The fault lines of democratization in Central Asia

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The two decades following the fall of Communism in East and Central Europe and breakup of the Soviet Union saw the emergence of political regimes, which effectively combine authoritarian characteristics with ostensibly democratic elements. These regimes hold regular multiparty elections but stifle real political competition. They permit the existence of formal democratic institutions that, nonetheless, remain under the strict executive’s control. They combine the rhetorical acceptance of democracy with other essentially authoritarian features.

The post-Soviet republics of Central Asia – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan – exemplify this trend. Over the period of national independence, these states have introduced and reformed the entire set of formal institutions associated with democracy – general elections, constitutional “checks and balances”, and multiparty systems – and passed legislation in support of human rights, media freedoms, and civil society. While different patterns of patronage politics, political leadership, natural resource endowment, and international engagement have produced variation in the nature of state power and autocratic stability across the region, all Central Asian governments have entrenched authoritarian rule to a greater or lesser extent (Turker 2014).

Initially, the study of democracy and dictatorship in Central Asia had been approached using democratization theories developed in comparative politics and its area of analysis known as “transitology”. Focusing on the processes of change from one regime to another, transitology portrays democratization as a linear process furthered by civil society actors and political elites. From this standpoint, the Central Asian leaders, who perceive democracy as the gravest threat to their personal political survival, have been held responsible for the democratic stalemate in their states. It has also been argued that these countries’ political cultures and historical legacies, compounded by acute socioeconomic conditions, have served as roadblocks to democratization.

Recent scholarship has seen a shift away from characterizing these states through the lens of democratization theory. Influenced by the rise of authoritarianism studies in comparative politics and international relations, the new analyses of Central Asian politics approach these regimes as durable authoritarianisms with their own internal logics. Since the Central Asian governments are examples of authoritarianism “by design” rather than “by default”
democratization theories focusing on the obstacles to and preconditions for a successful democratic transformation are limited in explaining their persistence. The fact that these regimes enjoy a degree of popular support suggests that their governments do not stay in power exclusively through repression. Therefore, authoritarian legitimacy and rhetorical persuasion have become subjects of increasing scholarly attention in the study of Central Asian authoritarianism. In addition, an international dimension has been introduced to the study of regimes in Central Asia, centered on the idea that various international actors – including the United States, the European Union (EU), Russia, China, and others – play an active and, at times, decisive role in the success of democratic reforms or derailment of democratization.

The goal of this chapter is to critically engage the extant scholarship on political institutions and processes in postindependence Central Asia. The chapter begins by taking stock of democratic reforms in the Central Asian states, following with a discussion of the main explanations of the obstacles to democratization in Central Asia. Next, this same question is approached through the lens of persistent authoritarianism. The last section of the chapter assesses international efforts at promoting democracy and autocracy in Central Asia.

**Overview of democratic reforms in Central Asia**

The *demokratizatsiya* movement launched by the General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev during the last years of the Soviet Union had little resonance in Central Asia. The leadership of the Central Asian republics was either quiescent in the face of a looming change or loyal to the Kremlin administration. Yet when the “parade of sovereignties”, a secessionist movement undertaken by the ethnically distinct republics of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), tore the Soviet Union apart, the Central Asian governments too embraced their suddenly acquired independence and freedom to pursue democratization. As years went by, none of the Central Asian states fulfilled the promises of democratic consolidation. Today, as twenty years ago, the Central Asian regimes sit along a continuum of autocracy rather than democracy. In all of these republics but Kyrgyzstan, the power and authority are firmly entrenched in the office of the president and maintained through a combination of repression, co-option of civil society institutions, and constraints on the exercise of political freedoms. Presidential and parliamentary elections are held regularly in these republics, but they are typically deficient in meeting the basic democratic benchmarks. Additionally, political authority in Central Asian states has been personalized and conceived in traditional ways. Patronage networks continue playing an important role in the relations of power in Central Asia with respect to determining access to authority and keeping important political decisions hostage to particularistic orientations and interests of the ruling elites (Collins 2006; Omelicheva 2015; Schatz 2004).

