

**Barriers to Democratization and the Benefits of Authoritarianism: Post-Soviet
Politics in the Ferghana States of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan**

by

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Fall 2009

Introduction

The Ferghana Valley, derived from the old khanate of Kokand and split between the nations of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, is in many ways the heartland of Central Asia. An area heavily dependent on industry and agriculture, it is also one of the least Russified regions where indigenous culture has best survived the test of time. Since the days of the Basmachi rebellions against both Tsarist and Bolshevik armies, the Ferghana Valley has also been a stronghold of radical Islam which has especially grown since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, despite the prominence of the more tolerant Hanafi school of Sunni Islam in Central Asia (Naumkin 2005, Khalid 2007). Followers of radical Islam seek to replace secular governance with Shari'a law, either by the militant use of force used by such groups as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan or through non-violent popular mobilization by groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir (McGlinchey 2005). The zigzag nature of the Soviet-constructed borders which divide the valley between the three republics has served to facilitate the ease with which militants can cross from one country to the next resulting in the fate of these three Central Asian states being inextricably linked.

The Ferghana states also share the pre-Soviet era system of clan politics with allegiance to the clan sometimes taking precedence to that of the modern post-Soviet nation state. This phenomenon highlights the falseness of Stalinist nationalities policy, a system of administrative

and political classification based on territorialization and language, dividing populations on the basis of political and strategic logic (Roy 2000). Regionally based, clans operate on the sub-state level yet most government positions and prestigious jobs are handed out with clan affinity rather than merit in mind. The balancing of clan interests and the establishment of a clan pact go much further for providing stability in the country and discussing pertinent issues of national interest than do political parties. The role of clans in all three states has played a major part in the events that have unfolded since independence.

Lastly, as in many of the former Soviet republics, the government has been run by former Communist Party leaders who became president after independence and in some cases, are still in office nearly two decades later. All three Ferghana states have leaders who rule with varying degrees of authoritarianism as measured by Freedom House, with very little meaningful participation on behalf of Western-minded civil society or opposition political parties.

With similar history, culture, threats, political and social norms and post-independence leadership, how is it that each state has had drastically different experiences and that the most authoritarian of them all is actually the most stable? Tajikistan suffered through civil war in the mid 1990s and has remained the poorest of the former Soviet republics. Kyrgyzstan, long seen as the least authoritarian state in Central Asia, experienced the Tulip Revolution in 2005. However, contrary to its “color revolution” title and assistance from the West, it was more based on clan politics and merely traded a northern leader for a southerner who is now beginning to be the target of the very same protests that brought him into office. Finally, Uzbekistan, one of the most authoritarian states, with a heavy political influence on the part of its three major clans, numerous militant attacks since 1998 and the Andijon incident in 2005 has still not undergone a change of regime.

Working Hypothesis

Specifically, this thesis seeks to explore the question of why has Uzbekistan maintained regime stability since independence while Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan have not. While all three are classified as weak, non-viable states and simultaneously listed as authoritarian (Fritz 2003, Tsygankov 2007), Uzbekistan has the lowest democracy scores (Freedom House 2008) yet is the only state not to experience any type of regime change. The working hypothesis is that in a region with weak state identities and a lack of viable state and political institutions authoritarianism is initially more stable than democracy (Huntington 1968, Kubicek 1998). The combination of the credible threat of militant Islam, a strong and viable clan pact and a mild dose of authoritarianism has enabled the Uzbek regime to survive in conditions where the other Ferghana states' regimes did not. This delicate balance must be maintained as a too heavy-handed approach will drive ordinary citizens into the arms of extremists while a total relaxation of power could result in the seizure of power by Islamic groups, while a break in the clan pact could also significantly weaken the government and give rise to an insurrection.

The Comparative Method

This paper will examine the roles played by militant Islam, clan politics and level of authoritarianism in each of the Ferghana states which resulted in the Tajik Civil War, Kyrgyz Tulip Revolution and in Uzbekistan's continued regime stability, even after the Andijon incident. I will be comparing three cases of the most similar system, as the variables stated above are present in each case and constitute the most important part of analyzing the question at hand. All three states present somewhat deviant cases in regards to literature on democratization as instead of the increased likelihood of violence noted between states (Mansfield and Snyder 1995)

conflicts in Central Asia have been within states and mostly performed by non-state actors. Scholars have discussed the need for authority to initially take precedence over democracy in developing states (Huntington 1968, Kubicek 1997) and by examining the three cases with this concept in mind we can see one possible reason for the changes of regime in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan and regime continuity in Uzbekistan.

In my research I will be using both Western and regional sources, in English and Russian, including scholarly books and journals, NGO reports and journalistic accounts looking at the factors of radical Islam, clan politics and authoritarianism in three similar states in order to explain why Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan experienced a change of regime and Uzbekistan has not. I will be looking at such topics as the structure of radical Islamic groups, the actions they have carried out, the structure of clans and the methods used in forming alliances and running politics, policies enacted by the various state governments all in an effort to show why a total democratic opening would result in chaos and that there are certain benefits to be found in authoritarianism. The timeframe will be from the dissolution of the Soviet Union up until the present day.

