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*Central Asia- Caucasus Institute
Silk Road Studies Program*

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THE CENTRAL ASIA-CAUCASUS ANALYST

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Submission Guidelines:

Analytical Articles: Analytical articles require a three to four sentence Key Issue introduction to the article based on a news hook. Rather than a general, overarching analysis, the article must offer considered and careful judgment supported with concrete examples. The ideal length of analytical articles is between 1,000 and 1,300 words. The articles are structured as follows:

KEY ISSUE: A short 100-word statement of your conclusions about the issue or news event on which the article focuses.

BACKGROUND: 300-450 words of analysis about what has led up to the event or issue and why this issue is critical to the region. Include background information about the views and experiences of the local population.

IMPLICATIONS: 300-450 words of analysis of the ramifications of this event or issue, including where applicable, implications for the local people's future.

CONCLUSIONS: 100-200 words that strongly state your conclusions about the impact of the event or issue.

Field Reports: Field Reports focus on a particular news event and what local people think about the event, or about the work of an NGdO. Field Reports address the implications the event or activity analyzed has for peoples' lives and their communities. Field Reports do not have the rigid structure of Analytical Articles, and are shorter in length, averaging ca. 700-800 words.

Those interested in joining *The Analyst's* pool of authors to contribute articles, field reports, or contacts of potential writers, please send your CV to: scornell@jhu.edu and suggest some topics on which you would like to write.

Svante E. Cornell

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THE BENEFITS OF NEGOTIATING WITH MODERATE TALIBAN LEADERS

Haroun Mir

Recently, important international and local players in the Afghan political arena have brought up the prospect of talks with moderate Taliban leaders. President Hamid Karzai has publicly announced that he has been in contact for some time with Taliban representatives. Also, a number of political and military experts from NATO countries are increasingly favoring dialogue with moderate Taliban figures. The growing Taliban resurgence and the unwillingness of the majority of NATO countries to lose troops have contributed to this development. The government of Pakistan has also provided incentives to the Taliban to enter into political negotiations to revamp its international image.

BACKGROUND: The idea of negotiations with moderate Taliban leaders is not new. Indeed, the exclusion of moderate Taliban figures from the Bonn negotiation following the collapse of their regime in 2001 is now considered a mistake. In fact, the quick and easy victory of coalition forces over the Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters blinded Western decision makers about the reality of political and tribal issues in Afghanistan, which are the direct result of almost three decades of conflict in the country. While all other Afghan political and ethnic groups were represented in Bonn, the moderate Taliban leaders, who were willing to cooperate with the coalition forces, were sidelined from the negotiations. They could have participated not in the name of the Taliban movement but as local leaders of the Greater Kandahar region, which includes all Pashtun-dominated provinces of the southwest of Afghanistan. In fact, the Bonn negotiations alienated Pashtun tribes that had ruled Afghanistan for over 200 years.

Indeed, the lack of representation of moderate Taliban leaders in the Bonn process as well as in the transitional government headed by Mr. Karzai forced a considerable number of them to seek refuge in Pakistan. This promoted the agenda of the hard-line

Taliban leadership to impose its vision of military resistance on the moderate ones who had been in favor of a settlement with Karzai. In early 2002-2003, the hard-line Taliban led by Mullah Omar coerced a number of moderate local tribal leaders to cease cooperation with Mr. Karzai, and did not hesitate to

assassinate those who rejected Omar's leadership. The latest of such assassination attempts was the recent attack against Mullah Naqibullah, a former prominent mujahideen commander and chieftain from the Arghandab district of Kandahar.

Unlike what is commonly assumed in the West, the Taliban movement is not a political or ideological

movement. It is primarily a predominantly Pashtun movement from the Greater Kandahar area. For instance, other Pashtun opposition leaders such as Gulbuddin Hekmatyar (the leader of Hezb-e-Islami)



Mullah Omar

and Mawlawi Jalaludin Haqqani (a former mujahideen commander from Paktia province) are not considered the integral part of the Taliban movement because they do not belong to the tribes of Greater Kandahar. Despite being a close ally of al-Qaeda, Hekmatyar does not enjoy a close relationship with the Taliban. The most loyal units of the Taliban forces have always been a core of young fighters from the main tribes of Greater Kandahar.

The late Ahmad Shah Massoud, the former Afghan defense minister, recognized much earlier the importance of legitimate interlocutors in the Pashtun-dominated region of Afghanistan. He understood that Pashtun leaders from the South and East of the country, who enjoyed a friendly relationship with Pakistani authorities, could not represent the dominant tribes of Greater Kandahar.

He had tried to promote some of the Durrani leaders who had deliberately been kept isolated by Pakistani military authorities. Once the Taliban movement emerged in early 1994 in Kandahar, Massoud promoted leaders in the Durrani-dominated area with whom he could share political power. For instance, when the Taliban reached the southern doors of Kabul, he went to *negotiate* with Mullah Omar's deputy, Mullah Rabbani in their stronghold of Maidan-Shar in the west of Kabul. Massoud went alone with several bodyguards to a meeting surrounded by Taliban fighters. He was convinced that in the Afghan traditions of Pashtunwali code of conduct, he would never be harmed as a guest even by his enemies.

The making and unraveling of alliances between belligerent groups has been the norm in Afghan politics since the communist coup in 1978. Those very close collaborators of Massoud who criticize Karzai for negotiating with the Taliban, ignore the fact that

Massoud never closed the door to negotiations with any of his enemies. When Hekmatyar lost his stronghold in the South of the country to Taliban forces, he sought Massoud's protection in Kabul. He was safely escorted from Kabul to Kunduz and from there to Iran. In 1997, Massoud twice conducted long conversations via satellite phone with Taliban leader

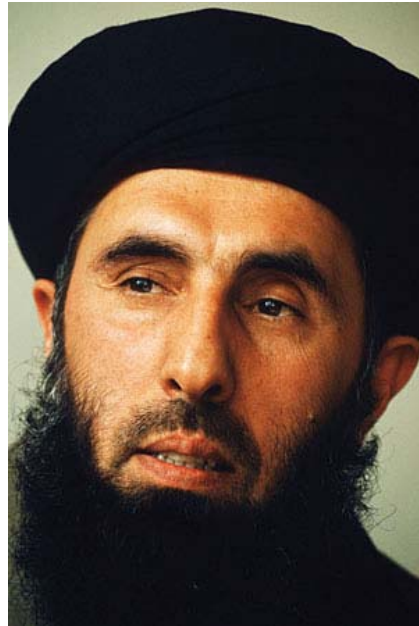
Mullah Omar. Each time, he invited him to negotiations and to accept the will of people through a Loya Jirga (Traditional council). Unfortunately, Taliban leaders such as Mullah Rabbani and Mullah Burjan who favored negotiations with Massoud were marginalized or eliminated by hard-line elements inside the Taliban movement.

Indeed, the initiative to negotiate with moderate Taliban leaders holds promise for the long-term stability of Afghanistan. All of the Taliban are not terrorists or backers of al-Qaeda. People have joined the Taliban movement for various reasons, including economic and social ones. Initiating talks with the Taliban is not a difficult enterprise, but finding legitimate and representative leaders is more difficult. Only Pakistani authorities could help NATO and Afghan

government in facilitating negotiations with moderate Taliban leaders, because the majority of them live in or maintain loose ties to Pakistan.

IMPLICATIONS: Extending an olive branch to the Taliban is the most cost-effective way to resolve the conflict in Afghanistan. If American and NATO military expenses in Afghanistan were to be spent for the reconstruction of the country, electricity, paved roads, water, schools, and hospitals would have been brought to much greater parts of Afghanistan's population. In fact, many teenagers join the Taliban as fighters because they lack alternatives or prospects of a normal life.

Appointing a number of influential people from the tribes of Greater Kandahar to key government positions, even though they have collaborated with the Taliban, would legitimize the Afghan government in the trouble spots in the southwest. In fact, current Afghan ministers are not the best and the brightest,



Gulbuddin Hekmatyar

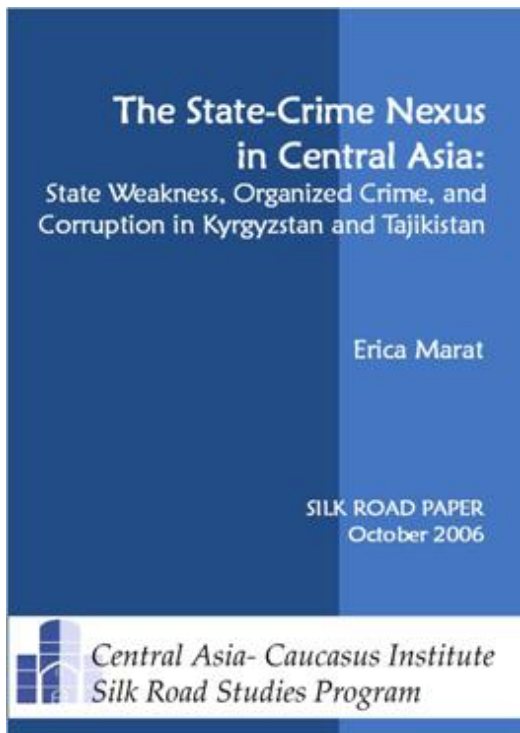
and some of them lack serious credentials. Replacing a few of them with traditional Pashtun leaders accompanied with good advisors could be a better solution to the current governance issues.

