

Part I. General Perspectives: those lay behind the movements : 3. Why Are Social Protest Movements Weak in Central Asia? : Relations between the State and People in the Era of Nation: Building and Globalization

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3. WHY ARE SOCIAL PROTEST MOVEMENTS WEAK IN CENTRAL ASIA?

RELATIONS BETWEEN THE STATE AND PEOPLE IN THE ERA OF NATION-BUILDING AND GLOBALIZATION

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Despite the persistence of poverty and corruption, social protest in Central Asia is relatively weak. In this chapter, we will begin by summarizing the history of social protest in Soviet Central Asia, and then examine how nation-building and globalization have affected the relations between the state and the people in the post-Soviet Central Asian countries, and how they serve as limitations to social protest.

Recent studies find that Soviet citizens took part in protests against the authorities more often than is commonly known. Following the Basmachi movement in the 1920s, forcible collectivization provoked various forms of protest. Kazakh scholars estimate that there were 372 uprisings, with the participation of 80,000 people, in Kazakhstan in 1929–1931.¹ In the 1950s, the Virgin Lands development policy brought many young people from all over the Soviet Union to Kazakhstan. However, these youth, dissatisfied with the poor working conditions, attacked the police and shops. In 1959, workers who were constructing the Karaganda Metallurgic Factory in Temirtau (Central Kazakhstan), where there was not even enough water, attacked the police and shops. Nursultan Nazarbaev, the current President of Kazakhstan, was studying in Ukraine at the time in order to start working at the same factory the following year. He later wrote that Brezhnev had come to Temirtau to reproach workers for committing sabotage and helping the anti-Soviets and imperialists, but the workers were not daunted by the sermon from a high-ranking official; Brezhnev was obliged to fire local party officials and fill the shops with food and goods.²

In Jetigara (Northern Kazakhstan) in 1960, Russians assaulted Ingush people from the North Caucasus—partly because they envied them for their wealth—and attacked the police. In 1967, more than thousand people, who were infuriated by rumors about murders committed by policemen, attacked police in Chimkent (Southern Kazakhstan) and Frunze (present-day Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan).³ In 1979, Kazakhs in Tselinograd (present-day Astana) and other cities protested the Communist Party's plan to establish a German Autonomous Oblast in Northern Kazakhstan, and succeeded in getting the party to abandon the plan.⁴ Some of these actions were difficult to distinguish from riots and delinquency.

These events show that protest actions, though rare, did take place under the Soviet regime. In addition, while the participants were punished, they could—even more rarely—affect Soviet policies. In fact, although the Communist Party reacted very negatively to protests against its policies, the official ideology did recognize the legitimacy of protests against regimes other than communist ones. History books and newspapers hailed revolutionary movements in Tsarist Russia and struggles against capitalists outside of the Soviet Union. Demonstrations were also held in a ritualized form on May Day and other occasions.

In milder forms, a small number of intellectuals engaged in dissident activities. Murat Auezov, Maqash Tatimov and other Kazakh students in Moscow formed an organization called "Jas Tulpar (Young Swift Horse)" in 1963. Similar unofficial youth organizations were established in Karaganda, Semipalatinsk and other cities. They reevaluated the tradition of Kazakh nomadic culture and called upon the authorities to improve rural life in Kazakhstan.⁵ In the 1970s, Khasen Qoja-Akhmet, a young composer, criticized Russian colonialism and advocated independence for Kazakhstan.⁶ Generally, the 1970s and the early 1980s witnessed a quiet, partial but steady upsurge of nationalism and Islamism. The Uzbek writer Mamadali Mahmudov published a novel *Olmas qoyalar* [*The Immortal Cliffs*] in 1981. In it, he depicted Central Asian resistance to Russia in the 1850s and 1860s, and expressed his pan-Turkistanist sentiment. In the late 1970s, young unofficial *ulama* in the Ferghana valley and Tajikistan set up underground organizations, where they discussed the proper form of relations between Islam and politics.⁷

Soon after Mikhail Gorbachev declared *perestroika*, in December 1986, Kazakh youths held demonstrations in Almaty and other cities against the appointment of Gennadii Kolbin, an ethnic Russian who had never worked in Kazakhstan, as First Secretary of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan. This was the first mass protest against a decision made by the

Gorbachev administration. However, the authorities violently suppressed the demonstrations, and carried out a campaign against "Kazakh nationalism." The fear produced by this suppression and campaign was one of the reasons why social and political movements in Central Asia during *perestroika* were less active than in other regions of the Soviet Union. It was not until 1990 that the 1986 demonstrations were reevaluated as not an expression of narrow-minded nationalism but as a first attempt at exercising civic and political rights.⁸

