

# Clans, Authoritarian Rulers, and Parliaments in Central Asia

S. Frederick Starr

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## Summary and Recommendations

This *Silk Road Paper* was written by S. Frederick Starr at the request of the Policy Planning Unit of the Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It was commissioned after a joint seminar s conducted in Helsinki in January 2006, focusing on priorities toward the Caucasus and Central Asia for the Finnish EU Presidency in the second half of 2006.

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- Clans, regional elites, and financial magnates are a formidable presence in the politics of all Central Asian countries. Working behind the scenes, they have placed leaders in power for over forty years and define the nature of politics today.
- The fundamental political dynamic in each country is between the president and these power brokers, not between president and parliament, as is often assumed in the West. Any effort to advance democratic norms must be built on the recognition of this reality.
- Because of their lack of resources and personnel and their dependence on largely invisible power brokers, “authoritarian” rulers view themselves as weak. The countries they rule are in fact not over-governed but “under-governed.”
- The presidents’ desire to emancipate themselves from control by the power brokers who put them in office and thus strengthen their rule can lead them to look favorably on parliaments and parliamentary elections, albeit for their own purposes. This is true even though parliaments may ultimately challenge the rulers’ authority.
- Day-to-day parliamentary practice helps create a political class and concept of citizenship that is independent both of the authoritarian

rulers and of the clans, magnates, and regional power brokers who put the parliamentarians in office.

- Recognizing the above, Europe, in its efforts to advance democratization, should:
  1. Focus more on parliamentary elections than on presidential elections, as these have the greatest potential for advancing the concept of citizenship with the least threat to overall stability.
  2. Focus more on parliamentary practice and on political parties through exchanges and support, rather than on the development of NGOs. The day-to-day practice of parliaments and parties develops a political class that in turn reshapes government at both the local and national levels. NGOs, by contrast, are generally viewed as the creations of external interests and not part of the normal political process.
  3. Pressure to remove authoritarian rulers is likely to lead either to the indefinite prolongation of their rule or to a descent into crises. The most likely outcome of crises in Central Asia is either the reaffirmation of the former inter-clan pacts, with dire consequences for the losing factions, or the creation of new pacts, leading to the repression of all those regions, clans, families and magnates who formerly held sway. Either outcome would be gravely destabilizing for each country and for the region as a whole.
- Europe will be in a position to influence the evolution of political life in Central Asia only to the extent that it also makes a commitment to the region's security and to its economic development. As noted above, national leaders feel themselves to be weak and beholden to clans, regional power brokers and magnates, as well as to external powers (mainly Russia) with whom the latter are often aligned. To the extent that Europe responds to the leaders' security concerns and need for investment it will have a voice in how political life in the region evolves.

## 1. Central Asia's Dual Political Systems

Politics in Central Asia, as well as in Azerbaijan, puzzle and frustrate western observers. To varying degrees. Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have all been dismissed as authoritarian systems, hostile to democracy and the rights of citizens. Similar concerns have been voiced for Georgia and Armenia. Yet the prescriptions favored by the EU and USA for addressing these supposed pathologies have had little positive effect and may be making matters worse. Given the growing importance of these states, a better understanding of their politics is past due.

Immediately after these countries gained independence in 1992, western countries focused their assistance on developing new parliaments, parties, laws, and courts. Gradually, however, it became clear that the “presidential” (as opposed to parliamentary) systems adopted everywhere had opened the door for powerful individuals to rise to the fore and claim authoritarian powers. Notwithstanding the fact that they came from substantially different cultures (Turkic versus Persian; nomadic versus oasis versus mountain), presidents Akaev, Aliyev, Karimov, Nazarbayev, Niyazov, and Rokhmonov all consolidated their grip in very similar ways, and to the detriment of political parties and parliaments.

Western critics viewed these presidential systems as a long step backwards, notwithstanding that they trace their genealogy through Yeltsin's Russia back to the France of de Gaulle. Accordingly, western governments have supported NGOs that work outside the systems rather than political forces that work within them. Naively convinced that matters could not get worse, the westerners' policies towards all six countries at times border on calls for regime change.

It should be stressed that the “problem” of Central Asian politics is not simply one of presidential might versus feckless parliaments—a relationship which we might call “Politics A.” Indeed, that relationship is something of a sideshow to what is occurring on the main political stage, which is dominated by great power brokers and the networks they control. On that



main stage, presidents and parties, as well as parliaments, are engaged in a constant struggle with these power brokers and networks, which western analysts misleadingly refer to as “clans.” It is convenient to refer to this second pair of contests as “Politics B.” Because the key factors in Politics B are virtually invisible to outsiders, they have proven frustratingly elusive.

## **2. Family Networks, Regional Power Centers, and Economic Barons**

The so-called “clans” that dominate the invisible politics (Politics B) of Greater Central Asia (including Azerbaijan and Afghanistan) can be divided into three groups.

First, the formerly nomadic peoples, the Kyrgyz Kazakhs, and Turkmens, are comprised of large kinship systems that are in turn subdivided into lower units culminating in individual families. The three Kazakh “hordes” or *zhuses* extend deep into Xinjiang and embrace all people calling themselves Kazakh. Analogous groupings divide northern and southern Kyrgyz. The next lowest level in both peoples can fairly be called a “tribe” or “clan.” For both the Kyrgyz and the Turkmens these remain an important source of identity, as they were formerly among the longer-settled Uzbeks.

