas of southern Kyrgyzstan and in Tajikistan.

As in the case of Kazakhstan, an important subtext for Uzbek politics is control of economic development and resources. While there has been some meaningful foreign investment in Uzbekistan, reportedly the contracts go only to those who are willing to pay substantial bribes to Uzbek officials. The inefficient (and ecologically disastrous) emphasis on cotton cultivation has con-

tinued despite the complaints at the time of independence that this was an exploitative imposition on the Uzbeks by the authorities in Moscow. The government has not done much to alleviate the relative poverty of much of the population. Yet it has lavished resources on public buildings and commemorations of prominent figures of the past, such as the

fifteenth-century conqueror Tamerlane, who have become emblematic of the newly invented "national" history.

Government policies regarding minorities (in particular with regard to the role of the Russian language) have not encouraged their sense of belonging to a common citizenry of Uzbekistan. Many of the best-educated members of the population, who in Soviet "colonial" days occupied key positions, have left. Interethnic tensions thus exist, with the most serious potential problem being the numerical preponderance of Tajiks in some of the historically important centers of the southern part

VIEWPOINTS ON:

ESTONIA

The collapse of the Soviet Union was a great blessing for me because straightaway there were many interesting opportunities for work and study. It gave us the motivation to carry on living. But it's true that in the Soviet Union there was not the need to sell oneself that has appeared with today's market economy.

- Anneli Berends, town official, 41, Tallinn



of the country (notably Bukhara and Khiva). Despite government efforts to develop the symbols of national identity and promote patriotism, it is not clear that much of the population has been much animated by the campaigns. Official patriotism is no substitute for civic engagement. What little there is of the latter is largely the work of NGOs, which must tread carefully so as not to incur the suspicion of the government. Unfortunately, too many of the services the government might reasonably be expected to provide (for example, good medical care) have to be addressed by NGOs, but with limited resources.

KYRGYZSTAN

A country dominated by some of the highest mountains in the world, with a population of somewhat under five million and a host of economic challenges, Kyrgyzstan nonetheless is strategically important because of its border with China. At least in the first years of independence Kyrgyzstan seemed to be developing some genuine features of democracy. In part the explanation is that the current president, Askar Akayev, is the only Central Asian head of state that was not previously a professional Communist Party apparatchik. That said, like his counterparts in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, he has held power since independence. The country preserves some features that might eventually facilitate the establishment of genuinely democratic institutions, but there have been alarming indications that Akayev is following the other Central Asian heads of state along the path to authoritarian rule.

The characteristic pattern here is the strengthening of the executive power of the president. This has been accomplished in part by constitutional change (three such revisions of the Kyrgyz constitution took place in the 1990s), the manipulation of elections, and/or by the circumvention or overruling of parliamentary actions and stifling of political opposition. Important steps in Akayev's

consolidation of power were the 1995 elections, in which key opposition candidates were disqualified at the last minute, and a court ruling in 1998, which allowed him to run for what in effect would be a third (and therefore constitutionally illegal) term in 2000. The politically motivated arrest of a parliamentary critic of Akayev's in early 2002 resulted in public protests that local government officials met with deadly force. As a consequence of continuing public demonstrations, Akayev forced the government to resign, but this did not result in the inclusion of representation from the political opposition when the new government was formed. On the one hand, one might argue that the crisis in 2002 shows the potential for meaningful public impact on the political process, but on the other hand, there is so far no indication that the government is moving away from its policies of undermining the ability of its critics to organize and conduct overt political campaigns. Positions of power are still in the hands of people close to the president and often related to his family, a pattern that is echoed in all the other Central Asian countries today.