Though belatedly, civil and political movements emerged at the end of the 1980s like mushrooms after a rain. The famous Kazakh poet Oljas Suleimenov established the antinuclear movement "Nevada-Semipalatinsk" in 1989, and managed to get President Nazarbaev to close the Semipalatinsk nuclear test site in 1991. Various opposition movements also appeared: "Jeltoqsan" (established by Qoja-Akhmet and other participants of the 1986 demonstrations) and "Alash" in Kazakhstan, "Birlik" and "Erk" in Uzbekistan, "Rastokhez," the Democratic Party, and the Islamic Renaissance Party in Tajikistan, "Erkin Kyrgyzstan" and "Asaba" in Kyrgyzstan, "Agzybirlik" in Turkmenistan and many others. But most of them (the exceptions were the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan and, to a lesser extent, "Birlik") were primarily based on marginal groups of urban intellectuals.

Some social protests led to riots and interethnic conflicts. In Dushanbe in January 1990, rumors that Armenian refugees would be given priority in the allotment of apartments led to a protest rally calling for the resignation of Qahhor Mahkamov, the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Tajikistan. Violence and looting broke out in the destabilized situation, and the Dushanbe event as a whole served as a prelude to the later civil war. In Osh in May 1990, "Osh aimaghy," a Kyrgyz organization, held rallies to demand permission to build houses on farming land. Local ethnic Uzbeks, led by the "Adolat" organization, opposed this plan (because most of the farmers on the farmland in question were Uzbeks) and demanded an Uzbek autonomous zone in Southern Kyrgyzstan. The confrontation between the two groups led to violent clashes in June, which killed hundreds of people.⁹

After the fall of the Soviet Union, terrible wars in Tajikistan (1992–1997) and various regions of the Caucasus implanted even deeper in Central Asian people the notion that order is more important than the right to protest. The euphoric hope that demonstrations and rallies could change the country quickly faded, and people went to the other extreme, coming to regard them as illegitimate or undesirable political actions. Opposition groups, pensioners and mothers of large families have organized protest

actions from time to time in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, but these protests have not attracted the public attention they once did.¹⁰ It is extremely difficult to carry out protest actions under the severe authoritarian regimes in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, although there have been rare reports on protests in the latter.¹¹

In order to solve socioeconomic problems, people tend to resort to clientelistic connections than to public protests. A field study in Southern Kazakhstan by Cynthia Ann Werner, an American anthropologist, shows that extravagant and frequent feasts and gift exchanges, which often involve local notables, provide opportunities for households to maintain and extend their social networks.¹² People who lack these networks, which are ultimately connected to state officials, may be placed at a disadvantage in finding jobs and gaining access to goods and services.

Meanwhile, the presidents have largely monopolized political legitimacy, with the parliaments being mostly dependent on them. In Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, the suppression of the opposition has been very harsh. The writer Mahmudov has been repeatedly arrested and reportedly tortured. Some people have died in jail, possibly because of torture. For example, Shovrik Ruzimurodov, a member of the Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan, died in custody in July 2001. Muhammad Salih, the leader of "Erk," Avdy Kuliev, a former Foreign Minister of Turkmenistan whom the opposition hoped to make president, and others have long been in exile.

In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, the opposition is frequently harassed. For example, Topchubek Turgunaliyev, the former leader of "Erkin Kyrgyzstan," was sent to jail in 1995, 1996 and 2000. Feliks Kulov, the former Vice President of Kyrgyzstan and mayor of Bishkek, who was considered the main rival to President Askar Akaev in the 2000 presidential election (he was barred from the ballot after refusing to sit the mandatory Kyrgyz language test), was sentenced in January 2001 to seven years in prison. Akejan Qajygeldin, the former Prime Minister of Kazakhstan, who was barred from the 1999 presidential election, was tried in absentia (he lives in exile in Europe) and sentenced in September 2001 to ten years imprisonment. Some former activists have been co-opted by the government,¹³ discrediting the opposition.

In Tajikistan, the government has largely succeeded in laying the blame for the civil war on the opposition, and especially the Islamic movement. The assignment of 30 percent of government posts to members of the former opposition under the 1997 peace accord is often viewed as proof that they fought not for their ideas but merely for such posts. In general,

although the presidents are not especially popular, the population in Central Asia trusts opposition groups even less.

