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Central Asia Grows Wobbly

ERIC MCGLINCHEY

Central Asia was, before the Russian Revolution, and is again since the Soviet collapse, imagined as critical to world politics. This, after all, was the land of the legendary "Great Game," the field where imperial Russia tried to push its influence southward and the British Empire sought to expand to the north. Alexander Cooley, a contributor to these pages, has written that Central Asia is once again host to a "new Great Game," only this time the contestants—Moscow, Beijing, and Washington—are, in their competition for geostrategic influence, manipulated to their hosts' advantage, furthering Central Asian state sovereignty.

Cooley is right: Today's great powers have been quick to cut financial, military, and political deals with Central Asia's autocrats. Moscow is keen to maintain some impression of the Soviet footprint in Russia's "near abroad." Beijing sees in Central Asia abundant natural resources to fuel China's growing economy. And Washington prizes Central Asia's air, rail, and road links to Afghanistan.

That said, the external aid that flows to Central Asian leaders as a result of their privileged geopolitical positions is insufficient to stem the growing internal challenges these leaders face at home. Central Asia, the land Sir Halford Mackinder dubbed in 1904 the "geographical pivot of history," is wobbly. Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan face real prospects of sudden political disorder. Kyrgyzstan has long been and will continue to be in political disarray. Only in Turkmenistan is there a real chance that the political status quo will continue uninterrupted.

In Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, countries that, curiously, have known only political stability since achieving independence in 1991, what once were stability-enhancing strengths—the leadership of young and determined autocrats—have lately become liabilities. Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev is 71. Uzbek President Islam Karimov is 74. Both are rumored to be in poor health, and neither has established a clear succession mechanism.

In Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, two countries that have been plagued by political disorder since 1991, the drivers of instability—a narrow and fragmented political elite in Kyrgyzstan and warlord politics in Tajikistan—continue unabated. True, neither country must confront in the near future the aging autocrat dilemma that weighs heavily now in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Kyrgyzstan installed a new and comparatively young president, Almazbek Atambaev, in December 2011, and Tajikistan's president, Emomali Rahmon, is a sprightly 60 years old. These leaders' relative youth, though, has done little to change the reality that effective central government authority in the two countries extends little beyond the capital cities. Upheaval, often violent, is a constant in Kyrgyzstan. In June 2010, hundreds died in ethnic riots in the southern Kyrgyz cities of Osh and Jalalabad. In July 2012, fighting among drug warlords and government forces left several dozen dead in Khorog, eastern Tajikistan.

Turkmenistan is the only post-Soviet Central Asian country that has seen a peaceful transfer of authority. Turkmenistan's first president, Saparmurat Niyazov, died of a heart attack in December 2006. Niyazov's successor, Gurbanguli Berdymukhamedov, ascended to Turkmenistan's top post in a style reminiscent of Soviet leadership successions—behind closed doors and out of public view. Turkmen politics is opaque and, as of yet, the country has only seen one alternation of presidential power. As such, it is premature to conclude that the country is immune from divisive succes-

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sion struggles. That said, Berdymukhamedov, at the age of 55, is the youngest of Central Asia's presidents and neither he nor his patrons need immediately fear his demise. Buoyed by gas exports, his future appears stable as long as the price of hydrocarbons remains high.

ONLY GAME IN ASTANA?

Nazarbayev for 20 years has been the envy of other Central Asian leaders. As first secretary and later president of the Kazakh Republic in the final days of the Soviet Union, he was able to take with him into post-Soviet independence a large and united political elite. Nur Otan, his "Light of the Fatherland" party, dominates Kazakh politics almost to the same degree that the Communist Party did when Nazarbayev was first secretary. This near monopoly on power—Nur Otan holds 83 of the Kazakh parliament's 107 seats and, it is safe to reason, an even larger portion of posts in the state bureaucracy—ensures that Nazarbayev can easily replace erstwhile supporters. For would-be dissenters, this knowledge that they can be so easily replaced dampens incentives to defect. It is hard to play the oppositionist when the presidential party is the only game in town.

Critically, though, the staying power of Nazarbayev's party is increasingly in question. The loyalty of aspiring members of the political elite to Nur Otan and, more broadly, to large presidential parties, can be counted on only as long as the president fulfills one of two conditions: He has demonstrated his mental and physical fitness, or has indicated his chosen successor. Nazarbayev has done neither. Now in his eighth decade and, as the *Economist* reported in December 2011, thought to be struggling with prostate cancer, Nazarbayev can no longer count on continued elite loyalty to him and Nur Otan.