As in those other cases, a key issue is control of economic resources, although in some ways Kyrgyzstan has moved much further in the direction of economic liberalization than have its neighbors. Privatization of farming has occurred, and the legal framework for entrepreneurship put in place. Furthermore, the activities of NGOs, many of which have focused on fostering entrepreneurial activity, have been at least mildly encouraged, with many of the NGOs operating with relatively little government interference. This pattern is quite different from what one observes in, say, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Despite this somewhat encouraging picture as far as the institutional framework for economic development is concerned, the economic realities in Kyrgyzstan are grim. The country is poor in economic resources, and independence of farmers resulted not in their becoming prosperous but rather, in too many

instances, in their very quickly going bankrupt. NGO initiatives that succeeded initially in establishing cooperatives of small producers soon saw their work undermined as members of the local elite gained control of production and distribution. The country's economic problems have been exacerbated by the fact that it is dependent on its neighbors for petroleum, and there have already been disputes with Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan regarding rights to the water from rivers flowing out of the Kyrgyz Mountains, a significant portion of the irrigation water for some areas of those neighboring countries. Increasing demand for scarce water has the potential to lead to serious conflict in the region.

TAJIKISTAN

In many respects, Tajikistan resembles its somewhat less populous Kyrgyz neighbor to the north. It is a country of high mountains and a weak economy. In 2000, its per-capita gross domestic product (a measure of the total economic output, which can be used to estimate prosperity) was a mere \$154, and the inflation rate was 33 percent. Strategically its long border with Afghanistan complicates its position. If at least for a time the political situation in Kyrgyzstan gave some optimism about the prospects for democracy in Central Asia, events in Tajikistan have, from the start, been cause for pessimism. The current regime of President Imomali Rakhmonov came to power in 1992 after several months of political instability that broke out at the time of independence. For its first year or so, Rakhmonov's government was engaged in a very destructive civil war, which officially came to an end only in 1997 with an agreement that guaranteed the opposition a place in the government. The civil war was a product of regional political factionalism, exacerbated by the country's geography and ethnic divisions and by the interference of neighboring Uzbekistan and of Russia. Unlike in Uzbekistan, where Islamic politics have been uniformly suppressed, in Tajikistan the political land-

scape has included an active moderate Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP), which has been allowed to function openly and has collaborated with the government. However, Tajik members of the more "fundamentalist" Hizb-ut-Tahrir (see above) have been arrested. There are indications that growing discontent at the government's inability to address basic economic and social problems is driving many to support the groups with more radical programs. In one assessment, "by 1997 Tajikistan was effectively a failed state, with only the outward appearance of coherence," and it seems clear that in many areas until very recently the government has been too weak to curb the power of local warlords. There has been some recent but still very limited progress in overcoming regional divisions.

The most recent elections—for president in 1999 and parliament in 2000—are generally regarded as seriously flawed. The vast majority of parliamentary seats are occupied by members of the president's own party; analysts have noted how Rakhmonov's tactics have fragmented the opposition and thereby rendered it practically meaningless. At the same time, it seems as though the strength of regional factions may have prevented the president from consolidating his power in the same way that Karimov in Uzbekistan has done. Patronage and traditional loyalties are still central to the politics of the country. Whether Rakhmonov will step down when his term ends in 2006 or whether he will manipulate the system to extend it as his counterparts have been doing remains to be seen.

Among the few encouraging developments in Tajikistan is the survival of a rather weak independent media. This is in sharp contrast to the total government control over the media in Uzbekistan. However, as in Kazakhstan and increasingly in Kyrgyzstan, the Tajik media have come under government pressure, and there have been some egregious examples of intervention to silence critics. Apart from government actions, the media in Tajikistan as in other parts of Central Asia have struggled for want of economic resources.

Advertising revenues are practically non-existent; most people cannot afford newspapers. Television does not reach many remote areas, and its content often has little of substance on important current events. Rumor is a poor substitute for real news, which might help to create an informed public.

Tajikistan was the poorest of all the Central Asian republics of the Soviet Union, and little has occurred since independence to improve the bleak economic picture. This fact and its sharing of a porous border with Afghanistan have contributed to its unenviable reputation as a major channel for drug traffic. One of the few bright spots in building for the future has been the activity of the Aga Khan's programs to encourage self-help development projects and education. The eastern third of Tajikistan (Mountain Badakhshan) is inhabited largely by the Pamiris, who are Ismaili Muslims and whose spiritual leader is the Aga Khan. These development initiatives have involved safeguards to ensure that funding is not simply pocketed by the local elite. An important investment for the future is the establishment of a new university, which the Aga Khan is funding.