**Kazakhstan**

Kazakhstan exemplifies a durable nondemocratic regime, effectively combining authoritarian features with formal democratic elements. Nursultan Nazarbayev, who has ruled the country since 1989, flaunts the official title of “the Father of the Nation”. Using a combination of public referendums and constitutional reforms, he has run almost uncontested in five consecutive presidential elections, claiming the margin of victory greater than 90 percent in each of them. According to Kazakhstan’s constitution, the president has *de jure* control over the legislature, judiciary, and local governments. Nazarbayev, however, has a *de facto*
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presidential authority in virtually every aspect of public policy, thanks to the dominance of Kazakhstan’s politics by the pro-presidential ruling party, Nur Otan. In 2010, the ruling party carried out a campaign to make Nazarbayev a lifelong president. Although this endeavor did not bear fruit, he and his family received a lifelong immunity from any prosecution. A law adopted by the parliament in 2010 ensured that the property of the presidential family was inviolable as well (The International Federation for Human Rights 2012a).

Kazakhstan has held regular parliamentary elections criticized for the use of administrative resources in support of pro-presidential candidates, the politically motivated disqualification of the opposition, and electoral fraud (The International Federation for Human Rights 2012a). For many years, a requirement to pass a 7 percent threshold to enter the Mazhlis – the lower house of the Kazakh parliament – had effectively disenfranchised the smaller parties. In response to the criticisms of a single-party rule, the Kazakh parliament approved changes to electoral law that allow at least one of the parties challenging Nur Otan to have representation in the parliament, even if it failed to pass the 7 percent threshold. Following the early parliamentary election held in January 2012 and March 2016, two other parties – Ak Zhol and the Communist People’s Party – barely passed the required electoral threshold and received seven seats each in the lower chamber of the parliament. Both parties are sympathetic to the president and, therefore, represent no genuine opposition in the parliament.

Despite the country’s lack of civil and political freedoms, Kazakhstan evinces several areas of more liberal politics. It, for example, has one of the better human rights records in Central Asia. Its citizens enjoy freedom of movement, access to a fairly diverse media, more educational and employment opportunities, and greater individual freedoms. Kazakhstan’s standards of living are the highest in the region. Under Nazarbayev’s leadership, it implemented extensive market reforms and integrated the country into the global economy. The government of Kazakhstan has invested wisely into the training and education of the country’s managers, engineers, and bureaucrats.

President Nazarbayev has sought favorable international reputation by positioning his state as a regional leader and model for development in the Central Asian region. To qualify for this prestigious role, Kazakhstan pledged to rectify the frailty of its democratic institutions. Its promises to establish a genuine democratic rule won support for its 2010 Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) chairmanship bid from several democratic states and the U.S. administration. However, the expectations that the chairmanship would provide impetus for Kazakhstan’s deeper democratization were not fulfilled, and the critics of the Nazarbayev government dubbed the liberalization efforts of the Nazarbayev administration merely “cosmetic”.

The global financial crisis, especially the fall of oil market prices, had a dampening effect on Kazakhstan’s economy. The republic’s political situation has deteriorated as well. Kazakhstan, which had never experienced political turmoil and prided itself on being a model of stability and interethnic harmony, experienced a series of terrorist attacks in 2011, which were blamed on religious extremists. The new legislation enacted immediately following the bombings gave the government unprecedented authority to regulate and control religious communities. The government’s repression culminated in clashes between the oil workers protesting in the western city of Zhanaozen and police in December 2011, which left 16 people dead. The emergency powers assumed by the government in the wake of the violence in Zhanaozen were used to severely constrain the freedom of expression across the country. The government harassed, detained, and prosecuted outspoken civil society activities and journalists attempting to report on the aftermath of violence. Mass protests broke
out again in spring 2016, triggered by the announcement of land reforms in the republic, although some analysts claim that many Kazakhs attended the demonstrations to express their general discontent. A spate of shootings on civilian and military targets in Aktobe in June 2016 had further undermined the republic’s acclaimed stability, revealing the growing public discontent and socioeconomic hardship.

**Kyrgyzstan**

In the early 1990s, Kyrgyzstan earned a reputation as an “island of democracy” in the ocean of authoritarianism due to its rapid economic and political liberalization, assisted by democracy promoters and donors from the West. Kyrgyzstan had a vocal, if poorly organized, political opposition, which was neither banned nor prosecuted. The media enjoyed the greatest freedom in the region, and the “third sector”, while struggling financially, encountered no constraints or repression from the ruling regime (Bingol 2004).

