

# **Revolutions and Religion in Central Asia**

## **PONARS Policy Memo 364**

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Unable to achieve change through the ballot box, the Kyrgyz and Uzbeks have taken to the streets in an effort to turn out their authoritarian leaders. Despite divergent outcomes, the Kyrgyz and Uzbek protests confirm that fourteen years after the Soviet collapse, the region is finally ripe for political change. The patronage networks which sustained Central Asia's first generation of post-Soviet strongmen are showing signs of vulnerability. New sources of wealth, and with them, new elites and new centers of power present a growing challenge to the region's aging autocrats. There is no guarantee though that these new elites, should they succeed in winning power, will prove more politically tolerant than their predecessors. Importantly, however, lessons from the recent uprisings in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan demonstrate that U.S. foreign policy can improve the odds of democratic change in the region by supporting two critical groups: members of parliament and independent Islamic leaders.

### **Central Asia's Independent Elite**

New elites—or, in several cases, newly independent elites—directed the recent protests in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Roza Otunbaeva, whom Kyrgyz president Askar Akaev posted in embassies abroad for fear that her domestic popularity might eclipse his own, broke with the Akaev regime in 2002 to serve with the UN mission in Abkhazia. Internationally respected and now free of the Akaev government, Otunbaeva returned home in 2004 and later led the opposition protests that helped oust the Kyrgyz president in March 2005.

In Uzbekistan, elites similarly free of patronage ties helped precipitate the May 2005 anti-Karimov uprisings in the Ferghana Valley. More specifically, the Karimov government's sentencing of two dozen leading businessmen in the city of Andijan sparked a local insurrection, in which the businessmen's armed supporters clashed with government forces. The Uzbek government claims that the imprisoned businessmen and their supporters were Islamists. Regardless of their ideology, however, the popular Andijan businessmen represent the new, financially independent elite, which the Karimov regime cannot co-opt through patronage politics.

The Uzbek and Kyrgyz economies, however feeble, have created pockets of wealth beyond the reach of the current authoritarian governments. And, particularly in the case of Kyrgyzstan, Western aid to civil society and political party activists has helped foster autonomous elite that can effectively challenge autocratic rule. However, Central Asian political reform will require more than new leaders; a break with the Soviet legacy of patronage politics requires new institutions in addition to new faces.

## **The Need for Strong Parliaments**

The concentration of authority in the hands of Central Asia's presidents limits the chances for substantive and peaceful political change in the region. Over the past decade Central Asian executives have steadily eroded their parliaments' powers. Through their control over judicial appointments, the region's presidents have stacked local, regional and national courts with hand-picked supporters. These judicial appointees, in turn, deliver rulings that bolster executive rule. Most notably, through trumped up criminal charges and election rule infractions, the presidents' courts regularly disqualify would-be opposition Members of Parliament (MPs) from running for office.

Thus, Kyrgyz courts deregistered oppositionist Roza Otunbaeva in the February 2005 parliamentary ballot because, due to her assignment as ambassador to Britain until 2002, she did not fulfill the election law requirement of physical residence in Kyrgyzstan for five years prior to running for office. In Uzbekistan, opposition candidates have fared even worse. Uzbek courts, for example, found opposition leader Mohammed Solih guilty in absentia of masterminding the 1999 Tashkent bombings, which were allegedly directed against President Karimov. Not only is Solih ineligible from participating in elections, he cannot return home for fear that he would be forced to serve the fifteen-year sentence the Uzbek courts delivered.

By eliminating opposition MPs the Uzbek and Kyrgyz presidents have steadily eroded parliamentary oversight. However, as both Karimov and Akaev have recently discovered, stacking the parliament and eliminating official venues for the expression of popular discontent encourages the opposition to pursue revolutionary, and occasionally violent, change. It is important to note that even if revolution inaugurates new elites, there is no guarantee that these new leaders will refrain from manipulating state institutions in the same manner as their predecessors. Absent institutional reform, in which parliaments receive true power to balance the executive, autocrats will replace autocrats and Central Asian society, increasingly disaffected, will gravitate towards progressively more radical and violent ideologies of political change.

## **Islamist Ideologies**

Radical political Islam is one ideology that is gaining currency in the region. Groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT) and the militant Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) have found a growing support base among Central Asians disaffected by authoritarian rule.

