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### Searching for Kamalot: Political Patronage and Youth Politics in Uzbekistan

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## Searching for *Kamalot*: Political Patronage and Youth Politics in Uzbekistan

ERIC M. MCGLINCHEY

THE ISLAM KARIMOV GOVERNMENT IN UZBEKISTAN is precariously brittle. Signs that the regime might collapse, though, would not be readily apparent if one's analytical framework derived solely from the political science transitions literature. Paradoxically, though political scientists are preoccupied with change, our leading theories emphasise continuity. We stress path dependency, institutional stickiness, and enduring ethnic, national and indeed civilisational identities. When change does arrive, we attribute it to sudden disruptions, to 'exogenous shocks', 'punctuated equilibriums', mobilisation 'cascades', and to the contingencies of 'elite miscalculation' (North 1990; Steinmo *et al.* 1992; Kuran 1991; Huntington 1993; Pierson 2000). So much for predictive social science theory.

What if, however, we jettisoned the *ex-post* causal parsimony of transitology and, instead, rolled up our analytical sleeves and actually 'mucked around' in the messiness of day-to-day autocratic politics? What indicators, short of the familiar dichotomy between stability and collapse, might we use to assess the pulse of authoritarianism? And might these indicators actually help us, *ex-ante*, predict political change? In this essay I illustrate that we can evaluate the health and, furthermore, the likely longevity of autocracy. More specifically, by taking seriously that which political scientists often do not—symbols, spectacle and discourse—we can identify the stress points where authoritarian governments are most likely to crack.

The spectacles I study involve the Karimov government's efforts to mobilise the soon-to-be majority of the Uzbek population through the youth group *Kamalot*. To a certain degree, this study parallels the familiar social science model of inquiry; *Kamalot* became suddenly prominent in the early 2000s and one of the essay's goals is to explain this variation. At the same time, though, this analysis of past variation is decidedly forward looking. I argue that by understanding the causal factors behind changes in symbolic politics, we can understand the processes and the likelihood of Uzbek regime change. That is, I argue, the same factor that is driving symbolic politics in the *Kamalot* case—the spreading failure of patronage-based politics in the regions—will lead Uzbek regime change in the near future.

That this is a case study need not lessen the implication of the essay's broader methodological findings. Political change and revolutions are seldom 'now out of never' (Kuran 1991, p. 7). Just the opposite, as I demonstrate here, political change is almost always foreshadowed by identifiable changes in discourse, symbols and

spectacles. Lamentably, political analysts rarely acknowledge these changes in symbolic politics until it is too late, until well after dramatic institutional changes come to pass. Sovietologists, for example, not only failed to acknowledge the potential importance of the changed discourse embodied in the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, they smugly derided the human rights language of this diplomatic effort. Thus, Anthony Lewis wrote of the Final Act in August 1976: 'Only a fatuous optimist would have expected its [the Soviet government's] attitudes to be transformed by the Helsinki Declaration' (Lewis 1976, p. 1). Some 25 years later we find political scientist Daniel Thomas offers a differing assessment:

That the unraveling of the Communist party-state enabled by Gorbachev's reforms proceeded in a democratic and largely peaceful direction across Eastern Europe is explained by the continued salience of those activists and independent organisations who had made 'Helsinki' a watchword for human rights nearly a decade earlier. (Thomas 2001, p. 23)

While Thomas's is a superb study, of Sovietology and transitology more broadly, one cannot help but conclude that while our punchlines are good, our delivery is frequently too late. Political scientists justify the discipline's collective tardiness by appealing to the need for methodological rigour. John Hall, in his essay, 'Ideas and the Social Sciences', writes for example: 'Given the sloppiness to which facile idealist analysis is prone, this sort of explanation should, in my opinion, be entertained only after more structural accounts have been exhausted' (Hall 1993, p. 52). Thus, we are instructed that ideas—the shorthand political scientists use for symbols, discourse, norms, for causal variables that neither rational choice nor institutionalist explanations adequately address—should be treated as the residual, something to be analysed only as a last resort when all other explanations fail. Judith Goldstein and Robert Keohane's study of *Ideas and Foreign Policy* instructs aspiring PhDs that, for their 'null hypothesis', they should assume political outcomes as the result of actors following 'egoistic interests in the context of power realities'. Only when this 'null hypothesis is carefully addressed and comparative evidence brought forth', Goldstein and Keohane instruct, will we be in a position to evaluate the role ideas play in political change (Goldstein & Keohane 1993, pp. 26–27).

