

Central Asia - Trouble Ahead

Repression and rebellion are on the cards for Central Asia after the U.S., seeking support for its military campaign in Afghanistan, strengthened the region's five authoritarian presidents

Far Eastern Economic Review 01/05/2002

By Ahmed Rashid/Islamabad

For much of the 1990s Boris Sheikmuradov was the most acceptable public face of Turkmenistan's dictatorial regime as he travelled the world as foreign minister. A former journalist, Sheikmuradov was suave, jovial and spoke English fluently—a sharp contrast to his dour, megalomaniacal boss, President Saparmurad Niyazov, who prefers to be called "Turkmenbashi," Father of the Turkmen, and has established a personality cult surpassing that of Stalin.

Now Sheikmuradov is rebelling, having fled to exile in Moscow late last year from his assignment as ambassador to China. In January he set up the Turkmenistan Popular Democratic Movement and has been touring Europe and the United States to drum up international support for his aim to topple Niyazov.

One year ago, Sheikmuradov's efforts might have gone unnoticed. But September 11 brought the five former Soviet republics of Central Asia onto the global stage. The U.S. now has air bases in the region, sends aircraft through its airspace, transports arms and humanitarian aid through some of its countries and trains some of their military officers.

This increased cooperation has put the region's five presidents under increasing scrutiny. All five have been in power since the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991 and are determined to remain in power. When the U.S. rushed into Central Asia to establish military bases for its campaign in Afghanistan, many in the region hoped that the international attention and pressure would force the five leaders to carry out long-needed political and economic reforms. Instead, the U.S. has focused on Afghanistan, while the Central Asian regimes have felt confident enough to use the threat of Islamic fundamentalism and the Al Qaeda terrorist network to continue in their old ways. The result: a staggering increase in repression and only mild criticism from Washington.

While Washington reaps the short-term benefits, it may well be storing up trouble for later. The increase in repression also energizes extremists, who are certain to destabilize their host countries, sow strife in the region and possibly target the U.S. just as Al Qaeda has done.

But the growing power of Central Asian leaders is also inspiring revolt among some in the top level of former communist bureaucrats who inherited the newly independent Central Asian states in 1991. Many are fed up with their leaders' lack of vision and unwillingness to carry out desperately needed reforms.

In Kirgystan, which was once the most free of the Central Asian states, there have been mass protests, while the main opposition leader is serving a lengthy jail sentence. In Kazakhstan, which over the years has attracted the largest foreign investment because of its oil wealth, the regime's unwillingness to carry out reforms and the concentration of wealth and influence within the first family have pushed businessmen and politicians to form a new opposition party, the Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan.

In Turkmenistan, in the past three months, Sheikmuradov has been joined in exile by other prominent members of the bureaucratic elite—the Turkmen ambassadors to Turkey and the United Arab Emirates, a former deputy prime minister and a senior diplomat from the Turkmenistan embassy in Washington.

In March, Niyazov sacked 20 top officials from the security, intelligence and defence services, for allegedly plotting a coup against him. "There has been stagnation in Central Asia for 10 years and now the elites are resisting because all the presidents are trying to extend their political life and the terms of their presidency," Sheikmuradov told the Review from Vienna. "The more opposition we have the better, but we are all in exile because there is no legal environment to operate in. That's true for all of Central Asia." Niyazov has accused Sheikmuradov of corruption and selling arms abroad, charges he says are completely groundless.

According to Martha Brill Olcott of the Carnegie Endowment in Washington, "Turkmenbashi was literally choking out any fresh air among the elite. Everything had to be his way and the situation was becoming intolerable. The country was becoming more isolated."

But isolation has become less of a worry to the region's leaders now that the U.S. military has arrived. All five countries are either hosting U.S. troops, getting American military training or at least allowing U.S. aircraft into their airspace.

In varying degrees all the regimes have used their new alliances with the U.S. to further repress democratic opposition, Islamic groups and the media.

