

## CENTRAL ASIA'S POWER DILEMMAS

Viktor BUDKIN

*D.Sc. (Econ.), professor,  
chief research fellow,  
Institute of World Economy and  
International Relations,  
National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine  
(Kiev, Ukraine)*

It turned out to be much harder to create new power structures in Central Asia than elsewhere in the post-socialist world: no matter how hard it was for the Central European countries to acquire new political institutions, their advance toward the Western democratic model was much smoother. In the European part of the

post-Soviet geopolitical expanse, Russia, Ukraine, and Moldova experienced fewer problems than the Central Asian region (CAR for short), though they too had their share of contradictory and, in many respects, unpredictable attempts at reforming their state machines. In Central Asia, this is due to the poly-civilizational

nature of public life that could not but affect the local peoples' political culture and the political elites' approaches to the task of the fundamental political reconstruction in their countries.

Those responsible for such reconstruction took the Western democratic values as their starting point, but this civilizational orientation proved relative, not absolute: in most of the local countries these values are not rejected—they are merely imitated. The local peoples find it hard to embrace the values as part of their national political mentality: they are interpreted through the seemingly more European (than the traditional local culture) elements of the Soviet way of life of long standing. The Soviet educational system might have helped, but its impact on “Europeanization” was greatly undermined by the predominance of the rural population, which, for obvious reasons, was less exposed to European culture than the urban dwellers. Since the early 1990s, the intelligentsia more widely exposed to technological and economic achievements in other countries has been affecting Westernization of the local perception of the world to a certain extent.<sup>1</sup>

The Soviet past created very specific conditions for today's political developments in the region. A keen observer will conclude that in many respects the Soviet political system was very close to the local traditional culture. I have in mind state paternalism, the authority of elders (the republican and local Communist functionaries of Soviet times) used for political purposes, purely formal elections, the obvious gap between the form and real nature of the power structures, etc. Until the mid-1970s, it was the “Soviet” traits that dominated these elements of political culture, which consistently, but not efficiently enough, squeezed out the traditional approaches to society and the relations inside it, which could be described as nationalistic and contradicting the “friendship of peoples” ideology. During the stagnation of Brezhnev's era,

<sup>1</sup> It was P. Willis who detected this phenomenon as applied to the Soviet technical intelligentsia back in the 1960s (see: P. Willis, *Political Economy of Communism*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1962, p. 329).

however, and especially during Gorbachev's perestroika, the traditional culture of social relations in CAR came to the fore. The old internationalist slogans survived for a while, but the traditional culture, carefully painted in the colors of the “developed socialism” ideology of the Communist Party and the Soviet system, slowly but surely drifted toward the traditional clan-based vertical of power. The Kremlin proved unable to check this drift.

Kazakhstan was one of the most graphic examples: during Brezhnev's stagnation, D. Kunaev, first secretary of the C.C. Communist Party of Kazakhstan, who, according to Soviet tradition, wielded more power than anybody else in the republic, belonged to the Elder Zhuze; the Chairman of the Council of Ministers represented the Middle Zhuze, while the Chairman of the Presidium of the Republican Supreme Soviet belonged to the Younger Zhuze. This means that the top republican posts were clan-controlled.<sup>2</sup>

The remaining elements of Muslim civilization that Soviet power undermined, but could not uproot altogether, proved extremely important for all the political changes occurring in Central Asia. Like all other world religious and civilizational phenomena, Islam, after many centuries of functioning in the region, adapted itself to the local conditions, political priorities, and mechanisms of their realization. The role of Islam and its values in public life differed from country to country: from very important among the settled population of Uzbekistan and agricultural population elsewhere to much less important among the nomadic groups of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan. The homo politicus, however, in all the countries followed the same landmarks in the system of political relations of the newly independent states. Many, including Samuel Huntington, share the opinion that Muslim society is more collectivist than Western society<sup>3</sup> and that human conduct is largely determined by clan and tribal affiliation.<sup>4</sup> As part of the local mentality, this

<sup>2</sup> See: N. Amrekulov, “Zhuzes and Kazakhstan's Social and Political Development,” *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 3, 2000, p. 105.

<sup>3</sup> See: S. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York, 1996, p. 71.

<sup>4</sup> See: *Ibid.*, p. 174.

directly affects citizen involvement in political activities, even in the less religious Central Asian countries.

The original poly-civilizational elements of local world outlook (of the common people as well as of the people at the helm) not only made state development more difficult, but also created a number of hard-to-resolve dilemmas. Today, they are still negatively affecting, albeit to different degrees, everything that goes on in public life.

