

The Future of the Ferghana Valley States

Fatimakhon Ahmedova and Keith A. Leitich, "Ethnic and Religious Conflict in the Ferghana Valley," Journal of Central Asian Studies, 6:1 (Fall/Winter 2001).

Some Central Asian specialists thought that Tajikistan, whose 2005 parliamentary elections took place the same day in February as those in Kyrgyzstan, would be the next post-Soviet republic to overthrow its authoritarian leader when citizens took to the streets. Instead, the next demonstrations protesting government action—which this time were met with deadly force—took place in the Ferghana Valley in Uzbekistan, where hundreds died in Andijan after clashes with the government.

In the last century the Ferghana Valley—parts of which belong to Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan—faced political and economic challenges brought by Soviet rule. This new century has presented its own challenges to the region as Russia and the United States jockey for influence there, given its geographic proximity to the United States' war on terrorism. In order to understand the possibility of political change in the region—and whether the area's next elections (for Tajikistan's president in 2006) could bring change—one must understand the history of the Ferghana Valley and its implications for the region's present.

Problems of the Twentieth Century

The Ferghana Valley has a far reaching impact on Central Asia because it is an area with tremendous resources. For example, though only one third of the population of Tajikistan lives there, it contains three quarters of the country's arable land and produces as much as two thirds of its GDP. In another example, Uzbekistan's Ferghana Valley territories make up only 4.3% of its total land, but they contain 27% of the country's population, 37% of its arable land, and five of its ten largest cities.

The valley is also the locus of serious regional tensions that have ethnic, religious and economic roots. Long a single political unit, it was first split in the late 1920s, when the USSR divided it into three administrative districts, whose winding boundaries frequently crosscut economic zones, transportation corridors, and even towns and villages. It wasn't until the early 1990s though—with the valley's division into three separate countries—that these divisions began to be the source of serious tensions. The three new governments began to implement radically different economic strategies: Kyrgyzstan moved towards full privatization (including of agricultural land), Uzbekistan pursued a more measured approach (retaining currency controls and subsidies on key consumer goods), and Tajikistan struggled through a destructive civil war (1992-1997) that devastated the south of the country but impacted the entire economy. Concurrent with this

divergence in economic policy, the common informational space of the Soviet Union was replaced by three states with separate mass media, educational systems and ideological orientations, thereby diminishing mutual understanding across borders and emphasizing the building of individual nations over the unity of the valley as a whole.

Ethnic and Religious Differences

Ethnically, the valley is extremely diverse, not only across the region, but also within each country. For example, Tajik communities live in the western end of the valley, which belongs to Tajikistan, as well as across its length in both Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Uzbeks constitute a substantial minority in the Ferghana Valley provinces of Kyrgyzstan (27%) and Tajikistan (31%) and are often the majority population in rural areas bordering Uzbekistan. Within each broader ethnic group, there is also significant diversity—in language, in rural vs. urban roots, in recent vs. ancient migration to the region, in clan identification, etc.—which further distinguish one group from another.

Though historically the residents of the valley have been majority Sunni Muslims, recently there has been a tremendous growth in religious pluralism throughout the Central Asian states, which some observers view as a potential source of conflict. For example, the region has seen the arrival of Protestant Christian missionaries as well as the importation of new forms of Muslim education, ranging from Turkish-style secular schools to militant madrasas sponsored by Pakistan.

The fall of the Soviet Union, and the glasnost that preceded it, also opened the political arena to opposition groups, who quickly formed to challenge the state's monopoly on power. Almost as quickly, Central Asian leaders silenced domestic dissent through political repression and censorship, banning many opposition political parties. They also adopted policies that limited Islamic political activity and banned the Islamic Renaissance Party, which continues to function underground and is most active among Uzbeks in the Ferghana Valley. The appeal of Islamic-based political movements in the valley is due largely to the fact that people lack an outlet for secular political expression. Alienated and disenfranchised by Central Asia's authoritarian regimes, people turned to Islam as a means of political expression. However, outsiders have moved to radicalize this indigenous Islamic revival and, since 1990, Islamic fundamentalism has made significant inroads among the Uzbek areas of the Ferghana Valley.

Economic Problems

While independence from Russia brought Central Asians both economic problems and hopes for a better life, some 15 years on, the region's economic problems have worsened while Central Asians' hope is less robust. Both ethnic and religious differences in the region have been exacerbated by the stress caused by severe poverty, unemployment, and a shortage of key resources, such as land and water. Central Asians' standard of living dropped dramatically since 1990, and in countries like Tajikistan, it is estimated that

some 80% of the population lives in poverty despite the efforts of international organizations to improve the situation. The inhabitants of the Ferghana Valley blame their governments for indulging corrupt bureaucrats while failing to address their poverty. If in the 1990s, they thought that the end of the Soviet system was the primary cause of poverty and conflicts, then the beginning of the millennium has changed their minds. People now believe that the region's authoritarian regimes care more about turning their presidencies into monarchies than about solving the region's problems. As a result, and echoing other residents of the Ferghana Valley, the protesters in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, and Andijan, Uzbekistan, made political demands as well as economic ones.

The New Millennium

To make matters more complicated, in the new millennium the countries of Central Asia have found themselves caught between Russia and the United States. The Ferghana Valley states unanimously decided to support the U.S. in its struggle against global terrorism in 2001, and they agreed to allow U.S. military forces access to bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Central Asian leaders thought this new relationship would give them (1) a powerful new friend who could balance the influence of Russia, Iran and China in the region; (2) guarantees of stability within their borders, for they feared the activities of local and foreign Islamists; and (3) economic benefits, both for state coffers and perhaps also for state officials' personal accounts. In general, they seemed to get what they had bargained for and the number of grants, humanitarian aid and other "friendly" assistance grew consistently between 2001 and 2005. The recent events in Kyrgyzstan, however, have changed the political landscape.