There are dissenters, of course. 'Symbolic change', David Kertzer writes, produces 'important political and material consequences' (Kertzer 1996, p. x). And political actors recognise this, even if political scientists often do not. Thus, Alison Brysk demonstrates, actors, even those who pursue egoistic interests, seek 'to achieve social change through symbolic collective action' (Brysk 1995, p. 564). This, as I next demonstrate, is what President Islam Karimov is attempting through *Kamalot*. No longer able to count on patronage politics to ensure monopoly power, Karimov is seeking to rally youth to his side through symbolic collective action. His efforts may not, and it is likely, will not prove successful. That he is engaging youth politics in symbolic collective action, though, is a ready indicator of the political change that is likely to come.

In the first section below I discuss the emergence of and the extraordinary spectacles conducted by the state-led Uzbek youth group, *Kamalot*. In the second section I

explore what *Kamalot's* spectacles potentially tell us about the health of the Karimov regime and the potential for change in Uzbek politics. The image I present, that of an aging and ailing autocratic leader attempting to enlist youth support, is notably at odds with the portrayal of liberalising youth politics in other post-Soviet contexts, for example in Georgia, Serbia and Ukraine. Critically though, I argue that just as reformists see youth as vigorous and symbolically potent allies in the fight against moribund autocracy, so too do autocrats see youth as a way to revitalise stalled authoritarianism. The third section concludes by exploring the implications of youth mobilisation for the future of Uzbek governance. Here I demonstrate that Karimov's attempt at youth mobilisation is an indicator of failing patronage politics. If the septuagenarian president's gambit at winning youthful affection fails, if *Kamalot* is but a one-sided romance, then Karimov's political star will quickly fade.

#### *The Kamalot youth organisation*

For any student of Soviet politics, Uzbekistan's *Kamalot* youth organisation is immediately familiar. Modelled after the Soviet *Komsomol*, *Kamalot* is designed to capture the hearts and minds of Uzbekistan's burgeoning youth population. It may be trite to conclude a country's youth is its future. Nowhere in Central Asia, though, is this more the case than in Uzbekistan. In 2015, 47% of Uzbekistan's population will have been born after the Soviet collapse. This 14 million strong, youth cohort of people aged 24 and under, moreover, will be larger than the total country populations of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan in 2015, and just two million less than the total population of Kazakhstan.<sup>1</sup> However, numeric strength need not equal political power. As the following paragraphs illustrate though, the Karimov government is intent on enlisting the support of younger generations through *Kamalot's* carefully crafted programmes and events.

My description of *Kamalot's* activities is derived largely from secondary sources, primarily from Uzbek media accounts of the youth organisation. This reliance on secondary sources is the result of political necessity rather than any lack of desire to research the organisation firsthand. For one decade, between 1995 and 2005, I conducted several extended research trips to Uzbekistan, working with Uzbek colleagues in Bukhara, Andijan, Namangan, Karshi and Tashkent. My last research trip to Uzbekistan was in June 2005, one month after the Karimov government's repression of protesters in Andijan. In September 2005 a Human Rights Watch representative informed me that several Uzbek colleagues—all human rights activists—were either under threat of state repression, actively being repressed, or in exile and seeking refugee status. The Human Rights Watch representative further added that one of my Uzbek colleagues noted in his United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) asylum application that his collaborative research with me was what had elicited Uzbek government threats of repression. I have neither directly collaborated with Uzbekistan-based colleagues nor returned to conduct field research in Uzbekistan since June 2005.

<sup>1</sup>Calculations based on the *United Nations World Population Prospects, The 2008 Revision*. The full population dataset is available online at: <http://esa.un.org/unpp/>, accessed 29 April 2009.

Despite or perhaps because of these challenges, my interest in the Uzbek polity has grown. More specifically, in the light of my colleagues' trials and given what I had witnessed of youth–state interactions during my own field research, I became increasingly puzzled as to why Uzbek youth broadly did not appear to share the dismal view of the Karimov government that my Uzbek friends and I did. Upon reflection, I realised my research interests<sup>2</sup> brought me into contact with youth who, understandably given the often fraught relations between state and Islam and the state and consumer goods traders, probably harboured more animosity toward the Karimov government than did the average Uzbek teenager or person in their twenties. If I could return now to study *Kamalot*, would the Uzbek youth I encountered be any different from the frustrated traders and young religious scholars I had encountered during previous visits? If the following media-derived accounts are even partially true, then the answer is almost certainly yes; that far from fearing the Karimov regime, many youth value the state-run *Kamalot* for the entertainment and education opportunities the organisation provides. And that it is uncertain whether this appreciation might translate into mobilised political support for the Karimov government.