These countries are exposed to the dilemma of either choosing the Western values by which the geopolitical giants (the U.S., NATO and EU members) assess the situation in the region's public life or accepting the impact of the Soviet heritage and the revived and strengthening symbiosis of traditional mentality and the Muslim axiological attitudes. This dilemma is most comprehensive and hard to resolve. The Central Asian leaders, with the exception of Saparmurat Niya-

zov and his autocratic regime in Turkmenistan, are out to exploit, to different degrees and with very different results, the entire range of these impacts to preserve their regimes, depending on their countries' specific domestic and foreign policy contexts.

It can be said that during the 15 years of independence, none of the CAR leaders has stumbled across the best possible correlation between the two factors. I shall demonstrate below that these factors have not only failed to consolidate political institutions—they act as opposing factors. On the whole, the combination of these factors is still shaky and has not yet developed into a force capable of moving regional political developments in one direction. Each of these factors is, in fact, an individual phenomenon that only partly cooperates with other similar factors in molding the political organisms of the Central Asian countries.

## The Western Values

Very rarely, if ever, do the local leaders speak of Western values when talking to their nations. More often they talk about the traditional mentality of Central Asian society. The principles of democracy and civil society are present in all Central Asian constitutions, but their implementation, divorced from the entire system of political transformations, has little in common with Western standards. However, this allows the local leaders to talk, more or less confidently, to the West about the democratic institutions gradually unfolding in their countries in order to remain among the civilized regimes. In fact, in the geopolitical context, it is an open secret that the Central Asian leaders are busy persuading their Western partners of their total dedication to the democratic form of governance, which is taking a lot of effort to introduce due to the "objective difficulties" of the period of building statehood under very specific local conditions. The developed democratic countries, on the other hand, which treat stability in CAR as an absolute priority, have to accept these arguments and resign themselves to sporadic reproaches of human rights violations, imitation of free elections, and other digressions from the democratic norms.

The circumstances in which President Islam Karimov visited the United States in 2002 are very typical in this respect. The sides signed the Declaration on the Principles of Strategic Cooperation and Interaction between the two countries, which developed the idea of a special partnership between Uzbekistan and the U.S. first formulated a month after 9/11. It would be naïve to think that the Americans believed that Uzbekistan would carry out "democratic transformations in society more actively"—a formulation that appeared in the final communique. In fact, the United States had to support the thesis in order to preserve its geopolitical position in the region.

Washington passively responded to the fact that President Karimov failed to live up to the obligations he assumed during his American visit—it merely cut back its financial aid in 2003 and

later. The West, the OSCE in particular, was more energetic in its negative assessment of the undemocratic parliamentary election in 2004. (Back in 2002, President Karimov pledged, on his own free will, to radically change the election procedure.) It was only Uzbekistan's refusal to let foreign observers investigate the tragic events in Andijan in May 2005 that caused a more stringent and much wider response from the OSCE, EU, the U.S. and other democratic states and international organizations.

The election systems and parliamentary procedures in Central Asia supply the most graphic examples of sham "dedication of the Central Asian regimes to democratic values." The extremely high share of votes (from 80 to 90 percent) cast for the leaders in 1990 and 2000 in Uzbekistan, in 1999 and 2005 in Kazakhstan, and in 1999 in Tajikistan is the best illustration of this. In Turkmenistan, President Niyazov received 99.5 percent of votes in the absence of a rival—a figure that brings to mind Soviet times. In other republics, where competition was allowed, the stronger rivals were prudently removed from the race. This happened to former Premier of Kazakhstan A. Kazhegeldin and former Majilis Speaker Zh. Tuiakbay.

In Central Asia, the multiparty system is nothing but an imitation, which parliamentary elections throw into bolder relief. It devalues the very idea of Western-style legislative power. When summing up the first decade of the Central Asian republics' sovereign existence, German researchers concluded that this imitation made the parliament, which had no independent role to play as the legislative branch, an extension of the president's power.<sup>5</sup> In the last five years nothing much changed, even though the seats the opposition won in nearly all the parliaments is considered a sign of intensive democratic "Westernization."

In fact, parties and alliances of varied orientations were allowed to run for the parliaments on a wider scale in most of the local states because of the changed domestic situation rather than due to Western pressure. The leaders strengthened their position to the extent that they became less afraid of opposition; the presidential term was extended from five to seven years (in 1999 in Kazakhstan, in 2002 in Uzbekistan, and in 2003 in Tajikistan); and the presidents were allowed to be re-elected to the same post for several consecutive terms. (In Turkmenistan, President Niyazov became president for life in 1999.) The two-chamber parliamentary system introduced in the Central Asian countries in imitation of developed democracies made it easier for the presidential administration to manipulate the highest legislative body. This explains why on the eve of the Tulip Revolution, the Kyrgyz opposition demanded a one-chamber parliament. Economic and political stability in Kazakhstan and relative political stability in Tajikistan relieved the ruling elite's fears that the opposition might undermine the ruling clans' position.

