

Authoritarian Pathways in Central Asia: A Comparison of  
Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic and Uzbekistan

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**Introduction:** The collapse of the Soviet Union was initially viewed with great optimism by many in the newly independent states and by the wider international community. In part reflecting this spirit, within academic circles the study of the post-Soviet states was initially framed largely in terms of a 'transition to democracy'. Indeed, for many authors the demise of the Soviet state was interpreted as part of a wider global shift towards democracy in the latter decades of the twentieth century.

In the early years of independence within the Central Asian states themselves there was considerable optimism about the future of the new countries. At the same time, Western governments and international organisations devoted important resources to the development and consolidation of democratic politics and institutions in the region. By the late 1990s, however, it became hard to avoid the conclusion that rather than participating in a broad movement towards democracy, the Central Asian states had bucked wider trends. In 1998 Freedom House ranked many of the Central Asian states as among the most authoritarian in the world, alongside regimes such as Iraq, North Korea and Yugoslavia.<sup>1</sup>

The development of authoritarian politics in Central Asia during the 1990s was not confined to individual countries in the region. Clear evidence of the shift towards authoritarianism was apparent in all five of the Central Asia states. By the late 1990s, almost all of the Central Asian states were engaged in the regular and widespread violation of human rights and attempts to repress not simply opposition forces but almost any independent voice. Together these developments left little doubt that rather than a

transition to democracy in Central Asia, it was authoritarianism that had become the dominant political mode in the region a decade after independence.

The emergence of authoritarian politics in Central Asia was not altogether unexpected. Many experts on the region had previously noted the long history of repressive regimes and a culture and traditions that would seem to lend support for authoritarian forms of rule. Authors also pointed to the low level of socio-economic development as a likely check on democratisation. An examination of the regimes of Central Asia reveals, however, that cultural and socio-economic explanations alone cannot account for the contemporary authoritarian politics of the region.

In terms of formal political systems, the three Central Asian states examined here shared a broadly similar structure at independence, based on the Communist Party and the state apparatus of the USSR. Yet each country subsequently adopted different political paths. The Kyrgyz Republic began a broad-based course of liberalisation. Kazakhstan adopted a “Western” development model, embracing elements of a democratic order, a market economy, the rule of law, and civil rights. Uzbekistan assumed a quite different route, emphasising traditionalism, strong leadership and the state, collective rights, and national consolidation.

By the end of the first ten years of independence, while all three states could be categorised as authoritarian, there were important differences between them. Uzbekistan was characterised by a high degree of repression and an extremely powerful ruler.

Kazakhstan and the Kyrgyz Republic, on the other hand, displayed important elements of pluralism and opportunities for opposition. The rapid development of such diversity amongst the systems of the Central Asian states suggests that the sources of authoritarian politics within the region may themselves be diverse. Indeed, evidence indicates that the emergence of authoritarian politics owes as much to contingent factors, such as policy choices, institutional design, and the macro-structural factors of historical legacies, as to traditions and culture.

This paper aims to begin to develop answers to three interrelated questions: What is authoritarianism in Central Asia? Why did authoritarianism develop in the region in the early years of independence? What explains the diversity of authoritarian forms in Central Asia? Below the nature and sources of contemporary authoritarian politics in the early years of independence in three Central Asia states - Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic and Uzbekistan - will be explored.

The paper will begin with a brief outline of approaches of authoritarian politics and consider their applicability to Central Asia. In the second section, the dominant approach to explaining authoritarianism in Central Asia – cultural theories – will be examined. In the following section, the nature of authoritarian forms in the three cases will be considered. In section four, the factors that have contributed to the emergence of diverse forms of authoritarian politics will be detailed. It will be argued that five factors are important in this respect: patterns of state formation, (pre-colonial, Russian imperial, and Soviet); experience of modernisation, the manner in which the old order broke down

(principally elite structures); the personality of the leader, and finally strategies for the transition (primarily economic policies). The paper will conclude with a section on the trajectory for further political development within the region.

