

## NATION-BUILDING

**POLITICAL CULTURE  
AND MODERNIZATION  
IN THE CENTRAL ASIAN STATES****Alim DONONBAEV***Professor of political science,  
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Their newly acquired sovereignty has turned the attention of the Central Asian countries toward nation-building. Throughout history, the nation-state has been responsible for consolidating society: previously disunited peoples became a closely-knit civil nation. The process went in three directions: ethnic groups joined together to form a civil society; economic progress helped overcome social and class distinctions, while rivaling groups pursuing opposite interests reached unity on vitally important issues.

In Central Asia and elsewhere in the CIS the transition is creating numerous difficulties. Foreign researchers are trying to grasp the deep-rooted causes of these difficulties and critically assess our experience. An analysis of current socioeconomic dynamics and their possible future development suggested to certain foreign academics that the region “in fact lacks the necessary prerequisites” to move forward and that it is sinking “into a deep and protracted crisis” as a result of which the local states will degenerate into “failed countries.”<sup>1</sup>

It goes without saying that the social and economic situation in all the Central Asian countries fighting for survival is still grave; the earlier optimistic forecasts proved to be unfounded.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example: *Central Asia and the New Global Economy*, ed. by Boris Rumer, Armonk, New York, London, 2000, p. IX.

Although landlocked, these countries preferred isolation from each other. Today they are following a pernicious road leading to regional disintegration. To survive they should obviously join forces and try to integrate. Any careful and rational analysis of the local developments produces less pessimistic conclusions than might be expected. Whatever the case, it is hard to agree that the local states are degenerating into “failed countries.” At the same time, if the situation does not improve and continues deteriorating, such degeneration can no longer be excluded.

It is easy to agree with the opinion that the economic problems reflect to a certain extent the political systems that have developed in these countries. American academic Boris Rumer has the following to say: “Obviously, if the social order, power systems and economic management that have taken shape in the post-Soviet period remain intact, none of the region’s countries, no matter how rich in natural resources, will be able to leave behind its present social and economic stagnation.”<sup>2</sup>

This hits the nail on the head: to overcome social and economic stagnation the countries must replace the key social indicators. They must form a framework that will allow the new emerging system to remain stable and even move forward. It seems that as a result of the recent developments in the Central Asian republics the political component moved to the frontline of social transformations. Only a democratic state can inspire society and bring in creative initiative.

There is the opinion that the former Soviet Central Asian republics and Kazakhstan proved unprepared for nation-building and were forced to set up statehood attributes rather than doing this willingly. Hence the “ineffective political system.” Freedom and sovereignty were like a bolt from the blue; so the region set about building democracy through trial and error rather than according to a rational and consistent economic and political strategy. More often than not Western standards were borrowed without discrimination. Hence a political system in which democratic garb covers the old authoritarian-clan core. Israeli political scientist V. Khanin has written in this connection: “All of the countries that emerged in the post-Soviet expanse have declared that their aim is to create a modern, open society with a democratic, secular state. Yet each of the former Soviet republics has developed variations of an authoritarian political model based on the personal power of political leaders (presidents).” He applied this first and foremost to the post-communist Central Asian republics, the presidents of which, while personifying the ideology of independence, assumed functions typical of the communist general secretary of Soviet times.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, it would seem that the makeup of power in the post-Soviet states (the Central Asian states among others) has changed a lot. In the majority of them power became seemingly much more democratic. A keen observer, however, will soon discover that democracy is nothing more than a mask. Power is doing its best to become democratic, but is failing. It proved very hard to discard the mask and change the true face of power. Today, as before, the vertical of power is ruled from above: this is an autocratic, not democratic, method. Democratic elections at all levels did little to change the power pattern inherited from Soviet times. Obviously, the present election system should be radically changed. Recently, nearly all of the region’s countries have been displaying a tendency toward concentrating power in the hands of one person.

