States of Protest in Central Asia

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The nature of violent protest in Central Asia exhibits variation both in form and state response. In Kazakhstan, violent protest is rare and economically oriented, and it elicits accommodationist state responses. In Uzbekistan, violent protest is also rare, often has Islamic overtones, and elicits repressive state responses. In Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, violent protest is more frequent and elicits accommodationist state responses. In Kyrgyzstan, violent protest tends to be ethnonationalist in form. In Tajikistan, violent protest is regional and, at times, secessionist in orientation.

This memo seeks to explain these variations in the states of protest in Central Asia. The first section explores causes of violent protest and finds that Soviet-era legacies drive variations in violence, in addition to post-Soviet factors. The second section explores state responses to Central Asian violent protest and concludes that, contrary to what might be expected, it is not a regime's brute coercive strength but rather government ideology that shapes state responses. Fortunately, with the one exception of Uzbekistan, Central Asian states do not perceive episodic violent opposition as fundamentally threatening to existing modes of governance and, as such, states have been inclined to accommodate rather than repress protest movements.

I. Violent Protest

Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan have each experienced notable violent state-society clashes in the last two decades. Violent clashes have been more frequent in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan than in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, a variation that, to a large degree, stems from these countries' differing modes of transition to post-Soviet independence. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan began independence with their political elites united whereas Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan entered the post-Soviet period with their elites fragmented and in disarray, inclining both countries toward political instability.

These structural variations, though they explain why violent protest is more frequent in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan than it is in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, do not explain variations in the forms of violent protest in Central Asia. To some degree, as I illustrate below, this variation is a product of contingency. Violence was not foreordained in any of these countries. That said, the varying nature of Central Asian protest is not entirely a product of chance. Grievances expressed during episodes of

post-Soviet Central Asian violent protests are grievances that have long been present in these polities.

Kazakh Violent Protest: Zhanaozen 2011

In December 2011, seventeen people died and an additional 100 people were injured in clashes between oil strikers and police in Zhanaozen, a city in western Kazakhstan. The violence was the culmination of seven months of contentious strikes in which worker demands for better pay and safer work conditions fell on deaf ears. The protests might have continued peacefully were it not for the sudden appearance of a symbolic target upon which the strikers could vent their anger. On the morning of December 16, Zhanaozen's central square was transformed with yurts, a central stage, and a fir tree in preparation for the day's celebrations—Kazakh Independence Day. Frustrated oil strikers dismantled the decorations, sparking the security services' heavy-handed response.

Beyond this degree of contingency, the economic nature of the Zhanaozen protests was far from unprecedented. Economic grievances—and protests based on economic grievances—have long been commonplace in Kazakhstan. *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, for example, reported in June 1989 that mass protests erupted in the Mangyshlak peninsula, in western Kazakhstan. The cause of the protests, according to the paper, was high youth unemployment.[*] In September 1990, "tens of thousands" in Ust-Kamenogorsk protested against unsafe working conditions "at the Ulbinsky metallurgical works" following an explosion that released radioactive gases into the air.[†] In the Ust-Kamenogorsk and Mangyshlak protests, as ultimately was the case in the Zhanaozen protests, the central government softened its tone toward the protestors and instituted reforms to address workers' grievances.

Uzbek Violent Protest: Andijan 2005

On May 12, 2005, armed men stormed a prison in Andijan, freeing twenty-three businessmen who had been jailed on charges of Islamist extremism. According to the Uzbek government's account of the 2005 events, the militants and now-freed businessmen occupied the regional government administrative building, taking government employees hostage in the process. The militants then fired on Uzbek government forces attempting to free the state employees. The gun battle left 187 dead, the majority of whom, according to the Uzbek government, were soldiers and militants.

Scholars dispute this Uzbek government's account of the Andijan events. Independent research suggests the businessmen were not Islamists, but rather religiously devout and savvy entrepreneurs whose enterprises employed a considerable portion of the local population. The businessmen's prominence unnerved the Uzbek government. Jailing them on charges of militant Islamism was an expedient way to check this growing prominence. There indeed was a jailbreak on May 12 to free the

[*] "Conflict in the Soviet Union: The Untold Story of the Clashes in Kazakhstan," Human Rights Watch, 1990, p. 52.

