

## Karimov Contributing To His Own Demise In Uzbekistan

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By Ahmed Rashid

In early December, two Uzbek women from Tashkent arrived in Pakistan to take part in an international workshop on legal rights organized by a non-governmental organization in Lahore. Two days later each woman received a distressing telephone call from their respective daughters, both of whom said they had been sacked from their government jobs without explanation. Both daughters were the apparent victims of official retaliation, punished because a close relative had traveled abroad to engage in non-government-sanctioned activity.

Not only does Uzbekistan want to control who can travel abroad, the country is trying to keep out all those who would criticize the government, or otherwise undermine incumbent authority. For the past four months, I had been trying to get a visa to visit Uzbekistan. I have covered the country for 16 years, written three books about Central Asia and interviewed President Islam Karimov three times in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The Uzbek Embassy in Islamabad had refused to explain the delay in visa processing until an answer finally came in mid-December; a visa would not be forthcoming because I had been critical of Karimov in my recent writings and had been deemed as "anti-state" by the authorities in Tashkent.

When I asked to see the Uzbek ambassador to discuss the matter, I was told by a diplomat, who is also a long-time friend, that such a meeting would be impossible to arrange. Apparently, the ambassador had been forbidden from having contact with me.

The travails of the two Uzbek NGO activists, along with my own visa experience, underscore the fact that an iron curtain is falling on Uzbekistan. Contact with the outside world for Uzbek citizens is becoming as difficult as it is for those in Turkmenistan. Outsiders are not welcome in Tashkent, whether journalists, investors or aid workers. Yet, despite the sharp deterioration of human rights conditions, Uzbekistan remains a close ally of the Bush administration in its war on terrorism.

The closing down of Uzbekistan is more than a threat to the country's own population. It also represents a growing danger to all Central Asian nations. The arbitrary behavior of Karimov's administration is increasingly seen as a destabilizing factor for the entire region. [For additional information see the Eurasia Insight archive].

The impact of Uzbekistan's isolationist policies hits Afghanistan, a country struggling to overcome a quarter-century of upheaval, especially hard. Afghanistan's reconstruction hopes count heavily on the country's ability to serve as a regional trade hub. Uzbekistan has dented Afghanistan's trade aims by keeping the key border crossing at Termez closed. Even US military supplies, which are being trucked in to Afghanistan from the US air base in Karshi face innumerable problems and delays getting across the Uzbek-Afghan border.

Tashkent's reluctance to stimulate Afghan-Uzbek trade does not deter it from providing funds, bodyguards and logistical support to the Afghan warlord Gen. Rashid Dostum, an ethnic Uzbek. Warlordism has been identified as one of the major threats to Afghan stabilization efforts, and Afghan President Hamid Karzai is in the midst of a campaign to curtail the influence of Afghan warlords. [For background see the Eurasia Insight archive]. Nevertheless, Uzbekistan is among several countries in the region that continues to strengthen its own favorite warlord.

Uzbek action to seal the country's border has only helped extremist Islamic militants in Central Asia find allies among the Taliban, al Qaeda and militant groups in Pakistan. According to Pakistani officials, there is a constant flow of militants belonging to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) traveling to the Pakistani region of Waziristan, located along the Afghan-Pakistani border. In Waziristan, IMU militants receive weapons

and training before being sent home with the aim of destabilizing Central Asia.

Six months after Pakistani troops conducted an anti-terrorist offensive in Waziristan, the traffic in Islamic militants between Central Asia and Pakistan and Afghanistan continues unabated. By closing its official borders, Uzbekistan has encouraged Islamic radicals to develop a clandestine highway - traversing Turkmenistan, Iran and the Pakistani province of Balochistan - along which militants travel back and forth. Meanwhile, Uzbekistan's decision to sow minefields along its border with Turkmenistan and Tajikistan have led to civilian deaths and rising discontent among farmers and traders living in frontier areas. [For additional information see the Eurasia Insight archive].

The Uzbek government's failure to open up the political system is only breeding a new kind of paranoia, fear and instability within the regime, and among the broader population. The opening up of borders, accompanied by the promotion of trade and contacts, is essential if militant Islam is to be defeated in Central Asia. Unfortunately, Uzbekistan is doing just the opposite. In turning inward - cutting off travel opportunities for Uzbeks and contacts with outsiders - Karimov's regime is contributing to its own eventual demise.

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