Democratization, legitimacy and political change in Central Asia

ANNA MATVEEVA*

Recent events in Central Asia—January 1999 pre-term presidential elections in Kazakhstan, heightened religious tensions in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, setbacks in the peace process in Tajikistan—urge analysts to make yet another effort in interpreting post-Soviet political change in the region. This might also be an appropriate moment to look back and reflect on the way the region has developed in the decade since perestroika in the USSR enabled the birth of politics.

Today the political development of the five Central Asian countries displays more diversity than uniformity, and Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are now distinct entities to a much greater extent than they were as Union Republics. At the same time, a regional identity, reflected in common political phenomena from referenda to extend presidential powers into the next millennium to dynastic marriage, is also apparent. Political changes in the region give rise to a number of questions. Did the results match expectations created by perestroika? Were the developments in Central Asia accidental and how distinct are they from those in other CIS countries? Can they be attributed largely to the role played by the leaderships, or were more fundamental factors present? Were external influences important or did the region act on its own agenda? And, most importantly, can we identify the direction transition has taken?

The ruling groups in Central Asia are also concerned with the issues of political change and the legitimacy of their rule. The domestic requirement to provide a basis for legitimacy derives from two considerations. First, legitimacy embodies the consent of the majority of the population, and it is easier to rule in conditions of compliance than to rely heavily on enforcement mechanisms. Secondly, international pressure and a fear of exclusion from the Western sphere of influence make ever more acute the need to be accepted as legimate.

There is anxiety in the West that what it sees in Central Asia is not what it necessarily wanted to see. Politicians are concerned with legitimacy as they are interested in stability, which legitimate rule is more likely to deliver. Given the Western interest and engagement in the region in the 1990s, external misgivings

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regarding legitimacy and political order in Central Asia are understandable. One might question whether correct assumptions regarding democratization were made by scholars and politicians at the outset. Why were these countries considered likely to develop in a democratic way? Is it because the world outside judged these societies by the criteria of what it thought they ought to achieve rather than by what they themselves were trying to achieve?

Without aspiring to provide ultimate answers, this article argues that post-independence developments in Central Asia cannot be attributed solely to political manipulation, but have been a product of fundamental structural elements in these societies. It is impossible to impose political regimes without some basis of social support for them, nor is it possible to venture into major policy undertakings without building at least an elite consensus. On the one hand, the political order in Central Asia in its present form was shaped by the challenges and concerns of survival in the post-communist rubble which were common to the whole region. These concerns of the ruling elites were shared by segments of their large populations, and this enabled the regimes initially to act in the ways that they did. On the other hand, the policy responses adopted by the leaderships were different in each case, reflecting their varying priorities and capacities in meeting the challenges of the new era. This, in turn, led to political diversification.

The article is structured in the following way. The analysis begins by outlining the factors influencing the formation of political regimes and the challenges the regimes had to address after independence. It then assesses the policy responses adopted by these regimes and the extent to which governments acquired legitimacy as a result of these responses. It also focuses on what their sources of legitimacy mean for democratization, and for the directions of political change. The article concludes with some reflections on the nature of new challenges which emerged out of political developments in the 1990s and the capacity of the regimes to cope with them.

Initial challenges

With the break-up of the Soviet Union, independence was forced on the Central Asian states rather than won by them. Political elites lacked the benefit of political legitimacy that they might have gained from a struggle for independence. The respective leaderships were presented with a challenge of state-building in societies with no prior experience of existence as nation-states. Resolution of the multiple dilemmas involved in making a successful transition depended on addressing five crucial challenges.

First, new power relations had to be constructed. Part of the legacy of the Soviet system was the 'empty shells' of political institutions—structures of autonomy inherited from Soviet federalism, in which a façade of republican and local bodies in fact functioned as implementation agencies for decisions made at the centre. Local autonomy was further suppressed by the authority of an all-Union economic *nomenklatura* in the republics. The challenge was to fill these

formal structures with real power. The destructive effects of the power vacuum were demonstrated by developments in Tajikistan after independence, resulting in a civil war, which had had a major impact on politicians elsewhere in the region. The immediate necessity was to secure the channels through which power could be exercised from top to bottom. Because of the ways in which the five Central Asian republics were originally created by Moscow,[1] the validity of relations between those at the top of the political structure and those at the bottom could easily be called into question, as fundamental divisions persisted over the identity of the new nations and even over their very existence. This uncertainty brought about the challenge of nation-building.

Secondly, a lack of clarity about what 'nationhood' essentially consisted of was complicated by the presence of minorities. The states' leaderships were faced with a tension between predominantly civic or ethnic state orientations and the issue of what place the minorities would occupy in the new societies. None of the Central Asian states is mono-ethnic, and nowhere does the titular nationality constitute an overwhelming majority. Each state incorporates distinct minority groups: European (predominantly Slavic) settlers, diaspora minorities indigenous to the region and peoples forcibly deported to the area. These groups were confronted with choices between accommodation to the host society, assimilation and emigration. Emigration became the most viable option for minorities with relatively prosperous kin states outside the CIS, and their exodus looks likely to result in the disappearance of their Central Asian communities. Accommodation was only partially possible, as in an era of nation-building titular nationalities frequently regarded minorities with suspicion. Minorities' loyalty to the newly established states was often doubted, especially when they lived in border areas abutting on their kin states, and their members have in many cases been deprived of positions of power.

The lessons drawn by the authorities from the recent Soviet past gave them grounds for apprehension about the possibility of inter-ethnic violence. Mindful of the experience of inter-ethnic clashes in 1989–90, the leaderships kept a tight lid on real or perceived minority grievances. The demographic picture and population density gave grounds for a variety of concerns. The existence of concentrated areas densely populated by diverse groups, such as the Fergana valley, inhabited by Uzbeks, Kyrgyz and Tajiks, and split between Uzbekistan, Kyrgyestan and Tajikistand, posed a danger of inter-ethnic violence, while minority settlements in remote areas of the country, such as Russians in Kazakhstan, provoked a fear of irredentism.

A third and potentially major challenge was fragmentation along regional, tribal or clan lines.[2] Stark divisions persist within the titular nationalities themselves,

[1] Shirin Akiner, 'Conflict, stability and development in Central Asia', in Luc van de Goor, Kumar Rupesinghe and Paul Sciarone, eds, *Between development and destruction* (Basingstoke: Macmillan; New York: St Martin's, 1996), pp. 257–97.

[2] For a discussion on clan and kinship groups see Barnett Rubin, 'Russian hegemony and state breakdown in the periphery: causes and consequences of the civil war in Tajikistan', in Barnett R. Rubin and Jack Snyder, eds, *Post-Soviet political order: conflict and state building* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 147.

and sub-ethnic identities remain very strong. Sometimes regional affiliations can even cross ethnic lines. In many instances, the removal of the Soviet state's protective role created a vacuum into which these affiliations moved. Although they were already in evidence during the Soviet period, their significance as a basis for political mobilization, social support and especially for elite relations has dramatically increased. Whether national identities can be fostered out of narrow clan loyalties, or whether, as the example of Tajikistan suggests, such divisions virtually preclude the emergence of a political community, remains a formidable obstacle in building coherent nation-states.

