

### Authoritarianism in the new states of Central Asia: an overview of post-independence politics

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## Inhalt

Seite

Kurzfassung	.....
3	
New States between Reform and Stabilization	.....
6	
Kazakhstan	.....
7	
Background to liberalization.....	7
Independent Kazakhstan.....	8
Kyrgyzstan	.....
13	
Uzbekistan	.....
16	
Turkmenistan	.....
19	
Tajikistan	.....
21	
Conclusion	.....
23	
Summary	.....
25	

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## **Autoritarismus in den neuen Staaten Zentralasiens:**

Ein Überblick über die politische Entwicklung nach Erlangung der Unabhängigkeit

**Bericht des BIOst Nr. 46/1996**

### **Kurzfassung**

#### *Vorbemerkung*

Nach dem Zusammenbruch der UdSSR erwartete man, daß sich die neuen unabhängigen Staaten Zentralasiens als instabil und anfällig für Gewalt erweisen würden, doch haben vier Jahre Unabhängigkeit gezeigt, daß sie, mit der Ausnahme Tadschikistans, zu den stabilsten der sowjetischen Nachfolgestaaten gehören. Diejenigen der zentralasiatischen Führer, die den Erhalt der politischen und gesellschaftlichen Stabilität für wichtiger als Reformen halten, fühlen sich in ihrer Wahl bestätigt. Die Präsidenten Kasachstans und Kirgisiens, die eine Demokratisierung versucht haben, wurden ihrerseits zunehmend autoritärer, um die Reformprogramme durchsetzen zu können.

Die Notwendigkeit der Stabilität wird dadurch begründet, daß es Zentralasien an Erfahrung mit der Demokratie westlichen Stils mangelt und in der Region keine Tradition der Staatlichkeit existiert, obwohl die politische und kulturelle Oberschicht dort auch schon vor der Auflösung der UdSSR ein gut entwickeltes nationales Bewußtsein besaß.

Westliche Beobachter, die darauf gehofft hatten, daß die Demokratie in Kasachstan und Kirgisien rasch Wurzeln schlagen würde, sahen sich enttäuscht, als die Präsidenten dieser Länder immer autokratischer regierten. Gleichzeitig wuchs das Interesse an Usbekistan trotz beträchtlicher Demokratiedefizite in dem Maße, wie der Westen die strategische Bedeutung dieses Landes erkannte.

#### *Ergebnisse*

1. Die Demokratisierung in Kasachstan erhielt Aufschwung durch die Ereignisse im Dezember 1986 in Alma-Ata. In den späten 80er Jahren erschienen in Kasachstan die ersten Anzeichen einer zivilen Gesellschaft. Es war die erste zentralasiatische Republik, in der öffentliche, von der Kommunistischen Partei unabhängige Organisationen wirken durften. Vor der Unabhängigkeit Kasachstans hatte sich Nursultan Nasarbajew den Ruf eines der Demokratisierung und wirtschaftlichen Liberalisierung verpflichteten Führers erworben. Aber in den vier Jahren der Unabhängigkeit zeitigten die Reformen auch negative Auswirkungen wie zunehmende soziale Härten und eine wachsende Kriminalitätsrate. Die politischen Parteien Kasachstans sind im politischen Leben bislang eher bedeutungslos geblieben. Nasarbajew vertrat die Meinung, daß seine Reformen durch das Verfassungsgericht und ein unkooperatives Parlament vereitelt worden seien. 1995 löste er dann das Parlament auf und herrscht seither mittels Erlasse. Kasachstans erste nachsowjetische Verfassung wurde durch eine neue ersetzt, die dem Präsidenten viel

mehr Macht einräumt, aber allgemein als undemokratisch kritisiert wird. Der kasachische Präsident enttäuschte erneut alle, die ihn für einen Verfechter der Demokratie gehalten hatten, als er seine Amtszeit durch ein Referendum verlängern ließ. Da er die gesetzgebende und richterliche Überwachung seiner Macht abgeschafft hat, steht Nasarbajew nun in dem Ruf, ein ähnlich autoritärer Herrscher zu sein wie sein Nachbar in Usbekistan.

2. Der Präsident Kirgisiens, Askar Akajew, leitete einen Prozeß der Demokratisierung schon vor dem Auseinanderbrechen der UdSSR ein. Aber nachdem das Land seine Unabhängigkeit erhalten hatte, geriet der Präsident zunehmend mit dem Parlament in Konflikt, welches nicht gewillt war, seine Wirtschaftsreformen zu unterstützen. Als Akajew versuchte, die nichtkirgisischen Minderheiten von der Emigration abzuhalten und sie in den neuen Staat zu integrieren, wurde er von den kirgisischen Nationalisten angegriffen, die ihn zuvor unterstützt hatten. Der Antagonismus zwischen Präsident und Parlament erreichte 1994 einen Höhepunkt, als Akajew die Legislative auflöste. Akajew hat auch die Pressefreiheit eingeschränkt und während der Präsidentschaftswahlen von 1995 eine Herausforderung seiner Macht verhindert. Seither ist sein Ruf als ein der Demokratisierung verpflichteter Politiker angeschlagen.
3. Usbekistan trat unter einem autoritären Regime in die staatliche Unabhängigkeit ein. Sein Präsident, Islam Karimow, stuft Stabilität in der politischen Werteskala höher ein als Reformen. In Usbekistan hatte sich schon vor der Unabhängigkeit eine politische Opposition entwickelt, doch war sie die meiste Zeit über mehr oder weniger starker Repression ausgesetzt. Aufgrund von Festnahmen und Prozessen wegen Landesverrats hatte Usbekistan im Westen einen schlechten Ruf, der es dem Land schwer machte, diplomatische Beziehungen herzustellen. Karimow ist jedoch ein geschickter Politiker, und es gelang ihm, westliche Abneigungen bezüglich seiner Menschenrechtsverstöße zu überwinden, indem er den Westen in seinen Initiativen gegen den Iran unterstützte und eine langsame Privatisierung in Gang setzte, um westliche Investitionen anzulocken.
4. Der Führer Turkmenistans, Saparmurad Nijasow, der sich selbst "Turkmenbaschi" - Vater der Turkmenen nennt, hat niemals behauptet, ein Demokrat zu sein. Sein autoritäres Regime und seinen ausufernden Personenkult rechtfertigt er mit dem Hinweis auf orientalische Herrschaftstradition. Politische Opposition gab es in Turkmenistan fast überhaupt nicht, so daß eine Demonstration von einigen hundert Menschen in Aschabat 1995 als eine Sensation galt. Nijasow war das erste zentralasiatische Staatsoberhaupt, das sich der Notwendigkeit einer Präsidentschaftswahl entledigte. Dabei konnte er sich ohnehin sicher sein, daß die Wähler seinen Wünschen folgen würden.

5. Tadschikistan lebte die meiste Zeit seiner Unabhängigkeit im Bürgerkrieg. Die wichtigste Oppositionspartei, die Islamische Wiedergeburt, führt einen bewaffneten Widerstand gegen die Regierung des Präsidenten Imomali Rachmonow, eines ehemaligen kommunistischen Funktionärs, durch. Obwohl die Regierung Rachmonows die Bezeichnung "kommunistisch" ablehnt, bleibt die Kommunistische Partei dennoch die beherrschende Kraft in dem von der Regierung kontrollierten Teil des Landes. Rachmonow behauptet, er wolle einen säkularen, demokratischen Staat aufbauen, aber der ständige Bürgerkrieg hat dazu geführt, daß die Opposition weiterhin vom politischen Leben Tadschikistans ausgeschlossen bleibt.



## **New States between Reform and Stabilization**

Immediately after the disintegration of the USSR at the end of 1991 and the appearance of the Newly Independent States on the international scene, most Western observers entertained certain assumptions about the nature of these states. The new countries of Central Asia, and to a lesser extent, of the Caucasus and other regions, were frequently described both by journalists and some specialists on the former USSR as having been condemned by their history to instability, prone to violence, in the best case authoritarian rule, because they had never experienced the stages of development that had led to democracy and a civil society in the West.

Although this assessment of the nature of the problems facing post-Soviet states in creating a civil society was largely accurate, the predictions of instability that proceeded from it have proved inaccurate. With the exception of Tajikistan, which has been mired in civil war almost since its independence, the new countries of Central Asia have proved quite stable. Those Central Asian leaders who embarked on the path of independent statehood as authoritarian rulers are convinced that their insistence on stability before reform has been justified by events. Those who tried to introduce a degree of democratization have become more authoritarian as they found fractious legislatures and independent political groups were unwilling to support their modernization and privatization plans.