**The Study of Authoritarian Systems:** The collapse of Soviet power and the disintegration of the Soviet state have attracted considerable academic attention. The demise of the USSR has been seen by some authors as part of a larger movement in the latter part of the twentieth century away from dictatorship, an end of ideology and a consolidation of democratic politics.<sup>2</sup> Within this context, the dominant mode for analysing subsequent political developments in the post-communist states has been drawn from the work of democratic theorists. Such work has been concerned to apply the knowledge of democratic change and consolidation derived primarily from experience in Latin America and southern Europe in the 1970s and 1980s.

Much of the work that has addressed the post-communist world has thus explored the issues of the independence period through the framework of 'transitology' and the breakdown of authoritarian regimes. Frequently, however, the approaches and assumptions that inform transition theory have faced opposition from area studies specialists who have pointed to the role of historical legacies ('path dependency') and culture in shaping and limiting the possibilities for change in the region.

While the literature on democratisation is extensive, work on the emergence and consolidation of authoritarian – as distinct from totalitarian – regimes is less developed.

Although totalitarianism provided the dominant framework through which to analyse the USSR, in the final decades of Soviet power and in the post-Soviet period, work was undertaken to develop notions of authoritarian politics appropriate to 'developed socialism'. Archie Brown, for example, has argued that post-Stalin Communism should be seen as a sub-type of authoritarianism and he has proposed five defining features which, taken together, distinguished Communist systems from other authoritarian or totalitarian regimes.<sup>3</sup>

In the late Brezhnev era, a number of scholars also sought to explore the link between political cultures and authoritarian politics in the Soviet Union.<sup>4</sup> These authors were, in particular, keen to identify the relationship between communism and pre-communist cultures and traditions. While such studies suggested that links existed between historical cultural practices and contemporary politics, developing a rigorous accounting for how political culture changes proved elusive.<sup>5</sup>

In recent decades, the study of authoritarian politics has been focused in particular on Latin America and African.<sup>6</sup> The most cogent discussion of authoritarianism is the extended essay written by Juan Linz in 1975.<sup>7</sup> This essay provided the basis for later work on sultanistic regimes. Subsequent studies of authoritarian politics have sought to develop approaches that explore the diversity of authoritarian regimes, their nature, genesis and collapse. Work has highlighted the variety of forms that authoritarian politics can take, from military regimes to one party civilian rule.<sup>8</sup>

While existing work is provocative, it hardly constitutes a theory of authoritarian politics that can be applied and tested in different contexts. The existing literature on authoritarian politics can be characterised as strong on descriptive accounts and classificatory schemes of authoritarian regimes. The study of authoritarian politics, however, has yet to generate adequate theories to account for the emergence of authoritarian regimes.

In part, the weakness of existing approaches appears to stem from a conceptualisation of authoritarian politics as a 'failure' to democratise or to 'consolidate' democratic politics. Democratic politics is presented as a 'break' with an authoritarian past or culture and the emergence of authoritarian forms is viewed as a failure of the break. While a number of authors have placed considerable emphasis on the role of values, culture and tradition, the link between these elements and the emergence of concrete authoritarian regimes is unclear. It is particularly noteworthy that there are as yet no adequate accounts of the emergence of authoritarian regimes in the context of globalisation and the apparent spread of international norms of human rights and democratisation. In this paper, authoritarian politics are themselves viewed as a project of transitional periods and dynamic in nature. A form of political activity that has to be constructed in just the same way that democratic forms must be forged.

**Cultural Approaches to Politics in Central Asia:** The breakdown of the Soviet state raised a number of key issues for understanding the dynamics of newly established political orders. Firstly, what direction would the former Soviet republics follow in terms of their political evolution? Secondly, what factors would determine the forms of

political evolution in these states? Central to these questions was the role of tradition and culture. Would the post-communist states be characterised by distinct sets of political values? Would these values be the products of long-term and culturally distinctive political and religious traditions or reflect more recent experiences? Had communism bequeathed values and political cleavages different from those to be found in other post-Soviet societies? Would values and attitudes be fixed or would they respond to the successes and failures of democratisation and economic change in particular countries? Providing answers to these questions is central to determining the nature and origins of authoritarian politics in Central Asia.