Fourthly, the prospects for quick economic readjustment were uncertain, while welfare provisions and often even immediate subsistence levels were put in jeopardy. Much of the previous development in Central Asia, either based on monoculture of cotton or related to various heavy industrial projects, was viable only given the all-Union system of division of labour. Its mineral wealth was largely underdeveloped, since similar resources were more easily extracted elsewhere in the USSR at places nearer to the markets. As a result, vast resources generated only a small proportion of their potential profits, while the prospects for short-term operation of the economy looked bleak. Moreover, Central Asian financial systems were tied to the Russian ruble, while they had no control over the monetary policies in Moscow. Consequently the first years after independence were dominated by attempts at market reforms, the need to sustain basic goods and services and arrest industrial decline, the search for capital investment worldwide, adjustment to the severance of old ties between the republics and readjustment to each others' adjustment processes.

Finally, the fear of foreign, especially Russian, domination partly explained the attitudes to Russian minorities, which were suspected of acting as a fifth column in working towards a restoration of the USSR. Kazakhstan was particularly vulnerable to irredentist moves if supported by Russia's military, and anxieties of this kind were indeed raised by Russian and Uzbek intervention in the civil war in Tajikistan in 1992, which turned the latter into what Barnett Rubin calls 'a Russian-sponsored garrison state'.[3] Concerns centred on the questions of whether Russia would allow the Central Asian states to enhance their independence, and, should it attempt to assert a hegemonic role, whether this might happen through economic or military pressure. These fears proved unfounded, as Russia had initially little interest, and later no real resources, for substantive interference. Moreover, Russia gradually acquired a role of competitor in relation to Central Asia, rather than conqueror. Its 'involuntary disengagement' from the region followed.[4] Turkey and Iran, regarded as major aspirants for influence eager to impose their respective 'models' of secularism or Islamic governance, made no decisive efforts at taking over the Russian mantle in Central Asia, lacking both the means and any substantial commitment to the area.

[3] Rubin, 'Russian hegemony and state breakdown in the periphery', p. 156.
[4] Lena Jonson, *Russia and Central Asia: the new web of relations*, CACP Key Paper (London: RIIA, 1998).

Policy responses

Faced with similar sets of concerns, Central Asian leaderships exercised different policy responses. These responses, which shaped the state-building projects and laid the foundations of the new states, were characterized by the following key elements.

Maintenance of social stability and avoidance of open conflict

This objective on the part of the leaders and major political actors supporting them influenced the means through which they exercised power. Initially most of the leaders represented a continuation of the previous 'party of power', attractive to the population at large in part because of their perceived ability to preserve inter-ethnic peace; hence they were backed by minorities and by those within titular nationalities apprehensive of the rise of ethnic nationalism.[5] Former Party officials who under the Soviet regime preached internationalism were regarded as able to play a balancing act and stay above narrow ethnic interests. The President of Kyrgyzstan, Askar Akaev, the only non-*nomenklatura* leader, also came into prominence as a champion of inter-ethnic accord following his peace-making intervention in the clashes between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in Osh region.

In their constitutional arrangements (which proved to be remarkably fluid; Kazakhstan, for instance, has already survived three constitutions in less than a decade), all the states opted for presidential republics with strong formal powers vested in the presidency, although it could be argued that a parliamentary republic is better suited to achieving the accommodation of diverse interests in fragmented societies.[6] The initial goal of the leaderships was to secure a position of power for themselves and their immediate entourage, preferably by peaceful means. Once this was achieved, through elections of widely varying democratic credentials, the road to consolidation of power was opened up. The key steps in this direction were restricting or sidelining the opposition, ensuring the compliance of national parliaments, creating new allegiances through distribution of economic assets, and exploiting the old loyalty networks by distributing favours. These measures were supplemented with a degree of intimidation of political opponents, while quietly co-opting elements of their most appealing agendas. The culmination of the process came with the extension of the terms of offices of the presidents of Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan into the next century.[7]

[5] Interview with Rafik Saifullin, Director of Institute of Regional and International Studies, Republic of Uzbekistan, June 1998.

[6] Juan J. Linz warns that the presidential model can easily lead to zero-sum outcomes: 'Transitions to democracy', *Washington Quarterly* 13, Summer 1990, pp. 143–64 at p. 153. The same argument was made for Russia's case by a number of researchers; see e.g. Maurizio Mazari, 'Russia: the stability factor', *World Today* 50: 8–9, 1994, pp. 172–4.

[7] The Kyrgyz president attempted to follow his comrades. His rapid retreat to the practice of presidential elections (held in December 1995) demonstrates his different style of governance rather than the nature of his rule. Akaev is likely to run for a third term in 2000, although according to the constitution of Kyrgystan a president can be elected for only two terms. In Kazakhstan President Nazarbayev, in an unexpected reversal of his earlier intentions, declared pre-term presidential elections (which he is most certainly going to win) to be held in January 1999.

As opposition in the capitals (with the exception of Tajikistan) was either marginalized (in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan) or eliminated (in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan), a political challenge to the system is more likely to emerge from the regions, led by ambitious provincial leaders who may rise to prominence. Centre–periphery power relationships are for the most part exercised in a patron–client fashion. They rely on the centre's ability to distribute wealth, favours and appointments and expect loyalty and stability in return. In Kyrgyzstan the regional barons put serious constraints on the extent of presidential power. In Kazakhstan, where a scarce population is scattered around a huge territory, President Nazarbayev paid careful attention to keeping appointments to positions of power in the regions, including the regional heads (akims), under tight control from the centre, simultaneously practising local recruitment of younger people.[8] As a result regional elites, especially in the potentially troublesome north, became more balanced, but with the Kazakhs at the top and Russians in secondary positions. Whether the move of the capital to Astana will provide a more centralized system of governance, or whether Almaty will emerge as an alternative power centre, remains to be seen.

Use of economic means for political ends

The interplay between politics and economic development presented the regimes with many opportunities, and they were quick to make the most of them. In Kazakhstan, for instance, the chosen path of economic restructuring was to put most hope in the country's hydrocarbon resources, while leaving the remnants of Soviet industrial might to die of natural causes. This orientation also helped to diminish the political significance of the former Soviet economic *nomenklatura* in the republic, thereby depriving the Kazakhstani Russians, concentrated in the north, of their privileged position, and severely undermining the status of their elite, which was derived from its former industrial role.[9] Control over the valuable assets distributed during the privatization process enabled the new leaders to secure the personal loyalties of a closed network of supporters and opened up opportunities for corruption on an unprecedented scale. Economic liberalization (where it took place) and abolition of restrictions on trade in valuable commodities created a gigantic car-boot sale of everything which could be sold quickly, and preferably for hard currency. The oligarchy which emerged out of these processes, with powerful vested interests and the money to protect them, gained new prominence in the shadow of formal political institutions.

