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Eurasia 2014: Into Thin Air

Eric McGlinchey

Watching the dance between Central Asian state and society one gets the same unsettling feeling as when watching a climber on a rock face. Depending on how the next few moves go, the outcome may be prosaic, exciting, or disastrous. Kyrgyzstan has made that hair-raising climb several times. Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan are still contemplating their ascents. Right now it is Tajikistan that is in mid climb. With the November presidential elections approaching, the arms of Tajik state and society are pulling in opposite directions. Tajikistan's dizzying void of the past, including the 1990s civil war, unfurls below.

Scholars, analysts and policy makers, are asked to identify drivers, the push and pull factors, behind political and social developments. These drivers provide clues into potential outcomes.

Key Points

Factors that produce democracy can produce violence. Drivers of reform are also drivers of radicalism. Predictable indeterminacy is the surprising suddenness of protest and the ability of social capital to produce liberal and illiberal outcomes.

Predictable indeterminacy is the product of two dynamics: (1) the ability of political entrepreneurs to marshal social capital for liberal *and* illiberal ends and (2) the reality that the onset of social mobilization is often as much a surprise for those mobilizing as for those against whom the masses are mobilizing.

Eric McGlinchey, Associate Professor of Government and Politics at George Mason University. He received his Ph.D. from Princeton University in 2003. He is the author of *Chaos, Violence, Dynasty: Politics and Islam in Central Asia* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011).

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The reality is, though, how regime change ultimately unfolds—the stomach churning free fall, the awe-inspiring summit, or plodding politics as usual—is often not what we expect. Factors that produce democracy can produce violence. Drivers of reform are also drivers of radicalism. Predicting which outcome will obtain is difficult. What we can do is anticipate. We can gauge the presence of key drivers while acknowledging these drivers may produce diverging social and political outcomes.

Take, for example, two defining social movements from the past two decades: (1) the emergence of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) during the course of the Tajik civil war; and (2) and the uprising in Khorog, Tajikistan in 2012. Both developments were driven by the same push factor—by a binding and mobilizing social capital rooted in shared Islamic identities and norms. Despite their common origins, however, these movements have followed diverging trajectories. The IMU became increasingly militant and radical. And the Khorog uprising, though it began with a small group of militants, sparked popular, reformist and enduring social mobilization.

Key to understanding these diverging outcomes of radicalism and reform is the fickleness of social capital and suddenness of social mobilization. Political entrepreneurs, present at the right place and the right time, can marshal the raw power of feet on the street for both liberal and illiberal ends. Scholarship and policy need not be confounded by this indeterminacy. Just the opposite, by understanding how shared drivers produce diverging outcomes, our analysis and policy becomes flexible rather than flimsy. And it is in favor of this new flexibility toward Islam in Eurasia that this policy brief is oriented.

My paper proceeds in two steps. I first examine the fickleness of social capital and the suddenness of social mobilization. Both dynamics rest on what I call predictable indeterminacy. Predictable indeterminacy is the product of two dynamics: (1) the ability of political entrepreneurs to marshal social capital for liberal *and* illiberal ends and (2) the reality that the onset of social mobilization is often as much a surprise for those mobilizing as for those against whom the masses are mobilizing. If not for this predictable indeterminacy, social mobilization, particularly in authoritarian contexts, would be rare. An autocrat, if he knew he were vulnerable to anti-regime popular mobilization, would systematically eliminate social activists and defuse environments permissive of protest. Though autocrats indeed do repress, they too live in a world of political indeterminacy. They fail to identify all oppositionists and fail to understand which political contexts are likely to produce protest. Miscalculation opens the doors to protest, much to the surprise of both the autocrat and the oppositionists.

I next apply this concept of political indeterminacy to illustrate how the fickleness of social capital and the suddenness of social mobilization enabled the emergence of the IMU in the 1990s and the Khorog mobilization of 2012. These movements are in many respects mirror opposites of one another. The first began as a peaceful reformist movement and subsequently turned militant. The second began in militancy but concluded in the peaceful protests of the many residents of Khorog. Both movements share similar drivers yet diverging outcomes. And both movements, as well as the many similar movements that will inevitably follow, can productively be viewed through the flexible understanding of Islam in Eurasia that I am proposing here.

Predictable Indeterminacy

Robert Putnam's work on civil society and social capital transformed political scientists' understanding of democracy and democratization.[1] Putnam demonstrated that getting the institutions right was not enough. Democratic institutions, to be effective, need engaged societies and engaged societies, in turn, are the product of high degrees of interpersonal trust. Curiously though, what Putnam argues is good for democratic institutions is likely true of all institutions: social capital facilitates not only liberal politics, but illiberal politics as well.

Sheri Berman illustrates this reality in her study of Weimar Germany.[2] In the early 1920s middle class Germans became increasingly alienated from national parties that were perceived as "tools of big capitalists and financial interests."[3] Instead, Berman documents, the middle class

turned inward, to local civic organizations. Later in the decade, these "dense networks of civic engagement provided the Nazis with cadres of activists who had the skills necessary to spread the party's message" and catapult the Nazis to electoral success in the early 1930s.[4] Berman's observation is sobering: the very thing that Putman identifies as the reason for why some democratic institutions perform better than others—high levels of civic engagement—abetted the rise of fascism in Germany. The glue that binds society, in short, can be applied to both liberal and illiberal ends. Predictable Indeterminacy.

