

The Politics of Central Asia: National in Form, Soviet in Content

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The politics of Central Asia—limited in this discussion to the five states of former Soviet Central Asia—are neither as obscure nor as complex as is sometimes thought. Certainly, the region and each of its component societies are rich in indigenous traditions and culture and they did not merit the Western neglect, which was their lot during their incorporation in the Russian and Soviet empires. Nonetheless, the contemporary political institutions and prospects of the five states—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—reflect little of the millennial history of the region, other than for purposes of propaganda, but are instead overwhelmingly the products of their recent Soviet past. Future Central Asian generations may draw on pre-Soviet traditions to deal with modern issues, whether for good or ill, but today’s ruling elites remain wedded to the Soviet way of doing things, which is how they came to power in the first place.

Alone among the nearly 30 successor states of the former “socialist camp,” ranging from Albania to Mongolia, Central Asia has experienced no regime change. The bosses and ruling elites today are those of the late Gorbachev era with some purging, especially of Slavs. Regime change elsewhere has not always been positive, for example, in Belarus, but every other socialist successor state has at least experienced a political or a generational transformation of top leadership, or both. However, in the five Central Asian states, the rulers that came to power within the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), with all that implies about methods and mentality, have stayed. They have remained in power by applying Soviet techniques to independent statehood. While some Communist parties have produced remarkably progressive figures, a few even validated by

genuine popular elections, this has not been true in Central Asia, where old-style CPSU politicians retain power indefinitely with periodic sham ballots of affirmation.

Thus, a key starting point in understanding the region is the recognition that these countries cannot be compared properly with the Slavic or Caucasian successor states of the Soviet Union, and still less with the Baltic or East European countries. Rather, the Central Asian regimes are in the same category of governance as those of Cuba and North Korea, with whom they have much in common. They are a combination of post-colonial nationalism and neo-Sovietism, and can be characterized as “national Soviet” in form.

The decade since the Soviet collapse and the emergence of the Central Asian republics as independent states (albeit, initially, reluctant ones) is a short period in political development, although other successor states experienced rapid changes in the same time. These are regimes of the first post-colonial generation, comparable to many African and Asian countries three or four decades ago. Present conditions in these states are neither stable nor reliable indicators of what they will be like in the second and third post-colonial generations. In common with other post-colonial experience, including that of North America, Central Asia will almost certainly undergo dramatic changes in the coming decades. Political and economic systems will alter, and borders may move. This analysis will not speculate about what Central Asia will look like in mid-century, other than to note that straight-line extrapolations of that future from the present will certainly be wrong. We can, however, reasonably look at the region’s prospects in the next decade, based on an examination of the twin identities which define its politics today—post-colonial and neo-Soviet—and its potential to respond successfully to the challenges it faces.

The Imperial Legacy in the Heart of Eurasia

Properly speaking, “Central Asia” is much larger than the five states under consideration, encompassing significant parts of the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China, plus much of Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. In terms of culture, and especially of religious culture, much of Central Asia remains occupied by alien political systems based in Moscow and Beijing. The region sometimes known as “Turkestan” (to reflect the Turkic ancestry of many of its inhabitants) was divided into western and eastern areas of domination under Russian and Chinese rule in the nineteenth century. The famous “Great Game” rivalry between Imperial Russia and Imperial Britain in the same century drew lines defining

the southern frontier of Western Turkestan, an identity reinforced by the violent imposition of Soviet rule in Central Asia in the twentieth century.

Soviet nationality policy, under the motto “National in Form, Socialist in Content,” was in reality little more than the age-old imperial device of divide-and-rule. Stalin deliberately drew republic borders in Central Asia to separate large and potentially unruly ethnic groups—in particular, the Uzbeks and Tajiks—into ethnically-mixed areas for political administration and to create majority-minority tensions to facilitate Soviet rule. The states which emerged from the failure of Soviet power in late 1991 had external borders which no rational ethnographer would have drawn for titularly-ethnic “nation states” and reflect little more than Joseph Stalin’s nationality policies. These states should be seen first and foremost as political systems, rather than as reflecting national identities.¹

Challenges of Post-Colonialism

Irrational borders spawning ethnic conflicts are common in the Third World as legacies of European imperialism. While one always should be cautious in applying general principles of political development to diverse societies, what European powers wrought on the African continent is, in broad outline, very similar to the imperial handiwork of the Soviet Union in Central Asia. This point, while seemingly obvious, is important because Western analysis of Central Asia sometimes treats the region’s problems as entirely *sui generis* and ignores relevant experience of other parts of the Third World.

