

Civil Society

By Ignoring Uzbek Bad Behavior, Washington Risks Repeating Historical Mistakes

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In a speech in Cairo on June 20, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice cast the United States as the unequivocal backer of global democratization. "We are supporting the democratic aspirations of all people," Rice claimed. Unfortunately, the US commitment to democratization is undermined by Washington's tepid response to the Andijan tragedy in Uzbekistan.

Intransigent Uzbek authorities say 176 people were killed in Andijan on May 13, when government security forces put down what they claim was an Islamic militant-led uprising. Russia and China are among the few countries that have accepted the official Uzbek version of events at face value. The United States, Britain and other states have called for an independent international investigation - something that Tashkent steadfastly resists. International rights organizations, meanwhile, insist that Uzbek soldiers opened fire without warning and fired indiscriminately on civilian protesters, killing hundreds. [For background see the Eurasia Insight archive].

<http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/civilsociety/articles/eav060705.shtml>

While Rice and the State Department have become increasingly vocal on the need for an outside investigation, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld has reportedly worked to block an inquiry into Uzbek conduct. [For additional information see the Eurasia Insight archive].

<http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/civilsociety/articles/pp061105.shtml> The infighting has prevented the United States from making policy changes that could encourage or coerce better behavior from Uzbek President Islam Karimov.

Without Washington exerting substantive pressure on Tashkent, the international investigation proposal stands little chance of ever being realized. At present, Uzbekistan is disappearing from the news, and the issue of Karimov's behavior appears to be slipping off the international diplomatic agenda. This is exactly what Karimov wants: his survival strategy depends on the international community turning a blind eye as he stifles internal dissent and arrests hundreds of witnesses to the massacre.

The Bush administration has remained silent as Karimov has locked foreigners out of the country, refusing visas to everyone from journalists to health workers. Washington did not speak out forcefully even when Tashkent took action to kick 50-plus US Peace Corps volunteers out of the country.

In addition, the humanitarian fall-out from the Andijan massacre has failed to attract widespread attention, despite outrageous Uzbek behavior. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) have still not been allowed to visit the families of the victims of the Andijan massacre, nor its survivors. Both the ICRC and UNHCR are now trying to persuade the tiny neighboring state of Kyrgyzstan not to return 570 Uzbek refugees who escaped Andijan. [For additional information see the Eurasia Insight archive].

<http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/civilsociety/articles/pp052605.shtml> Uzbek authorities have pressed their Kyrgyz counterparts to return the refugees, who would face likely persecution if repatriated, rights advocates say. Already four refugees have been returned to Uzbekistan. Efforts by the ICRC and UNHCR to track the four returnees have proved fruitless. Now there is a danger that the Kyrgyz may return another 29 refugees, despite appeals from the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan.

The lack of Western pressure on Karimov sends the wrong message to other leaders of predominantly Muslim nations. Seeing Karimov go unpunished for brazen behavior is likely to embolden dictators across the Muslim world. They now know that as long as they remain supporters of the US-led anti-terrorist campaign, there is a good chance that they can get away with gross rights violations.

For all of its efforts to accommodate Karimov's administration, it appears unlikely that the US Defense Department will be able to rescue the US-Uzbek strategic alliance, which revolves around American access to the airbase at Karshi-Khanabad. [For background see the Eurasia Insight archive].

<http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/civilsociety/articles/eav061705.shtml>

In recent weeks, state-controlled Uzbek media outlets have lashed out at the United States and Britain, using language that would seem to render the strategic alliance untenable.

For example, a June 23 commentary published by the Uzbek newspaper Khalq Sozi accused Western media of printing and broadcasting "slanders and fabrications" about the Andijan events. It went on to suggest that Western states were trying to undermine Uzbek sovereignty in order to "take over its [Uzbekistan's] wealth and to use our state's geopolitical location in their own interests."

Rice, during her June 20 speech in Cairo, stated: "For 60 years, my country, the United States, pursued stability at the expense of democracy in this region here in the Middle East -- and we achieved neither. Now, we are taking a different course."

This is not quite true. And Uzbekistan serves as a case in point. In Central Asia, the United States appears in danger of repeating the mistakes made in the Middle East. Perceived security needs are being given higher priority in Uzbekistan than is the promotion of basic human rights. From Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf to Egyptian leader Hosni Mubarak, the lack of US action in response to Tashkent's behavior speaks louder than Rice's words. As a result, democratization will likely have to wait in the Muslim world, and threats to US security will continue to arise.