The post-Soviet countries are dominated by political groups eager to retain real power through authoritarian rule, which is best suited to this purpose. This is the most obvious explanation of the present situation. By maintaining the Soviet tradition these groups are strengthening their political and economic bastions—they do not need real democratic control over the state structures. The stereotypes of authoritarian Soviet mentality and behavior have anchored Central Asia to the past. They breed totalitarian methods of state administration better suited to the corporate and private interests of certain groups in the corridors of power. The bitterest conflicts in Central Asia occur within this extremely important sphere.

<sup>2</sup> B. Rumer, “Tsentral’naia Azia—desiat’ let spustia,” *AKIpress*, 1-2 January, 2003, p. 9; see also: B. Rumer, “Ne vizhu poka sveta v kontse kyrgyzskogo tunnelia,” *AKIpress*, No. 13-14, 2002; S. Zhukov, O. Reznikova, “Kyrgyzstan blizok k strukturnym proporsitsiam afrikanskikh stran,” *AKIpress*, No. 15-16, 2002.

<sup>3</sup> See: V. Khanin, “Kyrgyzstan: Ethnic Pluralism and Political Conflicts,” *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 3, 2000, pp. 123-124.

It must be said that similar political groups have been and are present in all societies, including the developed democratic ones where the political context alone prevents usurpation of power. The democratic state does not seek over-centralized power: it spreads control, influence and authority among individuals, groups, associations and organizations. Real power becomes diffused in civil associations, therefore the upper levels of the administrative vertical have to constantly verify their actions with what these associations want. In such societies no closely-knit group can concentrate power—it is spread among more or less independent associations. While wielding only part of authority such groups oppose domination of any of them; they compete among themselves for possible advantages, enter into conflicts that end in negotiations and carry out independent actions. It is this dissolution of power and control by civil structures that has so far eluded Central Asia, despite its efforts to achieve it.

The failure is rooted in post-Soviet society and people, as well as in their lifestyle and traditional institutions or, rather, in their political culture. In more general terms we can say that it is rooted in what is divorcing traditional and contemporary civilizations in historical reality. G. Almond and S. Verba, two American academics, have written that statesmen working toward political democracy usually concentrate on its formal side—a specific set of democratic institutions, the constitution, and political parties to stimulate mass involvement. Yet the authors write, such efforts should be concentrated on something much more important than political and administrative structures. Democratic developments depend on political culture: if it proves inadequate to a democratic system, then the latter is doomed to failure.<sup>4</sup>

This logic suggests the following conclusions. First, neither industrial development nor educational levels are conducive to breakthroughs. They are important, yet they depend on a factor that psychologists call “readiness” to accept radical social reforms and to suffer for their sake. Life has taught us that the nation’s spiritual makeup, its political culture, adequate mentality and values create its profound understanding of the aims and tasks of such reforms and its ability to effect them. The state has an important role to play when it comes to consistent reforms. Much, or even everything, depends on the state’s historical form; the state channels social development, therefore the state component (together with the personal component) serves as an indication of society’s historical potential and its development rate. The correlation between the state and the individual in each specific case varies. We regret to say that the CIS countries display a fundamental discrepancy between these two components; as a result the state institutions are democratic in form and authoritarian in content.

The political system’s weakness is manifested by its inability to create an efficient mechanism for regulating socioeconomic relations in order to prevent the poor majority from slipping into destitution and allow the rich minority to gain strictly legal profits. What is even more important is the fact that the present economic situation in the Central Asian countries does not allow them to radically increase their incomes while the political elite that decides the fate of the political and economic reforms does not meet democratic requirements. This was to be expected: its backbone was formed by that part of the Soviet nomenklatura that survived the changes. The U-turn in history that swept away the U.S.S.R. and created the CIS brought back the bureaucrats who, after filling the temporal vacuum, “transformed themselves” into democratic reformers and seemed to have discarded the old authoritarian forms of mentality and behavior “imbibed” under Soviet power.