Conceptual Significance

This paper seeks to demonstrate the need for a closer inspection of the various post-Soviet states instead of a broad, all-encompassing post-Soviet or post-Communist transition theory due to the various local factors unique to certain regions. States such as Estonia, Slovenia and Uzbekistan have very little in common other than the broad label of post-Communist states and in order to better understand the successes and failures of democratization in a region such as Central Asia it is necessary to examine particular factors such as weak identity, lack of state history, clan politics and radical Islam in explaining the presence of authoritarianism. This

research also attempts to show the benefits that can be attained from said authoritarianism, countering the popular advice of democracy-promoting “color revolutions” in the post-Soviet region. This project seeks to build on Huntington and especially Kubicek who in 1998 noted some of the beneficial aspects of authoritarianism in Central Asia. However, this paper also examines the role of non-state actors such as clans and Islamists and their influence on the level of authoritarianism or democracy present in each state instead of just looking at the state as a whole.

Table of Contents

I. Introduction: The Ferghana States – Radical Islam, Clan Politics and Authoritarianism

This section will contain background information on the Ferghana states of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan including a short historical overview as well as the role of the core concepts of radical Islam, clan politics and authoritarianism. The issue of the Ferghana States is important as it examines specific factors which act as barriers to democratization in the post-Soviet region while showing some of the benefits of authoritarianism given such factors. The comparative method is the most useful for examining this issue as all three factors exist in each of the Ferghana states and they all have similar histories, culture and lack of previous statehood experience.

II. Literature Review: Democratization in the Post-Soviet Era

This section will include a review of the relevant literature on democratization, particularly in the post-Soviet era. It will examine the role of authoritarianism and the aspects unique to the post-Soviet transitions as opposed to the general observations of post-Communist states. This type of literature is insufficient as it first automatically assumes all post-Communist states are democratizing states. It also overlooks various local factors such as the core concepts listed in Chapter I and oversimplifies the authoritarianism vs. democracy issue instead of examining the benefits and drawbacks of each one.

III. Tajikistan: Conflict, Authoritarianism and Poverty in the Pamir

This chapter will explore the case of Tajikistan, a state that experienced civil war between various factions of former Communists, nationalists, democrats and Islamists. It will describe the clan divisions of regions such as Khojand and Garm, the radical Islamic movement with its indigenous roots as well as links to Uzbekistan and Afghanistan and the authoritarian policies of President Rahmon both leading to, and then stemming from the Tajik Civil War. A scramble for power between the old Communists, Islamists, Democrats and rival clans resulted in a civil war as there was no true authority after independence. This void has since been filled by an authoritarianism which still caters to clan politics and has not been able to eradicate radical Islam.

IV. Kyrgyzstan: Democratic Hopes, Autocratic Realities

This chapter will explore the case of Kyrgyzstan, the most democratic state in Central Asia but which experienced a “color revolution” in 2005. It will then explain the division of politics between clans of the north and south of the country, the presence of radical Islamic groups such as Hizb-ut Tahrir and the use of Kyrgyz territory by other regional radical groups and the reasonably democratic nature of the Akayev regime, its overthrow in the “Tulip Revolution” and the increasingly authoritarian aspects of the Bakiyev presidency. Democratic tendencies merely gave clans, regional allies and Islam legal platforms to use to their own benefit rather than producing a Western-style democracy.

V. Uzbekistan: Balancing Clans, Islam and Authoritarianism on the Silk Road

This chapter will explore the case of Uzbekistan, a state which has experienced the highest number of militant attacks in Central Asia yet has not had a change of regime since independence. It will describe the system of clan politics (Tashkent, Samarkand, Ferghana, Jizzak, etc.), an in-depth view of the development of radical Islamic groups since independence and their actions against the Karimov regime, and also the authoritarian policies of Karimov which simultaneously fend off radical Islamists and bolster their ranks. The authoritarianism of the Uzbek government has avoided both civil war and regime change and has kept rival clans at bay while repelling radical Islam despite several attacks by militants during the last decade.

VI. Conclusion

This chapter will review the findings of the paper which has explained why Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan experienced a change of regime and Uzbekistan has not, examining the three variables stated in Chapter I. The most authoritarian regime has lasted the longest and has managed to control both radical Islam and the various regional clans. This demonstrates the need to more closely examine authoritarian states instead of just directly dismissing them as failures as well as the need to take local realities into consideration when talking about the democratization process. A “color revolution” type democratization, one which is not even close to consolidation in Georgia or Ukraine, would in Uzbekistan unleash chaos that could potentially destabilize the entire Central Asian region.

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