TURKMENISTAN

In a discussion of democratization in Central Asia, Turkmenistan requires few words indeed, because there has been no democratization and will be none so long as the current head of state, Saparmurad Niyazov, remains in power. His is a case of a Stalinist personality cult so extreme that Stalin himself might have blushed. It is not uncommon for Niyazov to be characterized as a buffoon for the extremes to which he has taken this cult. In fact, the strategic location of the country on the southern flank of the former Soviet Central Asia (Iran and Afghanistan occupy its southern borders) and its control of immense reserves of natural gas mean that Turkmenistan has to be taken seriously. Unfortunately, for all the potential wealth, ordinary people have seen few benefits, since so many

resources have been used to build extravagant presidential palaces, mosques, gilded statues of the great leader that rotate to face the sun, and luxury hotels that remain largely empty since so few foreigners have any reason to visit the country. The only significant opposition voices to have emerged are from members of the elite who dared to speak up only when safely abroad in diplomatic or other capacities. The government response, naturally, has been to accuse them of various kinds of malfeasance and try to secure their extradition.

THE REASONS WHY

With these bleak histories of the past decade in Central Asian politics as background, we might summarize some of the key institutional features of these states to help us understand the lack of democratic development.

First, though, it is worthwhile emphasizing that the terminology of democratic politics may conceal practices that are anything but democratic. Even the U.S. State Department, which justifiably assesses the human rights records of these regimes in such negative terms, describes them as having republican governments and notes the existence of constitutions that ostensibly frame a political system of checks and balances, guarantee basic rights, and provide for elections. Were constitutional law to be upheld in a meaningful way, then at least some meaningful elements of what we would judge democracy might be found. Unfortunately, much of what we see on paper has little to do with anything but the most superficial aspects of political reality.

Most Western observers of politics agree on a range of features characteristic of democracies. We talk of the ability of the public to exercise citizenship, which requires that there be institutions of civil society providing a sphere of activity autonomous from government control and direction. Furthermore, there has to be an administrative and legal framework that can function honest-

ly and transparently. Diversity of opinion and individual rights must be protected. Government must be responsive to the public. There have to be mechanisms such as fair and free elections to hold those in government accountable. The public must have the opportunity to be informed from sources that may provide a diversity of views. Thus, an independent media is important. Many would insist as well that there couldn't be meaningful democracy without the existence of private enterprise and a strong middle class.

Now, we need not argue whether all such features must be present for a political system to be democratic. The important question here is whether any of them are to be found in Central Asia. For the most part, the answer is no.

The challenges to democratic development exist at all levels. Recent analysis has suggested that to a considerable degree the nature of elite politics, inherited from the Soviet era, is responsible. Key figures in the political leadership of all these countries were also Soviet-era functionaries, educated in a system that was anti-democratic, and in the post-independence era, dedicated to preserving their political power by any means. Close analysis of the makeup of the elites ten years after independence does reveal a substantial representation of a new membership, but these individuals do not owe their emergence to any kind of democratic process but rather to their being co-opted into a system already in place and enjoying the patronage of the leadership that emerged in the 1990s. In many instances

the new elite's basis for power is its control of economic resources rather than its political background. A key question for any attempt to project the future of politics in Central Asia is whether the current elite will come to realize that its interests may not be best served by encouraging meaningful popular participation in government. So far that has not happened, and politics are governed from the top down. Some may argue, not without justification,

that the current shape of politics is simply a continuation of the previous traditions in many parts of Central Asian society, whereby patronage and power were personalized and generally exercised through clan or tribal structures that guaranteed loyalty. It would probably be a mistake, however, to assume that such tradition is so entrenched that it has to govern politics into the indefinite future.

At least for now, the control over politics by authoritarian leaders has been ensured by their ability to manipulate constitutions, elections and elected institutions. Thus, presidential terms keep being extended, political parties or opposition politicians discredited or subjected to persecution, and political positions filled by appointees or by those selected by such appointees. While all the Central Asian states have some kind of parliament, none of those bodies has for long, if at all, been able to operate as a counterbalance to overwhelming executive power. Nowhere in Central Asia are there opposition political parties with an institutional base and the means to contest elections

VIEWPOINTS ON:

UZBEKISTAN

Our family came to Uzbekistan in the 1970s. We didn't think it would be for long, but it turned out to be for 30 years. I've always wanted to go back to my homeland, but the children were at school, and then life got more difficult. They declared independence. At the beginning of the 1990s, when anti-European feelings ran high, the children went back to Russia. It's been difficult for me, of course, and I'm dependent on money from my son. I will move back too when they have enough money.