Narcotics producers are taking advantage of the precarious and unstable situation in the southwest of Afghanistan. The issue of poppy cultivation can only be resolved if the Taliban abandon their fight against Afghan government and coalition forces. In the past, the Taliban have shown their capacity to eradicate poppy cultivation from Afghanistan. If they are provided the right incentives, they could become an asset in forcing drug traffickers out of their area.

Pakistan is under increasing international pressure over its ties with the Taliban. The initiative of talks with moderate Taliban leaders might provide an opportunity for the Pakistani authorities to save face and to play a positive mediation role to facilitate such negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan government. In addition, this could be considered as the right step to improve bilateral relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

CONCLUSIONS: Every military expert knows that an insurgency in Afghanistan's southwest could last over a decade, and the Soviet debacle in Afghanistan is still alive in the memory of people. In fact, NATO countries that have a military mission in Afghanistan do not have the will to commit their forces for unforeseeable future, as their public opinion has become increasingly critical to the loss of soldiers. Past experience of conflict resolution throughout the world has shown that political stability cannot be achieved through guns alone but through political compromise and economic development. Ultimately, the initiation of dialogue with the Taliban through the mediation of Pakistani authorities would improve ties between Afghanistan and Pakistan, which is critical to reduce the grasp of international terrorists, such as al-Qaeda, in the tribal zone bordering the two countries.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Haroun Mir served over five years as an aide to the late Ahmad Shah Massoud, Afghanistan's former defense minister. He works as a policy analyst in Kabul.



New Silk Road Paper!

The State-Crime Nexus in Central Asia: State Weakness, Organized Crime and Corruption in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan

by Erica Marat

This paper analyzes the divergent forms that relationships between organized crime and the state have taken in the two worst hit Central Asian states in the past decade.

This 138-page paper is available from the offices of the Joint Center cited on the inside cover of this issue, or freely downloadable in PDF format from either www.cacianalyst.org or www.silkroadstudies.org.

BERDYMUKHAMMEDOV BURNISHES MUSLIM CREDENTIALS ON VISIT TO SAUDI ARABIA

Christopher Boucek

On April 16th, recently elected Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov concluded a four-day visit to Saudi Arabia, his first trip abroad as head of state. It is noteworthy—albeit not entirely surprising—that Berdymukhammedov’s first foreign destination was Saudi Arabia, and not Moscow or Beijing. The trip was focused on two objectives: bolstering the president’s Muslim credentials and expanding bilateral cooperation and investment in the Turkmen energy sector. While Saudi participation in an expanding hydrocarbon industry may eventually result, the most significant development of this trip may prove to be the increased usage of religion to legitimate the Turkmenistan’s first post-Niyazov government.

BACKGROUND: The planning for Berdymukhammedov’s official visit began with an invitation from King Abdullah in late March. Saudi Arabia has maintained steady ties with Turkmenistan since relations were established in 1992, and in 1997, the Saudis began construction of a major purpose-built embassy facility on a 15,000 m² location in downtown Ashgabat. Recently, relations with Saudi Arabia have been characterized as consisting primarily of ‘aid and assistance.’ Annual trade between the two nations is modest, having been lately estimated at approximately \$41 million, primarily consisting of Saudi exports of industrial equipment and consumer goods. In addition to expanded commercial ties and greater collaboration on energy matters, the Turkmen government is also eager to develop greater tourism, cultural, and educational relations with the kingdom, and a Saudi state cultural mission recently visited Ashgabat. Tourism has thus far been relatively low; however, Turkmenistan has been a frequent desert hunting and falconry destination for Saudi and other Gulf Arabs.

Berdymukhammedov began his visit to Saudi Arabia not in Riyadh, but by traveling first to Jeddah, and from there proceeding to make *umrah*. Frequently described as the ‘lesser pilgrimage’ *umrah* can be preformed at anytime of the year, as

opposed to the *Hajj* pilgrimage, the timing of which dictated by the Muslim lunar calendar. In Makkah, he took part in Friday prayers, and from there made the additional trip to Medina and preformed the



President Berdymukhammedov

ritual visit to the Mosque of the Prophet and Prophet Muhammad's tomb.

Turkmenistan's *Watan* television news and TDH, the State Information Agency of Turkmenistan, showed Berdymukhammedov prior to his departure at Ashgabat airport dressed in *ihram*, the simple white garments required of all male pilgrims denoting the humility and equality of all pilgrims. This symbolism and imagery is extremely important in such a tightly controlled environment as Turkmenistan, and was no doubt intended to bolster Berdymukhammedov's Muslim credentials and broaden his legitimacy.

In Riyadh, Berdymukhammedov and the Turkmen delegation had a series of official meetings with King Abdullah and other senior leaders, including Crown Prince Sultan; Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal; Interior Minister Prince Nayaf; Prince Salman, governor of Riyadh Province; Deputy Petroleum Minister Muttalib an-Nafisa; Prince Sattam, deputy governor of Riyadh; as well as a number of other senior civil and military officers, and representatives of the armed forces and General Intelligence. Following the meeting with the King, the two foreign ministries signed a General Agreement on Cooperation to further develop bilateral relations between the two governments. In a sign of the expanding bilateral relations, it was also announced during this visit that Ashgabat would establish a Turkmen embassy in Riyadh.

The issues discussed in the Turkmen delegation's meetings included investment in the Turkmen medical sector, collaboration in agricultural education, and expanded cooperation in hydrocarbon development and coordination. Of particular interest, the two leaders discussed "the outlook for bilateral relations and a number of international problems," interpreted by some observers to be developments regarding Iran and Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia's newly assertive foreign policy, and the future of the Gas Countries Exporting Forum (GCEF). Berdymukhammedov and Oil and Gas Minister Gurbanmurat Atayev discussed possible Saudi investment in the Turkmen hydrocarbon sector and called for Saudi

participation in the exploitation of Caspian shelf reserves.

At a red carpet reception for the Turkmen delegation at the Riyadh Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Berdymukhammedov invited private sector Saudi businesses to invest in the Turkmen hydrocarbon sector, and agreed to the formation of a joint Saudi-Turkmen Business Council. Specifically, he encouraged Saudi firms to conduct geological surveys and advanced hydrocarbon surveys in the Central Asian state and called for Saudi assistance in the modernization of the country's oil-refining and petrochemical industries. Other possible investment opportunities were discussed by the Turkmen delegation, including opportunities in the agricultural sector and the tourism sector—in particular the construction of several major hotels along the Caspian coast. Berdymukhammedov also offered incentives to Saudi businesses investing in Turkmenistan and promised to 'ease visa application for Saudi businessmen.'

IMPLICATIONS: Saudi Arabia has frequently been an initial foreign destination for regional leaders. In January 2002, Afghan President Hamid Karzai made Saudi Arabia his first foreign destination, and in 1992 late president Niyazov traveled to the kingdom as one of his first trips abroad and made *umrah* in an attempt to enhance his legitimacy.

Such trips convey several messages. First and foremost, they serve to reinforce the perception of Muslim piety and legitimacy. This is important in the case of Berdymukhammedov as he was a relatively unknown functionary prior to Niyazov's death, and he has had to construct an image separate from that of Turkmenbashi. Moreover, the decision to make Saudi Arabia his first foreign destination signifies a relative independence from the region's historic and emerging hegemonic actors. This echoes Niyazov's foreign policy of positive neutrality and it resonates with what we have seen thus far of the Berdymukhammedov government: non-alignment, suggestions of greater constructive

engagement with other regional powers, and a primacy of hydrocarbon sales.

While Berdymukhammedov was in the kingdom, the Turkmen media provided regular reports of his visit. These newscasts on state-controlled television have repeatedly noted the president's pilgrimage, while providing relatively little information of the substantive outcomes of the meetings with Saudi officials. It appears that this aspect, the establishment and reinforcement of the president's Muslim credentials, has been a primary objective of the visit. Such careful image maintenance is extremely important for the new president as he seeks to craft his own visage, distinct from Niyazov's ever-present shadow. In a further highlight of the president's Muslim identity, state-run Turkmen media also highlighted the fact that 'sacrificial meals' being offered throughout the country in Dasoguz, Mary, Ahal, and Balkan regions in honor of Berdymukhammedov's successful completion of *umrah* pilgrimage.

Of his four days in Saudi Arabia, Berdymukhammedov and his delegation spent two of them performing *umrah*, leaving only two days for official meetings in Riyadh. While Saudi economic and humanitarian assistance was very likely discussed, substantive discussions focused largely on expanding commercial ties and increasing energy cooperation. Following on the GECF Doha meeting and recent Turkmen assertions that it will be able to meet all its international obligations for natural gas sales, much of the discussions are presumed to have focused on ways in which the two hydrocarbon producers can maximize their market shares. Indeed, Berdymukhammedov stressed to his Saudi hosts several times how Turkmenistan is on schedule to expand its oil and gas production and exports by 15 and 20 percent respectively.