In addition to studying markets, mosques and *madrasahs*, by June 2005 I had attended enough weddings, dance clubs and football matches, and frequented enough internet cafes, to know that Uzbek youth share the same aspirations and gravitate to the same forms of entertainment that youth the world over do. And it is here, in the arena of entertainment, that *Kamalot* particularly excels. In January 2006, for example, *Kamalot* and the government's Forum on Culture and Art televised the *Kelazhak Ovozi* [*Voices of the Future*] ceremony, a government-sponsored celebration in which medals are awarded to promising young leaders in the arts, businesses and sciences.<sup>3</sup> Headlining the event were singers Tohir Sodiqov and Gulnora Karimova. (Karimova, in addition to her musical career, is serving her father's government as Uzbekistan's Representative to the United Nations Office in Geneva.) Sodiqov, immensely popular in Uzbekistan, provided a fitting start to this equally popular annual celebration of youth achievement. *Kelazhak Ovozi* has grown from 3,000 competitors in 2005 to over 54,000 in 2008. So as to reach the broadest possible audience, *Kelazhak Ovozi* rotates the categories of competition every year—2009's fields include 'Architecture and Design, Information Communication Technology, Traditional Arts and Crafts, and Poetry and Prose' as well as a competition for 'the best collection of materials covering *Kelazhak Ovozi* contest'.<sup>4</sup> Participants compete at the local level before advancing to the final, national level selection. Those who win, in addition to being honoured on national television by household names like Sodiqov and Karimova, receive stipends to further their education.

<sup>2</sup>In the 1990s I studied the development of post-Soviet Uzbek bazaars and in the 2000s I have focused on the emergence of local Islamic associations and elites.

<sup>3</sup>'Uzbek President's Daughter Sings in Patriotic Chorus', *BBC Monitoring of International Reports*, 7 January 2006, available via: <https://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe>, accessed April 2009. For more on *Kelazhak Ovozi*, see the organisation's website, available at: <http://www.kelajakovozi.uz>, accessed 29 April 2009.

<sup>4</sup>'Journalism Contest Announced for News Agencies, Printed and Online Media', *UzReport.com*, 19 August 2008, available via: <https://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe>, accessed April 2009.

For the more athletically inclined, *Kamalot* sponsors a range of sporting institutions and events. The youth group runs summer camps for disadvantaged children. The goal of these camps 'is to bring children up in the spirit of love and loyalty towards their motherland, to prepare them for service in the Uzbek armed forces, to strengthen their health, to temper them physically and spiritually'.<sup>5</sup> *Kamalot* regularly sponsors sports festivals. In September 2003 it organised an 'Extreme Sports' festival in Tashkent where skaters competed while organisers worked the crowds to raise awareness about the dangers of drug abuse.<sup>6</sup> In December 2005 *Kamalot* coordinated a 'mass marathon' from Termez to Tashkent to commemorate the 13-year anniversary of the Uzbek constitution.<sup>7</sup> In Andijan in July 2006 *Kamalot* held an 'international youth martial arts tournament' under the slogan: 'we are against terrorism and drugs'.<sup>8</sup> And, together with the Presidential Fund for the Development of Children's Sports, *Kamalot* sponsors the annual 'Student Games' in which 2,400 of the best athletes from secondary schools and universities converge in Tashkent to compete in basketball, tennis, table tennis, football, track and field athletics, swimming, chess and wrestling.<sup>9</sup>

For Uzbek youth more interested in virtual games, *Kamalot* has opened computer cafes and provides free internet access points throughout the country (Novinskiy 2005). Should cerebral rather than virtual or athletic competitions be more attractive, *Kamalot* hosts 'Values, Customs, Traditions and Youth' contests in which university students are quizzed on the 'uniqueness of national customs, traditions and values of various regions, peoples and nationalities'.<sup>10</sup> For future lawyers and judges, *Kamalot* organises 'Do You Know the Law?' contests for high-school students.<sup>11</sup> There are also job fairs, and seed capital is offered to start small businesses for the entrepreneurially inclined.<sup>12</sup> For the more spiritually oriented, *Kamalot's* Andijan branch has established a resource centre 'to prevent the spread of drug addiction and religious extremist ideas among minors'.<sup>13</sup> And for history enthusiasts, *Kamalot* organises tours of Tashkent's national monuments. The goal of these excursions, tour director Khilola Makhmudova explains, is 'to shape in forthcoming generation the sense of love to

<sup>5</sup>'Uzbekistan Finds Military Sports Camp for Difficult Children', *BBC Monitoring Central Asia Unit*, 24 July 2003, available via: <https://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe>, accessed April 2009.

<sup>6</sup>'Young Uzbeks Skate against Drugs', *BBC Monitoring Central Asia Unit*, 23 September 2003, available via: <https://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe>, accessed April 2009.

<sup>7</sup>'Marafontsy Napravalis' v Bukharu', *Narodnoe Slovo*, 1 December 2005, available at: <http://old.narodnoeslovo.uz/?a=sport&c=show&id=65>, accessed April 2009.

