

NYRblog : Roving thoughts and provocations from our writers

New York Review of Books, 13/12/2011

By Ahmed Rashid

Hope in a Sea of Dictatorship

One of the uncomfortable results of Pakistan's late November decision to close down US and NATO supply routes to Afghanistan is that it has forced Washington to rely more on the Central Asian countries that border Afghanistan to the north. These nations are hardly known for democracy and rule of law: Tajikistan for example is a [base for Islamic extremists](#) who fight in Afghanistan, while in recent months Uzbekistan has only deepened its reputation for large-scale human rights abuses. And yet there is some exceptionally good news from a small corner of this region, the fledgling republic of Kyrgyzstan, which has shown itself determined to establish a working democratic government. Will the US, with ever fewer options in Afghanistan and Pakistan, be able to capitalize on the all-too-overlooked Kyrgyz example?

The US's principal Central Asian allies are no picnic. Uzbekistan is particularly important to the Afghan war. With the closing of the Pakistan border on November 26—in retaliation for a US air strike that killed two dozen Pakistani soldiers—the Northern Distribution Network supply route that passes through Uzbekistan is now the main conduit for fuel and supplies for US and NATO troops. But promises made by Uzbek President Islam Karimov to halt the use of torture in jails have not been fulfilled. [In a new report](#), Human Rights Watch says Uzbekistan continues to use torture “in its criminal justice system, including electric shocks and asphyxiation.” One well-documented case from 2002 describes a prisoner dying after being immersed in boiling water—and boiling water has been poured over detained activists far more recently.

As Human Rights Watch points out, Western governments have eased off their criticism of Uzbekistan despite its continued use of torture. The European Union dropped sanctions on Uzbekistan in 2009 and now the US is even providing military aid and training to the Uzbek armed forces. Germany refuses to take any position against the Uzbek government because it uses Termez air base in southern Uzbekistan to supply its troops in northern Afghanistan. Meanwhile, though Uzbekistan carried out some legal reforms in 2008, the judiciary continues to be tightly controlled by the state and abuse is widespread. “Talking about reforms while the police and prison officials go right on torturing people is no improvement,” Steve Swerdlow, a Central Asia researcher for Human Rights Watch who wrote the new Uzbekistan report, told me.

Nor is the story much different elsewhere along Afghanistan's northern border. Like Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan is ruled by [one of the most repressive regimes on earth](#). Tajikistan, which is emerging from a five year civil war, is not only vulnerable to Islamic extremists but also suffers from severe lack of resources, with an economy that is wholly dependent on worker's remittances from Russia and drug smuggling from Afghanistan. Meanwhile, Kazakhstan—which has oil, gas, uranium, coal, and wheat—has been a magnet for western and Chinese investment despite the fact that it is a virtual one party state run by a former Communist, Nursultan Nazarbayev, who has ruled the country since 1991. (He is trying to promote his daughter to succeed him.)

A leader in Central Asia who surrenders power voluntarily is as rare as a flower in the desert. But that is exactly what has appeared with Roza Otunbayeva, 61, a remarkable woman whose two-year term as interim president of Kyrgyzstan ended on December 1, when she handed power to a democratically-elected president. This is particularly surprising since Kyrgyzstan is a poverty stricken country with little arable land, and more sheep and goats than people. It is beset with ethnic violence and clan rivalries. And it also finds itself squeezed between China, Russia, and Afghanistan, and lies on the front line of the US led war in Afghanistan—hosting a major US military installation, Manas Air Base, near Bishkek, the Kyrgyz capital.

Yet under the leadership of Otunbayeva the Kyrgyz government has doggedly pursued democratic reform. She became interim president in April 2010, after her predecessor Kurmanbek Bakiyev was forced out in a popular

uprising in which ninety people were killed. On October 30, the leader of the opposition, Almazbek Atambayev, who earlier served as prime minister in the interim government Otunbayeva headed, was elected President in what international observers described as the cleanest and fairest election Central Asia has ever held.

Much of this owes to Roza's leadership. A rambunctious, feisty, worldly, highly intelligent diplomat and politician, she has forcefully pushed for democracy in her country for more than a decade. In the 1990s she was considered such a political threat that Kyrgyzstan's first dictator-ruler, President Askar Akayev, packed her off to become ambassador in London and Washington. A stint with the UN Peacekeeping mission in Georgia followed. All this has stood her in good stead in Kyrgyzstan, where riots and political unrest were endemic and two presidents were forced into exile when their cronyism and corruption were exposed. Last year, she implemented a new parliamentary style constitution that considerably curtails presidential powers. This was followed by the orderly elections and transfer of power this fall. (Though Atambayev has already declared that he wants to get closer to Russia and will close the US installation at Manas.)

Otunbayeva's major failure has been her inability to heal the deep ethnic rift between the majority Kyrgyz and the minority Uzbek population who live in the south. Violent ethnic clashes in 2010 resulted in entire Uzbek villages being razed to the ground and hundreds being killed. A major political effort is needed to reconcile the two sides. But she has given the country hope.

This is a stark contrast from Uzbekistan, where the government has refused to take responsibility for its [massacre](#) of hundreds of unarmed peaceful protesters in Andijan in the Ferghana valley in May, 2005. Since then, Uzbekistan has refused to give visas to journalists or independent human rights observers, though it maintains close ties to western governments. I have made continuous visits to the country since 1986, interviewed President Karimov in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and written two [books](#) on Central Asia; yet I am now on an Uzbek list of foreign journalists who are barred from entering for writing about the Andijan massacre.

Sadly, it is Uzbekistan, not Kyrgyzstan, that counts as the political heavyweight of Central Asia and is now, because of supply routes, an increasingly pivotal player in the Afghan war. As long as Karimov, who has ruled Uzbekistan since the communist era, refuses to believe in the rule of law, so, too, will most of the rest of Central Asia.