

## AUTHORITARIAN/ CONSTITUTIONAL-PATRONAGE REGIMES IN CENTRAL ASIA

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### *I n t r o d u c t i o n*

The Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan and public demonstrations in Uzbekistan have drawn the attention of the outside world to the political realities and social conditions of these countries. As a result, those who have dealings with this part of the world have begun to ask the following questions: What caused these events to happen? Might we see similar events happening in neighboring countries in the near future?

In order to answer these questions it is necessary to go back several years. In 1991 when these countries unexpectedly gained independence, the leaders had to find radical and structural solutions to the extremely difficult condi-

tions—social, economic and political—which prevailed in their societies at this time. Their long-term aim was to align their political and economic systems with those of the rest of the world. Although certain regional states possessed enormous reserves of natural gas and oil, they lacked both an efficient economic system and state institutions that would permit their countries to exercise their country's responsibilities and rights according to international law. Moreover, the Nationalities Policy put forward by Joseph Stalin in 1924, had never been implemented. Their desire, at this stage, was therefore to construct a new state, which would aspire to a free market economy and democratic values.

Although the regional leaders originally promised to make democratic reforms, to respect human rights and to create a free market economy, they subsequently formed authoritarian and constitutional-patronage regimes. In addition, they initiated nation-building and state-building processes, both of which were in line with Stalin's Nationalities Policy. It is these policies, essentially, which gave rise to the revolutions and public

demonstrations which have been seen in these countries.

Using the authoritarian, constitutional-patronage regime as a theoretical framework, this study will focus on the policies of the leaders as regards nation-building, state-building and democratization processes. It will also analyze Islam and Islamic groups in Central Asia.

## Theoretical Framework: Authoritarian/ Constitutional-Patronage Regime

According to Neil Robinson, there are two types of political regime: absolutist (where executive and legislative branches are under the control of one man) and constitutional (where legislative power is shared by parliament and the executive).<sup>1</sup> Similarly, administrative systems can also be divided into two different groups: patronage (where bureaucrats are viewed as the personal staff of the president, who is the boss) and bureaucratic (where officials are selected through legal procedures). Based on this division, there exist four types of state administration: absolutist-patronage, absolutist-bureaucratic, constitutional-patronage, and constitutional-bureaucratic. Nowadays, most states view the constitutional-bureaucratic regime as the ideal one, whereas the Empires of the past were examples of absolutist-patronage regimes.

In the constitutional-patronage regime, the power of the state's institutions cannot be strengthened due to the president's increasing personal power, nor can they pursue their own agenda free from presidential control. For that reason the capacity and organizational unity of state institutions in these countries are weak. Corruption, bribery, poor governance and so on are widespread and state officials exploit both the power and the resources of the State for their own personal gains.

In authoritarian regimes, on the other hand, officials tend to pay scant regard to the rule of law. Human rights, such as freedom of speech, freedom of religion, property rights, freedom of expression etc., are protected by law. But in authoritarian regimes, the social, economic and political sectors of the state are under the strict control of one ruler and he has the power to directly suppress both citizens as well as state officials. He tries to suppress the opposition groups and does not give permission to the people to express their concerns. Thus the people have no opportunity to affect the political decision making process. Any idea which runs counter to existing policy is perceived by the ruler as a threat to the regime as well as himself. Some authoritarian regimes do allow universal elections but these are held simply to justify the existing government.

Within the framework of these theoretical explanations, the Central Asian states have constitutional-patronage and authoritarian regimes. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the former communist leaders in the region became the presidents of these newly independent countries. At first they declared themselves in support of a free market economy and secular, democratic government

<sup>1</sup> See: N. Robinson, *Russia: A State of Uncertainty*, Routledge, New York, 2002.

but this was simply done in order to consolidate their power in the internal political area, and at the same time to encourage the Western countries to make financial and economic assistances to them. They also promised to find urgent solutions to the social and economic difficulties their countries were facing.<sup>2</sup>

However, after consolidating their power, they immediately constructed constitutional-patronage and authoritarian regimes. In these regimes, state institutions were dramatically modified in order to bestow privileges upon progovernment clans thus putting them under the direct control of the presidency. They also suppressed the media, eliminated their opponents and distributed the country's economic resources to privileged groups as a reward for their loyalty. Through these actions, the new leaders contributed significantly to the emergence of radical Islamic groups, ethnic conflicts, and internal political instabilities.

