

# Central Asians Take Stock

*Reform, Corruption, and Identity*

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## SUMMARY

**T**he new Central Asian states—once obscure outposts of the former Soviet Union—are becoming a significant focus of U.S. foreign policy. Central Asia’s enormous resource base—including the largest gold mine in the world, enormous reserves of other nonferrous metals and cotton, and some of the world’s largest resources of oil and gas—has, since the collapse of the Soviet empire, made the region increasingly attractive to foreign investors. Uzbekistan alone is the eighth largest gold producer and the fourth largest cotton producer in the world. Turkmenistan is the world’s third largest producer of natural gas. Some believe the rich oil and gas resources of Kazakhstan will make it “another Kuwait.”

Central Asia has also become more important to our political, strategic, and humanitarian interests because of a range of features and factors. These include a population of over fifty million, mostly Muslim; a huge territory the size of eastern and western Europe combined (Kazakhstan alone is the ninth largest country in the world) and bordering on the volatile Middle East; extreme poverty and devastating environmental problems; several authoritarian governments, frequent

human rights abuses, and a great deal of regional strife; and a vast arsenal of nuclear weapons on its territory. It is likely that events in Central Asia will reverberate far beyond the republics’ borders.

For all these reasons, it is in the West’s interest to encourage the development of stable, democratic systems and market economies in these new countries and to minimize the social, ethnic, religious, and other sources of conflict that could destabilize the region further. But increasingly, effectiveness in these efforts will depend as much on the views of the Central Asian populace as on policies promulgated by their leaders.

As a small step toward understanding some of these popular views, this author, under the auspices of the United States Institute of Peace and working with the Expert Center in Uzbekistan, conducted a public opinion survey in June and July 1993 among 2,067 respondents in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan—countries that together comprise almost three-quarters of Central Asia’s population and about 80 percent of its landmass.

### *Democracy*

While “democracy” has become a catchword used by leaders and the general population alike throughout Central Asia, our survey suggests that strong leadership, stability, law and order, and economic improvement are far higher priorities than the construction of any particular government system. Since there is no history of democratic rule in these countries, democracy is perceived there as, at best, an ideal for some distant future, not as the best system to resolve Uzbekistan’s or Kazakhstan’s problems today.

Respondents who said they supported democracy, moreover, often demonstrated vague or contradictory perceptions of what democracy entails as a political system. In general, while traditional values in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan tend to emphasize fairness and certain other democratic values, survey results also highlight competing currents of less-than-democratic priorities and support for relatively authoritarian systems and leaders.

### *Economic Reform*

Respondents’ contradictory perceptions were mirrored in their views on economic reform. While

“market reform” and “privatization” have become catchwords throughout Central Asia, most of our respondents simultaneously demonstrated a good deal of skepticism about, and displayed little understanding of, what constitutes economic reform. Although in an earlier survey most had said they favored the “creation of a free market” and “an economy free from direct government administration,” for example, most also said it is “very important” to institute or retain state control over prices.

Economic problems such as high inflation, dramatic declines in production, and growing economic hardship among the population as a whole are the most immediate areas of concern among Uzbekistan’s and Kazakhstan’s populations. Most respondents were skeptical that economic reforms will improve the situation.

### **Corruption and Organized Crime**

A large part of the reason for respondents’ ambivalence toward economic and democratic reforms stems from their perceptions of widespread government corruption and organized crime. Corruption has become an integral and accepted part of the political and economic life of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. More than two-thirds of our respondents in Uzbekistan and about 70 percent in Kazakhstan, for example, believe that “without bribes, it is impossible to resolve *anything* [emphasis added] in a timely manner.”

Corruption and ties to organized crime, moreover, are viewed as particularly rampant among highly placed government officials and law enforcement personnel. As such, widespread corruption and organized crime are viewed as perhaps the greatest constraints on implementing economic reform. One cannot establish a market economy based on the rule of law while a significant portion of that economy continues to operate outside the law and has spawned deep-seated vested interests opposed to reform. And as widespread corruption and organized crime increase, the population has become more skeptical of the reform process itself. As many as 60 percent of Kazakhstani respondents, for example, believe that economic reform is only promoting the growth of organized crime.

### **Islam**

Western observers, as well as Central Asian leaders, have often portrayed Islam as one of the strongest sources of identity in this region, gaining in importance rapidly and likely to present political challenges for both Central Asia and the rest of the world. However, although Islam is deeply ingrained in Central Asian history and culture, and popular interest in Islam is growing, the survey suggests that at least for now its influence may be more limited.

Instead, the survey suggests that, largely because of a history where religious teaching and practice were either forbidden or co-opted by successive political regimes, personal understanding of Islamic doctrine in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan remains limited or distorted. With the possible exception of parts of the Fergana valley of eastern Uzbekistan, Islam tends to be viewed much more in traditional and cultural terms than in religious ones. Politically, the survey suggests that Islamic leaders are seen as relatively weak, and few respondents hope for an Islamic state. Were an “Islamic” conflict to explode in the near future, the results suggest, Islam is less likely to be the root cause of the conflict than to be a vehicle for expressing other grievances that are far more immediate causes of dissension and despair.

### **Ethnic Identity**

Survey results suggest that while divisions in Central Asia run deep between Russians and other ethnic groups, they are strong among the different Central Asian ethnic groups as well. In addition to ethnic affiliation, responses suggest the importance of other identities—for example, family, relatives, community, and region—in shaping individuals’ thoughts and actions. This point was particularly glaring when respondents were asked whom they would like and not like to have as a son- or daughter-in-law, as a neighbor, and as a colleague at work.

The lines between Central Asians and Russians, or Muslims and non-Muslims, are not always clear-cut. Instead, discord may be expressed in terms of region, smaller ethnic group, neighborhood, family, or clan as much as in broad ethnic or religious terms. The survey also suggests that the younger generation—regardless of nationality or educational level—may be just as intolerant of other national groups as older respondents are.

## ***Foreign Policy Views***

Facing a litany of political, economic, and social challenges at home, Central Asian citizens are often expected to favor turning to other countries for aid and technical assistance. Religious and ethnic identity are viewed as playing an important role in their determinations of partners abroad, with foreign competition largely a contest between Turkey and Iran, or between the Muslim and non-Muslim worlds.

Despite economic hardship at home, the survey suggests that support for foreign investment in, or assistance to, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan may be far weaker than many observers have assumed. And among those who do welcome foreign investment, most are seeking it not from Turkey or Iran, but overwhelmingly from the West or Japan.

## ***Implications***

Survey results suggest that western foreign policy toward Central Asia must be structured to take account of a population whose support for reform may be more complex and ambivalent than perhaps previously thought; whose support for sometimes authoritarian leaders may be quite high; whose leaders may have magnified less significant threats, such as Islamic fundamentalism, to obscure more pressing problems; and in whose countries organized crime and corruption have become major obstacles to reform. Western assistance efforts must be sensitive not only to the hardships, lack of social safety nets, and cultural values and traditions, but also to the uniquely contorted mixture of Soviet and Middle Eastern political and economic systems in these new countries, which may be quite different from other parts of the world.

Finally, democratization and reform cannot be viewed primarily as policies to be implemented from the top down. Instead, reforms will emerge not only as a result of new laws or regulations, but from the oversight and accountability that come only with a greater sense of empowerment from below. A shift to a healthy market can occur only when there is a sense that it will contribute to the greater well-being of the population, and not just

to the corrupt government and the organized criminal world. How the population of Central Asia thinks and feels about these issues will become an increasingly important factor as we refine our policies for the region.

# 1

## INTRODUCTION

The new Central Asian states—once obscure outposts of the former Soviet Union—are becoming a significant focus of U.S. foreign policy. Central Asia’s enormous resource base, for example—including the largest gold mine in the world; enormous reserves of other nonferrous metals and cotton; and some of the world’s largest resources of oil and gas—has made the region increasingly attractive to foreign investors, including the U.S. business community. Uzbekistan alone is the eighth largest gold producer and the fourth largest cotton producer in the world. Turkmenistan is the world’s third largest producer of natural gas. The \$20-billion Chevron oil venture with Kazakhstan and the western consortium to exploit the oil fields in the Caspian Sea are among the world’s largest and potentially most lucrative oil and gas ventures, and the number of other U.S. companies seeking opportunity there has grown exponentially in the past few years.

Central Asia has also become more important to our political, strategic, and humanitarian interests because of a range of features and factors. These include a population of over fifty million, mostly Muslim; a huge territory the size of eastern and western Europe combined (Kazakhstan alone is the ninth largest country in the world) and border-

ing on the volatile Middle East; extreme poverty and devastating environmental problems; several authoritarian governments, frequent human rights abuses, and a great deal of regional strife; and a vast arsenal of nuclear weapons on its territory. It is likely that events in Central Asia will reverberate far beyond the republics’ borders.