Although on the surface Kazakhstan's would-be opposition appears weak, the country's political economy is conducive to the rapid emergence of viable alternate elites. In contrast to Uzbekistan, where President Karimov has tirelessly prevented the emergence of alternative power centers, Nazarbayev has tolerated, even encouraged the growth of a vibrant business class. Nazarbayev is quick to liken Kazakhstan to the "Asian Tigers." Channeling East Asian success, he has trademarked his strategic plan, "Kazakhstan 2030," with a Central Asian snow leopard. And essential to Kazakhstan's sustained development, Nazarbayev notes in the plan, is "economic growth based on an open market economy with high level[s] of foreign investments."

Nazarbayev's words are not mere rhetoric. The World Bank's annual "Doing Business" rankings for 2011 placed Kazakhstan 47th in the world in "ease of doing business," ahead of European Union countries like Poland (62nd) and Italy (87th) and well above the closest Central Asian competitor on the list, Kyrgyzstan (70th). The upshot of Nazarbayev's free market leanings, however, is that members of the Kazakh business class can, should they perceive the timing to be right, shift their investments from London real estate to Astana politics.

This question of timing one's investment is critical. In November 2001, Kazakh banker Nurzhan Subkhanberdin teamed up with Mukhtar Abliazov, a financier who was serving as energy minister, and Galymzhan Zhakiyanov, the governor of Pavlodar *oblast*, to form the opposition movement Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan. Though well financed—Subkhanberdin was a billionaire and Abliazov was a multimillionaire—Democratic Choice did not inspire a wide following. By March 2002 Abliazov and Zhakiyanov were in jail and Subkhanberdin had quietly and apologetically returned to his career as a banker.

Might a Democratic Choice–style opposition movement prove more successful today? In 2001 Nazarbayev was 61 and healthy. It made sense then for political elites to stick with him. It makes less sense now to remain loyal to the increasingly frail president. Were he to falter, it is unclear whether members of the ruling elite and politicians like Astana Mayor Imangali Tasmagambetov or Presidential Administration Director Aslan Musin would jump to Nazarbayev's defense or defect in the hope of joining a successful opposition.

Tasmagambetov and Musin have demonstrated appetites for power. What they do not have in abundance are resources for mounting sustained opposition. This is where Kazakhstan's billionaires, people like Vladimir Kim, head of the Kazakh mining company Kazakhmys, or Bulat Utemuratov, director of the private equity firm Verny Capital, can play a role. Kim and Utemuratov may not have political ambitions. They do, however, have a strong desire for guarantees that their investments in the Kazakh economy are secure. An aging Nazarbayev is less and less capable of providing such guarantees.

A populist successor might not provide them, either. Rather than leave things to chance, Ka-

zakhstan's economic elite might strike a bargain with insiders like Tasmagambetov and Musin to push aside Nazarbayev now so as to ensure secure property rights tomorrow. Whether the result is an Egyptian-style populist uprising or an insider putsch, one thing is clear: Nazarbayev's days are numbered.

UZBEK POLITICS AND PRAYERS

The same is true for Karimov. The septuagenarian Uzbek president can no longer count on the guaranteed loyalty of his inner circle and, absent a sudden epiphany in which he anoints a successor, he may find himself pushed out in a palace coup. In contrast to Kazakhstan, though, Uzbekistan's kingmakers are listed on the organizational charts of state ministries, not on the London Stock Exchange. Most prominent among these elites are the directors of the military and economic "power ministries"—people like Rustam Inoyatov, the head of Uzbekistan's National Security Services; Kabul Berdiev, the minister of defense; Rustam Azimov, the minister of finance; and Shavkat Mirziyayev, the prime minister.

It is tempting to imagine such people eyeing each other, guns at the ready—as if, with Karimov's advancing age, Uzbekistan is approaching a political high noon. Equally plausible are less bloody, more cooperative scenarios in which the elites work together to effect a managed succession whereby each minister would keep his fiefdom following an insider putsch or Karimov's death in office.

Political insiders, however, may not be the only ones with designs on Uzbekistan's future. Within Uzbek society are alternative elites—religious leaders—who have the potential to bring down not only Karimov but the entire Tashkent political class. Most Uzbek imams have thus far chosen not to mix politics with prayer. This steering clear of politics has yielded considerable rewards; every Friday hundreds of thousands gather to hear respected imams deliver insights that cannot be found in Uzbekistan's tightly controlled media. Even so, as cascades of popular protest in the Middle East over the past two years demonstrate, seemingly apolitical gatherings for Friday prayers can plant the seeds of sustained revolutionary opposition. The still unfolding Arab uprisings provide ready proof that secular autocrats, particularly aging ones like Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, are vulnerable to Islam-centered mass mobilization.

