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Uzbekistan's State-Building Fatigue

In his quest for regime stability and security, Uzbek president Islam Karimov first looked to the United States, beginning in the late 1990s with a covert relationship born of a mutual distrust of the Taliban. After the September 11 attacks, Uzbekistan became the United States' trusted ally, providing a military base as access to Afghanistan and becoming a partner in the war on terrorism. Yet, in May 2005, U.S.-Uzbek relations were changed irrevocably. The United States, now pedaling democracy promotion as its top foreign policy objective, could not turn a blind eye to Uzbek authorities' violent suppression of the protests in Andijon.

Karimov defended his reaction as necessary to put down subversive forces. With the images of the Colored Revolutions etched into the regime's psyche, Andijon was a sign that unrest could lead to chaos and collapse. Domestically, his regime's stability has long been threatened by the influence of radical Islamists and clan politics. A democracy simply cannot be created overnight, transplanted on top of a tribal, clan-based society with no national civil society to speak of. Realizing that his alliance with the United States was becoming a liability and fearful that Islamists were turning their anger about the U.S. presence against his regime, Karimov decided to abandon the West and its democracy promotion agenda and look to Russia as an ally that would respect his political choices and provide Uzbekistan with security and opportunities for economic growth.

Should Uzbekistan be pushed to democratize, as the current U.S. foreign policy agenda predicates, or should it be moved gently toward reform by focusing on economic cooperation and engagement? Can Tashkent keep the lid on radical Islamist influences in the country? Do Uzbekistan's problems

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condemn it to eventually be subsumed under the failed-state category, as a number of observers believe, or are they merely the by-products of state-building fatigue?

Competing Influences

With a population of more than 25 million, Uzbekistan is Central Asia's largest state, as well as home to the main historical centers of Central Asian statehood and Islamic culture. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the newly independent republic found itself suddenly separated from neighbors by official boundaries and borders. Its economy was closely attached to Russia's, and its landlocked position made access to world markets difficult. In the south, Uzbekistan borders a restless neighbor, Afghanistan, that was gripped by disorder. During these early years of independence, Karimov was inspired by the Chinese model of modernizing the economy while holding political change in check. He believed that tight state control of political life and suppression of dissent were the best means to prevent the country from sliding into chaos, which had occurred in neighboring Tajikistan in the beginning of the 1990s.

Karimov soon began to drag his feet on reform in the economic sphere as well, calling for gradualism as opposed to the "shock therapy" characteristic of the Russian model. He believed a more radical strategy could trigger social upheaval and risk both the country's stability and his regime's hold on power. Although the slow pace of reform would lead to stagnation and impede the transition to a market economy, it initially enabled Uzbekistan to escape the slump in production experienced by some post-Soviet republics. Uzbek leaders were particularly concerned about the Ferghana Valley region, where the seeds of radical Islamism were sown as early as the Soviet era, because overpopulation, land crises, and unemployment were creating social unrest. Broadly speaking, two groups have increasingly sought claims on power from the leaders of Uzbekistan as well as the rest of Central Asia: Islamists and solidarity groups.

AN ISLAMIC REVIVAL

Despite the Soviet-era Communist regime's efforts to drive religion to the margins of public life and impose strict party and state control on religion, Islam in Uzbekistan survived not only under the auspices of official institutions but in a much broader, popular, and informal form beyond the government's control, including underground circles, illegal religious literature, private family discussions, and secret observances of rites and customs. Such practices paved the way for a swift re-Islamization of the Uzbek population during the period of perestroika under Mikhail Gorbachev. Alongside the traditional Hanafi doctrine of Sunni Islam, which is closely connected with the Sufi tradition, the ideas of "pure Islam," or Salafism, began to spread.

