

Avoiding the Great Game and Domestic Unrest in Eurasia

PONARS Policy Memo No. 402

Eric McGlinchey
George Mason University
December 2005

Central Asia's growing instability has opened the region to a host of would-be political entrepreneurs. The March and May 2005 uprisings in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan underscored the weakness of Eurasian authoritarianism and emboldened both domestic and international actors to stake new claims in Central Asia's increasingly uncertain political landscape. Some of these actors seek deepened political and economic reform. Others, however, are engaged in power struggles with little concern for anything but immediate local and geopolitical interests. Who ultimately wins these struggles—extremists, reformists, or newly resurgent great powers—will be shaped by U.S. engagement in the region and, equally important, by Washington's cooperation or great power competition with Moscow in post-Soviet Central Asia.

A New Climate of Mass Protest

Among the several factors furthering instability, and thus continued opportunities for political entrepreneurs in Central Asia, are purposefully vague and often manipulated laws of political succession as well as the rapid spread of new communication technologies throughout the region. Vague and manipulated laws of succession, particularly presidential succession, leave oppositionists little choice but to contest power through irregular and extra-constitutional means. As witnessed by this year's

political protests in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, mass mobilization, which sometimes is violent, will continue to shake Central Asian polities in the coming years.

Moreover, the recent spread of new information technologies, most notably mobile phones and the Internet, will make staging protests considerably easier for political entrepreneurs of all stripes. Social scientists have long characterized mass uprisings and political revolutions as rare events, correctly noting that would-be protestors perceive authoritarian practices of imprisonment, torture, and death as strong disincentives to individual and collective action. Importantly, though, the spread of new communication technologies has reshaped risk calculations and social mobilization capabilities in the region. Cellular phone use in particular is increasing, even among Central Asians with only modest means. In Uzbekistan, the number of mobile phone subscribers increased from 26,000 in 1998 to 635,000 in 2005. In Kyrgyzstan, mobile phone usage grew twenty-fold between 1998 and 2004, reaching 450,000 subscribers. Granted, subscriber rates (23 and 91 per 1,000 in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, respectively) are low when compared to figures in Western countries. Crucially though, what aggregate figures do not reflect is that mobile phones, like Internet usage, is most heavily concentrated in the younger generation, among precisely those groups who turned out in greatest numbers in the spring 2005 Kyrgyz and Uzbek uprisings.

Growing access to new communication technologies has eroded the effectiveness of state-led repression. In the late 1990s, for example, when only the wealthy could afford mobile phones, Central Asian states could suppress protests before word of demonstrations spread throughout regional and kinship-based social networks. With the geometric increase in mobile phone users, however, a few dozen oppositionists can quickly rally hundreds and indeed thousands of supporters to the streets. Large numbers do not guarantee success, but they do afford some measure of protection. In Uzbekistan, perhaps the most repressive of the Central Asian states, for example, thousands-strong demonstrations erupted in Fergana Valley cities in November 2004. Confronted with the first mass protests since the Soviet collapse, Uzbek security forces stood idly by as demonstrators upended and set fire to police cars. Even the recent killings of some 400 to 800 of the several thousand demonstrators in Andijon and the subsequent state-led intimidation of other protestors, though a horrific and deplorable violation of fundamental human rights, stands in stark contrast to previous, smaller scale Uzbek demonstrations in which all participants faced certain repression.

New communication technologies and vague laws of political succession are by no means the only causes for the recent upsurge of political unrest in Central Asia. Successful oppositionist mobilizations in other former Soviet states, along with fifteen years of accumulated fatigue and frustration under corrupt and oppressive would-be presidents-for-

life, have likewise increased the willingness of societies to protest. Along with this willingness have arisen new opportunities for alternative elites and ideologies to reshape the region's politics.

Central Asia's New Political Entrepreneurs

In 1999 Russian border guards withdrew from Kyrgyzstan, reinforcing what many Central Asians already saw as the steady erosion of Moscow's influence in the region. This perception of Russian decline was further confirmed when, in response to the Western campaign against the Taliban in Afghanistan, both the Kyrgyz and Uzbek governments granted the United States basing rights to use what were once Soviet airfields. The Uzbek concession, however, proved short-lived, when President Islam Karimov demanded the departure of American troops, in effect turning against his Western critics so that he might more brutally repress his domestic ones.

