

Uzbekistan and the United States: Authoritarianism, Islamism & Washington's Security Agenda

Shahram Akbarzadeh

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Uzbek president Islam Karimov has gotten away relatively easily with his brutal suppression of the Andijon uprising (May 13-14, 2005), in which the state security forces opened fire on protesters and killed about 700 of them. Despite the fact that this book was written before this event, Shahram Akbarzadeh's *Uzbekistan and the United States: Authoritarianism, Islamism & Washington's Security Agenda* articulates quite well how Karimov came to the point where he could find the courage to become increasingly authoritarian despite Uzbekistan's bad record of human rights abuses and failed democratic reforms. The author argues that Karimov's already existing authoritarianism has intensified and yet has been relatively ignored as a result of his close cooperation with the United States in the American-led "war-on-terror." He argues that the common threat of

Islamist extremism has brought the United States and Uzbekistan together and has become a pretext for the latter to continue its repressive policies, which have caused Uzbekistan's human rights and democratization records to falter even further.

Akbarzadeh takes the reader through a series of sociopolitical transformations by which Karimov has sought to consolidate his power. These include the domestic restructuring of the Uzbek political system in the post-Soviet era; regional alignments and power struggles, most notably against Russia; and, finally, Tashkent's long-sought bilateral relations with the United States, which gained a whole new dimension after 9/11 and throughout the American-led "war on terror." The author concludes that the cooperation between Tashkent and Washington in the fight against Islamist extremism and, consequently, the latter's downplaying its concerns about democratic reforms in Uzbekistan, would only encourage Karimov to be more repressive and less accountable toward the citizens of Uzbekistan. The book contributes to the understanding of political developments in the newly independent states by probing the interaction between Uzbek domestic politics and the international political and security agendas.

Uzbekistan has succeeded in shielding itself from the wave of democratization that has transformed most of the post-Soviet states. "The Uzbek leadership was determined not to be influenced by what it regarded as an impractical and utopian fascination with democracy and political openness," notes Akbarzadeh. Instead, Tashkent has avoided the demands of local opposition groups and the international community for freedom of association, the emergence of a multi-party system, free and fair elections, and the rule of law by building only a façade of democracy and public accountability. In fact, post-Soviet reforms in Uzbekistan have served only to strengthen the president's grip on the public and political realms. Akbarzadeh stresses that while adorning himself with extensive powers, Karimov has argued that the emergence of political parties is the gravest threat to state authority and a threat to national unity. Similarly, in order to justify his strict measures and the heightened state control over the public domain, he has portrayed the Islamist insurgency, symbolized by the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP), the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), and the late Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT), along with the Taliban's seizure of power in Afghanistan in 1996, as a severe threat to the Uzbek way of life.

The discourse of the fight against Islamist extremism and the desire to avoid Russia's continuing influence in Central Asia have been central to Uzbekistan's foreign policy preferences. Akbarzadeh contends that

Karimov's Uzbekistan was among the first to seek to mobilize the international community against the surge of Islamist fanaticism that was due to spread by both Tajikistan's civil war and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. However, Karimov failed to garner enough support for his call, since the international community had been skeptical about his hidden agenda of exploiting the Islamist threat as a pretext for his anti-democratic rule. Karimov has sought the support that he could not find in the international community within regional alignments and partnerships. Accordingly, Uzbekistan has joined the GUUAM (a political, economic, and strategic alliance founded in 1996 by Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, and Moldova) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in order to counterbalance Russia in the region and to prevent the spread of Islamist fundamentalism. Nevertheless, stresses the author, both organizations have not fulfilled Tashkent's expectations. Consequently, Karimov finds it imperative to align himself with the United States.

American-Uzbek relations consist of two radically different phases, divided by September 11. Akbarzadeh notes that Washington was extremely critical of Tashkent's poor performance on human rights and democratic reforms. Washington was so critical that the Clinton administration hardly, if ever, established bilateral relations with Karimov's Uzbekistan. However, 9/11 and the ensuing war on terror centered on Afghanistan put Uzbekistan at the center of the American agenda as a key strategic ally in the region. The author provides a definitive account of how academic circles in Washington, most notably SAIS (the School of Advanced International Studies), have been influential in assessing Uzbekistan's strategic importance to the United States, and, hence, developing bilateral relations. Akbarzadeh contends that parallel to its increased importance to Washington, Tashkent has become increasingly repressive in its domestic politics and has found the courage to intensify the Islamist crackdown at the expense of political reforms.

Akbarzadeh's book is a timely contribution to the study of Central Asia in that it provides a definitive account of the sociopolitical developments that enabled Tashkent to be reckless enough to repress civilian protestors as brutally as in Andijon. However, the book lacks a theoretical framework that articulates the behavior of authoritarian regimes to legitimize and consolidate their power. Such a theoretical basis and comparison of Uzbekistan to other authoritarian examples could serve to predict the nation's future. Similarly, despite its emphasis in the title, the book has relatively little emphasis on American-Uzbek relations in the content. Over all, Akbarzadeh

presents to the readers a good scholarly work that will help them to better understand the dynamics of the authoritarian regime in Uzbekistan and where that regime is headed.

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