<sup>8</sup>'Young Andijan Athletes Compete to Condemn Terror', *BBC Monitoring International Reports*, 5 July 2006, available via: <https://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe>, accessed April 2009.

<sup>9</sup>'2008 the Year of Youth in Uzbekistan', *UzReport.com*, 31 January 2008, available via: <https://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe>, accessed April 2009.

<sup>10</sup>'Ferghana Implements "Values, Customs, Traditions and Youth" Project', *Times of Central Asia*, 28 March 2008, available via: <https://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe>, accessed April 2009.

<sup>11</sup>'"Do You Know the Law" Nationwide Contest Ends in Jizzakh Region', *UzReport.com*, 17 May 2007, available via: <https://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe>, accessed April 2009.

<sup>12</sup>'4th International Education and Career Exhibition Opens in Uzbek Capital', *UzReport.com*, 19 February 2009, available via: <https://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe>, accessed April 2009.

<sup>13</sup>'Uzbek Body Mulls Prevention of Religious Extremism among Minors', *BBC Monitoring Central Asia Unit*, 23 December 2006, available via: <https://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe>, accessed April 2009.

Homeland, respect to its invaluable culture and history, which serves an important factor in upbringing the youth [*sic*].<sup>14</sup> Should diplomacy capture an Uzbek teen's imagination, *Kamalot* organises biannual cross-cultural exchanges with youth groups in neighbouring countries. Occasionally, these exchanges result in diplomatic pronouncements. Thus, a 2005 visit to Azerbaijan concluded with Shohret Gasimov (*Kamalot*'s vice president) issuing the following statement on the Nargono–Karabakh conflict: 'We also understand the problems of the Azerbaijani youth and we believe that the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan should be restored'.<sup>15</sup>

Religious resource centres, internet cafes, sports tournaments, academic competitions, small business loans, cultural exchanges, arts and entertainment—these all sound like wonderful programmes, but how broad is *Kamalot*'s actual reach? *Kamalot*'s target age group is 15–30 (Karimov 2001). In 2005 there were approximately eight million Uzbeks between these ages,<sup>16</sup> and according to *Kamalot*'s leader, Botir Ubaydullayev, the organisation had 4.5 million members in February 2006.<sup>17</sup> This is an impressive figure and, if true, it begs the question why the Karimov regime has made this concerted effort to reach out to Uzbekistan's younger generation. No other post-Soviet state can claim half the 15–30-year old population as active members of a state-sponsored youth association. Indeed, one must look back to the Soviet period, to the *Komsomol*, to find a state-led effort to engage younger generations on such a massive scale.

The answer to the *Kamalot* puzzle, to these carefully designed sporting events, concerts, and nationalism and state-oriented competitions, I argue in the next section, lies in the growing crisis of Uzbek governance. The spectacle of youth politics is an indicator that President Karimov's traditional source of power, the patronage politics that had throughout much of the 1990s secured the deference of regional elites, is failing. Youth politics is Karimov's attempt to 'rebuild', to replace broken patronage networks among older, Soviet-era elites with a new younger polity that coheres not only as a result of state largesse, but also as a result of individuals' perceptions of a post-colonial, Uzbek-nationalist identity. Thus, *Kamalot*'s festivals, the organisation's executive secretary Said-Abdulaziz Yusupov unabashedly notes, are designed to promote youth 'loyalty to the mother land' (Sharai 2005, p. 1). Through symbolism and spectacle, through 'Patriots' Festivals', marathons celebrating the Uzbek constitution, and post-Andijan music concerts held under slogans such as 'Protect Your Motherland As You Would a Loved One', President Karimov is reaching out to a younger generation to replace an ossified political elite while, at the same time, redefining that which constitutes political legitimacy (Shukurov 2005).

<sup>14</sup>'The First Stage of Charity Campaign Held in Tashkent', *Times of Central Asia*, 24 July 2008, available via: <https://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe>, accessed April 2009.

<sup>15</sup>Youth of Uzbekistan Interested in Cooperation with Azerbaijan Coevals', *Times of Central Asia*, 21 July 2005, available via: <https://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe>, accessed April 2009.

<sup>16</sup>Calculations based on the *United Nations World Population Prospects, The 2008 Revision*, available online at: <http://esa.un.org/unpp/>, accessed 29 April 2009.

<sup>17</sup>'Uzbek Youth Movement Leader Says its Ranks Increasing', *BBC Monitoring International Reports*, 2 February 2006, available via: <https://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe>, accessed April 2009.