National referenda became a tool for pushing the parliaments aside when key political issues were at stake (longer presidential terms and broader presidential powers among others). On top of this, some countries acquired essentially unconstitutional political structures that doubled the parliaments: the Assembly of the Peoples of Kazakhstan set up in 1995 and the People's Council (Khalk Maslahaty) in Turkmenistan, which appeared in 2003. Pro-governmental parties dominate all the parliaments, while the obviously opposition parties (Birlik and Erk in Uzbekistan and the Democratic and the Social-Democratic Party in Tajikistan) are regularly removed from the race under various pretexts. Opposition in the highest legislative structures is a decoration intended to embellish the regime and make it look more democratic.

This is especially true of Kazakhstan, which is being closely watched by the West because of its intention to chair the OSCE in 2009. The presence of a loyal opposition in its Central Asian neighbors has already improved their image in the eyes of the world community. In real life, however, such opposition parties as Ak zhol in Kazakhstan and the Communist Party and the Islamic Revival Party

<sup>5</sup> See: *Internationale Politik*, No. 10, 2001, p. 66.

in Tajikistan cannot influence the political reality in their countries because of negligible representation in parliament.

While adhering to “Westernization” for the sake of appearances, the ruling regimes actually fear it, since it might have an ever-greater effect on social processes. The money the West, both the governments and the NGOs, allocated for democratic changes goes to all sorts of organizations, not necessarily loyal ones, but also to those that oppose the regimes in the most obvious and irreconcilable way. M.B. Olcott, an American expert in Central Asian affairs, has written that money from the U.S. Agency for International Development was distributed through American NGOs that cooperated with local, mostly politically neutral, groups; there were also those that openly opposed the regimes.<sup>6</sup> Askar Akaev, former president of Kyrgyzstan, directly accused foreign foundations, without enough evidence, of plotting against him. The other Central Asian leaders took this into account. In Turkmenistan, the money is mostly distributed among Turkmenbashi’s political opponents based abroad.

The very fact that the most “pro-Western” of the Central Asian leaders was deposed increased anti-Western sentiments among his colleagues. From the reforms of the early 1990s, initiated without much success by the IMF, to the latest efforts to invigorate political and economic cooperation with the U.S., EU, the World Bank, and other international structures on the eve of the political changes in Kyrgyzstan, the West was looking at the country as a state most inclined to embrace Western-style democracy, despite its CIS membership and affiliation with EurAsEC headed by Russia.<sup>7</sup> The fact that the United States and the other big geopolitical actors abandoned Askar Akaev at the most critical moment convinced the other CAR leaders that the region’s secondary importance geostrategically in the eyes of the West made it an unreliable partner.

It would be wrong to say that Western values were introduced under outside pressure, no matter how contradictory they looked inside the country. By introducing them Nazarbaev, Karimov, and Rakhmonov, as well as Akaev (while he was the president) cemented their political and ideological base and limited, by the same token, the influence of their opponents wielding narrow traditionalist and religious-extremist slogans. Limited “Westernization” also drew the best-educated part of the autochthonous population and the Russian-speaking population to their side.

The ruling circles’ tendency to use elements of Western political culture to different degrees, coupled with the traditional mentality of the nations’ majority, has created a dilemma. Together with the social and economic crisis obvious nearly everywhere in the region, it developed into a potential threat of destabilization in the Central Asian countries.

Nursultan Nazarbaev and his administration have found the most rational (albeit far removed from the Western standards) solution. R. Zhanguzhin, a leading Ukrainian researcher of the Central Asian problems, has offered the following interesting opinion: “Kazakhstan is a special phenomenon, a transit country actively adjusting to Western standards of state, political, legal, and socioeconomic development.”<sup>8</sup> Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are demonstrating no haste to resolve this dilemma through a national model; the same is true of post-Tulip Kyrgyzstan. In Turkmenistan, even the most primitive Westernization elements were rejected, but the threat of the dilemma persists.

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<sup>6</sup> See: M.B. Olcott, *Vtoroy shans Tsentral'noy Azii*, Moscow Carnegie Center, Moscow, Washington, 2005 (English edition: *Central Asia's Second Chance*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, DC, 2005), p. 166.

