

# An Opening in Uzbekistan

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May 2008 marked the three-year anniversary of the tragic Andijon events in Uzbekistan's Fergana Valley. My understanding of these events is informed by discussions with Uzbek colleagues both within and outside of President Islam Karimov's government. These confidants have, at considerable risk to themselves and their families, confirmed that the Karimov government applied disproportionate force in suppressing the largely peaceful protest in Andijon on May 13, 2005. If we are to believe this account, rather than the alternative militant Islamist narrative the Karimov regime offers, the question for us is: can the international community influence the Uzbek government to refrain from future political violence? Four recent developments – all profound structural changes in the geopolitics of Central Asia – offer a political opening through which the international community broadly, and the United States in particular, can encourage the Karimov regime to move toward political liberalization:

- North Atlantic Treaty Organization operations in Afghanistan have not been adversely affected by Uzbekistan's rescinding of access to the Karshi-Khanabad airbase;
- Changes in commodity markets, namely Uzbek cotton exports and basic food imports, are weakening the already brittle economic foundations of the Karimov government;
- Generational change coupled with new information communication technologies (ICTs) is creating an Uzbek population more welcoming to the international community;
- The political legacies of two Karimov contemporaries, former Kyrgyz president Askar Akayev and deceased Turkmen president Saparmurat Niyazov are actively,

and literally, being dismantled.

Critically, however, the sense of vulnerability these developments may engender in the Karimov government can equally lead to autocratic retrenchment and political repression. This paradox of political openings makes it all the more important that the United States continues to stress Uzbek political reform and deemphasize military cooperation.

## **Authoritarianism and the Karshi-Khanabad Airbase**

Analysts such as Galima Bukharbaeva and Alexander Cooley find that NATO bases in Uzbekistan encouraged the Karimov government's autocratic leanings. By allowing Western powers access to airstrips close to the Afghan border, President Karimov was able to cultivate a credible image at home and abroad as a partner in fighting transnational terrorism. However, while NATO engaged real terrorist groups like the Taliban and Al Qaeda, Karimov fought imagined terrorists, political oppositionists, human rights defenders, and businessmen, whom the Uzbek president portrayed as homegrown Islamist militants. Calling Karimov on this charade cost the United States access to the Karshi-Khanabad airbase, but rebuking Karimov did not cost the United States and NATO any noticeable decreased military capacity in Afghanistan.

In congressional testimony of March 5, 2008, Admiral William Fallon, then Commander of U.S. Central Command, noted that the United States has "reinstated a security relationship with Uzbekistan after a hiatus of about three years." Our past security relationship with Uzbekistan, albeit short-lived, suggests that pursuing the opposite strategy, deemphasizing military relations with the Karimov government, may prove more fruitful to Uzbek political reform while presenting no limitation to U.S. strategic interests in the region. This relationship between military bases and Uzbek autocracy is a question the U.S. Congress might address as it considers confirmation of the next commander of Central Command.

## **Challenging Commodity Markets**

One relationship Western partners would do well to stress with the Karimov regime is that of international trade. The Uzbek government, similar to governments in other developing states, is vulnerable to the global trend of rising commodity prices. Extended drought in Central Asia and Australia, floods in the American Midwest, and the shifting of cropland in Brazil and the United States from food to ethanol production have produced marked increases in commodity prices in Central Asia just as these environmentally-induced changes have raised commodity prices throughout the world. An April 2008 World Bank study estimates that corn prices increased 80 percent between 2005 and 2007. During this same two-year period, wheat and rice prices increased 70 percent and 25 percent, respectively.

In contrast to Bangladesh, Haiti, Cameroon, and Somalia, countries where price hikes have sparked politically destabilizing and sometimes deadly food riots, Uzbeks

have thus far proven surprisingly tolerant of rising commodity costs. As Central Asia's autumn harvests appear less and less promising, though, there is increasing cause for concern, not so much because of protests, but because of how the Uzbek government might respond to protests. In May 2005 thousands gathered in Andijon to protest, among other things, mounting food and energy costs. Whether the Karimov regime might once again brutally repress such protests is uncertain. Partnering with Uzbekistan now, though, to ensure food supply through the winter, would help preclude hunger and conflict as well as improve strained relations between Tashkent and Western governments.

Rising food costs are not the only commodity challenge the Uzbek government must confront. The Karimov regime's most reliable hard currency source—cotton exports—is also encountering challenges on the global market. Uzbekistan is the world's second largest exporter of cotton. Problematically for this billion dollar state-controlled export, recent media reports exposing the widespread use of child labor in the Uzbek cotton industry have sparked a growing international boycott of Uzbek cotton. Retailers and clothing manufacturers that have pledged not to source Uzbek cotton include H&M, Gap, Tesco, Marks and Spencer, Debenhams, Marimekko, and Krenholm. This dual challenge of more expensive food imports and less secure cotton exports suggests that the Karimov government cannot remain a political island but, rather, must partner with the international community to ensure adequate food supplies and engage Western consumers' child labor concerns.

