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(3)

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TÜRKÇE: ÖZBEKİSTAN'DA OTORİTER REJİM SİYASETİ

ENGLISH: AUTHORITARIAN POLITICS IN UZBEKISTAN

ABSTRACT

All the ex-Soviet Central Asian states have super-presidential, authoritarian regimes with poor human rights records. Uzbekistan has also had an authoritarian regime with a super-presidential government almost since independence in 1991. Ever since then, Islam Karimov has been president, re-elected without meaningful opposition on three occasions and likely to rule indefinitely without a constitutional replacement.

Competing personalities and parties have been eliminated, exiled, or prevented from exercising any public opposition. This article summarizes democratic and authoritarian tendencies occurred after Uzbekistan emerged as an independent state, Uzbek parliamentary elections and Karimov Period, and US-Uzbek Relations after 9/11 and Andijan Massacre and the prospects of the future.

Keywords: US, Uzbekistan, Karimov, Authoritarianism, Andijan

Jel Code: C54, D72, O47.

ÖZET

Bütün eski Sovyet Orta Asya devletleri kötü insan hakları kayıtları ile birlikte başkanlık sistemini aşan otoriter yönetimlere sahiptir. Özbekistan 1991 yılında elde ettiği bağımsızlığından bugüne değin bu otoriter yönetime sahip devletlerden biridir. Özbekistan lideri İslam Kerimov anayasa değişikliğine gidilmeden güçlü bir muhalefetle karşılaşmaksızın üç kez ard arda seçilmiştir.

Rakip kişilerin ve partilerin, elimine ya da sürgün, yoluyla her türlü toplumsal muhalefetleri engellenmiştir. Bu makale, Özbekistan'ın bağımsız bir devlet olarak ortaya çıkmasından sonra ülkede oluşan demokratik ve otoriter eğilimleri, Özbek parlamento seçimlerini, Kerimov dönemini, 11 Eylül sonrası ABD-Özbekistan ilişkilerini, Andijan katliamını ve geleceğe yönelik beklentileri özetlemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: ABD, Özbekistan, Kerimov, Otoriter Sistemler, Andican.

Jel Kodu: C54, D72, O47.

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INTRODUCTION

Authoritarianism describes a form of social control characterized by strict obedience to the authority of a state or organization, often maintaining and enforcing control through the use of oppressive measure. Authoritarian regimes are generally considered to be highly hierarchical. In an authoritarian form of government, citizens are subject to state authority in many aspects of their lives, including many matters that other political philosophies would see as erosion of civil liberties and freedom. There are various degrees of authoritarianism; even very democratic and liberal states will show authoritarianism to some extent, for example in areas of national security. Usually, an authoritarian government is undemocratic and has the power to govern without the consent of those being governed. If we compare democracy with authoritarianism we maintain that as a concept democracy is different from authoritarianism. In political theory, 'democracy' describes a small number of related forms of government and also a political philosophy. A common feature of democracy as currently understood and practised is competitive elections. Competitive elections are usually seen to require freedom of speech, freedom of press and some degree of rule of law. Civilian control of the military is often seen as necessary to prevent military dictatorship and interference with political affairs. In some countries, democracy is based on the philosophical principle of equal rights.

We have been experiencing so-called democratic revolutions around the world today. These opposition movements from the Caucasus to Central Asia, from Iraq to Ukraine, are toppling the old regimes and their state structures. Inexperienced opposition movements and their leaders are taking over the state and have continued to control the entire society on behalf of democracy in the Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, Georgia, Uzbekistan, Iraq, Lebanon and many more countries both now, and there are more to come.¹ However, no one questions the social nature of the democratic ideas contained in these opposition movements. Where do they emerge from, and what exactly do they attempt to achieve? Is the problem in these countries really democracy, or perhaps instead the exploitation of the market and natural resources through the use of these so-called democratic movements. The meaning and the real notion of democracy have changed, and today democracy and civil society are part and parcel of a process that serves the interests of the powerful, rather than creating freedom and equality within modern society. Freedom, free speech and civil society are the true nature and characteristics of a democracy; however replacing dictators with puppets will not bring democracy or solve the socio-economic issues for these underdeveloped and developing nations, but will only serve to sustain further relationships of exploitation. The cases of the Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, Georgia and Iraq have shown us that old and corrupt, anti-democratic regimes cannot survive by disregarding the people's democratic demands and sustaining economic equality. On the other hand, the opposition movements of Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, Georgia and Iraq stepped up and demanded more democracy, supported by other exploiters. What a dichotomous situation it is for a so-called democracy. In contrast to the argument of some scholars, democracy is actually a very vague term that is defined in the context of cultural parameters rather than within a universal pop-culture. We are within a certain historical stage of human development; therefore in order to improve our society and to continue along this path of social and economic achievement, we cannot live without democracy.