By the end of the first decade of independence, Kyrgyzstan showed many signs of the reversal of these early democratic trends. The parliamentary and presidential elections held in 2000 revealed an array of irregularities, ranging from ballot stuffing and intimidation of the media to the exclusion of serious opponents. The speedy privatization of the state-owned property resulted in the monopolization of ownership and control over Kyrgyzstan’s strategic sectors by the members of the presidential administration. Access to economic resources became enmeshed with political authority, giving rise to the growing nepotism of the first Kyrgyz president Askar Akayev. As the country sank deeper into economic crisis, people showed increasing dissatisfaction with the president. Under the pretext of electoral fraud during the 2005 parliamentary election, the disgruntled opposition staged a series of protests that spread across the Kyrgyz capital, leading to the resignation of President Akayev in a series of events that became known as the Tulip Revolution.

Kurmanbek Bakiyev, who led the 2005 revolt, came to power on popular pledges of fighting corruption, improving public welfare, and furthering democratic reforms. Despite the promises of democratization, in less than two years, he managed to consolidate all power in the office of the president and his administration. A new constitution pushed through the public referendum in 2007, endorsed presidential dominance over other branches of power, and eliminated local self-governance. The same year, the parliamentary elections, widely deemed to lack transparency, established a parliament completely controlled by a pro-presidential party.

President Bakiyev’s regime was overthrown by mass anti-government protests in April 2010. The forcible ejection of the president was accompanied by widespread disturbances in the Kyrgyz capital and interethnic violence in the southern Osh and Jalalabad regions in June 2010, which left hundreds dead and thousands injured (The International Federation for Human Rights 2012b). Although unable to halt violence and provide protective measures and humanitarian aid to the population affected by ethnic clashes, the interim government led by Roza Otunbayeva, a prominent political figure and a leader of the democratic opposition, called for the public referendum that approved a new Kyrgyz constitution in June 2010. The new constitutional law removed extensive presidential powers and, in effect, institutionalized a parliamentary democracy in Kyrgyzstan. The presidential election held in 2011 was judged to be generally free and fair by the OSCE. Almazbek Atambayev, the former prime minister of Kyrgyzstan and a chairperson of the Social Democratic Party, won the majority of votes, claiming the presidential seat. The parliamentary elections of 2010 and 2015 were also described as “lively and competitive” and “unique in the region” but
demonstrated another worrisome trend of wealthy politicians and businessmen interested in economic gains and political leverage effectively hijacking Kyrgyzstan’s political process. As a result, a high degree of political participation and contestation in Kyrgyzstan has not been matched by political cohesion and consolidation within its political parties (Juraev 2015).

**Tajikistan**

Shortly after becoming independent, Tajikistan plunged into a prolonged violent conflict between the United Tajik Opposition (UTO), a coalition of new nationalist and Islamic groups, and the Russian-backed Popular Front, uniting communists with ties to the former Soviet regime led by Emomali Rakhmonov. Since the Tajik government was dominated by the natives of Leninabad and supported by people from Kuliab, a district in the southern Khatlon province, while the opposition coalition drew its forces mainly from the “Gharmis” and “Pamiris” residing in the northeastern parts of Tajikistan, the conflict took on a regional dimension of power struggle among regional and local identity groups. In the end, the six-year civil war devastated the country, crippled its economy, and took a disastrous toll on the civilian population, leaving at least 50,000 dead and displacing some 800,000 people. The peace accord signed in June 1997 officially halted the hostilities, but intermittent fighting and skirmishes between the former UTO fighters and security forces of the Tajik government persisted for years after the end of the war, the shadow of which continues to linger over Tajikistan’s political situation, affecting the country’s prospects for democratization (Akiner 2001; Jonson 2009).

Rakhmonov, who changed his surname to Rakhmon in 2007 in an effort to return to his Persian roots, and the ruling People’s Democratic Party (PDP) have dominated political life of Tajikistan since the early 1990s. Glaring electoral machinations and widespread electoral fraud during the presidential and parliamentary elections allowed President Rakhmon and his supporters drawn from one region of the country to retain political control over Tajikistan. First elected to the newly created post of president of Tajikistan in 1994, Emomali Rakhmon ran almost uncontested in 1999 securing another seven-year term as Tajikistan’s president. A highly controversial public referendum held in 2003 allowed Rakhmon to run for two more consecutive seven-year terms. The incumbent president won the November 2006 and 2013 elections, which were characterized by a marked absence of competition and substantial electoral violations.