After the breakup of the Soviet Union, groups formed on the basis of these beliefs and the idea of replacing the secular regime with an Islamic state took shape. In the early 1990s, these groups managed to gain control over a significant number of mosques, including sites in Tashkent. In a number of towns in the Ferghana Valley, they even began to assume the exercise of some government functions, such as maintaining law and order, supervising markets, managing certain spheres of community life, and settling disputes. Their activities received vigorous support from abroad, primarily from Saudi Arabia, where a huge number—several hundred thousand, according to some reports—of Uzbek immigrants' descendants lived.

Uzbekistan has long been threatened by radical Islamists and clan politics.

In 1992, Karimov cracked down on radical Islamic groups after a number of influential radical Islamic organizations in the Ferghana Valley directly challenged Karimov by calling him to the city of Namangan to start negotiations on the creation of an Islamic state in Uzbekistan, hoping that he would resign. Subsequently, a substantial number of the Islamic groups' members crossed over into neighboring Afghanistan or to Tajikistan. Many of those who sought refuge took part in the Tajik civil war alongside armed units of the Islamic Revival Party. After a national reconciliation was reached in Tajikistan in 1996, leaders of the Islamic militants created the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), which strove for the violent overthrow of the Karimov regime and the establishment of *shari'a* rule. Between 1996 and 2001, armed IMU units with bases in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan traversed the territory of Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, launching a number of terrorist attacks and taking hostages.

Yet another radical Islamic organization, a branch of the transnational Islamic Liberation Party, or Hizb at-Tahrir al-Islami (HTI), also rose to challenge the authorities. HTI branches, which are banned in most countries of the Muslim world as well as Germany and Russia, operate in individual countries virtually independent of one another. They are united, however, by a common ideological platform and a utopian agenda of constructing a global caliphate. HTI observes strict rules of secrecy in its activities and has a hierarchical organizational structure resembling those of illegal nationalist and leftist movements of the past.

The Tahriris, as distinct from the IMU, proclaim their adherence to peaceful methods of struggle, mostly by distributing literature and recruiting new members. Yet, some passages in the works of HTI's founder, the Palestinian sheik Taqiuddin an-Nabhani, permit the assumption that this peaceful effort can later give way to a violent one. Nabhani spoke of three stages of political struggle: first, "finding and cultivating individuals who are convinced by the thought and method of the party" who will then carry forth the party's ideas; second, interacting with the *umma* "to establish Islam in life, state, and society"; and finally, taking control of the government, "implementing Islam completely and totally, and carrying its message to the world."[1] As analyst Zeyno Baran wrote, "By combining fascist rhetoric, Leninist strategy, and Western sloganeering with Wahhabi theology, HTI has made itself into a very real and potent threat that is extremely difficult for liberal societies to counter."[2]

Uzbek leaders have made suppression the main instrument for opposing radical Islam.

Because resisting this Islamist threat is easier for an illiberal regime to accomplish, Uzbek leaders, similar to most Middle Eastern governments, have made suppression the main instrument for opposing radical Islam. After a February 1999 assassination attempt against Karimov in Tashkent, reprisals within Uzbekistan against members of Islamic organizations and their followers intensified, but at the same time, the Uzbek authorities decided that it was impossible to control the Islamic extremists with harsh police measures alone. Since then, a number of elements have shaped Karimov's policies toward radical Islam.

One way that he has attempted to counter its influence is through the preemptive borrowing of the Islamists' messages and symbols. Karimov started positioning himself, for example, as a defender of "real" Islam and a successor to Timurleng, the great Central Asian ruler and conqueror of the Middle Ages. Of course, this strategy cannot be fully separated from his overall system of authoritarian government.

Another element of the Uzbek government's anti-Islamist strategy is to promote official religious institutions controlled by the state. These institutions set up under government auspices, such as the Directorate for the Muslims of Uzbekistan and the Islamic University, oppose extremists by educating students in the spirit of a traditional, tolerant version of Islam and publishing pamphlets and books, including those devoted to delicate aspects of Islamic doctrine and practice such as democracy and shari'a and the role of women, that were based on moderate Hanafi tradition.