As a justification for this political U-turn and their failure to implement the policies they had originally promised, the leaders declared that the prevailing conditions in their countries would not allow the introduction of a Western-style democracy. Ensuring territorial integrity, national security, social unity and internal stability was, they claimed, a higher priority than providing opportunities for political participation, economic liberalization, human rights and free media. It was this volte-face which finally provoked the public demonstrations and Color Revolutions which we are witnessing today.

## Nation-Building Process: Top-Down Nationalism

The nation-building process began with Stalin's Nationalities Policy of 1924 whereby each republic, autonomous region and clan would gain a national identity and state authorities would help them create their own identities and mentalities. But this top-down nationalistic approach failed to transform the local people from primitive communities to modern nation states because they insisted on preserving their own customs and beliefs—in short, their own cultural identity—rather than accept a national identity based on Russification formulated by the Soviet state.<sup>3</sup>

In 1991, the regional leaders decided to fully implement Stalin's policy to form a nation state based on the dominant ethnic group. In this way they hoped to gain acceptance for the idea of a national identity and nationalistic perspective defined by the state authorities and imposed from above.<sup>4</sup> This policy saw the emergence of a new local culture, traditions, history, and the introduction of new symbols (e.g. new flag, anthem, state symbols), which gave the appearance of a homogenous nation state. Similarly, street names were changed, new national and religious holidays were declared, and national histories were rewritten. New national heroes and intellectuals were identified and the language of the majority ruling clan became the new official language.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See: International Crisis Group, "The Failure of Reform in Uzbekistan: Ways Forward for the International Community," *Asia Report*, No. 76, 11 March, 2004, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> For further information about identity issue in the Turkish world, see: M. Aça, H. Durgut, *Küreselleşen Dünya ve Türk Kimliği* (Globalized World and Turkish Identity), Toplumsal Dönüşüm Yayınları, İstanbul, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> For further information, see: E. Efeğil and Y. Çolak, "Central Asia in Transition: Deteriorating Policies of the Central Asian Leaders," in: *Security of the Post-Soviet Space: Realities and Stereotypes*, ed. by Sergey Golunov, Volgograd State University Regional and Transboundary Studies Center, Volgograd, 2003, pp. 28-35.

<sup>5</sup> See: International Crisis Group, "Repression and Regression in Turkmenistan: A New International Strategy," *Asia Report*, No. 85, 4 November, 2004, p. 8.

## State-Building

In 1991, the Central Asian countries lacked effective state institutions. The task facing the new leaders was therefore to reshape the existing system according to a democratic and capitalist nation state model. In the event, they actually set about constructing a system where the state is under the control of some privileged clans, and the presidency is at the top of the administrative pyramid.

In the absence of a proper government, Uzbekistan today comprises a state system that is controlled by the clans of Tashkent, Samarqand and Ferghana loyal to President Karimov. These clans dominate both political and economic fields. In order to retain both privileges and wealth, they willingly provide whatever support the Presidency desires and actively resist any political or economic reforms that might threaten or damage their powerful position within the country. Legal restrictions are weak and ineffective and fail to act as a check and balance to the activities of bureaucrats and political figures. As a result, corruption, bribery, abuse of power and other crimes are commonplace. The Parliament is ineffective and legislative powers rest largely with the president himself.<sup>6</sup>

In Turkmenistan, President Turkmenbashi has strengthened his position in the country with the assistance of *Ruhnama* ideology: personal affiliation, management of the differences among five clans, and appointing some privileged clan members to top-level state positions

Additionally, security departments also serve the personal interests of the Presidency. As is the case in Uzbekistan, the real power lies in the hands of the Ahal Taka clan, which controls both political and economic fields. All state institutions, ministries and judicial organs are under the strict control of the Presidency and so ministries and state officials cannot take any decision without presidential approval. On the contrary, they can be removed from office without the president having to provide any legal justification. All of this serves to weaken their positions in political life. According to Turkmenistan's constitution, only one party—the Turkmenistan Democratic Party—can play a role in political life, but the system as it exists does not permit the formation of any other political party.<sup>7</sup>