These challenges in Central Asia are not hypothetical. The civil war in Tajikistan has already claimed an estimated 30,000 to 50,000 lives, more than all previous conflicts combined on the territory of the former Soviet Union. Increased instability in Central Asia is already affecting and will continue to affect the precarious reform process in Russia and Russia’s relations with the United States; will continue to complicate shifting alliances in Iran, Afghanistan, and the rest of the Middle East; and threatens to increase the flow of nuclear materials and narcotics that reportedly has already begun from this region to other parts of the world.

For all these reasons, it is increasingly in the U.S. interest to encourage the development of stable, democratic systems and market economies in these new countries and to minimize the social, ethnic, religious, and other sources of conflict that could destabilize the region further.

Traditionally, questions of democratic and economic reform and social and religious tension in Central Asia have been examined from the top down, or from the outside in. But today these challenges are being driven increasingly from

### *The Survey*

These themes, therefore, formed the basis of our survey: attitudes toward democracy and market reform; corruption and organized crime; environmental and other social challenges; Islamic, ethnic, and national identity; ethnic or national intolerance; and foreign policy orientations. The survey results could be broken down by most major indicators of age, sex, nationality, urban versus rural residence, place of residence (oblast), level of education, and profession. The sample was ran-

dom, and it closely followed the 1989 census data in most of these indicators. The survey was conducted in face-to-face interviews in one of four languages: Uzbek, Kazakh, Russian, and Karakalpak. And it included a separate, additional survey of 100 experts from law enforcement, commerce, the courts, and the procuracy in Uzbekistan for comparison with responses of the population as a whole.

By themselves, the responses to our survey by no means paint a definitive picture of the views of Uzbekistan's or Kazakhstan's citizens. Responses were undoubtedly influenced, for example, by the prevailing "party" line, by fear, or by the likely desire of many respondents to give the answers they believed the interviewer wanted to hear rather than their actual opinions. These influences may have been felt particularly in Uzbekistan, where the regime of President Karimov has tended, sometimes brutally, to suppress views contrary to those of the government. Like other types of research, the survey was also undoubtedly influenced by outside events and local media coverage at the time it was conducted. At that time, for example, relations between Uzbekistan and the United States were depicted in Uzbekistan's media as somewhat more strained than they had been just a few months earlier; and several opposition figures had recently been arrested or had fled. And survey research generally, like any other type of research, is plagued by a host of other uncertainties and inexactitudes.

These problems may have affected our survey less than anticipated, however. For numerous questions, the "proper" answer or party line was unclear at the time the survey was taken. Official government pronouncements at this time were quite contradictory on the question of Islam, for example, simultaneously supporting and condemning the renewed interest in Islam throughout Central Asia. The survey questionnaire, moreover, was designed to minimize these problems further by, for example, asking the same type of question several times in different contexts and in different ways. And personal observation on my part (in rural and urban areas of the Fergana valley and Tashkent oblast) and on the part of the scores of survey takers who had been trained to conduct this survey throughout Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan suggests that

respondents may have been surprisingly forthcoming in their answers.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, despite the limitations, the results of the survey are intended to provide a broad sense of some of the attitudes and values among Uzbekistan's and Kazakhstan's populations, so that readers may gain some additional appreciation for the challenges that may lie ahead in this region, both for the Central Asians themselves and for the West. At a time when U.S. policy is oriented so heavily toward introducing concepts of democratization, market reform, tolerance, pluralism, civil society, and rule of law in Central Asia, it is hoped that the survey results may also provide insights to better shape our policies so that they may have more resonance in a region rife with confusion and contradiction.





## 2 DEMOCRATIZATION

Popular attitudes toward democracy and market reform demonstrate perhaps the greatest contradictions and challenges. Previous surveys in Uzbekistan have revealed relatively widespread support for “democratic reform.” “Democracy” has become a catchword repeated by leaders and constituents alike throughout Central Asia, but democratic views have not been reflected widely in policy.

This situation has led some to conclude that we share the same vocabulary and concepts regarding democratic reform and that one has only to get on with the particulars. It has led others to conclude that the Central Asians have no real democratic instincts and that one must start by trying to inculcate basic notions of trust, honesty, and fairness.

Our survey results suggest something more complex and in-between. While the Central Asian publics have expressed support for democracy, and while the governments of Central Asia have been quick to espouse democratic and free market ideals, our results suggest that support for these abstract notions of reform is tenuous and contradictory. Since there is no history of democratic rule in these countries, democracy is perceived there as, at best, an ideal for some distant future, but not the best system to help solve Uzbekistan’s or Kazakhstan’s problems today. In general, while traditional values in these two countries tend to

emphasize fairness and perhaps other democratic values, survey results also highlight competing currents of less-than-democratic priorities and support for relatively authoritarian systems and leaders.

When asked, for example, which political system would best promote the resolution of their country’s problems, half of all respondents in Uzbekistan and almost two-thirds of Kazakhstani respondents supported “any system, as long as there is order” (figure 1). The proportion of Central Asians and Slavs, males and females, and different age groups did not differ greatly on this answer.

The small group of respondents who selected a “western-style democracy,” moreover, also displayed contradictory sentiments.<sup>2</sup> As a rule, for example, the “democrats” in Uzbekistan also strongly supported President Islam Karimov; such support for an incumbent leader is typical of their culture but, in this case, the president is widely viewed as heading one of the least democratic governments to have emerged since the disintegration of the USSR. The “democrats” were mixed in their views regarding opposition parties: about 40 percent of the respondents who supported democracy in Uzbekistan, and about 30 percent in Kazakhstan, also believed opposition groups should be limited or banned. And when asked what kind of person a politician should be in order to get the respondent’s vote, only one-quarter of the “democrats” in both countries said the politician should indeed be democratic. More important were that the politician bring law and order, be honest and decent, and understand economics (each selected by 50 percent to 60-percent of respondents).

The heavy focus on order over democratic freedom emerged from other questions as well. When asked to rate a series of challenges facing their countries, roughly 90 percent of respondents in both countries identified as most important the need to “strengthen social order and discipline.”<sup>3</sup> More than 70 percent of respondents in both countries also considered the following problems to be among the most important: establishing government control over prices (89 percent in Uzbekistan, 76 percent in Kazakhstan); securing the independence of Uzbekistan (84 percent) or Kazakhstan (74 percent); fighting speculation (83 percent in Uzbekistan, 72 percent in Kazakhstan);

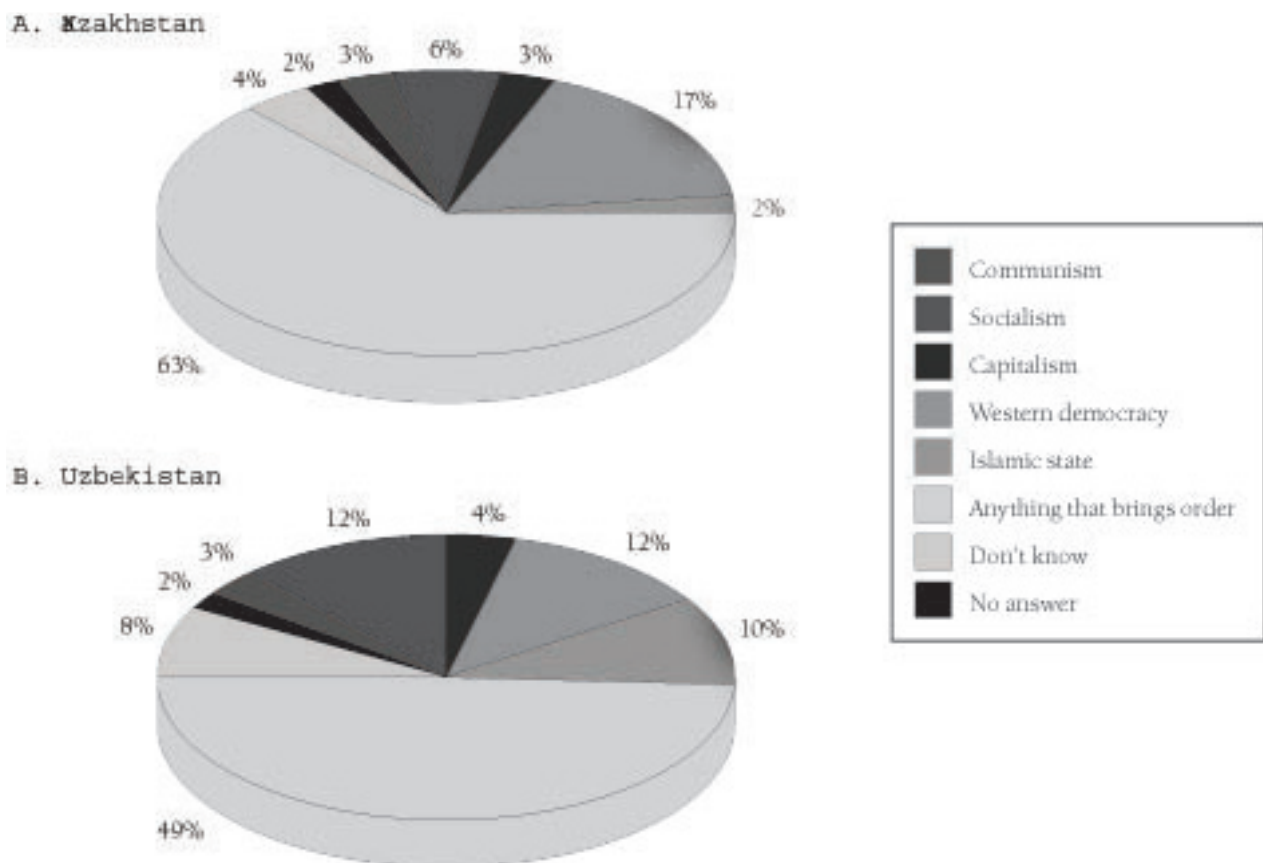
and environmental protection (about 80 percent in each country).