For the most part, all the governments made a choice to rely on natural resources to provide basic welfare and (if the need arose) buy off the counter-elites. The assumption was that wealthy citizens care less about political rights

[8] Neil Melvin, 'The consolidation of the regional elite in Pavlodar (Kazakhstan): the end of transition?', paper presented at the British Association of Slavonic and East European Studies conference, 4–6 April 1998.

[9] Martha Brill Olcott, Presentation at the RIIA–Moscow Carnegie Center conference, 'Borderlands in transition', Moscow, January 1998.

than hungry ones. Meanwhile, the less well-off citizens themselves, sceptical about their prospects of access to luxuries in the future, were faced with the down-to-earth social and economic concerns of the present: unemployment, deteriorating health care, rising crime and a rapid migration into urban areas from the countryside.

New ideologies based on state nationalism

An orientation towards a predominantly civic concept of nationality prevailed in the early period of independence and is still reflected in constitutional arrangements (all residents, for example, were granted citizenship and guaranteed equal status). However, a drift towards an ethnic bias became more apparent as time passed. State-centric nationalism, based on promotion of the dominant ethnic group as a defining element of the new societies, required construction of these 'imagined communities' from above.[10] Ideologies incorporating myths of a Golden Age, moral virtues, cultural traditions and promotion of local heroes to service the requirements of nation-building broadly followed the Soviet pattern of ideological design and generally demonstrated the familiar lack of subtlety. This is where the project met with its worst enemy—popular apathy towards this or any other centrally designed dogma. The Uzbek leadership was probably the most earnest in its desire for the new ideology to take root. However, the establishment of this frail plant has proved to be a formidable task. The July 1998 resolution of the President of Uzbekistan 'on measures for further deepening of reforms in the sphere of spirituality and education and increasing in its effectiveness' repeats the complaint of 'slowness in formation of ideology of national independence', suggesting that more younger people need to be attracted to the enterprise with modern notions of national and human values.[11]

In reality, the enhanced status of the titular ethnic groups came about to only a very small degree because of the new national ideologies, which left many indifferent, or the imposed use of state languages, as language laws had few resources to supplement their implementation, and minorities were not forced to communicate in them.[12] Of far more significance in this development was the promotion of selected representatives of the dominant group to positions of real power and influence. In Kazakhstan the governmental positions and top civil servants' jobs are dominated by the members of the titular nationality, with Russians unable to rise above junior ministerial level, and this pattern is broadly followed to varying extents by other states. Another method of securing privileged positions for the members of the titular groups was to ensure their

[10] For analysis of a highly complicated process of a search for national orientation see e.g. Shirin Akiner, *Formation of Kazakh identity: from tribe to nation-state*, FSS Key Paper (London: RIIA, 1995).

[11] *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 12 September 1998.

[12] Russian activists in Kazakhstan, however, claim that even this situation has begun to change. According to Victor Mikhailov, the chairman of the Lad Slavic movement, more than 2 million people have left the republic during the past seven years, prompted mainly by the lack of Russian-language courses: *Inside Central Asia*, BBC Monitoring Service, 31 August–6 September 1998, p. 4.

predominance in the national parliaments. In Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, where competitive elections were conducted, the constituencies were defined in such a way as to safeguard the titular nationality majority where at all possible.

International cooperation, regional security and prevention of irredentism

The removal of ideology from, and diversification of, external relations by all these states, irrespective of their domestic policies, marked a clear departure from the Soviet era, when the internal and external policies of the regime were intimately interlinked. The desire to cooperate with the West, however, was determined in large part by the need to secure financial assistance and investment in order to develop the natural resources. A cynical assumption might be that those countries (such as Turkmenistan) which were confident in their attractiveness to foreign capital could show almost total disregard for democratic values and practices if it suited them, while resource-poor countries (such as Kyrgyzstan) had to demonstrate some additional appeal. It would be an exaggeration to suspect Askar Akaev of being motivated exclusively by a desire for Western economic assistance in promising to make Kyrgyzstan a 'Central Asian Switzerland', but a factor of 'they are trying to be like us, therefore we should help them' undoubtedly played a role in the IMF decision to allocate funds to support the introduction of the national currency in May 1993.

As far as secessionism is concerned, all the republics' leaders had an interest in resisting any such pressure on the part of groups linked to majorities in neighbouring states, and all were keen to stress that support by a neighbouring regime for any such group could lead to greater general instability or to retaliatory treatment. Uzbekistan, for instance, was firm in rejecting the appeals of the Tajikistani Uzbeks living on the border to join their kin state. Russia, despite all its rhetoric, proved to be fairly indifferent to the fate of ethnic Russians in Central Asia, especially in the absence of any physical threats. Most of the local Russians seemed to have accepted their new status;[13] for those who do not, emigration, rather than struggle for their rights, is the preferred option.[14]

Democratization

Many observers have pointed to the relationship between pre-authoritarian political experience and a transition to democracy.[15] Although the Central Asian

[13] Eduard Limonov, in *Anatomiya geroya* (Smolensk: Rusich, 1998), pp. 305–16, provides a bitter account of his failure to find any Russian group capable of direct action against the Kazakhstani authorities.

[14] In Kazakhstan, according to a demographic study published in the country, Kazakhs, who emerged as a minority in their own country, now outnumber Russians by 7.6 million to 5.8 million. For the year 2015 the study projected a ratio of 10 million Kazakhs to 3.6 million Russians: *JamesTown Foundation Monitor* 4: 4, 8 January 1998. In Uzbekistan the proportion of Russians changed from 8.3 per cent (1989) to 4.1 per cent (1996): *Human Development Report: Uzbekistan 1997* (Tashkent: United Nations Development Programme, 1997).

[15] Samuel Huntington, *The third wave: democratization in the late twentieth century* (Norman, OK and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

countries cannot boast a previous democratization experience, the political legacy of the pre-Russian period is far from straightforward. A careful observer (or a political manipulator) would be able to find convincing examples of hierarchical subordination, nomadic democracy, despotism, enlightenment, anti-colonial struggle against Russian domination and peaceful coexistence with the Russians. To what extent does the past determine the future, or rather, are the components of it used by political actors as building blocks to construct the present order according to their political needs?

The newly independent states of Central Asia are very young, and their state-building projects are in the initial stages of development. Those who expect quick results have to bear in mind how long it took for west European states to develop coherent democratic systems. At the same time, some prevailing trends are becoming more apparent. The emergent regimes appear at their best as a hybrid between authoritarianism and democracy, at their worst as offering a choice between state disintegration and totalitarianism. The issue is whether democracy as such is unsuitable as a basis for legitimate political order in Central Asia, or whether democratization projects live through hard times because the forms in which they were implemented failed to take into account Central Asian realities.