*Patronage politics: a failing policy of balance of power*

Scholars, both Uzbek and foreign, have devoted considerable attention to the Karimov regime's strategy of balancing regional elites so as to maintain centralised power. Some analysts describe this balance as one among competing clans, among broad networks of familial (or perceived familial) relations with each network headed by a single charismatic leader (Collins 2004; Faizullaev 2005). Others argue that competing regional and state-institutional identities, rather than ones of blood and kin, are what drive Uzbek politics (Ilkhamov 2007; Jones Luong 2002). Regardless of the nature of the affiliation, the central government's strategy of divide and rule is the same—Karimov steadily rotates elites into positions of power so as to first promote loyalty by distributing the riches of the state, and second, to promote inter-regional or inter-clan competition so as to divert animosity away from his personalised authoritarianism. Thus, for example, the Samarkand regional elite compete with the Tashkent and Ferghana groupings or devotees of Rustam Inoyatov, head of Uzbekistan's National Security Service, unite against supporters of Zakir Almatov, Uzbekistan's former Interior Minister, so as to win the centre's attention and material largesse.

Problematically for the Karimov regime, resources for maintaining patronage politics are limited. In contrast to the oil-rich Nazarbaev regime in Kazakhstan, Karimov has struggled to replace Moscow's Soviet era largesse with easily exploitable industries or international supporters. To some extent, monopoly control over the domestic purchase and international resale of Uzbekistan's large cotton crop has yielded rents that Karimov can redistribute to the political elite.<sup>18</sup> The World Bank estimates that 25% of Uzbekistan's foreign reserves come from the international resale of cotton (Guadagni *et al.* 2005, p. 1). Declining cotton yields, however, and the Karimov government's attempt in recent years to offset this decline through some liberalisation of the industry, have eroded cotton's ability to deliver patronage funds. Net tax transfers from cotton production have declined from 10% to 3% of Uzbek GDP between 2000 and 2004 (Guadagni *et al.* 2005, p. 3).

Some, most notably the former British ambassador to Uzbekistan, Craig Murray, would argue that, beginning in late 2001, the Karimov government found in the US a ready substitute for declining cotton revenues. In October 2001, US troops began landing at Karshi-Khanabad, an Uzbek airbase 90 miles north of the Afghan border. A marked build-up in US troops at the base and a similarly marked increase in US assistance to Uzbekistan quickly followed. In 2002 the US extended \$160 million in assistance to Uzbekistan, a figure equal to 77% of combined US assistance to Uzbekistan from 1993 to 2001 (United States General Accounting Office 2003, p. 20). Murray would later conclude of this build-up, and of US and UK military and intelligence cooperation with Uzbekistan more broadly, 'we are selling our souls for dross'.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup>Although the IMF has encouraged the Karimov government to liberalise the domestic pricing of cotton, Uzbekistan's cotton farmers receive only a fraction of the international market price for their crop. For more on how the Karimov government extracts rents from the cotton industry, see International Crisis Group (2005).

<sup>19</sup>*Financial Times*, 16 October 2004.



The US military presence, and with it, generous US assistance budgets, ended in November 2005, following five months of strained relations in the wake of the Karimov regime's bloody repression of the Andijan protestors. And while Uzbek experts like Murray may be correct to question the morality of Washington's and London's partnering with autocratic regimes, human rights have only worsened with the decrease in US assistance. The US government devoted more than half its 2002 US assistance to Uzbekistan to democracy, community development and humanitarian programmes (US Department of State Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs 2002). These programmes proved critical in supporting, among others, Uzbekistan's human rights and democracy activists. In short, although US assistance from 2002 to 2005 may have, to a degree, offset declining cotton revenues thereby temporarily shoring up Karimov's weakening patronage system, US assistance equally aided Uzbekistan's democracy and human rights activists.

Although it is difficult to assess the net effect that US assistance between 2002 and 2005 had on Uzbek politics, what is clear is that revenues from international aid and from the cotton industry are now in decline. And while Uzbek regional elites continue to compete for an ever-shrinking economic pie, the long-run sustainability of Karimov's divide and rule strategy of patronage politics is ever less certain. Patronage politics demand that the state maintains a near monopoly on economic wealth.<sup>20</sup> As soon as alternative sources of wealth emerge, the effectiveness of centrally defined patronage networks weakens. Paradoxically, as the Karimov regime is now discovering, regional and familial identity networks—networks which the central leadership actively cultivated as part of its balancing strategy—rapidly turn against the executive once alternative, local sources of wealth become available.

#### *Andijan—a window into weakening patronage politics*

The May 2005 Andijan uprising illustrates both the dynamic of patronage politics and, at the same time, the potentially destabilising demonstration effects that mass mobilisation generally and youth mobilisation in particular may have on Karimov's weakening autocratic rule. Andijan, perhaps more clearly than any other event since the Soviet collapse, provides a window into why the Karimov government has initiated a new strategy of youth politics so as to pre-empt its declining power in the regions while, at the same time, to persuade younger generations of the ills of colour revolutions.