By contrast, our respondents indicated less support for elements fundamental to a democracy—free speech, freedom of the press, pluralism, and tolerance of other political views. Fewer than 40 percent of all respondents in Kazakhstan and fewer than half in Uzbekistan (47 percent) believed that securing free press and free speech are important.<sup>4</sup> Ironically, support for these notions was weaker among the younger age groups (18 to 29 and 30 to 39 years old) than among the older age groups, although responses did not differ greatly by nationality.

Certainly these answers are ambiguous. In the relatively oppressive, authoritarian context of Uzbekistan, for example, where opposition groups are brutally repressed and are consistently discredited in the media, the fact that almost one-quarter of respondents challenged government policy by declaring that these groups should be given full freedom is significant. But the large proportion of respondents supporting a ban on the activities of opposition groups—and the relatively narrow dif-

ferences between respondents in Uzbekistan and the relatively more open Kazakhstan—suggest that when we speak of supporting democratic principles, we are not necessarily speaking the same language as most Central Asians.

Overall, the data suggest that the notion of democracy, and perhaps notions of other systems of government, are highly idealized in Central Asia. In the minds of our respondents, the sense of fairness and the need for “decency” appear to be high, but other basic democratic values are still poorly understood. Most important to our respondents are questions of maintaining order and stability in the wake of the chaos of political and economic disruption throughout the former Soviet Union. This attitude should not be surprising in countries that have a long history and tradition of authoritarianism, colonial rule, and economic hardship. But this attitude may be one reason why President Karimov’s casting himself in the role of defender of stability and security has so far proved effective in his country, and why public support runs high for both presidents.



**Figure 1.** Respondents’ views on which political system could best solve their country’s problems.

# 3

## ECONOMIC REFORM

Similar contradictions are reflected in survey responses regarding economic reform. Economic problems—such as high inflation, sometimes dramatic declines in production, and growing economic hardship among the population as a whole—clearly are the single greatest concern among Uzbekistan’s and Kazakhstan’s populations. When asked to select the most important problems in their countries today, most respondents named high prices and unemployment.<sup>5</sup> And since the survey was taken, the economic situations in both Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have only deteriorated. As but one example, in June and July 1993, when this survey was taken, one dollar in each of these countries was worth roughly 1,000 rubles; by November 1993, on the eve of the introduction of their own currencies, the exchange rate had risen tenfold, to 10,000 rubles. In the first half of 1994, Kazakhstan’s gross domestic product (GDP) fell 27 percent compared with the same period in 1993. Inflation continued to climb in 1994. In June, prices rose by 20 percent in Uzbekistan and by more than 40-percent in Kazakhstan, while GDP continued to decline.

Several surveys suggest that most people in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan support some type of “economic reform.” In a survey conducted by our partner, the Expert Center in Uzbekistan, in Febru-

ary 1993 among roughly the same sample, most respondents were in favor of “the creation of a free market economy, i.e., an economy free from direct government administration.” This preference has been mirrored in other surveys as well.

While “market reform” and “privatization” have become catchwords throughout Central Asia, however, most of our respondents simultaneously demonstrated a good deal of skepticism toward reform and displayed little understanding of what constitutes a market economy. Most respondents have seen their quality of life decline since economic reform became a government slogan, and severe economic problems loom large today: only about 7 percent of respondents in Kazakhstan believed they had gained from economic reforms, while six times as many, or nearly half (45 percent) said they had lost. In Uzbekistan, one-tenth of all respondents said they had gained, while nearly four times as many, or almost two-fifths of all respondents, said they had lost (table 1).

Although respondents favored the “creation of a free market” and “an economy free from direct government administration,” most respondents in both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan (76 percent and 89 percent, respectively) also believed that it is “very important” to institute or retain state control over prices. Our survey also showed that the public was split over the importance of introducing private ownership of land with the right to buy and sell it (although support was somewhat stronger in Kazakhstan, especially among the younger generation). Overall, roughly 40 percent of Uzbekistani respondents believed that privatization of land is important; just under half of Uzbekistani respondents believed it is either not very important or even undesirable. In Kazakhstan the figures were roughly reversed.

In other words, despite strong vocal support for reform, respondents tended to view the specifics of economic reform with apprehension and skepticism. Since this survey was taken, there have been some steps toward privatizing in both countries. But in the midst of much economic hardship, there was little support for enduring any more short-term hardship for the sake of longer term economic gains. And many were skeptical about the prospects for fair economic reform because of the main constraints inhibiting or perverting it: widespread political corruption and organized crime.

**Table 1:** Respondents' Views on Personal Effects of Economic Reform in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

	Gained <sup>a</sup>		Neither gained nor lost		Lost <sup>b</sup>		Don't know/ difficult to answer/ no answer	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
<b>Kazakhstan</b>								
Kazakh/ Central Asian	28	8	171	46	156	42	17	5
Russian/Slav	19	6	111	37	162	54	11	4
Other	12	10	60	48	45	36	9	7
<b>Total</b>	59	7	342	43	363	45	37	5
<b>Uzbekistan</b>								
Uzbek/ Central Asian	115	11	443	44	368	37	84	8
Russian/Slav	8	6	60	43	70	50	3	2
Other	11	10	51	44	40	35	13	11
<b>Total</b>	134	11	554	44	478	37	100	8

Note: Percentages may add up to more than 100 because of rounding. Responses were given in answer to the question, "Have you gained or lost from the recent economic reforms?"

<sup>a</sup>Includes categories "gained" and "gained more than lost."

<sup>b</sup>Includes categories "lost" and "lost more than gained."

# 4

## CORRUPTION AND ORGANIZED CRIME

Indeed, much of the respondents' ambivalence toward economic and democratic reform stems from their perceptions of widespread corruption and organized crime. This is the area of our survey where responses were least ambiguous. Corruption has become an integral and accepted part of Uzbekistan's and Kazakhstan's economies. It is no longer considered a "second" economy; our survey suggests that it is enormously widespread, and many believe it is the economy.

More than two-thirds of our respondents in Uzbekistan, for example—and about 70 percent in Kazakhstan—believe that “without bribes, it is virtually impossible to resolve *anything* [emphasis added] in a timely manner.” The composition of those who agreed with this statement was roughly similar along nationality lines. Although a higher proportion of Russians in Uzbekistan felt bribes were critical to resolve anything quickly, a higher proportion of Central Asians felt this way in Kazakhstan.

These bribes, moreover, may represent enormous sums, especially in relation to the average wage. Admission to a prestigious institution of higher learning in Kazakhstan or Uzbekistan, while technically free, commonly ran close to one million rubles, more than twice the average annual salary in these countries at the time this survey was taken. Bribes to avoid a traffic ticket (especially if one had prior convictions) commonly reached as high as 50,000 rubles, and surgery in