Uzbekistan's imams are well positioned to lead such a mobilization. In contrast to political insiders like Inoyatov and Berdiev, religious leaders can offer a vision of political change that resonates with ordinary Uzbeks. Moreover, Uzbek imams, unlike the country's narrow business class, have ready access to capital thanks to steady contributions from devoted followers.

Critically, what Uzbek imams do not have ready access to, nor an appetite for, are instruments of violence. Just the opposite: Uzbekistan's religious leaders have been, throughout post-Soviet independence, the targets of sustained state-led repression. The Karimov government suppressed Islam-inspired popular mobilizations in Namangan in 1991 and in Andijan in 2005. The Uzbek state has intimidated, incarcerated, and killed dozens of imams, and is believed, most recently, to have been behind the February 2012 attempted assassination of the imam Obid-kori Nazarov in Sweden.

Friday prayers provide an institutionalized mechanism for protest.

This campaign of state-led intimidation has worked to limit Islam's revolutionary potential in Uzbekistan. Whether the country's power ministers will sustain this intimidation as Karimov's inevitable departure nears is difficult to predict. In any event, the likelihood of political instability in Uzbekistan is markedly greater today than it was in the early 2000s. And political change there has the potential to markedly redefine the tenor of politics in neighboring countries, most notably Kyrgyzstan.

KYRGYZSTAN'S NATIONALIST TURN

Kyrgyz politics has long been chaotic. Unlike Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan began post-Soviet independence with a political novice rather than a seasoned Soviet first secretary at the helm. President Askar Akayev was a compromise candidate, installed by a fractured political elite as a caretaker following deadly and divisive ethnic riots in Osh, in southern Kyrgyzstan. Thanks in large part to his ability to dole out substantial foreign aid extended by Western donors in the hopes that Kyrgyzstan could be transformed into Central Asia's "island of democracy," Akayev was able to sustain a tenuous ruling coalition until obviously

falsified parliamentary elections led to his ouster in March 2005.

Akayev's less adept successor, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, lasted only five years before being deposed in April 2010. Many of the political elites who brought Akayev and Bakiyev to power were the same ones who precipitated both presidents' sudden departures. Kyrgyz politics for the past two decades has been more about endless political intrigues than enduring policy platforms. This constantly shifting political scene, though, may be giving way to something more durable: Kyrgyz nationalism.

Political missteps following the April 2010 toppling of Bakiyev produced an environment conducive to deadly ethnic conflict in southern Kyrgyzstan. The April 2010 interim government, in contrast to the one installed following Akayev's ouster in 2005, sought to clean house rather than bargain with holdover Bakiyev-regime political elites entrenched in the south. In order to oust these holdover elites, the interim government in Bishkek sought the assistance of prominent Uzbek businessman Kadyrjon Batyrov, a multimillionaire entrepreneur and founder of the People's Friendship University in the southern Kyrgyz city of Jalalabad.

Central Asia is entering a decade of heightened instability.

Most notably, in mid-May 2010 the interim government requested and Batyrov delivered dozens of supporters, many of them ethnic Uzbeks, in an ultimately successful effort to forcibly dislodge Bakiyev loyalists from Jalalabad's central administrative building. Batyrov's actions predictably enraged Jalalabad's ethnic Kyrgyz population. The People's Friendship University was burned to the ground and, within days, the unrest in Jalalabad morphed into deadly ethnic riots in nearby Osh, southern Kyrgyzstan's largest city.

Before the June 2010 ethnic riots, the minority Uzbek population in Osh and Jalalabad held the majority of these cities' most desired properties while the Kyrgyz majority controlled the political offices. This political and economic divide, laid bare by the deadly ethnic violence, has resulted in an upwelling of Kyrgyz ethno-nationalism and has finally provided a point of ideological convergence for Kyrgyzstan's otherwise divided political elite. Even reformist interim President Roza Otunbayeva, feted in western capitals for her democratic leanings, remained largely silent on Kyrgyzstan's nationalist turn. Otunbayeva, for example, had no response when her representative to the parliament, Azimbek Beknazarov, praised one of the principal instigators of the June 2010 violence, Osh Mayor Melis Myrzakmatov, as a "hero of those events."

Ethnic opportunists will, for the near future, have the decisive vote in determining which coalition of elites holds power in Kyrgyzstan's perpetually shifting national politics. Moreover, at the local level, ethnic opportunists like Myrzakmatov will increasingly rule their cities like warlords, free from Bishkek's oversight. For Bishkek to challenge this arrangement is to risk civil war and state fragmentation. Continuing along this path of nationalism, however, places Kyrgyzstan on a potential collision course with a post-Karimov Uzbekistan.