"Twelve years have passed but the undemocratic, human-rights-abusing, one-party states have not changed and neither has Western support for them," Mohammed Solih, leader of Uzbekistan's banned Freedom Party, or Erk, wrote in The New York Times on March 11. Solih, who has been in exile in Norway since 1992, says Uzbek President Islam Karimov "shows it is possible to gain prestige and money and extend your rule on a whim-and still gain American support in the post-terrorism world."

The U.S. military presence is a turning point in the history of Central Asia. It is the first arrival of Western armies since Alexander the Great conquered the region in 334 B.C. So far Russia and China have gone along with Washington's aims, but as the war in Afghanistan winds down, hardliners in both countries are expressing resentment and apprehension about a long-term U.S. military presence in a region they consider as their backyard.

And it's not all about geo-politics. The key to the region's future is who gets to dominate the oil and gas reserves of Central Asia and the Caspian region and build pipelines to new markets.

But designs on lucrative pipelines could remain pipe dreams unless there is stability in Central Asia, and that looks increasingly uncertain. In the absence of reforms, all the Central Asian economies have experienced massive downturns. Health and education services are disintegrating and unemployment is growing-reaching 80% in some areas, including the volatile Fergana Valley, which straddles Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kirgызstan. The United Nations estimates that 70%-80% of the populations of Tajikistan and Kirgызstan are living below the poverty level.

Such conditions offer extremist Islamic groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and Hizb-ut-Tahrir ripe ground for recruitment. The U.S. war has hit the IMU hard, as it maintained bases in Afghanistan and received aid from alleged terrorist mastermind Osama bin Laden, but its underground network in Central Asia remains intact. Hizb-ut-Tahrir, a pan-Islamic movement which has growing underground popularity in four of the five countries, has issued anti-American leaflets in Kirgызstan criticizing the U.S. troops' presence.

The growth of fundamentalism is a direct result of the suppression of secular democratic political parties, tight state control over local media and multiple corruption scandals in the leadership. Nobody is expecting an Islamic takeover in the near future. Instead, what has angered sections of the former communist establishment, including politicians, bureaucrats and members of the military and intelligence services, is their leaders' incompetence and unwillingness to reform. "All the regimes have escalating political problems. We don't know if it will take one year or three years to see major changes," says Anthony Richter, director of the Central Eurasia Project at the Soros Foundation in New York.

The key question is whether the U.S. is going to use its presence to push the regimes into carrying out reforms or merely take advantage of their strategic assets. U.S. Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs Beth Jones told a press briefing in February: "Because we have so much more contact, we have an easier time of discussing each of these issues with the governments of the region, particularly Uzbekistan and particularly Kirgызstan."

But there are few signs that this might go beyond discussion. Washington has given Uzbekistan and Tajikistan \$160 million and \$125 million respectively in aid for this year, but has attached no conditions with regard to economic and political reforms. Instead it has sought verbal assurances from the regimes regarding reforms. The World Bank plans to lend \$1.5 billion to the region over the next 10 years, and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development has pledged \$300 million this year alone.

rhetoric, not reform

Some officials are already cocky about their new strategic importance and how they can exploit it. "Foreign investors don't care where they are investing money, be it in a dictatorship or democracy," Ermukhamet Ertysbaev, a senior adviser to Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev, told a conference in Almaty on April 9.

Uzbekistan's Karimov signed a "Strategic Partnership" treaty with the U.S. when he met with President George W. Bush on March 13. The treaty urged Karimov "to intensify the democratic transformation of its society politically and economically." Karimov also pledged to "promote democratic development." Uzbeks have heard such rhetorical flourishes in the past, but they have brought no reforms.

"The Americans make statements that don't tie them down to anything and which are ignored by the Central Asian regimes," Emil Aliev, leader of Kirgызstan's opposition Ar-Namys party, said in February.

Others are more optimistic. "One of the unintended consequences of the U.S. presence is that it is providing a sort of security umbrella and allowing opposition to get more active and people to speak up for the first time," says Richter.

So, should Washington tie its future strategy to largely discredited leaders or push for reform and support democratization? The dilemma is made more acute by the fact that many of the new opposition leaders served time in the regimes they now criticize and are themselves engulfed in corruption scandals.