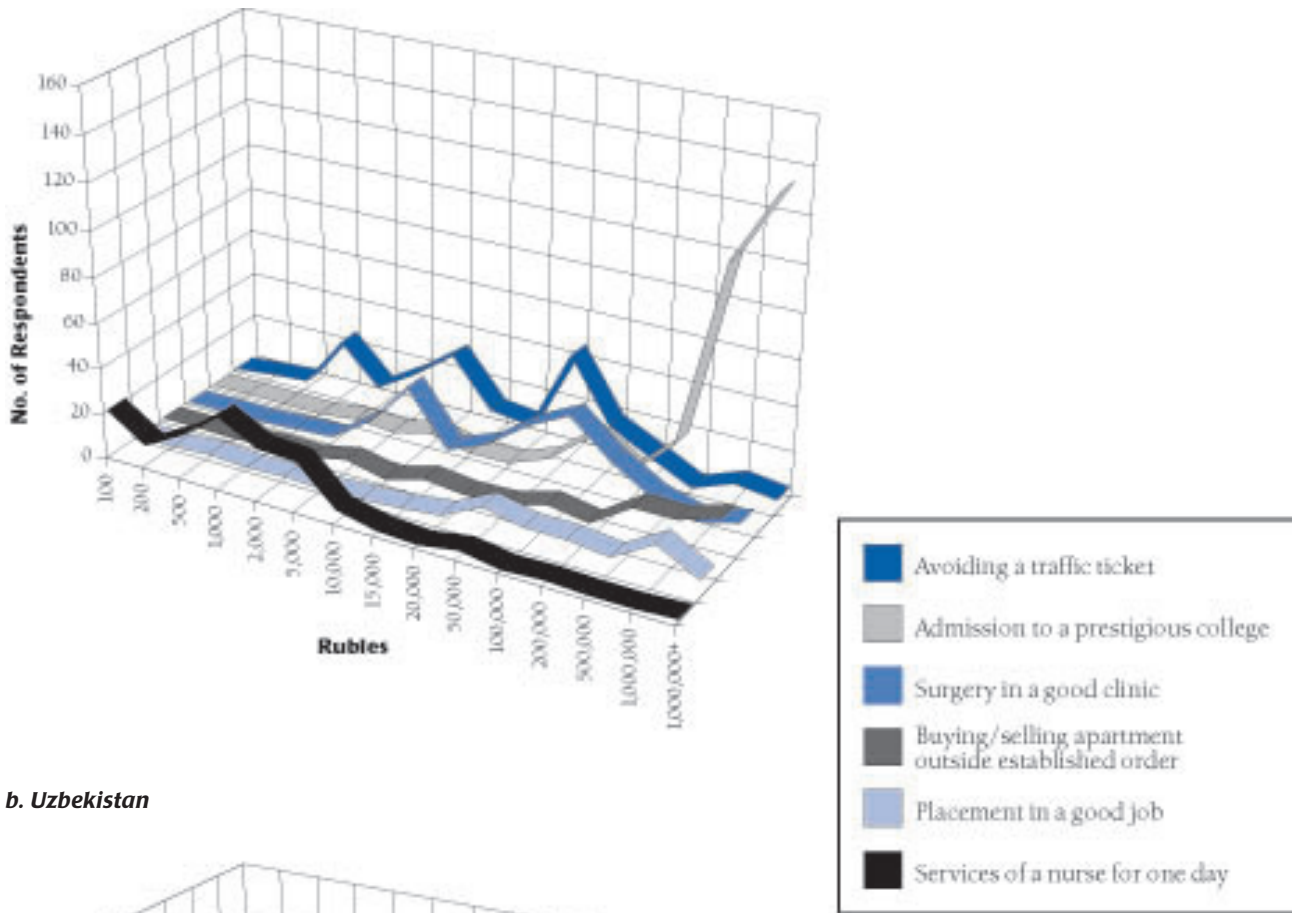
a good clinic, while technically free, likewise cost 50,000 rubles or more (figure 2).

Corruption was viewed as particularly rampant in government and law enforcement, as well as among the business community (figures 3 and 4). When asked, for example, to indicate how closely a list of individuals and organizations may or may not be tied to the mafia, nearly half of all respondents (45 percent) in Uzbekistan and more than 60 percent of respondents in Kazakhstan said that as a rule, highly placed government officials are either themselves members of the mafia or are closely tied to the mafia.<sup>6</sup> A higher proportion of Russians than Central Asians felt this way, but the belief was widespread across the board; there was little variation by gender or age.

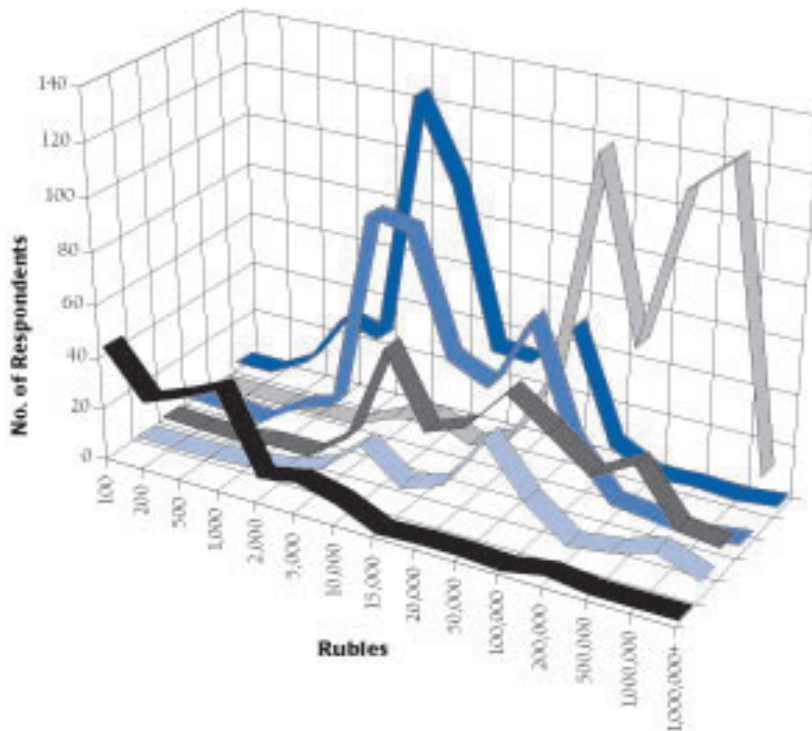
The perception of corruption at lower levels and in different branches of government varied and was sometimes ambiguous. Least ambiguous, however, were perceptions of bribe taking in the legal and law enforcement communities, where corruption is seen as especially pervasive. More than half of all respondents in Kazakhstan, and almost half in Uzbekistan, said that bribery occurs sometimes or often in the procuracy and in the courts.<sup>7</sup> (Almost one-third of Kazakhstani respondents said that it occurs often in these two institutions.) And roughly three-quarters of all respondents said that bribery is common in the police department.

In our survey of 100 Uzbekistani experts, law enforcement officials themselves corroborated the high level of bribe taking and corruption in the law enforcement community. More than two-thirds of the 100 experts stated that, as a rule, the following groups are either members of the mafia or closely tied to the mafia: local government officials (61 percent); businesspeople and merchants (61 percent); highly placed government officials (63 percent); store owners (69 percent); millionaires (73 percent); owners of bars and restaurants (77 percent); and racketeers themselves (85 percent). Only in two areas were experts' estimates of ties to the mafia lower than those of the general population: the procuracy (44 percent) and the courts (36 percent). But lest one believe that law enforcement personnel automatically protect their own, the police in our survey provided a dose of honesty: more than one-quarter of the police surveyed, or 11 of 39 respondents, said that as a rule their fel-

*a. Kazakhstan*



*b. Uzbekistan*



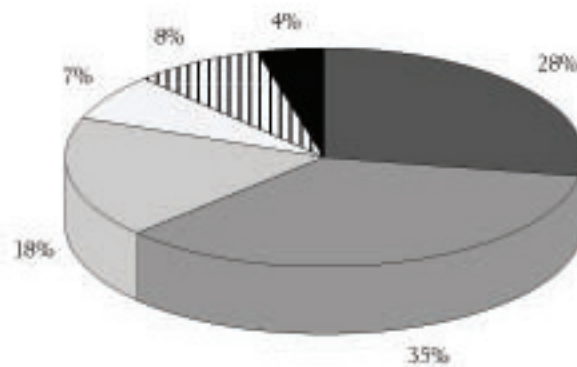
**Figure 2.** Respondents' reports of bribes required for various services.

low police are themselves either members of or tied to the mafia.