Warlordism, fragmentation, armed interstate conflict: These all pose difficult challenges that could derail Kyrgyzstan's current experiment with parliamentarianism. Calls to return to an autocratic presidential system in the belief that a strong executive is better positioned to meet such challenges will be difficult to resist. Jockeying for control of Bishkek's White House, only now with a decidedly nationalist rather than democratic-reformist color, will define Kyrgyz politics for the near future.

TENUOUS IN TAJIKISTAN

If warlordism in Kyrgyzstan is a possibility, in Tajikistan it is a reality. President Rahmon's power is tenuous outside the capital, Dushanbe. Occasionally Rahmon's government does attempt to flex its muscle in the regions. In April 2011 government forces killed Abdullo Rakhimov, a warlord who first came to prominence as a United Tajik Opposition fighter in the country's 1992–97 civil war. The killing was retaliation for a September 2010 clash between Rakhimov's fighters and central government forces in the Rasht Valley, which left two dozen government troops dead.

The Rakhimov killing, however, is as much indicative of Dushanbe's weaknesses as it is of the government's strengths. The Tajik president can project power in spurts beyond the capital; securing the state's monopoly of power in the regions is a struggle. In January 2012, for example, Rahmon rotated several of his regional administrators and fired others, suggesting that it is not only armed

militants but also state appointees who question the president's authority outside Dushanbe. And in July 2012 fighting between a Tajik warlord, Tolib Ayombekov, and Rahmon's forces left 17 government troops dead.

Rahmon, 59, need not immediately address the age-related challenges that his Kazakh and Uzbek counterparts must. A different time horizon, however, does threaten his already weak grip on power: the United States' planned withdrawal of combat forces from Afghanistan by 2013. The decade-long US presence in Afghanistan, though it has not prevented the spread of Afghan-style warlordism to Tajikistan, has slowed the transnational spread of Afghanistan's warlord-sustaining drug trade. Even more important, the US presence disrupted the activities of transnational Islamist groups that played an important role in Tajikistan's civil war.

Rahmon might be able to withstand and potentially even benefit from increased narcotics trafficking through Tajikistan. Driving bargains with Tajikistan's regional drug warlords could help Rahmon capitalize on one of the few assets to which he has ready access: the ability to provide safe haven for the conduct of the illicit trade. In return for this safe haven, Tajikistan's narco-warlords might pledge support or, at the very least, not directly challenge Rahmon's authority in Dushanbe.

An Islamist resurgence as a result of the US drawdown in Afghanistan would not offer the Tajik president similar benefits. Rahmon is unpopular with devout Tajiks, for understandable reasons. He is second in the region only to Uzbek President Karimov in repressing Muslims who do not conform to state-sanctioned Islam. Tajikistan's brief period of religious toleration following the 1992–97 civil war has, in recent years, given way to the steady erosion of religious pluralism.

In January 2009 the Tajik supreme court passed a ruling barring Salafism, the literalist, puritanical strain of Islam. This harsh measure was necessary, the court explained, due to Salafism's close association with terrorist organizations. In the year following the court's decision, convictions for alleged "extremist activities" jumped from 37 to 158. The state's intolerance of "nontraditional" Islam reaches into everyday expressions of religious piety. Female students are barred from wearing the hijab to schools and bearded men are routinely detained and quizzed about possible associations with Islamist organizations.

Rahmon fears Islam for the same reasons Karimov does: Religion offers a compelling critique of post-Soviet secular authoritarianism. Friday prayers, moreover, provide an institutionalized mechanism for coordinated protest. In contrast to Karimov, however, Rahmon does not enjoy the overwhelming repressive capacity that would be necessary to suppress a surge of Islam-centered popular protests. Unlike Karimov, he did not inherit from the Soviet period a large, stability-enhancing, pro-executive political elite. Instead, the distinguishing characteristic of Tajik politics for the past two decades, as in Kyrgyzstan, has been a narrow and fragmented ruling class.

Considerable distance exists between the militant strategies that Islamists employ in Afghanistan and the everyday acts of resistance that pious Muslims deploy in Tajikistan. A merging of these two communities, nonetheless, is possible following the American withdrawal from Afghanistan. In Rahmon's secular autocratic rule both militant Islamists and ordinary Muslims can find a common adversary. Such a merger, though, is by no means essential for Islam-centered mobilization to prove destabilizing for the regime. Militant Islamists were not the drivers of the Arab uprisings. Rather, the mobilizing capacity of religion, and of the community and interpersonal networks that religion creates outside the reaches of the state, is what most threatens Tajikistan's autocratic regime.

