

Cozying up to Karimov?

By Robert M. Cutler

Uzbekistan has sought a special relationship with the U.S. since the early 1990s. The country received designation as an American “strategic partner” in 1995 in a bilateral communique. This “strategic partner” relationship has, until recently, been largely a rhetorical designation.

In its new war on terrorism, however, Washington is quickly moving to put this strategic partnership to work. It has already turned to Uzbekistan’s President Islam Karimov, who has spent the past decade cracking down so hard in his own country that he has driven the possibility of loyal Islamic dissent out of the political arena, and is now targeted by the Taliban-backed Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), with which there have been military clashes over the past two years.

Although Uzbekistan may provide a useful launching pad for a U.S. armed intervention in Afghanistan, with which it shares a small border, as well as surveillance capabilities, the danger exists that too blunt an American approach would negatively affect U.S. interests and the future of politics in the region. To avoid counterproductive effects requires sensitivity to local nuances. It would be a mistake, for example, for Washington to lump together all Islamic political movements. In Central Asia in particular, the indigenous development of Islamic social and political thought historically differs from that in other parts of the world, including Afghanistan. Islamic trends in Uzbekistan are especially distinctive.

In the early 1990s, Karimov denounced “Islamic fundamentalism.” In the early post-Soviet tumult—before Western observers realized what was happening—he stamped out all forms of political opposition. In this way he brought the country’s nascent multiparty system to an unhappy end, treating as outlaws even those who might have become a “loyal

opposition” that supported the regime and its institutions. The result was a radicalization of many of the groups that survived.

For example, the liberal tradition within the historical Jadid (“Renewal”) movement seems to have been lost. This reformist Islamic movement, native to Central Asia, took shape in the early twentieth century, before the Bolshevik revolution, in order to resist Russian cultural and political dominance. It operated through clandestine religious celebration and education, including the establishment of printing houses. The Jadid movement had an underground revival in the decades after the Second World War. However, given the overarching forms of control that the Soviet-Russian regime attempted to install, as contrasted with the more limited control that typified that Tsarist-Russian presence, late Soviet Jadidism tended to be less collaborative and more confrontational vis-à-vis Moscow. Under Gorbachev’s glasnost, it burst onto the scene publicly.

Jadid’s conservative wing influenced the formation of the contemporary Hizb-e-Tahrir group, which agrees with IMU on the overthrow of all secular states in the region, and on the eventual goal of a transnational Islamic Caliphate. But Hizb-e-Tahrir concentrates at present on the dissemination of religious education and propaganda, whereas the IMU focuses on the armed struggle. This is the spectrum of political Islam under Karimov’s authoritarianism: the distinctive and progressive modernism of the liberal Jadidists has disappeared within the country.

This is all the more tragic as none of the tendencies and circumstances that aided liberal political transitions from authoritarianism in other parts of the world in the 1970s and 1980s exists in Central Asia. Take the repressive authoritarian regimes in Portugal and Spain. There were four reasons why Washington’s

support for these regimes through the mid-1970s did not result in popular antipathy toward America. First, there were pre-existing national historical traditions in those countries promoting political pluralism. Second, the constraints of geography and cold war bipolarity help to impose a Western-oriented political culture (although this almost did not happen in Portugal, where the Communists nearly succeeded in imposing a Moscow-oriented regime through a coup in November 1975). Third, the transnational party organizations, such as the Socialist International and its Christian Democrat counterpart, played an extremely important role in supporting and securing multiparty democracy. Fourth, the eventual possibility of membership in the European Union also served as an important incentive in maintaining a liberal orientation.

Likewise in Latin America and East Asia (e.g., Philippines, South Korea), it is mainly due to national political culture and longstanding patterns of national security orientation that transitions to democracy have not

entailed great popular antipathy toward America. In the case of Uzbekistan's neighbor Kazakhstan, U.S. and European criticism of fraud and abuse in the electoral system in the 1990s mainly resulted in the country's president rejecting "Western models" of political development and enhancing his relations with Russia and China.

But the public in Uzbekistan is exhausted by the violations of civil and human rights that have become part and parcel of Karimov's search for Islamic militants. Among Uzbekistan's middle class, such as it exists, there is hardly a family in which a member has not been detained, questioned, arbitrarily imprisoned, or beaten by internal security forces. To be sure, the countries of the region, Uzbekistan included, are hopeful that cooperation with the U.S. will lead Washington to close its eyes to human rights deficiencies. It is likely that if the U.S. becomes too closely identified with the current regime, then it will also be identified in the popular mind with the regime's abuses.

For the U.S. to be visibly identified with the Karimov regime, in the eyes of those social strata where these are not already linked together in a demonizing mythology, is a danger both to U.S. interests in the region and to the progressive evolution of society and politics in Uzbekistan. On the one hand, a presence in the country would facilitate intelligence-gathering, the better to ascertain the specific situation among the political elites and sub-elites. On the other hand, if Washington becomes too closely identified with the regime in power, then it risks losing future possibilities of influence upon the evolution of politics and society in the country, including during any post-Karimov transition. That, in turn, will affect the country's foreign policy orientation as well as its domestic affairs.

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