We will now turn to state- and nation-building as a deterrent to social protest. For a few years after the fall of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan at times focused more on reintegration of the CIS states than on the separate development of their countries. Some people maintained that Kazakhstan should become a synthesis of the East and the West, the North and the South, and become an "open state" with half-transparent borders.¹⁴ One cabinet member (Petr Svoik, who later became one of the leaders of the "Azamat" opposition movement) advocated Kazakhstan joining the Russian Federation. But rapid reintegration of the CIS soon proved impractical. Together with Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, which consistently emphasized unique courses of development selected by their presidents, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan began to give the ultimate priority to strengthening their statehood. Tajikistan, where regionalism had served as one of the main causes of the civil war, established a highly centralized system of local administration. Many Tajiks, in saying that the civil war was caused and aggravated by foreign countries (they primarily implicate Uzbekistan, but sometimes hint at a contradictory role played by Russia as well), seem to be trying to forget internal discord. Although the Tajik elites are in fact still divided along regional and political lines, many find it necessary for their own interests to strengthen national unity under the leadership of the president.

The Soviet republics lacked a developed state apparatus, and the newly independent states have been reinforcing it, especially in the fields of economic policy and diplomacy (the foreign ministries of the Soviet republics only had a small number of staff and performed merely symbolic functions). By recruiting personnel, they opened career opportunities for educated people, who made up the bulk of the opposition movements in the late Soviet period. In the economic sphere, despite progress in privatization, the presidents and bureaucrats retain their influence on business: in Kazakhstan, Nazarbaev's relatives and close associates control key enterprises, especially in the sectors of oil, banking and mass media; Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan retain Soviet-style bureaucratic organizations which control various industrial sectors.¹⁵ Therefore, unlike large companies in the West and bazaar merchants in some parts of the Middle East, there is practically no group of entrepreneurs who can independently make demands on the state.

Ideologically, the presidents partially adopted the nationalistic agendas of the opposition,¹⁶ portraying themselves as the founders of independent

states, although in fact they did not pursue independence until the last stage of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Discourses of ethnic history and peculiarity, which had already been developed in the Soviet period, are now used to provide legitimacy for the existence of nation-states. Among others, the "autochthonous" theory, which was developed in the 1940s and considers the most ancient inhabitants of a territory to be the ancestors of the ethnic group that inhabits it now, proved to be a convenient tool for arguing for the historical legitimacy of the territorial unity of a country.¹⁷ For example, the Uzbeks regard as their ancestors the Timurids and the more ancient inhabitants of the territory of today's Uzbekistan, rather than the nomadic Uzbeks who came from the north and overthrew the Timurid dynasty.¹⁸ Today, Timur, Ismail Samani, Manas and Abylai Khan have become the symbols of Uzbek, Tajik, Kyrgyz and Kazakh statehood, respectively. Many scholarly works and conferences are dedicated to the "history of statehood," and prominent historians declare with sincerity that they are proud of working for their countries.

The Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan, which once controlled the *imams* in all the five republics, was divided into five separate directorates in the early 1990s (in Tajikistan, the *Ulama* Council later replaced the Spiritual Directorate). At present, each directorate closely cooperates with the political leadership of its country. Even independent Islamic movements are not free from the framework of nation-states. The Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)—to be fair, these two organizations have very different natures—aim at Islamizing a particular existing state. Some media reported in May 2001 that the IMU had changed its name to the "Islamic Party of Turkistan" as an expression of the aim of liberating the whole of Central Asia, including Xinjiang and Kashmir. However, one of the leaders of the IMU, Zubair ibn Abdulrahim, denied the report, saying: "We have only one enemy—the Tashkent regime."¹⁹ Although the IMU, the Taliban, al-Qaida and some Uyghur nationalists cooperate in training militants, their political aims are apparently different.

Thus, nation-building is considered to be a matter of high priority for the Central Asian newly-independent states. Precisely because people realize that their states are still vulnerable, they accept the necessity of consolidating state power.