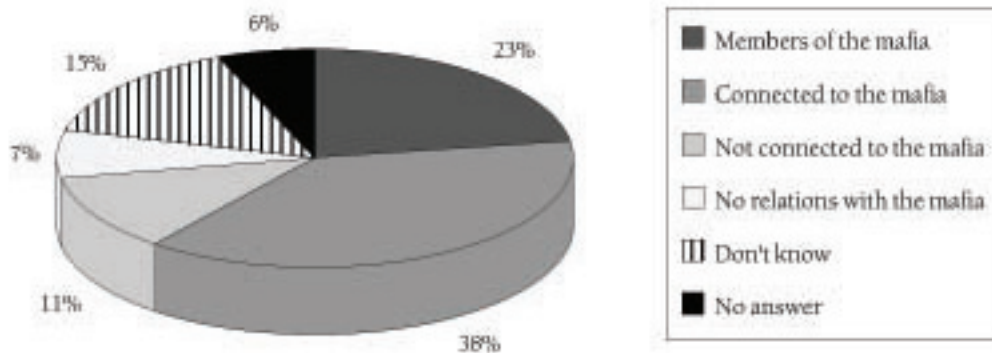
The extensive nature of corruption and organized crime is affecting psychological attitudes toward economic reform. Certainly there is nothing new about corruption and what is now being called

“organized crime” in these countries. Earlier research by this author suggests these activities have always been an integral part of Central Asian, if not Soviet, society.<sup>8</sup> Press coverage of “organized criminal activity” was likewise high during the Soviet period, both in all-Union newspapers and in

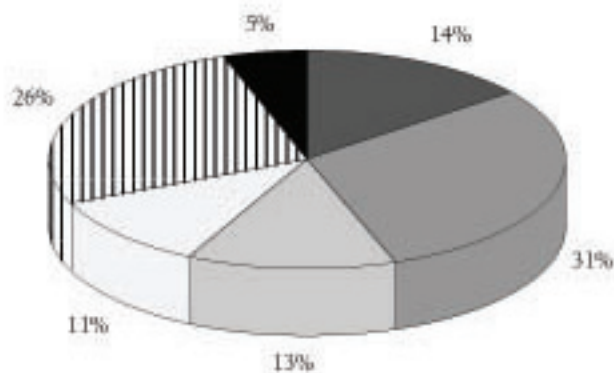
#### A. 100 Uzbekistani experts



#### B. Kazakhstan



#### C. Uzbekistan

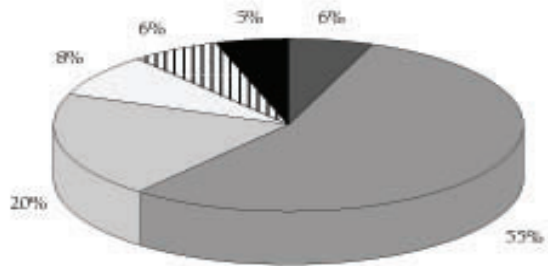


the local press.

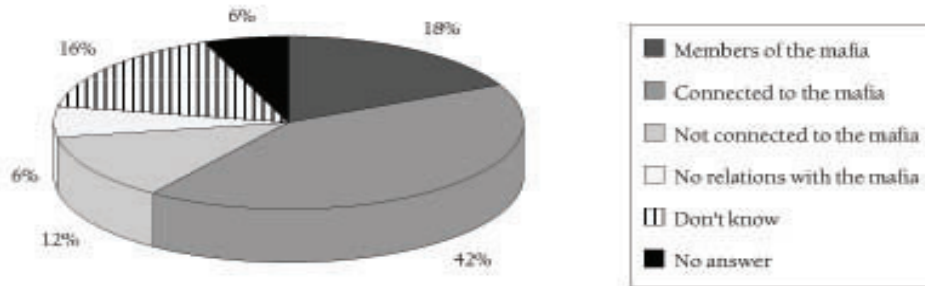
The more widespread that corruption and criminal economic activity have become with the breakdown of the Soviet system, however, the more skeptical the population has become of the reform process itself and of legitimate private economic

activity. Indeed, many respondents associate economic reform directly with the growth of corruption and disorder. More than 80 percent of respondents in Kazakhstan, and about 70 percent in Uzbekistan, believe that organized crime has grown in the past few years.<sup>9</sup> Among Kazakhstani

**A. 100 Uzbekistani experts**



**B. Kazakhstan**



**C. Uzbekistan**

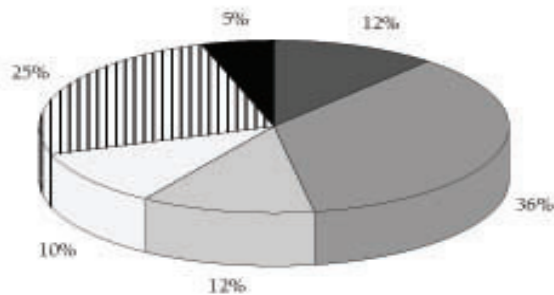


Figure 4. Respondents' views on the relationship on the relationship of businessmen and merchants to the mafia.



respondents, 60 percent believe that economic reform is only promoting this growth of organized crime.<sup>10</sup>

These beliefs have made our respondents particularly wary of new entrepreneurs and businesspeople—precisely the people who would likely spearhead reform. Almost two-thirds of respondents in Kazakhstan, and more than half of all respondents in Uzbekistan, said that owners of commercial stores are either members of or tied to the mafia. Roughly the same proportions of all respondents said that workers in trade, businesspeople, and owners of bars and restaurants are in this category.

Corruption, while extremely widespread, is not

always regarded as a negative phenomenon in the former Soviet Union. In the words of a Kazakh sociologist, “It is like rain or snow. Some people like it, some people don’t. But it is a natural part of life.” Nevertheless, corruption is viewed as perhaps the greatest constraint to implementing economic reform. A market economy based on the rule of law cannot be established if a huge chunk of that economy continues to operate outside the law. And as life becomes harder, the additional burden of bribes and payoffs has, at least in some cases, become a destabilizing influence.

# 5

## ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

**D**issatisfaction with the quality of life in Central Asia is increasingly affected by environmental concerns. The new countries of what formerly was Soviet Central Asia have emerged as some of the world's most serious environmental cases. For many, this situation is symbolized by the Aral Sea catastrophe. The dramatic drying up of the Aral Sea, located in both Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, has wreaked havoc with the region's agriculture and ecosystem and the population's health. Industrial waste and exceedingly heavy use of agrochemicals and other field poisons have contaminated the water supply. In the words of Turkmenistan's former minister of health, much of the population of Central Asia drinks from "little more than a sewage ditch." The cumulative health effects of these problems have been devastating, with infant mortality rising dramatically over the past two decades to levels that are among the highest in the world. In the western regions of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, more than 10 percent of newborn infants do not live to their first birthday. This infant mortality rate is compounded by increasing incidences of typhoid, cholera, hepatitis, intestinal diseases, cancers, dysentery, and a host of other illnesses, making life expectancy in some villages near the Aral Sea as low as 39 years.

In light of these problems, one might expect

environmental issues to be uppermost in the minds of the local populations, a potential catalyst for public pressure if not enormous unrest, and perhaps therefore the most important area to be targeted by western assistance.

To be sure, concern about deteriorating environmental and health conditions is reflected vividly in our survey. Roughly half of all respondents in Kazakhstan and almost one-third in Uzbekistan believe the environment where they live is dangerous for human habitation. About 80 percent of respondents in both the Uzbekistan survey and the Kazakhstan survey said that environmental protection measures are very important to achieving normal living conditions.

Despite the extent of environmental concern, however, environmental problems are still overridden by economic and political concerns, not only among government officials but among the general public as well. When asked, for example, which problems on a list of challenges should be addressed in first, second, and third place, respondents in both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan ranked high prices, unemployment, housing, crime, and ethnic relations as more important than environmental problems. In Uzbekistan, only 4.5 percent of respondents put environmental problems in first place versus 29 percent who put high prices in first place and 23 percent who put unemployment there. This outlook held even in such environmentally devastated regions as Karakalpakstan, which borders the Aral Sea, even though about three-quarters of respondents in Karakalpakstan believe their local environment is dangerous for human habitation.

These responses, ironically, also contrast greatly with responses in other parts of the former USSR. Despite the magnitude of environmental problems in Central Asia, Central Asians themselves demonstrate a lower level of awareness and concern about these problems than people elsewhere in the USSR. In a survey conducted by this author in 1990 throughout the entire USSR, roughly one-third of the entire pool of respondents named environmental protection as a top priority, along with provision of food products; all remaining categories were viewed as lesser priorities.<sup>11</sup> The survey showed quite a different set of priorities among Central Asians: roughly 40 percent of Central Asian respondents ranked interethnic conflicts in first place, and the next most important problem,

named by 25 percent, was crime. In last place were environmental problems, named by only 3.6 percent of Uzbek respondents as the first priority.

Likewise, Central Asians were less willing to make environmental and economic trade-offs than their counterparts in other parts of the former Soviet Union. For example, when asked in the 1990 survey which of the following scenarios would be preferable for the future—(1) that consumer goods availability get better but the situation of the environment stay the same; (2) that consumer goods availability stay the same but the environmental situation improve slightly; or (3) that consumer goods availability get worse but the environmental situation improve significantly—the largest group of respondents in the whole USSR, about 38 percent, selected the second option, namely, that consumer goods availability stay the same but the environment improve slightly; about 23 percent selected the first option; and 20 percent selected the third. By contrast, the largest group, 42 percent of all Uzbek respondents, selected the first option, and less than 6 percent selected the third—that the economy worsen but the environmental situation improve significantly.

This outlook seemed to be reflected in the 1993 survey as well. More than one-third of all respondents said they would not agree to some worsening of their own material position even if it would help to protect the environment. While not dramatic, these numbers may be particularly telling, given the relative “political incorrectness” of these answers; most people at least want to appear environmentally conscious.