Both HT and the IMU seek to replace Central Asia's civilian autocrats with a clergy-led Islamic caliphate. The two groups differ, however, in their avowed means to this end. While HT envisions a non-violent uprising, the IMU, as it has demonstrated in repeated battles with Uzbek and Kyrgyz troops, prefers armed revolution.

Unfortunately, radical Islamist groups are a boon to Central Asia's autocratic rulers. Indeed, the Islamist opposition and the region's dictators both benefit from a symbiotic relationship. Uzbek president Karimov, for example, justifies authoritarian rule as a temporary necessity, a defense against the "terrorism, extremism and fanaticism, which has been posing a threat to our peaceful and calm life." HT responds by rallying Uzbek public opinion against "the arrogant, tyrant ruler." Radical Islam and authoritarianism are mutually legitimating, an irony which HT, the IMU, and the region's autocrats actively encourage.

## **Supporting Reformist MPs and Independent *Imams***

Survey research suggests, however, that Central Asians are equally, if not more, supportive of democracy than they are of radical Islamist ideologies. Richard Rose, director of the New Europe Barometer opinion polls, found in a December 2001 survey that three-fifths of Kyrgyz Muslims prefer democracy to all other forms of government. Importantly though, one's democratic leanings, need not preclude concomitant support for radical Islamists. In an environment where domineering executives and rubberstamp parliaments make impossible any meaningful political contestation, radical Islam's promise of revolutionary action may resonate more than what thus far has been the false promise of democratic elections.

Problematically, revolutionary change, though attractive in the abstract, is often deadly in reality. The Karimov government's repression of the May 2005 uprising in Andijan, which was encouraged by Islamist groups, resulted in hundreds of civilian deaths and dozens of police casualties. Far less explosive would be opposition voiced through government institutions and powerful parliaments. Understandably, outside encouragement of such strong parliaments is difficult and, at times, awkward. Due to the very nature of Central Asian states, U.S. foreign policy in the region prioritizes the presidential administrations and not the parliaments. Just to note one example, Presidents Islam Karimov and Askar Akaev, not Uzbek and Kyrgyz MPs, granted the American military basing rights so that the United States might better conduct operations against the Taliban in nearby Afghanistan.

Ultimately, as the Kyrgyz case illustrates, it is the region's would-be opposition MPs who may best serve U.S. strategic interests in Central Asia in the long run. The opposition candidates Kurmanbek Bakiev, Roza Otunbaeva and Azimbek Beknazarov took lead of Kyrgyzstan in the wake of Kyrgyzstan's rigged March 2005 elections. As a result, President Akaev, who fled the country, was forced to concede voting irregularities and seek negotiations with the opposition. Bakiev is now Acting President, Otunbaeva is Foreign Minister and Beknazarov is Kyrgyzstan's Prosecutor General. U.S. foreign

policy would do well to encourage these new elites to continue what, only a few months ago, was their admirable struggle to limit Askar Akaev's abuses of power and to bolster parliamentary authority.

The United States faces a considerably more difficult challenge in Uzbekistan. Whereas Akaev was unwilling or unable to repress the March 2005 protests in Kyrgyzstan, Karimov has proven unflinching in his use of force to silence the opposition. The U.S. government needs to be equally unflinching in its condemnation of this repression. Senators McCain, Sununu and Graham's May 2005 visit to Tashkent and their strong denouncement of Karimov's brutality in Andijan is a helpful first step. But U.S. pressure must remain steadfast now that the Karimov regime has begun a larger, albeit less visible, repression campaign against human rights activists and the political opposition. Recalling American troops from the military base in Qarshi while, at the same time, substantially increasing support to local human rights organizations would bolster Uzbek activists working to limit the excesses of Karimov's unbridled rule.

The U.S. government should equally increase its support to religious leaders in Uzbekistan. The only people more at risk than oppositionists and human rights activists in Uzbekistan are independent *imams*. Independent Islamic leaders, who refrain from politics and neither sing the praises of the Karimov government nor support the agenda of HT or the IMU, enjoy immense authority at the local level. Not surprisingly, the Karimov government perceives these charismatic independent *imams* as a threat to monopoly rule and, as a result, regularly imprisons them under false charges of Islamist radicalism. Such repression engenders the very extremism the Karimov government requires to validate its own authoritarian practices. By opposing the widespread imprisonment of Uzbekistan's independent *imams*, the U.S. government can undermine what today is the Karimov regime's only remaining claim to legitimacy. At the same time, supporting independent *imams* will reassure Muslims that authoritarianism, and not Islam, is America's foe in Central Asia.

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