The Andijan protests, contrary to the Karimov leadership's claims of religious extremism, were a product of the leadership's failed attempts to reassert control over regional appointees and a regional population that had become more responsive to local rather than national-level sources of wealth. In May 2004 Karimov dismissed Qobijon Obidov, Andijan's governor, citing the negative effects of regionally based 'personal connections'.<sup>21</sup> Karimov's charge of corruption was an oblique reference to

<sup>20</sup>For a detailed discussion of inter-group competition and the politics of political survival, see Migdal (1988).

<sup>21</sup>'Uzbek President Slams Andijan Governor over Corruption', *BBC Monitoring International Reports*, 25 May 2004, available via: <https://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe>, accessed April 2009.

the growing influence a local cohort of wealthy Muslim businessman—a group the Uzbek regime labeled *Akramiya*—held both over Obidov’s administration and among Andijan society more broadly. Karimov, however, was not content with simply sacking Obidov. Concerned that an administrative reshuffle alone was insufficient, Karimov proceeded to imprison and eventually to convict the Muslim businessmen on charges of religious extremism—an action which precipitated the May 2005 uprising (McGlinchey 2005).

Andijan is the most prominent but by no means the only case of failed patronage. Given the state’s control over the Uzbek press, it is often difficult to uncover the full extent of patronage breakdown. That said, Karimov’s own pronouncements suggest central authority breakdown at the local level is a common and geographically widespread phenomenon. In 2000 Karimov sacked Jora Noraliyev, the governor of Surkhandarya, citing that the governor had cultivated an environment of ‘nepotism, cronyism and bribery’.<sup>22</sup> In October 2004 the Uzbek president removed Alisher Otaboyev, governor of Fergana, noting that his regional representative’s ‘instructions and orders are beginning to lose, or possibly have already lost, their power in the localities’.<sup>23</sup> And in December 2008 Karimov dismissed three district *hakims* as well as the governor of the Tashkent region, Ziyovuddin Niyozov, for embezzling state land and selling housing plots to political supporters.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps the most astonishing state acknowledgement of declining (and in this case, altogether absent) control over its regional appointees is the case of regional *hakim* Isoqov. Isoqov, Uzbek Prosecutor-General Rashid Qodirov explains:

Wanted to get rich and paid no attention to solving social, economic, cultural and everyday problems. Feeling himself to be invulnerable and all-powerful, he stopped taking into consideration people’s views and did not pay heed to their problems and needs. This former official gathered around him people loyal to him. He created an atmosphere of unlimited autocracy in the locality by exerting duress on his subordinates . . . the arrogant governor was given a long prison term.<sup>25</sup>

Complementing these challenges at the elite level have been further mass mobilisation challenges at the local level. The Andijan protests, for example, were preceded by a string of ‘market uprisings’ in September 2004 in Fergana, Andijan, Quqon and Karshi, in which retailers marched on and, in several cases occupied, local administration buildings in protest against new central government laws regulating local commerce. These protests ended when regional administrators quietly ceased

<sup>22</sup>President Karimov Sacks Regional Governor: “Nepotism, Cronyism, Bribes Rife”, *Uzbek Radio Second Programme*, 23 March 2000, available via: <https://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe>, accessed April 2009.

<sup>23</sup>Uzbek Leader Warns of Perils of Mismanagement’, *BBC Monitoring Central Asia Unit*, 16 October 2004, available via: <https://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe>, accessed April 2009.

<sup>24</sup>Uzbek Leader Sacks Regional, District Governors’, *BBC Monitoring Central Asia Unit*, 16 December 2008, available via: <https://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe>, accessed April 2009.

<sup>25</sup>Uzbek Chief Prosecutor Points to Corruption Crack-Down’, *BBC Monitoring of International Reports*, 23 April 2005, available via: <https://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe>, accessed April 2009.

implementing Tashkent's directive.<sup>26</sup> Uzbeks throughout the country as well as regional leaders learned from these demonstrations that protest was possible, and that Karimov's control was not absolute. Moreover, Uzbeks learned from their own success in these protests, as well as from the March 2005 Tulip Revolution in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan, and from the earlier Rose and Orange revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine, that uprisings could be successful, that citizens could constrain and, in some cases, turn out their autocratic rulers. Giving voice to this new optimism, Mukhammed Salikh, the leader of *Erk* opposition party, declared in the days following the Andijan events of 13 May 2005: 'We can transform this movement into a velvet revolution, just as in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, without arms and bloodshed'.<sup>27</sup>

Given Uzbeks' growing inclination to protest and Tashkent's increasingly failed rule at the local level, it is understandable that the Uzbek President might pursue new strategies of control. Karimov's old regional elite are no longer responsive and reliable. In some cases, as in the September 2004 market protests, this elite simply lacked the power to be responsive. In other settings though, for example in the case of regional *hakims* Obidov, Isoqov, Noraliyev and Niyozov, these elite members chose not to be responsive. In all cases, though, Tashkent's authority is in retreat. And it is in this environment of central government retreat that the Karimov government initiated its new strategy of youth politics in an effort to restore executive rule in the regions.