Western assumptions about the inherent instability of the Central Asian successor states were also based on a recognition of the weak sense of statehood in these countries and also on the outbreaks of violence in all of the Central Asian republics except Turkmenistan in the late 1980s and beginning of the 1990s. Most of the newly created countries in Central Asia lacked not only any experience with Western-style democracy, but also any experience of statehood prior to their creation in the Stalinist national delimitation that accompanied the creation of the Soviet Union in the early 1920s. Only Uzbekistan could be said to have had some experience of statehood, if the emirate of Bukhara was accepted as the direct ancestor of modern Uzbekistan. The indigenous intellectual elites in the Central Asian republics developed a degree of national consciousness in the early years of Soviet rule, but this generation was largely lost in the Stalinist purges of the non-Russian political and cultural elites in the late 1930s. After World War II, national self-identification began to reassert itself among the Central Asian elite, despite Moscow's efforts to create a "new Soviet man" whose first identity was with the Soviet Union, rather than with his ethnic group.

This development was especially pronounced in the Brezhnev "era of stagnation," when indigenous Communist Party chiefs and government officials tolerated the strengthening of national identification among the indigenous intelligentsia under the slogan "national in content, socialist in essence." It comes as little surprise, in view of this development, that the Brezhnev-era Communist Party chiefs of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, Sharaf Rashidov and Dinmuhamed Kunaev, are officially regarded in those states as having played major roles in the preparation of their countries for independence.

No matter how strong the national identification of the indigenous intellectual and political elites in the republics of Central Asia, the indigenous inhabitants of the towns and, to an even greater extent, the rural areas, put ties of family, village or locality before identification with their newly-independent country. Anecdotal evidence from Central Asian intellectuals indicates that many rural inhabitants took months, if not years, to register that the Soviet Union no longer existed and that they were now citizens of a new country. The weakness of the sense of nationhood in these

states has also played a role in strengthening the inclination toward authoritarianism that the governing elites inherited from their Soviet upbringing.

As foreign perceptions of individual Central Asian countries began to take form, it was noted that both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan were led by men who seemed to be committed to the democratization and Westernization of their societies. The leaders of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, while paying some lip-service to eventual democratization, were clearly of an authoritarian bent, which affected the willingness of the West to develop close ties with them, although Western businessmen valued the stability that characterized the political life of these countries. Tajikistan's leadership during most of the period of the country's independence, while characterized by authoritarianism, has had to function in conditions of utmost instability, and has never been able to assert its control over the entire country.

Western expectations that democracy would develop rapidly and painlessly in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan were unrealistic, and have led to considerable disappointment and some cooling of Western interest in these countries. At the same time that foreign disillusion with these states has risen, interest in the admittedly authoritarian Uzbekistan has increased. Foreign observers often seem to forget that all Central Asian leaders want to maintain and strengthen their hold on power, because, rightly or wrongly, they believe the future of their countries depends on the realization of their programs for modernization, development and the creation of a sense of statehood. All of these leaders have had different ideas on the best way to achieve these goals. The following study is an overview of political developments in each country that have led to the authoritarianism that now characterizes political life in all the Central Asian states.

## **Kazakhstan**

### ***Background to liberalization***

In December 1986, young Kazakhs staged a protest demonstration in the square facing the main government building in the capital, Alma-Ata, to protest the "parachuting in" to the republic of a Russian Communist Party chief who had had no previous ties with Kazakhstan. The practice of sending non-indigenous Communist Party leaders into the non-Russian republics had been widely practised by the authorities in Moscow from the 1930s onward. Kazakhstan, in which no ethnic group had clear dominance since the Virgin Lands development project in the 1950s had brought thousands of non-Kazakhs into the republic, had had a series of Moscow-selected Party and government leaders who were Russians or other non-Kazakhs.

Most notable among them was probably Leonid Brezhnev, who in his memoirs indicated a striking lack of sympathy for Kazakh national feelings but among whose closest friends in the republic was the Kazakh mining engineer, Dinmuhamed Kunaev. Thanks to Kunaev's friendship with Brezhnev, the Kazakh spent over twenty years as the ruler of the republic, during which time he looked the other way as Kazakh national consciousness grew among Kazakh intellectuals. Kunaev had been a fixture in the republic's political life for so long that it came as a severe shock to Kazakhs and non-Kazakhs alike when Mikhail Gorbachev, insensitive to the extent to which national consciousness and ethnic pride had developed in all parts of the USSR, appointed Gennady Kolbin to revitalize Kazakhstan's declining economy.

Despite the investigative efforts of government commissions both before and after Kazakhstan gained its independence, accounts differ on how violence erupted during the December 1986

demonstration in Alma-Ata. Young people who made up the bulk of the demonstrators insist that they were staging a peaceful sit-in in the square and were attacked by law-enforcement officials. At the time, government officials charged that at least some of the Kazakh demonstrators had displayed anti-Russian slogans and had attacked Russians in the streets. Whatever the truth about the course of events, the events in Alma-Ata were a great shock to Gorbachev and the liberalizers in Moscow, forcing them to see interethnic relations as a main focal point of political tensions within the USSR.

In retrospect, the events of December 1986 in Alma-Ata have been canonized as Kazakhstan's first step toward independence from Moscow, and Kolbin is widely condemned by Kazakhs for trying to reverse the gains made in the development of national consciousness during Kunaev's rule. In fact, the Russian Party chief attempted to balance the interests of the different ethnic groups in Kazakhstan, focusing more attention on the teaching of the Kazakh language than it had received under the supposedly nationally-minded Kunaev. Although Kazakh intellectuals look back with great bitterness on Kolbin's few years in Kazakhstan, it was during this time that the first signs of the advent of a civil society began to appear, as the Communist Party press began to explore formerly forbidden topics such as public opinion and the effects of the famine caused by Stalin's collectivization drive in the early 1930s.

One of the most notable signs of the advent of political liberalization was the founding of the Nevada-Semipalatinsk anti-nuclear movement, which had as its goal the stopping of nuclear weapons testing at the Soviet army's test site in Kazakhstan's Semipalatinsk Oblast. The movement's founder, Kazakh nationalist poet Olzhas Suleimenov, hoped to enlist the aid of the politically-experienced US anti-nuclear movement, hence the inclusion of Nevada in the organization's name. Nevada-Semipalatinsk was the first public organization in Kazakhstan that was not controlled by the Communist Party, and as such it represented the first stirring of civil society in Central Asia. Suleimenov, who probably already had political ambitions, was careful to stress that the group united Kazakhs and Russians, because both of Kazakhstan's major ethnic groups had suffered the effects of the Soviet testing program.

Kolbin, stung by his reception in Kazakhstan and mindful of Gorbachev's calls for the liberalization of Soviet society, actively supported the anti-nuclear movement despite its criticism of the Soviet military establishment. When the Russian Party chief was finally replaced by a Kazakh, prime minister Nursultan Nazarbaev, the stage had already been set for the appearance of a wide spectrum of political organizations, ranging by 1991 from tiny Kazakh nationalist groupings such as Alash, which called for the expulsion of Russians and other non-Muslims from Kazakhstan, to the moderate Kazakh nationalist Azat and a variety of groups representing Slavic interests in the republic. Alash and another small Kazakh group called Zheltoqsan (December) that agitated for the rehabilitation of those arrested after the events of December 1986 in Alma-Ata, were regularly harassed by the authorities and refused official recognition, but were not actively repressed.<sup>1</sup>

### ***Independent Kazakhstan***

When Kazakhstan declared its independence in December, 1991, in the wake of the Soviet collapse, Nazarbaev, who by then held the newly-created post of president, had already gained a reputation as one of the more liberal statesmen in the former USSR. This reputation, which he enjoyed both at home and abroad, was based largely on his enthusiastic support for the economic

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<sup>1</sup> See V.A. Ponomarev, *Obshchestvenniye organizatsii v Kazakhstane i Kyrgyzstane*. Alma-Ata: Glagol, 1991, and B. Brown, "Informal Groups in Kazakhstan," *Radio Liberty Research Bulletin*, December 1, 1988.

reform projects of Gorbachev and his more liberal advisers, as well as on Nazarbaev's active promotion of the replacement of the USSR by a voluntary union of republics in which none dominated. The fact that Gorbachev's twin principles of *glasnost* and *perestroika* were making headway in Kazakhstan, when they had hardly been felt anywhere else in Central Asia except neighboring Kyrgyzstan, also contributed to the image of Nazarbaev as a liberal leader.