CONCLUSIONS: Many of the results of Berdymukhammedov's first foreign visit remain to be seen. Greater Saudi investment in the Turkmen economy may be a difficult sell in the kingdom, especially after the difficultly Saudi firms experienced when they first went to region after independence, when bureaucratic obstacles and

rampant corruption drove all but the most persistent investors away.

To be sure, the Saudis most certainly have been relieved at Berdymukhammedov's expression of 'appropriate' Muslim piety. The last time a Turkmen president visited the kingdom, the Saudis gave the Turkmen government a massive grant to subsidize mosque construction and to underwrite pilgrimage expenses. Niyazov reportedly spent these funds to build the enormous mosque at Kipchak—complete with inscriptions of the *Ruhnama*—hardly what the Saudis had in mind. Insult was added to injury when Niyazov then announced that yearly pilgrimages to Kipchak could be substituted for making *Hajj*.

Perhaps the most tangible development to come from Berdymukhammedov's visit could come in the form of expanded permission for Turkmen citizens to make pilgrimage to the Makkah. The number of Turkmen pilgrims allowed to make the Hajj in recent years has been limited to 188—the capacity of a single passenger aircraft—despite a quota by Saudi authorities of over 4,500. During the Niyazov era, the Turkmen government was alleged to have subjected potential pilgrims to investigation by the country's security services, and it was reported that Hajj pilgrims were escorted by Turkmen security officers while in the kingdom. After their president's own pilgrimage and the certain encouragement to loosen restriction that his Saudi hosts likely offered, this would be a welcome expansion of personal freedoms in line with other recent decrees. However, such religious liberties might be a step too far for the cautious Berdymukhammedov.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Christopher Boucek is a Postdoctoral Researcher at Princeton University focusing on terrorism, security, and regime stability issues in energy producing nations in the Middle East and Central Asia.

ARMENIA GEARS UP FOR PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

Grigor Hakobyan

Parliamentary elections will be held in Armenia on May 12, 2007. The opposition parties have yet again found themselves unable to unite around common candidates or develop effective campaign platforms to rally people around themselves. They fail to pose a substantial challenge to the ruling coalition government. Instead, a new political force, known as Prosperous Armenia and led by a leading industrialist, has emerged on the political scene. This force's relationship to the government remains a question mark. More than anything, the conduct and result of the election will set the stage for next year's presidential elections.

BACKGROUND: Twenty-four political parties and one election block called "Impeachment", (comprised of the formerly ruling Armenian National Movement and a number of small parties and organizations) will compete during the May 12 parliamentary elections in Armenia. Recent electoral reforms have changed the number of candidates to be elected on proportional party list and in single-mandate constituencies, where party membership is not required. Specifically, 1497 candidates will compete for 90 mandates available under the proportional systems based on party lists, while 41 parliamentary seats will be filled through single-mandate constituencies. Furthermore, as provided by the new Armenian constitution, the distribution of powers between the main branches of government are balanced out at the expense of curtailed Presidential powers.

Other changes that occurred as a result of these electoral reforms were the creation of a new national voter registry database, and the introduction of new regulations regarding official announcements of voting results. Specific guidelines regarding the handling of voter complaints were also established in tandem with an expansion of the rights of candidate proxies and electoral observer teams present at the polling stations. Further electoral reforms were carried out in order to streamline the process of counting votes

and preventing any tampering with ballots and ballot boxes. However, despite constitutional changes and major electoral reforms, the opposition parties in Armenia have failed to unite themselves into a political force that holds promise to bring significant changes in the internal political dynamics of the country.

The lack of charismatic leaders among the opposition parties and their inability to unite on a common political and economic platform, as well as their inability to elect united opposition candidates, cast doubts on their overall abilities to rally a significant portion of the Armenian electorate to secure enough seats in Armenia's post-election parliament. This would prevent the opposition from exerting enough influence to establish the frequently promised strong and transparent democratic institutions in the country, or any influence on the foreign and domestic policies of the government. These shortcomings, prevailing among the Armenian opposition, are further compounded by a lack of available resources.

Furthermore, the absence of clear party lines on various issues important to the Armenian electorate undermines the opposition's efforts to gain substantial representation in the new Armenian Parliament. This includes proposals to resolve Armenia's prevailing problems, including the high unemployment rate, excessive tariffs on public

services such as gas, water and electricity that many consumers cannot afford, the lack of competition in various sectors of Armenia's economy, widespread tax evasion by the most profitable companies, and rampant corruption among law enforcement bodies and local and state governments. Additionally, indifference among many discontented voters toward political affairs is likely to further weaken the voter turnout for the support of opposition candidates.



Gagik Tsarukian

IMPLICATIONS: As a result of the many weaknesses of the opposition camp, the only major political forces that have a prospect of gaining a decisive mandates in the next Parliament are the Prosperous Armenia Party, the Republican Party of Armenia, and the Armenian Revolutionary Federation. A small number of other parties, including oppositional ones, may be able to secure several seats as well, yet their individual and collective political clout is likely to be limited to the point of being ineffective in exerting any influence upon the political process.

Among the parties representing the ruling coalition government, the Republican Party of Armenia is the most influential, due to its possession of large financial resources and its ability to rally numerous voters into supporting the RPA, at times utilizing questionable methods to do so. The recent death the RPA's former leader, Prime Minister Andranik Markaryan and the meteoric rise of long-time Defense Minister Serge Sarkissian to the helm of the RPA leadership and into the position of acting Prime Minister is likely to have boosted the RPA's prospects of winning a large number of parliamentary seats in the upcoming elections. Markaryan was known for his openness to dialogue with the opposition and balanced approach toward the competing interests of Russia, the U.S. and the EU in the region. Serge Sarkissian's closeness to Russian business circles and the ruling leadership in Moscow makes the RPA Moscow's favorite. By contrast, the opposition parties that present themselves as western-oriented do not have enough resources or supporters to effectively compete with the RPA. Moreover, it is not exactly clear which party or group of parties within the Armenian opposition genuinely believe in western values and thus could become effective conduits for western ideas into the Armenian public mainstream.

The only political force in Armenia appearing to have the potential to seriously challenge the RPA during this election campaign is the Prosperous Armenia Party, headed by Gagik Tsarukian. Tsarukian is by some accounts the richest oligarch in Armenia, and currently a member of Parliament from electoral district #42. Tsarukian is a member of Parliament's Standing Committee on Defense, National Security and Internal Affairs. He is formerly a Chief Engineer at the Yerevan Institute of Animal Husbandry and Treatment, and presently owns a range of large profitable businesses, including the Kotayk Abovyan Beer Factory, the Abovyan Plant of Measuring Equipment, Yerevan Chemical Factory, Mek Furniture Network and Yerevan Ararat Brandy, Wine & Vodka Factory.

The weaknesses of the Prosperous Armenia party are nevertheless many. They range from its lack of

any specific political ideology that the party would have aligned itself with to the absence of major ideas about ways to improve the state of Armenian economy, finding means to tackle the problem of tax evasions and public corruption in the country or having any vision of the country's foreign policy direction and priorities. Although the Prosperous Armenia Party boasts having the largest number of members and voting constituents, their loyalty to the party and its leader in the long term are rather doubtful. Furthermore, the role of Prosperous Armenia Party in the rivalry between the opposition and the ruling government is rather vague and its future course of action remains undefined.

CONCLUSIONS: Due to continuous political pressure by the EU, the U.S. and various international bodies on the government, it is very likely that the parliamentary elections will register improvements in the conduct of elections and the tabulation of votes. Washington's decision to connect the disbursement of Millennium Challenge

Account funds to Armenia with the conduct of the elections is likely to play a major role in improving the transparency of electoral conduct. This will to some extent deter high-ranking individuals or those with ties to the ruling government from making efforts to engage in an electoral fraud. A number of prosecutions associated with electoral fraud are also expected.

The results of Armenia's parliamentary elections will be decisive for the upcoming 2008 presidential elections. Those who will win a significant mandates in the Parliament will be able to utilize much greater resources in waging a strong presidential campaign. Furthermore, the degree of transparency and fairness in the conduct of the parliamentary elections will provide a better picture of what to expect during the Presidential elections.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Grigor Hakobyan is a freelance writer based on the U.S. East Coast.



New Silk Road Paper!

The Wider Black Sea Region: An Emerging Hub in European Security

by Svante Cornell, Anna Jonsson, Niklas Nilsson, and Per Häggström

This 120-page paper analyzes emerging role of the Wider Black Sea Region in European Security, and European interests there. It provides concise analysis of major challenges in the region, and policy recommendations for Europe's future policies there.

This 120-page paper is available from the offices of the Joint Center cited on the inside cover of this issue, or freely downloadable in PDF format from either www.cacianalyst.org or www.silkroadstudies.org.