[†] David Remnick, "Kazakhs Protest After A-Plant Blast Looses Gases," *Washington Post*, September 29, 1990.

Muslim businessmen, and protesters did occupy the regional administrative building. The violence that followed, researchers have concluded, was disproportionately inflicted by government forces and against unarmed civilians protesting on Andijan's central square.

As in the Kazakh Zhanaozen conflict, so too in the Andijan violence can precursors of protest be found in the Soviet period. In the mid-1980s, the influence of both Moscow and Tashkent faded in Uzbekistan's regions. As central authority receded, new actors—charismatic and reformist imams—established large followings, particularly in the Fergana Valley.[*] In the summer of 1989, Moscow appointed a new first secretary, Islam Karimov, in an effort to reassert central control. Karimov, in contrast to his predecessor, was intolerant of the charismatic imams and systematically worked to undermine their influence. This late Soviet-era dynamic of charismatic local religious leaders amassing influence and power has continued into the post-Soviet period. So too, moreover, have Karimov's efforts at limiting—through repression and coercion—these imams' influence. The Andijan violence is the most prominent example of enduring Islam-centered state-society tensions stretching back to the late Soviet period.

Kyrgyz Violent Protest: Osh 2010

In April 2010, a coalition of northern Kyrgyz political elites ousted President Kurmanbek Bakiev. This was Kyrgyzstan's second post-Soviet revolution; Bakiev, who is from Kyrgyzstan's southern Jalalabad region, rose to power as a result of the March 2005 "Tulip Revolution." Significantly, Bakiev left regional patronage networks largely undisturbed. The April 2010 revolutionaries, in contrast, sought to weaken the patronage networks of the southern Kyrgyz political elite. To do this, the northern coalition government enlisted the support of ethnic Uzbeks living in southern Kyrgyzstan, most notably the support of the influential Jalalabad businessman, Kadyrjan Batyrov.

The central government's alliance of convenience with Batyrov and the perceived threat this alliance posed to southern power relations led to growing tension between southern Kyrgyz and the minority Uzbek population living in Jalalabad as well as in southern Kyrgyzstan's largest city, Osh. In June 2010, these tensions escalated into interethnic violence. Kyrgyz security services in the south, services loyal to local politicians now out of favor with the northern coalition government, were slow to intervene. At least 350 people—the majority of whom were ethnic Uzbeks—died in the violence.

The 2010 ethnic violence coincided with the twentieth anniversary of Kyrgyzstan's deadly 1990 Osh riots, which left 470 people, again mostly ethnic Uzbeks, dead. Then, as in the 2010 violence, a slight to a status quo that privileged titular interests above those of the Uzbek minority sparked the conflict. Osh, like many Kyrgyz cities, had seen an influx of rural ethnic Kyrgyz migrants in the late 1980s. In contrast to

[*] Noah Tucker, "Violent Extremism and Insurgency in Uzbekistan: A Risk Assesment," USAIS, August 2013.

other cities, however, much of Osh's housing stock was in the hands of ethnic Uzbeks. To redress this imbalance, the Osh city administration promised new ethnic Kyrgyz arrivals land on what was a predominantly Uzbek collective farm. The city administration backpedalled on this promise in June 1990, motivating ethnic Kyrgyz migrants to turn to violence.

The 1990 Soviet-era riots are not directly responsible for Kyrgyzstan's post-Soviet ethnic violence. If it were not for missteps of the 2010 interim government, Kyrgyzstan may have remained free of deadly ethnic conflict. What the 1990 riots did do, however, was introduce a mode of protest into state-society relations that could be replicated given a now familiar set of political contingencies.