Finally, the government has developed and provided strong support for traditional neighborhood communities, the *mahallas*. One mahalla may comprise up to several hundred households, with the total number of residents usually no more than 5,000. Councils of elders, or *aqsaqals*, consisting of six to eight people were formed within these communities, through which the government channels financial assistance to the mahallas. The mahalla councils are used by Uzbek leaders to control residential areas, provide information on the neighborhood, and prevent mobilization actions by Islamists. At the same time, these councils are regarded as a step toward the development of local self-government. Many observers have concluded that although the mahalla strategy has helped counteract the spread of radical Islam, it has also encouraged the re-traditionalization of Uzbek society. In doing so, it bore an antisecular element within itself and paradoxically promoted further Islamization.

THE POWER OF SOLIDARITY GROUPS

Solidarity groups, the members of which are tied by bonds of close cooperation and mutual responsibility, are among the mainstays of Uzbekistan's political system. In Kazakhstan, solidarity groups are formed mostly on the basis of kinship; in Turkmenistan they come together on the basis of clan and tribal background; and in Tajikistan as well as Kyrgyzstan, they develop primarily on a regional basis. Uzbekistan is closest to the Tajik model but differs in that the local solidarity groups are not so strictly attached to their territory's and fellow countrymen's links. Uzbek solidarity groups may include not only members from a single region but also the members' relatives, close friends, partners, and all those connected to members through patron-client relationships.

Solidarity groups influence the functioning of government institutions, hinder modernization, and generally act as an obstacle to national reform. At this point, the situation is similar to the "tribal problem" in Afghanistan. A complex system of Uzbek identity formation includes many markers, or determinants, that are traditional (ethnic, religious, clan and tribal, regional, kinship) or modern (professional, business, financial and other ties and interests) and combinations thereof. In the multitiered Uzbek identity, former identities based on kinship, regional, clan, or tribal affiliation no longer play crucial roles, but their traces still remain.[3] The traditional bonds of solidarity at the micro level, the mahallas and extended families, remain as well. Solidarity groups predetermine the political mobilization within their framework, and any political leader usually relies on a certain group to build larger alliances. Accordingly, solidarity groups also make ethnic and thereby national transethnic consolidation and mobilization difficult. Without the proper balance of solidarity groups at all levels within society, Uzbekistan's stability cannot be ensured.

During the Soviet era, the interests of solidarity groups were accommodated in designing the local *nomenklatura* elite, promoting personnel, and making appointments to leading posts. The intertwining of clannish interests and rivalry in the struggle for control over Uzbekistan's financial, economic, and administrative resources (privatization, appointments to lucrative posts, career development, educational opportunities for children, trips abroad, and other benefits) form the background against which the formation and evolution of Uzbek statehood are unfolding today. Authoritarian rule in societies such as Uzbekistan's can better control various competing clans during painful periods of transition, but it can also doom society to a stagnation fraught with explosion if it does not soften its grip on power and conduct changes and reforms.

Dancing with the Superpower

To help combat these domestic challenges, Karimov has sought international allies to ensure national and particularly his regime's stability. In the 1990s, his strategy was oriented toward gradually distancing Uzbekistan from Russia; enhancing cooperation with other outside actors, beginning with Western states; and trying to elicit from the latter financial and technological aid. After the September 11 attacks, Uzbekistan became a close ally of the United States in the war on terrorism. By allowing the United States to use the air base in Karshi-Khanabad (K2), Karimov contributed to the success of U.S. military operations in Afghanistan against the Taliban. Yet, his trusted cooperation with the United States' antiterrorist struggle had begun long before that. Beginning in the late 1990s, Uzbekistan's poor human rights record and slow pace of reform did not prevent the United States from initiating rapprochement for geopolitical reasons.[4] Uzbekistan's population, resources, geography, and leadership assigned it a crucial role in maintaining regional stability and predetermined its importance for the United States. Karimov willingly responded to U.S. overtures, as cooperation with the West brought him significant economic benefits and gave him a chance to shore up his position politically.