KYRGYZSTAN'S CRIPPLED CONSTITUTIONAL COURT

Joldosh Osmonov and Nurshat Ababakirov

Given the vibrant opposition's fervor to limit the President's power through constitutional reforms, and the President's stubborn determination to oppose that, the Kyrgyz Constitution appears a victim of the belligerent sides. Both opposition and pro-government parliamentarians ignored the voice of the Constitutional Court, which was to give a permission to consider the amendments, in November and December 2006. As an institution that should be at the center of the constitutional discussions, it remains highly constrained by the interests of some politicians and being used as a tool to delay constitutional reforms.

BACKGROUND: Established in 1993, the Constitutional Court quickly became a stumbling stone for other branches of government. During the regime of Askar Akayev, there were several attempts to abolish it by merging it with the Supreme Court. In 1995 the Parliament for the first time attempted to carry out a referendum on this matter; however it failed, since the Constitutional Court successfully disputed the constitutionality of the Parliament's decision. In 2002, there was a second attempt to incorporate it into the Supreme Court on the wave of constitutional reforms initiated by the "expert commission" gathered by then President Akaev. The main argument was that merging the Constitutional Court with the Supreme Court, which has representatives at the local level, would bring it closer to the people by opening access for all citizens to turn to it. Experts argued that transferring its right of constitutional review to ordinary courts would contradict the basic principles of the legal system. They strongly contended that no local court could consider the cases of the Constitutional Court, decisions of which are final and cannot be disputed.

On 26 September 2005, acting Minister of Justice Marat Kayipov, after leaving the Constitutional Court as a judge, made a statement about radical reforms in the judicial branch. He resumed the efforts of the previous regime, arguing that the Constitutional Court failed to fulfill its tasks, pointing to its "inefficiency and detachment from

the grassroots." However, such radical moves on the part of government officials generated deeper suspicions. Undermined by the Akaev regime during the Constitutional reforms of 2003, the already weakened Constitutional Court again became threatened of abolition during the discussions on Constitutional reform that followed the ouster of Akaev. On the other hand, many pointed to Marat Kayipov's bad personal relations with Cholpon Bayekova, the chairperson of the Constitutional Court. While Kayipov was part of Bakiev's team, Bayekova was considered an Akaev cadre, and worked in the Court for more than 10 years. After the March 2005 events, she appeared critical about the new government's unwillingness to proceed with radical reforms, especially in relation to the balance of power among the branches of government.

Formed after the March 2005 events to draft a new constitution, the variegated Constitutional Council, which included people from both the opposition and government, including local elders and high officials, had only one representative from the Constitutional Court: its chair, Cholpon Bayekova. The other five judges were excluded. The Constitutional Council proved inefficient in carrying out its task, given its cumbersome size and nature, representing people unwilling to compromise, and rather proving susceptible to advancing President Bakiev's interests.

IMPLICATIONS: Over the last years, the Constitutional Court has remained paralyzed and sidelined from intensive discussions over Constitutional reform. It is unable to work fully because of the absence of a quorum. It presently has six judges, while one more is needed to form a quorum and three to fill all the vacant seats. Officially, the question of selection of judges stumbles on the “gender issue.” According to President Bakiev, the parliament is interested in choosing female nominees, which additionally should come from the southern part of Kyrgyzstan. And President Bakiev does not constrain himself from blaming the legislative branch for delaying the completion of a fully-fledged Constitutional Court, stressing that he nominated two candidates over six months ago.

Nevertheless, despite the President’s rhetoric about a “powerful and impartial” judicial branch, many experts and opposition parliamentarians claim that the president intentionally keeps the Constitutional Court idle by using his majority support in the Parliament. The Parliament has repeatedly postponed the process, thus hindering Constitutional reforms forced on the President by the strong opposition and geared towards limiting the President’s power.

Another reason why the Constitutional Courts remains paralyzed is related to the parliament itself. The rigged parliamentary elections of 2005, which led to ouster of Akaev, still mar the parliament’s legality and legitimacy. In a recent interview, newly appointed Prime Minister Almaz Atambaev expressed his skepticism that lawmakers would be in favor of the Constitutional Court’s activities, which among other would be scheduled to consider the numerous complaints coming from parliamentary candidates that were officially defeated in 2005 but claim their defeat was caused by fraud. If these cases were brought to court, several of the seats in the parliament could be disputed.

As the court remains crippled, its power has been considerably reduced. As a result of the constitutional amendments that were controversially passed during the political tensions of November and December 2006, the articles about the power of the Constitutional Court were cut to

five out of nine guaranteed by Constitutional amendments in 2003. Moreover, according to the last draft of the constitution developed by the working group headed by Prime Minister Atambaev, some of the court’s function could be abolished. For example, if these amendments are passed, the Constitutional Court will not be able to assess the constitutionality of the activities of political parties and public organizations, while being confined to the issues related to state bodies and protecting citizens’ rights.

Last but not least, one reason for the impediments to a functional court is that if a sound and potent Constitutional Court is established, questions over the legitimacy of the constitutional amendments passed in November and December are likely to be raised. The November amendments, believed to usher in a parliamentary system, were pushed forward by the opposition parliamentarians backed by thousands of people on the streets. A month later, the pro-Bakiev parliamentarians returned the lost powers to the president, given the apparent contradictions in the constitution, falling short of considering provisions for a transitional period.

CONCLUSIONS: The necessity of staffing the Constitutional Court is apparent, and could come to the fore soon as the opposition and the government should come to an agreement on a draft of a yet again revised constitution. However, the Constitutional Court’s current state of idleness is favorable for the pro-Bakiev parliamentarians and for the President himself. It helps the president and his parliamentary supporters delay the process of constitutional reforms, which they firmly oppose, and prevents the legitimacy of parliament and the constitutional amendments from being questioned. Such foot-dragging could also serve to cool off the opposition’s supporters on the streets. In general, the judicial branch remains weak and susceptible to the influences of the other two branches. Not only the Constitutional Court but other courts as well are far from fully staffed.

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FIELD REPORTS

IS KOCHARIAN ESTABLISHING A SECOND “PARTY OF POWER” IN ARMENIA?

Haroutiun Khachatrian

The main intrigue of the May 12 parliamentary elections of Armenia will evidently be if the Republican Party of Armenia (RPA), which has been the core of the government since 1999, will keep its leading position or will share its powers with another “party of power.”

The RPA was founded in 1990 by a group of activists of nationalist ideology led by Ashot Navasardian, a Soviet-era dissident. Its official ideology is so-called tseghakron (stands for “nation-religion”) of Garegin Nzhdeh – a prominent political figure of the first half of 20th century who died in the Gulags in 1955. Tseghahkron implies that the national identity and nation-state are highest values for Armenians, and should serve as a religion for them. In 1998, after the death of Navasardian, a large group of so-called Yerkrpahs (Karabakh war veterans) joined the RPA. Their leader Vazgen Sarkissian, then defense minister, became the party leader and after the June 1999 elections also ascended to the post of prime minister. In May 2000, Andranik Markaryan replaced Vazgen Sarkissian who fell victim of the terrorist act of October 27, 1999, when gunmen entered the parliament and killed Sarkissian as well as the speaker of parliament and several other officials. Markaryan died on March 25, 2007, his seven-year tenure being the longest period of stability and rapid economy growth of Armenia, during his tenure, the country

was even branded “The Caucasian Tiger” by the World Bank due to its impressive economic performance. On April 4, Serge Sarkissian, previously defense minister, was appointed prime minister to lead Markaryan’s government for the one month remaining before its resignation prior to the May 12 elections.

The RPA faces several challenges, which the death of Markaryan, its long-term and skilful leader, has exacerbated. The first challenge is keeping its grip on power. Paradoxically, the main danger in this aspect arises not from any official opposition party (they are weak and fail to co-ordinate their actions), but from a new party, which pledges to follow essentially the same path as RPA has followed so far. This would-be ruling party, Bargavach Hayastan (Prosperous Armenia) led by Gagik Tsarukian, one of the wealthiest people of Armenia, came to the scene last year,. Prosperous Armenia has managed to gain the sympathies of a significant part of the population, especially, the poor, not least because of the large-scale “charity actions” funded by Tsarukian. Hence Prosperous Armenia is evidently attracting potential opposition voters. However, this party, declaring its ambitions to become part of the ruling elite, is short of people having experience in working on key state posts, as most of its activists are mid-level state officials. As for the elections, the administrative and financial

resources of both parties look similar. After the initial shock caused by the growing popularity of Prosperous Armenia (and aggravated by Markaryan's death), the RPA said its ambitions have become as high as to seek a majority in the 131-seat parliament. Currently, RPA has 40 seats and runs a coalition government with two smaller parties.