To simplify, if one wants to project in broad outline where Central Asia is likely to go, it is instructive to look at where Central Africa has been. The objective circumstances of the post-colonial experience of the two regions are sufficiently similar, despite obvious differences, to make the comparison useful. The parallels are particularly acute in the realm of politics, with the Central Asian regimes even less likely to adopt political pluralism or genuine rule of law than the bosses of Central Africa have been, because neo-Soviet regimes possess better instruments of domestic repression combined with the habits of an ideological monopoly of power. Central African rulers also have positive models in their former European overlords, while those of Central Asia are surrounded by the dubious examples of Russia, Iran, Pakistan and China. Central Asian elites dislike comparisons with other Third World regions and proclaim, and perhaps even believe, themselves to be exceptional. However, the assertion of national exceptionalism is well-nigh universal and is generally a poor excuse for rigid or reactionary policies. An objective observer cannot help

but notice how after ten years of independence the Central Asian states are traveling down a well-trodden Third World path.

To be fair, the region's problems are the poisoned legacy of imperial exploitation and would pose huge challenges even to progressive leaders. As with most imperialism in Africa and Asia, Russia conquered Central Asia for purposes of domination and exploitation, rather than for mass colonization. While Slavic people did enter and settle in the region, they did so slowly and without demographically displacing indigenous populations. The only major Slavic settlement region in Central Asia (analogous to South Africa) is the heavily-Russified northern part of Kazakhstan, which, at some point, could either attempt secession to join Russia or demand effective self-rule. Elsewhere, the Slavic inhabitants of Central Asia were not rural *pièds noirs* as in French Algeria or British Kenya, but urban dwellers and members of the administrative and technical elite. This set the stage for "white flight" after independence and a rapid loss of many skilled Slavic cadres who left the region for personal security or from loss of status and employment. In parallel, Soviet military formations in Central Asia were largely composed of local conscripts, led by both Slavic and native officers, thus allowing the new states to inherit established armed forces, though with a loss of many Russian officers.

The Enduring Mentality of Empire

In common with imperial practice elsewhere, the Soviet Union maintained its rule in Central Asia by developing and training local elites in ways that deliberately alienated them from the broad mass of the native population. These cadres were living extensions of the power of Moscow and often became more Soviet in mentality than the Russians themselves. They enjoyed great status and affluence, all dependent on their position in the Soviet *nomenklatura* with its shared attitudes, practices and imperial vernacular. While spoken Russian became common throughout Central Asia, though weak in rural areas, local elites employed the imperial language in preference to their mother tongues for purposes of prestige, education, communication within the broader Soviet elite, and for acceptance by their Slavic overlords. Higher education often took aspiring members of native *nomenklaturas* to Moscow (as Africans went to Paris or London) to acquire the habits, manners and lifestyles of the imperial "center." Such persons often had little contact or empathy with the poor and semi-educated masses at home, who were a constant reminder of the privileges and comforts they obtained by serving the empire and potentially could lose in the post-colonial environment. In the Central Asian case there was the

additional factor of ideology, which, however much cynicism may have attached to the ideals of communism, did reinforce the arrogance of elites in their possession of scientific socialism, making them even less inclined to accept political pluralism or accountability after independence.

While use of Russian is fading on the streets in Central Asia, it is likely to remain the elite *lingua franca*. The only regional substitute would be Uzbek, an unwelcome option for other nationalities. Although English as the world language has spread very quickly among younger and educated people in the region, this will not obviate the need for a regional language to communicate with other successor states, which can only be Russian. By way of comparison, English has not displaced French or Portuguese in much of Africa but occupies a place alongside. In Central Asia, the utility of maintaining Russian is obvious, from its use in technical manuals to ease of dealing with the region's leading trading partners. However, as in other parts of the Third World, the persistence of the imperial language sustains imperial attitudes and behavior, especially in officialdom.

Manmade Economic Nightmares

Central Asia also has parallels with Africa and South Asia in the inherited burden of misdevelopment and unbalanced economies. In the Soviet plan, Central Asian economies were structured around commodity exploitation, with consequent massive ecological damage. While Soviet planners did not employ the terminology of plantation colonies, they were even more single-minded than their capitalist counterparts in fostering commodity mono-cultures, especially of cotton in Central Asia. The depletion of water supplies, degradation of soil, and destruction of the existing nomadic and farming environment are well-documented, in some places attaining ecocide, as in the overuse and near evaporation of the Aral Sea. The focus of the Soviet central plan on the extraction of minerals and hydrocarbons, combined with the use of Central Asia for testing nuclear, chemical and other weapons, produced a legacy of economic imbalance at least as severe as the coffee, hemp or cocoa-based economies of sub-Saharan Africa or of "banana republics."