These family groups have long memories. The present president of the Kyrgyz Republic, Kurmanbek Bakiev, is described in the West as a “southerner.” Yet among the Kyrgyz it is known that back in the 1880s his tribe or clan broke ranks with the other southern tribes and cooperated with the hated Uzbeks of Kokand. Thus, some of his most bitter foes are fellow southerners.

Second, are the regional networks that exist in every country. Based on close economic and political ties and accent (in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan also on language) these regional networks are extremely powerful, reflecting the diverse emirates and local power centers of earlier centuries. The largest of these, acting alone (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan) or in alliance with another regional power center (Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan), have long dominated the politics of each country.

Control of the territory of present-day Uzbekistan long fell to local elites from the two largest cities, Tashkent and Samarkand. Gorbachev’s effort to dethrone this alliance and replace it with one based on Ferghana and

Khorezm failed dismally. In Tajikistan, the transfer of power from north (Khojent) to south (Kulyab) led to civil war, while Kyrgyzstan's 2005 "Tulip" revolution's shifted political power from north to south, which gravely destabilized that country. No wonder that Niyazov in Turkmenistan presents himself as above tribal and regional groupings and stresses (to the point of absurdity) a general Turkmen nationality.

The third source of Politics B power in Central Asia derives from control of resources. In pre-Soviet times this meant the emirs' control of irrigation systems. Today it means control of whole sectors of the economy, whether cotton, power, mineral extraction, construction, or transport. The authority of these magnates often dates to Soviet times, and is therefore deeper than that of Russia's recently minted oligarchs. The influence of some of these magnates or barons often overlaps or merges with regional power centers or even kinship groups. In the case of a number of individuals, their influence is reinforced by illegal activity. The renowned "Gafur" in Tashkent may resemble a mafia don but his power extends deep into the central government.

### **3. How the Soviet System Dealt with the Power Brokers or "Clans"**

A paradoxical result of the Soviet colonial system is that it transformed local power brokers and clan leaders into civic and even national leaders. They may have been in conflict with one another locally, but they had a common interest in protecting their republics from Moscow. During the 1920s and 1930s Moscow tried to suppress such locally-based political networks in the region. Later, during the less repressive era following Stalin's death, Moscow allowed them free rein so long as they delivered the production and social control that the Communist Party demanded of all republics.

Clan and local interests differ sharply within each country. Under Soviet rule the task of balancing these divergent interests fell to the Politbureaus, meeting behind closed doors. To achieve this they backed strong local leaders like Rashidov in Uzbekistan, Usubaliev in Kyrgyzstan, Kunaev in Kazakhstan, Aliyev in Azerbaijan, Gapurov in Turkmenistan, and Rasulov in Tajikistan. *These men gained legitimacy because the local power brokers supported them.* The resulting authoritarian systems of rule flourished under both Khrushchev and Brezhnev, and lasted for thirty years.

The rise of Gorbachev in the 1980s brought a decisive end to these arrangements. In the name of anti-corruption and the restoration of “Soviet norms,” Gorbachev effected a revolution.<sup>1</sup> Between 1982 and 1986 all five Central Asian leaders disappeared from the scene, whether through death, retirement, or firing. In their places Gorbachev named reliable servants of Moscow, all of whom quickly proved themselves incapable of maintaining the old balances, of protecting the interests of the titular nationality against Russia, and of maintaining the local economy.

Local dissatisfaction spread, and burst out in violence in the first major anti-Soviet revolt of the era of *glasnost*, in Almaty in 1986. Even where there was no violence, the power brokers, clan leaders, and magnates who had heretofore controlled local affairs began to regroup. With the first elections in 1989 they re-imposed the balances that had worked for thirty years, and then lent their backing to new, younger leaders who could serve in their behalf. Thus, it is the power brokers, clan leaders, and magnates who launched presidents Akaev, Nazarbayev, and Karimov, rather than *vice versa*. In Tajikistan their failure in this effort led directly to the civil war of 1993-97. Only in Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan did the new leaders arise with a broader and more personal mandate. Everywhere, however, the new leaders were confirmed by election during the last year of Soviet rule, and then reconfirmed by subsequent votes immediately after independence.<sup>2</sup> This was the case also in Azerbaijan where Ayaz Mutalibov had himself elected in late 1991, but was unseated by a popular revolt linked to his poor performance in the Karabakh war.

Thus, independence in four of the five Central Asian republics and in Azerbaijan was, in political terms, less a revolution than a *restoration*. People in all five new countries believed they had reversed the revolution that Gorbachev had attempted to impose on them. In doing so, they expected that the relative prosperity of the 1970s would soon return, and that their lives would continue as formerly, but with the added benefit of full national sovereignty.

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<sup>1</sup> James Critchlow, *Nationalism in Uzbekistan: A Soviet Republic's Road to Sovereignty*, Boulder, San Francisco, Oxford, 1991, Ch. 3, esp. p.43.

<sup>2</sup> A good study of the phenomenon of “deals” between clans and the post-Soviet leaders is Kathleen Collins, “The Logic of Clan Politics: Evidence from the Central Asian Trajectories,” *World Politics*, vol. 56 no. 2, January 2004, pp.224-61.