The second challenge is the danger of ideological degradation. Having declared itself a "national-conservative" party, the RPA has tried to support its ideological principles, including by amending the school curriculum and regulating relations between Armenia and the Diaspora, etc. However, since the late 1990s, many people joined it just to become part of the ruling elite. Members of Yerkrapah were followed by ministers, community leaders, and businessmen. Thus the RPA faces the perspective of becoming a "trade union of state officials," such as Yedinaya Rossia (United Russia) in Russia. In this sense, the death of Markaryan, also a Soviet-era dissident, was a heavy loss for the party, as he managed to combine ideological "purity" with pragmatism. It is not evident that Serge Sarkissian, who joined the party as late as last July, will be similarly successful in this respect. His recent interview to the *Financial Times* on April 9, in which he said the government may be forced to choose between securing economic growth and protecting human rights, is an indication of this danger.

The third and probably most serious challenge is the possible conflict between Serge Sarkissian and Robert Kocharian, both before and after the May elections. Kocharian and Sarkissian have co-

operated since the late 1980s, when they were among the leaders of the movement for the separation of Nagorno-Karabakh from Azerbaijan, and later among those who governed Karabakh during the war with Azerbaijan. Yet they increasingly obviously becoming rivals. Kocharian's second and last term as president expires in 2008, but Kocharian has declared his intention not to leave active political life thereafter. Sarkissian, in his turn, is seen as the most likely next president, and success in the May parliamentary elections will enhance his chances. It is not clear what particular post or position Kocharian will seek, but it is evident that Prosperous Armenia – a party strongly supported and allegedly controlled by Kocharian – is expected to play a key role in the plans of the current non-partisan president. It is noteworthy that Tsarukian, the formal leader of Prosperous Armenia, has said that he will not seek any government post, and rumors allege that the businessman was simply pushed by Kocharian to lead this party. The most likely scenario is that Kocharian, with Prosperous Armenia, tries to create a counter-balance to RPA, thus acquiring more room for maneuver against Sarkissian when and if he takes the office of President next year. In fact, Kocharian has not made his plans clear, and there is a broad range of speculations as for the possible actions of the two leaders (and their parties), during the battles in the coming months. There is concern that violent actions will not be excluded either. The recent assassination attempt on a RPA activist and explosions near two Prosperous Armenia offices may be part of these battles.

UN EXTENDS OBSERVATION MISSION IN ABKHAZIA

Kakha Jibladze

The latest extension for the United Nations Observation Mission in Georgia has been universally praised by all sides in the Abkhazian conflict. While the Russian government stressed the

decree includes all of Moscow's 'priorities,' Tbilisi is also praising the document for its support of Georgia's position in the Kodori gorge, as well as the government's position on refugees.

On April 13, the UN Security Council passed resolution 1752, the biannual extension of the UN's monitoring operation in the Abkhazian conflict zone. Although the mandate has already been in existence for over a decade, it has only been in the past year that the Security Council's biannual vote has taken on serious political implications.

Six months ago, under resolution 1716, the Security Council passed a resolution widely characterized as pro-Russian. It reprimanded Tbilisi for its July police action in the Kodori gorge in upper Abkhazia, and for its decision to move the Georgian-backed Abkhazian government-in-exile to the gorge permanently. This year, however, instead of another slap on the wrist, Georgia received what amounts to neutral support for its continued presence in the gorge – the Abkhaz de facto government was called on to exercise caution in its relations with the Georgian government, in particular residents of the Kodori gorge, a tiny island of Georgian authority in the conflict zone. In addition, an earlier UN statement noted that the number of weapons and armaments in the conflict zone had decreased and Georgia was fulfilling its obligations under the mandate.

The only glaring omission in the resolution concerning Kodori was the council's lack of any definitive position over the March 11-12 bombing campaign on the administrative center of the gorge. While the UN did use the resolution to decry the attack, its diplomatic language did not shed any light on who is to blame for the bombing. Georgian authorities maintain that three surface-to-surface missiles were fired from Russian Mi-24s that flew into Georgian airspace from Russia. However, Moscow has denied any involvement, and the UN-led fact-finding mission has yet to announce any definitive result to their month-long investigation.

The Georgian Foreign Ministry praised the resolution, largely for its support of the Georgian initiative to expedite the return of the more than 200,000 Georgian displaced persons to their previous homes in Abkhazia. While the move to return the IDPs is nothing new, this resolution was the first

time the UN stated that not only are the refugees themselves important, but so is the new, younger generation which – although they have never lived in Abkhazia – certainly has also suffered due to a conflict they did not cause.

The Russian Foreign Ministry has also expressed support for the document, mentioning that it contains all of Moscow's 'priorities' for the conflict, which largely consist of the continued support for the Russian-led CIS peacekeeping force stationed in the conflict zone as part of the 1994 cease-fire agreement.

Despite continued efforts on Tbilisi's part, the UN once again maintained its support for the CIS peacekeepers and their role in maintaining stability in the region. The Georgian government has repeatedly attempted to overturn the 1994 agreement and internationalize the all-Russian peacekeeping force. However, resolution 1752 is unambiguous in its support for the peacekeepers' mandate, which means Tbilisi will have to wait another six months to try to upset Russia's continued presence in the conflict zone.

Resolution 1752 is certainly a diplomatic victory for Tbilisi – especially in comparison to resolution 1716 passed in October 2006. Georgia received support for fulfilling its obligations to date and an impetus for new negotiations with the de facto authorities 'without preconditions.' However the UN's continued reluctance to recognize the shortcomings of the Russian-led CIS peacekeeping force remains an obstacle if Tbilisi is determined to internationalize the peacekeeping and negotiation formats in the conflict zone.

CULTURAL REFORMATION IN TAJIKISTAN

Firuza Ganieva

Tajikistan has recently been creatively engaged in the revival of cultural heritage. On March 21, President Emomali Rahmonov publicly announced that he is abandoning the Russian suffix “ov” from his name, because he wants to be known as Emomali Rahmon – the original name of his father, which reflects the Persian roots of his family. Soon after this statement was made, the President rather spontaneously demanded the British Museum return the Oxus treasure, an ancient Persian collection of silver and gold found long ago on the territory of today’s Tajikistan.

Tajikistan has many problems. More than half the population in Tajikistan live below the poverty line, and the country experiences large deficits in both electric power and natural gas. Labor migration is another huge problem. Yet the President, now Rahmon, has chosen to focus on the revival of cultural heritage and thus embarked on a course of traditionalization. On the holiday of Novruz, which traces its origins to Zoroastrianism, Mr. Rahmon announced his new name, ancient and venerable.

President Rahmon explained this by his desire to be known by his father’s name, and he also encouraged the people of Tajikistan to reconsider their surnames, as well as the names of historical places and monuments of national value. Although national media claims that it was only an advisory gesture to the general populace to de-Russify their names, there is speculation that the reform of names will soon become mandatory in Tajikistan. Given the high level of labor migration from Tajikistan to Russia, a country which is unwelcoming towards immigrants, it is actually beneficial for Tajik citizens to have a Russian suffix. For instance, many people find it easier to register their documents in Russia with Russian surnames. Nevertheless, there was already an order at the civilian registry office to register newly born

children without Russian suffixes “ov” and “ev”, but rather with Persian alternatives.

In another move, Mr. Rahmon in early April demanded the surrender of the Oxus treasure, which belongs to and is part of the British Museum’s collection. The President gave a rigorous public speech that was broadcast on national television emphasizing that the Oxus treasure was found on the territory of present-day Tajikistan, and should be given back to the country. The British Museum never received a formal request from the Tajik government on the subject. Hence, this appears to be another act of demagoguery on the part of President Rahmon, seemingly an attempt to remind and draw public attention to the glorious past of the Tajik heritage.

Are the President’s reforms undertaken to unify the country and draw Tajikistan geopolitically closer to countries such as Iran and Afghanistan that share a common language heritage? Or is this a strategy to distract the public from larger, more pressing economic and social problems in Tajikistan? A pertinent question is why there is such an urgent need to abandon the Russian suffix now, when a law allowing people to change surnames has been in place as early as 1989. The sheer dimensions of the Tajik state bureaucracy and its corruption make the prospective reformation of names seem utopian, at least beyond the level of media-induced patriotism.

An additional plausible explanation for President Rahmon’s need to change his name is dissatisfaction with the work undertaken by Rusal, one of the world’s largest aluminum producers, closely connected with the Kremlin. Tajikistan and Rusal are participating in a joint venture to construct the Rogun hydroelectric station on the Vaksh River. When constructed, the station will not only have the potential to make Tajikistan self-sufficient in energy, but also to make the country one of the

main exporters of electricity in Central Asia. Emomali Rahmon's presidency has greatly focused on ways to increase the production of electric power, which can foster economic growth in Tajikistan, but already in August 2006, Tajik officials complained that Rusal was slow in respecting the agreement to finish construction of the hydroelectric station by 2009. At present, the construction of Rogun is further postponed due to

disagreements about the dimensions of the dam, as well as other technical issues between the two sides.

Such public ways of showing Tajikistan's dissatisfaction with Russia are bold and risky moves on the part of Dushanbe, because Russia has a significant role in the development of the country. For example, it would take nothing more to lead the country into chaos than a new restriction on the quota of labor migrants, that now officially is 600,000.