This is not to diminish the importance or severity of environmental problems in Central Asia. Instead, our survey and others suggest that Central Asians view environmental problems as but one component of the rapidly deteriorating quality of life. Thus, although it is critically important to address environmental problems in the new Central Asian states, our survey stands as a reminder that those problems cannot be viewed in isolation. Efforts to address environmental problems will have more resonance if such problems are placed in the context of equally catastrophic economic, demographic, political, and social challenges plaguing the populations of these new states.

# 6

## IDENTITY: ISLAM, ETHNICITY, AND NATIONALITY

As elsewhere in the world, questions of identity have become powerful sources of conflict in Central Asia. With the severe social dislocations that resulted from the collapse of the USSR, the question of how individuals define themselves has caused new schisms and tensions.

### *Islam*

In the past, Islam has been viewed as one of the strongest sources of identity and a sense of belonging in this region, likely to grow rapidly and present important political challenges for both Central Asia and the rest of the world. Local leaders have certainly played up this view. As Central Asian leaders consolidated their power in the wake of the disintegration of the USSR, they often portrayed the specter of growing Islamic political movements as the biggest challenge to their own power and authority and to the stability of their new countries. Tajikistan's government believed it had only to label its opposition as "Islamic fundamentalists" to garner Russian and western support for its side. President Karimov of Uzbekistan has used the threat of an allegedly growing Islamic opposition in Central Asia to justify a crackdown on his own population.

While interest in Islam is growing rapidly throughout Central Asia, however, our survey highlights more ambiguous conclusions and suggests that, at least for now, fears of Islamic opposition may be exaggerated. Largely because of a long history of religious teaching and practice being either forbidden or co-opted by successive political regimes, personal understanding of Islam in Central Asia remains limited or distorted. Although this situation could certainly change, Islam is viewed more in traditional and cultural terms than in religious ones, weakening the claims of some Central Asian leaders that an already widespread Islamic fundamentalism poses a threat to their survival.

Forty-three percent of Kazakh respondents and 52 percent of Uzbek respondents said yes when asked, "Do you consider yourself a believer?" (table 2). Of these believers, 24 percent of respondents in Kazakhstan and 46 percent of respondents in Uzbekistan professed belief in Islam (table 3). However, knowledge or practice of the main pillars of Islam among these Muslim believers appeared weak. Almost one-third of respondents in the Uzbekistani survey who identified themselves as practicing Muslims—and about two-thirds of the self-proclaimed practicing Muslims in the Kazakhstani survey—could not translate the sentence "There is no God other than Allah, and Mohammed is his prophet" from the Arabic, or they gave a wrong translation. (Indeed, nearly 20 percent of the Kazakhstani respondents who said they are practicing Muslims also said they disagree with this statement, which is a fundamental tenet of Islam.) In terms of rituals, more than three-quarters of those who said they are Islamic believers do not pray at all, and three-quarters say they never fast. In Uzbekistan, responses suggest slightly more adherence to rituals, but adherence is still low.<sup>12</sup>

Age and regional differences were striking, especially in Uzbekistan, where expressed adherence to Islam was higher. Despite a reported spread of Islam among Uzbekistan's younger population, our survey suggests that Islamic belief is still weaker among the younger generations. Roughly 39 percent of the 18-to-29-year-olds in our survey, for example, consider themselves Muslim believers, versus 47-percent of the 50-to-59-year-olds and two-thirds of the respondents over 60.

Regionally, adherence to Islam was stronger in the Fergana valley than elsewhere in Uzbekistan, especially in Andizhan oblast, where about three-quarters of respondents see themselves as practicing Muslims—versus, say, 25 percent of respondents from Tashkent, or between 13 and 20 percent in the western regions of the country. The proportion of Islamic believers was lower in the other two oblasts in the Fergana valley included in our survey: 47 percent of respondents in Namangan consider themselves practicing Muslims, as do 41 percent in Fergana oblast—roughly the same proportion as in Syrdar'ya oblast and only slightly higher than Samarkand and Bukhara oblasts.

As far as the political threat of Islam is concerned, our survey also suggests that, so far, respondents view the political role of Islam as weak. Our survey indicates that Islamic leaders are generally viewed as exerting little power and influence today, and few respondents supported the establishment of an Islamic state in either country. For example, when asked what kind of state would best promote the resolution of Uzbekistan's and Kazakhstan's problems, fewer than one-eighth of Uzbekistani respondents selected an Islamic state (slightly fewer than the number that picked western-style democracy.) In Kazakhstan only 18 respondents, or less than 2 percent, chose an Islamic state.

Moreover, it was unclear what those who selected an Islamic state meant by that term, and their responses were contradictory. For example, when asked what traits are most important in politicians they vote for, only 17 percent of those who supported the creation of an Islamic state in Uzbekistan said they believed it is important for the politician they vote for to be a Muslim. Instead, the most important traits were honesty and decency (68 percent) and experience in leading (49 percent). Also more important than religious affiliation were that a leader defend the poor (24 percent), understand people well (23 percent), and bring law and order (19 percent). For the survey as a whole, religious affiliation was viewed as one of the least important traits for a prospective leader of Uzbekistan.

Likewise, when asked which government leaders they most respect, more than 70 percent of those who selected an Islamic state named President Karimov. While it was typical among all groups to support the incumbent, this percentage of support was higher than that expressed by any other group despite the fact that Karimov has been quite vocal in his opposition to an expanded role of Islam in politics.<sup>13</sup>

Certainly, responses about personal belief may be underestimated in our survey, for respondents likely sought to provide the politically "correct"

**Table 2: Religious Belief by Nationality.**

	Yes		No		Don't know/ difficult to answer/ no answer	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
<b>Kazakhstan</b>						
Kazakh/ Central Asian	180	48	167	45	25	7
Russian/Slav	106	35	175	58	22	7
Other	57	45	55	44	14	11
<b>Total</b>	<b>343</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>397</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Uzbekistan</b>						
Uzbek/ Central Asian	544	54	441	44	25	3
Russian/Slav	60	43	71	50	10	7
Other	55	48	52	45	8	7
<b>Total</b>	<b>659</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>564</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>3</b>

**Note:** Percentages may add up to more than 100 because of rounding. Responses were given in answer to the question, "Do you consider yourself a believer?"

Table 3 Professed Religious Belief by Nationality and Religion.

	Islam		Christianity		Russian Orthodox		Other		Non-believer		Don't know/ difficult to answer/ no answer	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
<b>Kazakhstan</b>												
Kazakh/ Central Asian	178	48	—	—	—	—	2	1	167	45	25	7
Russian/Slav	1	<1	73	24	30	10	2	1	175	58	22	7
Other	17	15	31	25	4	3	5	4	55	44	14	11
<b>Total</b>	<b>196</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>104</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>397</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Uzbekistan</b>												
Uzbek/ Central Asian	544	54	—	—	—	—	1*	<1	441	44	25	2
Russian/Slav	—	—	39	28	20	14	1	<1	71	50	10	7
Other	43	39	9	8	1	1	2	2	52	45	8	7
<b>Total</b>	<b>587</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>564</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>3</b>

Note: Percentages may add up to more than 100 because of rounding. Responses were given in answer to the question, "If you consider yourself a believer, what belief do you profess?"

\*One respondent answered both "Islam" and "Buddhism."

answers to our questions. At the time the survey was taken, however, the correct answers to these questions were not clear. At that time, most Central Asian leaders presented a dual approach to ethnic identity and Islam. They tended to support the growth of traditional values and Islam as a faith while steadfastly denouncing the growth of any potential fundamentalist or political Islam that could challenge their political power. Although this duality could possibly account for the low proportion of those who supported an Islamic state, it does not explain the low level of personal belief in Islam. On the contrary, it would probably have seemed more embarrassing to assert that one is a practicing Muslim but to then display little knowledge of, or interest in, the content of Islam.

If this logic holds, then our survey responses suggest that, with the possible exception of the Fergana valley, adherence to Islam may be seen today more in cultural or traditional terms than in purely religious ones. While Islam may be growing, public opinion suggests that the threat of the growth of a political Islam as an alternative power source to President Karimov or President Nazarbayev is, at least so far, a relatively weak one.

This is not to minimize the importance of Islam in Central Asian society or politics. The practice of Islam is certainly growing throughout Central Asia, and Islamic politicization may become a real-

ity in the future. As we have seen elsewhere in the world, it can be a powerful political tool in fomenting conflict and unrest. What our data do suggest, however, is that were an "Islamic" conflict to explode in the near future, Islam itself would probably not be the root cause of the conflict; more likely, it would be an umbrella or a vehicle for expressing other grievances that are far more immediate causes of dissension and despair.

### **Ethnic and National Identity**

It is difficult in any analysis to separate ethnic, religious, cultural, and other identities, and our survey again presented mixed results. When respondents were asked, for example, to which groups it was most important for them to belong, most selected family and community over religious or specifically national identity. Only 13 percent of respondents in Uzbekistan and only 4 percent in Kazakhstan selected "people of my nationality." This finding likely reflects the fact that the groups that respondents selected—family, relatives, neighbors, community, and region—are often of the same ethnic identity to begin with. But it also suggests how important these other identities are in individuals' thoughts and actions.