*The spectacle of youth politics—rejecting ex-post causalities while anticipating the future*

Youth movements are often portrayed both in the popular media and in the social science literature as drivers of liberal political reform. Empirically and, no less important, symbolically, youth mobilisation causalities enjoy considerable support. Any reflection on the recent pro-democracy revolutions in Serbia, Ukraine and Georgia immediately evokes images of young protestors challenging—and winning over—equally young and armed government soldiers. Substantive explanations do exist for why younger generations appear so willing to challenge the authoritarian leanings of their elders. Importantly though, closer analysis suggests that the causality scholars attribute to youth protest may be mistaken. That is, although choreographed youth mobilisation is an indicator of impending political change, youth mobilisation need not be an indicator that liberalising political change is near.

This observation is soberingly at odds with the 'end of history' optimism that characterises much of the study of youth in post-Soviet transition. Valerie Bunce and Sharon Wolchik, for example, tell us that there are compelling reasons to believe younger generations are more inclined to liberal change than their elders. Writing of the Serbian, Slovakian and Georgian revolutions, Bunce and Wolchik find that youth, in addition to bringing 'fresh approaches [and] new techniques', are also 'untainted by

<sup>26</sup>Author interviews with Tulkun Karaev, Karshi, November 2004 and author interviews with a prominent, though not state 'accredited' local imam and a human rights/political activist in Quqon, November 2004.

<sup>27</sup>'Uzbekistan Possibly on Way to "Velvet Revolution"', *AFX News*, 17 May 2005, available via: <https://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe>, accessed April 2009.

the compromises many members of the opposition had made [with the old regime] (Bunce & Wolchik 2006, pp. 56–57). Importantly, however, though Bunce and Wolchik's argument helps explain the demographics of revolutionary moments and the enduring youthful face of post-revolutionary successor regimes, we should not be deluded that this younger generation is any more committed to reform than their elders. The '30 and 40-somethings' of the United National Movement who dominate post-Shevardnadze Georgian politics, we now know, are no more democratic than the pre-2003 Georgian political elite. President Saakashvili's cohort may be less tainted by associations with the Soviet state, but these young, Western-educated leaders, champions of NATO, the European Union, and a Euro-Atlantic future, are now compromised in the eyes of Georgian voters by other associations—associations with ballot rigging, corruption and 'Dr Dot'.<sup>28</sup>

In short, even if one accepts the hypothesis that younger generations are more open to change, there is little evidence that youth are any more inclined toward liberal rather than illiberal change. Perhaps because analyses of post-Soviet politics have centred on liberal or partial reform rather than authoritarian retrenchment, the question of illiberal youth politics has received comparatively little attention. New research however, most prominently Lucan Way's analysis of Ukraine's Orange Revolution, suggests that youth mobilisation may be an indicator of autocratic weakness rather than a causal force behind liberal reform. More specifically, Way questions Orange Revolution interpretations which attribute the winter 2004–2005 defeat of the Kuchma–Yanukovych alliance to mass youth protest. He instead argues that it was internal discord within the Kuchma regime in the autumn of 2004, not 'the idealistic youth who braved Kyiv's ice-cold streets' that precipitated the Orange Revolution (Way 2005, p. 144). This does not mean youth politics is inconsequential. Just the opposite, if as Joel Migdal suggests, we can assess a government's strength by the degree to which it insures 'compliance, participation, and legitimation', then sudden shifts in the nature of these processes may well indicate eroding, or a government's perception of eroding state capacity (Migdal 1988, p. 32).