POLITICAL POPULISM IN POST-MARCH 24 KYRGYZSTAN

Erica Marat

Following the Tulip Revolution in March 2005, Kyrgyzstan's civil society groups noticeably increased in numbers and scope of activities. Today, the number of Kyrgyz civil society organizations and individual civic activists is high not only by Central Asian standards, but also in comparison with other post-Soviet states.

However, along with high civic activism, Kyrgyzstan is drowned in political populism voiced by various civic and political groups, as well as individual advocates. As Edil Baisalov, a known civic activist, notes, "today, a government official, former minister, and a 65-year old woman – all have an opportunity to voice their individual political agenda".

Most civic activists condemn the divide between political elites into northern and southern clans or pressure the government to fight corruption. Especially, anti-corruption slogans allowed numerous political actors to quickly gain popularity.

Meanwhile, although Kyrgyzstan's political domain is filled with populism and loud voices, the progress towards meaningful changes in the state's functioning and state-society relations is rather sluggish.

Local civic groups and activists are able to use a range available means of reproducing their messages, from print mass media outlets to internet forums. Among all, however, street protests have become an effective and popular tool in voicing political agendas. For two years since the Tulip Revolution, Kyrgyzstan has experienced dozens of large and small street protests staged almost on a monthly basis.

On April 11, two leading opposition blocs, the United Front and For Reforms, organized yet another mass demonstration in Bishkek to pressure the president to curb corruption and adopt a new constitution. The on-going demonstrations show that local political leaders have sharpened their skills in staging mass gatherings. The demonstrations' basic tool-kit includes organization of transportation for demonstrators from rural areas, setting up yurts and tents, serving warm meals, providing drinking water, handing out uniforms and posters to protestors, and arranging entertainment programs by inviting popular singers and musicians.

Importantly, Kyrgyz activists value the importance of peaceful demonstrations and seek to avoid

violence and looting. With that, political leaders, as well as protestors gathering at mass demonstrations, often represent the same group of people. There is indeed a “rent-a-mob” element in all protests organized since March 24, 2005.

The government and individual politicians have also learned ways of countering mass demonstration. For instance, in the November 2006 demonstrations, the government mobilized hundreds of public employees, including law-enforcement representatives, against opposition forces. As most Kyrgyz experts agree, the government-hired mobs intended to provoke the opposition into starting a fight. Before the April 11 demonstration, the opposition sought to warn the public that pro-government political forces might hire groups of sportsmen and criminal leaders to provoke fights among opposition demonstrators, as well as to stir looting throughout Bishkek.

Amid civil society’s hyper-activism, the state exhibits a limited propensity to enhancing its own functioning by delineating powers between its institutions and actors, as well as by curbing corruption. The state, thus, is not able to respond to the society’s demands besides giving verbal promises. As one Kyrgyz expert observes, unlike current president Kurmanbek Bakiyev, his predecessor, Askar Akayev, was able to effectively deter his opposition’s demands by framing erudite

answers, though also often being a populist himself. Bakiyev, on the other extreme, proved unable to address even the mainstream public with any convincing arguments. His *ad hoc* speeches to the public have turned into a source of mockery for their inconsistency and colloquialism.

Civil society activists, however, also often see their role as simply confronting the state, as opposed to finding ways for collaboration. Activists such as Baisalov suggest that holding early parliamentary elections is a possible solution to Kyrgyzstan’s swelling populism. If the next parliamentary elections will be held on the basis of party lists instead of single-mandate constituencies, political parties will be forced to consolidate.

In the current demonstrations, political forces should learn that absolute victories in political struggle do not necessarily secure stability. In contrast, finding political compromises should emerge as a new value among political actors in Kyrgyzstan. To date, political compromises have been associated mainly with political losses.

Potentially, opposition forces in neighboring Central Asian states could find it useful to learn from their Kyrgyz counterparts’ experience in staging popular protests. According to one Kyrgyz civic activist, Kazakhstan’s opposition leaders regularly express their excitement with the political activism in Kyrgyzstan.



NEWS DIGEST

TAJIKISTAN WORKS TO REPATRIATE CULTURAL VALUABLES FROM BRITAIN

6 April

Tajik President Emomali Rakhmonov has called for studying the chances of repatriating the Oxus treasure, also known as the Amu-Darya treasure, his press secretary Abdufattokh Sharipov told Interfax on Friday. "During his visit to the site of the ancient town of Takhti-Sangin in Khatlon region President Emomali Rahmon called for taking measures to organize an exhibition of findings of the Amu-Darya treasure and their subsequent repatriation," Sharipov said using the non-Slavic version of the president's name, in line with a recent presidential decree. "Meanwhile the Academy of Sciences and museums of Tajikistan have been invited to make their relevant proposals," he said. He found it difficult to say whether Tajikistan will insist on the free return of the exhibits from the British Museum or if it plans to buy them back. The Amu-Darya treasure discovered in 1877 comprises over 1,300 coins and pieces of jewelry dating back to the IV-II centuries B.C. when the ancient state of Bactriana existed in the territory of modern Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan and Iran. British representatives in India bought the treasure by installments from several merchants. "The question of repatriation is always complex and delicate. It is extremely difficult to prove that the artifacts had been smuggled from Tajikistan after so many years but we will study all the documents related to the Amu-Darya treasure," Rahim Masov, director of the Museum of Antiquities of Tajikistan told Interfax. (Interfax)

RUSSIAN DUMA RATIFIES PROTOCOLS ON KAZAKH TEST SITES

6 April

The lower house of parliament Friday ratified protocols on changes to agreements between Russia and Kazakhstan on the lease of four military test sites in the Central Asian state. Russia and Kazakhstan signed additional protocols to 1996 bilateral treaties on

the lease of the 4th and 929th testing ranges of the Russian Defense Ministry, and testing ranges at Sary-Shagan and Emba on November 25, 2005. "The ratification of the protocols meets the national interests of the Russian Federation and will promote the maintenance and further development of Russia's facilities aimed at testing new weaponry and military equipment, including missile defense systems, which will ensure the strengthening of the country's defense potential," the State Duma said in a statement. According to the protocols, Russia is required to pay an annual sum of about \$24.8 million for the lease of four testing grounds and related research facilities totaling 10 million hectares on the territory of the former Soviet republic as of January 1, 2005. Twenty-three percent of Russia's 4th state firing range at Kapustin Yar is located in Kazakhstan. In recent years, Kapustin Yar has been the site of the official trials of the Iskander-M missile system, as well as tests of the S-400 (SA-20 Triumf) surface-to-air missile system. The 929th State Test Flight Center, also known as Taysoygan or Vladimirovka, is comprised of three sections in Atyrau, Mangystau, and Western Kazakhstan regions. The territory is used to test combat aircraft and various types of weapons for all branches of the military. The Sary-Shagan test site was established in 1956 as the 10th State Scientific Research Testing Range of the former Soviet Union where anti-ballistic missile defense systems, air defenses, and laser weapons were tested. It was the only Soviet ABM test site permitted under the 1972 ABM Treaty. The Emba testing grounds, subordinated to Kapustin Yar in 1998, is where the F300, Buk, Tor and Tunguzka air defense systems have been tested. (RIA Novosti)

RELEASED IRANIAN DIPLOMAT ACCUSES CIA OF TORTURE - NEWS AGENCY

7 April

An Iranian diplomat abducted in Baghdad in early February and released earlier this week claims he has been interrogated and tortured by the CIA agents, an Iran's news agency reported Saturday. Jalal Sharafi,

the second secretary at the Iranian Embassy in Baghdad, was released and repatriated on Tuesday following what he claims an abduction by Iraqi special services working under U.S. control. In an interview with the Fars news agency, the diplomat said he was brought to a military base near the Baghdad airport and interrogated in Arabic and English languages. "The CIA agents asked me questions about Iran's presence and influence in Iraq, and Tehran's assistance to the Iraqi government, the Shiite, Sunnite and Kurd factions," Sharafi said. He also claimed the interrogators tortured him after they had become dissatisfied with his answers. He showed the signs of torture on his body to journalists, the news agency said. "They used different torture techniques during the interrogation, day and night for a long time," the diplomat, who is currently under medical examination, told the reporters. Tehran has already called the abduction an act of aggression, and blamed U.S. intelligence agents in Baghdad. (RIA Novosti)

NAZARBAYEV: REFORMS IN UKRAINE RESULTED IN INSTABILITY, THE SAME SCENARIO IN KYRGYZSTAN

10 April

Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev expressed his opinion on the events in Ukraine, speaking with leading analysts of four Kazakh TV-channels that was broadcasted yesterday. As a REGNUM correspondent informs, speaking about democratic reforms in the republic, Nazarbayev said: "What is going on in Ukraine now? Current Ukraine's president, Viktor Yushchenko spoke about big constitutional reforms two years ago in the Maidan (Independence Square in Kiev), he said that the whole power would be given to the parliament that would be given to the government and so on. Now, when all that has been fulfilled, when the parliament started using its powers, the president started having representative capacity only like the Queen in the UK." According to the Kazakh leader, reforms resulted in instability, and the generally elected president, as Nazarbayev said, cannot become guarantor of stability of the government and now "he started claiming for his powers back." An analogous scenario is being repeated in Kyrgyzstan. "Do we need it? As General De Gaulle used to say, rule of political parties resulted in France's collapse. During the world war, France that had the most effective army in Europe surrendered to Germany because members of the parliament could not come to a compromise a whole month long. There was nobody to take the responsibility." (regnum.ru)