<sup>7</sup> “In Kyrgyzstan, it was democratization that determined the social and economic developments in the country,” said former president Akaev about the causes of the Tulip Revolution in his country. We may agree with this on the whole (*Moskovskiy komsomolets*, 27 July, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> R.N. Zhanguzhin, *Novye nezavisimye gosudarstva Tsentral'noi Azii v sisteme sovremennykh mezhdunarodnykh otnocheniy*, Institut mirovoi ekonomiki i mezhdunarodnykh otnocheniy, Kiev, 2005, pp. 321-322.

## Soviet Heritage

The political culture of the Soviet period has been rejected nearly everywhere, yet it continues to affect, to a lesser degree, the social processes in all the Central Asian countries. This influence can be traced in several areas.

For obvious reasons, it affects the world outlook of the older functionaries, especially of those who filled the top posts. All the Central Asian presidents, with the exception of Rakhmonov and including deposed Akaev, came to power as leaders of the Union republics. This allowed them to invite the most experienced people, all of them Soviet administrators, into power structures (especially in the first years after gaining independence). In the past fifteen years, new people arrived (through removing the most efficient rivals among other things), yet the old traditions of administration partly survived.

The ruling elite remained convinced that the Soviet standards of political administration and economic management from above, as well as building up the vertical of power by appointing people were the most efficient. In all the Central Asian countries, the presidents appoint the cabinets, while the parliaments are either completely removed from this process or take token part in it. As a result, the top executives are frequently removed. This is true, first of all, of the prime ministers and heads of the military and law-enforcement bodies, who potentially might become too strong and pose a threat to the president. This is true of the lower administrative levels. Today Kazakhstan is the only country in which, starting in 2001, some of the bureaucrats have been elected to their posts from among several candidates.

It should be said that the widely shared trust of the population in Soviet traditions—state paternalism, undeveloped civil consciousness, passivity when it comes to key political decisions (confirmed by the inordinately high support of the leaders during elections)—feeds the elite's conviction that this model of social administration is the best one.

In all the Central Asian states, the "Soviet" elements survived in political life thanks to the transformation of "socialist property of all the people" into the cornerstone of the economic clans' might. The relations between political and economic power in the local countries are not as straightforward as elsewhere in the world: here business depends to a great extent on administrative structures. This dependence (which is especially high in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, according to foreign experts, where property remains under administrative pressure) makes the business community obedient Soviet-style. The initial privatization process bordered on crime, which means that the owners of former public property remained extremely vulnerable, while the attempts of the "new business circles" to confront power could be effectively suppressed. In Kazakhstan, those businessmen who, beginning in late 2002, were involved in the opposition Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan movement had to retreat in the face of state pressure; their organization was disbanded.

The Soviet heritage is especially obvious in foreign policy; all the countries are still members of the post-Soviet CIS, even though Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan repeatedly criticized its results and the fact that the organization is Russia-dominated. At the same time, their continued presence in the post-Soviet geopolitical expanse allows the Central Asian countries to obtain tactical advantages in their relations with the outside factors of influence—the United States, EU, Turkey, and Iran. On the other hand, because of their CIS membership, two countries—EurAsEC members (Kazakhstan and Tajikistan)—profited from their cooperation with Russia: Kazakhstan acquired economic advantages, while Tajikistan achieved relative domestic stability. Uzbekistan deemed it necessary to shift its priorities from GUUAM to EurAsEC. Turkmenistan has revived its active relations with Russia within the CIS.

As distinct from the other factors of political influence in CAR, the Soviet heritage will never develop into a dilemma: the number of those who cherish it (former Soviet functionaries and members of the communist parties still in some parliaments, although losing electoral support) is gradually diminishing. There will be no place for the Soviet elements in the new political and economic structure; most CAR countries will preserve, for a while, the features that make them post-Soviet states.

## The Reviving Traditional Values

National self-identity, which brings people back to historical traditions, is an objective feature observed in all the new states. In the 1960s-1970s, this was obvious in Africa and Asia. Francis Fukuyama, who in 1991-1992 wrote about the awakening nations in Soviet Central Asia, noted that their members were rummaging in libraries to rediscover their historical tongues and cultures, which were absolutely novel for many of them.<sup>9</sup>

In Central Asia, like in many other regions, the national self-identification process was accompanied by the revival of deeply buried nationalism and traditionalism. It is not my intention to discuss nationalism and its constructive and aggressive sides here—the subject is too vast and complicated. I have to say, however, that this phenomenon has affected the process of power formation in Central Asia. Xenophobia was mounting not so much at the official as at the everyday level; it was responsible for the exodus of Russian-speaking refugees, who left the Central Asian countries in millions. Starting in the early 1990s, all local Russians lost their more or less responsible posts due to official politics. This happened everywhere, especially in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The vacated positions went to locals, many of whom lacked the necessary experience and acquired the posts through family and clan connections. The remnants of the Russian community and the non-titular nations (even with due account of emigration) are inadequately represented in the CAR legislatures.