#### 4. Politics A, Politics B, and the “Authoritarian” Rulers

Many dismiss the professed interest of Central Asian leaders in national elections and even parliaments as mere cynicism. After all, if they were to apply systematically the principle of “one person one vote” they would upset delicate regional and other balances and risk throwing their country into chaos. But their involvement with elective politics is not mere cynicism. For no sooner were the new leaders in office than they began working to emancipate themselves from the control of the power brokers, clan leaders, and magnates. The presidents appreciated that carefully controlled national elections could strengthen their own hand without upsetting any of the internal balances on which their rule depended. Of course, it was out of the question that any of the presidents would follow Yeltsin and allow the local election of governors or *hakims*. This would have allowed local magnates to create what in effect would have become states within states. This happened in Russia under Yeltsin, and Vladimir Putin made apriority of reversing this once in power. The presidents of Central Asian states all opposed this on the same grounds that the French have always done.

For the same reason the presidents embraced the notion of carefully controlled national parliaments. True, in every country local magnates worked hard to shape the electoral processes, as had occurred in the early history of all the western democracies. From the presidents’ standpoint, the goal was to use parliaments to dilute the magnates’ control locally. It did not hurt that election to parliament brought more than a few of these magnates to the capitals, where they were under the presidents’ constant watch and control.

The only president who doubted his ability to control the situation was Niyazov, who therefore established a council of clan elders that worked in parallel with the parliament and could be invoked as a brake on parliamentary restiveness. Bicameral legislatures in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan also served as effective brakes on parliamentary caprice, since the upper houses invariably included local officials who had been appointed by the president. Karimov, who initially thought he could prevail with a unicameral legislature, shifted in 2004 to a bicameral system, with the upper house dominated by officials and other presidential appointees.

From the rulers' perspective, this was a completely logical step. Periodic national and parliamentary elections could serve a useful purpose to the extent they would engage the populace with the president's programs and ratify the presidents' general course. What was not acceptable was to turn over the great question of balancing regional, clan, and family interests to the principle of "one person one vote." Instead, legislatures dominated by an unofficial "presidential bloc," provided solid assurance that the elective principle would not undermine the fragile presidencies or, equally important, tamper with the political balances or "deals" on which those presidencies depended.

## **5. Presidential Power, Parliaments, and Politics B**

Authoritarianism requires an authoritarian ruler. It is tempting to explain the appearance of such rulers in terms of their personalities. But in Central Asia the individuals in question, Presidents Akaev, Karimov, Nazarbayev, Niyazov, Rokhmonov, and also Aliyev differ, so sharply in background and outlook as to question whether they share any "authoritarian profile". Alternatively, one could explain such rulers in terms of culture. In Central Asia, this usually means defining these five states as uniformly "oriental" and therefore inclined to oriental forms of despotism. Yet the diverse cultural heritages of the countries in question --Turkic versus Persian, formerly nomadic versus formerly oasis dwellers-- throws this hypothesis into question. Or, finally, one could blame authoritarianism in the region on acculturation gained through years of Soviet rule. This thesis has some merit, but it, too, must be qualified. While it is true that most former Soviet states followed Russia in endowing their presidencies with "Gaullist" powers, the Baltic republics chose a very different path and others may yet do so.

Why, then, did the others opt for authoritarian rule? Because it promised to resolve a genuine problem in the polity that might otherwise have posed dangers to the state's very existence. This common problem, evident across Central Asia, is posed by the continued existence of powerful sub-national local networks, clans, families, and wealthy magnates—in short, Politics "B."

This explains why Central Asian presidents view elections more as a means than an end. The end is to emancipate themselves from control by the local networks, clans, and magnates who put them in office, but without at the same time making themselves subservient to parliaments which those same

power brokers could control. Presidential elections serve this end well, for they enable the president to say he is beholden only to the “people.” Parliamentary elections pose greater problems, however, because they can be controlled by the very networks, clans, and magnates from whom the presidents are trying to free themselves.

In the history of democratization, there is nothing unusual in rulers viewing the vote as a means of strengthening their control rather than an end in itself.

But any attempt to use democracy in this way entails great risk. Karimov in Uzbekistan tried to do this when he embraced an alliance with the U.S. It was the hope of his key advisors that the “democracy promotion” clauses that they inserted prominently in the Strategic Partnership agreement signed after 9:11 could be used to exert pressure on the main power base of the regional networks and magnates, namely, the Ministry of Internal Affairs. However, the U.S., preoccupied with the operations in Afghanistan, did not exert the pressure that the reformers around Karimov (Safayev, Gulyamov, etc.) had hoped it would. This undercut the reformers and forced Karimov himself back into the hands of the power brokers. As this happened, Uzbekistan again embraced the Russian/Chinese authoritarian model, which posed no danger to the country’s traditional power brokers.

## **6. A Further Paradox: The Deficit of Government Under Authoritarian Rule**

The notion of independence as a restoration of the *status quo ante* in Central Asia helps explain a peculiarity of the dilemma in which the new leaders found themselves. For in spite of the public’s expectations of a smooth return to prosperity enhanced by independence, the new states faced a formidable challenge. For independence destroyed the capacity of the state to collect taxes and in turn use them to pay civil servants who would deliver needed services. At the same time, it generated an urgent need to create new and costly institutions like armies and ministries.