Next, we will consider the impact of globalization. In general, while globalization leads to stronger roles for transnational and non-governmental actors, it does not necessarily weaken state power. The legitimacy and

financing of international organizations are guaranteed by its members—nation-states. Transnational actors are regulated by the laws of nation-states, and those who evade these laws—such as international terrorists and drug traders—are seen as enemies of the world community. Furthermore, the very notion that globalization can threaten sovereignty ironically stimulates the defense of statehood and national unity.²⁰

In Central Asia, the propagation of democracy is often seen as an attempt at forcibly globalizing Western values. Many people—above all, the presidents—assert that they are building their own style of democracy, and they in practice use this to justify authoritarianism. Whenever a presidential or parliamentary election is held in a Central Asian country, the United States and the OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) criticize it as undemocratic, and Central Asians retort that the criticism is not fair. After the presidential election in Kazakhstan in January 1999, the Kazakh literary newspaper “Qazaq Adebieti” wrote: “What do Americans know about democracy? Their history is one of bloody conquests of new territories not belonging to them . . . Kazakhs have never conquered anyone . . . Kazakhs know much more about democracy.”²¹

On the other hand, globalization has made Central Asian countries vulnerable to the influence of economic crises in other regions, as well as to the infiltration of drugs, terrorism and Islamic movements. As a result, they have taken countermeasures, such as strengthening their defense, control over economic activities, and border control. Among other events, the invasion of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan by IMU militants in the summers of 1999 and 2000 greatly contributed to increasing state control over social life.

As an increasing number of people go abroad, they have come to know foreign values, but at the same time, many have become more conscious of their identity and national pride. In e-mail lists related to Central Asia, patriotic-minded Central Asian students in the United States, Europe and Turkey discuss the future of their countries and the “misunderstandings” of Westerners about Central Asia.

All these elements turn people’s attention toward the need to strengthen statehood, and make them hostile, or more often indifferent to, political and social protest.

As we have seen, a history of protest actions that either failed or brought tragic results has produced apathy among most Central Asian people, who think that everything is decided by a handful of elite (not always properly, but better than by the populist opposition), and that ordinary people can change nothing. Nation-building and globalization have induced most

socio-politically conscious people to support and/or profit from the existing regime, rather than to organize protest actions. Of course, there is always discontent of some kind or the other among people. This discontent would be legally and more openly expressed if viable systems of political representation and free mass media were formed, but it does not appear that the authorities will allow such changes in the near future. The success of more radical, anti-governmental movements will depend on whether counter-elites, including unofficial Islamic leaders, can gain authority.

In this regard, the challenge of Hizb ut-Tahrir, an Islamic party of Palestinian origin, which advocates the establishment of a single Caliphate for the Islamic world, deserves special attention. It is attempting to spread its influence across state and ethnic borders, and its small-size secret cells seem to be multiplying in and around the Ferghana valley (Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan). It has strongly criticized the alliance with the United States that the governments of the regions have maintained after the terrorist attacks in September 2001.²² The authorities have reacted to Hizb ut-Tahrir and other Islamic movements by mass arrests, which may—and partly already have—radicalized them and to some extent led to a swelling of their ranks. But judging from reactions to news related to the IMU and Hizb ut-Tahrir, most ordinary people value their daily life and do not wish to be disturbed by “extremists”; to this extent they support the governments. The Western powers have criticized the Central Asian governments for neglecting human rights, but they themselves do not wish to see a destabilization of the region. Moreover, the cooperation of the Central Asian governments with the United States in fighting against the Taliban and bin Ladin has somewhat thwarted Western criticism. The legitimacy of the nation-states is strongly supported both internally and internationally, and although protest movements may destabilize the existing political order in some or other way, they are unlikely to change the nation-state system fundamentally.

Notes:

- ¹ Manash K. Kozybaev, *Kazakhstan na rubezhe vekov: razmyshleniia i poiski*, Kniga 2-ia (Almaty: Ghylym, 2000), pp. 46, 111–118; Mukash Omarov, *Rasstreliannaia step': Istoriia Adaevskogo vosstaniia 1931 goda* (Almaty: Ghylym, 1994).
- ² Nursultan Nazarbaev, *Bez pravykh i levykh* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1991), pp. 52–56.