In addition, Central Asia is challenged by the results of the most benign of imperial policies, the spread of public health services and sanitation, which, in turn, have led to rapid demographic growth. In common with much of the Third World, these states face population increases far beyond their ability to generate new employment, especially given the deterioration of Soviet-era infrastructure and the limited job-producing capacities of high-capitalization commodity-extractive industries such as oil and

gas. The loss after 1991 of investment funds and subsidies from the Soviet central plan robbed the newly-independent states both of the wherewithal to maintain existing industry and agriculture and of the means to establish productive enterprises independent of the Russian market (even assuming that local political interference and corruption would have allowed such enterprise). A by-product of population growth is distortion of education, as schools established in the colonial period churn out graduates in excess of available jobs equivalent to their training, which in Central Asia is often oriented to Soviet-era standards. While public education is an area where Central Asia is ahead of some Third World regions, the advantage is eroding in many skills, especially in high technology where Indian and Chinese training models are more competitive.

Politics Following the Worst Models

It is in the political realm, however, that the post-colonial experience of the Third World is most relevant to Central Asia, in the replication there of what in Africa is called the “Big Man” regime type. Such regimes tend to be dominated by members of single ethnic groups or clans and by the enshrinement in power of a single individual or, more commonly, a Great Leader and his family (leading to the *sotto voce* witticism in several post-Soviet states that Stalin’s quest to build “socialism in one state” has been replaced by the goal of “socialism in one family”). Such regimes do not distinguish public from private wealth, transforming corruption from a form of social deviance into effective state policy. These regimes maintain political control by strictly limiting participation in the political process; by extending state authority over a wide range of civil institutions, including business, labor unions, organized religion, and the media (or, as playwright Tom Stoppard once put it, by establishing a “relatively free press” in the form of a press run by one of the ruler’s relatives);² and by lecturing Western critics that the local populations are “not ready” for democracy which “takes time.” Finally, such regimes almost invariably encounter a crisis when attempting a generational transfer of power within the ruling family or clan, as the authority and legitimacy of the first post-colonial “Big Man” creates shoes too large for a successor to fill.

The Central Asian regimes, with individual variations, fulfill all the “Big Man” criteria. This is not only because of their former Soviet experience, but also due to policy choices by the new regimes. Among socialist successor states there have been cases of political maturation mostly in Eastern Europe and the Baltics; violent transfers of power as in Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia; democratic transitions which made things no

better or worse as in Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova; and shifts of public opinion to either left or right, or, as in Bulgaria recently, in both directions at the same time. Alone among socialist successor states, the Central Asian regimes still are of the first post-colonial generation, while all the rulers, perhaps with the exception of Kyrgyzstan, intend to remain in personal control indefinitely. These are classic “Big Man” regimes of the type Africa has experienced to its continuing cost. In common with their African counterparts, these states will experience systemic crisis when they finally transfer power, especially difficult where there are dynastic aspirations as in Kazakhstan.

A Genuine, if Grim, Exceptionalism

As the Central Asia regimes replicate the experience of “Big Man” states, they are also different and exceptional, although not in a positive sense. In contrast to other parts of the Third World, these five states remain strongly Soviet in institutions and practices. While the Communist Party is gone in a formal sense, its personnel and methods remain in revamped ruling parties under national banners. The leaders, to a man, are all former Soviet Communist Party bosses, who changed their Communist lapel pins for nationalist ones while retaining a purely Soviet approach to political power. While many of the Soviet successor states have regressed badly in recent years, only in Central Asia have the bosses of the Soviet era avoided competitive politics or the challenge of a legitimate ballot box.

In sharp contrast to Third World leaders who took part in anti-colonial movements or at least aspired to independence, Central Asia’s rulers were propelled into independence by happenstance. These states entirely lack the genuine nationalist credentials of the Baltic States, Caucasian republics or Ukraine—let alone those of Eastern Europe. With the exception of Kyrgyz leader Askar Akaev, the rulers opposed Gorbachev’s efforts to reform the sclerotic Soviet system and welcomed the reactionary coup attempt of August 1991. At the time of the Soviet collapse, they hoped to remain within some kind of renewed Soviet system, with Moscow providing subsidies and support for their rule.³ As cosmetic nationalists, the party bosses who chanced to be in power when their republics became independent could not inspire an “end of empire” boost in public morale common when Third World liberation movements come to power. For most inhabitants, very little changed politically other than the removal of the top tier of Moscow-based party icons and the suitable enlargement of portraits of the former republic CPSU First Secretary as new national

president. In other respects, daily life for average people became even harder and more repressive than under Gorbachev.

