

Uzbekistan: On The Slippery Slope

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By Ahmed Rashid

In the aftermath of the Andijan massacre, Western leaders may be wondering what to do with Uzbek strongman Islam Karimov. The United States, along with the European Union, should start any policy reevaluation by admitting that they bear a significant share of the blame for enabling Karimov's authoritarian rule. Since the September 11 terrorist tragedy, the United States and EU have preferred to prop up dictatorships in Central Asia, rather than promote democratic values.

The US Defense Department has long been the dominant Western influence in Central Asia - which comprises Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The Pentagon broadened its security ties with Uzbekistan in the late 1990s, when Islamic militants first became active in the region. [For background see the Eurasia Insight archive].

The CIA and MI6 followed suit, training and reorganizing the Uzbek security services. Defense cooperation took a quantum leap forward following September 11, as Uzbekistan suddenly emerged as one of Washington's main strategic allies in the anti-terrorism struggle. [For background see the Eurasia Insight archive]. Since then, Tashkent retained its status as valued partner, even though human rights groups, and even the US State Department, have condemned the Uzbek government's reliance on repression. [For background see the Eurasia Insight archive]. During a visit to Tashkent in February 2004, US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld praised Uzbekistan as a "key member" of the anti-terrorism coalition, while ignoring the Karimov administration's deplorable human rights record, along with its failure to implement promised reforms. [For additional information see the Eurasia Insight archive].

Cementing the US-Uzbek partnership is the Karshi-Khanabad air base, which American forces use to fly support missions for ongoing anti-Taliban military operations in Afghanistan. [For additional information see the Eurasia Insight archive].

Cooperation reached a point where US defense officials used Uzbekistan essentially as a torture chamber, transporting suspected Islamic radicals from US custody to Uzbekistan for interrogation, in a process known as rendition. The New York Times, which published a lengthy investigative report into the practice, suggested dozens of prisoners were dispatched to Uzbekistan. Given Uzbekistan's lengthy record of systematic torture, it is hard to believe that US officials were unaware that detainees transported to Uzbekistan would be exposed to coercive interrogation methods that are plainly illegal in the United States, and that violate international human rights norms.

Some US and British diplomats - especially Craig Murray, the former British envoy in Tashkent - sought to change Washington's and London's approach toward Karimov's regime, advocating the conditioning of economic assistance to Tashkent on Karimov's implementation of reforms. [For additional information see the Eurasia Insight archive]. The Bush administration, along with EU member state governments, frequently called on Karimov to promote change and the Uzbek leader repeatedly pledged to carry out reforms. But nothing ever happened beyond the usual rhetoric.

The US State Department decertified Uzbekistan in July of 2004, revoking \$18 million in aid. [For background see the Eurasia Insight archive]. However, this move was effectively undermined by the Pentagon when visiting US General and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Richard Meyers extended \$21 million in military assistance in August of that same year. [For background see the Eurasia Insight archive].

The United States and EU remained largely silent when Karimov, sensing that the democratization trend unleashed by Georgia's Rose Revolution in 2003 posed a threat to his regime, cracked down on non-governmental organization activity. Among the international NGOs targeted was the Open Society Institute's Tashkent office. [For background see the Eurasia Insight archive]. (EurasiaNet operates under the auspices of the Open Society Institute).

Karimov sent numerous signals that he would employ force against any and all domestic opponents. At the same time, his disregard for outside interference with his domestic strategy became blatant. In March, Tashkent called off a visit by British Foreign Office Minister Bill Rammell because he announced in advance that he would raise human rights issues during his planned visit. [For additional information see the Eurasia Insight archive].

This snub did not prompt any perceptible changes in US or EU policy.

As Karimov clamped down at home, the strategic importance of the Karshi-Khanabad base, the cornerstone of the US-Uzbek alliance, was dramatically declining. Today, many of the functions performed by the base could be easily shifted to Afghanistan. Indeed, Afghan President Hamid Karzai wants permanent US military bases in Afghanistan and the Pentagon is spending US \$83 million this year to build permanent facilities at its large bases near Kabul and Kandahar.

Western powers may soon come to regret its lack of attention to civil society developments in Uzbekistan. Karimov's repressive system has ensured that all democratic parties are banned. Unlike in Georgia Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, where democratically oriented opposition leaders were waiting in the wings, there is no democratic force at present in Uzbekistan capable of replacing Karimov, and maintaining stability.

The main result of Karimov's authoritarian practices has been the formation of underground Islamic extremist groups in Uzbekistan. Such groups took shape in the late 1990s, receiving assistance from Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, the Taliban and al Qaeda.

The most well known group the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which was decimated in the 2001 anti-terrorism offensive in Afghanistan, but whose remnants are now based in the tribal areas of Pakistan. Over the past four years, IMU militants have reorganized and reestablished contact with supporters in Uzbekistan. [For background see the Eurasia Insight archive].

Reports of a clash near the Kyrgyz border on May 15, in which Uzbek soldiers were supposedly killed, may be an indicator that Islamic militants are again active inside Uzbekistan, and are seeking to take advantage of the chaos in eastern Uzbekistan. It should be stressed, however, that the armed group which first attacked the government jail in Andijan on May 13 did not comprise Islamic radicals, but friends and relatives of the 23 businessmen and traders who were on trial in Andijan. [For background see the Eurasia Insight archive].

There are simply no good choices available in Uzbekistan. In Tashkent, Karimov is rumored to be extremely ill, and there is a possibility of a three-way power struggle to succeed him. The main contenders for power in Tashkent are; secret police chief Rustam Inoyatov; Interior Minister Zakir Almatov; and the powerful presidential adviser Ismail Jurabekov. All these figures are considered even more ruthless and dangerous than Karimov. [For background see the Eurasia Insight archive].

Western policies have ensured that even if Karimov were toppled in an internal power struggle, his replacement would only be another dictator. The chances of a democratic movement emerging in Uzbekistan are highly unlikely. Armed struggle, even if waged by democrats in the Ferghana Valley, is unlikely to stay democratic very long.

The longer that Karimov carries out acts of repression, the greater the likelihood that Islamic extremism spreads.

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