It fell to the new presidents to meet these demands. Both the international and national communities expected them to do so, while grossly underestimating the complexity of the task and their lack of human and financial resources. The international community may have been impressed by the presidents’ exceptional powers *de jure*, but the presidents themselves

were overwhelmed by the acute awareness of their actual weakness. This gave the presidents an interest in strengthening the *de facto* powers and resources of their office, an interest that set them at odds with the regional elites and clans that had installed them in power and upon whom they depended.

Anyone watching from this perspective would have sensed how privatization, demanded by international donors and financial institutions, revealed the presidents' power or lack of it. In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan the presidents embraced privatization. While the resulting process created many instant millionaires, presidents Nazarbayev and Akaev were nonetheless able to maintain control and balance in the polity. In Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan the presidents encouraged the establishment of small and medium businesses but shied away from privatizing larger firms as this would inevitably have upset the fragile political balances in the country. Paradoxically, it is precisely those presidents whom the outer world judged as most authoritarian who were least able to use their supposedly limitless powers to privatize in such a way that it would strengthen, rather than undermine, the prevailing balances. In long refusing to privatize larger firms, presidents Rokhmonov, Niyazov, and Karimov acknowledged the severe limits of their power *vis-à-vis* local elites and clans.

The weaker they felt themselves to be, the more they tried to exploit national symbols to generate centripetal force. Meanwhile, regional elites and clans controlled whole sectors of the economy by their domination of state industries. To elevate the voice of the capital and their own authority, the presidents all promoted nationalism (Rokhmonov's cult of the Samanids, Karimov's cult of Timur, and Niyazov's cult of himself, not to mention Akaev's cult of Manas, and Nazarbayev's new capital at Astana) and undertook populist policies that reached over the main power blocs directly to the people.

The supposedly "authoritarian" rulers of Central Asia have all been functioning under conditions of actual *under-government*, which they lack the resources to correct. In the absence of such resources, they resort to bluster and bombast, and to direct appeals to the public at large. This explains Niyazov's decision to subsidize cooking oil and electricity and Karimov's decision to increase expenditure on health and education, even after the economy began to falter after 1998. It also explains Nazarbayev's successful effort to renationalize part of the Kazkah oil industry, and Akaev's wife's

attempt to create a national foundation under her exclusive control that would promote Kyrgyz welfare.

Above all, it helps explain the presidents' efforts to enrich themselves or, in Karimov's case, seize control over the use of assets. Venality doubtless played a role in this, but it was also driven by the authoritarian rulers' perceived need to redress their actual weakness. Indeed, control over financial resources – whether personal or through the states – became equated with control over the political system.

## **7. Why “Civil Society” May Not be an Effective Agent of Change**

This, then, is the peculiar nature of “authoritarianism” in post-independence Central Asia. While many politicians and journalists who have come afoul of the prevailing system have good grounds for complaining about the presidents' seemingly unlimited powers, the reality is different. The countries all suffer not from too much but from too little government. They suffer from high officials who lack the resources to provide the basics of normal governance and welfare, and from lower civil servants who are both grossly under-qualified and under-paid. Above all, they suffer from presidents who are beholden to ironclad understandings with powerful but largely invisible regional, clan, and economic power brokers. Even if they wanted to do so, the presidents cannot escape from these arrangements and embrace fully democratic forms of legitimacy. To do so would, in their view, threaten the stability of the state.

How, then, can more open and participatory systems come into being? What forces, if any, will soften the prevailing presidentialism and bring about a greater degree of civic participation? Is it possible for this to occur through a process of evolution? Or will such changes come about only through crisis?

For a dozen years after independence western countries all assumed that the systems would quickly evolve in the way they desired. To hasten the process they lent support to what they called “civil society,” groups and forces outside the government that could be provided with training and financial support from abroad in the expectation that they would gradually take root at home and spearhead greater openness.



The evidence to date suggests this tactic has not worked. On the one hand, few members of the broader public in the region consider such “civil society organizations” to be truly indigenous, as they depend almost entirely on foreign funding and foreign-educated locals drawn mainly from the elite of the capitals. On the other hand, members of the governments, especially officials at the local level, see these foreign-sponsored groups as undermining their own authority. Such organizations rarely work through or with local officials, whom they (correctly) judge to be largely unreformed holdovers from the Soviet era. Being comparatively well-funded, they daily remind the governments of their own lack of resources, incompetence, ineffectiveness, and overall fragility, but without providing those same governments and the bureaucrats who comprise them with the means of improving the situation from within. No wonder the bureaucrats view the foreign-sponsored “civil society” organizations as elements of instability.

The West’s strategy for introducing greater openness into the governance of Central Asian states has led on both sides to an unproductive confrontation. During 2005-6 this blossomed into full-blown conflict between the governments and civil society organizations in the Kyrgyz Republic and Uzbekistan. Earlier, Turkmenistan had severely restricted such organizations. By late 2005 Kazakhstan began to move in the same direction. Many NGOs are choosing to leave the region, if they are not meanwhile expelled. As a result, many international groups have abandoned the hope of a peaceful transition and are looking instead to regime change as a precondition to progress. Yet Kyrgyzstan’s experience since March 2005 gives cause for concern as to the viability of this option.