The single factor that most sharply distinguishes the Central Asian states from most post-colonial countries is their possession of the fully-formed mechanisms of a modern authoritarian police state. While other imperial powers developed security agencies in their colonies and in some cases bequeathed them to the new governments, none bear comparison with the Soviet KGB which passed almost intact into the hands of the new Central Asian rulers. This advantage assured a high level of domestic control by the new regimes, except in Tajikistan, which quickly descended into civil conflict, and in the Ferghana Valley, an area of serious unrest during much of the Soviet period. The comparative social peace enjoyed by the Uzbek, Kazakh, Turkmen and, until recently, Kyrgyz regimes is in large measure due to the coercive Soviet institutions they have employed with greater vigor than had been true under Gorbachev. In particular, the repression of peaceful manifestations of independent religious activity is more severe in post-Soviet Central Asia than had been the case under late Soviet rule.⁴

In addition, these countries inherited the former Soviet armed forces deployed on their territories. These were not first-line units like those stationed in Germany or along the Chinese border; most were reserve or mobilization formations of limited operational capability. Nonetheless, they constituted substantial military establishments for newly-minted Third World states. In the Kazakh case the presence of parts of the former Soviet strategic nuclear arsenal engaged the United States directly in Central Asia for the first time, which brought substantial financial and technical benefits to Kazakhstan and provided some limited improvements to their conventional armed forces. At independence, Uzbekistan by accident possessed one of the world's largest inventories of conventional heavy weaponry due to the Soviet practice of using the dry Uzbek interior as a parking lot for treaty-limited equipment (especially battle tanks, artillery and armored personnel carriers) withdrawn from west of the Urals under the provisions of the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE). While this weaponry greatly exceeded Uzbek defensive requirements, it fed Tashkent's pretensions to regional hegemony. Uzbekistan also possessed the best officer corps in the region, significant training facilities, and a more balanced overall force structure than its neighbors. Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan inherited armed forces of greatly inferior quality and operational capabilities, and the prolonged civil conflict in Tajikistan not

only dissipated its limited military strength but soon required intervention by Russian and regional troops.⁵

In sum, although some Western critics have perceived in Central Asia a reversion to a kind of pre-Soviet “Asiatic despotism,” the reality may be even worse. A form of medieval rule could not long succeed in the contemporary world, but a modern police state—with sufficient political will at the top—can be quite robust. Across the region, the will power has not yet faltered. Indeed, the regimes become more rather than less repressive with each manifestation of domestic unrest or attempts at political pluralism. Therefore, sadly, Central Asia is not so much moving in the tracks of Tamerlane, but regressing into those of the CPSU and KGB.

Geography and Geology as Destiny

Central Asia’s potential to meet its challenges is limited by objective circumstances in addition to its political makeup. First, it is the most land-locked region on the globe and suffered a long enforced separation from the outside world by the Soviet prohibition on interaction with historic neighbors, especially Iran and China. While most colonies are incorporated into an imperial trading system, they nonetheless retain some contact with the broader world. In contrast, Soviet policy insulated the Central Asian peoples from their ethnic and spiritual hinterlands, while all legal economic activity was oriented northward toward Russia despite natural trading routes to the east and south.

The opening of the region’s external frontiers in 1991 introduced external influences, which the regimes perceived as challenges rather than as opportunities. To the west, Turkey initially saw itself as the natural leader of Turkic peoples of the former Soviet Union. However, as Turkey made efforts to exercise a benign hegemony in Central Asia, its leaders quickly encountered cultural tensions and conflicting agendas. The regional leaders rejected Turkish pretensions and disliked the Kemalist political model. To the southwest, Iran and some other Islamic states sponsored construction of mosques and training of religious personnel and introduced a radical tinge into the traditionally moderate Central Asian practice of Islam. Islamic proselytizers alarmed the elites of the region who exhibited their Soviet-trained incomprehension of religion and fear of any challenge to the state monopoly of belief. To the south, the Tajik-Afghan frontier had been fairly porous during much of the Soviet decline and ceased to be an effective barrier after 1991, contributing to the complex domestic conflicts in Tajikistan and greatly expanding the narcotics trade. More worrisome was the importation of Taliban and al Qaeda-inspired extremism into some of

the poorest parts of Central Asia, such as the Ferghana Valley. Finally, to the east, the immense and growing Chinese economy quickly established a major trading presence in Central Asia, while Beijing exhibited concern about separatist tendencies in its own slice of “Turkestan,” Xinjiang. Under the umbrella of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, China is expanding its influence in Central Asia to include even military ties, probably with a long-term view to replacing Russia as regional hegemon.⁶