-Lidia Aleksandrovna, pensioner



effectively. Governments have erected barriers to registration and have devised means to fragment the opposition. Those who might represent serious opposition have been suppressed, leaders arrested or driven abroad.

Such actions have been possible in part because of the control and manipulation of the judiciary. None of the Central Asian countries has an independent judicial branch, since in all cases the extension of executive power has given the presidents or the ministers they appoint the control over judicial appointments. This is merely a continuation of the situation that existed in the Soviet Union, which, of course, under Stalin was known for its show trials illustrating how the regime wished to give an aura of legality to its suppression of real or imagined political opponents. Politically motivated legal proceedings are among the human rights abuses catalogued in detail in the U. S. State Department's reports.

Such abuse of government power is facilitated by the weakness if not total absence of independent media. A signal of what would be the norm in Uzbekistan was seen in the first days of independence in 1991, when the local government-controlled media, in response to criticisms raised in Moscow (where a substantial freedom of the media had developed), printed facsimiles of documents purporting to show that the Uzbek media were independent. Such "documentation," of course, was no different from a constitution that claims to guarantee political freedoms at the same time that the police are rounding up any who spoke out against the government. In Kazakhstan, which at one time had a fairly vigorous independent media, increasingly the noose has been tightening; most significantly, the sale of licenses to authorize radio and television broadcasting has resulted in these key media ending up in the hands of members of President Nazarbayev's family or their close associates. Deprived of independent media outlets, potential opposition political movements are severely undermined if they wish

to gain a following and be able to compete in elections. The populace may know of official malfeasance on the basis of personal experience, but without critical investigative journalism, such malfeasance is generally unlikely to spark coordinated movements for political change. A profound level of corruption distinguishes all the Central Asian countries, which is totally antithetical to any possibility of democratic development.

It is not enough to note that "opposition" exists and thus to see this as evidence of democratic possibilities within these Central Asian states. Opposition movements may themselves not be dedicated to or understand democratic principles. Wishing to replace an existing regime may mean merely wishing to exercise power and ensure privilege in the same fashion. For opposition movements to hold the promise of real democratic pluralism requires that there be an accepted legal and institutional framework to support democracy. Such a framework does not currently exist in any of the Central Asian countries.

THE FUTURE

Is there any hope for democratic change in Central Asia? Most analysts are justifiably pessimistic. Even Kyrgyzstan, the one Central Asian country that seemed to hold promise for real democracy, has moved decisively in an authoritarian direction. All the political leaders have taken steps to extend their terms in power and ensure that the electoral process will not dethrone them. The suppression of opposition figures proceeds apace. We may not even begin to sense the possibilities for the future until the time comes when the current presidents die or, possibly, attempt to transfer power to designated successors.

Given the depth of economic and social problems in most of these countries and the disparities between the wealth of small elites and the mass of their populations, the transition in political power could well create instability, which would then be

exacerbated by possible discontent. We have seen only a few hints of such discontent so far (e.g., in the recent political confrontation in Kyrgyzstan); so it would be unwise to project genuine popular revolution. Even if it were to happen, the result, as we know from the experience of other revolutions, may not be the establishment of democracy. Many have noted how the policies of the current regimes seem to be having as an unintended consequence the radicalization of groups that might otherwise be willing to participate peacefully in the political process. In particular such observations have been made about moderate Islamic groups, suppressed by the government of Uzbekistan and to a considerable degree discredited in Tajikistan. Thus in certain regions, especially among the young population, which seems to have little hope for the future, there has emerged some support for radical Islamic political movements. Ironically, then, the suppression of moderate Muslims in the name of suppressing dangerous Islamic radicalism has backfired.