As vexing as *how* the glue of civil society is applied is the question of *when* civil society is mobilized. Here again the German case, albeit a half century later, is instructive. In 1989 a sudden cascade of protests brought an end to communism in East Germany. This sudden wave of protest, the political scientist Timur Kuran demonstrates, began as seemingly inconsequential scuffles between state authorities and everyday citizens.[5] The scuffle Kuran cites in particular is the Leipzig protest in October 1989, a protest that proceeded peacefully despite orders from East Germany's Communist leader, Erich Honecker, to forcibly repress the demonstration. Kuran argues that this refusal of local authorities to repress sparked a cascade in which ordinary East Germans, now less fearful of state violence, took to the streets to voice long-suppressed frustrations.

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Events that shift protest thresholds of even a small portion of the population—a state's one-off failure to repress dissent, the arrival of new ideologies or religious beliefs, the sudden departure of an autocrat's powerful external patrons—can lead to regime-destabilizing waves of protest. Critically, this political indeterminacy is not unique to German politics. As the next section's review of the rise of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and the Khorog protests demonstrates, a similar process of sudden and unexpected social mobilization equally holds the potential to reshape Tajik politics.

Islam, Militancy and Reform in Tajikistan

The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan

In September 2000 the US State Department designated the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan a foreign terrorist organization. What's curious about this designation is that, as late as June 2001, the State Department did not view the IMU as a real threat. Ambassador Clifford Bond, for example, when asked what he thought of the IMU during House a June 6, 2001 International Relations Committee, responded:

"We do not see Islamic fundamentalism right now as a threat to the states of Central Asia, but that the policies that are being pursued by the governments now are driving the young, particularly because there is *a lack of economic opportunity*, into the arms of extremists. And that's a message which we have to make and continue to make with the leadership in Central Asia."[6]

Bond's statement reflects well the idea of predictable indeterminacy that this paper seeks to convey. Bond acknowledges that Uzbekistan was witnessing a cascade of youth turning to the IMU. This cascade caught Bond, and I think many of us, by surprise. As I suggested earlier, though, surprise is cooked into social and political outcomes. We should not be surprised that we are surprised.

The sudden surge in support for the IMU likely had its roots in what, at the time, may have appeared to be seemingly inconsequential acts of repression, for example, the disappearance of popular Imam Abidkhon Nazarov, leader of Tashkent's Tokhtaboi Mosque, in 1998. Not long after Nazarov's disappearance, five bombs exploded in Tashkent. The leaders of the IMU, Tohir Yoldosh and Juma Namangani, were blamed for the bombings and sentenced to death. Yoldosh and Namangani, though, were high up in the Tajik mountains, beyond the reach of Uzbek law.

And here we have the causes of the cascade few of us anticipated. A seemingly inconsequential event—the disappearance of Imam Nazarov—motivated a handful of militants to bomb Uzbek government buildings. That these militants avoided punishment emboldened others who normally would have remained on the sidelines to join the IMU. In short, the changed protest threshold of an aggrieved few sparked a cascade or, in Bond's words, the "driving" of many youth to the IMU. Predictable indeterminacy.

Why, though, were youth being driven to the IMU and not to other possible organizations? Here too Ambassador Bond's words are instructive: the youth were gravitating to the IMU due to "a lack of economic opportunity." The IMU was not merely a militant organization, it was an institution that provided means to escape poverty.

Indeed, the origins of the IMU lay not in Islamist militancy, but rather, in the institution's ability to provide where the state could not. The IMU had its start in 1991 in Namangan, an Uzbek city forty miles from the Tajik border. At the time, the IMU leaders, Tohir Yoldosh and Juma Namangani, called their movement by a different name, *Adolat* – Justice – and they distinguished themselves by providing law and order in a city where, in the waning days of the Soviet Union, law and order had all but disappeared.

Yoldosh and Namangani were wildly successful. One of their goals was to replace the city's Communist Party headquarters with an Islamic Community center. Yoldosh and Namangani rallied the city's Muslim community around this cause, at times gathering upwards of 20,000 people in the streets of Namangan. In short Yoldosh and Namangani were consummate community activists; they capitalized on shared religious norms to build civil society and, in the institution of the Islamic center, a haven where city residents could escape the economic and political chaos of the Soviet collapse.

So what happened? Why did *Adolat* become the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan? Uzbek President Islam Karimov shuttered Namangan's Islamic center four months after it opened and Yoldosh and Namangani fled to Tajikistan where they fought alongside the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan in the 1992-97 Tajik civil war. Yoldosh and Namangani, however, did not abandon their social activist ways. Just as social capital helped catapult the community organization, *Adolat,* to success in 1991, so too did social capital sustain the militant Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan—paradoxically in Tajikistan—during and after the Tajik civil war. And here we have the other component of predictable indeterminacy: the reality that political entrepreneurs can marshal social capital for liberal *and* illiberal ends.