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The Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan asserts that ‘democracy in the Republic of Uzbekistan shall be based upon common human principles, according to which the highest value shall be the human being, his life, freedom, honor, dignity and other inalienable rights’.ⁱⁱ But in reality Uzbekistan is called by Human Rights Watch Report and the Western world one of the most authoritarian of the post-Soviet states, with a poor record on human rights. Because of this, Uzbekistan offers an interesting example of the contrast between democracy and authoritarianism.

Located in the heart of Central Asia between the Amu Darya and Syr Darya Rivers, Uzbekistan has a long history and interesting heritage. The leading cities of the famous Silk Road – Samarkand, Bukhara and Khiva – are located in Uzbekistan,ⁱⁱⁱ and many well-known conquerors passed through the land.^{iv}

The Uzbekistan land was once part of the ancient Persian Empire and was later conquered by Alexander the Great in the fourth century BC. During the eighth century, the nomadic Turkic tribes living there were converted to Islam by invading Arab forces who dominated the area. The Mongols under Ghengis Khan took over the region from the Seljuk Turks in the thirteenth century, and it later became part of Tamerlane the Great’s empire and that of his successors until the sixteenth century.^v The Uzbeks invaded the territory in the early sixteenth century and merged with the other inhabitants of the area. Their empire broke up into separate Uzbek principalities, the Khanates of Khiva, Bukhara and Kokand. These city-states resisted Russian expansion into the area but were conquered by Russian forces in the mid-nineteenth century.^{vi} The territory became the Uzbek Republic in 1924 and the independent Uzbekistan Soviet Socialist Republic in 1925. Under Soviet rule, Uzbekistan concentrated on growing cotton with the help of irrigation, mechanization and chemical fertilizers and pesticides, causing serious environmental damage.^{vii} Uzbekistan became the Soviet Union’s fifth largest republic with its largest Muslim community

In June 1990, Uzbekistan was the first Central Asian republic to declare that its own laws had sovereignty over those of the central Soviet government.^{viii} Uzbekistan became fully independent and joined with ten other former Soviet republics on 21 December 1991, in the Commonwealth of Independent States.^{ix}

Uzbekistan occupies a key position in Central Asia. It is the region’s most militarily capable and populous country, and large Uzbek minorities live in neighbouring states. As it approaches the nineteenth anniversary of its independence at the time of writing, however, its political system is highly repressive and its economy has been barely reformed since Soviet times. Political sclerosis and economic decline threaten internal stability and undermine regional security. The international community has long urged political and economic reform, but with little success.^x

Since Uzbekistan announced its independence from the former Soviet Union in 1991, the Uzbek government has made little progress in moving away from the Soviet-style repression of human rights, specifically religious freedom.^{xi} With the largest and most devout Muslim population (28 million) in Central Asia,^{xii} the Islamic religion flourished in Uzbekistan as a result of the break up of the Soviet Union.^{xiii} Despite the trappings of institutional change, the first years of independence saw more resistance than acceptance of the institutional changes required for democratic reform to take hold. Whatever initial



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movement towards democracy existed in Uzbekistan in the early days of independence seems to have been overcome by the inertia of the remaining Soviet-style strong centralized leadership.

Uzbekistan is still trying to pursue independent policies without account of Russia. But at that point we have to ask the following question: ‘How long can it proceed?’

