

Uzbekistan: Evolving Authoritarianism

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Source: *Current History*, Vol. 93, No. 582, Central Asia (APRIL 1994), pp. 178-182

Published by: University of California Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45316980>

Accessed: 27-03-2022 19:04 UTC

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The authoritarian government in Uzbekistan has maintained stability in the country, unlike at least five other former Soviet republics. This “reminds us that ‘democratization’ is but one factor in the development of the new nation-states in the territory of the former Soviet Union. Given the priorities of the leadership in Uzbekistan, it seems to be a factor that will not be considered for some time.”

Uzbekistan: Evolving Authoritarianism

BY ROGER D. KANGAS

The non-Russian republics of the former Soviet Union are finding that the transition to full independence is much more difficult in practice than in theory. During the two and a half years since they gained independence from Moscow in December 1991, some of the newly sovereign nations—Moldova, Georgia, Tajikistan, Azerbaijan, Armenia—have been racked by civil unrest and violence. Others, such as Kyrgyzstan and the Baltic states, are attempting economic transformations with significant assistance from Western organizations. In contrast to these countries, Uzbekistan has remained virtually undisturbed, and has not sought outside assistance if such help is tied to domestic reform.

Indeed, Uzbekistan is establishing itself among the former Soviet republics as a model of conservatism and control. Things appear calm on the surface, but several potential crises could threaten the country's stability. Despite its emphasis on stability, the leadership is creating a situation in which further controls could exacerbate existing tensions, which might well foment political instability.

TIME-WARP POLITICS

Drawing heavily on the experience of the Soviet period, President Islam Karimov, who was appointed the republic's party boss by Mikhail Gorbachev in 1990, has created a political structure that centralizes power in the office of the president. His consolidation of power is furthered by the fact that Karimov is an

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¹It is also the case that these parties are headed by Karimov supporters. For example, the leader of the Fatherland party, Usman Azim, is a close family-clan ally of Karimov and a member of the advisory Presidential Council.

ethnic Uzbek from a prominent family whom most major clan leaders find satisfactory. The constitution, which was ratified a year after independence, on December 8, 1992, clearly spell out Uzbekistan's commitment to the protection of human rights and various individual freedoms, including the right to privacy. Yet—reminiscent of the Soviet-era constitutions of the republics—these rights are limited if they infringe on the “rights of society.”

According to the constitution, the Oliy Majlis, or Supreme Soviet, is the ultimate source of power in Uzbekistan. On paper, the Oliy Majlis is responsible for debating and approving legislation, as well as for directing government policy. A presidium, cabinet, and prime minister are selected from this body. The next round of elections is scheduled for 1995, at which time the legislature will be reduced in size to 150 members.

But the appearance of “popular sovereignty” is marred by several factors. The legislature currently in session came to office in a November 1990 election in which the candidates ran unopposed, so it is not surprising it is overwhelmingly composed of members of the former Communist party of Uzbekistan. In fact, 96 percent of the Oliy Majlis members belong to the Peoples' Democratic party (PDP), President Karimov's party and the successor to the Communist party in the republic. Vaguely committed to multiparty democracy and a market economy, the PDP nevertheless acts much like its predecessor.

In the past year, several “loyal opposition” parties emerged to counter the perception that Uzbekistan is a one-party state. Considered separate entities and registered as such, these organizations are actually extensions of the ruling party. The Fatherland party, the Peasants' party, and the Communist Party of the Workers of Uzbekistan all openly support the PDP.¹ Even if these parties obtain seats in the next round of elections, it is highly unlikely that they will come up with many alternative policy initiatives.

True opposition parties and groups, though not totally absent from the political scene, are severely

hampered by government restrictions. This includes parties such as Birlík and “Will” (ERK) in existence before the 1991 declaration of independence. Birlík—which means “Unity”—was an early advocate of Uzbek rights during the last years of Mikhail Gorbachev’s tenure as Soviet leader. After being branded a threat to the state, it is now officially forbidden to meet. ERK, the first officially recognized party in opposition to the PDP, also has been prohibited from actively propagating its views. As a result, Mukhammed Solih, ERK’s leader, a poet and political activist, vacated his position in protest, and the party has been forced to abstain from criticizing the government. Other groups, such as the Islamic Renaissance party, Adolat (“Justice”), the Nation Homeland Movement, and National Assembly, have fared even worse. None has successfully registered and all have experienced persecution of members and prohibitions of meetings by the government.