Having enjoyed a pluralist and tolerant political system up until the second half of 1990s, Kyrgyzstan was once seen as an Island of Democracy in Central Asia. After this date, however, Akaev, the former president, followed other regional leaders in pursuing nondemocratic and suppressive policies. As in other republics, both political and economic activities were placed under the control of clans loyal to the president and his wife. In systems such as these, where corruption and bribery are widespread and officially sanctioned, the state authorities have neither the capability nor the interest to find solutions to social and economic problems. Furthermore, the government of Kyrgyzstan has denied the Uzbek minority representation in the national parliament. As a result of the regionalism in Kyrgyzstan, a united opposition movement at the national level has not really occurred.<sup>8</sup>

The executive branch is controlled by President Rakhmonov's clan in Tajikistan. Meanwhile the president has used his authority to render parliament politically ineffective. The latter consists

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<sup>6</sup> See: N.J. Melvin, *Uzbekistan: Transition to Authoritarianism on the Silk Road*, Harwood Academic Publications, Canada, 2000.

<sup>7</sup> See: International Crisis Group, "Cracks in the Marble: Turkmenistan's Failing Dictatorship," *Asia Group*, No. 44, 17 January, 2003, pp. 3-5, 21; International Crisis Group, "Repression and Regression in Turkmenistan: A New International Strategy," pp. 3-5, 9-10.

<sup>8</sup> See: J. Anderson, *Kyrgyzstan: Central Asia's Island of Democracy*, Harwood Academic Publishing, Canada, 1999; International Crisis Group, "Kyrgyzstan's Political Crisis: An Exit Strategy," *Asia Report*, No. 37, 20 August, 2002, pp. 7-14; International Crisis Group, "Political Transition in Kyrgyzstan: Problems and Prospects," *Asia Report*, No. 81, 11 August, 2004, pp. 4-10.

of progovernment deputies and supports Rakhmonov's policies without any question. The existing regime has overtly violated the regulations governing universal elections. Posts within the state department are bought and sold and state officials abuse their power to advance their own personal interests.

President Rakhmonov has used the fight against international terrorism as a means of preserving his political career and eliminating the opposition. What is more, he has altered the constitution in order to strengthen his legal power. On the one hand, he blames opposition groups for civil unrest, while on the other hand he has failed to answer those who accuse him of supporting the activities of radical Islamic groups.<sup>9</sup>

## Economic Field

From an economic perspective, these countries are using their resources to ingratiate themselves with a few privileged groups and to ensure their continuing, active support for their regimes. Economic systems are highly centralized, and this, together with the support of these privileged clans, enables the president to manipulate the political and social areas.

In Uzbekistan, President Karimov claimed that for the Uzbek people internal stability was much more important than market economy. But the existing economic system has led to the creation of poverty, social instability and a widening gap between the poor and the wealthy. For example, the living conditions in Turkmenistan are deteriorating rapidly. In Tajikistan both education and the health service are in crisis. Most of the population is dependent on remittances from other countries and international/regional organizations in order to survive. In addition to those engaged in legitimate economic activity, some groups are involved in the illicit drugs and weapons trade.

Despite all the difficulties facing their societies, the existing regimes object to economic and political reforms. This is because they fear that the introduction of a free market economy might erode their power and strengthen opposition groups both economically and politically. If this were to happen, then new clans might succeed in taking control of the country.

## Democratization

As we have seen above (state-building processes) the regimes in these countries are not making any serious attempt to create more democratic systems. On the contrary, the dominant groups who control economic and political areas, continue to suppress any development toward this goal. In Uzbekistan torture is systematic and religious groups and opposition political parties are under the strict control of the regime. The administration actively prevents civil society from operating freely and from investigating social problems. Demonstrations involving more than 100 people are forbidden. In 2003 President Karimov formed the National Security Unit to monitor the activities of the civil society organizations. The media, too, are controlled by state officials. In fact, most media organizations are actually owned by state institutions, either ministries or hakims and it is not possible for the media to survive without financial assistance from the government. All planned transmis-

<sup>9</sup> See: International Crisis Group, "Tajikistan: A Roadmap for Development," *Asia Report*, No. 51, 24 April, 2003, p. 10; International Crisis Group, "Tajikistan's Politics: Confrontation or Consolidation?" *Asia Briefing*, 19 May, 2004, pp. 2-4.