'Democracy' is one of those notions which can mean different things to different people.[16] A minimalist definition of democracy involves free elections and separation of the executive from the legislature and judiciary. According to these criteria, its essential elements are:

- free elections—people have to be able to make an unfettered choice;
- fair elections—people have to be able to make an informed choice;
- accountability—people have to be able to rectify their choices and recall unworthy representatives;
- the executive power has to be limited by other independent bodies (although three branches of power can have equal weight only in theory);
- the rule of law.

At the same time, any observer of post-Soviet politics would note that there is something lacking in this definition, something related to the democratic process and the values which accompany it. Without these underpinning factors, as Central Asian leaders implicitly assume, introduction of democracy is premature (Uzbekistan), dangerous (Tajikistan) or prone to reduce governability (Kyrgyzstan).

[16] To overcome this ambiguity gap, various attempts have been made to measure democracy in tangible ways; see e.g. Ted R. Gurr, *Comparative studies of political conflict and change: cross-national data sets* (Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research, 1978). Such an event-based approach to democracy has been developed by the authors of *Polity* databases which code the changes in political structures: see Sara McLaughlin, Scott Gates, Havard Hegre, Ranveig Gissinger and Nils Petter Gleditsch, 'Timing the changes in political structures: a new polity database', *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 42: 2, April 1998, pp. 231–42. This article, by contrast, takes a less tangible, process-oriented approach.

Western politicians and scholars have been predominantly concerned with the institutional expression of democracy,[17] and much effort has been made to facilitate and monitor the emergence of these institutions. Yet the functioning of institutions often remained remote from their intended goals. Furthermore, the democratization projects are complicated by the ways in which these societies are structured. The social fabric of these societies is made up from an intermixture of family, clan, tribal, sub-ethnic and regional affiliations and loyalties. These networks of allegiance are strengthened by the lack of anonymity and impersonality enjoyed by Western countries, as, despite restrictions on the press, local news is spread by word of mouth very quickly. Internal divisions within titular nationalities usually make little impact on everyday social and economic life, but play an important role in appointments to socially prestigious positions. In the Soviet days, family and clan networks acted as a buffer between the individual and the state, and also served as a social support system. However, in the post-Soviet days internal fragmentation can present a genuine threat to the viability of the community as a whole and reinforce barriers between people. How real this danger is in each separate country is ultimately hard to determine, but it certainly hinders the emergence of a meritocracy and popular participation in national political life across internal divisions. In Turkmenistan it may be the case that 'the country's tribal disunity has been one of the most influential determinants of the centralised, repressive political system.'[18]

Without trying to lay down an exhaustive set of guidelines for achieving a democratic ideal, it is possible to identify a few other factors that must be taken into account if democratization is to take root in deeply divided societies. First, the choices people make are more likely to produce a functioning structure of governance if they are made according to a system which accommodates the social and ethnic composition of the society. For instance, the presidential elections in Tajikistan in November 1991, when people voted predominantly according to their regional loyalties, only emphasized the internal split and left the defeated party with the conviction that the powerful regions had again won at the expense of the underdogs. Divided societies, such as India, Lebanon and Northern Ireland, usually tend to design more complicated electoral arrangements rather than following a simple open-candidate system, with the very aim of incorporating diverse groups into the governance structure.

Secondly, in divided societies the winning party is very vulnerable if it aspires to rule in a majoritarian way (in effect, pretending that the opposition does not exist in periods between elections) and finds no meaningful role for the opposition within the political system, or at the very least does not attempt to

[17] See e.g. Linz, 'Transitions to democracy'; also Samuel Huntington, 'How countries democratize', *Political Science Quarterly* 106: 4, 1991–2.

[18] Michael Ochs, 'Turkmenistan: the quest for stability and control', in Karen Dawisha and Bruce Parrott, eds, *Conflict, cleavage, and change in Central Asia and the Caucasus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 318.

co-opt its elite into the existing order.[19] Such practices, depending on the strength of the opposition, either lead to a civil war (Tajikistan) or open the road to authoritarian trends (Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan). In Uzbekistan, where the initial opposition parties were made redundant to the political process, a danger exists that anti-system groups might gain in appeal and momentum.

Thirdly, people have to have a sufficient degree of belief in politics and trust in each other as members of a political community. People may vote politicians into office without confidence that they hold real power. In the absence of key civic values of trust, tolerance and mutual respect, formal democratic institutions can become meaningless decorations. In this respect the Soviet legacy of cynicism, yoked with the political traditions of Central Asia, made for an unfortunate combination.

Ultimately, successful democratization is about a commitment to democracy on the part of significant sections of elites and populations. The remainder of this section examines the factors that are most widely held to facilitate such commitment.

Civil society

There is a lack of clarity on what a civil society essentially is, let alone on what it means in Central Asia.[20] The broadest definition of civil society combines two aspects: its separateness from the state, and certain values attributed to it, such as tolerance and care for the community. In Soviet times there was a popular belief that because genuine commitment to the alignment of the Soviet state and its official ideology was unthinkable for the overwhelming majority, there existed underneath the surface a civil society based on critical reflection on and alienation from the state. The state controlled the public expression of opinion, but it did not control the private sphere. As the Soviet state weakened and subsequently collapsed, the people had a chance to take a closer look at what their society looked like. In Central Asia the state did not succeed in supplanting all other societal affiliations, because to an extent local languages, traditional values and customs acted as a natural barrier. However, it became clear that these societies consisted almost exclusively of traditional (non-voluntary) groups, such as extended families, kinship associations and religious communities, which were not designed for playing political roles. At the same time, the society emerging from under the Soviet rubble bore the values of alienation and cynicism which were crucial to maintaining dignity during the Soviet era, but which imposed barriers in the way of collective action and prevented voluntary

[19] In theory, consociational democracy, based on moderating elites' behaviour as the missing link between a plural society and political stability (Arend Lijphart, 'Consociational democracy', *World Politics* 21: 2, pp. 207–25) might have provided a solution; however, given the virtually complete absence of any tradition of elite accommodation, it seems hardly viable in Central Asia.

[20] John Anderson suggests adoption of a broader focus on 'actually existing civil society' rather than on a narrow Western notion rooted in the experience of developed democracies: see John Anderson, *Kyrgyzstan: Central Asia's island of democracy* (Reading: Harwood Academic, forthcoming 1999). See also Steven M. Fish, 'Russia's fourth transition', *Journal of Democracy* 5: 3, 1994.

associations from taking root. As a result, instead of belief in civic responsibility, various conspiracy theories of internal and external manipulation began to flourish. The free press, where it exists (Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan), partly reflects this phenomenon and often declines into cheap entertainment and political gossip in order to survive commercially, or has to resort to serving the ruling group. Any demand for analytical journalism is very limited. Whether Uzbekistan's policy of very gradually relaxing control over the media will in the end bring about different results remains to be seen.[21]

Political culture and education

Even compared to other CIS states, the political culture of Central Asia is highly conservative.[22] This was an important asset upon which the former Soviet *nomenklatura* managed to capitalize. The Soviet governing style was familiar for populations and was associated with stability. Even Askar Akaev, who has a more modern outlook and demonstrates more subtlety, had to incorporate segments of the former communist bureaucracy and associated traditions into his regime. The pre-Soviet experience is also a poor guide to modern democratic development, as its legacy is at best mixed, and the democratic credentials that the nomadic past could offer cannot easily be reproduced in the conditions of industrialized society. Education remains an important factor. However, with a gradual exodus of more educated European minorities (traditional pro-democracy groups) and declining living standards, some parents find themselves unable to afford to send their children to school, even the educational achievements of the Soviet era might be lost.[23] This will, in turn, impede the democratization process.