Of all post-colonial regions of the world, Central Asia is the most distant from any ocean and the most cut off from direct interaction with the global economy, and hence from the positive influences of globalization. The problem of transit through neighboring states, most with ambitions in Central Asia, limits regional economic prospects and potential for political reform. The countries of Central Asia remain critically tied to Moscow despite Russia’s own status as a semi-failed economy. The Central Asian states want to diversify their external trade, but have little to offer to the more balanced economies of Eurasia. At the same time, investment from First World economies is concentrated in commodity exploitation, mainly oil and gas. Western business engagement in the region in other than extractive investments actually has declined in recent years, due to disappointed expectations, corruption and regime interference. One business survey assessed Western investment potential in Central Asia beyond the hydrocarbon sector as negligible.⁷ The only important external economy now expanding in a broad range of commerce in the region is the Chinese, which is certainly freighted with political influence.

A Future Built on Oil, Gas, Water, and Drugs

In the early 1990s, the Western vision of vast oil and gas wealth in Central Asia obscured the seriousness of the region’s economic plight, but even the substantial recent discoveries in the Northern Caspian basin can no longer conceal that these states are not Persian Gulf emirates in the making. Most of the region has little or no hydrocarbons. Only Kazakhstan has major proven oil reserves on a scale to become significant on world markets. Turkmenistan’s vast holdings of natural gas are an asset largely devoid of a market. Turkey was the logical customer, but Ankara already has contracted to purchase more gas from other sources than it may be able to use in the years ahead. The proposed trans-Afghanistan pipeline for Turkmen gas faces many obstacles, not the least of which is that India (the largest potential customer) does not want to depend on a pipeline crossing Pakistan for energy supplies. In addition, the global hydrocarbon market is much more diversified than it used to be, with the

higher transport and transit costs of Central Asian energy creating a price disadvantage. Finally, as in other hydrocarbon-rich countries, oil investments tend to distort broader economic development, discourage enterprise, warp labor markets, and spawn corruption. In this regard, Central Asia is following the examples of Nigeria and Indonesia rather than that of Norway.

For the region as a whole, two other commodities are likely to be as or more important than hydrocarbons. The first of these is water, due to the inherent aridity of most of Central Asia and to the depredations of Soviet development policies, which drained the Aral Sea, over-exploited the few rivers and depleted water tables. The water-rich areas of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan might seem natural complements to the energy-rich but water-poor areas to the west and north, but the deal is not so simple. Water is a shortage item for most inhabited parts of Central Asia. The mountainous states are unable to satisfy the needs of their northern neighbors and face the dilemma that supplying water for summer use in the lowlands prevents hydroelectric generation in the winter. The Uzbek and Kazakh authorities prefer to sell their oil and gas on world markets for hard currency than swap it for Kyrgyz water, while Tashkent prefers saber-rattling toward Bishkek rather than commercial compensation. The regime in Ashgabad is fostering vast new irrigation schemes and a “Lake of the Golden Turkmen” which, if realized, would require the entire flow of the major regional rivers. Thus, rather than serve as a regional unifying factor, water is a cause of tension and rivalry.⁸

The other commodity likely to dominate Central Asia in the years ahead is narcotics, as the region is the main transit route toward growing European markets for the output of Afghanistan, today the largest raw opium producer in the world. As elsewhere, the vast illegal profits involved in the narcotics trade easily can overwhelm weak political institutions and dominate fragile economies. If comparatively mature republics like Colombia can be enervated by this commerce, how likely are the Central Asian states—much poorer than in Soviet days and already famous for corruption—likely to withstand the pressure? The fatal double impact of this burgeoning illegal trade is that it appeals to the dispossessed of society excluded from other economic opportunities while suborning law enforcement and politics. The narcotics traffic is also likely to fund extremist Islamist elements of the region, especially in places like the Ferghana Valley that combine population growth, poverty, religious ferment and political repression.⁹

What Lies Ahead?