As in the presidential elections, the run-up to the parliamentary vote has been consistently marred by intimidation of opposition candidates, exclusion or obstruction of opposition parties, biased media coverage of electoral campaigns, and grave irregularities on election days to ensure victories for the PDP members. As a consequence, the representatives of the ruling party, pro-government independents, and government-affiliated political parties dominate Tajikistan’s bicameral parliament. The two opposition parties – Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRP) and Communist Party of Tajikistan – won two seats each in the parliament following the 2010 election. Only the Communist Party was able to retain the seats following the recent 2015 legislative election, whereas the IRP failed to surpass the 5 percent vote barrier.

Until 2015, Tajikistan was the only Central Asian republic that allowed religious parties to legally operate in the state. The legalization of political movements of a religious character was one of the major concessions made by the Tajik government to the UTO during the 1997 peace negotiations. A peace accord that ended the war also provided for the allocation of 30 percent of all government posts to the representatives of the UTO, including members
of the IRP. Despite this agreement, the IRP had been increasingly marginalized in state politics. The IRP leadership reported a wide-ranging official campaign to tarnish the party’s public image and bar its candidates from entering the 2015 parliamentary election campaign. In August 2015, the Tajik government announced that IRP could not legally continue its activities, effectively placing a ban on the party. A month later, a high court in Tajikistan placed the IRP on a list of extremist and terrorist organizations, clearing the way for authorities to crack down on its leadership and members.

**Turkmenistan**

During the fifteen-year reign of Saparmurat Niyazov, popularly known as Turkmenbashi, or “the father of all Turkmen”, Turkmenistan earned the reputation of one of the most repressive states in the world with the worst human rights record in the region. A home to considerable hydrocarbon resources, Turkmenistan failed to capitalize on its endowments with the natural wealth and attract foreign capital. The erratic foreign policy of the Niyazov government, pervasive cult of personality, and police state tactics rendered the country a virtual pariah status in both regional and international affairs (Olcott 2005, 37–41). At the end of Niyazov’s rule, Turkmenistan was known to the outsiders for all the wrong reasons: Pharaonic architectural projects of the president, his book of spiritual guidance *Ruhnama*, and Niyazov’s egomaniacal personality most visibly defined by the golden statues of the president built across the country using resources from the sales of its energy wealth (Anceschi 2008).

Niyazov’s successor, Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov, held out some hope that the oppressive regime that he inherited in the wake of the sudden death of Turkmenbashi in December 2006 would be eased. Following the 2007 presidential election, the Berdymukhamedov government abolished the Halk Maslahaty (People’s Council), which was the highest legislative and deliberative body of Turkmenistan consisting of about 2,500 members, some of whom were elected, transferring its powers to the president and the Turkmen parliament (Majlis). The size of the parliament was expanded from 65 to 125 members, and the president assumed a new prerogative of appointing the governors as well as judges, members of the National Security Council, and National Electoral Commission. The revised version of the constitution also established the right of any individual to own private property, including land and real estate, and form small- and medium-sized businesses (Kangas and Todd 2010).

In 2012, President Berdymukhamedov announced the creation of a new political party – the Party of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs – to move away from a single-party rule. The new party was officially registered in August 2012 and took part in the special elections for five vacant parliamentary seats the following summer. This landmark event in the political history of Turkmenistan resulted in the election of the chairman of the party – Ovezmammed Mammedov – who was not a member of the ruling Democratic Party of Turkmenistan to the Turkmen parliament (ITAR-TASS 2012).

Although some observers noted “modest improvements” in Turkmenistan’s political and human rights situation (U.S. Department of State 2011), the country’s regime is profoundly authoritarian one. The Turkmen authorities keep a tight lid on the independent scrutiny of the republic’s politics and social relations. The press and Internet are tightly controlled. The access to social media is banned, and the government tolerates no dissent. The ruling Democratic Party exercises control over state politics and institutions. All political dissidents and challengers of the ruling administration fled the country. Those who stayed back in Turkmenistan have been imprisoned on fabricated charges or placed in the psychiatric facilities (Human Rights Watch 2013).
Uzbekistan