Participation

In the republics themselves, the discourse on democratization is centred on the issue of whether direct participation in politics is possible or even desirable.[24] Soviet-style compulsory participation, practised in Turkmenistan and to some

[21] Some endorsement of an open media in Uzbekistan began in autumn 1997, and the newspapers began to be used as sounding boards for internal debates on policy, such as agricultural privatization. Alternative views, although more acceptable in the press, do not extend as far as criticism of the regime.

[22] Scholars have noted the significance of political culture and education; for instance, Helmut Dubiel writes that 'civility reaches its summit when a democratic public sphere develops from the quotidian experience of a shared legal order': H. Dubiel, 'Cultivated conflicts', *Political Theory* 26: 2, April 1998, pp. 209–20 at p. 218. There is, however, far less understanding of how this new public sphere develops.

[23] According to the International Federation of the Red Cross, 11 per cent of children in Kazakhstan were not attending school in 1997 because they lacked adequate shoes and winter clothes: *JamesTown Foundation Monitor* 3: 217, 19 November 1997. Other reports put this figure even higher, at 19 per cent: *JamesTown Foundation Monitor* 4: 9, 15 January 1998. The *UN Human Development Report* of 1997 put school non-attendance at 14 per cent. Sharp regional differences in education cause concern, and rural economic poverty makes the outlook very grave.

[24] For instance, the head of Issyk-Kul' akim regional administration Jumagul Saadanbekov (Kyrgyzstan) questioned the appropriateness of universal suffrage for his country in *Slovo Kyrgzstana*, 15 July 1995; cited by Eugene Huskey in 'Kyrgyzstan: the fate of political liberalisation', in Dawisha and Parrott, eds, *Conflict, cleavage, and change*, p. 268.

degree in Uzbekistan, might in the eyes of the leaderships prepare the population for responsible political behaviour in the future, but in reality reflects a desire to wipe out a dividing line between the state and society and expand state control as far as possible. Voluntary participation in public life, including free elections, open media and non-violent protest actions, is either restricted or subject to widespread malpractice—and, repressive policies aside, increasingly hampered by popular apathy and disbelief in politics.

If the system demonstrates a degree of success in co-opting brighter and more educated people to serve the existing order, as in a way is happening in Uzbekistan, this might serve indirectly to indicate that the system is able to communicate with its people. In contrast, the Soviet system of the Brezhnev era was actively boycotted by the intellectual elite. In the absence of a free press, *mahallahs* turn into centres of discussion and communication where news and views are openly shared.[25]

Property ownership and the middle class

It is argued that a substantive class of small and medium-sized property owners is likely to generate stability and bring about representative government.[26] In Central Asia the middle class consists of a dwindling stratum of Soviet-era professionals, such as teachers, doctors and engineers, many of whom depend on payments from the state budget, and of small businessmen, mainly traders. There are many entrepreneurs who exist only on paper; the genuine are heavily dependent on local and central authorities, and normally their situation is insecure. In these countries, where natural resources constitute the primary commodity, the important players on the political scene are those small groups who control the production and distribution of these crucial assets. Their power is unlikely to be challenged or even influenced by social groups of shopkeepers and teachers. As the experience of the oil-producing countries worldwide suggests, such states are more likely than not to resort to authoritarian rule.[27]

To sum up, the complicated structure of Central Asian societies, with their mixture of regional, family, clan, tribal and ethnic loyalties, the use of electoral systems and practices incapable of incorporating these elements, the majority parties' virtual denial of legitimacy to minority interests and the anti-system stance assumed by opposition groups, the salience of natural resources as a basis for regime viability, and the lack of any widespread sense of public engagement

[25] *Mahallah*, translated as 'local community' in English, can also mean a neighbourhood in a city or town where the population is traditionally linked to the norms of a common and collective life. See Guissou Jahangiri-Jeannot, *Local and regional power networks: the mahallah*, UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Field Coordination Unit, Tajikistan, December 1997, Background Paper.

[26] Barrington Moore Jr, *Social origins of democracy and dictatorship: lord and peasant in the making of the modern world* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966). This argument has been developed by Huntington in *The third wave*.

[27] Graeme Gill argues the same case for Russia, where 'a quasi-corporate outcome in which the formalities of democracy are present, but the substance absent, may be more likely than a democratic one': Graeme Gill, 'Democratization, the bourgeoisie and Russia', in *Government and Opposition* 33: 3, Summer 1998, pp. 307–30 at p. 329.

and civic responsibility, aggravated by lower levels of urbanization and education, have together jeopardized the republics' chances of achieving successful democratization.

Authoritarianism

If the choice appears to be one between, on the one hand, civil war, a gangster economy and corrupt networks as a surrogate for politics, and, on the other, authoritarian regimes headed by personal leaders who promise law and order, it is hardly surprising if attempts are made to install authoritarian rule. However, authoritarian regimes are susceptible to their own perils. First, there is a danger of strong concentration of power in one individual. As Bruce Parrott notes, 'authoritarian states built around a single ruling party are more stable than personal dictatorships.'[28] Personal (in Huntington's terminology) or sultanistic (in Linz's) regimes with no opposition in the public domain are vulnerable to two kinds of threats.[29] One is the death of a leader and the instability which might follow. The other is Indonesia-style mob violence by a desperate population that spreads across the country when a combination of economic decline and political repression becomes intolerable. Either scenario can lead to a rapid and complete dismantling of the major political institutions. As Linz notes, 'sultanistic rule leaves a vacuum in the society that makes the establishment of democratic politics difficult.'[30] Turkmenistan is more likely than some of the other republics to be able to contain sporadic violence if it should break out, owing to the fact that a dispersed people in a thinly populated country faces enormous problems in mobilizing. Uzbekistan is more vulnerable in this respect, as it contains pockets of poverty, ethnic tensions and social discontent within areas of high population density. On the other hand, the death of Saparmurad Nyazov, President of Turkmenistan (who, so far as we can judge, suffers from heart problems) is likely to wreak complete havoc on the Turkmen ruling establishment.