As a Russian interviewer commented at the end of 1995, for the first few years of Kazakhstan's independent existence, Nazarbaev was widely perceived to be the most democratic leader in Central Asia.<sup>2</sup> By 1996, however, the Kazakh president's actions in the political arena had called into question his commitment to establishing Western-style democracy in Kazakhstan, and his disappointed admirers in the West were prepared to see him as an authoritarian leader little different from his counterpart in Uzbekistan. Nazarbaev remained, however, determined to create a market economy in Kazakhstan as quickly as possible. Nazarbaev himself denied that his intention to see Kazakhstan become a functioning democracy had weakened, but he defended the need for a strong executive power to ensure that his reform program was carried out and to gain the upper hand over rising levels of crime.

The beginnings of a political life outside Communist Party control, Nazarbaev's active promotion of economic reforms aimed at the rapid creation of a market economy, and an increasingly independent press created the impression, even before the collapse of the USSR, that Kazakhstan was on the path to Western-style democracy. But political groups seeking to protect the interests of the country's large Slavic population assert that laws prohibiting actions that could incite interethnic violence are more strictly applied to them than to Kazakh groups. Kazakhstan's rulers have had considerable success in keeping the lid on interethnic tensions, while presiding over a growing imbalance in the number of Kazakhs in government jobs or in the legislature in comparison with their numbers in the country's population. By the beginning of 1996, only nine government ministers out of 21 were not ethnic Kazakhs, according to Nazarbaev, while the Kazakh share of the country's population was 50%.<sup>3</sup> The Russian share had declined to 32%, but even so there was no question but that Russians were underrepresented in the corridors of power.

Nazarbaev's economic reform program, which envisaged the rapid introduction of a market economy, with large-scale foreign investment and assistance from international financial organizations such as the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, was initiated at the same time that the republic's economy was feeling the effects of the rupture of Soviet-era economic ties. The result was disruption of an economy that had already been in decline in 1986 when Kunaev was removed. Social suffering associated with the failure of the Soviet-era safety net and the appearance of widespread unemployment led to an increase in street crime. Nazarbaev has designated a rising level of crime generally as one of the most serious threats to the country, and used the need to reestablish law and order as an excuse for increasingly arbitrary rule.

Despite Kazakhstan's early start in developing independent political groups and relatively independent information media, the parties and other political groups have proved largely irrelevant in the political process.<sup>4</sup> Kazakhstan's legislature, the Supreme Soviet, allowed the creation of party fractions, but there has been little evidence of party discipline. The largest parties, the People's Congress of Olzhas Suleimenov and the People's Unity, considered the party of

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<sup>2</sup> Argumenty i fakty, No. 51, December 1995, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> See the assessment of the founder of the moderate Kazakh nationalist Azat Party in *Kazakhstanskiye novosti*, July 2, 1994.

Nazarbaev, are widely seen as little more than vehicles for the political ambitions of their leaders.<sup>5</sup>

Already in the first year of independence, Nazarbaev found that some aspects of the civil society were not entirely to his liking. While Westerners were urging the government of Kazakhstan to respect the concept of a state ruled by law, the country's very independent Constitutional Court was taking its tasks seriously, and routinely striking down the president's decrees on grounds that they violated the constitution. In early 1996, the court was rocked by charges that its chairman had taken a huge bribe. The charge has served to discredit the court and weaken its position vis-à-vis the government, as represented by the Ministry of Justice.<sup>6</sup>

In 1994, a new parliament was elected under the first post-Soviet constitution and election laws. The political parties complained that they had great difficulty registering their nominees, but despite discussions in the press of the validity of the charges, there was little evidence that the population had much interest in what party politicians charged was a violation of democratic standards.<sup>7</sup> Nazarbaev was infuriated when the leader of a delegation of election observers from the European Union cast doubt on the fairness of the election because of reports of widespread irregularities in the nomination process and in the actual voting. Voters were obliged to cast votes for candidates on a special list hand-picked by the president, in addition to candidates nominated by parties or other public organizations.

Despite the presidential tampering with the election process, Nazarbaev found the new legislature was little more pliant than its Soviet-era predecessor. It too was unwilling to approve economic reform packages proposed by the government if they seemed likely to worsen the already desperate situation of many of the country's citizens. There was no deadlock between president and parliament because the desires of parliament were largely ignored by the government, although Prime Minister Tereshchenko went through the motions of seeking the approval of the Supreme Soviet, which as one of its first orders of business attempted to remove him. The deputies had to be reminded by Nazarbaev that they did not have the right to remove the prime minister. The president later tried to defuse popular dissatisfaction with the economic reforms by removing Tereshchenko, ostensibly because he had not been able to show positive results with the reforms, and replaced him with the Kazakh Akezhan Kazhegeldin.

In March 1995, the Constitutional Court precipitated Kazakhstan's first constitutional crisis by announcing that the parliamentary elections had violated the law, and ruled that the results were invalid.<sup>8</sup> Nazarbaev called on the deputies to resign and most did so without complaint. Olzhas Suleimenov attempted to organize resistance to the dissolution of the Supreme Soviet, but his effort was seen as an attempt at self-promotion with an eye to the presidential election scheduled for 1996, and he found little support among the deputies or outside the parliament.

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<sup>5</sup> In a rambling report to the party leadership in December 1994, Suleimenov described the party's goals as the promotion of democratization and economic reform, with no real difference between it and the other major party. Suleimenov himself was sharply criticized in the Almaty press for permitting the commercialization of the anti-nuclear movement, of which he was still the head, though he gave little attention to it. See *Ogni Alatau*, No. 23, March 1994.

<sup>6</sup> *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, February 10, 1996 and *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, February 6, 1996.

<sup>7</sup> *Kazakhstanskaya pravda*, January 13, 1994.

<sup>8</sup> The court defended what some observers saw as its self-destructive decision by pointing out that if the country was to have a rule of law, the courts had to strictly uphold the law. See *Kazakhstanskaya pravda*, March 14, 1995 and *Karavan*, March 17, 1995.

Nazarbaev took the opportunity to rule by decree without the inconvenience of having to deal with a recalcitrant legislature.<sup>9</sup> Among the first decrees he issued after the dissolution of the Supreme Soviet were several dealing with the struggle against crime, under which heading restrictions on demonstrations and rallies were put into force. These included a requirement that hunger strikers should obtain official permission for their strikes.

Another decree limited the types of advertising that could appear in publications, putting further pressure on the independent information media.<sup>10</sup>

Of particular disappointment for those who still thought that Nazarbaev had the makings of a liberal leader was his agreement soon after the dissolution of the Supreme Soviet with the proposal of an Assembly of the Peoples of Kazakhstan, a body appointed by himself, that his term of office be extended to the end of 2000. Although some suggested that Nazarbaev might have feared that he would lose the presidential election that should have been held in 1996, political observers in Kazakhstan and ordinary citizens alike agreed that Suleimenov did not have the popular support to mount a credible challenge to the incumbent president. The president had simply lost patience with the limited democracy that had been tried in Kazakhstan, and found it easier to rule by decree. When the proposal to extend Nazarbaev's term was put to a referendum, over 95% of the country's voters approved.

In December 1995, Nazarbaev defended the extension of his term as a necessary first step toward the promulgation of a new, and in his view, more effective constitution. He argued that a strong executive is not harmful to democracy, insisting that Kazakhstan needed a presidency with enhanced powers in order to push through the economic reform that the elected legislature had hampered, and to conduct the fight against rising levels of crime.<sup>11</sup>

The president's replacement of Kazakhstan's first post-Soviet constitution with a second that was more to his liking resulted in demonstrations by the political opposition in July 1995, protesting that the new constitution gave too much power to the executive branch. Six of the ten judges on the Constitutional Court sent a letter to Nazarbaev, characterizing the new constitution as inimical to the creation of a civil society.<sup>12</sup> Critics of the new constitution asserted that it did away with any effective checks and balances between the executive and legislative branches of government, and abolished any hope for an independent judiciary. Others argued that there was no need for a new constitution so soon after the adoption of the first, because the existing constitution provided an adequate framework for any reform program.<sup>13</sup>

The Kazakh nationalist leader of the tiny Zheltoqsan party, Hasen Kozhahmetov, condemned the new basic law as destroying democracy in the country, and leaders of Lad, the most prominent organization seeking to protect the interests of Kazakhstan's Russian population, described it as a regression from the first constitution because it limited civil liberties and failed to give official status to the Russian language.