Shortly after the declaration of Uzbekistan’s independence in August 1991, the government of President Karimov established an authoritarian regime shored up in the pervasive network of highly intrusive and repressive security institutions that keep a watchful eye over the population and effectively root out any dissent. Islam Karimov has been reelected as the republic’s president three times without any meaningful opposition in the elections (Ismailov and Jarabik 2009). Despite the creation of a bicameral legislature – Oliy Majlis – in 2002, and a post of the prime minister the following year, president dominates all branches of power (Nichol 2008; Spechler 2007). There is no parliamentary oversight over the president who makes decisions about all the most important political appointments and uses presidential decree as a means to devise and implement public policy. The judiciary in Uzbekistan is also heavily dependent upon the executive power, including the appointment and dismissal of judges, and is seriously afflicted by high levels of corruption.

Although the Karimov government likes to point out the existence of a multiparty system in the republic, only openly pro-Karimov government parties can operate legally in Uzbekistan. As of 2012, Uzbekistan’s party spectrum encompassed the People’s Democratic Party, founded by Islam Karimov, the Adolat (Justice) Social Democratic Party, the Liberal-Democratic Party, consisting of government-connected businessmen, and the Milliy Tiklanish (National Revival) Party, consisting of state-supported intellectuals. In 2008, the National Revival Party absorbed the Fidokorlar (Self-Sacrifice) National Democracy Party, created by Karimov as a youth party. There is also the Ecological Movement of Uzbekistan. Differences in these parties’ programs appeared to be minor, with all registered parties supporting government policies (OSCE/ODIHR 2010). Obviously, popular elections held in Uzbekistan are by no means competitive or democratic.

Like its neighbor, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan is one of the worst human rights offenders in the world. The Uzbekistan section of the annual human rights report published by the U.S. Department of States catalogs every type of human rights violation observed by the U.S. monitors ranging from torture, arbitrary arrests and detention, attacks on journalists and human rights defenders to restrictions on freedoms of speech, press, assembly, and association (U.S. Department of State 2012). Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are the only Central Asian states designated as the countries of particular concern engage in “systematic, ongoing and egregious violations of religious freedom” (U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom 2012).

Ostracized by the Western governments and isolated in its international relations, the Karimov regime took multiple, if largely ceremonial, measures for rebuilding its international reputation in the years following the 2005 Andijan massacre. Notable attention was given to electoral processes in the context of a “step-by-step” approach toward further democratization declared by the president in 2008. The same year Uzbekistan overhauled the pre-trail detention process and instituted new habeas corpus regulations into domestic law requiring a judge to review arrests within 72 hours. Specific provisions were introduced to its criminal and criminal procedure codes banning the practice of torture and attaining evidence under duress. The government also initiated the digitization of police records in an effort to curb corruption in the law-enforcement agencies (Ismailov and Jarabik 2009). Some of the changes in the legal frameworks for elections were noted and commended by the OSCE, which, nonetheless, concluded that Uzbekistan’s election legislation continues to fall short of OSCE commitments and, more importantly, the good faith implementation of the new measures remains indispensable to ameliorate electoral practices in Uzbekistan.
The lack of genuine political freedoms, including political pluralism, and low respect for human rights remain the weakest spot in the rule of the Karimov administration.

Obstacles to democratization in Central Asia

The Central Asian republics’ democratic trials were not altogether unexpected. Many experts on the region have noted a lingering impact of the Soviet-era authoritarian practices and a weak and deferential civil society that has been unable to push for democratic reforms (Zhovtis 1999). Others pointed out that these countries’ traditional culture and institutions revived in the postindependence context continue supporting authoritarian forms of rule (Cummings 2002; Ismailov and Jarabik 2009; Matveeva 1999).

Indeed, the patriarchal streak has been an enduring feature of the Central Asian societies (Gleason 1997). In the public realm, the acceptance of age and gender hierarchies, respect for authority, and loyalty to one’s family and kin have found expression in a distinct political culture that privileges strong leadership and state paternalism. The gravitation to collectivist values encouraged during the Soviet time has reinforced the “passive-traditional” attitudes in the people who look to the state as an instrument of protection from frightening changes in the social and political realms. Furthermore, the networks of traditional ethnic, clan, and family ties have resulted in the creation of the so-called “fourth branch of government”, i.e., a dense and pervasive system of informal politics and institutions (Ilkhamov 2007). These informal structures engage in a variety of nondemocratic practices, such as clientelism and patronage, which also undermine civil and political rights (Collins 2006; McGlinchey 2011; Schatz 2004).

