

# Averting Central Asian Rwandas

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Georgi Derluguian  
*Northwestern University*

With the May 2010 pogroms in southern Kyrgyzstan, the semi-forgotten specter of ethnic violence and state disintegration has returned to Central Asia with a vengeance. In the two decades since Soviet collapse, commentary on Central Asian affairs has focused mainly on measuring how near or far the so-called “Stans” have come in embracing the standards of Western countries. This intrinsically optimistic vision has translated into measurements along three principal scales: authoritarianism vs. democratization, corruption vs. free market entrepreneurship, and Islamist fundamentalism vs. moderation or secularism.

For the sake of argument, let us accept these highly stylized measurements. Advanced Western democracies are presumably then located at the high end, African examples might perhaps be on the lower end, and post-Soviet states would be spread over the middle and lower-middle sectors. The critical question for Central Asia concerns its emerging vector of development: Are the region’s indicators moving Central Asia toward Central Europe or Central Africa?

## **The Perversely Protected State**

In the 1970s, a leading Western scholar of African politics famously observed that Zaire’s dictator, Joseph Mobutu, might be a pompous and vindictive despot, but so was Louis XIV, which evidently did not prevent the political modernization of France. Missing from this cheerful comparison, however, is a difference in world-historical context. The French king, along with his ministers and generals, continuously faced two huge challenges: external war and domestic taxation. Taxation was, in fact, the overriding concern of early modern states. Inherently fraught with the threat of rebellion, it required an extensive bureaucratic apparatus capable of both enforcing political bargains with provincial nobles and squeezing individual taxpayers while preventing open discontent. Historians have demonstrated that status competition in maintaining lavish lifestyles was not the main expense for royal courts; that honor goes to military spending for artillery, navies, and standing armies, extraordinarily resource- and skill-intensive inventions without which a state would be absorbed by hostile

neighbors, as attested to by the examples of Burgundy, Scotland, and Poland. The dual task of surviving the secular arms race and increasingly taxing subjects and eventually citizens without causing wholesale rebellion and revolution lay at the core of the evolutionary logic that led to the emergence of modern bureaucratized and mostly democratic states in the West.

In our age, the typical risks and challenges facing the “pompous and vindictive” despots of the Third World (or, for that matter, democratic politicians) seem surprisingly minor. Even the “sickest men” of our day, unlike the erstwhile Ottomans, might not fear foreign conquest and dismemberment (Saddam Hussein, whose rate of militarization was a throwback to the absolutist monarchies of the eighteenth century, is an exception). True, Mobutu faced an almost continuous series of domestic rebellions and border conflicts. But he never really had to create a strong army that could become a political and financial dilemma of its own. Instead, Mobutu relied on buying the acquiescence of his subordinates with piecemeal bargains – essentially tacit and revocable licenses to indulge in corruption – and, when necessary, on foreign paratroopers and mercenaries. In short, the dictator did not have to concern himself with the significant cost and headache of maintaining an effective army and bureaucracy as his security and finances had external origins in, respectively, geopolitics and mineral export.

Such parasitical behavior could continue for several decades thanks to the Cold War and also because Mobutu had much to squander. Remember that at independence, the former Belgian Congo boasted impressive literacy rates, industrial employment levels, and infrastructural development. This was mainly due to the country’s natural wealth and the anxiety of Belgium after 1945 to show something impressive for her domination.

### **Demographic Pressure: Redundant Elites and Paupers**

This brings us back to Central Asia. Even if the Soviet legacy of development is more substantial than the imperial Belgian one, this still does not mean it cannot be undone. Such “de-modernization,” however, will not mean a return to a stable traditional order. One realistic scenario is lasting violent chaos, reminiscent of another historical case: the Western religious wars that followed the Reformation. In both Central Asia and post-Reformation Europe, demographics seem to be a major destabilizing factor. The “Malthusian squeeze,” (i.e., population growth outstripping available resources) is a well-known mechanism of social breakdown in agrarian societies although its effects are not as direct as often assumed. Historical sociologists have found that the greatest political threat to governing regimes almost never comes from the rioting starving masses, whose protests are often disorganized, short-lived, and local, but rather from the overgrowth of disestablished elites who emerge in successor generations but fail to find social niches commensurate to their aspirations. The presence of alienated upper-class youths might be the key indicator of forthcoming state breakdown.