While the press remains relatively free, at least in the capital, printing facilities are still largely in the hands of the government, forcing editors to engage in a degree of self-censorship to avoid losing access to presses. In 1994, Kazakhstan's most popular weekly, *Karavan*, had to be printed in Bishkek, the capital of neighboring Kyrgyzstan and only a four-hour bus journey from

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<sup>9</sup> Financial Times, March 17, 1995.

<sup>10</sup> Handelsblatt, March 14, 1995 and Reuters, March 22, 1995.

<sup>11</sup> Argumenty i fakty, No. 51, December 1995, p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> Interfax, June 12, 1995.

<sup>13</sup> Sovety Kazakhstana, February 28, 1995.

Almaty, because the newspaper's coverage of a scandal involving the mayor of Almaty drew government wrath.

In 1995, a Russian-language publication of Kazakh nationalist bent called *Kazakhskaya pravda* was closed down and its editor charged with inciting interethnic hatred. The publication was back on Almaty news-stands in 1996, but this episode could not but have a chilling effect on press independence in Kazakhstan.

Given the ethnic makeup of Kazakhstan's population, the avoidance of interethnic tensions has had top priority for the country's government. Groups representing the interests of the Cossacks whose ancestors took a major role in establishing Russian rule in what is now Kazakhstan in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have been routinely refused the possibility of registering as public organizations with the Ministry of Justice, and have been refused permits to demonstrate in Almaty on the grounds that the Kazakh population finds their activities disturbing.<sup>14</sup> Groups representing the interests of the Russian population routinely complain that they suffer greater harassment from law enforcement agencies than do Kazakh nationalist groups.<sup>15</sup>

Laws prohibiting the incitement of hatred between ethnic groups have been used, as in the *Kazakhskaya pravda* affair, to limit the speech of those whose political views the governing elite finds uncomfortable. It has also been used to limit criticism by ethnic Russians of policies they believe threaten their interests as a group. In May 1994, Boris Suprunyuk, editor of an independent Russian-language newspaper in Northern Kazakhstan, was arrested and charged with incitement of interethnic tensions. The chairman of an umbrella organization of Russian-interests societies threatened to rescue Suprunyuk from jail by force.<sup>16</sup> The threat was never carried out, but it signalled that interethnic relations were worsening in Kazakhstan despite the efforts of the government.

While democratization was losing out in the political arena, privatization and other market-oriented reforms appeared to be making some headway, although Kazakhstan's economic managers were unable to reverse the effects of the post-Soviet economic malaise to a sufficient degree for an improvement in the economy to be visible. Ordinary citizens had little hope that their lives would improve in the foreseeable future, and had little interest in politics.

Although Nazarbaev appeared to find rule by decree very congenial, he permitted a new legislature to be elected under the new constitution in late 1995. Foreign observers assessed this election as even less democratic than the one in 1994. Although its opening session, at the end of January 1996, was attended by the demonstration that has become a staple of legislative life in Kazakhstan, the deputies are unlikely to be able to mount an effective challenge to the president, should they desire to do so. Few well-known political figures were elected to the new body, and the new constitution so restricted its powers that it has only half-jokingly been described as "the legislative department of the president's staff."<sup>17</sup> As Nazarbaev told an interviewer from a Russian television network on the day the first parliamentary session opened, the new constitution provided him with the means to influence the legislative process, and he had every intention of using them.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Interfax, November 21 and 29, 1994, and article "Qazaqtar men Kazaktar" (Kazakhs and Cossacks) in Kazakh-language weekly *Turkestan*, No. 3, January 1995.

<sup>15</sup> *Kontinent*, No. 52, 1995.

<sup>16</sup> ITAR-TASS, May 18, 1994.

<sup>17</sup> *Izvestiya*, February 2, 1996.

<sup>18</sup> NTV news show "Today," January 30, 1996. See also *Segodnya*, February 1, 1996.

Despite the president's stated belief that he could control the new legislature, he decided not to put to the test the issue of seeking the deputies' approval of private ownership of land, preferring to introduce it by decree in early January before the parliament met.<sup>19</sup> Nazarbaev himself had rejected private landownership in the early stages of his reform program, on the grounds that private ownership would endanger the lifestyle of the traditionally nomadic Kazakhs, who might find their summer pastures bought up by Russians, thereby exacerbating relations between the two ethnic groups.

In any case, Nazarbaev's decree on private landownership fell short of creating a real market in land, because it prohibited the use of private land for the construction of industrial enterprises or office buildings, nor could land be alienated from its use at the time of sale, that is, agricultural land had to remain agricultural. As a step toward the creation of a market economy, the decree on privatization of land is a half-hearted measure at best.

The constitution gave the president the right to name the speakers of the two houses of the new parliament, and soon after the session opened, one of them commented that deputies could form groupings in opposition to the government, but it would be unacceptable for the entire legislature to oppose the government. So there would be no parliamentary investigation of such potentially inflammatory issues as the question of how the government was using foreign credits.<sup>20</sup> Nazarbaev had succeeded in eliminating legislative and judicial checks on his power, and was perceived both inside Kazakhstan and abroad as an authoritarian leader who had abandoned the road to democratization.

## Kyrgyzstan

As Mikhail Gorbachev's loosening of controls began to spread into the Soviet hinterlands in the late 1980s, the Communist Party chief of Kyrgyzstan, Absamat Masaliev, not only prevented liberalization from reaching his republic, but also fought *perestroika* and *glasnost* at the source in Moscow. His vehement attacks in the USSR Supreme Soviet against the weakening of the Soviet control structure earned all Kyrgyzstan the scorn of Moscow liberals.

But this perception was reversed in October 1990, when Masaliev, following the lead of other republican Communist Party chiefs, persuaded Kyrgyzstan's Supreme Soviet to institute the post of president of the republic. Of course, Masaliev wanted the position for himself, but the Supreme Soviet deputies refused to elect him, most likely in reaction to his inept response to the fighting between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan's southern Osh Oblast in June of that year. The "Osh events," in which dozens and possibly hundreds of people lost their lives, were a major trauma for the inhabitants of the placid mountain republic, and during investigations of their cause evidence emerged indicating that Masaliev and his hard-line leadership team had been warned beforehand that friction over land and water rights were building between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in the Osh region, Kyrgyzstan's part of the fertile but overpopulated Fergana Valley that was divided in the national delimitation between Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

The compromise candidate who received the newly-created post of president was Askar Akaev, a physicist who had been chosen not long before to head Kyrgyzstan's Academy of Sciences. Subsequent claims, in Russia and the West, that Akaev is the only Central Asian head of state who was never a Communist Party official are incorrect: prior to his selection for the Academy of Sciences post he had served as republican Communist Party secretary for science and education.

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<sup>19</sup> Izvestiya, January 4, 1996.

<sup>20</sup> Russian TV news, February 4, 1996.



But Kyrgyzstan was the first Central Asian republic in which the president prior to the collapse of the USSR was not at the same time head of the republican Communist Party.<sup>21</sup>

Immediately after his election, Akaev let it be known that radical changes were coming in Kyrgyzstan. He called for rapid economic and political reform, encouraged liberalization in republican information media, and declared his commitment to the establishment of Western-style democracy. Intellectuals in neighboring republics soon announced that they too wanted a leader like Akaev.

Kyrgyzstan's Communists were outraged at Akaev's loosening of *perestroika* and *glasnost* in the republic, and during the attempted coup by Communist hard-liners in Moscow in August, 1991, a mini-coup was attempted against Akaev. He easily thwarted it with the assistance of the republican KGB chief, and used the opportunity to break the power of Kyrgyzstan's Communist Party.

A month before the disintegration of the USSR, Akaev was in Washington, outlining to US President George Bush and the US Congress his plans for turning Kyrgyzstan into "the Switzerland of Central Asia," with foreign help. So impressed were the Americans with his presentations that Kyrgyzstan soon became one of the main Central Asian recipients of US foreign aid.

As economic ties between republics dissolved after the Soviet collapse, Kyrgyzstan suffered more than many of the new states from the disruption, and had little choice but to seek assistance from Western financial institutions and foreign investors. Although the country possesses natural resources that could be exploited, outside partners are needed to develop them. Akaev's plan was to make the remote, undeveloped country attractive to investors through rapid economic liberalization and democratization.

He soon discovered, however, that political liberalization does not necessarily ensure support for a market economy. The independent press in Bishkek analyzed and criticized every action of the government. The political parties that had begun forming even before the country gained its independence wrangled among themselves over whether to support Akaev or act as a loyal opposition. Fractions formed in the parliament and shifted from support of the government to opposition and back, depending on the issue at hand. The Supreme Soviet inherited from the Soviet era was in general, however, far more conservative than the president.