Uzbek parliamentary elections and the Karimov period

Islam Karimov became an official in the Communist Party of the USSR, becoming the party’s First Secretary in Uzbekistan in 1989.^{xiv} On 24 March 1990 he became President of the Uzbek. Karimov agreed to dissolve the Soviet Union and form the Commonwealth of Independent States, of which Uzbekistan became a charter member according to the Almaty declaration (on 21 December 1991), he declared Uzbekistan an independent nation.^{xv} Shortly thereafter (on 29 December), Karimov was elected president of independent Uzbekistan in the new country’s first contested election. Karimov attracted 86 per cent of the vote against an opposition candidate. The elections were called unfair, with state-run propaganda and a falsified vote count, although the opposing candidate and leader of the Erk (Freedom) Party, Muhammad Salih, had the chance to participate. The major opposition party, Birlik,^{xvi} was refused registration as an official party in time for the election. Shortly after the elections, a harsh political clampdown forced opposition leaders into exile, while many were issued long-term prison sentences and a few disappeared.^{xvii}

From the beginning of his presidency, Karimov remained committed in words to instituting democratic reforms. A new constitution was adopted by the legislature in December 1992. Officially it created separation of powers among a strong presidency, the Oly Majlis, and a judiciary. In practice, however, these changes were cosmetic. Although the language of the new constitution included many democratic features, it could be superseded by executive decrees and legislation, and constitutional law was often simply ignored. President Karimov began to adopt authoritarian measures to consolidate his power over the country, launching attacks against independent political parties, the free press and religious figures.^{xviii}

Birlik, the original opposition party formed by intellectuals, was banned for allegedly subversive activities, establishing the Karimov regime’s dominant rationalization for increased authoritarianism: Islamic fundamentalism threatened to overthrow the secular state and establish an Islamic regime similar to that in Iran. The constitution ratified in December 1992 reaffirmed that Uzbekistan was a secular state. Karimov believes that the Islamic religion is an ideological and political threat and warns that Islamic activists, or fundamentalists, are trying to destabilize his regime.^{xix} In response, Karimov ordered a crackdown against unofficial, independent Islamic worship and imposed state-sponsored, or official, Islamic observance.^{xx} During the early stages of independence, many observers attributed Uzbekistan’s relative socio-economic and political stability to Karimov’s authoritarian policies.^{xxi} This suppression and subjugation of independent Islamic adherence to the state violated the Uzbek Constitution and international human rights standards protecting religious freedom, including the right to practice one’s religion, the right to a religious education and the right to teach and lead religious worship without unauthorized



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state interference or involvement. The disregard for Uzbek constitutional protections raises serious issues concerning the rule of law in Uzbekistan and its future as a constitutional state. Moreover, the February 1999 bombing in the capital of Uzbekistan proved that Karimov's repressive tactics threaten rather than ensure peace and stability in Uzbekistan.^{xxii} Thus, the question of religious freedom in Uzbekistan is foremost for determining the limitations of civil liberties in that country as well as its future as a stable, democratic state under the rule of law.

In 1995, Karimov extended his term until 2000 through a widely criticized referendum, and he was re-elected with 91.9 per cent of the vote on 9 January 2000.^{xxiii} The election was widely judged as failing to meet basic democratic standards. US President Bill Clinton said that this election 'was neither free nor fair and offered Uzbekistan's voters no true choice'.^{xxiv} The sole opposition candidate, Professor Abdulhafiz Jalalov, admitted that he had entered the race only to make it seem democratic and he voted for Karimov.^{xxv} Perhaps the best insight into the state of democracy in Uzbekistan today is provided by Jalalov, the only alternative presidential candidate, who acknowledged that he himself voted for Karimov in the interests of, 'stability, peace, our nation's independence and the development of Uzbekistan'.^{xxvi} On 27 January 2002, Karimov won another referendum extending the length of presidential terms from five to seven years; Karimov's present term, formerly due to end in 2005, was subsequently extended by parliament.^{xxvii}

Parliamentary elections were held in Uzbekistan on 27 December 2009^{xxviii} and 10 January 2010 to elect the 150 members of the Legislative Chamber of Uzbekistan, the lower house of the Oliy Majlis. Of these, 135 were directly elected from single member constituencies using the two-round system. The Uzbekistan Liberal Democratic Party (O'zlidep) was reconfirmed as the largest party in the Legislative Chamber, with 53 deputies. The other parties permitted to participate in the elections were the People's Democratic Party of Uzbekistan (32 deputies), the Uzbekistan National Revival Democratic (Milliy Tiklanish, 31 deputies) and the Justice Social Democratic Party (Adolat, 19 deputies)^{xxix}