For authoritarianism to function effectively, two conditions have to be met. First, the regime needs a vehicle through which to exercise power and implement orders, such as a 'pragmatic party' of governance, a reliable military, or a co-opted network of regional elites. In the absence of developed national armies, and given the Soviet tradition of tight civilian control over the armed forces, in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan the ruling groups have been making attempts to build 'parties of power', so far with limited success. Secondly, the regime needs to maintain a capacity to deliver on its promises on welfare and on law and order; that is, it must possess both sufficient wealth and sufficient power of redistribution to bring a share of it to the population. In the short term Uzbekistan has been more successful in this respect than its neighbours, with a more diversi-

[28] Bruce Parrott, 'Perspectives on postcommunist democratization', in Dawisha and Parrott, eds, *Conflict, cleavage, and change*, p. 7.
[29] Huntington, 'How countries democratize', p. 581; Linz, 'Transitions to democracy', pp. 145–6.
[30] Linz, 'Transitions to democracy', p. 146.

fied and self-reliant economy, relatively little industrial decline and generally more balanced development. The viability of the regimes in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan is directly dependent upon the revenue generated by exports of their energy resources. Significant delays in revenue flows could be lethal to their stability and even survival. Moreover, if corruption grows beyond the level where the regimes are able to keep it within manageable bounds (and there are grounds for believing that the Central Asian regimes are very corrupt), the distribution system may be severely constrained, even if the wealth does materialize. This will leave the ruling elites vulnerable to authoritarian takeover by another group, probably from within the existing regime, under an anti-corruption banner.

Legitimacy

When people call something 'legitimate', they mean that it has a right to exist. There are two basic meanings of a concept of 'legitimacy': the first tests actions against rules; the second asks whether the rules are accepted as binding by the participants of a social system.[31] In the current Central Asian context, it appears reasonable to stick to the latter interpretation. A political regime, to be regarded as 'legitimate', does not necessarily have to have a high rate of popular approval of its policies. Moreover, it does not have to be democratic, if the social contract is based on distribution and social justice. Legitimacy can be judged on two criteria: whether most of the population accept that the system has a right to exist and broadly fulfils its functions (positive legitimacy); and whether they see viable alternatives to it (negative legitimacy). In 1990 Juan Linz argued that the democratic formula for legitimization of authority is regarded as the most desirable by most people,[32] and this certainly reflected the popular mood of the perestroika era. On closer examination, it is arguable that the legitimacy of the Soviet system in Central Asian republics was undermined most importantly by its inability to provide economic welfare, consumer goods and services easily available not only in the West, but also in neighbouring Turkey, and to a lesser degree by the maintenance of control from outside the republics, with all major decisions made in Moscow. The outburst of violence in Kazakhstan in 1986 was sparked off by the interference of the central power in republican matters. In Uzbekistan the 'cotton affair', an anti-corruption crusade implemented by investigators from Moscow, left a mark of bitterness on Uzbekistani politics in the late 1980s. Demands for more political rights and participation appeared only as lower priorities.

[31] Morris Zelditch, Jr and Henry A. Walker, 'Legitimacy and the stability of authority', in J. Berger and M. Zelditch Jr, eds, *Status, power and legitimacy* (New Brunswick, NJ and London: Transaction, 1998), pp. 315–38 at p. 322.

[32] Linz, 'Transitions to democracy', p. 147.

William Fierman defines legitimacy through three broad categories of distribution, participation and identity.[33] Each of the Central Asian regimes ranked these concepts in a different order of priority and shaped its policies accordingly. However, the situation in Central Asia is still too much in flux for either Linz's or Fierman's notion to be established as a solid pillar of the political order. At the moment, the legitimacy of the current regimes is based on the fact that they managed to cope successfully with the initial challenges facing them on independence. Four states of Central Asia proved their viability as self-governing entities. Compared to Soviet times, there are more consumer goods available and apparently some people are able to buy them. Alarmist scenarios, according to which the Central Asian economies would collapse without Moscow's interference, did not become reality. Moreover, the present economic crisis in Moscow has given the proponents of state regulation of the economy grounds for drawing proud comparisons. Social stability has so far been maintained, and the Tajikistan experience of civil war has remained an isolated case. Apart from anti-Caucasian sentiment, common to most of the CIS countries, the threat of inter-ethnic violence has become less acute than at the beginning of the 1990s. The rediscovery of the past, coming to terms with the region's recent turbulent history and allowing national cultures fuller expression, has helped at least partially to rectify the legacy of past injustices. Independence also provided an unprecedented degree of international recognition.

At a closer look, however, these achievements carry a number of inherent flaws. Maintenance of inter-ethnic stability came at a cost. In the dispute between 'nationalists' and 'internationalists'[34] about competing visions of state orientation both sides were the losers, while the ruling elite emerged as victors. The 'nationalists' lost de jure, in an open confrontation, but their agenda was gradually co-opted by the regimes, while the 'internationalists' lost de facto, as non-titular groups were quietly pushed out of the domain of real power. The economic policies in reality mean an exchange of the countries' valuable assets for cheap and low-quality consumer goods from China and Turkey. While a national revival did take place, popular perceptions of fairness have been significantly violated, and a sentiment of social injustice has started to replace ethno-national feelings. The political legitimacy of the regimes in Central Asia is weakened not so much by the dubious means by which they acquired power, marginalized their parliaments and suppressed dissent, but by the fact that they are seen as corrupt and their policies as benefiting narrow interests.[35]

[33] William Fierman, 'Political development in Uzbekistan: democratization?', in Dawisha and Parrott, eds, *Conflict, cleavage, and change*, pp. 360–408.

[34] In the sense used by Shirin Akiner in *Formation of Kazakh identity*, pp. 80–1.

[35] Samuel Huntington notes in *The third wave* that what in the end undermines the legitimacy of the democratic exercise is its failure to operate efficiently and its continuing inability to provide welfare, prosperity, equity, justice, domestic order and external security.

The second issue is whether people see realistic alternatives to the present regimes.[36] At the moment this does not seem to be the case; however, if the situation deteriorates further and it becomes more clearly apparent how far the regimes are able to cope with new problems, things might start to change.

Present challenges

As the first post-independence decade draws to a close, one can conclude that while the initial challenges to state-building—with the stark exception of Tajikistan—have been met, new challenges have emerged. They are of a predominantly internal nature and to an extent might be regarded as by-products of state-building projects undertaken in the independence period. The essence of the present political order is constituted by the attempts of the Central Asian leaderships to find adequate responses to them. Behind a façade of considerable unity and authority, some indications have begun to emerge of fears and concerns regarding the regimes' stability.

First, there are developing social tensions between rich and poor, a widening gap between the 'haves' and 'have-nots', and a rapid polarization of incomes. Recently, observers have started to reflect with alarm on a drastic decline in the ability of the Central Asian governments to maintain minimal levels of public services and social welfare protection.[37] While President Nazarbayev claimed that Kazakhstan has the highest per capita GDP rating ($1,500) in the CIS countries,[38] real per capita GDP in Kazakhstan in 1997 was estimated at $872;[39] at the same time, Kazakhstan dropped from 54th place on the UNDP's Human Development Index in 1993 and 72nd in 1996 to 93rd in 1997.[40] In per capita terms of attracting foreign investment, Kazakhstan ranks second only to Hungary; on the other hand, because most of these investments are narrowly concentrated in the energy sector, they have yet to generate any substantial pay-offs for the rest of the economy, or to have a significant effect upon living standards. According to the Red Cross, 73 per cent of the population of Kazakhstan live below the government-defined poverty line of $50 per person per month.[41] In Kyrgyzstan the real income of citizens decreased by 83.6 per cent between 1992 and 1996. According to Jangoroz Kanimetov, chairman of the parliamentary committee on social affairs, 41 per cent of city dwellers and 75

[36] In Kazakhstan, for instance, according to recent surveys, people are more likely to blame local authorities for their social problems rather than central government: *JamesTown Foundation Monitor* 4: 17, 27 January 1998.