Another challenge for the future lies in the multi-ethnic nature of the Central Asian states. Is it possible for political stability to be maintained and democracy to develop in a situation where national borders often divide major ethnic groups and where governments may be adopting policies that emphasize exclusiveness and unity rather than the creation of a framework for pluralism? Many analysts agree that in the short term, the most important priority has to be simply the creation of democratic institutions, but at the same time the issue of pluralism will need to be addressed. Perhaps the most serious challenge is in Kazakhstan, where Kazakhs currently have political preference for almost all the key government positions. The out-migration of non-Kazakhs since independence and high birth rates have shifted the population balance—Kazakhs are as yet only slightly more than half the population. Apart from Kazakhstan, there are other areas where the potential for ethnic violence and state disintegration is substantial. On the eve of the

disintegration of the Soviet Union, there were major riots pitting Uzbeks against Kyrgyz in the southern Kyrgyz city of Osh at the head of the volatile Ferghana Valley. The patchwork nature of national borders separating Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in that region is a source of continuing tension. In Uzbekistan prior

VIEWPOINTS ON:

LITHUANIA



In 1991 I unexpectedly lost my job and had to begin a new life. For a few years I used to travel to Turkey with large suitcases, buy cheap goods, and sell them here at the market. I remember how ashamed I was when I met people at the market who remembered me from my past life. But in time those exhausting trips raised enough capital for my friends and I to open a hairdressers.

-Rasa Martsinkyavichnyė, 53, hairdresser

to 1991, there were serious incidents in which Uzbeks set upon a Meshkhetian Turkish minority (a population that had been forcibly resettled in Central Asia by Stalin). The current Uzbek government policy of undermining opportunities for Tajik-language education has potentially serious consequences, given the preponderance of Tajiks in some of the southern regions of Uzbekistan. It is not clear that the current government in Tajikistan can be expected to hold together a country that likewise has substantial ethnic diversity and strong regional centers of political power. The list of such problems can readily be multiplied, and the dangers posed by nationalist exclusionary politics are real.

One of the hopes for democratic change is to build gradually, from the ground up, the institutions of civil society. Ironically, perhaps, in the eyes

of one astute student of Central Asia, one of the most important building blocks in the foundation of what might become "civil society" is the Soviet-era institution of the Collective Farm, which has served as a mechanism to provide for the needs of its members in a variety of ways. However, the collective farms institutionalize patronage, not democratic participation, and cannot be expected to serve as the basis for the development of private entrepreneurship. The Uzbek government has also promoted the urban mahallas, local neighborhood councils that can serve as a kind of low-level mechanism for administration and welfare. However, this does not mean the strengthening of institutions that might lead to democratic change. Rather, what we have here is the example of co-opting communal institutions to serve the government's purpose.

If institutions of civil society are to develop, the responsibility will probably fall to NGOs, for the creation of which there really is no precedent in the region. A substantial amount of foreign investment has supported their establishment, but with very uneven results. Among the more significant efforts have been ones aimed at developing standards of professional journalism, at addressing serious medical and environmental problems, and at developing the financial mechanisms to support small enterprises. The greatest successes are to be seen in Kyrgyzstan, in large part because there the government has felt less threatened by NGO activity than have the governments of the other Central Asian countries. Notably, the climate in Turkmenistan has been thoroughly hostile to NGO development; in Uzbekistan NGOs live in the shadow of government disapproval. Unfortunately, even where NGO development has not been hampered by government interference, it has been difficult to develop an understanding that the organizations are not simply devices for funneling foreign funds into private pockets. The greatest successes have come when communities have been brought to understand that NGO activity can empower them to solve local problems pre-

cisely because a concentration of even meager local resources and the will to cooperate in their use can often make a significant impact. Whether this NGO development can serve as the catalyst for what might become meaningful local political participation remains to be seen.

There is some potential for pressure by the international community to bring about political change in Central Asia. Clearly, at least some of the governments are very sensitive to international criticism, since that can affect the levels of economic support and military aid that they may receive. So far, it seems that the United States, in its eagerness to negotiate for use of Central Asia as a staging area for the Afghan War, has not done enough to insist on the necessity for meaningful political change and the observance of basic norms of human rights. There is a real danger here of providing too much support for repressive regimes that may prove to be a cause for instability rather than guarantors of the future stability of the region. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) has done some monitoring of elections and is involved in other projects that could promote democracy and economic development. So far, however, the OSCE commitment to the region is very small and would need to be substantially increased if it is to have much impact.