The probability is high that all five Central Asian regimes will suffer systemic failure. Failure in this context can mean one or both of two things. First, they can fail to achieve viability in the tasks of modernization and in reversing their decline ever deeper into the Third World. Second, they can fail as structures of political control. By the first definition, the Central Asian states already are failures, having all moved in the wrong direction on almost every relevant index, with little likelihood of more than cosmetic reforms in the years ahead. By the second definition, the regimes are currently successful, but in unsustainable ways.

The basis of regime failure in Central Asia is their Janus-like combination of post-colonial and neo-Soviet forms of governance. "Big Man" regimes throughout the Third World have demonstrated a very high failure rate in modernization and development. There are instances of limited success, for example, Tunisia and Malaysia, but they combine fairly moderate authoritarian rule with avenues for political pluralism, free speech and non-violent change. The Third World regimes most similar to those of Central Asia are case studies of lost opportunities for economic progress and eroding living standards since the end of colonial rule. Central Asian officials respond to such comparisons by saying their future will be better due to their stronger Soviet-style institutions. This is curious logic, as the Soviet model suffered systemic failure over a broader geographic area and in more varied conditions than any other form of governance in modern times. Even fascism did not collapse so completely, and often only under external pressure. Why should Soviet-style institutions and policies which failed in the Baltics and Balkans, in Albania and Ethiopia, in the Slavic states and the Caucasus, from Eastern Germany to East Asia, now prove viable in Central Asia to meet the demands of the post-Cold War world? Nothing is less probable. Indeed, the amalgam of "Big Man" and neo-Soviet ruling modes is almost a certain guarantor of systemic failure of the first type: failure to meet the needs of developing societies.

What are the prospects of failure of the second type? Cannot the addition of neo-Soviet police-state methods to Third World authoritarianism preserve regimes in power for long periods regardless of their substantive failings? Perhaps. This is the core political issue for Central Asia. Will these neo-Soviet regimes collapse more quickly than would a typical Third World dictatorship or can they prolong the process of decay behind a facade of nationalism for years to come? Will the internal contradictions of these systems (contradictions of a truly Marxian character) cause

them to implode relatively quickly or will the rulers demonstrate that they learned well their lesson from Gorbachev's experiment, the lesson not to ease up the strong hand of dictatorship? In short, are these regimes rigid and brittle or rigid and strong? The region's rulers believe the latter, that the Soviet Union would have endured indefinitely under a forceful leader. They clearly credit themselves with the strength necessary to deny reforms at home and to defy pressure for reforms from abroad, especially after the 2001 terror attacks on the United States.¹⁰

However, in the long term, the Central Asian states can avoid systemic failure only by true modernization, especially fostering development of active civil societies. Civil society refers to activity taking place between the institutions of the family and the state. In advanced countries, even those with very large state sectors, civil society encompasses most business activity, labor unions, organized religion, media, political parties, science and culture, and other organized human endeavors. In authoritarian regimes, the state seeks control if not outright monopolization of these roles. The importance of a vibrant civil society is that most creative human enterprise takes place there, as does essential pluralism and accountability of state institutions. The health of a country's civil society bears a close correlation to its success in responding to political and economic challenges. By this standard, the Central Asian states rank extraordinarily low. All five regimes seek monopolies of civil institutions and treat independent organized activity as threatening to their control, which, indeed, it is. While Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan were initially somewhat amenable to civil society development, they reversed course to the comfortable Soviet norm. Barring regime changes, prospects throughout the region for expansion of civil society are very poor.

Diversity Within the Regional Pattern of Failure

A case-by-case examination of the five current regimes indicates they are likely to experience different fates, at least in terms of the timing of their ultimate failure as power systems. Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan, the worst and least-repressive regimes, respectively, are the most likely to experience regime change or at least significant political turmoil in the near term. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have the wherewithal and authoritarianism to hold on considerably longer.

The megalomaniac ruler of Turkmenistan, Saparmurat Niyazov, emulates some of the world's worst dictators in his cult of personality; Romania's Nicolae Ceaucescu and Jean-Bedel Bokassa of the short-lived Central African Empire are legitimate comparisons. In addition to his as-

sumed name of Turkmenbashi or Father of the Turkmen, Niyazov has been anointed by his stooge parliament as president for life, a field marshal, and "The Great," among many other honorifics. However, for all his vainglory, Niyazov does not exercise the kind of bloodthirsty tyranny needed to maintain his rule for the long haul. While life in Turkmenistan certainly is marked by pervasive repression, it lacks the anxiety psychosis of a true Stalinist state. This weakness, combined with fatuous incompetence in running the economy (with fantasy statistics, such as the allegation of 21 percent growth in 2001), make Turkmenistan a good candidate for regime change by disgruntled domestic forces. The supposed coup attempt in late 2002, the facts of which are still unclear, may indicate the potential for an end to Niyazov. More recently, Niyazov has challenged Moscow in ways that inspired condemnation even by the Russian State Duma and is also verging on open conflict with Uzbekistan. How and when the transition will come is unclear (who could have said in advance what would expose Ceausescu's feet of clay?), but it is difficult to believe the sixty-two year old Niyazov will remain in power as long as his regional neighbors.¹¹