The new opportunities for empirical work, particularly opinion surveys, in the post-communist states afforded the chance to explore more directly some of the assumptions about values and political outcomes in Eurasia. During the Soviet period, little direct research was undertaken on the Central Asian republics and of this, little which focused explicitly on the political order in the region. Following the disintegration of the Soviet system, the scope of work produced on the new Central Asian states rose considerably, both in volume and in quality. In seeking to identify and explain the emergence of post-independence political forms in the region, experts on Central Asia employed a range of perspectives on the region. Although there is considerable diversity and subtlety in these works, the central thrust of writing on Central Asia has been to seek explanation for contemporary developments in the culture and traditions of the region.



One of the earliest exponents of a distinct basis for authoritarianism in eastern states was Wittfogel who situated the source of despotism in the environmental and economic conditions of the region.<sup>9</sup> More recently it has been argued ‘... that while culture may not determine outcomes, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that it serves to shape and constrain the choices made by elites.’<sup>10</sup> The important restrictions placed on the post-Soviet systems by their experience of rule from Moscow have also been highlighted.

Unlike the British in India, whose democratic rhetoric and experiments with local self-rule laid the basis for subsequent developments, Moscow provided no preparation for independent rule let alone a politics rooted in genuine pluralism. Given the absence of an older tradition of popular rule to fall back on, despite occasional Kazakh and Kyrgyz appeals to tribal assemblies of the past, and in a situation where independence stemmed from imperial collapse rather than popular pressure, it would have been surprising to see any substantive democratic experiments in Central Asia after 1991.<sup>11</sup>

Some of the diversity in political forms in the region can be explained in cultural terms as it is ‘... the inheritors of the more religious and settled emirates of Bukhara and Khiva (Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan) that have opted for authoritarian rule, whereas the relatively un-Islamicized and nomadic Kazakhs and Kyrgyz have seen the evolution of at least some elements of pluralism.’<sup>12</sup>

Although cautious in attributing too much weight to the past, other authors too highlight the importance of the region’s political culture for the development of authoritarianism in Central Asia. “Central Asian traditions of patriarchy, popular submissiveness, deference to authority and to elders, and weak democratic institutions would seem to impel Central Asian societies toward an authoritarian future.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, for many writers the failure of democracy to take root is a consequence of the ‘power of the past’, notably a traditional mind set.

Today, despite the social, political and economic upheavals of the past five years, Central Asia is still remarkably stable. The main reason for this is the highly conservative nature of society. The very specific conditions under which modernization of the Soviet period took place meant that change and development in the public sphere (i.e. the workplace) scarcely penetrated into the private sphere. Here, custom and tradition continued to be the dominant features. This conservatism, especially in the face of external threats, favours consolidation rather than fragmentation. It is underpinned by a number of socio-cultural factors. One is absolute respect for seniority: each individual is acutely sensitive to, and bound by, interlocking hierarchies of age, social standing and administrative power. Another characteristic is the great emphasis on consensus: whether in the private or the public sphere, disputes tend to be resolved through negotiation and compromise leading to the formulation of a common view. A third feature is the all-embracing sense of community. A high degree of conformity is required from all members. This entails full participation in group activities and the fulfilment of numerous obligations and responsibilities to the extended family. In return, the individual receives constant material and emotional support from the community.<sup>14</sup>

A number of authors have also noted that besides pre-Soviet and Russian influences there are important legacies from the Soviet era that have an influence upon the nature of contemporary politics in Central Asia. ‘Some Central Asians claim that ... [I]t is unlikely that the newly adopted political institutions of legislatures and independent judiciaries will be anything other than superficial ... unless fundamental changes take place in Central Asia’s “fourth branch of government” – the tradition of personalistic rule.’<sup>15</sup> During the period of Soviet rule, powerful and resilient mechanisms of public decision-making – informal authority structures – developed as a result of the interaction of the Soviet system of rule and local reactions to that system.<sup>16</sup>

If cultural factors were indeed at the core of the authoritarian political regimes of Central Asia, one would expect this to be reflected in the value systems in the region. In fact, survey work conducted in Central Asia since independence suggests a complex set of

value orientations in terms of popular political attitudes. Opinion data “suggests that strong leadership, stability, law and order, and economic improvement are far higher priorities than the construction of any particular government system. Since there is no history of democratic rule in these countries, democracy is perceived as, at best, an ideal for some distant future, not as the best system to resolve Uzbekistan’s or Kazakhstan’s problems today.”<sup>17</sup> Respondents who said they supported democracy, moreover, often demonstrated vague or contradictory perceptions of what democracy entails as a political system.