And so we return again to the question: are there any evolutionary processes that might in time bring about change in the direction of more open and participatory systems? NGOs may not be a very effective tool for achieving this but there is mounting evidence that specific aspects of the electoral process and associated activities are. However, not all elections and activities are equally efficacious in this regard. It is therefore worth examining in turn presidential elections, parliamentary elections, parliamentary practice, and the life of political parties in order to pinpoint which have of these are most likely to foster democratization.

## 8. Why Presidential Elections Are Weak Agents of Reform

Presidential elections garner national and international attention like no others and become a litmus test for the state of democracy in a given country. This is unrealistic. Not only are the stakes highest in these elections but they most directly affect those with the greatest capacity to influence improperly the outcome, i.e., the presidents.

The simplest means of shaping the outcome of a presidential election is to eliminate potential opponents. Long before Putin jailed potential rival Mikhail Khodorkovskii, Presidents Nazarbayev and Karimov had driven their rivals Akezhan Kazhegeldin (Kazakhstan) and Abdurrahim Pulatov and Muhammad Solikh (Uzbekistan) from the country, and Presidents Akaev and Niyazov had their rivals Feliks Kulov and Boris Shikhmuradov jailed. President Rokhmonov neutralized his Islamist rival Akbar Turajonzodah through jobs and money but made sure his other rival, Abdumalik Abdulajanov, would be arrested if he reentered the country. In all these instances we see authoritarianism in its most ruthless form.

More sophisticated measures for controlling presidential elections are also readily at hand, as President Akaev demonstrated when he introduced a Kyrgyz language test into the election law and then used it effectively against his rival, Kulov. The president needs do nothing. The entire bureaucracy, including those charged with managing elections locally, are beholden for their positions solely to the president. Under such conditions, an official in charge of any region that votes less than overwhelmingly for the incumbent can reasonably fear for his job. In the rare case that an authoritarian leader warns local bureaucrats not to interfere, as occurred in Azerbaijan in the 2003 presidential elections, local administrators still have good reason to stuff the ballot boxes.

These and countless further examples show that presidential elections, because they often reinforce the worst tendencies in a polity, are the least likely agents of positive evolutionary change. Indeed, they can even make authoritarian regimes more durable.

Acknowledging this, the ability of authoritarian presidents to manipulate presidential votes is subject to more constraints than a generation ago. The new states all turned over the management of elections over to electoral commissions, which operate according to written rules and procedures and

whose members and heads, unlike the presidents, cannot hide from international evaluators and critics. The recently introduced practice of international ballot watchers has also introduced new elements of transparency. It is unlikely that many American or European elections in the nineteenth century would have passed the kind of scrutiny that is now normal for elections in developing countries.

## 9. Parliamentary Elections as a More Promising Arena of Change

In most countries democratization began when elites sought to curtail the absolute authority of the throne. They acted through and in the name of parliaments, which began as the institutional channel for the assembled elite to *parlez* collectively with the monarch. Over time these bodies claimed the right to offer their collective views on such matters as the levying of taxes and the waging of war.

This did not come about smoothly: in England it required the multiple crises that led to the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and in Sweden soon afterwards it entailed the mass execution of the challenging elites. But if relations between parliaments and thrones often descended into armed conflict (France in 1788-9 and Russia in 1907-17) the process of selecting assembly members has been regularized and gained acceptance through multiple smaller confrontations. Thus, regularized electoral processes can serve as a stepping stone along a path leading out of authoritarianism.<sup>3</sup>

Corrupt parliamentary elections can trigger regime-change,<sup>4</sup> which occurred in the Kyrgyz Republic with the “Tulip Revolution” of 24 March 2005. But parliamentary elections in Central Asia have more often been a source of steady, evolutionary progress.

This is what occurred in the November 2004 parliamentary elections in Kazakhstan, and the December 2004 elections in Uzbekistan.<sup>5</sup> As the OSCE and other observers noted, these were both flawed elections, yet they were

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<sup>3</sup> Axel Hadenius, Jan Teorell, “Authoritarian Regimes 1972-2003: Patterns of Stability and Change”, paper presented at a conference on democratization in the Middle East and Central Asia, Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul, May 2005.

<sup>4</sup> “Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions, OSCE/ODIHR, 28 February, 2005, available at <http://www.osce.org/item/13831.html>.

<sup>5</sup> M.K. Dior, “Parliamentary Elections in Uzbekistan, 2004,” *Himalayan and Central Asian Studies*, vol. 9, 1-2, January-June, 2005, pp.34-40.

both significantly less flawed than previous parliamentary elections in those countries.

The fact that the party led by President Nazarbayev did poorly at the polls and the heretofore marginal White Path (*Ak Zhol*) party did relatively well attests to the fact that in both cases the electoral principle actually worked. Ak Zhol's scathing retrospective critique of the elections was quite justified, but does not refute this conclusion. Similarly, many international observers did not even bother to monitor the 2004 parliamentary elections in Uzbekistan, yet those elections featured included such improvements as published statements by all parties and televised debates among candidates.