In Kazakhstan, the situation is somewhat different: in the country's north, Russians and the members of other ethnic groups head some of the regions. (German A. Braun, for example, heads the Akmola Region.) They were also members of several governments; in the early half of the 1990s, Ukrainian Tereshchenko was prime minister; at least a quarter of the seats in the parliament were filled by members of the non-titular nations. In 1995, the Constitution of Kazakhstan was amended to fit the standards of political correctness: the formulation that described Kazakhstan as the "native home of the Kazakh nation," which appeared in the 1993 Constitution, was replaced with the "people of Kazakhstan" formulation. Still, the republic has already lost about two million of its former citizens: national relations in the country are obviously much less straightforward than the official statements try to make out.

The official course at reviving and strengthening traditions is even more important for building statehood in Central Asia. The conception "the Soviet people are a new historical community of people" devised, among other things, to distort or conceal the facts about the past that refused to fit official ideology disappeared together with the Soviet Union. The newly independent states found themselves in an ideological vacuum to be filled with a well-substantiated exposition of the historic mission of each of the titular nations. This could be best done by drawing on the traditions rooted in the distant past—before these areas became parts of the Russian Empire and the

<sup>9</sup> See: F. Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, The Free Press, New York, 1992.

Soviet Union. In quest of self-identification sources of the titular nations and wishing to justify their ambitions as the leaders of the newly independent states, the leaders of all the countries turned to the past.

The official assessments of the historical roles of the titular nations of nearly all the Central Asian countries have absolutely nothing in common with the “Turkmen-centered” conception of Eurasia’s presented by Turkmenbashi Niyazov in his *Rukhnama*. In all the other Central Asian countries, historical facts were treated more soberly, even though some of the events and prominent figures of the Middle Ages were obviously overestimated. This is true of different assessments of the role of Genghis Khan and his descendants and the effects of the Mongol conquerors in general; of Amir Timur and other national and regional leaders of the past. In Uzbekistan scholars are quite right when they speak of its much higher, compared to Russia and Western Europe, medieval civilization. Some Western academics, M. Olcott among them, has pointed out that the state symbols of Kazakhstan bring to mind the times of the Turkic Kaganate. Much is being done in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to carry out an in-depth study of their ethnogenesis and nation-formation on their territories, as well as their linguistic and cultural development. Like in all other countries that gained their independence before them (the United States of America and the former African and Asian colonies), these historical studies add weight to the ideas of statehood and slow down the “erosion” of national identity.

At the same time, historical studies offer an ideological basis for the traditionalist elements of the political system in the making, which is very different from the Western civilizational canons. Indeed, in all the Central Asian countries, clan and family affiliation is treated as an absolute priority when it comes to staffing administrative structures of all levels. That is why this principle is totally rejected by the Western thought.

On the one hand, this principle is responsible for the strictly centralized administrative system, which, in the final analysis, contributes to political and economic stabilization. On the other, the same principle is responsible for the corruption evident at all levels of the administrative vertical; it helps replace democracy with the rule of bureaucrats acting beyond control and tied together as members of the same clans by the cover-up system.

In her book *Central Asia’s Second Chance*, M. Olcott described another, no less important, specific feature of the Central Asian political culture. She wrote that the nomenklatura was made up mainly of ethnic Kazakhs raised in an atmosphere in which *respect for elders was the key principle*<sup>10</sup> (italics mine.—V.B.). This is even more obvious in Uzbekistan and can be partly applied to the other Central Asian countries. The authority of elders is one of the most typical features of the local mentality. In this respect, the local nations stand apart from the West, in which young people are, at best, indifferent to the elder generation or even hostile to it. This respect for those who preserve traditions helped the national cultures survive in Soviet times. The elements of national cultures were preserved in the Uzbek *makhallia* and the rural areas of all the Central Asian countries. This phenomenon is responsible for features which are very different and typical of CAR, and other Muslim states for that matter. It breeds conservatism and thus negatively affects the way the positive innovations (in the production and business sphere among other things), in which the contemporary world abounds, are seen. What is more, “respect for elders” is much more than respect for older people: it includes the people at the top. In this way, it negatively affects the nation’s political activity: at the polls, voters tend to follow the opinions of their superiors. To a great extent, the clan-based administrative vertical of power owes its stability to the same principle of bowing down to the authority of the bosses. Traditions and traditionalism are responsible for the passive acceptance of the personality cult of the local leaders imposed everywhere in CAR. As a result, they and their clans dominate politics and the economy, to say nothing of the extreme authoritarianism of

<sup>10</sup> See: M.B. Olcott, op. cit., p. 181.