IRAN'S BUSHEHR NPP TO GO ONLINE BEFORE MAR. 2008 – OFFICIAL

10 April

Iran's Bushehr nuclear power plant will be commissioned before March 2008, an Iranian official said Tuesday. The \$1 billion project being built under a 1995 contract was in jeopardy after Russia's Atomstroyexport, the general contractor, said that Tehran had not made any payments for the NPP's construction since mid-January, and that by the fourth quarter of 2006 the project had only received 60% of the required funding. The company warned that the launch of the NPP and nuclear fuel deliveries could be delayed as a result. On March 26, Atomstroyexport announced that Tehran had resumed financing of the Bushehr nuclear power plant and that it had received the first payment from Iran, but reiterated that Russia expected future payments on time to avoid further construction delays. "Even if we take into account the delays in plant construction, Iran will this year [the Iranian year ends March 20, 2008] undoubtedly become one of the states that have nuclear power plants," said Mohammad Saidi, a deputy head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran. According to the Iranian official, only 8% of the work remains to be carried out on building the Bushehr NPP and "this year its construction will be completed." Saidi said the construction of nuclear power plants by Iran is a priority in its nuclear program. "In the not so distant future, Iran will be able to build small capacity NPPs with the help of national specialists," Saidi said. The Bushehr project implemented under the supervision of the UN nuclear watchdog was originally scheduled for commissioning at the end of 2006, but the date has been postponed five times. The project was originally started by Germany's Siemens in 1975, but work stopped following the 1979 Islamic Revolution. (RIA Novosti)

ALI INSANOV: "ILHAM ALIYEV ABDUCTED POWER"

10 April

Trial of the former healthcare minister of Azerbaijan, Ali Insanov, and ten other suspects continues in Baku. Speaking at the trial today with his final plea, Ali Insanov said that President Ilham Aliyev abducted power, and founded his opinion this way: "Heydar Aliyev (Azerbaijan's ex-president, father of Ilham Aliyev -- REGNUM), while being in coma, could not appoint him as prime minister." As Azadlyg Radio reports, Insanov said in his final plea that at the presidential elections 2003, in order to gain control of election commissions, a lot of money was taken from ministers and ministries. Insanov said that allegations brought against him should be actually brought against the president. "Famous Russian pop-singer Alla Pugachyova said they are neighbors with Ilham Aliyev

in Miami, they have a villa there. How could he have such realty for his presidential salary? Ilham Aliyev has a lot of property not only in Miami, but in many other countries." The ex-minister completed his speech saying he was not expecting fair trial. The verdict is to be pronounced on April 20. It is worth mentioning, Ali Insanov was arrested in October 2005, on the eve of parliamentary elections in Azerbaijan. In 1993-2005, he was Azerbaijan's healthcare minister. (regnum.ru)

KYRGYZ OPPOSITION SPEAKS AGAINST INCREASING PRESIDENTIAL POWERS

11 April

The draft constitution prepared by Kyrgyz Prime Minister Almazbek Atambayev will only increase presidential powers, MP Kabay Karabekov announced today speaking to opposition supporters at a rally in Ala Too Square in Bishkek, a REGNUM correspondent informs. "Not only that the draft constitution was prepared on the basis of the December constitution, which was illegitimate, as it was passed by 49 votes instead of 50 needed, moreover, presidential authorities are increased in it. This is apparently a reform Bakiyev-style," the MP said. He was supported by one of the Democratic Forces Union leaders, MP Kubatbek Baybolov. "There are no reforms in the project at all! Bakiyev has been deceiving us for two years. He must resign!" the MP said. Besides, people appeared in the square carrying banners with the \$ sign saying "No to BaKS" (sounds like "bucks", the abbreviation is formed from Kurmanbek S. Bakiyev initials). (regnum.ru)

CHECHEN REPUBLIC HEAD NAMES COUSIN AS PRIME MINISTER

11 April

As widely anticipated, Ramzan Kadyrov named his cousin, Odes Baysultanov, as prime minister on April 10, and the Chechen parliament voted unanimously the same day to approve that appointment. Baysultanov, 42, graduated in 1994 from the Mathematics and Physics faculty of Grozny State University, and began working in the pro-Moscow Chechen government in September 2003, just weeks before the election of his uncle, Ramzan's father Akhmed-hadji Kadyrov, as republic head. In June 2004 (shortly after the assassination of Akhmed-hadji Kadyrov) he was appointed charge d'affaires for the government and presidential apparatus, and in March 2006 first deputy prime minister. Baysultanov is a member of the Chinkhoi teyp (clan), whose members have a reputation for theft and dishonesty, according to RFE/RL's North Caucasus Service. Baysultanov told journalists on April 10 that he does not plan any major

government reshuffle. He singled out as his priorities creating new jobs to reduce unemployment (which is currently officially estimated at around 50 percent of the able-bodied population), housing construction, and expediting the payment of compensation owed to those whose homes were destroyed during fighting over the past 12 years. Also on April 10, Kadyrov abolished the position of deputy prime minister responsible for law enforcement and security and stripped the finance, agriculture, and energy and industry ministers, together with the official Chechen representative in Moscow, of the rank of deputy prime minister. (RFE/RL)

AZERBAIJANI OPPOSITION PARTIES CALL FOR PROBE INTO EX-MINISTER'S ALLEGATIONS

12 April

Isa Qamber and Ali Kerimli, who are chairmen respectively of the Musavat party and the progressive wing of the divided Azerbaijan Popular Front Party, called on April 10 and 11 respectively for the Prosecutor-General's Office to launch an investigation into the April 10 allegation by former Health Minister Ali Insanov that President Ilham Aliyev usurped power in the summer of 2003 during the final illness of his father and predecessor, Heydar Aliyev, and then falsified the outcome of the November 2003 presidential election. National Unity Movement head Lale Sovket-Haciyeva for her part argued that in light of Insanov's allegations, the West should reconsider its support for the present Azerbaijani leadership. Also on April 11, presidential administration department head Ali Hasanov questioned why Insanov did not go public with his allegations at the time of Ilham Aliyev's appointment as prime minister in 2003. Hasanov claimed that Insanov greeted that appointment "more enthusiastically than anyone else." (RFE/RL)

THOUSANDS CALL ON KYRGYZ PRESIDENT TO RESIGN

12 April

More than 10,000 opposition demonstrators in Bishkek called on April 11 for the resignation of Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiyev, RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service reported. Recently appointed Prime Minister Almaz Atambaev was unable to finish an address to the crowd and hurriedly left the rally after demonstrators shouted him down. The protests, which began on April 9, are organized by the opposition United Front For A Worthy Future for Kyrgyzstan and the For Reforms movement. Those two movements are demanding Bakiyev's resignation and the formation of a coalition government that would

rule until new presidential and parliamentary elections are held. Although the rally was closely monitored by a nearby force of over 4,000 police and security personnel, Bakiev ordered them to deploy without arms, hoping to avert any direct confrontation. Prime Minister Feliks Kulov, the head of the opposition United Front, said another demonstration was scheduled for April 12, according to AKIpress. (RFE/RL)

GEORGIA'S ARMENIAN MINORITY PROTESTS PERCEIVED DISCRIMINATION

13 April

Some 3,000 Armenians congregated on April 13 in Akhalkalaki to protest what they consider discrimination by the central Georgian government over the past three years against the overwhelmingly Armenian population of the southern region of Samtskhe-Djavakheti. Participants in the protest adopted a resolution that included the following demands: an end to pressure on democratically elected local officials; designating Armenian a state language in the region together with Georgian; hiring local workers to participate in construction projects funded by the U.S. Millennium Challenge program; and Georgia's withdrawal from the planned Kars-Akhalkalaki-Baku railway project, which protest participants termed "anti-Armenian and anti-Georgian, and designed to further only pan-Turkish interests." At the same time, the protest participants called on their co-ethnics in Georgia to demonstrate solidarity and restraint and not to fall for unspecified anticipated "provocations." (Caucasus Press)