It has also been argued that certain levels of socioeconomic development have served as the roadblocks to democratization in Central Asia (Blank 2005; Collins 2006). The democratization prospects of the two poorest states of Central Asia – Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan – have been dimmed by their dire economic situation, whereas in the energy-rich republics – Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan – the natural wealth turned into a resource “curse” (Franke, Gawrich, and Alakbarov 2009). Turkmenistan sits on top of one of the world’s largest natural gas fields, while Kazakhstan’s Tengiz oil field has been ranked among the world’s ten largest. The weaknesses of institutions responsible for the management of these resources have brought about fierce competition among the ruling elites accompanied by rampant corruption and disregard for democratic norms (Luong and Weinthal 2010). Furthermore, the opportunity of private enrichment from the external capital flows has served as a powerful disincentive for democratizing their political systems or furthering market reforms (Bayulgen 2005).

Following the upsurge of global interest in Islam and Muslim societies, Central Asian Islam, too, has attracted considerable academic attention. Scholars began addressing the political significance and impact of Islam on post-Communist Central Asian states and assessing whether it has been necessarily a political factor incompatible with and inimical to democracy. These essentialist views on the Central Asian Islam have been dispelled in the subsequent scholarship, which showed how modern-day Islam in Central Asia has retained its largely apolitical nature and strong ethno-national association (Haghayeghi 1996, Khalid 2007; Louw 2007; Rasanyagam 2010). When radicalization of Islam did take place, it was a consequence of authoritarianism but not a deterrent to democratization (Hann and Pelkmans 2009; Ro’i 2004).

All in all, the dominant mode of analysis in the scholarship focusing on the obstacles to democratization in the region has been drawn from the work of democratic theorists.
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Premised on the assumption that a transition to democracy is a desired (if not inevitable) step, democratization theories have applied the knowledge of democratic change and consolidation derived primarily from the experience of Latin American states and countries in southern Europe in the 1970s and 1980s (Posusney 2004). Central Asian regimes call for a rethinking of assumptions about the spread of democracy and democratization. These are deliberately organized and durable authoritarian regimes that have adopted the formal trapping of democracy. The leadership of these states has been determined to hold on their power under the guise of democracy without exposing themselves to the political risks of competition for power (Ottaway 2003). Since these regimes are deliberately authoritarian, rather than imperfectly democratic (Mayer 2001), democratization theories focusing on the obstacles to and preconditions for a successful democratic transformation overlook a host of factors associated with a new phenomenon of durable authoritarianism.

From democratic breakdown to authoritarian persistence: what accounts for durability of authoritarian regimes?

The renaissance of authoritarianism studies in the 1990s gave rise to a number of works examining Central Asian authoritarian politics on its own right, rather than as an opposite of democracy. Initially, the scholarship has focused on the role of leadership and various institutional factors for explaining the outcomes of authoritarian rule. The strength of authoritarian institutions, for example, has been linked to three sources: a highly institutionalized ruling party, robust coercive apparatus, and state control over wealth (Way 2010). When a space has opened for democratic activities in any of the Central Asian republics but Kyrgyzstan, it has usually occurred “by default”, as an unintended consequence of the choices made by their leaders. Kazakhstan’s government led by President Nazarbayev, for example, made a choice of claiming its legitimacy on the basis of its commitment to international engagement, and these claims had an unintended but consequential impact on opening access to the republic’s civil society by international actors (Schatz 2006).

Neither repression nor economic stability acquired through the control of national wealth offers a complete explanation for the durability of nondemocratic regimes. The high costs of compliance based on the naked coercion make repression an ineffective method of the authoritarian rule. The risks associated with economic downturns threaten its socioeconomic foundations. Authoritarian governments, like their democratic counterparts, must have popular support to continue their rule, and this support can be elicited using ideological and rhetorical strategies of power legitimation.