Karimov's inclination toward repression, no doubt, found encouragement in the growing instability across the border in Kyrgyzstan. Here President Askar Akayev did not direct troops to shoot opposition protestors; as a result of his restraint, the Kyrgyz president was literally chased from power in March 2005. Importantly though, the Kyrgyz events were only a few of the tea leaves the Uzbek leader was divining in his near abroad. Similarly influential were Russian President Vladimir Putin's characterization of the Kyrgyz protests as "regretful" and his lament "that once more in a country in the post-Soviet area, political issues are decided by unlawful means." Putin, in short, remained unwavering in his support for Karimov's autocratic rule. In return, Karimov, though he had shunned relations with Moscow throughout much of the post-Soviet period, traveled to St. Petersburg and personally thanked Putin (fittingly on October 7, the Russian leader's birthday) by agreeing to new military ties and by proposing that Moscow and Tashkent explore the "possibility of developing a relationship of allies."

This new Uzbek-Russian rapprochement and the souring of Uzbek-U.S. relations have altered the political opportunity structure elsewhere in Central Asia. Kyrgyzstan, dependent on its Uzbek neighbor for energy and always fearful of outside incitement of unrest and irredentism among its large ethnic Uzbek minority, has repeatedly hinted that the U.S. airbase near the capital, Bishkek, must close as U.S. military operations in Afghanistan are curtailed. At the same time, Kyrgyzstan's new government, led by Kurmanbek Bakiyev, has pledged to deepen military relations with Moscow, allowing for the expansion of Russia's airbase in Kant as well for a possible opening of a new base in support of the region's Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).

Importantly, however, Putin and his *realpolitik* advisors are not the only ones profiting from Uzbek and Kyrgyz instability. Opportunities

likewise exist for supporters of both reformist and extremist strategies of Central Asian political change. Instability, particularly when coupled with repression as it is in Uzbekistan, provides fertile grounds for militant and radical groups of which there are no shortage in Central Asia. Militant and radical Islamists in particular have enjoyed increased popularity as a growing number of Uzbeks, out of frustration and desperation, have become attracted to ever more violent visions of political change. Though they represent a comparatively small portion of the Uzbek population, Islamist extremist groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and Hizb ut-Tahrir nevertheless have proven adept at increasing their profile by, paradoxically, goading the Karimov government into periodic fits of anti-Islamist repression.

Though disruptive and sometimes deadly in the short run, it is unlikely that these radical Islamist groups would enjoy continued support should political instability and repression suddenly disappear in Uzbekistan and elsewhere throughout the region. Here the Tajik case is instructive; following a peace agreement mediated by the United Nations in 1997, Islamists readily abandoned their weapons when they were given the chance to participate in politics through more (albeit imperfectly) democratic means. Political participation, even when constrained, has proven far more popular among Central Asians than have radical ideologies of violent change.

U.S.-Russia Cooperation and an Opening for Reformists

It is tempting, in light of the recent rebuff of Washington and Moscow's new ascendancy in the region, to withdraw costly U.S. assistance programs to Central Asia. One could argue, moreover, that the region is of declining concern to U.S. security. Kabul, in contrast to Baghdad, has achieved some measure of self-rule, with the consequence that Central Asian airbases may no longer be necessary to support the West's downsizing military operations in Afghanistan. As for Central Asia itself, Washington might find ceding its influence to Moscow in dysfunctional states such as Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan to be an asset rather than a liability. Fifteen years of Western engagement in the region have produced little in the way of substantive political liberalization. Even in cases where there has been regime change, as in Kyrgyzstan most recently, new political elites appear either unwilling or incapable of rejecting ingrained authoritarian practices.

A U.S. divestiture from the region, though, would be beneficial neither to American nor, ironically, Russian geopolitical interests. Without political reform, Central Asia will become less rather than more stable in the years to come. In contrast to the 1990s, when both the United States and Russia could count on Central Asia's authoritarian rulers, however

distasteful, to maintain political order, the spread of new information communication technologies in recent years has significantly eroded the repressive capacity of the region's autocrats. These new technologies have exposed Central Asians to a growing array of alternative forms of liberal and illiberal governance. At the same time, new communication technologies have greatly aided Central Asians' ability to mount effective political protest. Protests and even the overthrow of authoritarian regimes preclude neither continued unrest nor the rise of new forms of illiberal rule. New communication technologies, though they aid social mobilization, are in of themselves politically neutral; they are used by extremists and reformists to equal effect.

Given this new reality of Central Asian protest and the concomitant opportunities that political instability offers militants of all persuasions, both the United States and Russia share a common interest in ensuring that the precipitants of violent mass mobilization, particularly repression and monopolistic autocratic control, find little support abroad. To achieve this shared goal, both Moscow and Washington would do well to move beyond distracting formulations of a renewed great game in Central Asia and, instead, adopt a more productive strategy whereby both countries act in concert to encourage Central Asian political reform. The end result of such cooperative engagement need not be, and likely would not be, democracy. Merely opening Central Asian states to some degree of meaningful and institutionalized political contestation, however, would help move the region from the violent and convulsive politics of the street to the more peaceful and deliberative politics of group representation.