- 3 Vladimir A. Kozlov, *Massovye besporiadki v SSSR pri Khrushcheve i Brezhneve (1953-nachalo 1980-kh gg.)* (Novosibirsk: Sibirskii khronograf, 1999), pp. 31–59, 111–119, 402–403.
- 4 Manash K. Kozybaev et al., eds., *Istoriia Kazakhstana s drevneishikh vremen do nashikh dnei (ocherk)* (Almaty: Däwir, 1993), pp. 378–379.
- 5 Kozybaev et al., eds., *Istoriia Kazakhstana . . .*, p. 377.
- 6 Khasen Qoja-Akhmet, *Erewil atqa er salmay . . .* (Astana: Elorda), 2000.
- 7 Tomohiko Uyama, “Chuo Ajia-ni okeru Isuramu Shinko-no Tayosei to Kagekiha-no Shutsugen” (Diversity of Islamic Religious Beliefs in Central Asia and Emerging Extremist Groups), *Roshia Kenkyu*, No. 30, 2000, pp. 44–47.
- 8 V. A. Ponomarev & S. Dzhukeeva, eds., *Dokumenty i materialy o sobytiakh 1986 goda v Kazakhstane* (Moscow: Panorama, 1993); Tomohiko Uyama, “Kazafusutan-ni okeru Minzokukan Kankei: 1986–1993 nen” (Interethnic Relations in Kazakhstan: 1986–1993), *Kokusai Seiji*, No. 104, 1993, pp. 118–122.
- 9 Talant Razakov, *Osh koogalangy/Oshskie sobytiia* (Bishkek: Renessans, 1993).
- 10 In 2002, the situation somewhat changed in Kyrgyzstan, where the government resigned after antigovernment demonstrations over the killing of six protesters by police. Apparently, the government’s mishandling of protests fueled otherwise weak opposition movements.
- 11 Human Rights Watch, “Uzbek Women Protest Illegal Arrests,” November 1999 (<http://www.hrw.org/hrw/press/1999/nov/uzbek1119.htm>); Bruce Pannier, “Uzbekistan: Road Project Spurs First Public Protest in Nine Years,” *RFE/RL Weekly Magazine*, March 23, 2001; “Central Asian Popular Support for America May Be Shaky,” *RFE/RL Central Asia Report*, November 1, 2001.
- 12 Cynthia Ann Werner, “The Dynamics of Feasting and Gift Exchange in Rural Kazakhstan,” in Ingvar Svanberg, ed., *Contemporary Kazaks: Cultural and Social Perspectives* (Richmond: Curzon, 1999), pp. 47–72.
- 13 Oljas Suleimenov, who declared himself and his People’s Congress Party “the constructive opposition” in 1994, was appointed Ambassador to Italy the next year. Murat Auezov worked as the head of the Almaty oblast administration of information and social accord in 1998, although he formally remained one of the leaders of the “Azamat” opposition movement. Qoja-Akhmet became director of the Republican museum of folk music instruments in 1998.
- 14 Uyama, “Kazafusutan-ni okeru Minzokukan Kankei,” p. 133.
- 15 Ichiro Iwasaki, “Uzubekisutan-ni okeru Taisei Tenkanki-no Seifu-Kigyokan Kankei: Kogyo-wo Chushin-ni” (Mutual Relations between Government and Industrial Enterprises under Systemic Changes in Uzbekistan), in Manabu Shimizu, ed., *Chuo Ajia: Shijoka-no Gendankai to Kadai* (Tokyo: Institute of Developing Economies, 1998), pp. 33–66.
- 16 On the case of Uzbekistan in the early 1990s, see William Fierman, “The Communist Party, 'Erk' and the Changing Uzbek Political Environment,” *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 10, No. 3, 1991, pp. 55–72.
- 17 Tomohiko Uyama, “Kazafu Minzokushi Saiko: Rekishi Kijutsu-no Mondai-ni Yosete” (Rethinking the Ethnic History of the Kazakhs: Some Reflections on Historical Writing), *Chiiki Kenkyu Ronshu*, Vol. 2, No.1, 1999, pp. 104–113.
- 18 The autochthonous view of history influences such ostensibly anti-nation-state

movements as Hizb-ut-Tahrir. In one of its documents we read: “. . . the Uzbek people have been living on this land since ancient times . . . Throughout history this people has presented to the Islamic Ummah a distinguished group of scholars who spread the Deen, such as Bukhari, Tirmidhi, Zamakhshari, . . .” This is almost an exact copy of the words of their foe, President Islam Karimov. “Is Uzbekistan Really Independent? (http://www.hizb-ut-tahrir.org/english/leaflets/28_08_01_uzbk.htm).

- ¹⁹ Bruce Pannier, “Central Asia: IMU Leader Says Group's Goal Is 'Return of Islam',” *RFE/RL Weekday Magazine*, June 6, 2001.
- ²⁰ On the transformation of sovereignty brought about by globalization, and tension between denationalizing economic space and renationalizing political discourse, see Saskia Sassen, *Losing Control?: Sovereignty in an Age of Globalization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).
- ²¹ Quoted by Paul Goble, “Kazakhstan: Analysis from Washington—When the World Turns Away,” *RFE/RL Weekday Magazine*, February 3, 1999.
- ²² “Alliance with America Is a Great Crime Forbidden by Islam” (<http://www.hizb-ut-tahrir.org/english/leaflets/alliancewithamerica.htm>).