Karimov was elected president for a new term. Preliminary results were announced by the Central Election Commission on 29 December. Results were declared in 96 out of the 135 electoral districts; in the remaining 39 districts, no candidate obtained an overall majority of votes, and so a second round of voting was held in 10 January 2010.^{xxx} Final results were announced by the Central Election Commission on 13 January 2010.^{xxxi}

The elections were monitored by 270 observers from 36 countries and representatives of four international missions. The election monitoring arm of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) did not send a full mission, saying none of its earlier recommendations had been implemented.^{xxxii} Veronica Szenté Goldston, Human Rights Watch Advocacy Director for Europe and Central Asia, said the pre-election situation in Uzbekistan had been marked by intense repression by the government: 'Human rights are violated everywhere around the country, there is no political competition, all the parties that are running for this election are supporting the government.'^{xxxiii}

In looking at the impact of Karimov's policies on Uzbekistan's political environment, three areas deserve particular attention: the highly marginalized position of the secular



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democratic opposition, human rights violations and pressure on the media and independent civil society groups.^{xxxiv}

US–Uzbek relations since 2001

As Central Asia’s most populous nation, Uzbekistan is a vital player in the regional geopolitical and energy development games being waged by the United States, the European Union, Russia and China.^{xxxv}

Tashkent controls a relatively small amount of natural resources, mostly natural gas. But many of the export routes out of Central Asia cross Uzbek territory. Uzbekistan is world’s thirteenth largest natural gas producer and the third largest producer among former Soviet states after Russia and Turkmenistan.^{xxxvi}

The United States recognized the independence of Uzbekistan on December 25, 1991, and opened an Embassy in Tashkent in March 1992.

The US Defense Department has long been the dominant Western influence in Central Asia, which comprises Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The Pentagon broadened its security ties with Uzbekistan in the late 1990s, when Islamic militants first became active in the region.^{xxxvii}

US–Uzbek relations developed slowly and reached a peak following the US decision to invade Afghanistan following 11 September. Uzbekistan suddenly emerged as one of Washington’s main strategic allies in the ‘War on Terror’ campaign, because of a mutual opposition to the Taliban.^{xxxviii} The CIA and MI6 followed suit, training and reorganizing the Uzbek security services. Defence cooperation took a quantum leap forward following 9/11. Since then, Tashkent has retained its status as valued partner, even though human rights groups, and even the US State Department, have condemned the Uzbek government’s reliance on repression.^{xxxix}

The United States announced that it would withhold millions of dollars in security and economic assistance to Uzbekistan, citing ‘disappointment’ over Tashkent’s human rights practices.^{xl} Human rights advocates praised the US decision, expressing hope that it would increase the pressure on Tashkent to implement long-promised reforms to improve civil society conditions in the country.^{xli}

The Karshi-Khanabad air base, which American forces use to fly support missions for ongoing anti-Taliban military operations in Afghanistan,^{xlii} has cemented the US–Uzbek partnership.^{xliii} Uzbekistan hosted an 800-strong US troop presence at the Karshi-Khanabad base, also known as ‘K2’, which supported US-led efforts in the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan.^{xliv} This move was criticized by Human Rights Watch, which said the US government subordinated the promotion of human rights to assistance in the war in Afghanistan.^{xlv}

Uzbek officials, including President Karimov, were quick to blame the uprising on Islamist radicalism and ‘terrorism’. This is standard in Uzbekistan, where anyone who opposes the government risks being accused of ties to Islamist groups. The two groups most commonly cited are the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), a violent terrorist organization with links to the Taliban and Al-Qaeda that was decimated during the US invasion of Afghanistan, and Hizb-ut-Tahrir, an international Islamist group that has become



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popular in Uzbekistan.^{xlvi} Karimov acted against both the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and Hizb-ut-Tahrir – Islamist organizations that the government has designated as terrorist.^{xlvi}

Hizb-ut-Tahrir is inspired by a mediaeval vision of Islamic politics and wishes to replace current nation states by a Caliphate that would unite all Muslims. It insists it is a non-violent organization, and no proof has ever been presented by the Uzbek government linking it to violence. Crisis Group has reported extensively on Islam in Central Asia. Radical Islam has little support in Uzbekistan, a thoroughly secularized state with strong Russian influences from its time under Soviet rule. However, growing grievances about economic decline, corruption and official abuses and the banning of most secular opposition have forced some Uzbeks into the arms of Islamist groups.