However, while survey results highlight currents of less-than-democratic priorities and support for relatively authoritarian systems and leaders, they also identify competing patterns of traditional values that emphasise fairness and certain other democratic values.<sup>18</sup> Thus, while there is little support for the concrete basis of democracy - for example a commitment to freedom of the press or support for opposition parties - there is broad support amongst the population and elites for democracy as an abstract ideal.<sup>19</sup>

Existing interpretations of Central Asia’s political evolution, therefore, tend to emphasise the role of previous cultural systems as a constraint on political liberalisation. While it is indisputable that the past influences the present, the nature and mechanisms of this influence are often obscure, ambiguous and contested. In much of the writing on Central Asia it is left unspecified exactly how broad cultural orientations or macro-social system have produced the specific forms of contemporary authoritarian regimes in the region.

Further, in accounts of the relationship between the past and the present political life of Central Asia a variety of explanations seem to be operating simultaneously. While some authors suggest that underdevelopment and particular socio-economic forms in the region have been responsible for authoritarian politics, others argue that there is something specific to cultural and traditional practices (although these may be linked to socio-economic factors) that are behind the inclination towards authoritarianism.<sup>20</sup> Still other authors suggest that the legacy of the Soviet period in the form of informal networks and corruption lie behind contemporary developments.

The broad-based assertions about the role of culture, tradition and socio-economic factors leave considerable opportunities for interpretation. For example, in many accounts Islam is presented as a negative force, not least by much of the region's leadership. Hanks, however, indicates that Islam could be closely related to the emergence of civil society in the region. He argues that in parts of Central Asia Islam survived the Soviet years by fusing with the *mahalla* (traditionally the basic social unit of many urban and large rural communities), especially in the Fergana Valley region. In the post-Soviet period, Hanks suggests that in the right circumstances the *mahalla* and Islam could serve as the basis for grassroots civil organisation.<sup>21</sup>

Although cultural accounts of political development in Central Asia may be able to account for the absence of political forms comparable to those found in industrial democracies, how do they account for the specific nature of politics within Central Asia?

Moreover, how does such an approach explain the diversity of political forms and relationships found within the region today?

Thus, while most authors attribute a role to historical legacies and culture, the exact significance of these elements is far from clear. Have these factors determined or merely influenced the emergence of authoritarian politics? What exactly is the relationship between an authoritarian past and the specific forms that constitute the political regimes of Central Asia today? When a non-democratic culture is identified, does this operate at a regional, national, ethnic, or sub-regional level? Are there different political cultures in Central Asia (geographically and temporally) or is there only one? Qualitative and quantitative work has identified non-democratic values, traditions and practices, but alternative values, traditions and practices also co-exist. Why privilege one set of values in accounts of the region's development over others? Are values, traditions and practices themselves the reflection of other more fundamental factors in the political life of the region?

**Diversity of Authoritarianism in Central Asia:** While it is clear that Central Asia had an authoritarian past, the same is true for other parts of the world that have subsequently developed a more liberal form of politics. The key issue for analysis is to identify what prompts an evolution or extension of authoritarian politics, or indeed a break with past practices, within a particular society. In the case of the Central Asian states, the current regimes do not simply mark a continuation or re-emergence of past authoritarian traditions. There is no natural order to authoritarianism in the region. Close analysis indicates that rather than representing a continuation of previous practices, the

contemporary regimes of Central Asia have been constructed on the basis of new political arrangements that reflect the realities of the post-independence struggle for power and resources in the region.