And Akaev, whose commitment to the establishment of a Western-style democracy as he understood it, discovered the truth of the adage that democracy is very messy. The Supreme Soviet sought to limit or block most of Akaev's sweeping plans to transform the command economy of the Soviet era into a market-based system, and many of the parties questioned his reforms because of their negative effects on the standard of living of the population. Lacking experience of self-imposed discipline in public discourse, deputies and party leaders alike engaged in intemperate attacks on Akaev and the government, accusing various officials and the president's family of corruption, and questioning Akaev's commitment to democratization.<sup>22</sup>

The trauma of the events in Osh in 1990, when ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks slaughtered each other, proved no damper to a rising Kyrgyz national self-assertiveness that disturbed many of the non-Kyrgyz third of the country's population and that found expression in the free press. Many Russians, Germans and other non-Kyrgyz emigrated from the country, taking their desperately needed professional, administrative, industrial and even agricultural skills with them. Akaev tried

<sup>21</sup> Prior to the disintegration of the USSR, Kyrgyzstan was known under its Russian name, Kirgizia.

<sup>22</sup> For example, *Svobodniye gory*, July 23, 1993, and *Respublika*, January 7, 1994, and attacks on Akaev by the leaders of the Society for Protection of Human Rights and the *Erkin Kyrgyzstan Party* in *Respublika*, February 28, 1995.

to stop the haemorrhage of non-Kyrgyz experts by opening a Slavonic University in Bishkek and taking other measures to assure non-Kyrgyz that there was a future for them in Kyrgyzstan, but his efforts brought limited success. He was, however, severely criticized by the Kyrgyz nationalists who had supported him at the time of his election in 1990. These groups successfully blocked Akaev's efforts to make Russian a state language on a par with Kyrgyz.

Antagonism between Akaev and the parliament came to a head in 1994, when the deputies succeeded in forcing the president to dismiss his reform-minded prime minister, interpreting the premier's support for a joint venture with a Canadian company to develop a Kyrgyz gold mine as a sell-out of the country's natural wealth. The new prime minister, Apas Dzhumagulov, had been the last Soviet premier of the republic, and apparently the conservative deputies believed that he would try to slow down the pace of reform.

Akaev retaliated by publicly attacking the Supreme Soviet as a relic of the Soviet past. In July 1994, shortly after the president told a gathering of judicial officials that much of the information media in Kyrgyzstan demonstrated their irresponsibility by stirring up political and interethnic conflicts, a Bishkek court closed down the parliamentary newspaper. Other publications raised a clamor about what they described as an assault on democracy, and more than half the Supreme Soviet deputies then refused to attend a final session of the legislature that was to set a date for the next parliamentary election.

Akaev responded by dissolving the Supreme Soviet, scheduling a referendum on his proposal for changing the structure of the legislature from one chamber to two, and setting a date for the next parliamentary election himself. The president later commented that the political turmoil was only helping the restored Communist Party, which he feared would win the election in February, 1995. In the event, no party gained a clear dominance of the legislature in the elections. The Communist Party, the deputies of which include two former republican party chiefs, formed its own fraction and now claims to take pride in functioning as a genuine parliamentary opposition. Although the political parties are somewhat more influential in the political life of Kyrgyzstan than is the case with the political parties in Kazakhstan, the Western concept of a ruling party and an opposition party or parties has not yet been realized.

Western disappointment with Akaev had been growing even before his clashes with the old Supreme Soviet, fueled partly by the slow pace of economic reform despite the president's plans for rapid change, and partly by the charges of Akaev's opponents that the president himself was undermining the democracy he himself had introduced. Between the first and second rounds of voting in the 1995 parliamentary election, a conference of political parties in Bishkek called on Akaev to delay the second round until charges of electoral fraud raised after the first round had been investigated. Akaev refused, leading to further charges that he was not the democrat that many had believed him to be.

Domestic and foreign belief in Akaev's commitment to democracy was further shaken at the time of the presidential election in December, 1995, when manipulation by the electoral commission led to Akaev's challenger, former parliament speaker Medetkan Sherimkulov, being denied a place on the ballot. Akaev almost certainly would have won the election anyway, so it was unclear what he hoped to gain from the fraudulent election, which he must have known would alienate his Western supporters.

Despite Kyrgyzstan's apparent faltering on the road to democratization, an inspection of newsstands in Bishkek reveals that the press remains relatively free, but the closures of newspapers in 1994 has left its mark in the more cautious tone taken by editors. The major restriction on Kyrgyzstan's information media is, however, financial: like most institutions in the country, lack

of funding is a major constraint.<sup>23</sup> The cost of paper alone can be prohibitive. As in Kazakhstan, printing facilities remain in government ownership, making it easier for the authorities to enforce actions such as the 1994 closure of the parliamentary daily and the independent newspaper Respublika, the editor of which was accused of irresponsible journalism.

The real limit on democratization in Kyrgyzstan is most likely to be the country's economic situation.<sup>24</sup> If foreign aid and investment can stop the decline, democratization may resume with a stronger base than was the case in the first years of independence. If the country's situation does not improve, then social and interethnic tensions could wipe out all that Akaev has achieved.

## **Uzbekistan**

While Uzbekistan's president, Islam Karimov, has said that democratization is his distant goal, he has not sought to present himself as a committed democrat as have Kyrgyzstan's Akaev and Kazakhstan's Nazarbaev. The last Soviet-era chief of Uzbekistan's Communist Party, Karimov has remained true to his training in the Soviet authoritarian tradition, preserving more of the Soviet-era structure of rule than has been the case in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. In the wake of the Moscow coup in August 1991, Uzbekistan's Communist Party was not banned or restricted, as was the case in most other Soviet republics, but merely changed its name and adopted some nationalist trappings to appeal to the upsurge in national consciousness that intensified in Uzbekistan after independence was declared in September 1991.<sup>25</sup>

The Communist Party remains largely intact as the Popular Democratic Party, of which Karimov is the leading spirit. He has adopted the practice of paying lip-service to Islam as the moral code on which Uzbek statehood is based; at his inauguration after his re-election to the presidency in December 1991, he took his oath of office on the Koran. But Karimov's discovery of his own and his country's Muslim roots has not prevented him from ensuring that Uzbekistan's Muslim religious establishment is under firm government control.

Karimov has justified his refusal to embark on political liberalization, and the slow pace of economic reform in Uzbekistan, by warning of the danger of violence if the lid is removed too rapidly. He can support his arguments by citing the bloody assaults by Uzbeks against Meskhetian Turks in the Fergana Valley in 1989 and demonstrations in Tashkent in January 1992 by students protesting the freeing of prices. And, although Uzbekistan's strictly-controlled press no longer discusses issues that were pressing in the last years of Soviet rule, such as population pressure on arable land, water rights, environmental degradation and associated health problems, even the disruption of children's schooling so they can help out with the cotton harvest, these problems remain unsolved and potentially explosive.

In the late 1980s, political opposition groups calling for a type of Western-style democracy began to appear in Uzbekistan. The most prominent of these were the moderate Uzbek nationalist Birlik (Unity) Movement, and a small group calling itself the Erk Democratic Party, founded by the writer Muhammad Salih after a disagreement with Birlik leaders over the question of whether the use of force could be justified to advance a democratic program. Birlik's leadership refused to reject the use of force in all circumstances. Despite the disagreement between the two groups on this issue, they cooperated closely with each other in the face of official hostility.

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<sup>23</sup> See Eric Johnson, "The Media in Central Asia," an analysis conducted by Internews for USAID, April 1994.

<sup>24</sup> See Slovo Kyrgyzstana, March 18, 1995.

<sup>25</sup> Pravda Vostoka, September 15 and October 20, 1991.

Both organizations were harassed by the authorities, who interfered with the distribution of the two groups' publications and occasionally detained party activists although Erk was at least allowed to register as a legal opposition party and even to run Salih against Karimov in the presidential election of December, 1991. The opposition leader won 12% of the vote in what was the freest election Uzbekistan had ever had, and the result gave a fair indication of the extent of popular support for a non-Communist opposition. Birlik was refused official registration on various pretexts, probably because it was much larger than Erk and was perceived by the republic's leadership as a greater potential threat.

Birlik was able to organize demonstrations in Tashkent in support of state language status for Uzbek that drew thousands of participants. As Moscow's control over Uzbekistan weakened, the Uzbek leadership paid Birlik the compliment of adopting many of the points in its program calling for greater protection of Uzbek national interests, including an enhanced official role for the Uzbek language and for greater official recognition that Uzbekistan is a part of the Islamic world.<sup>26</sup> Birlik has not, however, espoused Muslim fundamentalism. It has been pro-Islam because this orientation was believed to be a necessary aspect of being pro-Uzbek.