[37] Martha Brill Olcott, 'The Caspian false promise', *Foreign Policy* 11, Summer 1998, pp. 95–113.

[38] Nazarbayev, speaking at the Kazakhstan State University: *JamesTown Foundation Monitor* 4: 10, 16 January 1998.

[39] *Kazakhstan Economic Trends*, April–June 1998, European Commission, DG1A, Technical Assistance to Commonwealth of Independent States, p. 80.

[40] *UN Human Development Report: Kazakhstan* (Almaty: UNDP). Other Central Asian countries in 1997 ranked in the Human Development Index as follows: Turkmenistan: 103; Uzbekistan: 104; Kyrgyzstan: 109 and Tajikistan: 118. UNDP, *United Nations Development Report* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

[41] *JamesTown Foundation Monitor* 3: 217, 19 November 1997.

per cent of rural residents are poor, receiving less than $26 per month.[42] In autumn 1997 Kazakhstan survived its most politicized labour unrest, when the workers from southern Kazakhstan protested against unemployment, wage arrears and declining living conditions (lack of gas and electricity, outbreaks of cholera and tuberculosis[43]) and were supported by their counterparts in the north. Only the huge size of the country prevented the protests from erupting into more serious nationwide action.[44] Meanwhile, the lifestyle and privileges of the oligarchy remained intact and the government managed to find funds to move the capital from Almaty to Astana, at a total estimated cost of between $500 million and $1 billion.[45]

Secondly, politics is criminalized and regionalized. Criminal networks often penetrate into the very heart of political systems. Lucrative privatizations in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan facilitated the emergence of a plutocracy. As the power of such oligarchy is being exercised informally and is not limited by any system of checks and balances, it is impossible to determine precisely how it is interwoven with political life. The power of the new plutocrats does not last long—it is easily gained and easily lost—but the essence of the relations remains the same. In Tajikistan the criminal networks, organized mainly around drug smuggling and often relying on protection by field commanders, represent very powerful vested interests, so that most of the attempts to construct a peace settlement stumble across them. Overtly criminal networks coexist in a complicated interrelationship with networks of corruption, patronage and nepotism, the latter based on either sub-ethnic/regional affiliations or (as in Uzbekistan) networks of personal loyalty inherited from the Soviet times, but frequently reflecting a combination of the two.[46]

These networks can completely paralyse the ability of the ruling establishment to govern effectively. Even in Turkmenistan, where to an outside observer central control appears to be absolute, President Niyazov complained bitterly in autumn 1998 that 'there are some people who, as soon as they occupy a top post, immediately start recruiting people from their region, their own tribe. Such a habit should be alien for a Turkmen.'[47] Increased centralization of power and frequent reshuffles of personnel were chosen as remedies for corruption and

[42] *Kyrgyz News*, 17 March 1998.

[43] Kazakhstan has the highest rate of TB per capita among the CIS countries. In 1997 alone, TB deaths numbered 7,000, double the number three years earlier. It is estimated that 53,000 people are infected. See *JamesTown Foundation Monitor* 4: 23, 4 February 1998.

[44] It should be noted that strikes are unusual in Kazakhstan where tough penalties are enforced for political protests.

[45] *JamesTown Foundation Monitor* 3: 212, 12 November 1997.

[46] Many local and Western observers disagree on the exact significance of these channels, and on the ways they operate. One view, expressed by Nurbulat Masanov, is that 'it is the clan factor that largely defines the extent of an official's authority, his power, how high he is likely to move in government service, the bounds of his social space, and the length of time he stays in power': 'The clan factor in contemporary political life in Kazakhstan', *Prism* 4: 3, part 3. Other observers put nepotism inherited from the Soviet period and the art of political manipulation by the leaders above the clan factor.

[47] *Inside Central Asia*, BBC Monitoring Service, 14–20 September 1998.

nepotism. In 1997 in Turkmenistan the President decided to appoint state officials for a 'trial period' of twelve months, at present reduced to six months. In Uzbekistan personnel reshuffling has intensified, normally justified by shortfalls in the grain and cotton harvests. In Kazakhstan two new weapons have been launched by President Nazarbayev. The first was a law 'on the fight against corruption', the second the establishment of an anti-corruption agency empowered to act against those state officials, mentioned in the presidential list, who benefited illegally from privatization.[48] In Tajikistan, by contrast, regional elites, often supported by local strongmen, are de facto masters in their own right, and politics is conducted on a regional rather than on a national level. Integration of the regional barons into a national elite remains highly problematic.

Thirdly, Islamic radicalism appears to be increasingly prominent in Central Asia, although fears of Islamic extremism, or so-called 'Wahhabism', by the republics' leaderships might be exaggerated. Nevertheless, the social grounds for the emergence of a radical movement of some kind, with an appealing quest for social justice, are being fermented. Is the 'politics of Islamophobia', as Annette Bohr argues, only President Karimov's attempt to consolidate his rule and portray himself as the guardian of stability and secularism,[49] or is there a real danger in the making?

Karimov argues that Islamic radicalism is the main threat to stability both in his country and across the region, and that strong measures are required to protect the majority of the population.[50] Moreover, the lesson drawn by Central Asian leaderships from their recent political experience is that if radical movements are not put down quickly, it is much more difficult to deal with the consequences of intercommunal violence than if it is nipped in the bud at an early stage. The episodes of violence which occurred in Uzbekistan in 1998 were blamed by the authorities on Islamic radicals, and a number of repressive measures have been implemented. Whether or not their coincidence with the US crackdown on Islamic militants in Afghanistan and Sudan was purely accidental, the simultaneity of the American and Uzbek measures placed the issue of policies towards religious extremism in the region into a global context. The OSCE, through its current chairman Bronislav Geremek, warned that the Uzbek government's moves against politicized Islam may strengthen these groups, and that in many cases such extremists had no chance of winning power unless they were persecuted. In Kyrgyzstan, where the activity of radical Muslim groups

[48] As many observers believe, when the anti-corruption measures began to look threatening Alnur Musayev, the chairman of the National Security Committee, was removed from his post after making a public statement to the effect that 'I shall make public every instance of theft, bribe-taking and abuse of office designed to hinder the progress of investigations': *Inside Central Asia*, BBC Monitoring Service, 31 August–6 September 1998.