Even when votes are obviously falsified, as occurred in the February, 2005, Tajik parliamentary election, the resulting crises are commonly handled through negotiation. In the end, the Tajik president rejected the opposition's demand that the vote be nullified, but had to accept the vote's unexpected conclusion, which advanced the Islamic Renaissance Party to the second spot in the Parliament.<sup>6</sup>

Situations such as occurred in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan have increased both national and international expectations regarding the conduct of parliamentary elections in Central Asia. For this reason the 2005 parliamentary elections in both the Kyrgyz Republic and Azerbaijan were looked to with great anticipation. In the former case, the reality fell short of expectations, giving rise to the Tulip Revolution. In the latter case President Aliev spent most of 2005 taking substantive measures to assure that the vote would strengthen rather than undermine his own legitimacy, both at home and abroad. Both cases testify to the possibility that rising expectations regarding the conduct of parliamentary elections can be agents for positive change.

One may conclude from this that even in Central Asia parliamentary elections serve as a kind of school that spreads understanding of the elective principle among the public. Because battles over the conduct of parliamentary elections are fought at both the national and local levels, they actively engage local clan heads, power brokers, and economic elites, even in cases like Tajikistan in 2005, where the broader public remained passive. Even at their worst, then, parliamentary elections are a source of ongoing civic education, which continues even in the face of occasional steps

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<sup>6</sup> Rashid Abdullo, "Tajikistan: The 2005 Elections and the Future of Statehood," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, 3(33), 2005, p. 133.

backwards. Most important, *they are the best means available for diverting the energies of local clans, magnates, and power brokers into constructive channels.*

## 10. The Role of Parliamentary Practice

No institution in authoritarian states is the object of more withering criticism and outright cynicism than “pocket parliaments.” Whether in Egypt, Nigeria, Russia, or any of the states of Central Asia they are seen as the willing tools of the national leader and hence ineffective. Yet across Central Asia the daily practice of parliamentary bodies has become a powerful if largely unacknowledged force for evolutionary change. However limited their mandate, even quasi-parliamentary bodies introduce thousands of members of the political class and even larger numbers of ordinary citizens to the idea that government should be responsive and responsible to the people.

The fate of President Akaev’s budgets in the Kyrgyz parliament typifies the manner in which parliamentary processes can become powerful educational tools. Most members of the Jogorku Kenesh down to April 2005 were Akaev loyalists, local clan heads, power brokers and other notables who, we now know, received bribes (called stipends) from the president. The Kyrgyz constitution at the time gave delegates the right to debate the budget but not to change it. Notwithstanding this, by 1998 President Akaev was exposed to astonishingly blunt criticism every time he presented his budgets to parliament. Even nominally loyal delegates vied with one another to demonstrate their independence and their command of budgetary matters, conspicuously parading their oratorical skills before a packed visitors’ gallery. Akaev had no choice but to listen patiently and respond in detail.<sup>7</sup> The slightest sign of condescension on the President’s part was met with a barrage of scorn, which forced the president and delegates to interact, if not as equals, at least as *citizens*.

It might be objected that Central Asian parliaments are packed with notables from the regional groupings and clans, and with people representing the magnates who control both publicly and privately owned enterprises. But how different is this from the eighteenth-century Virginia House of Burgesses, or from the British parliament prior to the First Reform Bill of

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1832, let alone from the French *parlements* on the eve of the Revolution, or the nineteenth-century Prussian *Landtag*, which represented not the interests of individuals but of estates (*Stände*)? Yet each of these bodies played significant roles in the development of representative government in their country.

The fact is that normal parliamentary processes sets in motion developments that more often than not favor democratization. Interviews with parliamentary delegates in all five Central Asian parliaments confirm this truth. A delegate may have been designated to stand by local clans, magnates, or power brokers. Or he or she may have been nominated “from above” and selected through a dubious election. Yet when that person acquires an office, a government telephone, a visiting card identifying him as a member of parliament, and a conspicuous badge for his lapel, he comes to view himself differently. Visits from foreign parliamentarians, participation in national and international conferences, and appearances on local television all serve to reinforce the delegate’s view of himself as a significant element in the national political process, no longer a mere *subject* but a true *public citizen*.

These processes have been going forward steadily even in Uzbekistan. Annual meetings with key delegates to the Oily Majlis over three years between 2001 and 2004 produced clear evidence that they were being steadily acculturated to parliamentary life. All had used the time to study the practices of parliaments abroad. All had had contact with foreign parliamentarians and all had grown more astute in their analyses of the good and bad features of each.

Nor should this be surprising. As noted above, President Karimov understood that parliament could provide a counterbalance to the unlimited aspirations of clans, families, and magnates. This has actually strengthened the parliament. But Karimov evidently considers this a small price to pay if it increases his own freedom of action vis-à-vis the all-powerful clans and families that put him in power.

Tajikistan’s bicameral Majlisi Oli lags far behind its counterparts elsewhere, thanks to President Rokhmonov’s ability to control its members financially. Yet even there the daily processes of parliamentary life have fostered a growing independence among members of the Majlisi Oli, with consequences that have yet to be seen.

In Kyrgyzstan as in Armenia, the liberalization of central control over parliamentary elections led to the elections becoming a marketplace pure and

simple rather than a marketplace of ideas. Businessmen, many of which involved in organized crime, secured a place in parliament, immunity, and influence over the legislative system.