Uzbekistan's leadership was and remains adamantly opposed to political groupings, particularly Muslim ones, based on religion. The country's post-Soviet constitution prohibits political parties based on religious principles, continuing the official hostility shown to Muslim groups that were not under the control of the official Islamic establishment, before Uzbekistan became independent. A rather loose grouping with a Muslim religious orientation that appeared in the Fergana Valley in the late 1980s, was suppressed for being an expression of Muslim fundamentalism, and an attempt to set up a branch of the Islamic Renaissance Party in Uzbekistan brought an immediate ban.<sup>27</sup> In March 1992, at a time when Karimov was being uncharacteristically tolerant of secular opposition groups, leaders of the Islamic Renaissance Party were being arrested.<sup>28</sup>

Karimov's heightened tolerance toward the opposition in the first months of 1992 was apparently motivated by his desire to enlist as many Western-oriented intellectuals as possible to support his vision of the direction that Uzbekistan should take in order to establish its place in the world. Most of the country's intelligentsia, delighted with the country's unexpected independence, were already in agreement with Karimov's call for Uzbekistan to be recognized as the most important state in Central Asia and the region's natural leader. Their criticism of Karimov's human rights record was somewhat muted, as though in response to Karimov's plea that political stability had to come before political innovation. In return, Birlik and Erk were permitted to distribute their publications and both groups experienced a surge in membership.

Karimov's honeymoon with the organized opposition ended only a few months after it began, when a coalition government, including members of the Tajik Islamic Renaissance Party and democratic and nationalist groups, was set up in neighboring Tajikistan. Karimov declared that Tajikistan's new government would turn the country into a hotbed of Muslim fundamentalism, and threw his support to those politicians in that country who sought to crush the nationalist-democratic-Islamic opposition by force.<sup>29</sup> At the same time, the Uzbek president used the pretext

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<sup>26</sup> See Karimov's statements about the Uzbek national heritage in *Pravda Vostoka*, September 24, 1994.

<sup>27</sup> The Islamic Renaissance Party was founded by Muslims in Russia in 1990. Representatives of the Central Asian republics were invited to the founding congress. See Daniil Mikul'skij, *Die Islamische Partei der Wiedergeburt*, *Berichte des Bundesinstituts fuer ostwissenschaftliche and internationale Studien*, No. 22, 1993.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Halq sozi*, April 1, 1993.

of stopping the spread of Muslim fundamentalism from Tajikistan to clamp down on opposition parties at home. Although Birlik and Erk retained their status as officially registered organizations for a time, numerous arrests of activists occurred, and the publishing activities of the two groups were suppressed. Several prominent human rights activists and opposition leaders, including Salih, went into exile in Turkey or the West.

When Western human rights groups criticized Karimov's treatment of the opposition, he countered with the demonstrably false claim that Birlik and Erk espoused Muslim fundamentalism. Uzbek officials asserted that the two opposition groups had not been banned but had failed to reregister as public organizations. This falsehood on the part of the government was especially egregious because the Tashkent police had turned the opposition groups out of their headquarters shortly before the deadline for reregistration, so that they would be unable to meet the requirement of providing an address.

Between 1992 to 1995 the Uzbek government remained highly repressive toward any opposition, which seriously damaged the country's reputation in the West, as the result of the seizures by Uzbek security officials of opposition leaders on the streets of neighboring countries as well keeping up steady pressure on the domestic opposition through arrests, treason trials and beatings. Liberal Russian journalists frequently criticized Karimov's authoritarianism, and issues of Russian newspapers that contained critical articles would usually be seized by the Uzbek police before they could be put on sale in Tashkent. Working conditions for foreign journalists became so bad that Western news agencies moved their offices to Almaty, which was a sharp blow to Uzbek prestige.<sup>30</sup> More serious for Uzbekistan, many Western aid-givers and potential investors backed away from Uzbekistan, not only because of its poor human rights record, but also because economic and legal reforms had made almost no headway. Thanks to Karimov's insistence on maintaining political stability by repressive means, Uzbekistan was finding itself more and more isolated.

In 1994, Karimov's former Vice President Shukrullo Mirsaidov attempted to take over leadership of the opposition within Uzbekistan, but veteran members of Birlik and Erk questioned the genuineness of his commitment to their human rights principles and tended to shun him. Despite this lack of acceptance, Mirsaidov continues to describe himself as the leader of the Uzbek opposition.<sup>31</sup>

The election for a new parliament, the Oliy Majlis (Supreme Assembly), in December 1994 was described by Karimov as a multi-party election because a handful of parties that had been set up by individuals loyal to the president were allowed to put up candidates along with Karimov's Popular Democratic Party, the renamed Communists. These spurious opposition parties attracted little popular support, and only one of them, Vatan tarakkiyati (Fatherland Progress), won a few seats in the new parliament.<sup>32</sup> There was no question that the legislature, despite the presence of an opposition, would not mount a serious challenge to the president's wishes.

In February 1995, however, a subtle shift started in the official Uzbek attitude to the opposition as government officials entered a dialog with opposition activists at a US-sponsored conference on the political and economic situation in Uzbekistan. This shift was part of a larger reversal of official Uzbek attitudes to the world community. Uzbekistan began a diplomatic offensive to

<sup>30</sup> Izvestiya, February 28, 1996.

<sup>31</sup> Nezavisimaya gazeta, February 15, 1996.

<sup>32</sup> The Popular Democratic Party, the former Communists, won 69 seats, Vatan tarakkiyati won 14, and 167 deputies were elected without party identification. Interfax, January 27, 1995. Subsequently, some deputies declared their membership in other parties, so that in October 1995 the parliamentary daily Narodnoe slovo could claim that four parties were represented in the Oliy Majlis. See Narodnoe slovo, October 27, 1995.

claim some of the foreign attention, and foreign investment, that had previously been directed largely to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.<sup>33</sup> Karimov also saw the West, particularly the United States, as a valuable counterweight to a Russian Federation that was experiencing an upsurge of nationalism and where some politicians were raising the possibility that the USSR might be reconstructed.<sup>34</sup>

There was surprisingly little Western reaction to the referendum in March 1995 on extending Karimov's term in office until 2000. The referendum had been proposed by the docile Oliy Majlis, but the idea for extending the president's term to the end of the century almost certainly had originated with Karimov himself. Although the referendum gained the approval of 90% of the voters, a result that was reminiscent of Soviet-era election results, the most negative comments came from Russian democrats.

Although Western leaders and aid-givers recognized that Uzbekistan was, and was likely to remain, a highly authoritarian state, the importance of the most populous state in Central Asia could not be ignored, especially since Uzbekistan declared that it shared to Western, especially US, fears that Iran would attempt to export its brand of anti-Western Islamic revolution to the new states of Central Asia.<sup>35</sup>

Karimov in turn recognized the value in small gestures to assuage Western concerns about the human rights situation in Uzbekistan, pardoning 85 opposition activists, including three leaders of the Erk Party, and allowing Western human rights organizations, including the New York-based Helsinki Watch/Human Rights Watch, to open offices in Tashkent.<sup>36</sup> The result was an immediate muting of the Western criticism of Uzbekistan's human rights record, and an upsurge of interest in the West in Uzbekistan as an important investment opportunity.<sup>37</sup>

## **Turkmenistan**

Turkmenistan's leader, Saparmurad Niyazov, has never sought to conceal his commitment to authoritarian rule. The last Communist Party chief of the republic before the collapse of the USSR, Niyazov asserts that his absolutism accords with the needs and traditions of the Turkmen people. There is little sign that significant numbers of Turkmenistan's inhabitants disagree with him, although some Turkmen intellectuals have indicated that they are embarrassed by Niyazov's personality cult that exceeds even that of Stalin.

In the last years of the USSR, Gorbachev's liberalizing trends barely touched Turkmenistan. An anti-corruption campaign in the late 1980s seemed to have been modeled on that in Uzbekistan, but it seemed to be more a settling of personal scores than an attempt to initiate even the mildest restructuring of administration in the republic. Even after independence, Turkmenistan has remained a country in which the Soviet mentality remains strong.

In the late 1980s, a tiny opposition group of intellectuals formed in Ashkhabad, the republican capital, and formed a branch in Mary, one of Turkmenistan's handful of cities. The group, known as Agzybirlik (Unity), was constantly harassed by law enforcement authorities and was never able to establish as much of a presence as did Birlik and Erk in Uzbekistan.