In 1999 he approved the use of the country's territory by a unit of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) created especially for hunting Osama bin Laden. Karimov was certain that bin Laden and the Taliban would not give up efforts to topple him. As *Washington Post* journalist Steve Coll mentions in his remarkable book, *Ghost Wars*, Cofer Black, then-director of the United States' Counterterrorist Center, wanted to project into Afghanistan and penetrate bin Laden's Afghan sanctuaries from a regional platform. Uzbekistan was the best possible candidate for that role. "Uzbekistan's government was not penetrated by Taliban sympathizers. … [Karimov] jailed and sometimes tortured democratic and Islamic opponents … [and] had no sympathy for bin Laden."[5]

Rapid democratization carried the risk of severe destabilization.

At that time, these were considered to be Karimov's virtues. Black and his colleagues reached out to Karimov, and a new intelligence alliance was proposed, centered on the two states' mutual enemies in Afghanistan. Karimov insisted that all of his dealings with the CIA be kept secret, examined the plan, and accepted it. It was not an easy decision for a Central Asian leader at that time to engage in close, secret cooperation with the CIA. Yet, according to Coll, Karimov agreed "to just about every request the CIA put forward."[6] In particular, he agreed to share intelligence information his government had obtained about bin Laden's bases in Afghanistan and expressed his willingness to join CIA military operations in Afghanistan within the framework of a new commando force. Moreover, Karimov agreed in 2000 to allow secret Predator drone flights to take off from the K2 air base (although only a few of the 15 planned flights actually happened). The equipment was brought in so secretly that many officials in the Uzbek government did not even know about it.[7]

Karimov's decision to permit the United States to use the facilities at K2 after the September 11 attacks had, then, been preceded by significant covert cooperation. In 2001, skepticism within the U.S. administration about corruption and human rights abuses in Uzbekistan was not strong enough to block the burgeoning security arrangement with Karimov from taking form. The new rapprochement culminated in March 2002 when the United States and Uzbekistan signed a Declaration on Strategic Partnership. For Tashkent, Washington's commitment to Uzbekistan's security and territorial integrity were irresistible offerings. Uzbekistan's neighbors understood when Karimov, speaking to a group of journalists after his return from Washington, said, "Let me warn some aggressive forces around us that look at us with an evil eye or with evil intentions: Now you know we are not alone."[8] Uzbek authorities rejoiced at the coalition forces' success in destroying their most vicious enemy, the Taliban regime. Tashkent had to deal with the West's growing criticism of its record of torturing prisoners, suppressing religious freedom, banning opposition political parties, and countless other human rights violations during this period. The expectation among Uzbek leaders, however, was that Washington's interest in partnership in the war on terrorism, as well as in curtailing Russian influence, would withstand any such criticism.

The Andijon Effect

It came as a surprise, then, that just more than three years later, on November 14, 2005, Karimov would tell a group of journalists in Moscow that "the resentful forces that have been told to leave the Khanabad airfield will not rest. They never tire of subversive activities."[9] The situation began to change after the wave of Colored Revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan began to roll across the post-Soviet space. Because it did not take into account the situation on the ground, the rapid democratization that was ever more persistently demanded by Uzbekistan's Western partners carried with it the risk of severe destabilization. The Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan, which resulted in the ouster of the region's most democratically minded and Western-friendly president, Askar Akaev, was a matter of particular concern for Uzbek authorities. The regime became keenly aware of its vulnerability and insecurity and started to critically reexamine its course toward developing relations, principally with the West.

