

Uzbekistan:
The Risks and Responsibilities of Democracy Promotion
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“Now, across the Caucasus, in Central Asia and the broader Middle East, we see the same desire for liberty burning in the hearts of young people. They are demanding their freedom – and they will have it.”

-- George W. Bush, May 10, 2005, Tbilisi, Georgia

A disturbing question about the massacre that occurred in Uzbekistan three days after President Bush praised “people power” in Tbilisi is whether the demonstration effect of the movements that unseated regimes in Georgia, Ukraine, and neighboring Kyrgyzstan is at all to blame for the killing of innocent men, women, and children in the Fergana Valley.

If so, the Bush administration, which has publicly championed “people power,” needs to act responsibly in its democracy promotion strategy—taking care not to provide false hope to those that confront hardline regimes, while making certain the United States does not associate itself with those regimes for no good reason.

A False Hope?

The violence in the city of Andijan and neighboring environs emerged out of a convergence of factors: indiscriminate use of police-state tactics against government opponents; real, potential, and imagined; heavy-handed economic controls; social discontent; and, socio-religious networks.

But one factor that is not often discussed is the heartbreaking optimism of thousands of peaceful demonstrators who thought they could emerge unscathed from the protest rally held on May 13.

Tragically, demonstrators appeared to have no idea they were putting their lives on the line. Some from the crowd who fled the hail of bullets later told journalists of their faith that Karimov was coming to the square to hear out their complaints. Other demonstrators said they just could not believe the government would use force to

suppress the gathering. Instead of fear, one *New York Times* correspondent commented, demonstrators “described a sense of jubilation at suddenly being able to talk openly.”

What caused this tragically misplaced optimism?

The rally had occurred in the middle of an armed jailbreak in a region long under suspicion by President Islam Karimov, the strongman who has ruled Uzbekistan since before the Soviet Union collapsed, for alleged sympathy with Islamists seeking to overthrow him. Supporters of 23 local businessmen, who were imprisoned on what they claimed were false charges of extremism, led an assault on a police station, military barracks, and state penitentiary; killed and wounded policemen, soldiers, and prison guards; released hundreds of prisoners, including violent criminals; took government officials hostage; and, forcibly occupied a regional administration building.

The number of demonstrators in front of the administration building swelled into the thousands (supporters of the imprisoned had been gathering regularly to call for their release). In a rare display of organized dissent in this authoritarian state, a microphone was set up for speakers to complain against government policies and even call for the resignation of Karimov.

Many governments freer than Uzbekistan would have been tempted to react to this combination of events with a measure of force. There should have been no doubt that the Uzbek government, with its track record of cracking down harshly on dissent, was not going to lay down its arms and listen meekly to the crowd.

In recent months, however, Uzbek authorities themselves had demonstrated a willingness to back down in the face of protests and riots. After a wave of suicide attacks and shootouts with militants in Uzbekistan’s capital Tashkent in 2004, the government did not clamp down as harshly on suspected Islamist dissenters and their relatives as it had in the wake of former acts of violence.

More recently, Uzbekistan experienced a number of small-scale, but turbulent, protests that also did not result in mass crackdowns but signs of halfhearted reconciliation. In November 2004, Kokand, another city in the Fergana Valley, experienced a riot after police officers confiscated the goods of local merchants who had not registered their businesses according to onerous new regulations on petty trade and commerce. Merchants held protests in response to the new regulations in other cities, including Andijan. Local governments delayed the implementation of the regulations or enforced them with laxity.

In late March, in another part of the country, a demonstration even ended with a government apology. Several hundred villagers assaulted a regional police station after a human rights activist was beaten up for helping them resist the confiscation of farms by local authorities (villagers feared the activist, who had gone to Tashkent for treatment, had been arrested). Greater disorder was averted, however, when the head of the regional

administration publicly apologized, organized a ceremonial feast of reconciliation for the community, and started to dole out tardy payments for the delivery of crops.

Importantly, these and other instances of moderation in the face of public protest were not operating in a vacuum. The broader regional context—the toppling of regimes east and west of Uzbekistan by “people power”—appears to have bolstered demonstrators’ conviction that their actions carried little risk. Uzbek sociologist Alisher Ilkhamov at the University of London argued that what happened in Andijan was “an expression of [the] hope” that “sprung up” in Uzbekistan “after the people-power revolution in neighboring Kyrgyzstan.” Two weeks before the jailbreak, a demonstrator supporting the jailed businessmen already was lamenting to a researcher for the London-based International Crisis Group, “Didn’t [authorities] see what happened in Kyrgyzstan? ...Don’t they understand?”