sions and publications must be submitted to the appropriate media and information agencies in advance. Given the close scrutiny which they are subjected to, it is hardly surprising that media reports speak of “happy workers, huge investments, permanent development of state economy” rather than reflecting the real situation.<sup>10</sup>

In Turkmenistan, a law was passed in 2003 preventing any civil society organizations from operating without official permission. Most media organizations are owned by the state and foreign newspapers cannot be sold in the country. The Turkmen government has also limited Internet access among the population. Thus media groups have no real means of criticizing the president’s policies.<sup>11</sup>

In Tajikistan there are only two daily independent newspapers: *Rozi Nau* and *Nervi Soukhan*. Whenever they have sought to deal with the subjects of corruption, abuse of power and bribery in their news coverage, the authorities have prevented publication by ordering the state-owned publishing house not to print. Journalists are also routinely intimidated and persecuted.<sup>12</sup>

In Kyrgyzstan, prospective publishers must first obtain permission from the state authorities and ten percent of their firm’s shares must be owned by the state. Before any book, bulletin or report can be printed, publishing houses have to submit copies to the authorized state institutions.<sup>13</sup>

Consequently, opposition parties in the Central Asian states are unable to make their presence felt in the political arena and the governments there have made it virtually impossible for any new leaders or effective politicians to emerge. In fact, due to the suppression of the media institutions, people are not adequately informed about the real conditions within the country. As a result, a badly informed electorate tends to give their votes to those candidates who will provide them with some form of financial reward and/or are members of their own clans.

## Islam and Islamic Groups<sup>14</sup>

By virtue of policies such as the establishment of constitutional-patronage/authoritarian regimes, giving privileges to some clans in the economic and political sphere, and in view of the existing socio-economic difficulties, Central Asian leaders have encouraged some opposition groups, especially radical Islamic movements, to resort to terrorism against the existing regimes. The reality is, however, that there is little support for such radical movements among the local people. For example, 92 percent of Uzbeks, 95 percent of Tajiks and 79.9 percent of Kyrgyz describe themselves as Muslims. However, very few of these people actually advocate the establishment of a common Islamic state in the region or the revival of the Caliphate. In fact, 45 percent of Tajiks and 30 percent of Kyrgyz claim to be against the establishment of political parties based on religious ideology.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>10</sup> See: International Crisis Group, “Uzbekistan’s Reform Program: Illusion or Reality?” *Asia Report*, No. 46, 18 February, 2003, pp. 3-5, 22-24; International Crisis Group, “The Failure of Reform in Uzbekistan: Ways Forward for the International Community,” pp. 6-10.

<sup>11</sup> See: International Crisis Group, “Cracks in the Marble: Turkmenistan’s Failing Dictatorship,” pp. 8-9; International Crisis Group, “Repression and Regression in Turkmenistan: A New International Strategy,” pp. 11-12.

<sup>12</sup> See: International Crisis Group, “Tajikistan: A Roadmap for Development,” pp. 14-15; International Crisis Group, “Tajikistan’s Politics: Confrontation or Consolidation?” pp. 11-14.

<sup>13</sup> International Crisis Group, “Kyrgyzstan’s Political Crisis: An Exit Strategy,” pp. 2-3.

<sup>14</sup> For further information about Islamic groups in the Central Asia, see: International Crisis Group, “Is Radical Islam Inevitable in Central Asia? Priorities for Engagement,” *Asia Report*, No. 22, 22 December, 2003, pp. 5-9, 20-24.

<sup>15</sup> See: International Crisis Group, “Is Radical Islam Inevitable in Central Asia? Priorities for Engagement,” *Asia Report*, No. 22, 22 December, 2003, pp. 3-5, 10-16.

On the other hand, existing conditions in the region—such as poverty, deprivation, lawlessness, violation of human rights, unemployment, low standard of living, drugs, poor governance, deteriorating economic conditions, social migration—along with the attitude of the regional leaders toward Islam have led the opposition groups to cooperate with the radical Islamic groups.