Niyazov's regime. Everything in the life of Turkmen society is subordinated to the head of state. In other countries, too, domination of the "ruling families" is no less obvious. Nazarbaev's family owns the lion's share of the republican mass media and many of the republic's economic facilities. His daughter, Dariga, heads the Asar Party; she is one of the most active political figures in Kazakhstan. Mansur Maksudi, President Karimov's former son-in-law, an ethnic Uzbek and an American citizen, established his control over the trade in cotton, oil products, and sugar. After his divorce, he was accused of profit concealment, money laundering, and larceny.<sup>11</sup> Saparmurat Niyazov, well known for his greediness, refused to trim his share of the gas revenues to 20 percent of its world price. He uses the billions thus earned to build exclusive facilities in Turkmenistan or stores the money away in a London bank, of which his son-in-law, A. Sokolov, is manager.<sup>12</sup>

In the countries in which the family clans of the top leaders are not alien to getting rich by plundering the national economies, bureaucrats of all levels feel free to line their pockets at the expense of the people. Nearly every study of the social and economic situation in the Central Asian countries speaks of an extremely high corruption level, which outstrips corruption in Russia and other post-Soviet states. The redistribution of extremely low incomes in favor of the corrupt bureaucracy exacerbates the social contradictions; despite the nations' low political activity, this is fraught with serious destabilization in the CAR countries. This has already happened in Kyrgyzstan. On top of this, the clan system tends to oust members of other clans or economic groups far removed from the country's leaders from the political and economic spheres. The discriminated groups are trying to hold out, which might destroy the country's political stability.

The negative features of social and political life in the Central Asian states described above cannot be explained by the centuries-old values of its nations: the rulers are merely exploiting traditionalism in their interests. The objective dilemma lies in a different plane: to secure their future each of the local states should limit the elements of conservatism inherent in traditionalism and find means and methods of cooperation with partners living in the post-industrial world and enjoying a higher information development level. Today the Central Asian countries face a different, purely subjective, dilemma: will the narrow circle of the political elite continue exploiting traditionalism in its own interests, or will forces appear capable of using traditional values to ensure stability in the interests of all the people and use their positive sides to ensure economic, social, and innovatory and technological progress. (India has already done this.)

## The Islamic Factor in the Central Asian Region

The terrorist acts of 2001 in the United States spurred on studies of the place and role of Islam in the contemporary world. There is any number of publications dealing with the role of the Muslim factor in the political and ideological spheres of the Central Asian states.<sup>13</sup> The vast number of works on this subject allows me to limit myself to a few of the most important aspects of the relations between Islam and state power in the Central Asian countries.

<sup>11</sup> See: E. Bay, "Byvshiy ziat Islama Karimova mozhnet possorit SShA i Uzbekistan," *Izvestia*, 24 December, 2003.

<sup>12</sup> See: "Padishakh XXI veka," *Korrespondent*, No. 49, 2005, p. 61.

<sup>13</sup> Besides the already quoted books by R. Zhanguzhin and M. Olcott, there are definitive works by the same authors: M. Olcott, *Kazakhstan: neproydenny put*, Gendalf Publishers, Moscow, 2003 and R. Zhanguzhin, *Kazakhstan postsovetskiy*, IMEMO Press, Kiev, 2004 (see also: P. Luong, *Institutional Change and Political Continuity in Post-Soviet Central Asia*, Cambridge University Press, 2002, and articles by V. Bushkov, E. Friedman and M. Walton, Ch. Chotaev and others in the *Central Asia and the Caucasus* journal, *Central Eurasian Studies Review*, etc.).

At the turn of the 1990s, Islam burst to the forefront in all the Central Asian countries for several reasons. The Soviet atheist regime was especially strict with Islam: the Muslims were deprived of nearly all contacts with Muslims abroad and could use a very limited number of mosques at home. Naturally enough, in the wake of the Soviet Union's disintegration, the number of mosques, madrasahs, and other religious facilities increased hundreds of times. The local people had the opportunity to receive a religious education at home (in the educational establishments run jointly with Saudi Arabian, Kuwaiti, and other Islamic sponsors) and in the Islamic university centers of Egypt, the UAE, Turkey, etc. The newly educated clerics gradually replaced the poorly educated "people's mullahs."