The bloody events in Andijon in May 2005 became the critical factor in deciding Tashkent's policies moving forward. Uzbekistan was resolutely condemned by the West after government forces shot into the crowd at a demonstration in which the organizers of the antigovernment mutiny called on peaceful inhabitants to take part on May 13, 2005. Whatever their background or goals, these organizers were well-prepared professionals and were surely Islamists, not peaceful citizens. The Andijon prison had been well fortified and guarded and could be captured only by a group expressly prepared for such an operation. The government had no choice but to put down the rebels, although this does not justify the level of cruelty employed by the government forces.

In the aftermath of Andjion, the Uzbek regime grew increasingly wary of Islamist influence both in Uzbekistan and in the Central Asian region. To its friends and neighbors, it was clear that poverty, unemployment, authoritarianism, the closed nature of society, suppression, appalling corruption, and the lack of any opportunities for protest had led to an influx of people into the ranks of supporters of radical Islamists.

There is another version of the mutiny that traces the root of the issue back to clan politics. The trial of more than 23 Andijon businessmen, which had triggered the May 13 events, was linked to the ouster in May 2004 of their patron and former regional governor, Kobiljon Obidov. He had fallen out of Karimov's favor after a wave of protests over the deterioration of living conditions swept through this ordinarily trouble-free region. A former minister of agriculture and irrigation, Saydullo Begaliev, was appointed as his replacement. Enjoying the authorities' confidence, he began a purge of Obidov's favorites, including the 23 businessmen later accused of belonging to the Akramiya radical Islamist group. The businessmen were allegedly advised to sell their enterprises to the allies of the new regional governor. When they refused, they were taken into custody.[10] Although the official claim that the businessmen themselves were affiliated with the Akramiya group has raised doubts among most Western observers, it is possible that the businessmen had at least financed the local Islamic opposition. According to members of the Islamic groups, their main financial support comes from within the country, not from abroad, as some observers claim. It is possible that the combination of the Islamist and clan versions of the mutiny is correct.

Authoritarianism is the integral feature of Uzbekistan's traditional political culture.

Return to Russia

Regardless of the mutiny organizers' affiliation, the sanctions imposed on the regime by Western countries after Andijon contrasted with the support Uzbekistan received from some members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), including Russia. Armed with the knowledge that Islamists had been using the U.S. presence in the country as a motivating factor to mobilize sentiment against his government and confronted with tough Western pressure after the crackdown in Andjion, Karimov decided to make a change in Uzbekistan's orientation, away from the United States and toward Russia.

He demanded a U.S. withdrawal from the K2 base within six months (although there is enough evidence that he had already been planning this). Simultaneously, he moved quickly to establish closer ties to Russia. On November 14, 2005, Russian president Vladimir Putin and Karimov signed the Treaty on Allied Relations. Among other provisions, the treaty allows for the two countries to use military facilities on each other's territory in case of an emergency and states that Russia and Uzbekistan will consider any act of aggression committed against either of them as an act of aggression against both.[11] With Western sanctions in force, only Moscow could now deliver arms to Tashkent.

Karimov was aware that he would have to pay a price to secure interest from Russia as well as its close partners in the CIS for rapprochement to occur and to support his regime. In the context of this rapprochement strategy, Uzbekistan withdrew from the grouping of GUUAM, a political and economic consultative forum created in 1997 by Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova that does not include Russia and pursues maximal cooperation with NATO. In October 2005, it filed an application to join EurAsEC, a collective economic organization founded in 2000 with Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan as members and Moldova, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan as observers. Tashkent also sought to extend opportunities to Gazprom, the Russian natural gas monopoly, as a means of ensuring Moscow's long-term interest in lending political support to the Uzbek regime. Without waiting for an official invitation for membership in the organization, Uzbekistan initiated talks with Gazprom on large-scale natural gas projects. Under the production-sharing agreement that was reached, Gazprom will receive a license to develop the three largest gas deposits in Uzbekistan's Ustyurt plateau, a project in which it will invest $1.2 billion. This cooperation is very significant for Tashkent.