[49] Annette Bohr, *Uzbekistan: politics and foreign policy* (London: RIIA, 1998), p. 30.

[50] In his view, 'groups of people who are guilty of fanaticism are capable of generating the greatest destabilization in society because, by painting such movements as "people's actions", they enable the population to relinquish feelings of personal responsibility for individual actions': Islam Karimov, *Uzbekistan on the threshold of the twenty-first century* (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1997), p. 21.

is increasingly in evidence, the government's approach has been different, reflecting a combination of conciliation with a degree of coercion; but the results do not appear to be much different from those in Uzbekistan. This causes one to question Paul Goble's assumption that the governments bear a responsibility for how much Islamic radicalism there is, and that if they are repressive, there will be more.[51] The emergence of radical Islamic groups may have deeper roots in social injustice, poverty, loss of coherent belief-systems, and reaction against disorder and criminality. Without addressing these social causes it will be difficult to counter the appeal of anti-system Islamic groups with any positive image.

Fourthly, the issue of succession has become a worrying factor, since in four of the states of Central Asia regime stability essentially depends on a single man in the centre of the political system who considers himself indispensable. The Soviet system of breeding *nomenklatura* has collapsed and nothing resembling the corporate rule of the Politburo has replaced it. Although the Central Asian presidents practise different ruling styles, they all have in common a supreme value—the fear of loss of power. Therefore, even a discussion about the succession is a threat. Publicly, at least, the rulers behave as if they were immortal. At the same time, the referenda extending their terms of office may mean that elections are suspended rather than completely abolished, and, as the Kazakhstani experience suggests, could be revitalized if political needs change. Ideally, the presidents expect the benefits from exports of resources to become real by the end of their extended terms. If this happens, the incumbents would have a right to claim a crucial role in delivering wealth to their countries and will have a good chance of winning in free, although not necessarily fair, elections.

Meanwhile, the rulers make any competitors very unwelcome. In Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan it is impossible for candidates to advance through state channels to public positions where they can enter a ruling coalition to counterbalance presidential power. However, the strong but not absolute powers of President Karimov and the existence of policy debate bodies and of groups of supporters and advisers around the President make the prospects in Uzbekistan slightly more hopeful than in Turkmenistan. In Kazakhstan, as Petr Svoik, a co-chairman of Azamat, an opposition movement, and the only ethnic Russian politician in a position of any prominence, notes, 'President Nazarbayev has no rivals in the system he has created. He has replaced the former corporate cohesion of the state bureaucracy with personal dependence';[52] and the forthcoming elections are unlikely appreciably to alter that. In Kyrgyzstan potential competitors are marginalized by more subtle means: for instance, Felix Kulov, the former national security minister believed by some to harbour presidential ambitions, was assigned to a lucrative position as mayor of Bishkek, which is likely to keep him satisfied.

The last and more long-term challenge is presented by patterns of unbalanced economic development and exclusive reliance on exports of mineral wealth. The

[51] Paul Goble, 'Leaders fail to read fundamentalism right', *RFE/RL Newsline*, 6 May 1998.
[52] Petr Svoik, 'Presidential elections are approaching in Kazakhstan and this time, there will be an alternative', *Prism* 3: 21, part 3, 19 December 1997.

paternalistic rule of Turkmenbashi is based primarily on the regime's distribution to the population of basic commodities, among them natural gas,[53] as well as bread, salt etc. For all that this policy has succeeded so far, it is a gamble against time. With land-locked gas resources and surrounded by other gas-producing countries, Turkmenistan's potential wealth is not of a kind to generate revenue quickly and easily, while foreign investment cannot be diverted for social needs. Kazakhstan, according to the State Investment Committee, in 1997 alone attracted $1.7 billion of foreign direct investment. At the same time, the social and even physical costs of the transition period (Kazakhstan was the only CIS state to register an absolute decline of population, from 16.9 million to 15.8 million, due to outmigration and poor health and environmental factors[54]) indicate that such impressive achievements in terms of capital investment have little bearing on the well-being of the country's citizens. A projection of these trends, feared by many, suggests that as the quality of life declines, the qualified workforce and infrastructure will gradually wither away so that even the modest modernization achievements of Soviet days might be lost. In this event, transition from the Second to the Third World seems an increasingly likely prospect.

Their resource-based economic orientation changes the whole economic and social outlook of these countries, as well as having damaging effects on their self-esteem. People in Central Asia were accustomed to think of their countries not as a mere resource base for the European parts of the USSR, but also as having developed industries and research capacities of their own. A transition to a situation in which their industrial and intellectual potential is no longer required is difficult to come to terms with, especially if tangible benefits do not materialize for some time. Uzbekistan (through the exercise of state controls) and Kyrgyzstan (through implementing liberalization) made earnest attempts to follow a more balanced pattern, but even for them dependence on natural resources is crucial.

Conclusion: where does the road lead?

Since the Central Asian republics gained their independence, the regimes have made efforts to ensure that the ruins of the old state would not destroy the viability of the new order. Some were careful enough not to raise popular expectations too much, and made the most of the power leverages inherited from Soviet days. However, they all appear to be experiencing problems in meeting the new challenges which no longer stem from the immediate needs of transition. They face two alternatives: to adapt their mode of governing to these new realities, or to ignore the challenges, hoping that they will go away. This, in turn, raises the

[53] At the same time, as the Turkmen opposition notes, many households in the countryside cannot benefit from this, as they do not have access to the gas mains: interview with a member of Turkmen opposition in Moscow, November 1996.

[54] *Jamestown Foundation Monitor* 4: 10, 16 January 1998.

question whether the emergent regimes are adaptable, or can govern only in the ways they currently do—in which case any attempts to reform them will lead to a complete dismantling of the political infrastructure. For Turkmenistan at least, the latter analysis may hold true. In Uzbekistan the regime recently made modest attempts at adaptation, practising less rigid and more inclusive policies, but it maintains a tight control over what it perceives as real dangers. In Kyrgyzstan the first signs of economic growth coincided with the ebbing of the democratization tide. In Tajikistan continuous reliance on outside political and economic assistance makes it hard for self-generated national institutions to emerge, while regionalization of politics further exacerbates the problem. In Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan heavy concentration of wealth at the top makes the equilibrium conditional on reinforced authoritarianism. Economic and social demodernization accompany political decay.

The continued legitimacy of the regimes will depend on their ability to deliver on the present agenda. If they are not able to do so, democracy is the only system which enables the ruled to get rid of failed rulers in a peaceful manner and facilitate orderly political change. As democratization encounters hard times in Central Asia, such a scenario is hardly feasible; an increase in social tensions is more likely. Again, this might not be particularly fortunate for democratization, as instability of undemocratic regimes does not automatically lead to their replacement by democratic ones. Democratization is less likely to be achieved through social upheavals, which can bring radical regimes to power, than through mundane and careful work in finding local governing arrangements which would incorporate the values and structures of the societies they intend to service. This, in turn, would create sources for political legitimacy able to withstand economic and social pressures.