Responses to other questions, on the other

hand, suggested schisms at a personal level as much within Central Asian and Muslim communities as between Central Asians and others. Indeed, aside from the most pronounced dislike they seemed to display toward Jews and Armenians, Central Asians displayed almost as much wariness of each other as they did of Russians.

For example, when respondents were asked whom they would like to see as a son- or daughter-in-law, a neighbor, and a colleague at work, most respondents—especially ethnically Central Asian respondents—tended to have strong preferences and biases. More than 90 percent of our Uzbek and Kazakh respondents said they would like their son or daughter to marry someone of their nationality; only 4 to 5 percent said the individual's nationality did not matter. But the second highest remaining percentage of respondents, roughly 10 percent of both groups, said they would like their son or daughter to marry a Russian. Between half and two-thirds of all Russian respondents (with a higher percentage in Uzbekistan) said they would like to have a Russian as a son- or daughter-in-law; about 13 percent said an Uzbek, and 10 percent, a Kazakh; about one-quarter of the Russians in both countries said the nationality did not matter.

When asked whom they would not want as a son- or daughter-in-law, Central Asians likewise had strong feelings. In both countries, the nationalities named most often were Jews and Armenians. But about the same proportion of Kazakhs who named a Russian as an undesirable son- or daughter-in-law (37 percent) also named Uighurs (36 percent) and Uzbeks (35 percent); and about the same proportion of Uzbeks who named a Russian as undesirable (23 percent) also named a Kyrgyz (21 percent) and a Kazakh (20 percent). Only 4 percent of the Kazakhs in our Kazakhstani survey, and only 6 percent of the Uzbeks in the Uzbekistani survey, said they had no strong feelings on the subject.

Respondents naturally were more tolerant about the desired nationality of their neighbors, who are more distant from one's immediate personal life; but prejudice and intolerance remained. Again, Jews and Armenians were at the top of the list, with almost one-third of all Uzbek respondents stating that they would not want to have a Jew as a neighbor; 26 percent said they would not want to have an Armenian neighbor. But here again, more Uzbek respondents named

Tatars (19.4 percent), Koreans (15 percent), Kazakhs (12 percent), Kyrgyz (11 percent), and Tajiks (8-percent) than named Russians (7 percent); and more Kazakh respondents named Uzbeks (14 percent), Tatars (20 percent), Koreans (19 percent), and Uighurs (17-percent) than named Russians (10 percent). Only 9 percent of the Uzbek respondents and about 20 percent of Kazakh respondents said it made no difference who their neighbor is.

A significant proportion of respondents preferred not to have Jews and Armenians even as professional colleagues. Almost one-quarter of all Uzbek respondents said they would prefer not to have a Jewish colleague at work, and one-fifth said they would prefer not to have an Armenian one. But again, more people said they would prefer not to work with other Central Asian nationalities and non-Russians than Russians. More Kazakhs would prefer not to have an Uzbek (11 percent), Tatar (13-percent), Korean (11 percent), or Uighur (11 percent) colleague at work than would prefer not to have a Russian colleague (6 percent); and more Uzbeks would prefer not to have a Kyrgyz, Tajik, Tatar, Kazakh, or Korean co-worker than a Russian one. Only 10 percent of the Uzbeks, versus 26 percent of the Russians, said that nationality makes no difference.

These patterns were similar among the younger generation and the more highly educated portions of our sample, who proved to be no more tolerant than their older or less-educated counterparts. Indeed, in general they were less tolerant.

Nonetheless, in view of increasing economic hardship and increased emphasis on "indigenization" in these countries after such a long period of colonial rule, it is also not surprising that Russians and Central Asians displayed a different sense of stake in these countries. When asked whether, given the opportunity, they would like to leave Uzbekistan or Kazakhstan and live in another place, well over 90 percent of the Uzbeks and Kazakhs replied no; by contrast, about 43 percent of the Russians in Kazakhstan and more than one-third of the Russians in Uzbekistan replied yes, despite the fact that many likely had roots in Central Asia going back two or three generations and had established their own communities there. Most of these Russians wanted to go to Russia, Ukraine, or Belarus, or else to Europe, the United

States, or Canada. Most wanted to leave because they feared for the future of their children or were seeking better economic conditions. They tended to be concentrated in the younger age groups and were among the more highly educated.

What the survey results suggest, then, is that while divisions among nationality groups in Central Asia run deep in interpersonal relationships, they may exist as much among Central Asians as between Central Asians and Russians. Discord, moreover, may be expressed in terms of

ethnic group, family, neighborhood, and region as much as in broad ethnic or religious terms. And our survey suggests that the younger generation of all nationalities and educational levels may be just as intolerant of other national groups as the older respondents. Divisions run deep and will likely have an enormous influence on Uzbekistan's and Kazakhstan's paths to reform, but the splits and schisms will not always be clear-cut.



## 7 FOREIGN POLICY ORIENTATIONS

Facing this litany of political, economic, and social challenges at home, Central Asian citizens are often expected to be in favor of turning to other countries for aid and assistance. Because Central Asian societies are imbued with a strong sense of separate ethnic and cultural identity, questions of religious and ethnic identity are often viewed as playing an important role in determining partners abroad. For example, many western observers have tended to view foreign assistance in Central Asia as largely a contest between Turkey and Iran, given their proximity to Central Asia and their shared cultural, if not religious, values. But the contradictory contextual nature of identity in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan seems to be reflected in foreign policy orientations as well.

First, despite the economic hardship at home, our survey suggests that Central Asians' attitudes toward foreign investment in or assistance to their countries may be ambivalent. When respondents were asked to rate the importance of a number of possible measures to address Uzbekistan's problems, only about one-third in both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan said that the widespread attraction of foreign capital is important; in Uzbekistan, more Russians than Uzbeks said it is unimportant.

Likewise, when asked whether their country

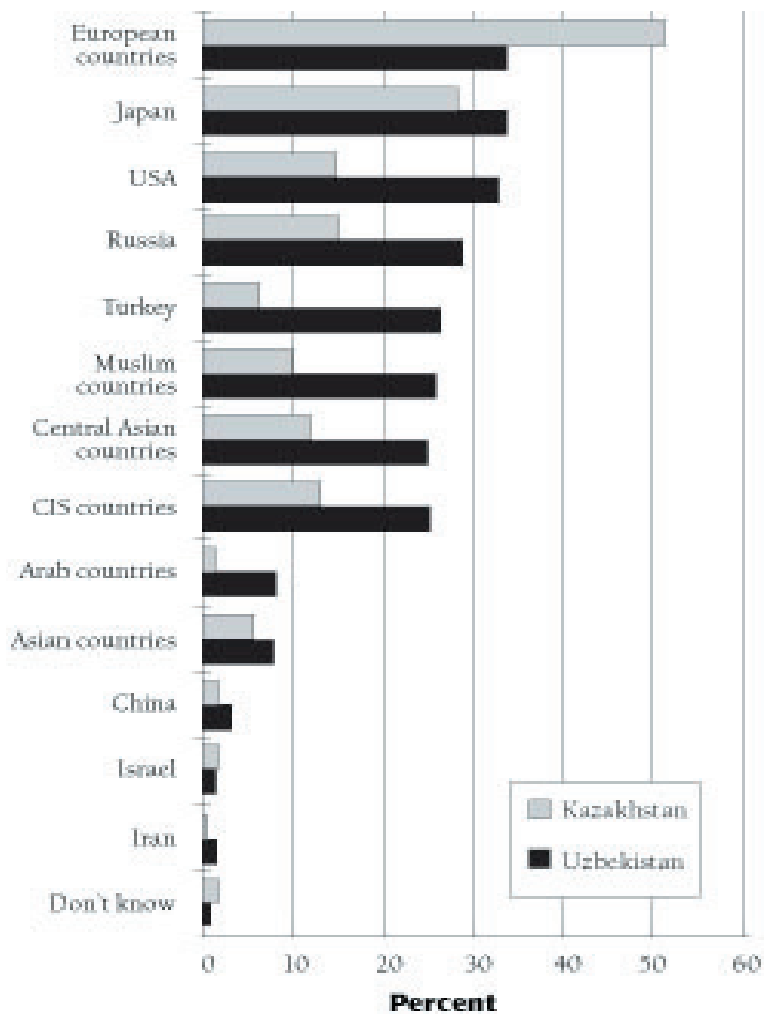
should turn to other countries to help solve its economic and environmental problems, respondents in both countries were split: almost half the respondents in Uzbekistan said no, while 40 percent said yes; in Kazakhstan these proportions were reversed. The overwhelming reasons for this wariness about turning to other countries for assistance were the sense that the Central Asian new states can "do it themselves," the perceived humiliation that would come with receiving outside assistance, and the fear of becoming dependent on western countries.