When a presidential election was held in December 1991, Karimov received 86 percent of the vote. Because of Karimov’s own executive decrees placing restrictions on opposition groups and difficulties with registering candidates, Solih ended up as Karimov’s only opponent. People’s preference for a strong leader, and their general conservatism, also contributed to the president’s electoral success. Armed with this “popular mandate,” Karimov has consolidated his powers. His most important act has been to institutionalize presidential decrees as a means of implementing policy, effectively circumventing the other branches of government. A hand-picked Presidential Council advises him when called on, and serves as a conduit to the legislature, which itself is more of a rubber-stamp organization. In addition, the hokims, or governors, of the dozen villiati (the Soviet oblasts, or provinces) and the autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan are appointed by the president, as formalized in a 1993 decree.

In short, Karimov has established himself in the office of the presidency as the primary actor in Uzbek politics. In many ways this is a simple continuation of the tradition of “strongman” leadership in Uzbekistan. Karimov’s habit of being visible at all major events in the country, his ability to literally stop traffic when traveling to and from the presidential residence, and his control over the press further the notion that he is establishing a personality cult. Unless rivalries within his party erupt into real divisions, one can assume that Karimov will retain *de facto* control over the system of political participation.

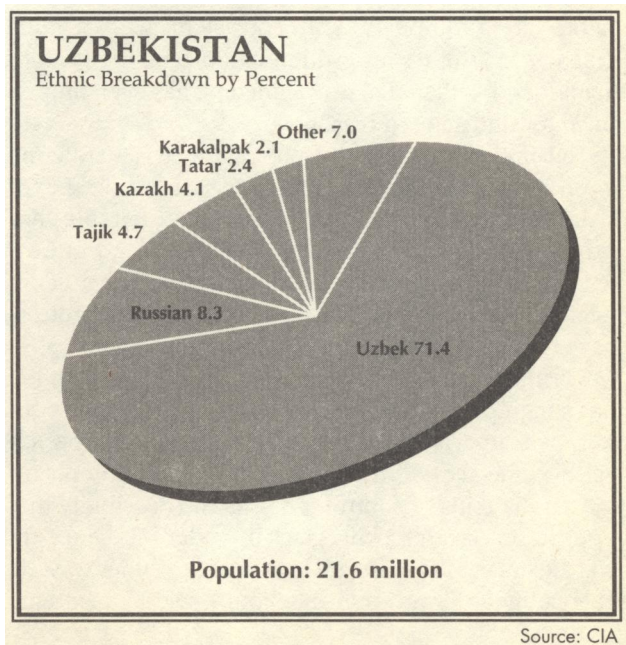
In sum, the institutional arrangements highlight a reality in politics in Uzbekistan. On the surface, the government makes an effort to build structures resembling those in democratic countries. To read official statements regarding the political system is to be given the impression that a true parliamentary system exists. However, for the sake of stability during this period of

transition, Karimov has made a conscious decision to keep as many as possible of the holders of political office beholden to him. Political parties are not seen as forums for open discussion, and they must express unwavering loyalty to the regime if they hope to be allowed to operate. Parties that profess alternative platforms are dealt with accordingly.

“DEMOCRACY” WITH A HUMAN RIGHTS PROBLEM

Karimov’s goal of political stability has been achieved at the expense of human rights. The president’s fear of an Islamic revival beyond what is taking place, especially in the Fergana Valley, a region known for its strong religious beliefs, drives a policy of human rights violations in Uzbekistan. “Opposition parties” such as Birlík and ERK have been targeted. The government consistently denies them permits to hold rallies, obtain office space, and prevents them, through censorship and other ploys, from publishing newspapers on a regular basis. Group leaders have been hounded and harassed. Since 1992, key figures, including Birlík’s leader, Abdurahim Pulatov, and Samad Muradov, Solih’s successor, have been beaten by groups of “unknown assailants.” The government claims the attacks are the work of “hooligans and the mafia.”