Outward changes remained superficial: the totalitarian-authoritarian syndrome is still ruling the minds of these people. The bureaucrats of today are obviously developing into a “bureaucratic class” wishing to appropriate the state and use administrative resources to redistribute economic property. During the transition period public property in the CIS countries is becoming private while the bureaucrats are doing their best to have their share of it. This is an objective process, therefore subjective judgments do not apply. This happened in many countries. Subjectively, all people with few exceptions follow the objective logic of events; this gave rise to the term “nomenklatura capitalism,” which is widely used by the academic community. The process is accompanied by an intensive blending of the interests of corrupted bureau-

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<sup>4</sup> See: G. Almond, S. Verba, *The Civic Culture. Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations*, Princeton, 1963, p. 479.

crats and shadow businesses and leads to a trap in which nomenklatura capitalism becomes oligarchic capitalism.

This made post-Soviet bureaucrats a solid barrier on the road to an efficient and extensive business environment, which they regarded as a threat to their basic interests. Society is split and the gap is widening because the interests of the social groups' basic interests widely vary. These factors prevent the social consolidation that a nation-state is trying to carry out. To resolve the problem in Central Asia, traditional societies should be transformed into modern ones, which means that the totalitarian-authoritarian institutions inherited from the Soviet system should be transformed into liberal-democratic ones. The fairly widespread opinion says that this will take a long time and that Central Asia will have to pass through several important modernization stages (already covered by the Baltic states, Russia and Ukraine). This is an exceptionally hard task—the Central Asian countries will have to negotiate a wide abyss that can be described as “civilizational incompatibility.”

Indeed, any attempt at modernization that will destroy the old institutions and remove old values to replace them with new ones is fraught with a very specific situation. According to Russian political analyst Andronik Migranian: “Traditional society finds itself stuck in a bottleneck where all social forces suddenly move toward opposite poles.”<sup>5</sup> The accumulated economic, social, spiritual and other contradictions become even more acute; life is permeated with conflicts. Migranian says that historical experience offers three ways out. The first of them was realized in the Anglo-Saxon countries (Britain in the first place) where the political culture of the ruling elite proved to be civil enough to allow this elite to move to the center so as to become, in the shortest time possible, a link between the extremes. This created a social consensus, removed the sharpest of the contradictions and helped democratic institutions strike root in society. The second way out (more painful) was realized in France. The third, and the most painful and even tragic, fell to Russia's lot. Its history was dominated by servility that permeated its social life, mentality, and norms of behavior. The Central Asian nations, which for a long time remained within the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, and their political culture were deeply affected by this.

Thus the question arises of how can real modernization be carried out in Central Asia? If the local states want to avoid many pitfalls, they should opt for the first of the alternatives described above. With this aim in view they should complete the stage of primary consolidation of a political democracy and market economy in the shortest time possible to create a class of property owners in the towns and villages who are able to support themselves. Being individually free and possessing all the political rights, this class will become a powerful factor that will prevent crises. Only a broad stratum of businessmen can create the “critical mass” capable of achieving economic breakthroughs. This process translates into reality all positive features of so-called democratic capitalism. There is no doubt that it played a decisive role in the spectacular progress demonstrated by those Western and Eastern countries that today are among the most developed countries in the world.

When discussing the inefficient political system emerging in the Central Asian countries we should avoid looking at it in isolation as if divorced from the socioeconomic, cultural and moral-psychological factors with which it is closely connected. The nature of any political and economic system in any country depends on traditional public institutions, which, in their turn, depend on the cultural milieu. The issue of a cultural type of worker prevailing in any society is very important. What is even more important is the type of individual that creates the social atmosphere, and directs the way of life and economic relationships. The social-psychological willingness to accept renovation depends on the mass individual and his political culture. Scholars have demonstrated that the primacy of political culture is expressed in the fact that any changes in social institutions and, consequently, in the political and economic system, should be accepted by the people in order to become new cultural imperatives. The political culture of servility that took the form of “man—the state” in the Soviet system still predominates in human minds and behavior. It is the main factor behind the authoritarian traditions still preserved in

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<sup>5</sup> A. Migranian, “Pochemu pobedili bol'sheviki i chto iz etogo vyshlo,” *NG-STSENARIJ. Prilozhenie k Nezavisimoi gazete*, No. 12 (21), November 1997.

the system of state administration. The political culture of civil spirit is coming to the fore; the process is slow and torturous, yet it alone can create a genuinely democratic atmosphere. Man will regain his dignity if he becomes a real source of power able to act together with his elected representatives as a “law-abiding citizen”.