The origins of the IMU lay not in Islamist militancy, but rather, in the Yoldosh and Namangani's ability to provide law and order where the state could not. Just as social capital helped catapult their community organization, *Adolat,* to success in 1991, so too did social capital sustain the militant IMU paradoxically in Tajikistan during and after the Tajik civil war.

The IMU case can inform how we understand Tajikistan's largest opposition group, the Islamic Renaissance Party. Both Tajiks and outside observers struggle to understand what the IRPT is – is it largely a secular organization as its leader, Muhiddin Kabiri says it is? Or is it the Islamist party that many backbenchers in the IRPT portray it to be? The answer is the IRPT has the potential to be both. The IRPT, like the reformist *Adolat* and the later militant IMU, enjoys a deep well of social capital. This social capital, depending on how it is marshaled, is permissive of both reformist and radical ends. Predictable indeterminacy.

The Khorog 2012 Uprising

In contrast to the IMU case, a social movement that began peacefully but ended in militancy, the Khorog 2012 uprising is an example of a movement that started in militancy but ended in peaceful protest.

On July 21, 2012, General Abdullo Nazarov was killed in the city of Khorog, in the Gorno-Badakhshan autonomous district located in east-

ern Tajikistan. Nazarov was President Rahmon's National Security Committee commander in Gorno-Badakhshan. Nazarov's alleged killers are relatives of Tolib Ayombekov, a Badakhshan militant who fought with the United Tajik Opposition during the civil war. Ayombekov was also General Nazarov's second in command, one of several government positions Ayombekov had held as a result of the opposition-government power sharing arrangement stipulated by the 1997 peace accords.

In an effort to capture Ayombekov and his relatives, the central government dispersed 3,000 troops to Khorog. Local militants engaged the Tajik government forces. Seventeen government soldiers and thirty militants are believed to have died in the fighting. The clash between the government and the militants yielded no clear outcome; Ayombekov remained at large and the government troops, though they retreated to their barracks, maintained a heightened presence in the city.

What is curious about the Khorog 2012 events is that, if you ask people today in the city what happened last July, the actual militant conflict is at most an afterthought. What residents of Khorog emphasize instead is the sudden cascade of peaceful protest and how this peaceful protest ultimately compelled the government soldiers to retreat to their barracks.

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The population in Khorog is Pamiri, not ethnically Tajik. The Pamiris follow the Ismaili branch of Shia Islam whereas most Tajiks are Sunni. And much of life in Khorog centers around projects, enterprises and NGOs either directly or indirectly funded by the Aga Khan Development Network, the humanitarian assistance organization founded by the Aga Khan, the spiritual leader of Ismaili Muslims. Khorog, in short, is a community in which a shared Ismaili identity and a robust philanthropic organization centered on this shared identity has led to the accumulation of a high degree of social capital. This social capital in July 2012 was marshaled for both militant and peaceful ends. Khorog, then, is yet another example of a sudden mobilization cascade and of shared social capital generating both liberal and illiberal outcomes. Predictable indeterminacy.

Conclusion

Civil society gave rapid rise to the peaceful *Adolat* and later, the militant IMU. And civil society prompted both the militant and the peaceful 2012 anti-government Khorog protests in Gorno-Badakhshan, Tajikistan. What are we to make of these diverging outcomes of radicalism and reform, this fickleness of social capital and suddenness of social mobilization? What should be the US approach toward Islam in Eurasia as 2014 approaches?

In this policy brief I have emphasized predictable indeterminacy—the surprising suddenness of protest and the ability of social capital to produce liberal and illiberal outcomes. I emphasize predictable indeterminacy because it is something for which neither the academy nor the policy community has much of an appetite. Academic studies with indeterminate findings do not get published. Development and policy proposals that acknowledge civil society can advance radical movements as much as it advances reform movements are unlikely to be funded. Such indeterminacy is not in our culture.

We need to change this culture. Now, as 2014 approaches, we are entering into thin air. In this new, rarified environment, we must see even more clearly that outcomes are unpredictable. This does not mean that we as social scientists

abandon scientific analysis or we as policy makers abandon policy. Rather, what this means is we understand the processes by which similar causes produce diverging outcomes and we anticipate these diverging outcomes. In this new environment the measure of good analysis and good planning is not reaching the summit, some hoped for objective, but rather, developing theories and policies that are sufficiently agile that they can accommodate this Eurasian world of predictable indeterminacy.

[1] Robert D. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).
[2] Sheri Berman, "Civil Society and the Collapse of the Weimar Republic," *World Politics* 49, no. 3 (1997): 401–429.
[3] Ibid, 416.
[4] Ibid., 420.
[5] Timur Kuran, "Now Out of Never: The Element of Surprise in the East European Revolution of 1989," *World Politics* 44, no. 1 (1991): 7–48.
[6] U.S. Representative Benjamin Gilman (R-NY) Holds Hearing on U.S. Policy in Central Asia || (FDCH Political Transcripts, June 6, 2001).
[7] Author interviews, Khorog, Gorno-Badakhshan, May 7-15, 2013.

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