Historically, European elites tended to export their troublesome offspring to overseas colonies. Today, the international circuit of nongovernmental organizations,

business education, and consultancies arguably helps to relieve some pressure. Today we all know the highly educated ambitious and mobile Central Asians who became experts in exploiting such opportunities. But at least potentially, this creates elite factions who might be tempted to return home as liberators, in one or another revolutionary capacity. A crisis in globalization that suddenly reduces the international opportunities of the elite could reveal hidden tensions.

Also relieving tensions, at a more popular level, are the labor and commercial migrations to Russia from Central Asia's rural reservoirs of poverty. In Tajikistan and parts of Kyrgyzstan, this has become part of the male socialization cycle. But again, international migration generates its own contradictions. At least to some degree, the ethnic targeting in Osh appears to have been related to the fact that local Uzbek sub-proletarians institutionalized their migrant capital into a panoply of small businesses more thoroughly than did their neighboring Kyrgyz sub-proletarians. Such disparity in itself is not explosive, which explains why two decades could have passed in relative peace since the last major outbreak of ethnic violence in 1990. The trigger is always political and found within elite rivalries. This recent bloodshed has confirmed what we know from detailed studies of Soviet disintegration – ethnic violence originates in uncertainty regarding the distribution of patronage resources.

### **Hopeful Warnings**

Written in the wake of the horrific massacre in Osh, this memo nonetheless carries a hopeful message. Ethnic violence in Central Asia has emerged only sporadically and is related (even more clearly than in the Caucasus) to revolutionary situations and the resulting political volatility among local elites. Neither poverty nor demographic pressures (and least of all religion) serve as its main causes. If we have learned something in the last twenty years from the tragic examples of Rwanda, Somalia, Bosnia, and the Fergana Valley, it is that the process leading to ethnic violence is always political and starts with elites. Therefore, the key to prevention lies within politics, not in the sense of who wins over whom but rather in how a political system is constituted over time.

But if a strong state is the answer, does this also mean a despotic state? Not necessarily. The majority of the strongest states today are democracies, which should not, however, lead us into the ideological syllogism that democracy equates to a strong state. Some of the weakest states (Jamaica, for instance) are democracies, too. State strength varies not according to the type of political regime but to the bureaucratic logistics of power. A successful democratization becomes possible only when there exists a structure of governance to be placed under the collegiate controls of democracy.

But what makes a state strong in the first place? Scholars are still debating the merits of competing theories and empirical examples. The emerging consensus, however, seems to point to the historical evolutionary logic of warfare, taxation, and revolution that shaped the Western experience. This organizational experience has become, for better or for worse, irreproducible in the contemporary world.

## **What Remains?**

First of all, we must soberly acknowledge that at the present juncture state collapse for Central Asia is no less a possibility than democratization. Central Africa serves here as a major warning: the process of state erosion there became particularly pronounced after a few decades of independence. For a while, corruption, chiefly through client-patronism and tribalism, was a familiar chronic ill. Chronic, however, turned into lethal with the end of the Cold War and the passing of the generation of charismatic founding presidents. Once successor elite factions and emergent warlords unleashed processes of uncertain and violent bargaining, the process turned into a vicious circle destroying the very basis for more stable arrangements. It is at this point that demographic pressures, ecological degradation, and ethno-religious tensions become massively aggravating factors.

However, even though at least part of Central Asia shows similarly worrying tendencies, all these states remain defined by their Soviet institutional legacies. These legacies are usually seen by Western commentators as burdens. Yet, responsibly considering the present situation in Central Asia, some Soviet legacies might acquire positive salience simply because they are so deeply engrained and still help to support the structures of modern society in the region.

The name of the game here is differentiating pragmatism. Political centralization around despotic presidents is one thing, but reminding post-Soviet rulers that a creatively productive national intelligentsia is central to their own prestige and legitimacy is another. Likewise, petty bribes at every judicial, administrative, or medical office are one thing, but the expectation that on September 1 children must go to school is another. These are the non-political bases of politics, or the “civilizing processes” in the seminal expression of historical sociologist Norbert Elias, whose main challenge lay in understanding how European states emerged in the seventeenth century out of the strife of religious wars.

Translating historical sociology into policy recommendations means reminding ourselves not only what makes a democracy, but also what makes modern societies at all possible.

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