

As New Term Approaches, Bush Administration Confronts Old Problems In Southwest And Central Asia

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The Bush administration, during its second term in office, faces the prospect of spreading unrest across Southwest and Central Asia unless it makes substantial changes in its foreign policy priorities. Pakistan, in particular, could develop into a major new headache for the Bush team.

More than three years after the September 11 terrorist tragedy, Islamic extremism continues to destabilize Southwest and Central Asia – an area comprising Afghanistan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The Bush administration during its first, four-year term consistently emphasized security considerations over economic and political factors in formulating its anti-terrorism strategy. This emphasis caused the United States to largely stand by as the leaders of most countries in the region embraced authoritarian methods in responding to Islamic radicalism. The Bush administration neither showed a willingness to push these regimes to promote political and economic reforms, nor did Washington mount public diplomacy to show that US leaders stood on the side of civil society development.

There is ample evidence that suggests that US policy has failed to achieve its objective of containing Islamic radicalism. If anything, radical impulses appear to still be spreading, accompanied by growing anti-Americanism. Al Qaeda and other Islamic radical groups are now operating in more than 60 countries around the world, and Iraq is emerging as a magnet for extremists. At least seven members of Lashkar-e-Taiba, a radical Pakistan-based pan-Islamic group, are known to have been killed fighting American troops in Iraq. Several dozen Pakistanis were involved in recent fighting in Falluja.

Perhaps more importantly, the current American reliance on a force-based strategy appears to be heavily influencing the way Muslims perceive basic democratic concepts, including respect for human rights. The intensity of the US use of force in Iraq, combined with the US tolerance for authoritarianism in Southwest and Central Asia, is prompting people across the Muslim world to view American-style democratic values as unacceptable for their own respective societies.

If the second Bush administration maintains its policies of the past four years, the region will continue to be an incubator of extremism and growing poverty, which could lead to social explosions especially in Central Asia. The key to avoiding such unrest will be the Bush administration's ability to broaden its policy scope -- shifting away from security concerns towards the need for more democratization initiatives.

To be successful, US President George W. Bush will also have to repair a rift between the United States and European Union, created by the American unilateralist approach toward the prosecution of the Iraq conflict. The US-EU policy differences over Iraq have diverted attention away from Afghan stabilization efforts, hampering international efforts to put together comprehensive financial assistance packages.

The October 9 presidential election in Afghanistan, in which more than 70 percent of the voting population participated, marked a potential turning point for Afghanistan. The presidential election's success severely damaged the credibility of Islamic radical elements, namely the Taliban and al Qaeda, opening the way for the election's winner, President Hamid Karzai, to deal more decisively with problems such as democratization, drugs control and warlordism. [For background see the Eurasia Insight archive].

An important immediate task for Karzai's administration will be fostering a stable parliamentary vote, now scheduled for early spring. However, efforts to expand an international security presence continue to be hampered by US-EU tension. In early December, departing US Secretary of State Colin Powell failed to persuade European leaders to sanction an expansion of the peacekeeping mandate for the NATO-led

International Security Assistance Force.

In many Central Asian states -- apart from maybe Kazakhstan, which is experiencing rapid, if uneven growth driven by the development of the country's natural resources - the immediate future is, as is the case in Afghanistan, uncertain. In varying degrees all the Central Asian states are experiencing rising poverty, while suffering from political sclerosis. The dearth of forms for democratic expression is helping to fuel the growth of Islamic radical groups, especially Hizb-ut-Tahrir. [For additional information see the Eurasia Insight archive]. The tendency of regional leaders to ignore reforms, while trying to tighten control over their respective countries, does not appear viable in a region where roughly 60 percent of the population is under 25, with perhaps a majority of young people lacking good employment prospects.

Outside of Iran, Pakistan could become the most problematic country in the region for the new Bush team. During his first term in the Oval Office, Bush gave Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf a pass on Islamabad's covert nuclear assistance to Iran, Libya and North Korea. Bush's stance toward Pakistan merely encouraged other countries, especially Iran and North Korea, to test US resolve by proceeding with nuclear programs. The United States, with its tolerance of bad Pakistani behavior, has sent an inconsistent message to the global community on the non-proliferation issue.

Despite elections and the rehabilitation of parliament, Musharraf has allied himself with Islamic radical parties, while handing the military almost total control over the country's political and economic development. The military has utterly failed to carry out reforms in key sectors, including education and human rights, thereby strengthening extremists and wasting the funds of Western donors. Ignoring the fact that Pakistani society is growing increasingly polarized, Bush strongly endorsed Musharraf's policies during the Pakistani president's early December visit to Washington.

Editor's Note: Ahmed Rashid is a Pakistan-based journalist and author of the book "Taliban: Militant Islam and Fundamentalism in Central Asia."