Mentality and behavior typical of servility forces man (even if he does take part in a democratic election procedure) to fully surrender to his elected representatives and behave like a “power-abiding subject.” Holding forth on this, certain authors insist that the political culture of servility that put down root in Central Asia in the course of history changed but little even under the heavy pressure of the Soviet totalitarian system. This is not completely true: any attentive observer can see that the totalitarian-autocratic methods helped to destroy the earlier traditional political culture. Radicalism that rejected everything inherited from the past was dominant in the communist ideology. At the same time, communist dictatorship relied on those traditional norms of political culture that latently supported and strengthened the totalitarian and authoritarian mechanism. In other words, tradition is ground down and starts playing a new role dictated by the changed social conditions.

It seems that in Central Asia deeply rooted everyday tradition was responsible for the fact that the Soviet modernization of the 1930s-1970s that had upturned people’s lives, labor, living conditions, mentality and behavior—in short, everything that Fernand Braudel called “the structures of everyday life”—was less destructive and much more superficial.

Russian academics are convinced that Soviet modernization destroyed society’s homogeneous structure. The industrially developed western regions of the Soviet Union promptly became industrial and urban areas. The eastern part of the Soviet Union and Central Asia remained mainly agricultural. This explains why the new content, but not the shell, of local existence that is changing under the impact of the market economy and political democracy is being rejected in full accordance with the still alive political culture of servility. In other words, the old traditional content is being put into a new democratic form. We can agree that the Central Asian “parliaments,” “parties,” “presidency,” and “executive and judicial power” should not be taken at their face value. To a certain extent they screen traditional political relations.

But nor should we go to the other extreme: these institutions are not entirely traditional; they are a blend of certain traditional and contemporary elements. In fact we are witnessing a slow, extremely complicated, very painful and contradictory clash between the old and the new. This process gradually pushes the traditional to the wayside in order to make way for contemporary elements. The democratic shell is being filled with new content. This process may prove to be long. We can still agree with D. Mikulskiy who said earlier: “The president of Uzbekistan differs from the president of France, Estonia or even Russia, but nor is he the emir of Bukhara. The Party of Islamic Revival of Tajikistan is not a party in the European sense of the word, but nor is it a group of clans wishing to climb as high as possible up the ladder of clan hierarchy.”<sup>6</sup>

Ten years of independent development revealed to everyone the fact that Central Asian historical specifics are “civilizationally incompatible” with the European model. There were no adequate conditions for the Western development model in any of the Central Asian republics, or across the post-Soviet expanse for that matter. By the mid-1990s the contradictions between Western democracy and the locally planted market economy, on the one hand, and post-Soviet political culture and social psychology that badly distorted the European values, on the other, had reached boiling point. Post-Soviet academics and practical workers reluctantly recognized that the methods of implementing the market mechanisms used by the international financial and economic organizations, the IMF in particular, do not function in our conditions.

First, laws, morals and ideology guide individual economic behavior in the European market system making the commonly accepted norms obligatory for all involved in economic activities very important. When the masses fail to obey the laws and norms or to grasp their moral and ideological meaning, no smooth functioning of the market system is possible. History has demonstrated that the capitalism which

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<sup>6</sup> “Krugly stol ‘Islam i obshchestvo’,” *Voprosy filosofii*, No. 12, 1993, p. 22.

first developed in certain West European countries adjusted itself to the prevailing social order thanks to the predominant Protestant morals. Likewise, in the latter half of the 20th century it was Confucian ethics that helped capitalism move closer to the previously backward East and Southeast Asian countries. Rational behavior in market economy logically stems from legal, ethical and ideological aspects; it is only possible in a well-ordered environment created by strict observance of the rules. This alone leads to creative competition, obligatory contracts and reliable rights of ownership.