Uzbekistan has imprisoned thousands on charges of ties to radical Islamist groups. While some certainly may have had links to groups like the IMU, human rights organizations have documented the jailing of some 7,000 people for the peaceful expression of religious beliefs, including 4,000 accused of membership in Hizb-ut-Tahrir.^{xlvi} The use of torture is systematic in Uzbek prisons, so most confessions have to be disregarded. A charge of links to Islamist groups is often used to settle local scores, extort bribes or subdue legitimate political opposition.

With few options for religious instruction, some young Muslims have turned to underground Islamic movements. The police force and the intelligence service use torture as a routine investigation technique. The government has begun to bring to trial some officers accused of torture. Four police officers and three intelligence service officers have been convicted. The government has granted amnesty to approximately 2,000 political and non-political prisoners between 2001 and 2002, but this is believed to be insignificant. In 2002 and at the beginning of 2003 the government arrested fewer suspected Islamic fundamentalists than in the past.^{xlvi}

Armed groups have carried out acts of violence in Uzbekistan, and some of these groups may have links to wider Islamist networks, although this has not been proved in open trials. A series of explosions and attacks on police checkpoints in Tashkent and Bukhara in March and April 2004 led to the arrest and trial of around 100 people. Human rights organizations have said that many of the accused claim to be innocent and that they were tortured in prison to extract confessions.

US-Uzbek relations cooled significantly following the ‘colour revolutions’ in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan in 2003–05, and the Government of Uzbekistan sought to limit the influence of the US and other foreign non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working on civil society, political reform and human rights inside the country.

The United States and EU remained largely silent when Karimov, sensing that the democratization trend unleashed by Georgia’s Rose Revolution in 2003 posed a threat to his regime, cracked down on non-governmental organization activity. Among the international NGOs targeted was the Open Society Institute’s Tashkent office.¹

Relations deteriorated rapidly following US and European demands for an independent, international investigation into the May 2005 Andijan Massacre.



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Andijan massacre

On 13–14 May 2005, the government of Uzbekistan brutally suppressed a popular uprising in the eastern city of Andijan and the surrounding area. President Islam Karimov announced that his forces had acted to end a revolt by Islamist extremists, yet the hundreds of victims – possibly as many as 750 – were mostly unarmed civilians, including many children. The uprising was not a one-off affair. It was the climax of six months in which especially ruinous economic policies produced demonstrations across the country. Nor is it likely to be the last serious bloodshed unless Western governments and international bodies press much harder for fundamentally different political and economic policies. At the time of writing, anger and frustration with the regime are tangible everywhere in Uzbekistan, and the explosion point is dangerously near. The uprising began with protests over the trial of 23 local businessmen accused of involvement in Islamic extremism and acts against the state. Karimov was quick to blame Islamic groups, a theme eagerly adopted by the Russian government. However, there is no publicly available evidence for the involvement of jihadists: the businessmen were part of a self-help collective of entrepreneurs that, although motivated by religion, has shown no inclination to violence. Relatives of the men say the trial was motivated by their economic success and their growing power in the city due to their provision of charity to the less fortunate. The government has linked the protests and the 23 businessmen to the Islamist Hizb-ut-Tahrir organization but has offered no evidence, and the businessmen’s families deny any connection.^{li}

That an armed crowd broke into Andijan prison on 12 May 2005, freeing as many as 2,000 prisoners, was certainly a crime, but the government’s response was to fire indiscriminately into the group of unarmed, peaceful civilians who had gathered after the prison break. This seems to be when most of the civilian deaths occurred. However in May 2005, hundreds were killed by police in demonstrations in the city of Andijan. Reports of a clash near the Kyrgyz border on 15 May, in which Uzbek soldiers were supposedly killed, may have been an indicator that Islamic militants were again active inside Uzbekistan, and were seeking to take advantage of the chaos in eastern Uzbekistan. It should be stressed, however, that the armed group which first attacked the government jail in Andijan on 13 May did not comprise Islamic radicals, but friends and relatives of the 23 businessmen and traders who were on trial in Andijan.^{lii}