The fact that none of the Central Asian leaders managed to fill in the void left by the rejected Soviet ideology strengthened Islam's position in the region. Islam filled the ideological vacuum with a system of postulates that, over the centuries, has adjusted itself to the national traditions.

It should be said that the local leaders were not overjoyed with the Islamic revival—at best they merely tolerated the renewed religious zeal. The constitutions of all the Central Asian states, elaborated and adopted under the strict control of the power structures, speak of their purely secular nature. The Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan is the only officially recognized Islamic party in this vast Islamic region; it survived under the 1997 national reconciliation agreement. Today, under pressure from the strengthening Rakhmonov regime, it has had to retreat from its former position, even though it demonstrates its loyalty to the government.

Officially, the state cannot interfere in religious affairs—in practice the power structures of all the Central Asian countries are seeking strict control in the religious sphere. Turkmenistan has established the strictest control over religion, as well as in all other social spheres. In 2004, the authorities went as far as arresting Mufti Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah, who objected to the propaganda of *Rukhnama* in mosques. Uzbekistan limits the number of newly built mosques; the mufti works under control of the Committee for Religious Affairs. The Spiritual Administrations of the Muslims of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, which have the power to appoint mullahs and imams, pass judgment on the canonical side of their activities, etc., are operating under strict administrative control. It should be said that the state and religious leaders act together against the unofficial sects and movements, many of which (Hizb ut-Tahrir, the Islamic Party of Eastern Turkestan, etc.) have turned religion into an ideology and a tool of anti-governmental activities.

Today, their potential threat to power differs from country to country. Geographically, such movements are the strongest in the Ferghana Valley, which covers, in addition to other areas, the southern fringes of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The share of Muslims in these two states is much lower than in the other Central Asian countries (according to Freedom House, there is an equal number of Muslims and Orthodox Christians in Kazakhstan<sup>14</sup>). In Uzbekistan, in which Muslim traditions are especially strong and in which the absolute majority of the population is Muslim, confrontation between Islamic extremism and the government has become very complicated. In the Ferghana Valley and elsewhere in the country, religious extremists can count on popular support; and some of the local functionaries are on their side too. In Tajikistan, the picture is different: the civil war taught the people to reject all potential threats to stability, which has considerably weakened the position of the Islamic anti-governmental forces.

On the whole, the problem of Islam's incorporation into the Central Asian state structure is far from simple, mainly because Muslims, as Western students of civilizations have pointed out, belong to the Muslim civilization as a whole, not to any single state.<sup>15</sup> For this reason, Islam, even its loyal

<sup>14</sup> See: E. Freedman, M. Walton, "Independent News Web Sites' Coverage of Religion in Central Asia," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 1 (37), 2006, p. 103.

<sup>15</sup> See: S. Huntington, *op. cit.*, p. 175.

yet orthodox varieties, cannot accept the Western/traditionalist “duality” of the current policies of statehood development in most of the CAR countries.

Their leaders have revealed a lot of pragmatism when dealing with the Islamic axiological postulates. In Uzbekistan, Muslim traditions are invoked to justify the state’s monopoly of land and foreign trade.<sup>16</sup> In real life, however, the local functionaries are getting rich through land distribution and top administrators are raking in the profit from export-import operations.

Instead of interfering in religious affairs in the interests of the ruling regimes, the state should extend its all-round support to loyal Islam in the form of assisting the local religious education system, setting up a network of religious facilities under the local spiritual administrations of the Muslims, etc. Even if this is not the best alternative, it is a mutually acceptable measure that could help loyal Islam resist extremist pressure, to which it is just as vulnerable as the state.

## The Problem of Successors

Everywhere in the region, with the exception of Kyrgyzstan, in which the leaders were replaced through a revolution, and of Tajikistan headed by a relatively young leader, the successor problem is of acute personal and political importance. In fact, it calls for the ingenuity Boris Yeltsin demonstrated in a similar situation, or for the long and careful spadework carried out by Heydar Aliiev in Azerbaijan, lest the change in leader cause an upheaval. In Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, the change in leader will not be limited to new people at the helm, or disappearance of the ruling clan from the political and economic scene. It might trigger radical changes in the state structure.