As discussed throughout this chapter, all Central Asian governments have embraced democratic ideas, if only rhetorically, but defended alternative visions of democracy and democratization for justifying their authoritarian rule. In Kazakhstan, President Nazarbayev has defended a model of “presidential democracy” with the “visionary leadership”. The ousted President Bakiyev of Kyrgyzstan proposed a model of “consultative democracy”, while the current government of President Atambayev has been experimenting with the model of parliamentary democracy. In Uzbekistan, an “Uzbek path” and “Uzbek model” of development and democratization has been central to the new state ideology of national independence developed by President Karimov. While there are important differences distinguishing these models of democracy, all of these alternatives to liberal democracy are premised on a belief in the strong state led by a strong leader, or a narrow circle of political and business elite, typically championing the interests of their clans. All of these models prioritize the goals of
economic development over political liberalization, and security and order – over democ-
ratization. Gradualism has been defended as a key principle of the post-Soviet sociopolitical
transformation, while the idea of universal democracy has been rejected by these states. The
liberal democratic model has been presented as unsuitable and dangerous for the republics
characterized by the unique history and potentially explosive socioeconomic and political
situation (Omelicheva 2015).

To convince the domestic and foreign audiences in the appropriateness of the devised
models of governance, all Central Asian states defended their “paths” to democracy by the
unique circumstances of post-Soviet transition. The Central Asian governments have relied
on the strategies of indigenization of their models by presenting them as compatible with
their nations’ historical trajectories and political culture and delegitimizing the Western con-
ceptions of democracy and efforts at international democratization. Presenting their regimes
as effective in economic growth, security provision, and meeting other citizens’ needs has
also been a functional way of legitimizing their governance (Omelicheva 2013).

International influences on political regimes in Central Asia

For a long time, the study of democratization in Central Asia and other parts of the world
had been approached from the standpoint of comparative politics focusing on the impact
of a wide range of domestic factors in explaining the trials of democratic transformation
or persistence of authoritarian regimes. It is only recently that international dimension was
introduced into the study of democratization giving rise to the burgeoning literature on de-
mocracy and autocracy promotion in transitioning states (Burnell and Schlumberger 2010).
The latter perspective is centered on the idea that various international actors play an active
and, at times, decisive role in the processes of democratization by fostering a democratic
opening in the target states, or hampering political transformation.

The United States has been one of the largest donors of democracy assistance and de-
velopment aid in Central Asia disbursing $1,802,000,000 to Central Asian republics over
1992–2006 based on the Freedom for Russia and Emerging Eurasian Democracies and Open
Markets (FREEDOM) Support Act (FSA) passed by the U.S. Congress in 1992 (Omelicheva
2015; Roberts 2009). The U.S. democracy assistance programs in the region have been
matched, if not surpassed, by democracy aid of the EU. Notwithstanding the sheer size and
variety of democracy assistance programs in Central Asia, they, on the whole, have been
ineffective in producing sustainable changes in people’s attitudes, institutions, and political
processes in Central Asian states (Omelicheva 2015). Furthermore, international pressures
for democratization have inadvertently had a reverse effect. The Central Asian authoritarian
leaders have chosen to curtail the activities of international donors and intensify repression
to protect their stronghold on power from external threats.

Part of the answer to the failed democratization efforts carried out by the United States
and EU in the Central Asian states lies in the conflict of their short-term strategic interests
and normative commitments in the region (Crawford 2008; Warkotsch 2010). The U.S. gov-
ernment’s relationship with the Central Asian countries that are hosting U.S. military bases
or otherwise important to U.S. national interest has been routinely politicized. The United
States has been criticized for neglecting democratic backsliding in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan,
and Uzbekistan in the effort to remain strategically engaged in Central Asia, especially on
the backdrop of the growing influence of Russia and China in these states (Cooley 2008,
2012; Crosston 2006). By playing the United States off Russia, and China, Central Asian re-
gimes have been able to set their own terms for foreign presence in the region. Furthermore,
by focusing on short-term security assistance in authoritarian regimes, the U.S. government has unwittingly created propitious conditions for extremism and anti-Americanism (Crosston 2006).

The EU, too, has demonstrated the lack of strong commitment to democracy promotion in favor of other competing priorities, such as the reforms within the EU, dealing with the consequences of the 2008 global financial crisis, the development assistance to Afghanistan and other goals (Boonstra 2011; Crawford 2008). Its diverse programs appearing under the broad rubrics of “technical assistance”, “development”, and “good governance” have shown little cultural resonance with political and social experiences of the target states (Warkotsch 2008). The neglect of historical and cultural factors affecting the region’s engagement with democracy has been a feature of the US-led democracy assistance programs in Central Asia as well (Roberts 2009). Taken together, all of these elements of the Western democracy assistance—cultural incompatibility, low attention to national priorities, and frequent inconsistencies of the stated goals—tarnished the image of the Western model for democracy and strategy for democratization and diminished the credibility of democracy promoters from the West.