OPPOSITION DEMONSTRATIONS IN KYRGYZSTAN CONTINUE

16 April

Several thousand demonstrators rallied for a fifth day in Kyrgyzstan's capital, Bishkek, on April 15 to demand an early presidential election and constitutional reforms, RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service reported. Speaking at the rally, former prime minister and leader of the opposition United Front for a Worthy Future, Feliks Kulov, blamed the Kyrgyz authorities for violence that erupted during the previous day's demonstration. Responding to that violence, which involved a clash between demonstrators and unknown assailants, Kyrgyz Interior Minister Bolotbek Nogoibaev warned the crowd that those responsible for provoking the violence will "face justice." The violence erupted after a group of between 20 and 30 men approached the demonstrators and began throwing bottles and stones, slightly injuring several protestors. The demonstration follows similar rallies in Bishkek, with several

thousand protestors rallying on April 13 and 14 in front of the National TV and Radio Broadcasting Corporation office, demanding unbiased media coverage of their protest actions. Speaking at a press conference in Bishkek on April 15, United Front leader Kulov demanded that President Kurmanbek Bakiev resign, according to RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service. Kulov warned that "the country is on the verge of regional confrontation and is very close to a state that can be called civil war," and demanded "immediate" formation of "a government of national reconciliation together with our parliament." He rejected the demand by some opposition activists for the dissolution of the Kyrgyz parliament, however, explaining that such a move "may cause even further destabilization" in the country, Akipress reported. The Kyrgyz authorities have ordered police to avoid any direct confrontation with the demonstrators and are hoping for an end to the rallies when the parliament opens a debate on April 16 of a set of new constitutional amendments formulated by a special working group led by Prime Minister Almaz Atambaev. (RFE/RL)

PRO-GOVERNMENT RALLIES CANCELED IN KYRGYZSTAN

16 April

Topchubek Turgunaliyev, the leader of the pro-government For Political Stability and Unity Movement, announced on April 13 that a series of rallies in support of President Bakiev has been canceled, AKIpress reported. The pro-government demonstrations were to be held throughout Kyrgyzstan to counter the continued opposition rallies held in Bishkek against the Bakiev leadership. Turgunaliyev failed to explain his decision, saying only that "we canceled our earlier plans to hold rallies, in order not to excite people with some more demonstrations," but warning that "if the opposition takes some illegal steps, an immediate reaction will follow." Turgunaliyev, the leader of the Erkindik (Freedom) party, formed the pro-government bloc in late March in an attempt to mediate between the Kyrgyz authorities and opposition. Despite his criticism of Bakiev, Turgunaliyev opposes demands for early presidential elections. (RFE/RL)

KYRGYZSTAN'S EX-SECURITY SERVICE CHIEF JOINS OPPOSITION

16 April

Ex-Chairman of Kyrgyzstan's National Security Service Kalyk Imankulov has joined the ranks of the united opposition. "I officially announce that today I have joined the ranks of the united front For a Decent Future of Kyrgyzstan and will actively participate in its actions," Imankulov said at a news conference on

Monday. He said he made the decision after an incident on the evening of April 15, when a Toyota Prado belonging to the Imankulov family was set ablaze near the home of his daughter and her family. "It was a political act of intimidation" Imankulov said. (Interfax)

NUMBER OF DEAD SEALS ON KAZAKHSTAN'S COAST REACHES 435 - MINISTRY

16 April

The number of dead seals found along the Caspian coast in Kazakhstan's western Mangistau region has reached 435. "In all, 435 dead seals, including 385 young and 50 adult species, had been found by April 15," the Kazakh Emergency Situations Ministry told Interfax on Monday. The first dead seals were found on March 30. The so-called animal plague infection could have caused the seals' mortality, the Biological Security Institute of the Kazakh Education and Science Ministry reported. The Kazakh Environmental Protection Ministry said last week, citing a tentative report by a commission investigating the disaster, said unfavorable weather conditions may have been to blame for the seals' deaths. (Interfax)

HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVISTS SOUND ALARM OVER CHECHEN REFUGEE'S ABDUCTION, MURDER

16 April

The heads of one Chechen, two U.S.-based, and two European human rights groups have addressed an open letter to UN High Commissioner for Refugees Antonio Guterres and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev requesting that they launch an investigation into the abduction, torture, and killing of Ruslan Eliyev, a Chechen granted refugee status in Azerbaijan, chechenpress.org reported on April 14. Eliyev was snatched on the street in Baku in November 2006; his mutilated body was one of several thrown from a helicopter over the village of Samashki, west of Grozny, in late March. (RFE/RL)

INDIA, AZERBAIJAN TO COOPERATE IN ENERGY

16 April

India says it will work with Azerbaijan to develop Baku's oil and gas sector. An Indian Commerce Ministry statement said Indian firms will play a major role in developing Azerbaijan's fast-expanding oil and gas industry. The decision came at a meeting between Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and Indian junior Commerce Minister Jairam Ramesh, who visited Azerbaijan last week, The Business Line newspaper reported Monday. The ministry statement said that

Aliyev agreed India's state-run Oil and Natural Gas Corp. and Azerbaijan's government-controlled SOCAR would initiate talks for cooperation and investment. Aliyev sought Indian help in increasing oil recovery and deep-sea drilling. Ramesh offered the expertise of state-owned Gas Authority of India Ltd. in gas-based petrochemicals and city gas distribution. ONGC will take part in the Caspian Sea Oil and Gas Exhibition that begins in Baku June 3, the statement said. Ramesh also offered India's help in tapping Azerbaijan's high wind-energy potential, the statement said. In its bid for energy independence, India, Asia's No. 4 energy consumer, has tried to reach out to international partners. Estimates of Azerbaijan's proven crude oil reserves range between 7 billion and 13 billion barrels, the U.S. Energy Information Administration says. It has proven natural gas reserves of roughly 30 trillion cubic feet, according to the Oil and Gas Journal. (UPI)

FIRST KAZAKH NPP TO BE BUILT IN AKTAU

17 April

First Kazakh NPP will be built in Aktau, Kazakh Energy and Mineral Resources Minister Baktykozha Izmukhambetov announced at a governmental session in Astana, a Regnum correspondent informs. Aktau, experts believe, is the most convenient place for an NPP construction. As far as in the Soviet time, a desalter that worked on nuclear fuel was built in the city, which is located on the Caspian Sea shore and has no reserves of fresh water. Its reactor, built in 1973, was stopped several years ago. The site and strong personnel potential allow settling the issue of deploying a nuclear power plant there most effectively, the ministry believes. Answering a question by Prime Minister Karim Masimov regarding development of nuclear energy industry, Izmukhambetov said that the question is now halted by lack of financing of the feasibility study. (regnum.ru)

FIVE KILLED AS UN CAR BLOWN UP IN AFGHANISTAN

17 April

Four Nepalese security guards and an Afghan driver were killed Tuesday when a bomb destroyed a UN vehicle in one of the deadliest attacks on the world body in Afghanistan since 2001. The Taliban claimed responsibility for the remotely controlled blast targeting a UN convoy in the southern city of Kandahar -- the birthplace of the Islamist movement which was ousted from power five years ago. "The blast has claimed the lives of an Afghan driver and four Nepalese contractors working with the United Nations office for project services," the UN said in a statement released from the capital Kabul. The world

body, which oversees reconstruction in post-conflict Afghanistan, said the attack was "a clear violation of international humanitarian law and the UN will be pursuing full accountability for those who are behind this." UN spokesman Adrian Edwards told AFP it was "certainly one of the deadliest attacks against the UN in Afghanistan since 2001." (AFP)

TOP U.S. GENERAL SAYS IRANIAN WEAPONS IN AFGHANISTAN

17 April

The United States' top general on Tuesday said U.S. forces intercepted Iranian weapons headed to the Taliban in Afghanistan in the last month, but he did not know who had sent them. "It is not as clear in Afghanistan which Iranian entity is responsible but we have intercepted weapons in Afghanistan headed for the Taliban that were made in Iran," said Gen. Peter Pace, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. "We do not know with the same clarity we know in Iraq who is delivering those weapons, who is involved," he told reporters in Washington. Pace's comments mark the first U.S. accusations that Iran could be playing a role in Afghanistan. They come amid heightened tensions between Washington and Tehran over Iran's nuclear ambitions and accusations by the Bush administration that Iranian forces are providing weapons technologies and other support to Iraqi insurgents. (Reuters)

TAJIKISTAN'S FOREIGN MINISTER CHANGES HIS NAME IN LINE WITH TRADITION

18 April

Tajikistan's Foreign Minister has followed the national president and changed his surname to meet the national tradition. The minister dropped off the Russian-style postfix '-ov' at the end of his surname that has read 'Zaripov' until now. His full name will read as Khamrakhon Zarifi as of this moment, he told a news conference. Tajikistan's President Emomali Rakhmon /previous surname version Rakhmonov/ did the same a short while ago. Zarifi said he found Rakhmon's call for returning to the roots of the national tradition of the Tajik people to be "a very timely and important one." He voiced the hope that many Tajiks will follow the example set by the President. As for the change of his own surname, Zarifi said "all the legal documents have been processed and all the diplomatic missions in Dushanbe will get appropriate notifications soon." 'Correct spelling' of Tajik first names and surnames is not the only thing that President Rakhmon has shown much care for recently. He also spoke out against 'farewell-to-classes' days and graduation parties at school and prohibited the use of mobile phones at school by kids. When it came down to the cars at the wheel of which some of the kids come to schools, he did not confine himself to banning arrivals at the doors of schools by own private cars but asked the national anti-corruption agency to track down the sources of their parents' revenues. (Itar-Tass)