For Russia, the agreement on energy cooperation and Uzbekistan's entry into the EurAsEC are no less significant. First, the former bolsters Gazprom's position in the post-Soviet space and its leading role in transporting gas extracted therein. Second, in Moscow's opinion this greater clout will compensate, to a certain extent, for the loss of Ukraine as a partner in the Unified Economic Space project, a project to establish closer economic cooperation among Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia within the framework of the EurAsEC. Ukraine agreed to sign only 11 out of 38 prepared documents on the creation of a free-trade zone.[12]

Uzbekistan's official entry into EurAsEC on January 25, 2006, was conditional on its consent to immediate economic reform to make its economy compatible with the other member states. In retrospect, however, it appears that Karimov had long been preparing to take such action. There are several reasons why he decided to undertake reforms at the prodding of commonwealth partners but not in response to Western pressure. First, he had no fear that the social problems that might arise while the government pursued market reforms would be used to destabilize the government and induce a regime change. Second, he hoped that close economic cooperation within the EurAsEC framework with such strong partners as Kazakhstan and Russia would make reforming easier. Third, he felt sufficiently strong pressure from the solidarity groups on which he relies, which are aware that the continued administration of the economy by mere injunction will lead the country into disaster. Fourth, he banked on cutting the ground out from under the feet of his opposition, which had been criticizing him for the lack of reforms and from which he sensed growing danger.

EurAsEC's leadership assessed Karimov's economic policies in no uncertain terms. The organization's secretary general, Grigori Rapota, in an interview with *Nezavisimaya gazeta* said that, "after the act of formal entry into the ranks of the EurAsEC on January 25, 2006, Uzbekistan must by June 2006 accede to 20 of the agreements in force in the organization, and to the remaining 54 by the end of the year."[13] According to the article, the difficulty of this move lies in the fact that "Uzbekistan's economic policy is based on isolationism and continued existence of rule by fiat in management, i.e., it is at variance with many principles upon which the EurAsEC had been founded."[14]

Uzbek society is not fatally doomed to live under authoritarian cultural traditions.

Speaking at a session of the Uzbek cabinet on February 10, 2006, however, Karimov stressed that Uzbekistan was committed to such EurAsEC principles as the formation of a free-trade zone, the creation of a customs union, and agreement on a list of goods subject to excise duty for which minimum rates are fixed. In a later address to the Uzbek people, he announced an economic reform plan and asserted that the opening of Uzbek markets for countries in the commonwealth should exert a salutary effect on the Uzbek economy.

Hoping that an orientation change will help Uzbekistan enhance its security, Karimov resolved to go all the way and decided to resume the country's membership in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).[15] This organization was formed in 2002 on the basis of the Tashkent Collective Security Treaty, which had been created in May 1992, and now consists of Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan. (In 1997, Uzbekistan did not renew its membership in the treaty.) The member states agreed to deter or eliminate any military threat to their sovereignty and territorial integrity, promote military cooperation, and combat international terrorism. Tashkent's decision to return to the CSTO was the logical sequel to the strategic treaty concluded between Russia and Uzbekistan.

In February 2006, CSTO secretary general Nikolai Bordyuzha presented in Tashkent a draft agreement on the creation and functioning of the United Group of Forces (UGF) of the Central Asian Collective Security Region under the CSTO. As explained by the CSTO's headquarters, the UGF is entrusted with localizing and terminating possible frontier conflicts at the external borders of the region and defeating the troops of an aggressor in case of attack.[16] As a result, Karimov will later probably have to host Russian forces on a base in his territory. Russian strategic analyst Sergei Karaganov observed that this base "is necessary as a factor of containing possible conflicts and strengthening any government—be it Karimov or post-Karimov."[17] Of course, he is referring to any government other than an Islamist one.