With the "Tulip Revolution," Central Asian leaders now view the presence of the U.S. military as the main destabilizing force in the region. The outspoken U.S. support for the "color revolutions" in Georgia and Ukraine plus the fate of their former colleague, Kyrgyzstan's Askar Akaev, frightened Central Asian leaders and made them reconsider their earlier distance from their old friend Russia. Though they realize that the American presence has helped them solve some problems—by providing economic support and decreasing the likelihood of a domestic Taliban—they are now focused on the more important goal of holding on to power (and, should the worst come to pass, they are certainly encouraged by the fact that Russia sheltered Akaev after his escape from Kyrgyzstan).

However, it is not only Central Asian governments that are glad to orient towards Russia rather than the United States but also the numerous unemployed Tajiks, Uzbeks and Kyrgyz people of the region. For many people, Russia is still the country that raises their hopes for a better life. Many Central Asian migrants work in Russia and feed their families by sending money home through the national banks (which generates significant profit for these state-owned banks). In reality, the countries of the Ferghana Valley are still very much economically dependent upon their wealthier

neighbor Russia, a dependence bolstered by the numerous historical and cultural ties among them.

Those who work with international and local nongovernmental organizations directly dependent on American money appear to be the primary group dissatisfied with the rising negativity toward the United States. Religious organizations do not welcome closer ties to Moscow but neither were they pleased with their leaders' previous relationships with Washington.

The Future of Central Asian Democracy

This regional realignment toward Russia does not bode well for the future of democracy in Central Asia. But real success in promoting democracy in any country will only come from a thorough understanding of the region's past and present. Underestimating the importance of geography (neighboring Russia), the economic dependence of Central Asians on Russia and the historical ties between the two regions will only bring frustration. The Americans made a mistake in thinking that post-Soviet republics were similar to African countries leaving colonial control for independence. In countries with a Soviet past, 100% of the population went through free education where they were exposed to a strong state ideology. They had very clear expectations of government, and it has not been easy for them to be subject to experiments in democratic change. In addition, the war in Iraq has not made the work of American democracy promoters easier in that it negatively impacts the attitude of Central Asians towards U.S. policy.

In addition, the slowness of the U.S. reaction to the recent events in Andijan cost the lives of hundreds of people and did not help rehabilitate the United States' image. As the main country promoting democracy in the region, these events offered the United States the chance to act according to its stated democratic purposes but it failed to do so in time—even though organizations like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International called for immediate action.

Perhaps much more worrisome, however, is the dark shadow of corruption lying over post-Soviet republics, draining national resources and widening the gap between rich and poor. The experiences of people in Georgia and Ukraine have not lived up to all of their expectations. Calling these new regimes "democratic" may unfortunately make "democracy" a synonym of "corrupt," "politically illiterate," and "unethical."

Elections in Tajikistan

The conduct of Tajikistan's February 2005 parliamentary elections does not inspire hope regarding the prospects for the 2006 presidential poll, for the ruling party (the People's Democratic Party of Tajikistan or PDPT) ensured its control of parliament by ignoring international election standards. While six parties were registered to run in the elections, all but members of President Emomali Rakhmonov's PDPT ran into difficulties when they attempted to register specific candidates. The parties expressed their indignation following

the elections, but to no immediate avail.

The events of March 2005—the so-called “Tulip Revolution” in Kyrgyzstan—and May 2005—the cruel suppression of peaceful demonstrators at Andijan in Uzbekistan—show what Central Asian leaders are willing to do to derail the opposition and retain their hold on political power. Already, Tajikistan’s government has begun to detain opposition leaders on charges the opposition says are politically motivated. The leader of the Democratic Party of Tajikistan, Mahmadrusi Iskandarov, has been jailed since December 2004 on charges of terrorism and embezzlement. International organizations have objected that Mr. Iskandarov has been denied access to counsel since his arrest. Two members of the Social Democratic Party were jailed last June on charges of hooliganism, though they claim the charges are in response to their protest of the February 27 election results. Two members of the Islamic Renaissance Party (which is legal only in Tajikistan) were also jailed recently on charges of hooliganism that they claim are designed to smear the reputation of their party. In addition, the deputy chair of the unregistered Development Party (whose chair is already in state custody) has been imprisoned for public insult and slander against the president and the country. The opposition believes that such persecution will only increase.

President Rakhmonov hopes to decrease the number of potential candidates for the presidency in 2006 by jailing them. Thus, when the elections arrive, he will be the only possible candidate for the post, and no one will dare to suggest he does not have the right to prolong his presidency.

Unfortunately, in some ways, he is the only alternative. Should the 2006 elections bring regime change, where are the guarantees that democracy would arrive with the new president? Which Tajik party has the ability to further democracy in the country? The Communists with their utopian ideas? The Islamic party and its pursuit of a religious state? The Democratic Party with its corrupt leaders? Many in Tajikistan fear that any new leader would simply begin his own plundering of the Tajik treasury as has happened in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Even despite their recent “revolutions,” the people of Kyrgyzstan are skeptical that the new government will act to address their problems. People are tired of living in poverty and afraid of instability, and given this fear and their present choices, it may be that citizens of Tajikistan will have no real choice except for Rakhmonov (and Russia) in 2006.

However, the peace is fragile in Tajikistan, and the president’s aggressive measures against his political opponents could be enough to push this volatile situation into conflict. Public demonstrations—and a second Andijan—could be enough to spark civil war in a country where the wounds of the last civil war have not yet healed. Given this situation, the people of the Ferghana Valley pray for peace, as it is the only thing they can do voluntarily and with pleasure. This was their practice before the Soviet era, during it and amid its

transition to democracy, and it will continue regardless of the party in control.