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<sup>33</sup> Interfax, April 6, 1995.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> See S. Frederick Starr, "Making Eurasia Stable," *Foreign Affairs*, January-February 1996.

<sup>36</sup> *Segodnya*, June 28, 1996.

<sup>37</sup> *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, June 22, 1996. *Izvestiya*, August 5, 1995.

After the collapse of the USSR, Niyazov launched his personality cult in the name of solidifying a sense of national consciousness among Turkmen whose primary loyalty had always been to their clan or family. The highly traditional nature of Turkmen society probably provided some justification for Niyazov's assertion that he was only responding to an ancient belief that Turkmen value only the leader with the strongest hand. Certainly Niyazov has never feared to turn to the electorate to approve his wishes. Turkmenistan was the first Central Asian state in which the voters were asked to approve or reject the country's independence. They approved independence in October 1991 as overwhelmingly as they had approved the continued existence of the USSR the previous March. Turkmenistan was also the first Central Asian state to institute direct election of the president.

Almost every industrial enterprise, farm, school and army unit now bears Niyazov's name. Apparently seeking to model himself on Ataturk, Niyazov has added to his name the designation "Turkmenbashi" (Father of the Turkmen), which is now the new name of the Caspian seaport of Krasnovodsk. But Niyazov's authoritarian bent has not only spawned a personality cult that reaches the heights of absurdity.<sup>38</sup> At the same time, he has ensured that there is no hint of political reform, and little sign of the introduction of a market economy.

In January 1994, Niyazov started the practice, subsequently adopted by the presidents of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, of seeking to extend his term in office through a referendum. Niyazov explained his request that the voters approve the cancellation of the presidential election scheduled for 1997 by saying that he needed at least ten years to put his plans for Turkmenistan into effect. According to official results that foreign human rights organizations did not even bother to challenge, 99.9% of Turkmenistan's electorate voted in favor of the president's proposal.

Turkmenistan has been very eager to attract foreign investment in the expansion and modernization of its oil and gas industries. There has been no shortage of Western, Russian and Iranian firms that are interested in becoming involved in developing Turkmenistan's petroleum and gas resources, although the lack of legal protections could give some foreigners pause. On the whole, however, it is Turkmen who have been the main targets of Niyazov's heavy-handedness.

Most of the tiny Turkmen opposition that evolved prior to the country's independence has emigrated, to Russia or the West. In 1994, the Turkmen security service enlisted its Russian counterparts to help round up opposition activists who were carrying on their attack on Niyazov's human rights record from Moscow. The Russian security service, on discovering that two of the persons they had arrested were employees of Radio Liberty, refused a Turkmen request to hand them over to Turkmen authorities.<sup>39</sup> But two of the detainees, Muhametkuly Aymuradov and Hoshali Garaev, were extradited to Ashkhabat to face trial in June 1995 on charges of having planned the assassination of Niyazov. The two were sentenced to long prison terms despite the improbability of the charges against them. The most articulate spokesman for democratization in Turkmenistan is Niyazov's first foreign minister in the post-independence period, Avdy Kuliev, who carries on a tireless campaign of propaganda against Niyazov from Moscow, where his Turkmenistan Fund seeks to promote human rights in his homeland.

In July 1995, between 300 and 500 people staged a demonstration in Ashkhabat against Niyazov's policies and calling for new elections. Security officials, at a loss to explain this outburst of popular anger at the Turkmen president, announced that the demonstrators were either drunk or high on drugs. Officials of the Moscow-based Turkmenistan Fund denied having had anything to

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<sup>38</sup> Izvestiya, August 5, 1995.

<sup>39</sup> Interfax, December 2, 1994.

do with the demonstration, and some Russian journalists speculated that officials of the Russian government might have been involved in inciting the protest as a means to embarrass Niyazov after he refused to permit Russian military bases on Turkmen soil.

By 1996, Niyazov realized that foreign investment in Turkmenistan's oil and gas would not be enough to develop a modern economy. At the beginning of the year, he began promoting market reform, but insisted that it must take place without social dislocation and hardships.<sup>40</sup> He insisted on retaining the free distribution to all citizens of Turkmenistan of water, gas and electricity, on which at least part of his apparent popularity is based. Turkmenistan was affected, as were all the former Soviet republics, by the breakdown of its economic relationships with the rest of the former USSR. It has tried to obtain consumer goods by arranging barter deals for its gas with Ukraine and other new states that are dependent on Turkmen gas to meet their energy needs. Some consumer items have been obtained from Turkey and Iran, but apparently their quality is poor.<sup>41</sup>

As Turkmenistan's economy becomes increasingly integrated with that of the outside world, Niyazov may find that his inclination to govern the country like an absolutist oriental ruler impedes the economic development that is the centerpiece of his prosperity plan. The Turkmen president, for all the apparent foolishness of his Stalinesque personality cult, may be a canny enough politician to realize this. It is significant that he has pardoned at least some of the participants in the July 1995 protest in Ashkhabat.<sup>42</sup>

## Tajikistan

In any discussion of post-Soviet authoritarianism in the new states of Central Asia, Tajikistan has a unique place because its existence as an independent country has been characterized almost exclusively by political instability and, for much of the time, civil war.

Tajikistan declared its independence at the beginning of September, 1991, in the midst of demonstrations in Dushanbe by anti-Communist groups trying to oust President Kakhkhar Makhkamov. Opposition groups consisting of reform-minded Communists as well as Tajik nationalists and supporters of the Tajik branch of the Islamic Renaissance Party had tried in February, 1990, to force Makhkamov from office because of his failure, in their view, to institute real political or economic reform, although a number of independent political groups had been allowed to form in the capital, although the Islamic Renaissance Party had been banned since it was founded. Another major grievance against Makhkamov was that he represented the power of the Leninabad clique that had monopolized power in the republic for decades.

By September, 1991, three groups in opposition to the Communist Party had become established in Tajikistan. The oldest of these was the Rastokhez (Rebirth) Movement, which coalesced in the late 1980s around efforts by the Tajik intelligentsia to restore Tajikistan's cultural and linguistic heritage. Some of its leaders were heavily criticized in the Communist press for their role in the Dushanbe demonstrations in 1990, but neither they nor the reformist Communists who joined them were arrested for their actions, which amounted to trying to overthrow the republican leadership. At worst, they lost their jobs.

The other two opposition groups that took leading roles in the events of late 1991 and 1992 were the Democratic Party of Tajikistan, a grouping of intellectuals with a Western orientation that

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<sup>40</sup> Nezavisimaya gazeta, January 11, 1996 and Delovoi mir, February 16, 1996.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Nezavisimaya gazeta, February 14, 1996.



was sometimes tinged with a strong admiration for Iran. The largest and most influential of Tajikistan's opposition groups, because of its potential appeal to many segments of Tajik society that would like to see Islam restored to a primary place in Tajik life, was the Islamic Renaissance Party, which had had no better reception from the government of Tajikistan than its counterpart in Uzbekistan had received from the leadership there. The Islamic Party provided most of the demonstrators, who patiently assembled daily before the government building in Dushanbe until Makhkamov could take no more and resigned only a few days after the parliament declared Tajikistan independent.

Makhkamov was replaced by the parliament with his predecessor as Communist Party chief, another representative of the "Leninabad mafia" named Rakhman Nabiev, who had been removed from power in 1985 because of his resistance to reform. The selection of Nabiev played a major role in precipitating the events that led to the outbreak of civil war in 1992, not least of all because Nabiev resisted all demands by the opposition for a share of power and the beginning of reform. In a popular presidential election at the end of 1992, filmmaker Davlat Khudonazarov, the candidate behind whom the opposition rallied, made a respectable showing but Nabiev gained the most votes. He took this as popular approval for his retention of Communist-era politics, and in March 1992 the demonstrations began again. The opposition demonstrations, calling for the democratization of Tajikistan, and counterdemonstrations in support of the government, continued until an outbreak of violence in June frightened Nabiev into agreeing to include several members of opposition groups, though not their leaders, in a "government of national reconciliation."

At that point, civil war broke out between opponents of the new government and the former opposition. Regional affiliations played at least as great a role in the fighting as did political ones. Opponents of the coalition government were centered in the Kulyab region in south-central Tajikistan and in the Hissar Valley west of Dushanbe; supporters of the non-Communist groups, in particular the Islamic Party, had their strongholds in the mountains east of Dushanbe, in the autonomous Badakhshan region in the southeast, and in the Kurgan-Tyube region that had been settled by migrants from the eastern mountains. The Leninabad region in the north, which had provided Tajikistan's leadership for decades, stayed out of the fighting although it supported those who sought to dislodge the coalition.