SEEDS OF TURKMEN UNREST

Turkmen politics, despite the international media's preoccupation with the eccentricities of the country's cultish leadership, thus far has proved stable. Turkmenistan owes this stability to several factors. Like Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, and in contrast to Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan carried a united political elite into the post-Soviet period. President Berdymukhamedov, at 55, need not share his Uzbek and Kazakh counterparts' concerns that key ministers might defect in favor of a younger leader. And, in contrast to his Kyrgyz and Tajik counterparts, Berdymukhamedov does not lack for resources to sustain autocratic rule. Turkmenistan is home to the 10th-largest natural gas reserves in the world, a resource all the more impressive given that Turkmenistan's population of five million is the smallest in the region.

As a result of these favorable ruling conditions, Turkmenistan has suffered neither civil war nor devastating ethnic conflict. Moreover, in contrast to the other Central Asian states, Turkmenistan has already seen one peaceful transition of power. Admittedly, outsiders have an imperfect under-

standing of the mechanisms through which Berdymukhamedov was selected as Niyazov's successor in December 2006. What is known, though, is that Berdymukhamedov took office without bloodshed and popular upheaval. Turkmenistan's presidential succession mechanism, however cloaked, appears institutionalized to some degree.

Despite this successful rotation of presidents, not everything is golden in Ashgabat. Elite loyalty, though encouraged by the presence of a young president, also demands real financial rewards. The sale of natural gas abroad has provided sufficient government revenues to keep state bureaucrats content. Were the price of natural gas to collapse, however, so too might elite loyalty to the Berdymukhamedov regime. In addition, a collapse in gas revenues might spell an end to passivity within Turkmen society.

The seeds of this potential unrest are already visible. Half of all working-age Turkmen are unemployed. Those lucky enough to have jobs are typically employed in some form of state-run agricultural, service, or construction enterprise. Given that 40 percent of the Turkmen population is under the age of 20, the challenges that unemployed youth pose to regime stability will only grow in the coming years. This youth bulge, combined with the unpredictability of natural gas prices, holds the potential to unhinge two decades of Turkmen political stability.

One thing is clear: Nazarbayev's days are numbered.

THE COMING INSTABILITY

Central Asia is entering a decade of heightened instability. Aging autocrats and an absence of clear succession mechanisms make a combination that, if not soon addressed, will lead to political upheaval in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. In Kazakhstan this upheaval could result in a protracted stalemate among competing coalitions of economic and political elites. Uzbekistan, which lacks Kazakhstan's economic elites yet has a religious leadership with proven ability to rally large numbers of followers, may find in Islam the mobilizing mechanism and opposition ideology capable of toppling President Karimov's illiberal rule.

Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, countries that have struggled with violence and instability since the Soviet collapse, will remain vulnerable to political unrest. The shape that this unrest will likely assume, however, is different in each country. For the near future, nationalism rather than the once familiar calls for democratic reform will drive Kyrgyzstan's street protests. Tajikistan will see an increased probability of Islamist-centered opposition as the US military drawdown in the region exposes the country to mobilization strategies honed by Tajik co-ethnics in the decades-long conflict in neighboring Afghanistan.

The Turkmen regime is the one in Central Asia that has some cause to anticipate longevity. Berdymukhamedov's relative youth and his access to immense hydrocarbon reserves can combine to maintain well-functioning patronage politics at the elite level. Berdymukhamedov does, however, face challenges at the societal level. Unemployment will be compounded by the entry of one million Turkmen youth into the labor force over the next decade. Ultimately, Berdymukhamedov too may prove a casualty of unrest.

While this increased likelihood of instability poses challenges for both domestic and regional security, it also provides opportunities for Central Asia's international partners. Most of all, Central Asia's coming leadership successions present a potential boon for the laggard great power in Central Asia, the Americans. Following its robust engagement in the 1990s, the United States is now a distant third to China and Russia in terms of influence in the region. Many analysts in the Central Asian capitals as well as in Beijing and Moscow anticipate that American influence will recede even further following the US and NATO drawdown of forces in Afghanistan in 2013.

A declining American presence in the region, however, serves neither Washington's nor Central Asians' interests. Central Asians would do well to maintain multiple and competing international suitors. Washington for its part needs a stable Central Asia to secure and build on the fragile political gains made in Kabul.

The United States can reduce its military footprint in Afghanistan while still enhancing its geostrategic influence in Central Asia. No sitting US president has visited post-Soviet Central Asia. A presidential visit timed to coincide with the US military pivot out of Afghanistan would be an important first step in rebuilding America's presence in the region, and would ensure that Washington is not sidelined in this still critically important great game. ■