Second, the legal, ethical and ideological system that has taken many centuries to form became part and parcel of Western society. It takes into account and specifies the subtlest of nuances in economic relationships, thus making the punishment of violators of laws and rules inevitable. So it restrains those who tend to breach rules and transgress ethical limits. This moral and psychological atmosphere is conducive to trust in verbal obligations, the code of honor and personal reputation become all important.

Finally, third, how is the human factor being transformed in recently Soviet Central Asia? We all know that communist dictatorship imposed atheism, thus depriving Soviet people of religion as a spiritual foundation of human behavior. Socialist morals disappeared together with the disintegration of the united nation, while the ethical foundation remained extremely vague. As for the legal awareness, Soviet society declared it, but did not plant it in people's minds. In the legal, ethical, and ideological vacuum, "devastation in the mind" created "economic devastation." Commercialization of the state of the mind and behavior inevitably corrupts people's spiritual health, and negatively affects human relationships, thus causing economic stagnation. In a country where people have never been taught to respect laws, new conditions transformed the old moral values. Ideological devastation reigns in the people's minds, while they are rejecting the imposed Western legislative systems.

At the same time, the traditional political culture of servility oriented toward the collective and communal existence typical of Central Asian society can be adjusted to developed capitalism. To do this we should carefully observe capitalism's historical experience in different countries. The theory of capitalism's "alternative systems" gaining popularity among politicians and economists proves that a "pure" capitalist economy (the subject-matter of classical theory) is nothing other than an ideal image of European development. It has been proven that the West is unique but not universal. Capitalism today assumes various qualitative forms characterized not only by general regularities, but also by certain essential peculiarities. Theoretically, capitalism is a universal economic system while in real life numerous "economic systems" exist side by side. Rationality as a *sine qua non* of the capitalist economy can exist and develop outside the European environment. A systemic analysis must be carried out in order to take account of the extra-economic factors unrelated to production relations yet greatly affecting the nature of the economic system. These factors are control, power, political culture, personal relationships, axiological norms, and trust. Anybody wishing to understand how capitalism functions in different regions and countries should take these factors into account.

Japan's fast progress toward economic prosperity in the latter half of the 20th century is highly specific. The country has organically blended the universal capitalist rules and the nation's historical and ethnic specifics: something that has already created the concept of the "Japanese road" to contemporary civilization. The traditional political culture of servility deeply rooted in Confucian ethics, which has taken the shape of the "culture of duty" (*giri*), proved to be perfectly compatible with the modernized principles of political democracy and the market economy.

During the transition period, the social-psychological and mental-moral type prevailing in Central Asia can be described as a "marginal" personality. It seems that for a long time to come political culture in the region will remain a combination of traditional and contemporary elements and communal-collectivist and individual-personal orientations and behavior.

In an effort to understand the essence of this process, we can conclude that the previous non-capitalist stages can (and should) be blended with the neo-capitalist stage of social transformation in the most developed countries. This strengthens the conviction that more or less painless transformation of our society into a capitalist one is possible in the future. In other words, our past does contain factors that will help us to fit into the context of the structural changes obvious in developed countries. We have in mind a

mixed political culture or, rather, a combination of collectivist and individualistic orientations in the mentality and psychology of the post-Soviet person. Facts have shown that contemporary capitalism is socializing and individualizing at one and the same time, which requires both developed individualism and collectivism in human consciousness and behavior.

Obviously, modernization of the Central Asian states is a very complicated issue that should be carefully studied and discussed. This article should not be taken as an appeal to build competitive-corporate capitalism in Central Asia. There is no need to transfer this experience to our soil and there is no point in it. For this type of capitalism has both positive and negative sides. It seems that another alternative more in keeping with the requirements of our modernization will take root in Central Asia. Probably there is another, much better suited, model. One thing is obvious: the Central Asian countries have reached the point at which they must assess their development alternatives in the context of the increasingly globalizing world. We urgently need a development model that stems from national specifics and promotes social modernization. Will these states be able to create a common modernization model and develop along the same regional lines?