Among those who do welcome foreign investment, however, most favor seeking it not from Turkey or Iran but from the West or Japan. Of the 519 respondents in Uzbekistan and the 423 in Kazakhstan who said their countries should turn to other countries for assistance, most did not name Turkey or other Islamic countries as the most desirable source of that assistance. Instead, the largest proportions of respondents named European countries (one-third of Uzbekistani respondents and more than half of Kazakhstani respondents) and Japan (34 percent of Uzbekistani respondents and 29 percent of Kazakhstani respondents). One-third of respondents in Uzbekistan also named the United States, but only 15 percent of Kazakhstani respondents did so—about the same proportion who advocated turning to Russia (figure 5).

By contrast, about one-quarter (26 percent) of Uzbekistani respondents and about 6 percent of Kazakhstani respondents said their governments should turn to Turkey. For Uzbekistan, this number was slightly less than the 29 percent who said Uzbekistan should turn to Russia for assistance, and about the same proportion (25-percent) who said it should turn to governments of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and also to other Muslim countries. Only nine Uzbekistani respondents, or less than 2 percent of Uzbeks who responded to this question—and only about one-half of 1 percent of respondents in Kazakhstan—said their countries should turn to Iran.

Nor were these answers divided strictly along nationality lines. Central Asians predominated both among those selecting Muslim countries and among those who advocated seeking assistance from the West.<sup>14</sup> When asked from which countries Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan should keep the greatest distance, respondents most frequently

named Afghanistan (more than one-third of respondents in both countries), followed by Israel, Iran, and Pakistan. One-third of Kazakhstani respondents also named China.



**Figure 5.** Respondents' views on which countries should be turned to for assistance in solving economic and environmental problems.

# 8

## CONCLUSION

United States policies in Central Asia have focused on promoting respect for human rights and democratic reform and encouraging the formation of market economies. Since independence, the leaders of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have echoed these goals. There has been more movement in this direction in Kazakhstan than in Uzbekistan, yet these concepts have remained vague in both countries, and any commitment to fundamental reform has been superseded by a perceived need to maintain stability and order.

Our survey suggests that this approach may find broad resonance among a population in which, despite the rhetoric, the concepts of “democracy” and “market reform” remain vague and ill-defined; economic reform is viewed with skepticism and apprehension; and maintaining order and stability is a priority, perhaps the chief priority. Widespread corruption and organized crime have strengthened resistance to fundamental reform among many highly placed officials and leaders who have so much to lose, and at the same time have increased the general population’s skepticism about reform.

The support these leaders enjoy today, however, may also be tenuous. As our survey and others like it illustrate, deteriorating economic conditions in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan are a major

and increasing concern to their populations. Our survey suggests that ideological concerns such as widespread support for Islamic fundamentalism are not as likely to spark instability as much as further deterioration in the economy and general quality of life, and increased political corruption and chaos. While Islam may be the vehicle through which these grievances are expressed, our survey suggests it is currently unlikely to be the root cause. Although ethnic and national divisions run deep, the survey suggests that they are not always clear-cut and cannot be viewed solely in terms of Russians versus Central Asians.

With the multitude of challenges facing them, Uzbekistan’s and Kazakhstan’s leaders and population alike recognize, however ambivalently the need for foreign investment in their countries to help address their economic and social crises. Contrary to a common belief, they are looking far beyond Iran and Turkey to Japan and the West, including the United States.

As U.S. assistance efforts are expanded then, they must be structured to take account of a population whose support for reform may be more complex and ambivalent than observers may have thought previously; whose sense of fairness and trust may be strong, but whose support for authoritarian leaders is also high; whose leaders may have magnified less significant threats, such as Islamic fundamentalism, to obscure more imminent ones; and among whom organized crime and corruption have become major obstacles to reform. U.S. efforts must be sensitive not only to the hardships, social safety nets, cultural values, and traditions of Central Asia but also to the uniquely convoluted mixture of Soviet and Middle Eastern political and economic systems in these new countries, which may be quite different from other parts of the world.

The U.S. record to date has been mixed. While numerous U.S. programs have had a beneficial impact, other initiatives have been criticized by locals as empowering the very government structures we may be trying to reform, or as patronizing. Some of our efforts at economic reform have been criticized for ignoring the pervasiveness of corruption and organized crime and thus benefiting the most corrupt elements rather than the population as a whole. And the fear of Islamic fundamentalism that seemed to drive so many of our initial efforts in Central Asia has also been

viewed as leaving a destructive legacy that may have only encouraged the growth of this very fundamentalism.

Perhaps most of all, U.S. efforts have been criticized for viewing democratic and market reform as something to be imposed and implemented largely from the top down. Despite our stated commitment to expand the role of grassroots efforts, U.S.–Central Asian partnerships of small nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have played a relatively minor role in our overall assistance programs. Likewise, few of our programs have required any prior on-the-ground expertise to help avoid obstacles from the beginning.

For example, the recent U.S. Agency for International Development (AID) Request for Applications for a \$5-million project to support the

development of Central Asian NGOs is one of the newest programs to “help citizens of Central Asia more actively and effectively participate in the political and economic life of their countries.” It states explicitly that “prior experience in the Central Asian republics” is “not required.”<sup>15</sup>

Democratic reforms ultimately will emerge not only as a result of new laws or regulations but from the oversight and accountability that come with a greater sense of empowerment from below. A shift to a healthy market can occur only when there is a sense that it will contribute to the greater well-being of the population, and not just to the corrupt government and the organized criminal world. How the population of Central Asia thinks and feels must become an increasingly important calculation as we shape and reshape our policies in the months and years ahead.

## Notes

1. The author deliberately did not conduct any of the interviews, for an American interviewer probably would have received different responses. She did sit in on several interviews during both the pretest and the actual survey to assess the kinds of responses the survey was generating. All interviews were conducted by trained and experienced local survey takers from throughout Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.
2. The small group comprised roughly one-eighth of respondents in Uzbekistan and about 17 percent in Kazakhstan.
3. Respondents were asked to rate whether each challenge listed was very important, not very important, unimportant, or undesirable.
4. More than one-third of all respondents in both countries said that a free press and free speech are not very important; more than one-tenth of respondents in Uzbekistan, and 15 percent in Kazakhstan, said they are unimportant; and about 2 to 3 percent of respondents in both countries stated that a free press and free speech are undesirable.
5. Twenty-nine percent of respondents in Uzbekistan and 24 percent in Kazakhstan named high prices as the greatest problem that must be resolved in their countries; 23 percent and 16 percent, respectively, named unemployment.
6. Respondents could choose one of the following responses: the individuals or organizations named, as a rule, are themselves members of the mafia, are tied to the mafia, are not tied to the mafia, have no relations whatsoever with the mafia, don't know, or no answer. Fewer than one-quarter of respondents (24 percent in Uzbekistan and only 19 percent in Kazakhstan) said that as a rule highly placed officials are not tied to the mafia or have no relations with the mafia, and one-fifth to one-quarter (26 percent in Uzbekistan and 21 percent in Kazakhstan) did not know or found it difficult to answer.
7. Only about 14 percent of Kazakhstani respondents said that one finds bribery there rarely or never.
8. See Nancy Lubin, *Labour and Nationality in Soviet Central Asia: An Uneasy Compromise*, Macmillan (England) and Princeton University Press, 1984, especially chapter 6.
9. Less than 8 percent of respondents in Kazakhstan and only 17 percent of respondents in Uzbekistan said they did not believe that organized crime has grown in the past few years; the remaining 13 percent in Uzbekistan and 10 percent in Kazakhstan did not answer or did not know.
10. In both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, Russians felt somewhat more strongly about the growth of organized crime than Central Asians did, but overall, differences were minimal.
11. The survey was conducted among 2,500 people in fifteen regions of the former Soviet Union, including several hundred respondents in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan, and was supported by grants from the MacArthur Foundation and the National Council for Soviet and East European Research.
12. For example, only about one-third pray one to five times per day, about one-fifth do so occasionally, and 44 percent not at all. Likewise, roughly one-third of those who said they are religious Muslims fast regularly, one-third do so sometimes, and one-third do not fast at all.
13. Next in line were eleven people (9 percent) who named Rashidov and eight people who named Lenin. Only one person named the Ayatollah Khomeini.
14. While 88 percent of the 135 people who selected Muslim countries and 85 percent of the 137 people who selected Turkey were Central Asians, 70 percent of the 150 people who selected Russia and 70 percent of the 159 people who chose European countries were Central Asians. Eighty-one percent of the 153 people who selected the United States were also Central Asian.
15. See U.S. AID Request for Applications, Solicitation No. NIS/RCO 94-05, cover letter, Central Asian Republics Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs) Support Activity, issued July 6, 1994, and awarded Fall 1994, p. 2.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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