The uprising came after a period of rising tensions throughout Uzbekistan.^{liiii} Protests have taken place across the country. Finally, in a move welcomed by the international community, the government of Uzbekistan ended prior censorship, though the media remain tightly controlled.^{liiv}

The Andijan uprising and its bloody suppression should not have taken the international community by surprise. What occurred in Andijan was not an anomaly, but the latest, albeit most deadly, manifestation of the growing dissent and instability within Uzbekistan. The many warning signs were consistently ignored. The bazaar demonstrations and riots attracted a fair amount of international media attention when they broke out across the country in November 2004, but when the unrest died down, so too did the interest. On the eve of the Andijan uprising, Tashkent’s diplomatic community was by and large dismissive of the trend. ‘Perhaps we are reading too much into these disturbances’, a Western diplomat said.



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‘People show displeasure in democracies as well. Local people showing their displeasure with heavy-handed administrators happen everywhere.’^{lv}

In the aftermath of the Andijan massacre, Western leaders may have wondered what to do with Uzbek strongman Islam Karimov. The United States, along with the European Union, should have started any policy re-evaluation by admitting that they bore a significant share of the blame for enabling Karimov’s authoritarian rule. Since the 11 September terrorist tragedy, the United States and EU have preferred to prop up dictatorships in Central Asia, rather than promote democratic values.^{lvi}

During a visit to Tashkent in February 2004, former US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld praised Uzbekistan as a ‘key member’ of the anti-terrorism coalition, while ignoring the Karimov administration’s deplorable human rights record, along with its failure to implement promised reforms. The US State Department decertified Uzbekistan in July of 2004, revoking \$18 million in aid.^{lvii} However, this move was effectively undermined by the Pentagon when visiting US General and former Chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Richard Meyers extended \$21 million in military assistance in August 2004.^{lviii}

However, non-government human rights watchdogs, such as IHF, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, as well as the United States Department of State and the Council of the European Union, define Uzbekistan as ‘an authoritarian state with limited civil rights’^{lix} and express profound concern about ‘wide-scale violation of virtually all basic human rights’.^{lx} According to the reports, the most widespread violations are torture, arbitrary arrests and various restrictions of freedoms – of religion, speech and press and free association and assembly.^{lxi} The reports maintain that the violations are most often committed against members of religious organizations, independent journalists, human right activists and political activists, including members of the banned opposition parties. In 2005, Uzbekistan was included in Freedom House’s ‘The Worst of the Worst: The World’s Most Repressive Societies’.

Cooperation reached a point where US defence officials used Uzbekistan essentially as a torture chamber, transporting suspected Islamic radicals from US custody to Uzbekistan for interrogation, in a process known as rendition. The New York Times, which published a lengthy investigative report into the practice, suggested that dozens of prisoners were dispatched to Uzbekistan. Given Uzbekistan’s lengthy record of systematic torture, it is hard to believe that US officials were unaware that detainees transported to Uzbekistan would be exposed to coercive interrogation methods that are plainly illegal in the United States and that violate international human rights norms.

Some US and British diplomats, especially Craig Murray,^{lxii} the former British envoy in Tashkent, sought to change Washington’s and London’s approach towards Karimov’s regime, advocating making economic assistance to Tashkent conditional on Karimov’s implementation of reforms.^{lxiii} The Bush administration, along with EU member state governments, frequently called on Karimov to promote change and the Uzbek leader repeatedly pledged to carry out reforms. But nothing beyond the usual rhetoric ever happened.

The international community has repeatedly criticized the Karimov administration’s record on human rights and press freedom. The United Nations found torture ‘institutionalized, systematic, and rampant’ in Uzbekistan’s justice system. President



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Karimov stated on Axborot News that he might consider staying in power after 2009 with election approval to save Uzbekistan from extremist groups that were now fully ready to take over the country.