More radical groups have fared even worse. The government considers the Islamic Renaissance party and Adolat sources of “Islamic fundamentalism” and has banned them from engaging in political activity; it imprisoned and is presumed still to be holding Abdulla Utayev, the leader of the former. A threat is seen in the Nation Homeland Movement, founded on the principle of secular political reform that guided the Jadidist movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which sought to reform the region’s emirates. Six members of National Assembly (later amnes-



ties) were charged with sowing unrest and attempting to seize power for forming an "alternative legislature," thereby challenging the legitimacy of the Karimov government. The government argues that limiting opposition group activity is necessary if the civil war in Tajikistan is not to be replayed in Uzbekistan. Karimov does not rule out the possibility of a multiparty system in the future, but only after stability has been achieved.

Concern to limit alternative views has also translated into government attacks against specific individual critics. These include the recent trials of Abdumanob Pulatov and Vasilya Inoyatova on charges of anti-state behavior. Even a former vice president of Uzbekistan and prominent family-clan leader, Shukhrulla Mirsaidov, has fallen victim, being found guilty of political corruption. As with most of these political cases, his sentence was commuted immediately. (Those convicted of an anti-state crime cannot run for public office, and are thus effectively barred from challenging Karimov politically.)

Groups representing national minorities are also facing difficulties in Uzbekistan, whose population is 71 percent Uzbek. Periodically ethnic tensions have escalated into episodes of violence. Problems with Meskhetian Turks, Kyrgyz, and even Armenians in the last four years have prompted the government to closely watch groups representing minority populations. Political organizations representing the Tajiks (almost 5 percent of the population) and Karakalpaks (2 percent) have formed, attempting to protect minority rights against a perceived Uzbek chauvinism. The Tajik organization Samarqand has been particularly vocal on this issue, saying that the domination of the Uzbek language and Uzbek customs in society will lead to discrimination against the Tajiks. Regardless of the validity of their complaints, the Uzbek leadership is taking these organizations very seriously. Meetings and rallies are prohibited, and consistent with actions taken against other opposition organizers, the head of Samarqand, Utkam Bekmykhamedov, has been imprisoned for undisclosed reasons.

Helsinki Watch's list of political activists suffering government harassment, published last year, is extensive. Almost two years of continued pressure has promoted many to seek safety elsewhere, and quite a few opposition figures are in currently in exile, either in Istanbul or the United States. International protests have had little impact on the government.

Karimov's strategy for maintaining political stability has a high price. If the human rights situation does not improve, international ties and support may be adversely affected. If the president, however, opts to loosen the reins of control, he risks the possibility that opposition groups will gain a wider audience in Uzbekistan, threatening his power base. Either way, he is creating an opposition that could resort to extreme

measures if his policies begin to fail. This in fact has been a view expressed by the Islamic Renaissance party and other, more fundamentalist, groups. Human rights has thus become an issue that, left unresolved, could lead to greater problems than those currently confronting the country.

ECONOMIC CONSERVATISM

The underlying principle of Uzbekistan's economic program is simple: liberalization policies that are too radical will only disrupt the economy and lead to an exacerbation of social tensions. Thus the past two years have seen little in the way of dramatic programs or declarations, and it often seems as if the Uzbek economy is reacting to external problems. For example, pressures resulting from the Russian price freeing campaign in January 1992 forced Uzbekistan's government to free prices at home. Since then, prices have risen at alarming rates, consistently outpacing wage increases. In 1992 the inflation rate was 2,700 percent, with wages declining 54 percent. By 1993 these numbers had dropped to under 1,000 percent and 30 percent, respectively.

As with the other former Soviet republics, Uzbekistan's production levels have steadily declined since 1991. Overall, GDP has declined 10 percent per year, which is modest when compared to the other countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). In part this is because Uzbekistan relies heavily on the production of raw materials. It is the world's fourth-largest cotton producer, and has sizable reserves of oil, gold, and natural gas. Since these materials are valued by the other former republics, barter or hard currency sales of them will more than likely continue to prop up the economy.

The emphasis on raw material production has its drawbacks. Consumer goods and finished products are in short supply, especially as hard currency trade becomes the norm. To solve this problem, the government has openly discussed diversifying, moving the economy away from the cotton monoculture, and some changes have already taken place. Again, Uzbekistan is caught in a dilemma: cotton production is the mainstay of the economy, yet the overextension of cotton farming has resulted in irreparable damage to the soil, the water supply, and the Aral Sea, in addition to the economic costs of maintaining a dependent economy. Unfortunately, all this means that aggressive restructuring is unlikely in the near future.