What has further complicated the situation with democratization in Central Asia is the presence of external actors offering alternative perspectives on democracy that find greater resonance with Central Asian states. Russia and China in particular, using their cultural and strategic power, have tried to counteract the Western efforts of democratization with their own ideological conceptions of the proper forms of governance and arguments about the ills and merits of democratization (Ambrosio 2008; Jackson 2010). The Central Asian authorities have been able to benefit from the “ideological cushion” provided by the like-minded states, such as Russia and China, and regional organizations, such as the Kremlin-led Collective Security Treaty Organizations (CSTO) and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The authoritarian governments have utilized these organizations’ norms and values, which run counter to democratic principles, for preserving their political power. With the backing of Moscow and Beijing, the Central Asian leadership has effectively discounted the universal notion of democracy and redefined democracy promotion agents as emissaries of Western influence and regional security threats (Ambrosio 2008; Omelicheva 2013, 2015).

Conclusion

Despite their promises of democratization, the Central Asian governments have showed little inclination toward implementing meaningful democratic reforms. While there are marked differences in the levels of political freedoms in these countries, none can be labeled a democracy or even claim to have made substantial progress toward democratic practices and norms. Kyrgyzstan continues to be recognized as the most open regime in Central Asia, but its political parties are poorly organized, lacking ideological cohesion, and unrepresentative of ethnic minority groups. Kazakhstan, too, has yet to hold completely free and competitive elections as serious cases of fraud continue accompanying each election cycle. Civil society groups are proliferating in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, but they lack resources and political clout, and are subject to various legal constraints and harassment by the state authorities. Both republics feature greater freedoms of movement as well as the press, and the Internet. Kazakhstan’s human rights record, however, has deteriorated since 2011 following the government’s enforcement of strict measures aimed at stamping out political opposition, exercising greater surveillance over media and civil society, and controlling religious groups. In Kyrgyzstan, too, serious human rights violations persist, especially in the south of the
country recovering from the mass interethnic riots in Osh and Jalalabad that took place in summer 2011.

Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, on the other hand, are the most repressive countries in the world. Basic civil and political rights are regularly circumvented in these countries, which tolerate no political dissent. Torture and other abuses of personal integrity rights are, reportedly, widespread. Recent developments in Tajikistan have also raised concerns about the deteriorating political situation there as the government of President Rakhmon has imposed restriction on the freedom of information, religious freedoms, and activities of civil society groups in addition to increased prosecution of political challengers of the president.

The sources of nondemocratic practices in Central Asia have been found in these countries’ traditions and history that is filled with authoritarian practices and recent totalitarianism. By revitalizing certain national and historical traditions, such as the strong leadership and paternalistic state, the Central Asian governments and societies have embraced those aspects of their political culture, which have been deemed as the key obstacles to meaningful democratization.

Like other authoritarian regimes, the Central Asian leadership has manipulated democratic rhetoric to disguise the suppression of political liberties that are perceived as threatening to their enduring rule. The governments of Central Asian republics have advocated for the strong state and strong leadership as the guarantors of stability, order, and successful democratization. All Central Asian leaders procured support for their rule by presenting their models of governance as highly effective in delivering on the basic security and developmental agendas. These agendas, in turn, were connected to the demands of their people.

In addition to providing an ideological rationalization for their rule, the authoritarian regimes of Central Asia have employed several other rhetorical strategies to increase the effectiveness of their ideological persuasion. All Central Asian governments have framed their “models” of development as consistent with their countries’ traditions and national values. Concurrently to framing their national expressions of democracy as culturally authentic and sensitive to changing national needs, the Central Asian leadership has attempted to downgrade the democratic practices of Western nations.

Another key factor in Central Asia’s poor democracy record is their strategic location, especially in the case of the hydrocarbon exporters – Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan – that gives these countries sufficient leverage in geopolitical maneuvers with the United States, Russia, China, and major international organizations and multinational corporations. Furthermore, the Central Asian authorities have been able to benefit from the political backing provided by other like-minded states, such as Russia and China, which offered support for the Central Asian regimes.

References


The fault lines of democratization