Kyrgyzstan President Askar Akaev is a great disappointment to many in the West who naively saw him as a Jeffersonian democrat in the heart of Asia. Sadly, a better parallel is Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe, who also won many admirers in his early years before his agenda narrowed to maintaining personal power. The two men betrayed supporters at home and abroad as they presided over corrupt regimes (the rot starting in their own households), moved to imprison former close political collaborators, became increasingly intolerant of criticism, suspicious of all domestic opposition, and unresponsive to Western pressures. Akaev has, so far, been less heavy-handed in his repression than Mugabe or his Central Asian counterparts. The mass popular unrest in Djalalabad province during 2002 demonstrated genuine grassroots opposition, which could be difficult to control over time. Akaev has at least held out the public prospect of leaving office voluntarily at the end of his current term in 2005, but the common regional practice is to extend terms at will.¹² Akaev's blatant manipulation of a series of constitutional changes to shore up his hold on power in early 2003 does not bode well for a peaceful transition. Indeed, Akaev's very moderation, by regional standards, may prove his undoing, as his poor stewardship of the economy gives little basis to appeal for public support of his continued rule.¹³

Tajikistan is something of a special case, due to the extended and complex civil violence of much of the post-Soviet period, which dominated domestic politics. So far, the 1997 arrangements that brought most

of the fighting to an end have held up. Nonetheless, Tajikistan remains in many ways the most fragile of the Central Asian states and the one most dependent on external economic and military support to retain cohesion. The regime of Imomali Rakhmonov is little more than a Russian protectorate and resembles some of the weak states of Francophone Africa, which are sustained through French beneficence and occasional intervention. As a semi-failed state for most of its independent history, Tajikistan is a poor prospect for serious reforms or even basic steps toward modernization. In many respects, Tajikistan resembles Angola, where the enervating impact of prolonged civil strife deprives domestic political and economic life of normal incentives, replacing these with the distortions of a war society and its potential for corruption, official malfeasance, and deterioration of what remains of civil society. In such conditions, political reform faces huge hurdles.¹⁴

If Kazakhstan maintains its current political order, it will be because the regime of Nursultan Nazarbaev has petroleum revenues adequate to buy and bribe his continuation in power. While in different hands the oil wealth might create real development, it is clear from the past decade that Kazakhstan has the same kind of “kleptocratic” ruling system that dissipated the riches of Nigeria and Indonesia.¹⁵ These examples of oil-rich but probity-poor states demonstrate that money flow can prolong a “Big Man” in power for years, but the regime ultimately will fail due to the corrosion of social peace and the inability of the ruling clique to keep a firm grip on political realities. There is little prospect of a voluntary regime change in Kazakhstan, as Nazarbaev had his term prolonged in 1995, extended in 1998, and has openly spoken of a new term in 2007.¹⁶ In such circumstances, opposition elements have few alternatives but to encourage domestic unrest, hoping the security forces will abandon the rulers in the face of massive popular protests (as did occur in Indonesia and Nigeria). Thus far, Nazarbaev and his clan have met every manifestation of opposition with harsher and more repressive measures, including arresting moderate politicians and journalists despite Western protests. In severe circumstances the regime could experience a loss of will or an inability to have its orders obeyed, but for the time being Nazarbaev’s rule looks likely to continue for a considerable time, with the waste of the country’s petroleum earnings lasting for at least as long.¹⁷

Finally, Uzbekistan is likely to retain authoritarian rule for an extended period. Among the Central Asian regimes, the Uzbek is truest to its Soviet roots. Islam Karimov certainly does not lack will in using his security services to repress any manifestation of a genuine civil society,

including even moderate religious practice. However, as ever more moderate Moslem practitioners are imprisoned, tortured or killed, the trend in underground Islamic teaching moves in increasingly extreme directions. This trend can only go from bad to worse. How bad things already are is shown by the fact Tashkent treats statistics on use of the death penalty as a state secret. Although Uzbekistan began the 1990s with the best regional prospects for balanced economic development combined with moderate petroleum wealth, these opportunities have been wasted in an unreformed structure of state controls and disincentives for enterprise or investment.¹⁸