The government's innate economic conservatism is evident in the privatization campaign. Karimov has repeatedly stated that the nation's economy will remain state-run, with a modicum of private enterprise. Privately owned concerns continue to be monitored by the economic ministries, and face hefty taxes. Property rights and legal recourse have not been clarified. The

hurdles for private entrepreneurs are substantial, which is discouraging news to any proponent of a more active private sector. Currently state firms accounts for more than 85 percent of GDP and 80 percent of employment, and this holds particularly for export industries such as cotton. The rationale is that with the state taking over from the Soviets Union the responsibility for most of the economy, the "transition" will be more peaceful.

Perhaps the most difficult issue Uzbekistan faces on the economic front is monetary conversion. For the first two years after independence, Uzbekistan depended on Russia for its currency supply and Russia set the rate of exchange. Russia's demand that Uzbekistan remain within the ruble zone if it wanted to receive part of the Soviet Union's hard currency reserves limited Uzbekistan's fiscal opportunities. Consequently, following the lead of other former Soviet republics, Uzbekistan introduced its own currency last November. This was troubling because Uzbekistan had reaffirmed its commitment to remain in the Russian ruble zone in an agreement signed two months earlier. On the pretext that Russia was placing undue constraints on Uzbekistan's monetary policies, Karimov quickly opted out of his obligation.

Overall, economic policies in Uzbekistan have not followed any specific form, although there has been a common theme: maintain subsidies and prevent major shocks, if possible. A mainstay of Karimov's leadership is his ability to prevent crisis at all costs. The monetary policy is to an extent an aberration, although it distances Uzbekistan from the economic problems of Russia.

THOUSANDS OF STRINGS

After the initial euphoria of independence and claims that Uzbekistan would chart its own path apart from the CIS, Karimov has gradually worked toward increased cooperation within the commonwealth. He is also an advocate of regional cooperation among the other Central Asian states. In both instances, economic and military matters dominate Uzbekistan's agenda. While maintaining political sovereignty, the government wants strong ties in these two areas.

From a practical point of view, this makes sense, since Uzbekistan still relies on the CIS infrastructure as well as the other republics for everything from fuel to finished products. Rakhmon Karimov, an economic adviser to the president, goes so far as to say that Uzbekistan is "tied to Russia by thousands of strings"

and must come to an understanding about its relations with this northern neighbor.

One way Uzbekistan can lessen this dependency on Russia is by opening up trade with the other former republics. This is being done, with cotton as the major cash crop. In addition, Uzbekistan is using its oil and gas reserves as bargaining chips in inter-republic trade.² The structure of imports and exports remains constant, with cotton fiber accounting for more than 70 percent of exports, and grains for 60 percent of imports. The financing of this trade has changed somewhat, with a greater emphasis on hard currency transfers. But the hard currency Uzbekistan earns for exports is offset by import costs, since the nation consistently runs a trade deficit. (Some estimates put Uzbekistan's inter-republic trade deficit for 1993 at \$200 million.) Nevertheless, trade links are being established, with the next step being the reduction, or elimination, of artificial barriers and tariffs.

Security issues are of equal concern. In January 1992 Uzbekistan established a national guard that is the basis of its military capability. Ethnic Uzbeks formerly enlisted in the Soviet armed forces have been called home, and new units are being created that will work in conjunction with other armies of CIS members. The government has declared that the national army will be defensive in nature and will promote a policy of neutrality.

This policy has already been compromised, as units from Uzbekistan have actively participated during the past year in the ongoing civil war in Tajikistan. The extent of involvement is unclear, but it is certain that Karimov supports the current regime in Tajikistan and is aiding in attacks on the "anti-Communist" forces. Also, units from Uzbekistan conducted exercises in Kyrgyzstan last May without informing the government there. Continuation of such behavior may spark unrest among ethnic Tajiks and Kyrgyz in Uzbekistan. Whether these are merely isolated incidents or the beginnings of a regional policy, Karimov considers it imperative that Uzbekistan show itself as a force for stability in the region.

A more direct concern for Uzbekistan is the continued presence of Russian troops. The collapse of the Soviet Union did not immediately translate into a collapse of the Red Army. After a series of CIS-wide negotiations, the process of regionalizing the military is slowly getting under way. Though the numbers have dropped, there are still Russian units stationed in Uzbekistan that follow Russian directives, with little local input. Despite Uzbekistan's creation of an independent army, this weakens the claim that the country is truly autonomous. A recent agreement between Russia and Uzbekistan on the exchange of intelligence materials also suggests that Russia's role will not diminish soon.