Karimov sent numerous signals that he would employ force against any and all domestic opponents. At the same time, his disregard for outside interference with his domestic strategy became blatant. In March 2004, Tashkent called off a visit by former British Foreign Office Minister Bill Rammell because he announced in advance that he would raise human rights issues during his planned visit.^{lxiv}

This snub did not prompt any perceptible changes in US or EU policy. As Karimov clamped down at home, the strategic importance of the Karshi-Khanabad base, the cornerstone of the US–Uzbek alliance, was dramatically declining. Today, many of the functions performed by the base could be easily shifted to Afghanistan. Indeed, Afghan President Hamid Karzai wants permanent US military bases in Afghanistan and the Pentagon spent US \$83 million in 2004 to build permanent facilities at its large bases near Kabul and Kandahar.^{lxv}

Western powers may soon come to regret their lack of attention to civil society developments in Uzbekistan. Karimov’s repressive system has ensured that all democratic parties are banned. Unlike in Georgia and Ukraine, where democratically oriented opposition leaders were waiting in the wings, there is no democratic force at present in Uzbekistan capable of replacing Karimov and maintaining stability.

The regime’s claims to the contrary, the danger comes not from extremist groups, Islamist or otherwise, but from the continuing lack of reform. ‘The old command system is rotting – you can practically smell it’, one local said. ‘Reform is the only thing that can save the situation’.

Karimov, the persistent president of Uzbekistan, is now at a crossroads. He can continue with his repressive policies, or he can move forward to reform the regime. Thus, it is likely that the longer Karimov carries out acts of repression, the greater the likelihood that Islamic extremism will spread.

There are simply no good choices available in Uzbekistan. In Tashkent, Karimov is rumoured to be extremely ill, and there is a possibility of a three-way power struggle to succeed him. The main contenders for power in Tashkent are Secret Police Chief Rustam Inoyatov, former Interior Minister Zakir Almatov and the powerful presidential adviser Ismail Jurabekov. All these figures are considered even more ruthless and dangerous than Karimov.^{lxvi}

Western policies have ensured that even if Karimov were toppled in an internal power struggle, his replacement would only be another dictator. The chances of a democratic movement emerging in Uzbekistan are highly unlikely. Armed struggle, even if waged by democrats in the Ferghana Valley, is unlikely to result in long-lasting democracy.

After the 11 September terrorist tragedy, Uzbekistan became a close strategic ally of the United States. Some experts believed strategic considerations, including the fact that the US military maintained an air base in Uzbekistan, might have overridden human rights concerns in the internal US government debate on the Uzbek certification question. Those beliefs proved to be unfounded, however. Despite the decision to block assistance, the State



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Department statement stressed in 2004 that Uzbekistan remained an ‘important partner’ for the United States in the regional effort to contain terrorism. ‘This decision does not mean that either our interests in the region, or our desire for continued cooperation with Uzbekistan has changed’, the statement said. Human rights activists said the ‘egregious’ human rights situation in, Uzbekistan left the State Department’s little room for maneuver. ‘It [the de-certification decision] was a long time in coming’, said Acacia Shields, a senior researcher on Central Asian issues for Human Rights Watch. ‘The United States couldn’t do anything but decertify given the Uzbek government’s intransigence on implementing reforms.’ Shields expressed hope that US and Uzbek officials would start a process of ‘engagement’ so that Uzbekistan could meet democratization standards and thus qualify for certification. ‘This [the State Department’s decision] should be seen not as the end, but as the beginning’, Shields said. ‘It’s a challenge for the government of Uzbekistan.’^{lxvii}

CONCLUSION

US–Uzbek relations improved slightly in the latter half of 2007, but the US has continued to call for Uzbekistan to meet all of its commitments under the March 2002 Declaration of Strategic Partnership between the two countries. The declaration covers not only security and economic relations but also political reform, economic reform and human rights. Uzbekistan has Central Asia’s largest population and is vital to US, regional and international efforts to promote stability and security.

Though the regime of Karimov aimed to suppress radical Islamism and terrorism, the main result of his authoritarian practices has been the formation of underground Islamic extremist groups in Uzbekistan. Such groups took shape in the late 1990s, receiving assistance from Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, the Taliban and Al-Qaeda.