Karimov combines relative youth and a focused political intelligence with a boundless ambition in his control of Central Asia's largest population. His aspirations for regional hegemony and his still-active dreams of a restored "Turkestan" centered on Tashkent (and himself) not only obviate effective regional cooperation but shift state priorities onto external ambitions at the expense of pressing domestic needs. Like the ill-fated Shah of Iran, it is difficult for such a self-absorbed ruler to accommodate change at home while lusting for regional great power status, especially as Karimov sees nothing really wrong with a Soviet-style centrally-directed economy and monopolization of civil society. The weakness of Karimov's outlook is illustrated by the analysis of a courageous Uzbek human rights activist who noted that Karimov initially had considered following the Turkish Kemalist model of development, but ruled it out because it involved a free press and genuine political opposition; he then toyed with the post-Mao Chinese model, but thought it allowed far too much economic freedom; he then examined the South Korean model, but again judged its openness and vibrant civil society as intolerable for Uzbekistan; finally, Karimov settled on a model he could feel entirely comfortable with, that of North Korea.¹⁹ Therein lies Karimov's near-term strength and long-term fallibility: He knows how to dominate but not how to adapt to changing circumstances. Such a regime—whether in Pyongyang or in Tashkent—may last a long time, but ultimately has painted itself into a corner with no exit.

What Is To Be Done?

Although prospects for the five Central Asian regimes vary, the countries all need the same things. First, regime change. The neo-Soviet "Big Man" leadership in every Central Asian state has demonstrated inability and unwillingness to adapt to the conditions of the modern world. New leadership is required, although one cannot have high expectations for what may come in the initial transition. Second, political pluralism.

This need not mean participatory democracy in the Western sense, but at least the involvement of all ethnic, geographic and economic groups in governance and in accountability for policies. Third, expansion of the civil society. The state effort to control activities not related to the necessary roles of government effectively prohibits creativity and development. The challenges of modernization can only be met outside the stultifying embrace of a pervasive bureaucracy, while an active civil society is also the best antidote to state-sponsored corruption.

Obviously, such a program of political change in Central Asia is not currently in the cards, nor will change be easy or perhaps, even peaceful when it comes. The region's periphery does not supply good role models, as Russia, Iran, Pakistan and China are themselves examples of regimes in need of reform. Even the more positive experience of Turkey and India show how slow, difficult and uneven progress can be, while also proving that current conditions in Central Asia are far worse than they need be. One thing is certain: "Stability" is no answer to the problems of Central Asia; indeed, a focus on stability is the heart of the problem. Central Asia needs profound political and economic transformations to escape its neo-Soviet morass—changes comparable to those of Eastern Europe—and the sooner the better.

Notes

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³ Author's diplomatic reporting from United States Embassy, Moscow, 1991-94.

⁴ Briefing on Religious Liberty Issues in Central Asia, United States Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, Washington, March 7, 2002; "Central Asia: Islam and the State," International Crisis Group (ICG), Osh/Brussels, July 10, 2003.

⁵ Author's experience as Regional Director for Russia, Ukraine, and Eurasia in the Office of the Secretary of Defense, Washington, 1995-97.

⁶ Discussed in the author's "Russia and China in Asia: Changing Great Power Roles," American Foreign Policy Council, Washington, 2002, 41-47; "Central Asia Fears Over China's Power," *RFE/RL Newslines*, Prague, June 17, 2003.

⁷ Robert Cottrell, "Asian Entanglement," *Financial Times*, April 17, 2002.

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¹² RFE/RL Central Asia Report, 3, no. 9, (February 27, 2003).

¹³ "Kyrgyzstan at Ten: Trouble in the 'Island of Democracy,'" (Osh/Brussels: ICG, August 28, 2002); "Kyrgyzstan's Political Crisis: An Exit Strategy," (Osh/Brussels: ICG, August 20, 2002); RFE/RL Central Asia Report, 2, no. 32, (August 22, 2002); RFE/RL Central Asia Report, 2, no. 34, (September 5, 2002); RFE/RL Central Asia Report, 3, no. 6, (February 6, 2003); RFE/RL Central Asia Report, 3, no. 29, (August 29, 2003).

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¹⁷ Robert G. Kaiser, "Kazakh's Season of Repression," *The Washington Post*, July 22, 2002; RFE/RL Central Asia Report, 2, no. 24, September 5, 2002; RFE/RL Central Asia Report, 3, no. 48, January 2, 2003.

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