In the meantime, the regimes push on with repression. In Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, there has been little problem with political unrest, simply because no democratic political parties are allowed to operate there. But the defections of top Turkmen officials and growing disquiet in Karimov's own entourage point to future problems. "We are now involved in a practical movement, and are organizing people inside the country," says Sheikmuradov. "Something very serious is going to develop in coming months."

So far neither Russia nor the U.S. is openly supporting the Turkmen opposition, fearing that unrest or a coup may trigger off a domino effect in other Central Asian states just when Washington wants stability.

The future of the U.S.-Central Asia relationship will partly be shaped by what happens in Afghanistan. "If the situation deteriorates, then straight security concerns will dominate. If Afghanistan stabilizes then the U.S. will press for more reform," says Olcott. But Washington appears to lack a strategic vision for the region, such as one that would unite major powers in a bid to push the regimes to reform. In the meantime, as China and Russia gear up to oppose a long-term U.S. presence in Central Asia and extremist movements gain strength, Washington will have to watch its back.

CENTRAL ASIA

With the U.S. as an ally, dictators get tougher An account of repression in Central Asia this year.

By Ahmed Rashid

Kazakhstan

Galymzhan Zhakiyanov, leader of newly formed Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan party, seeks shelter in French embassy, but is later arrested as government breaks agreement with European Union not to detain him. Other Democratic Choice leaders also arrested. Leading opposition figure, former Prime Minister Akezhan Kazhegeldin, head of Republican People's Party, remains in exile. Critical newspapers and TV stations closed down during Davos summit in Almaty in April. Government sets up agency to monitor all press.

Government cracks down on all opposition media and parties after President Nursultan Nazarbayev is accused of siphoning off \$1 billion to a Swiss bank in 1996. Foreign Minister Kasymzhomart Tokayev admits existence of fund, explaining that it was established to repay the country's debts.

Kirgyzstan

Main opposition leader, former Vice-President Felix Kulov serving lengthy jail sentence. Police kill five people, injure 61 in mass protest in mid-March following mass hunger strike, after popular parliamentary deputy Azimbek Beknazarov is jailed for asking President Askar Akayev why he ceded territory to China last year without informing parliament. Leaders of opposition party Ar-Namys harassed after saying that government is using U.S. presence to gag opposition. Government shuts down two opposition newspapers. U.S. army driver claims diplomatic immunity after killing Kirgыз woman in traffic accident in March, sparking popular outrage. All opposition groups are demanding Akayev's resignation.

Tajikistan

President Imamali Rakhmanov sacks several Islamist ministers belonging to the United Tajik Opposition from the coalition government set up in 1997. Dozens of alleged Hizb-ut-Tahrir activists arrested.

Turkmenistan

Leading Turkmen diplomats go into exile in Russia and set up Turkmenistan Popular Democratic Movement in January to topple President Saparmurad Niyazov. Baptist missionaries harassed and jailed. International lending institutions suspend loans due to lack of economic reform. Turkmens banned from travelling abroad without government permission. Niyazov sacks 20 senior security, intelligence and army officials, fearing more defections and a coup attempt. In the absence of state funds for education, 11,000 teachers laid off in the past two years. Students forbidden to study abroad.

Uzbekistan

7,000 political prisoners remain in jail. Interpol arrests Mohammed Solih, leader of opposition Erk party, in Czech Republic on demand of Uzbekistan. Referendum in January extends President Karimov's term in office from five to seven years. Uzbekistan prevents U.S.-run Radio Liberty from broadcasting in country. Government orders all newspapers to produce schedule of articles before publication. Uzbek courts step up convictions of opponents to the regime; 39 political prisoners convicted in February and March.

SIDEBAR 2

AMERICA'S PARTNERS

The U.S. continues to seek even more help from Central Asian leaders. In late April, U.S. Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld met with the presidents of Kirgystan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. In Astana he obtained permission for the emergency use of three Kazakh airports and announced that Kazakhstan will send liaison officers to U.S. Central Command headquarters. Rumsfeld also thanked the Turkmen president for the use of Turkmen airspace and for cooperation in getting humanitarian aid to Afghanistan.