Finally, what about Turkmenistan, where President Niyazov enjoys Khan-like powers and has reduced the Mejlis to a meaningless status? In contrast to Karimov, Niyazov so fully accepted his partnership with the major Turkmen tribes that he for years vetted his major policy initiatives with their collective council of elders, the Khalk Maslakhaty or People's Council, rather than the parliament. Yet the Mejlis has continued to meet, and its hand-picked members are being steadily acculturated to the possibilities of parliamentary life, even as they are daily reminded of their own total subordination. At some point President Niyazov's rule will end. Parliament is one of the more likely settings from which Niyazov's successor might emerge, and definitely the place where many future alignments and interests are already being quietly defined and shaped.

## II. The Role of Political Parties

Formal political parties developed late in the West, and in many countries they were greeted as an unhealthy pathology.<sup>8</sup> All the Central Asian states have taken great pains to assure that political parties not become the institutional expression of regional or ethnic divisions.<sup>9</sup> All but Tajikistan rule out parties based on religion.

This means that one of the main functions remaining for political parties in Central Asia might be to serve as the organizational base for dominant or rival elites. But even this is severely constrained. Following Yeltsin in Russia, all the regional presidents long resisted calls for them to organize their own party. Only Niyazov embraced the idea of a presidential party from the start. By the end of the first decade of independence, however, all had come to understand that they, too, needed solid party backing. Nazarbayev and Akaev tried to achieve this by getting their daughters to organize pro-government parties. Karimov, who had begun his presidency by

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<sup>8</sup> Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, and James Madison, *The Federalist Papers*, Baltimore, 1981, pp. 16-23.

<sup>9</sup> On parties and ethnicity in Kazakhstan see Valentina Kurganskaia, "The Party System in Kazakhstan and Ethnic Issues, *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No., 2(32), 2005, pp. 67-74. For an overview of parties in the region see Mira Karybaeva, "Development of a Multiparty System in Central Asia," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No.2(32) 2005, pp. 41-60.

de-legitimizing religious and nationalist parties on the right and social democratic parties on the left, eventually formed four (later five) legal parties of the center, all of them avowedly pro-government. By the 2004 parliamentary elections he went further, and began stating his preferences among them. Rokhmonov, faced with the entry of the Islamic party into parliament, immediately set up his own pro-governmental group, the Peoples' Democratic Party.<sup>10</sup>

This process demonstrates the gradual, if reluctant, acceptance of political parties by authoritarian rulers across Central Asia. Their early reluctance was due to the potential of parties to effect changes in the fundamental balances among regional networks, clans, magnates, and families upon which the presidents' personal power rested. From the presidents' perspective, parties, like parliaments, were fine so long as they constrained these forces, but would pose a threat as soon as they aspired to change fundamentally the relations among them. President Bakiev has already sought radical redress for the North's long-term dominance of Kyrgyz politics, and the consequences may prove destabilizing. <sup>11</sup> In the long run parties may bring about a fairer balance of power in each country, but the authoritarian rulers rightly judge that in the process this could undercut their own power base. Uncontrolled parties, even more than the principle of "one person one vote," could unleash uncontrollable forces within these new yet deeply conservative states.

This realization has led to the non-registration or banning of parties in every country in the region. This runs the danger of moving powerful forces outside the system, where they can pose a yet greater danger. A more effective method, practiced in all states except Uzbekistan, allow candidates to run as individuals, unaffiliated with any party. This retards the growth of parties, but at the potential price of elevating the status of rivals to the president.

Detailed laws on everything from party finances to the maintenance of membership lists by region can also be used effectively to curtail party activity. In Tajikistan the election law requires parties to publish their platforms in full; when a party competing in the 2005 parliamentary elections failed to do so it was banned.<sup>12</sup> A simpler and more effective method by

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<sup>10</sup> Parviz Mullojanov, "Party Building in Tajikistan," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 3(33), 2005, pp. 88-87,

<sup>11</sup> "Kyrgyzstan After the Revolution," *Crisis Group Asia Report*\_No. 97, 4 May 2005, pp. 4-8.

<sup>12</sup> Abdullo, p.132-133.



which governments can keep parties in check is through cooptation. This can mean giving key party figures or their supporters remunerative administrative posts or handing them outright payments, as Akaev earlier, and, more recently, Rokhmonov and Niyazov, have done.

This cursory account of the techniques by which authoritarian rulers can control the work of political parties might suggest that it is a one-sided battle, with all the most effective weapons in the hands of the state. If this were so, one would have to conclude that political parties, like presidential votes, offer few prospects for evolution towards more open systems. Yet the picture is more complex and, in the end, more positive.

Take, for example, the decision by all Central Asian leaders to champion a “presidential” party. As of this writing, only Niyazov has accomplished this without serious problems. In Tajikistan, Rokhmonov’s People’s Democratic Party received all possible support from the president prior to the 2005 parliamentary elections, yet it placed a weak third in the balloting.<sup>13</sup>

Presidential parties in Kazakhstan and the Kyrgyz Republic fared no better. In Kazakhstan’s November 2004 parliamentary vote Dariga Nazarbayeva’s Azhar Party received substantial subsidies, not to mention unlimited access to the national television station run by Ms. Nazarbayeva herself. Yet Kazakhs gave more votes to the heretofore marginal Ak Zhol Party. The differential might have been yet greater had not many local officials illegally promoted Azhar. Similarly, Bermet Akaeva’s presidential party failed to shine even in the grossly corrupt first parliamentary election of March, 2005, and fared still worse in the revote that followed. Even though she had disingenuously tried to distance herself from her father, Akaeva herself lost the election in her Bishkek constituency.

