

Democracy Is Not About To Sweep Central Asia

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After Kyrgyzstan

LAHORE, Pakistan The overthrow of President Askar Akayev in Kyrgyzstan has raised the possibility of popular movements erupting elsewhere in the region. But in the other four Central Asian countries, where far more repressive regimes remain in power and no viable democratic opposition has been allowed to function, the resulting instability would be much greater.

Much of the blame for the current state of Central Asia must rest with the United States, Russia and China, which have failed to move the region's regimes closer to democracy.

Before the Sept. 11 attacks, Central Asia was a forgotten corner of the world. The leaders and regimes of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan had barely changed since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 and they had refused to carry out desperately needed economic and political reforms.

After Sept. 11, when the United States leased military bases to conduct the war in Afghanistan, the region's peoples and regimes reacted in distinctly divergent ways. Most people embraced the U.S. presence in the hope that it would lead to American pressure on their regimes to carry out democratic reforms. The regimes, however, hoped the U.S. presence would strengthen their dwindling political legitimacy at home and bolster their international credibility.

For the past four years, the Bush administration has embraced the regimes rather than the peoples, as the Pentagon and NATO ran military bases out of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and the CIA sought countries where it could "render" suspected terrorists to be interrogated and tortured in secret by local intelligence agencies.

Uzbekistan is one of at least 10 countries where the CIA has rendered dozens of suspects. Until the revolution in Kyrgyzstan, U.S. diplomats at the State Department had fought a losing battle with the Pentagon and the CIA to adopt a more nuanced policy toward the regimes, using U.S. aid to bargain for economic and political reforms.

Today these beleaguered regimes need the U.S. stamp of approval far more than America needs the regimes. The utility of the U.S. bases in Central Asia is declining as Afghanistan slowly stabilizes. This year the Pentagon is spending \$83 million to build permanent facilities at its far larger Afghan bases at Bagram and Kandahar. President Hamid Karzai is supportive of a long-term U.S. military presence in Afghanistan.

Meanwhile President Vladimir Putin has been seeking to reimpose Russian influence over former Soviet territory. Russia has military bases in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, while Russian oil companies have a huge stake in Kazakhstan and virtually monopolize Turkmenistan's gas industry. Such ties suit the Central Asian regimes because Putin has no interest in pushing them toward economic reform or democracy.

China, a powerful neighbor and economic provider, has also increased its stake in the region, partly in order to better control its own restive Muslim population in Xinjiang Province. Beijing, too, has shown no desire to see democratic reform in Central Asia.

Since the end of the Soviet era, there has been a massive impoverishment of the people in Central Asia, with social services like education and health virtually collapsing in some states. The revolution in Kyrgyzstan was more to do with poverty and unemployment than with the slogans of democracy. Sooner rather than later, similar social and economic explosions can be expected in all the other states, where democratic forces are weak or nonexistent.

The people of Kyrgyzstan, the smallest, weakest and most impoverished country in the region, can certainly be proud that they have set in motion a potential move toward democracy that could have a far-reaching impact in the rest of Central Asia. But this quiet corner of the Muslim world will erupt in much greater violence and instability unless the United States, Europe, Russia and China come together in a concerted push for democratic and economic reforms.