The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, the most well known radical Islamist group in Uzbekistan, was decimated in the 2001 anti-terrorism offensive in Afghanistan, but some remnants are still based in the tribal areas of Pakistan. Between 2001 and 2005, IMU militants have reorganized and re-established contact with supporters in Uzbekistan.

In recent years, Uzbekistan has faced sharp criticism from human rights groups over the government’s clampdown on freedom of speech and religious expression. Human Rights Watch has estimated that roughly 7,000 independent Muslims have been improperly imprisoned. The crackdown intensified this spring after Tashkent was rocked in late March by clashes between Islamic radical insurgents and security forces. In addition to human rights transgressions, Uzbek authorities frustrated US and European officials by failing to fulfil economic reform commitments.

In order to change the bleak view created by the violation of human rights in particular, first and foremost Uzbekistan must allow a legitimate political opposition. Continuance of essentially single-party rule will only result disaster for the nation and the region. There is no justification for continuing the monopolization of power in the hands of a narrow elite dominated by Soviet-era bureaucrats. The government should immediately register the Birlik People’s Movement and the Erk Democratic Party as a first step towards democratization that is likely to reduce, not increase, tension within society. The leadership of these secular parties is just as interested in safeguarding stability as is the Uzbek government,



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and joint efforts will better serve this shared goal. Political plurality is the only way to eventually adjudicate the nation's competing regional, ethnic and patronage group interests. The government must stop demonizing even moderate forms of Islamic observance. Uzbekistan's brief independent history starkly highlights how unwise it is to force religious practitioners to become extremists simply to survive. Currently, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the National Security Service can target anyone affiliated with Islam as part of the government sponsored campaign of revealing 'potential extremists'. The constitutional right to practice religion in private and public, freely and without interference, should be accepted. Uzbekistan should not deceive itself into believing that 'order' can be preserved solely by force.

Wide and systematic improvements in the human rights environment are needed. The continuing pattern of extra-legal detentions, censorship, pervasive repression of civic groups and frequent use of violence, torture and intimidation must cease. Harassment of independent and opposition journalists practiced by the security services must be punished. Trying to eliminate all government criticism from reporting is simply not consistent with a modern state. Further, the nationally televised show trials of 'anti-state' activists should be stopped.

As for the international community, the European Union and the United States in particular must establish clear policies towards Uzbekistan designed directly to strengthen a pluralistic political system as a necessary condition for stability. Only unambiguous indications that international assistance will be predicated on political liberalization will encourage the government of Uzbekistan to reconsider its repressive tactics.

The international community needs to do a far better job of differentiating between respective elements of the Islamic faith. Support for secular dictatorships only antagonizes Muslim communities in Central Asia and encourages more extreme and violent forms of political and religious organization. The misperception that all forms of Islam threaten Western civilization has precluded policy-makers from dealing with the root causes of potential instability and conflict in Uzbekistan. Islam is not a monolithic religion, and it reflects local cultures. The fear of expansion by the Taliban should not cause the international community to support policies that drive Central Asia's most pivotal state into extended crisis and conflict.

The international community has ignored the abuses of the Karimov regime and the signs that trouble was brewing in the country for too long. This has not gone unnoticed in Uzbekistan. 'How can the United States give grants to support lawyers on the one hand and give grants to the Uzbek government to terrorize us on the other?', an Andijan resident wondered. Demands for reform are too late for the victims of the Andijan massacre, of course, but the time has come for the international community to reconsider seriously its relationship with the Karimov regime. The failed policies of muted criticism and tacit support must be abandoned.

As a first step towards assessing the true condition of the country, democratic governments and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), of which Uzbekistan is a member, should, following the lead of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, press for an independent and international investigation into what happened in Andijan.



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Unless Uzbekistan urgently adopts widespread economic and political reforms, it is likely to move with greater speed towards state failure. This would have a profound impact on all Central Asia, including Afghanistan.

It appears that the US Central Asian policy has changed significantly with the Obama administration. While Bush placed great emphasis on and devoted much time and resources to influencing the Central Asian countries, these efforts have been relaxed almost to the point of abandonment.

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