## **Generation and Technology Change**

Child labor in the cotton industry is only one of several areas where the intersection of Uzbek youth and Western values promises to reshape Tashkent politics. Uzbek society today is younger and more Western-leaning than ever before. The projected 2010 median age in Uzbekistan is 24. To place this figure in context, Uzbekistan's under 24-years-old population, approximately 14.2 million people in total, will be larger than the country populations of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan and 1.5 million shy of Kazakhstan's total population in 2010.

A large youth population is not determinative of liberal or illiberal political reform. As Sarah Mendelson and Theodore Gerber demonstrate in the Russian case, younger generations may be as likely to exhibit Stalinist and xenophobic leanings as they are to champion cosmopolitan and democratic values. In the Uzbek case, though, public opinion analysis does suggest that youth are more Western-leaning than their older counterparts. Specifically, surveys colleagues and I conducted in 2007, as part of a larger study on new ICT acquisition, demonstrate that younger Uzbeks are more trusting of international organizations (IOs) and of English-language media than are older Uzbeks. Thus, for example, the predicted probability of a 20 year old trusting the English language media is 65 percent, while the predicted probability for a 70 year old is 36 percent. The probability that a 20 year old will trust international organizations is 80 percent, while the probability that a 70 year old will trust IOs is 63 percent.

These findings may appear intuitive. Youth, be they in Tashkent or Turin, are far more likely to watch *Eurovision* than the over-forty crowd anywhere in Eurasia. What is surprising, however, is that an engagement of Western culture does not translate everywhere into greater trust of the West. Analysis of surveys conducted in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan in 2007, for instance, reveals no similar statistically significant pro-West youth effects.

Our 2007 Uzbek survey suggests one further age effect: Uzbek youth are more trusting of the Internet than are older cohorts. This combination of younger generations' trust in new ICTs and pro-Western leanings offers Uzbekistan's international partners a mechanism through which they can assist political reform. However, extreme care is required should Western states attempt to engage Uzbekistan's youth through new ICTs. Here the case of Alisher Saipov, one of Central Asia's most promising journalists, is instructive.

In the spring and summer of 2007, Saipov's newspaper, *Siyosat*, proved an immediate hit. *Siyosat*, a project funded by the U.S.-based National Endowment for Democracy, was a newspaper that employed the latest ICTs (SMS, Internet databases and news digests, instant messaging) in its reporting and provided Uzbek-language news for a population long starved for information. Saipov distributed *Siyosat* outside public gathering points, such as bazaars and mosques, in Kara Suu, Kyrgyzstan. From here, folded copies of *Siyosat* would travel in the pockets of mosque attendees and bazaar traders across the border into nearby Uzbekistan.

Lamentably, *Siyosat's* and Saipov's substantial contributions proved short-lived. In October 2007 assailants shot and killed Saipov, thereby shuttering the region's first uncensored Uzbek-language newspaper. Many sources, including Kyrgyz security services personnel whom I have engaged through intermediaries, attribute Saipov's death to the Karimov regime. Should these sources be correct, Saipov's biography demonstrates that new technologically savvy journalism is subject to the same repression as traditional mass media. In Saipov's case, fifteenth-century technology silenced Central Asia's leading twenty-first century reporter.

## **Fading Political Legacies**

Saipov was perhaps Karimov's most compelling and outspoken critic. This was a role Saipov embraced but also a role that the increasingly embattled Uzbek president could not abide. Karimov is the last of an endangered, if not practically extinct, political generation. The Class of 1991 – the cohort of five Central Asian leaders who became presidents of independent states following the Soviet collapse – has only two members still in power. Since the 2005 Andijon bloodshed, Uzbek President Karimov has watched the legacies of his Kyrgyz and Turkmen counterparts, Presidents Akayev and Niyazov, fade as successor governments build new legitimacy by rejecting old leaders. At the same time, Karimov has witnessed the comparative success of the well-choreographed leadership successions of Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin. Should the Uzbek president now be considering his own legacy, he likely is more attentive today to

potential exit strategies than he was three years earlier.

Robust U.S. political engagement with Uzbekistan at a time when President Karimov is casting a questioning eye toward political (im)mortality can positively influence the nature of potential successor regimes. Even carefully picked successors strike out on new paths. Just as we can imagine Russia's new president, Dmitry Medvedev, pursuing warmer relations with Washington while still celebrating his mentor, so too might Uzbekistan's next president reach out to the West while publicly honoring Karimov's legacy.

## **Proceeding with Caution**

Insecure political legacies, challenging commodity markets, new geopolitical realities, and generation and technology change are all structural reasons why Western states might find increasing influence over the Karimov regime. These structural changes, however, do not guarantee greater influence. As Andijon demonstrates, perceptions of vulnerability can just as easily spark renewed repression as they can political reform in autocratic states.

Regime vulnerability, dissident repression, and political reform paradoxically often share similar causalities. Ultimately, the outcome that emerges in Uzbekistan will depend on complex interactions among the structural changes outlined above and unforeseen developments in the months to come. Critically, though, these structural changes have produced a political opening in Uzbekistan, an opening that the West can positively influence through measured engagement with Tashkent.

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