In conclusion, it is clear that Western optimism about democratic development out of the ruins of the Soviet Union was naive and arguably based more on wishful thinking than on any kind of informed assessment of political, economic and social realities. Having seen the realities that have emerged even in a country as well endowed with natural resources as Kazakhstan, some predict not success in state-building, but, rather, a failure akin to the one in a country equally blessed with natural wealth, Nigeria. The concentration of power and wealth in the hands of a corrupt elite is both symptomatic of and responsible for the dismal political and economic picture there. Others

would compare Central Asian states with South America, where some countries are still struggling with serious economic and political problems, but the democratic process has also seen some successes. However, there is little merit to the arguments of some Central Asian presidents such as Nazarbayev and Karimov that authoritarian controls in the short term are essential to maintain stability that can ensure democratic development in the future. There is at present no clear indication of how a transition to a democratic future might take place. Increasingly, the predictions are that the current stability will ultimately result in violent instability unless mechanisms are developed to encourage meaningful participation in the political process by groups that are being suppressed in the current situation.

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Central Asia is M. Holt Ruffin and Daniel Waugh, eds., *Civil Society in Central Asia* (University of Washington Press, 1999), which includes essays by Central Asian activists.

There is a substantial literature containing scholarly analysis and debate on specific topics relevant to the question of democratization in the former Soviet Union. See, for example, Vladimir Shlapentokh et al., eds., *The New Elite in Post-Communist Eastern Europe* (Texas A & M Press, 1999), which includes an excellent analysis of the Kazakh political elite by Rustem Kadyzhanov and an overly optimistic analysis of the elite in Uzbekistan by William Kandinov. While the main focus is not on Central Asia, there are some stimulating ideas in Graham Smith, *The Post-Soviet States: Mapping the Politics of Transition* (Arnold, 1999). The title notwithstanding, a lot of relevance to Central Asia can be found in Will Kymlicka and Magda Opalski, eds., *Can Liberal Pluralism Be Exported? Western Political Theory and Ethnic Relations in Eastern Europe* (Oxford University Press, 2001). One essay deals specifically with Uzbekistan.

Fortunately for those wishing to keep up with current politics in Central Asia, there are several excellent resources available through the Internet. In addition to short daily news reports, regular reporting of some substance is available in the weekly "RFE/RL Central Asia Report" from Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. It is archived at www.rferl.org/centralasia/, and one may receive the weekly electronic mailing free by subscribing at www.rferl.org/centralasia/contact.asp. One-stop shopping linking the RFERL daily reports, but also providing a variety of other analysis, materials, and links, is to be found at the Soros Foundation's Eurasianet (www.eurasianet.org). Another good source of analytical news articles is the bi-weekly Central Asia Caucasus Analyst (www.cacianalyst.org), published and archived on the web by the Central Asia Caucasus Institute at Johns Hopkins University. A significant focus of each issue is on the Caucasus; there is an emphasis

on the international dimensions of the news stories and on what we might call "political economy."

Several recent reports on Central Asia that can be read on-line or downloaded in printable Adobe format (.pdf-format) have been produced by the International Crisis Group (www.crisisweb.org). These are written by some of the best-informed experts on the region. While the purpose of the reports is to point out areas of crisis that should be of concern both to the governments in Central Asia and to the international community, the reports generally provide a substantial amount of carefully researched background material and also draw upon extensive interviewing. The reports devoted to specific countries are the single best source of information about each country's respective recent political history. The ICG reports include Uzbekistan at Ten: Repression and Instability (21 August 2001); Kyrgyzstan at Ten: Trouble in the "Island of Democracy" (28 August 2001); Kyrgyzstan's Political Crisis: An Exit Strategy (20 August

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While representing the official viewpoint of the U.S. government, the U.S. State Department (www.state.gov) does offer on-line background information for Central Asian countries and, in separate files, annual, detailed human rights reports. The information in the latter is probably reliable and seems to be based, in the first instance, on material gathered by international human rights organizations. Further information on human rights issues can be found in the very extensive materials made available in electronic form by Human Rights Watch (www.hrw.org).

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