²Last June Uzbekistan temporarily cut off supplies to Kyrgyzstan in retaliation for the latter's introduction of its own currency. Kyrgyzstan currently owes more than \$13 million to Uzbekistan, and the two countries are trying settle on a repayment scheme.

BEYOND THE COMMONWEALTH

In the arena of international politics, Uzbekistan has made great strides in asserting itself as an independent nation. It is a signatory to the charters of the United Nations, the Council on Security and Cooperation in Europe, and the regional Economic Cooperation Organization, to which Iran, Pakistan, and Turkey belong.

During the first year after independence, when obtaining recognition was Karimov's primary goal and such posturing was deemed necessary to obtain it, the government signed a variety of international agreements that forbade the repressive tactics it subsequently used against the political opposition. After several reports critical of the country's human rights record appeared early last year, Karimov began to qualify his position on such agreements. At the January 1993 CIS summit he called for human rights issues not to be discussed, and now openly declares that domestic policy should not be part of international discussions. Last spring an unofficial declaration of Uzbekistan's foreign policy stressed the notion of mutual noninterference in the internal affairs of other nations.

The pattern of adjusting policy after initial declarations are made is also evident in Uzbekistan's economic agenda. An agreement with Russia, signed November 2, 1992, nullified Uzbekistan's responsibility for all debts and claims on any assets of the former Soviet Union, with Russia assuming both. This has allowed Uzbekistan to start with a clean slate. As a result, foreign debt is currently at a modest \$60 million.

The government's desire to improve the economy and develop Uzbekistan powerfully influences foreign policy. As early as 1991 Karimov announced his government was going to follow the "Turkish" model of development, which supports strong state involvement (and secularization). Since that time the leaders of both countries have paid reciprocal visits and signed agreements. But the moral support from Turkey has not translated into substantial financial support, since Turkey is trying to satisfy European Union demands. Other countries are staking claims. Missions from South Korea, China, and Japan have toured the country and are setting up factories and other business ventures.

The key factor in all this is that human rights policies are not at issue. Uzbekistan is actively seeking to replace the Soviet economic structure with an arrangement that will net the country hard currency and infrastructural support. Foreign policy is primarily aimed at fostering such ties. If "extraneous issues" like human rights surface, the government is quick to find

alternative partners, even if this means less aid from the West.

HOW STABLE IS THE STATUS QUO?

A trend seems to be emerging. Uzbekistan is successfully stabilizing the immediate threats to the government's existence, while consciously choosing not to resolve a number of issues that could fester into significantly greater difficulties. Uzbekistan's lack of political activism and participation leads to the conclusion that the state is evolving in an authoritarian manner. The litany of human rights violations supports this assessment. Whether outside pressures can encourage change is doubtful, as the government's short-term goal of stability could be compromised.

Economically, there has been no major innovation; muddling through is apparently the official tactic. Relations with the CIS states and with other countries also highlight the stopgap behavior of the Karimov administration. The opportunistic and shifting strategies suggest that the government is more concerned with immediate goals than long-term ones.

However, as long as Karimov can maintain a structure that satisfies the people's basic needs without making them eager for change, the status quo should continue. But if he fails in this, the inability to address underlying crises may well come back to haunt him. Karimov's fears that the events unfolding in Tajikistan, Georgia, and Moldova could be repeated in Uzbekistan have prompted him to ban opposition groups. Unless these groups are given voice, it is unlikely, as things stand now, that they could successfully challenge presidential authority. More likely is a less dramatic scenario: Karimov himself could be challenged, by one of his own party or a rival clan leader, and a change in leadership could ensue. The family-clan nature of Uzbek politics has created a situation in which the political leaders are constantly vying for power, or attempting to hold onto it. Karimov's efforts to disgrace Mirsaidov and preventing him from running for office in the future can be seen as a preemptive strike in this respect. Who the possible challengers are remains to be seen.

In spite of these ominous signs, Uzbekistan has progressed in the development of its state system. Largely unprepared for the sudden need to assume such responsibilities, the Karimov government has maintained order and expanded authority. The latter point reminds us that "democratization" is but one factor in the development of the new nation-states in the territory of the former Soviet Union. Given the priorities of the leadership in Uzbekistan, it seems to be a factor that will not be considered for some time. ■