

# Patronage, Islam, and the Rise of Localism in Central Asia

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While ideologies and elites change, patronage politics remains the preferred strategy of Central Asia's autocrats. Aspiring presidents-for-life distribute wealth to handpicked appointees who reciprocate by implementing, to varying degrees, executive policy. Shared strategies of rule, however, do not translate into shared state capacity. The trains do not always run on time, and in many places in Central Asia, the trains do not run at all. Similarly, just as these transport lines linking capital and region have stalled, so too in several states are the political sinews linking center and periphery frozen. Behind this malaise are two causal variables: (1) differing economic resources of patronage rule and (2) differing degrees of Islamic revivalism. In Kazakhstan, where economic resources are bountiful and the growth of Islam, in particular the growth of local-level Islamic societies, is limited, the Nazarbaev regime is adept at sustaining centralized autocratic rule. In Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, where economic resources are few and where, curiously, greater dialogue with the global Muslim community is encouraging the rise of locally-oriented Islamic societies, regional and religious elites are building new governance structures in defiance of centralized patronage rule.

These findings, in addition to advancing our knowledge of Central Asian politics, challenge core hypotheses of the broader academic and policy literatures on Islam and authoritarianism. Analysis of the Central Asian cases demonstrates that Islam need not be politicized to be a threat to autocratic durability. Central Asian Muslims do not harbor disproportionately greater animosity toward their presidents than do non-Muslims. Critically, however, in Central Asian states where patronage rule is ineffective, Muslims do form local self-help networks which are hastening state retreat in the regions. While isolated and seemingly Islam-related conflicts sometimes occur,

for example in Andijon, Uzbekistan in May 2005 and Kyrgyzstan's Kara Suu demonstrations in August 2006, these events are not causes but rather examples of autocratic implosion – Central Asian regimes attempting to reassert control as local politics turn inward to compensate for absent states and failed patronage rule.

## **The Economics of Patronage**

Patronage politics during the Soviet period was a top-down affair. The Moscow leadership, while unapologetic in its exploitation of the southern republics' natural resources, was nevertheless adept at currying favor and loyalty among Central Asian elites and among Central Asian society broadly. Although Lenin is absent in Russia's city centers, in Central Asia his marble likeness coexists comfortably alongside new statues of Al-Farabi, Tamerlane, and Manas. Central Asia's Muslims, contrary to the predictions of prominent western Sovietologists in the 1980s, never presented a challenge to Soviet rule. At the same time, Soviet rule in the years after Stalin's death rarely challenged Central Asian authority structures. Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Tajiks, and Kyrgyz sent northward raw materials – cotton, grain, oil, and minerals. In return, Moscow invested in infrastructure, education, and healthcare. If the steadfast nostalgia reflected in waves of public opinion surveys since Soviet collapse are an accurate indication, it was the Central Asians who got the better of Moscow, not the other way around. Here, in contrast to the Caucasus, the Baltic region, and even Russia itself, the Soviet Union is sorely missed.

However, the halcyon days of the USSR have not disappeared everywhere. Although economic survival is difficult for many Central Asians, a sizeable elite class, most notably the Kazakh political elite, enjoys the fruits of a patronage system remarkably similar to that of the Soviet period. Flush with oil revenues, Nursultan Nazarbaev's government in Kazakhstan nurtures loyalty among regional and local bureaucrats much as Moscow did across Central Asia writ large, distributing state largess through generous salaries, housing stipends, and government cars.

In February 2008, the forecasting company Global Insight reported that Kazakhstan's annual GDP growth had, for the first time since 1999, dipped below 9 percent. 2007's disappointing 8.5 percent growth rate has moved the Nazarbaev government to shelve several planned construction projects. At the same time, the Kazakh government has indicated that it will continue its decade-long practice of raising public sector salaries, promising a twofold increase by 2012.

Elsewhere in Central Asia, however, a new patronage model is emerging, one in which wealth is extracted from the bottom up rather than extended from the top down. In Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, state appointees trade loyalty to the center for the license to exploit local populations. The leaders of state governments with little to give cling to power by encouraging bureaucrats to take.

In February 2008, the Kyrgyz Ministry of Education acknowledged that over 65,000

school teachers have received no or only partial pay since 2003. Kyrgyz teachers fare better than their Uzbek counterparts who, in addition to receiving only partial pay, are forced every September to pick cotton alongside their students. Across the border in Tajikistan, many teachers and students are not in class at all because the Dushanbe government cannot afford to heat schools, let alone pay instructors. Similar realities exist in other public sectors in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, most notably in the national health care and pension systems. With the exception of Kazakhstan, the Soviet-style top-down patronage system – what others have called the Soviet social contract – has collapsed. Today, patronage in Central Asia is more frequently defined by predation than allocation. Indeed, the only public sector employees in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan who are faring well are those in positions of direct power who can use their offices to extract bribes from local populations. However, as recent events in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan suggest, patronage through predation is a poor strategy for state stability.