I have already written that the three presidents legislatively extended their presidential terms. This, however, has not solved the problem—for obvious reasons it has merely postponed the inevitable natural succession for an indefinite period. So far, none of the countries has chosen a clear procedure for selecting the best possible successor. The rivalry among the potential successors is gaining momentum, destabilizing the domestic political situation and undermining the country’s ability to oppose foreign influence (this cannot be fully applied to Turkmenistan where Niyazov’s dictatorship rules out alien influence).<sup>17</sup>

The situation in Uzbekistan is even vaguer than elsewhere: the family clan lacks strong figures, while the closest circle abounds in people with more or less equal political weight. Recently the names of Internal Affairs Minister Zakir Almatov, Chairman of the National Security Service Rustam Inoyatov, Premier Shafkat Mirziaev, vice premiers Eler Ganiev and Rustam Azimov, and Foreign Minister Sadyk Safaev have been mentioned as potential successors. More names can be quoted. In Kazakhstan, the successor might be selected from among the family of Nazarbaev—either Dariga, his daughter, already very active in politics, or her husband, Rakhat Aliev, or Timur Kulibaev, another son-in-law.

In both countries, the absence of one successor openly patronized by the head of state makes it impossible to predict who will ultimately receive the post. What is more, this situation is aggravating the rivalry inside the ruling elite, which may go on for a long time and abound in turns of fortune.

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<sup>16</sup> See: *Uzbekistan: desiat let po puti formirovaniya rynochnoi ekonomiki*, Uzbekiston Publishers, Tashkent, 2001, pp. 24, 339.

<sup>17</sup> R. Zhanguzhin offers a detailed analysis of the rivaling forces in his *Novye nezavisimye gosudarstva Tsentral'noy Azii v sisteme sovremennykh mezhdunarodnykh otnosheniy*, quoted above.

Karimov's successor depends on the balance of forces among the regional clans—the Samarkand (currently the closest to the president), Tashkent, and Ferghana clans. One of them is even going as far as enlisting the support of religious figures—a very specific Uzbek option that will add political weight to the Islamic factor.

In Kazakhstan, where one of the family stands a good chance of succeeding the president, the situation is not that simple: there is a widely shared opinion among the experts that the 2011 presidential election will be less smooth for the president; Dariga Nazarbaeva's Asar Party received fewer votes in the last parliamentary election than had been forecasted.

There is a specifically Kazakhstani factor, which may upset the balance of forces on the eve of the change in leader. I have in mind the economic and financial might of each of the rivaling clans and those of the oligarchic groups that are still pondering on the best possible political alignment. The so-called Eurasians (owners of the largest heavy industry enterprises of Kazakhstan) will play one of the key roles: they are not Kazakhs, therefore they are free from clan influence and are free in their political preferences. Other countries, Russia and the United States in particular, or probably (will less success) members of the Economic Cooperation Organization of the Muslim States (Turkey, Pakistan, and Iran) might interfere in the leader changing process. These Muslim countries already tried to actively interfere in the CAR in the mid-1990s.

In the near future, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan will have their share of successor-related problems.

In Turkmenistan, the current political system will collapse as soon as its present leader leaves the stage. We have already seen that elsewhere.

The leaders of the countries with undeveloped democracies must appoint successors during their lifetime: the future of their families depends on their choice. This is a tragic situation: the fate of too many "first families" across the world has been very sad. This is a tragedy for the man-in-the-street as well: having no say in a matter that will shape his personal fate and the country's future, he has to helplessly watch as developments unfold. This scenario, unfortunately, is the most probable for the Central Asian region, at least in the foreseeable future.

### *In Lieu of a Conclusion*

In his interview with the Chinese media on the eve of the June 2006 SCO summit, President Karimov said that his country intended "to resolutely counter external attempts to impose Western methods of democratization and public development on our countries." Other CAR leaders will agree, openly or not, with this. The statement itself arouses mixed feelings. On the one hand, it is caused by the persistent attempts of the United States, the EU, OSCE, and other international organizations to impose their own standards of social order on the Central Asian countries without taking due account of the local political, ideological, and economic specifics. This creates the risk of sharp rejection of a model imposed from the outside—Kyrgyzstan has already had a taste of this. On the other hand, what the president of Uzbekistan says and does in his country looks like his intention to "conserve" the negative features typical of Uzbekistan and of other countries to a greater or lesser degree.

The most rational development model cannot be found by choosing between accelerated "Westernization" and "conservation"—both are doomed to failure. To reach a higher, more stable, and dynamic level of social development, the Central Asian countries need consistent democratization that would take account of the positive sides of the local mentality and political culture. The future of the Central Asian nations, which deserve a worthy place in the world community, depends on the

ability of the Western and local leaders to understand that the region needs the best possible combination of conditions common to mankind and those specific for Central Asia and to support the efforts to create them.