At the end of 1992, the coalition government resigned in an attempt to end the civil war. A government of former Communists took over power in Dushanbe, but has never been able to gain control of the entire country. Fighting has continued sporadically up to the present, as Islamic fighters based in Afghanistan have clashed with Russian and other CIS troops on the Tajik-Afghan border, and opposition forces have continued the war against Tajik government troops in the mountains.<sup>43</sup>

Imomali Rakhmonov, a former collective farm chairman who took over as head of state at the end of 1992, was unable to crush the opposition with military force, even with massive Russian assistance, and in 1994 his Russian allies and United Nations representatives pressured him into starting peace talks with the opposition. Six rounds of inconclusive talks have taken place, the most recent ending on July 19, 1996.<sup>44</sup> A cease-fire that was agreed at the latest round of talks apparently broke down almost immediately, as each side accused the other of violating it.

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<sup>43</sup> See Mohammad-Reza Djalili and Frederic Grare, *Le Tadjikistan à l'épreuve de l'indépendance*, Geneva: Institut universitaire de hautes études internationales, 1995.

<sup>44</sup> Inside Central Asia, BBC Monitoring, No. 130, 1996.

After his accession to power, Rakhmonov was perceived in the West as little more than a former minor official who was part of an effort by former Communists to reclaim their control of Tajikistan. But Rakhmonov has proved to be a more competent and flexible leader than many would have expected. He has successfully conducted parliamentary and presidential elections in the country, despite the continuing fighting. Although his opponent in the presidential election, the former Communist prime minister Abdumalik Abdullodzhonov, claimed that there had been massive fraud during the election, he did not challenge the outcome.<sup>45</sup>

The armed opposition was excluded from the presidential and parliamentary elections, although one of the partners in the opposition coalition, the Democratic Party, was subsequently legalized despite its refusal to support the government.<sup>46</sup> The three members of the 1992 coalition of opposition groups were banned in June 1993, and the ban remains in force against the Islamic Party, the most important opposition force in the country.<sup>47</sup> The Rastokhez movement, almost all of the leaders of which have emigrated from Tajikistan, has recognized the Tajik constitution but has not had the ban on its activities lifted.<sup>48</sup> It remains part of the united Tajik opposition along with the Islamic Renaissance Party, which continues to carry the burden of the fighting against the Tajik government. A handful of small parties has been registered in Dushanbe, but the main force in Tajikistan's legislature as well as its government remains the Communist Party.

Rakhmonov has declared for international consumption that he is committed to the eventual establishment of Western-style, secular democracy in Tajikistan. But under the conditions that exist at present in the country, with the government losing ground to the armed opposition<sup>49</sup> and unable to guarantee the loyalty of its own supporters,<sup>50</sup> the possibility of democratization seems remote.

## Conclusion

The most immediate challenge facing the new states of Central Asia is to put their economies in order, stopping the decline in living standards that could, in the view of most Central Asian political leaders, lead to social and political instability that could undermine their own power. Despite the efforts of Western countries to encourage democratization, top leaders in all the Central Asian states see a strong presidency as the best way to ensure the controlled change that all of them, to a greater or lesser extent, consider to be necessary to achieve economic, social and political stability, as well as to ensure the sovereignty of their countries.

The shift in Western emphasis from Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan to the more authoritarian Uzbekistan suggests that political decision-makers and diplomats outside Central Asia are accepting, at least to some extent, the arguments of Central Asian leaders concerning the necessity for a strong hand to guide the modernization and state-building processes in these countries. The result of this reasoning, however, may be that the leaders of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, the two states in which stirrings of democratization on the Western model were most pronounced, are encouraged to follow the path of greater authoritarianism, as exemplified by Uzbekistan's

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<sup>45</sup> Nezavisimaya gazeta, September 28, 1994 and Interfax, November 7, 1994.

<sup>46</sup> Nezavisimaya gazeta, February 14 and 27, 1996.

<sup>47</sup> Nezavisimaya gazeta, December 29, 1994.

<sup>48</sup> Nezavisimaya gazeta, January 11, 1996.

<sup>49</sup> Nezavisimaya gazeta, June 26, 1996.

<sup>50</sup> At the beginning of 1996, Rakhmonov was faced with an armed rebellion by some of his former supporters in the south. See *Novoe vremya*, No. 5, 1996, p. 16.

President Karimov, rather than returning to the path of democratization on which they seemed to have embarked.

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## **Authoritarianism in the New States of Central Asia:**

An Overview of Post-Independence Politics

**Bericht des BIOst Nr. 46/1996**

### **Summary**

#### *Introductory Remarks*

The newly independent states of Central Asia were expected after the breakup of the USSR to be prone to instability and violence, but four years of independence have shown them, with the exception of Tajikistan, to be among the most stable of the Soviet successor states. Those Central Asian leaders who consider the maintenance of political and social stability to have priority over reform consider that events have justified their choice. The presidents of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, who attempted to introduce democratization, have become more authoritarian in order to carry out their reform programs.

The need for stability is grounded in the absence of any experience of Western-style democracy and in the lack of a tradition of statehood in Central Asia, although national consciousness was well advanced among the Central Asian political and cultural elite prior to the disintegration of the USSR.

Westerners who expected that democracy would take root rapidly in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have been disappointed as the leaders of those countries have become more authoritarian. At the same time, interest in authoritarian Uzbekistan has increased as the West recognizes the geopolitical importance of that country.

#### *Findings*

1. In Kazakhstan, democratization was given impetus by the events of December 1986 in Alma-Ata. In the late 1980s, the first signs of a civil society emerged in Kazakhstan, the first Central Asian republic in which public organizations independent of the Communist Party were allowed to function. Prior to Kazakhstan's independence, its president, Nursultan Nazarbaev, had acquired the reputation of being a leader committed to democratization and economic liberalization. But in the four years of the country's independence, the effects of reform have created social stress and a rising crime rate. Kazakhstan's political parties remain largely irrelevant in the country's political life. Nazarbaev considered that his reforms were being thwarted by the Constitutional Court and an uncooperative parliament. In the wake of his dissolution of parliament in 1995, Nazarbaev ruled by decree, replacing Kazakhstan's first post-Soviet constitution with one that gave the presidency vastly increased powers but was widely denounced as undemocratic. The Kazakh president further disappointed those who had considered him a proponent of democracy when he allowed his term in office to be extended by referendum. Due to his elimination of legislative and judicial checks on his power, Nazarbaev gained the reputation of being an authoritarian ruler similar to his counterpart in Uzbekistan.

2. Kyrgyzstan's President Askar Akaev began the process of democratization before the breakup of the USSR. But after the country gained its independence, the president came increasingly into conflict with the parliament, which was unwilling to support his economic reforms. When Akaev tried to persuade non-Kyrgyz not to emigrate from the country, he was criticized by the Kyrgyz nationalists who had previously supported him. The antagonism between the president and the parliament came to a head in 1994, when Akaev dissolved the legislature. Akaev's actions in limiting freedom of the press and preventing a challenge during the presidential election in 1995 have tarnished his reputation as a leader committed to democratization.
3. Uzbekistan began its existence as an independent state under an authoritarian regime, because its president, Islam Karimov, values stability above reform. Uzbekistan had developed a political opposition before the country gained independence, but the opposition has been subject to varying degrees of repression for most of its existence. Arrests and treason trials of political activists gave Uzbekistan a bad name in the West, which affected Uzbek efforts to develop diplomatic ties. A skillful politician, Karimov has overcome much Western antipathy to his human rights record by supporting Western initiatives against Iran, and beginning a slow privatization in order to court Western investment.
4. Turkmenistan's leader, Saparmurad Niyazov, who styles himself "Turkmenbashi" - Father of the Turkmen - has never claimed to be a democrat. He justifies his authoritarian rule and outrageous personality cult by citing oriental tradition. Political opposition has been almost non-existent in Turkmenistan, so a demonstration by several hundred people in Ashkhabat in 1995 came as a considerable surprise. Niyazov was the first Central Asian head of state to dispense with the necessity of facing a presidential election, though he has always been certain that the voters would carry out his wishes.
5. Tajikistan has been in a state of civil war for most of its existence as an independent state. The most important opposition party, the Islamic Renaissance, is conducting armed resistance to the government of President Imomali Rakhmonov, a former Communist official. Although Rakhmonov's government rejects the label "Communist," the Communist Party remains the dominant political force in that part of the country under government control. Rakhmonov asserts that he wants to create a secular, democratic state, but the continuing civil war has ensured that major segments of the opposition remain excluded from Tajikistan's political life.