Tajik Violent Protest: Khorog 2012

In July 2012, Tajik President Emomalii Rahmon sent troops to Khorog in an effort to detain the alleged killers of General Abdullo Nazarov, the central government's commander of border troops in the Gorno-Badakhshan autonomous region (GBAO). Militants loyal to a local warlord and former field commander of the United Tajik Opposition, Tolib Ayombekov, attacked the government troops. Seventeen soldiers and thirty militants died in the fighting. Ayombekov, it should also be noted, was General Nazarov's deputy commander, one of several government positions Ayombekov has held thanks to a 1997 UN-brokered power-sharing arrangement that ended five years of civil war.

The July 2012 Khorog violence can be viewed in multiple ways. Some argue the conflict was nothing more than a struggle between corrupt political elites for control of illicit trafficking networks.* Khorog is a short drive from the Ishkashim border post on the Afghan-Tajik border, where Nazarov was killed in a dispute over how to process a recently arrived goods shipment from Afghanistan. Others, however, see the July 2012 violence as emblematic of the long struggle of the GBAO to free itself from Dushanbe's rule. In March 1991, Pamiri nationalists, emboldened by independence movements elsewhere in the Soviet Union, formed Lali Badakhshan, a political party that upon Soviet collapse later that year pressed for the GBAO's secession from Tajikistan.† Although Lali Badakshan did not secure GBAO's independence, the central Tajik government has, for the most part, left the region to its own devices. The government's July 2012 dispatching of troops to the region was a rare departure for this arrangement of convenience between center and periphery, and one for which Dushanbe paid dearly.

II. State Responses to Violent Protest

Violent protest in Central Asia, in contrast to similar protest actions in the Middle East, South Asia, and North Africa, is notable in that it is fleeting rather than enduring. A key reason for the fleeting nature of Central Asian protest is that, with the exception of

* Farhod Milod, "Who Is Tolib Ayombekov?" July 30, 2012 (http://registan.net/2012/07/30/who-is-tolib-ayombekov/).

† Sebastien Peyrouse, "Economic Trends As an Identity Marker? The Pamiri Trade Niche with China and Afghanistan," *Problems of Post-Communism,* 59, 4 (July 2012): 7.

Uzbekistan, states in the region have gravitated toward accommodating rather than continuing to repress protest. Economic grievances throughout Kazakhstan, titular ethnonationalism in southern Kyrgyzstan, and secessionist pressures in Gorno-Badakhshan remain high and, in all these cases, central governments have sought to assuage rather than exacerbate these grievances.

In Kazakhstan, there have been multiple protests since the Zhanaozen uprising. Copper miners have gone on strike in Zhezkazgan, coal miners have picketed in Karaganda, and steel workers have forced production slowdowns in Temirtau. In each of these cases, the Kazakh government intervened on behalf of the striking workers. In Kyrgyzstan, the northern-led central government capitulated to the demands of southern Kyrgyz nationalists despite evidence that these southern elites played a direct role in fomenting the June 2010 ethnic violence. And in Tajikistan, Dushanbe has returned to the status quo of not intervening in the Pamiris' day-to-day governance of GBAO.

Notably, in none of these cases did violent protest pose a challenge to the legitimacy of central governments. Rather, following all of these violent protests, central governments effectively framed the conflicts as local and regional in origin.

In contrast, the Karimov government, in portraying itself as the only bulwark protecting society from radical Islamism, has transformed local conflicts into crises threatening Uzbek national identity. While this approach has won Karimov considerable support among many secular-minded Uzbeks, it has also forced the Uzbek government's hand. The Islam-related protest in Andijan was not merely Andijan's problem, but the Uzbek nation's problem.

Fortunately, Uzbeks will have a chance to rethink their current leadership's post-Soviet Islamist-alarmism. The Uzbek political elite will soon need to find a replacement for Karimov, who is now seventy-five and rumored to be in poor health. Karimov's successor would do well to follow the lead of his counterparts elsewhere in Central Asia and not stake central government legitimacy on an imaginary battle against Islamist extremism. Doing so would allow Tashkent to see protest in a more objective light, to see Uzbek protest for what it most often is: local actors voicing locally-directed grievances and not transnational Islamists seeking the militant overthrow of secular autocracy.