The Andijan events, as I illustrate above, suggest that the nature of compliance, participation and legitimation is shifting in Uzbekistan. Given Tashkent's fading economic influence relative to the growing resources of local business elites, Soviet-style patronage politics no longer guarantees President Karimov the loyalty of regional appointees. Rather, the Uzbek President must cultivate new sources of legitimacy and, having lost the economic game, Karimov is turning to nationalism in an effort to cultivate a new, less mercenary following among Uzbekistan's younger generations. However, will Karimov, Central Asia's oldest remaining Soviet-era

<sup>28</sup>Both domestic observers and international organisations such as the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) have forcefully criticised the United National Movement's (the UNM is the ruling party) electoral manipulations. For a detailed report of electoral abuse, see 'OSCE/ODIHR Limited Election Observation Mission, Final Report, Georgia Municipal Elections, 5 October, 2006', available via: [http://www.osce.org/documents/odihhr/2006/12/22806\\_en.pdf](http://www.osce.org/documents/odihhr/2006/12/22806_en.pdf), accessed April 2009. Dr Dot is the working name of Dorothy Stein, a masseuse whose website list of satisfied customers includes various show-business celebrities and the Georgian President, Mikhail Saakashvili. Dr Dot's video narrative of her trip to Georgia can be found on her website: <http://www.drdot.com/index.php?movies=1>.

autocrat, be able to reinvent himself and find legitimacy anew as the nationalist leader of a country where the majority of people were born after the Soviet collapse?

Given the forced nature of *Kamalot's* many productions it is tempting to conclude that Karimov has not a hope at rallying Uzbekistan's youth. His efforts to cultivate nationalist mobilisation are awkward and contrived: a country-wide celebration of Uzbek culture that culminates with the televised performance of the president's aspiring pop star daughter; 'Do You Know the Law' contests for a country that has no rule of law; sporting events that honour the Uzbek constitution, this despite Karimov's running roughshod over his country's founding document. Yet it is the very inanity of these spectacles that may hold the key to their potential success. Here Lisa Weeden's analysis of the Syrian President Asad's similar use of spectacle is instructive:

The images of citizens delivering panegyrics to Asad's rule, collectively holding aloft placards forming his face, signing oaths in blood, or simply displaying pictures of him in their shop windows communicated to Syrians throughout the country the impression of Asad's power independent of his readiness to use it. And the greater the absurdity of the required performance, the more clearly it demonstrated that the regime could make most people obey most of the time. (Weeden 2002, p. 723)

Ultimately, Karimov's political future rests not in *Kamalot's* ability to stage slick nationalist productions, but rather, in the organisation's ability to seemingly effortlessly rally youth *en masse* despite the artificiality of these clearly choreographed events. In order to achieve this appearance, Karimov must recognise that the power of spectacle exists only so far as his government is perceived as not expending considerable effort in the staging of *Kamalot's* rallies. Asad's absurdity is compelling because the Syrian President appears aloof from spontaneous displays of public fealty. Indeed, in addition to learning from Asad, Karimov would do well to study the same youth he is attempting to mobilise; the perfected detachment of adolescent youth is exactly the image the Uzbek autocrat needs to convey to his target audience.

### *Conclusion*

In Karshi, a city in southern Uzbekistan not far from the Afghan border, there was during my last visit in November 2004, a large billboard of President Karimov holding a young soldier aloft in a powerful bear hug (Figure 1). My colleague, Tulkin Karaev, and I would regularly joke about the obvious symbolism and the equally obvious insecurity this billboard conveyed. Karaev, father of two adolescent boys, was acutely aware of the billboard's true meaning. The Uzbek leader's embrace of youth politics was too tight. Karimov was suffocating the very population he hoped would breathe new life into his fading presidency.

If *Kamalot's* recent activities are an accurate indication, then it is clear that neither Karimov's embrace nor his insecurity has lessened in the intervening years. What is less clear is whether Uzbek analysts broadly and political scientists in particular will take *Kamalot* and the spectacle of youth politics seriously. As I have argued in this essay, taking *Kamalot* seriously need not mean we ascribe symbolism and spectacle some invariably determinative causality. Karimov's effort to mobilise youth may, and



FIGURE 1. UZBEK PRESIDENT ISLAM KARIMOV EMBRACES A YOUNG SOLDIER. THAT UZBEK YOUTH WILL RETURN THIS EMBRACE IS UNCERTAIN. BILLBOARD, KARSHI, UZBEKISTAN, NOVEMBER 2004

indeed most likely, will fail. What taking *Kamalot* seriously does mean, though, is that we recognise Karimov's clumsy attempt at youth mobilisation as a sign of growing autocratic strain and, as such, a portent of change to come. Political scientists, Sovietologists and transitologists have thus far all proven slow to recognise and interpret such signs of existing regime weakness. From a discipline-specific point of view, this reticence to recognise and interpret symbols and spectacle is unfortunate in that it impedes a central goal of social science—the development of predictive causal theories. From a policy-specific point of view, this reticence is equally unfortunate in that it leads to ephemeral alliances with embattled autocrats. Such alliances, as the United States has discovered in Central and South Asia, may yield fleeting gains, but these gains come, more often than not, at the expense of long-run strategic and, no less important, humanitarian interests.

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