Nor has Karimov succeeded in his efforts to champion one of Uzbekistan’s five pro-government parties over the others. Initially, he lent his support to the *Fidokorlar* or “Self-Sacrificers” Party, a grouping of younger professionals who favor a market economy and more open society, as opposed to the more popular *Halq Demokratik Partiyasi*, or People’s Democratic Party, made up mainly of older former Communists. No sooner had he accepted the nomination of this group than the Liberal Democratic Party began to advance rapidly. Appealing to young entrepreneurs, this group presented itself as the outspoken champions of economic reform. Following the voters’

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 130.

shifting loyalties, Karimov changed horses, and by the December 2005 parliamentary elections was actively signaling his support for the LDP.

The consistent picture in all Central Asian countries except Turkmenistan is for the legal parties to develop slowly and steadily, for them to use all legal tools at their disposal to challenge dubious restrictions imposed by the government, and, when improprieties occur, to turn for help to the international monitoring organizations and both national and international media in order to advance their claims against the government. In every instance enumerated here the supposedly authoritarian ruler either failed to manipulate the parties as he wished, failed in his effort to elicit from voters the preferred outcome, or was forced to follow rather than lead the electoral process.

All this is possible due to the experience that parties have gained through day-to-day practice. This can be observed in every country but emerges with particular clarity in the country where political parties would seem to be at a particular disadvantage, Uzbekistan. The four (later five) legal parties were all creations of the state, and are by definition pro-government. Yet over the three years in which the author met with their heads, a steady evolution was evident.

Viewed retrospectively, the process seems to have been all but inevitable. Created “from above,” each party nonetheless had to define its program and hence its constituents. The Democratic National Rebirth Party opted for a nationalistic path, championing national unity and appealing to government officials, older civic leaders, and the moderate Sunni Muslim majority. *Fidorkorlar* (also known as the National Democratic Party) presented itself as the party of the progressive intelligentsia, supporting openness and free markets. The People’s Democratic Party found a niche for itself as the defender of social welfare programs, and therefore appealed to poorer farmers, the urban lower middle class, retirees, and former Communists. The Adolat or Justice Party staked out similar territory but proposed more moderate left-centrist solutions, even rebranding itself as the Social Democratic Party. And the Liberal Democrats took up the cause of young business people in the major urban centers.

As they groped to translate these programmatic and social foci into practical actions, all five parties benefited from contacts with like-minded parties abroad. The Russian Communists lent support to the PDP while the German Social Democrats shared their experience with the *Fidorkolar*. Other

European parties sought out what they considered their counterpart parties in Uzbekistan and rendered them assistance. Meanwhile, a host of international organizations, including the US National Democratic Institute and National Republican Institute, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems, the Freidrich Ebert Stiftung, and many others provided non-partisan training in the conduct of elections and in practical aspects of party organization. Similar activities occurred in all the other countries of the region, with the exception of Turkmenistan. Even there, however, the voice of international organizations was audible, and, according to Turkmen parliamentarians, have given rise to the hope of more “normal” party activity in the future.<sup>14</sup>

## **12. Concluding Note: the EU and Domestic Politics in Central Asia**

The preceding discussion can have one of two purposes.

First, it can simply inform the EU presidency on some of the realities of domestic politics across the region. By identifying some of the potential pitfalls of domestic politics it can help European statesmen avoid them. At the same time, because it treats these realities as normal aspects of the development of new states and their evolution towards more democratic systems, it can put some of the current problems in a broader and more positive perspective.

Second, it can provide the context for more active EU programs and activities designed to foster the gradual evolution of these polities in directions compatible with European practice. If the arguments presented herein are correct, they suggest that progress towards democratization can be achieved by 1) fostering party-to-party contacts between legal political parties from Central Asian countries and counterparts in Europe 2) promoting direct parliament-to-parliament contacts between Central Asia and European countries, and 3) concentrating on election practices, especially parliamentary elections.

The great potential of such activity is gradually to loosen the grip on the region’s political life now exercised by clans, regional elites, and economic

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<sup>14</sup> Interviews by the author with Turkmen parliamentarians, October, 2002.

power brokers, and by the nominally “authoritarian” rulers through whom they work but with whom they are in very unstable alliance.

This can be achieved only by working through the governments and legally recognized parties and not around them. Yet this cannot be done in isolation. With the exception of Kazakhstan, all the national leaders are beset by a sense of their own weakness and of their government’s lack of resources. Only if the EU shows itself willing to engage with these issues can it expect cooperation from the Central Asian side on political reform. This means taking measures that will help address the real security concerns of these new states and it means investing in their economies and infrastructures to promote economic growth.

It is entirely possible for the EU to advance the cause of political evolution in Central Asia, but only if it is prepared also to take an active role in the region’s security and economic development.