The tragedy, of course, is that authorities did understand. In the context of the street revolutions in neighboring states, the Uzbek government did not want to give dissenters a pretext to rally the masses by responding to economic-based protests through excessive force. But the government also did not intend for this restraint to prompt dissenters to engage in ever more radical acts of protest. Nine days before the violence in Andijan, authorities forcibly shut down another protest against the confiscation of a family farm. At this relatively small protest, held in Tashkent in front of the United States Embassy, protestors had called for the resignation of government officials.

The lesson of this crackdown, that there were limits to government tolerance, was not learned by demonstrators in Andijan or—more problematically—those who brought them out on the street. Demonstrators, including many passive onlookers, were never warned of the risky commitment they were making by staying in the square all day. Whether the success of the jailbreak made those who participated in it euphoric with power or deathly concerned for their own safety, they encouraged demonstrators to come to the square and informed the crowd that Karimov was going to hear them out. According to one testimony, as demonstrators started to get anxious near the end of the day, speakers even “urged [them] to stay in the square” and promised they would encounter no harm. When the assault by government forces occurred, jailbreak participants walked behind demonstrators and hostages to make a retreat. “None of them,” said one gunman who later recounted this fact, “expected that soldiers would fire on an unarmed mass.”

The demonstrators in Andijan were thus not only betrayed by their government, which by all accounts did not even attempt to clear the square before opening fire. They were unfortunately led astray by those who brought them to the street in the first place and who believed the government would negotiate rather than shoot innocents.

The Responsibilities of Democracy Promotion

The Bush administration’s support to “freedom movements” in Eurasia, the Middle East, and around the globe is often more rhetorical than sincere. Bush did not target Uzbekistan as a near-term candidate for regime change through people power. Fear of instability in a

state that borders Afghanistan, where local Islamic rebels allied themselves to Al Qaeda and the Taliban, and launched anti-government strikes in the past, makes the United States wary of promoting any kind of regime change in Uzbekistan that could spin out of control.

But celebrating examples of “people power” risks contributing to the false empowerment of those who face hardline regimes, which are already on edge out of fear of the demonstration effect spilling across their borders.

The Bush administration does not have to dampen its rhetoric of freedom, but it should at least make clear that the costs involved in promoting freedom can be considerable, and that those who follow the lead of local activists sometimes place their lives at risk.

Activists and citizens in countries like Azerbaijan and Belarus, two Eurasian states approaching contentious election periods, should consider carefully when designing their tactics whether the regimes they face are more like those in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan, or that of Uzbekistan. People everywhere have the right to risk their lives for an improved political climate, but they need to know what they are doing going in.

For its part, the United States should not encourage “people power” only to leave those who act in good faith to hang. It hardly needs to provide active support to every grouping in every authoritarian country that seeks political change. But if the United States insists on providing moral support to those who seek greater freedom, it should be prepared to use whatever leverage it has with their governments to prevent the use of unrestrained force against them, in a timely manner and without delay.

The Bush administration was criticized for its slow and relatively weak condemnation of Uzbek authorities after the massacre in Andijan. The real criticism, however, should be reserved for the possibility that U.S. officials during the daylong standoff did not warn the Uzbek government—a recipient of U.S. assistance and an acknowledged partner in the war on terror—against an indiscriminate crackdown. Administration officials issued such warnings to the governments of Georgia and Ukraine—also strategic partners—during their crises. To have failed to do so in Uzbekistan—even in the more contentious context of the armed jailbreak—would have been unconscionable.

And while the victims in Andijan had not been forewarned, the United States can at least take the opportunity presented to it and communicate to Uzbekistan and other authoritarian strategic partners that only for the most vital reasons of national interest will it permit business as usual if they blatantly forgo their responsibility to respect fundamental human rights.

In Uzbekistan’s case, a portion of U.S. aid is already contingent on Uzbekistan’s human rights record. But this is not enough. The United States should also evaluate the necessity of its security partnership with Islam Karimov’s government altogether,

including considering the closure of U.S. military operations at the Khanabad air base in southern Uzbekistan.

This would be hasty if U.S. military operations in Uzbekistan were vital to the war on terror – either for continuing to stabilize postwar Afghanistan, hunting down members of Al Qaeda, or preventing Uzbekistan itself from turning into a jihadist haven. But so far the Bush administration has failed to offer a compelling justification for the U.S. military presence in Uzbekistan.

After Andijan, a justification has got to be forthcoming. For if the U.S. military presence in Uzbekistan is not vital for national security, that presence needlessly deepens the perception that despite President Bush's words the United States prefers stability to freedom—no matter what the price.

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