For example, in Uzbekistan, any citizen who believes in Islam is automatically suspected of being a member of a radical Islamic group and as such can be investigated by the security institutions. At the same time, the Uzbek leadership uses Wahhabism as a method of eliminating any opposition groups. In Turkmenistan no religious activity can take place without prior approval of the president.<sup>16</sup>

These policies have provided fertile ground for radical groups to operate within the local population.<sup>17</sup> After the 11 September attacks, Hizb ut-Tahrir and the Uzbekistan Islamic Movement lost their power as a result of the American military operation. But now, due to the local leaders' policies, they have regained their popularity among the people.<sup>18</sup> In Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, more and more people, disaffected youth in particular, are looking to radical Islam as a solution. Since 2002 and in the face of worsening social difficulties, religious groups have found popular support among the local people.

As a response to this development, the Central Asian leaders supported U.S. operations against the Taliban regime although they were against America's operation in Iraq. The understanding of this conflict in Uzbekistan was that the United States was seeking to secure the natural resources of the region for purely Western interests. Tajik and Kyrgyz officials, on the other hand, accepted that the U.S. aim had been to destroy Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. The only opposition groups who supported the operation were those in Kyrgyzstan and that was because they wanted the United States to send a clear message to the Akaev government. The reaction of the people themselves was twofold although unconnected: growing anti-Americanism, followed by anti-Westernism. The radical groups, which represent only five percent of the total population, are against the Western world under any circumstances.<sup>19</sup>

## *C o n c l u s i o n*

Through their policies, the leaders in Central Asia have lost a historic opportunity. In statements made during the first years of independence, they all vowed openly that their political and social aims would be very much in keeping with the spirit of Atatürk. But in the event they have shown themselves to favor the authoritarian approach. Atatürk sought to transform Turkish political life in a variety of ways: he moved from a one-party to a multi-party system, he encouraged his friends to form a separate party and at the same time enabled Turkish businessmen to form their own national bourgeoisie. Central Asian leaders have done the opposite: they have established one-party and one-man political system and provided privileges to those clans the President belonged to.

These policies will lead to the deterioration of regional stability and security of the type already witnessed in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. For once the opposition groups find an opportunity

<sup>16</sup> See: International Crisis Group, "Repression and Regression in Turkmenistan: A New International Strategy," p. 6.

<sup>17</sup> See: International Crisis Group, "The Failure of Reform in Uzbekistan: Ways Forward For the International Community," p. 4.

<sup>18</sup> See: International Crisis Group, "Tajikistan's Politics: Confrontation or Consolidation?" pp. 10-12.

<sup>19</sup> See: E. Efeğil, "11 Eylül Sonrası Büyük Devletler Arasında Artan İşbirliği, *KÖK Araştırmalar*, Vol. IV, No. 1, Winter 2002, pp. 163-176; E. Efeğil, "New Chapter in the Eurasia Politics After the September 11 Attacks: Reactions to the American Attempts," *Review of Social, Economic and Business Studies*, Vol. 2, Winter 2002-2003, pp. 65-89; International Crisis Group, "Is Radical Islam Inevitable in Central Asia? Priorities for Engagement," pp. 10-16.

to express their views, whether through peaceful means or other, they will rebel and organize demonstrations against the central authority. More importantly, protests such as these can lead to civil war, as happened Tajikistan. For the moment, there is strong rivalry between groups in the north and south of Kyrgyzstan. Meanwhile, the leaders are failing to select and train the politicians who will rule the country in the future. All of this means that the political outlook in these countries is at best uncertain.

It was originally hoped that with the support of external powers, the Central Asian states would become more democratic within a very short time. Unfortunately, however, the hope is no longer realistic. The Tulip Revolution is a case in point. For once the opposition groups had gained control of the state institutions, they postponed any constitutional changes and eagerly set their sights on property distribution rather than the democratic transformation of the country. Under the circumstances there would seem to be only one answer to the question of what should be done: the people need to be helped to understand more about democracy and encouraged to evolve in that direction.

In summary, it seems unlikely that the Central Asian states will have effective democracy in the near future although there is a desire on the part of the local people to see democratic regimes in power in the region. Therefore the Western world, together with civil organizations of the region, should prepare a comprehensive action plan that would take into account the specific conditions and requirements of the region. In addition to tailoring them to their strategic interests, Western countries must seek to incorporate a more idealistic dimension into their foreign policies.