## **Islam and Politics (Rather Than Islamist Politics)**

Just as differences in patronage politics shape regime stability, so too variations in Islamic revivalism influence the ability of Central Asia's autocratic-leaning states to project power in the regions. Local Islamic community networks, most notably in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, increasingly intersect with city, town, and village bureaucracies. Although Islam in this context is not political in orientation – rarely do local Islamic notables agitate for government change or nurture political ambitions – the overlap of mosque and municipality further draws appointed bureaucrats away from Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan's weak patronage structures.

Central Asia's Islamic revival is most pronounced among the "Fergana Valley" states. In Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, Islam has been practiced for over 1,000 years, and people are keen to engage the broader Muslim world in ways they could not during the Soviet period. In contrast, it was not until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that Islam made some inroads in the Kazakh steppe. At the same time, the ethnic and cultural reach of the Russian state is less pronounced in the Fergana Valley states than it is in Kazakhstan, which shares both a long border and long history with its northern neighbor. Ethnic Russians constitute approximately one third of Kazakhstan's population in contrast to 10 percent of Kyrgyzstan's and 2 percent of the populations of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

These differing histories and demographics are reflected in social attitudes toward Islam in all four states. Public opinion surveys, commissioned by the author, demonstrate that Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Tajik citizens are more likely to trust local mosques than are their Kazakh counterparts. At the same time, in contrast to Kazakhs, Kyrgyz and Uzbek citizens express greater trust in their local governments than in their national state leaderships. Pairing these survey results with recent domestic unrest in both Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, the causal link between patronage, Islam, and state

instability becomes apparent.

In May 2005, thousands of Uzbek citizens gathered in Andijon's central square to protest a court decision jailing 23 local businessmen, all devout Muslims, on charges of religious extremism. Uzbek research colleagues have stressed that it was this common religious belief, this shared trust and social capital, that first encouraged these businessmen to aggregate and transform modest resources into enterprises – bakeries, as well as clothing, furniture, and construction companies – employing a large portion of the city population. Problematically for the Tashkent government, these entrepreneurs' economic prominence was matched by their growing political legitimacy. As Karimov himself acknowledged in the wake of the protests, Tashkent's appointees in Andijon were more responsive to local "personal connections" than they were to central directives.

Similar protests erupted in Kyrgyzstan one year following the Andijon uprising. Here, Kyrgyz police killed a prominent regional imam, Muhammadrafik Kamalov, in what the government of Kurmanbek Bakiyev has since described as a botched anti-terrorist operation. Rejecting the government's story, upwards of 10,000 mourners flooded the streets of Kara Suu, Kamalov's hometown, declaring the imam a martyr and demanding a full investigation into the killing. In contrast to Karimov's violent repression of the Andijon protestors, the Bakiyev regime fortunately chose not to intervene in the demonstration. The Kamalov family, similar to the Andijon businessmen, sits at the nexus of overlapping Islamic and business networks in southern Kyrgyzstan, and the family enjoys greater local legitimacy than do Bishkek's regional political appointees, although there is no indication that either Muhammadrafik or his brothers nurtured political ambitions.

Tajikistan, in contrast to Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, has remained comparatively quiet in recent years. The conclusion of a five-year civil war in the 1990s resulted in de facto decentralization where power structures in the region are only loosely linked, if at all, to the central government in Dushanbe. Tajikistan in many ways parallels the "warlord" states political scientists Jeffrey Herbst and William Reno describe in sub-Saharan Africa; the national government rules the capital city and the capital city alone. Curiously though, despite Tajikistan being a failed or, at best, highly circumscribed state, it is relatively stable. The disintegration of top-down patronage and the rise of local overlapping economic and religious networks have produced a polity far less prone to conflict than either Kyrgyzstan or Uzbekistan.

The Tajik case suggests a potential paradox of Central Asian regime durability: weakening patronage networks and the revival of Islamic communities at the local level are only destabilizing if national governments attempt to reverse these dynamics. In Kazakhstan, where patronage remains strong and Islamic revivalism is limited, the Nazarbaev regime need not confront this choice. In Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, on the other hand, Presidents Bakiyev and Karimov are attempting to assert central control

and, in doing so, are further eroding their own legitimacy and power. This is not to say the Tajik outcome of de facto decentralization is ideal. Tajikistan's current energy and food shortages demonstrate that some measure of state capacity is critical for the provision of public goods. Such capacity, however, is considerably more likely to emerge in an environment where local governance structures are allowed to grow than in environments of alienating repression.

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