In its agreement to commence close cooperation with Tashkent and occupy the void left in the wake of the U.S. departure, Moscow seems to have been conscious of the assets to be derived from this strategy, including tremendous benefits for Russian business, as well as the risks involved. In some measure, Russia has undertaken a share of responsibility for the reorganization of Uzbekistan's ossified bureaucratic economy, hamstrung by the all-powerful patron-client system and its associated corruption. In the event of a severe economic crisis in Uzbekistan, Russia as well as Kazakhstan will have to render direct assistance, although Russia scarcely intends to assume the burden of resolving Uzbek problems.

Fatigued but Not Failing

In a failed state, as defined by former vice chairman of the National Intelligence Council Graham Fuller, "the breakdown of authority, legal norms, and the institutions of central control result in rising anarchy, lawlessness, [and] criminality."[18] This is not the current situation in Uzbekistan. In this country, paternalism, which forms the backbone of the nation's social structure, feeds the culture of solidarity groups that complicates the process of state building already threatened by religious extremists. When Western analysts speak of Karimov's authoritarianism, they overlook the fact that authoritarianism is not a whim or a political line, but the integral feature of Uzbekistan's traditional political culture.

The leaders of Central Asian states, similar to many Arab leaders, usually respond to criticism of their authoritarian methods of governance by saying that if they were to allow democratic freedoms to be instantly introduced, the government that replaces them would be led by radical Islamists. Free and fair elections in Palestine have confirmed this fear. As Fareed Zakaria has written, "The Arab rulers of the Middle East are autocratic, corrupt, and heavy-handed. But they are still more liberal, tolerant, and pluralistic than what would likely replace them."[19]

Tashkent is, at least to some extent, surprised that it has come under criticism from its post–September 11 Western allies for responding to fears of radical Islamism at the expense of democracy. In other instances, the West has been deservedly reproached for having double standards. In 1992, for example, with the tacit approval of Western states, a military coup in Algeria barred the road to power for the Front of Islamic Salvation (FIS), which was on the verge of gaining a majority in parliament and forming a government as a result of an imminent election victory. Uzbekistan's neighbor regime in Turkmenistan is far more authoritarian, but it has not been as strongly criticized by the United States as Uzbekistan, nor has it been put under sanctions.

Yet, Uzbek society is not fatally doomed to live under the sway of its authoritarian cultural traditions. On the contrary, if it does not change, the constantly seething Uzbek cauldron could overflow. The many opposition forces, including Islamic-oriented groups, manipulating the discontented masses and appealing to the values of democracy, however, seek a redivision of power and wealth and have no intention of putting an end to the loathed, moribund traditions should they come to power.

> Isolation will hinder the country's development along the path of reform.

Automatic transfer of the institutions of liberal democracy to Uzbekistan by sanctions, isolation, and exclusion, along with attempts to impose regime change, can clearly have negative consequences and will hinder the country's development along the path of reform. As Frederick Starr, chairman of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute at John Hopkins University wrote, "There is no fast track to democracy in Central Asia; democracy cannot be built in the absence of key reforms, especially at the local level, and those can only come from working patiently with other governments, however frustrating this may be at times."[20]

The political evolution of the Uzbek regime is a thorny issue and is especially relevant in light of the forthcoming transition in the country's top leadership in the scheduled presidential elections in 2007. Through their strengthened alliance with Uzbekistan, Russia and its regional partners will most likely seek cautiously to adapt the country to their own standards by assisting in a step-by-step, soft transformation of the regime in the direction of mild authoritarianism. Despite their differences, because Russia and the West are equally interested in a stable, secure, and prosperous Uzbekistan, they should encourage regional economic engagement, development, and political cooperation. In this framework, possibilities will emerge for Uzbekistan's evolution toward a market economy, gradually usurping the influence of solidarity groups and defeating religious extremists while paving the way for the introduction and support of norms and values of liberalism such as freedom of speech, assembly, and religion, property rights, separation of powers, and rule of law.

Notes

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