Although Central Asia emerged from the Soviet Union without the degree of turmoil found in some other regions of the former USSR, there was not an unbroken and automatic transition from Soviet authoritarianism to post-Soviet authoritarianism. In much of the early 1990s the three Central Asian states examined here were characterised by important elements of liberalisation and a variety of political and social groups were active. In the mid-1990s, this situation was, however, quickly transformed. In the space of a few years, much of the liberalisation of early years was reversed. One has to ask why and how cultural and traditional norms reasserted themselves in such a way?

Rather than looking at the contemporary regimes of Central Asia as representing a continuation of previous political forms in the region, it is important to stress their transformative character. The essence of the new regimes of Central Asia is not continuity and stability but change involving a restructuring of state and society in the guise of tradition. That is, while elements of previous regimes and cultural patterns are clearly to be found in the new orders, these are not so much the foundations of the present system but building blocs that have been rearranged to construct a new edifice in a neo-traditional form. It will be argued below that rather than a return to traditional forms of politics, the mid-1990s should be seen as a time when new authoritarian political systems were fashioned and opportunities for liberalisation ignored, poorly developed or crushed.

If the contemporary authoritarian regimes in the region are essentially new, what is new about them?<sup>22</sup> Four particular elements distinguish the current regimes from the political systems of Central Asia in the pre-colonial, Russian Imperial and Soviet periods:

i) Façade democracy: All three of the Central Asian states have gone to considerable lengths to set in place the formal institutions of modern democracy. Constitutions have been written, elections held, parties established, and legal systems developed. In none of the countries, however do these institutions operate as the primary means for conducting political activity and formal institutions and their rules are frequently ignored or overridden by the president. The existence of these institutions and practices is, nonetheless, critical to the new political orders of Central Asia. Façade democracy serves as a key mechanism for legitimating a new relationship between state and society in Central Asia. All of the post-independence regimes of Central Asia have sought to promote nationalism as a means to consolidate control and mobilise human and material resources. The emergence of façade democracy reflects the need to make concessions to the notion of popular sovereignty inherent in the idea of the national community, but to constrain real participation tightly.

ii) Executive power: Unlike the Soviet period, since independence there has been a wholesale concentration of power in the hands of a single figure within each of the Central Asian states. Rather than a party or the institutions of the state (during the Soviet era the Communist Party and central state apparatus provided a check on the power of the Central Asian elite), the new orders rely upon patronage networks for their power. The

emergence of neo-patrimonialism not just as an important element of the political orders of Central but as the central means of conducting politics has produced a loss of accountability, undermined the creation of new institutions and fostered the destruction of the institutions of the Soviet era.

iii) Unitary states: Under the guise of state-building, the leaders of the three Central Asian states have sought to centralise power in the new national capitals to a degree that never previously existed. Political space has been reordered. As part of this process the power of regional elites has been undermined and/or their relationship to the centre refashioned.<sup>23</sup>

iv) Radical policies: Behind the image of stability, continuity and a reassertion of pre-colonial practices, the new regimes in Central Asia have been promoting a series of radical policies aimed to transform the nature and distribution of political power and economic resources. Since independence, the regimes of Central Asia have undertaken to foster new national ideologies, reshape identities, transfer wealth, reorganise the state in each republic, and refashion elite structures. To achieve these ends, coercion has been employed in directions and to an extent that are essentially new in the region.

While the regimes of Central Asia share broadly similar characteristics, there are also important differences in the nature of authoritarianism in the three cases. Thus, while the political order in Uzbekistan closely resembles Linz's notion of a Sultanistic regime, Kazakhstan and the Kyrgyz Republic contain important areas of a more liberal politics.<sup>24</sup>



These differences are important because they highlight the degree to which different elements have fashioned diverse political forms. Five sets of difference, in particular, divide the authoritarian states of Central Asia; relations between centre and regions; policies of economic liberalisation; ethno-political cleavages, elite structures, and use of coercion.

Centre-regional relations: All three of the republics have adopted unitary state forms.

The actual nature of centre-regional relations, however, varies considerably. In Kazakhstan, the central authorities have sought to extend control over the regions but this policy has only been partially successful. Despite policies to forge a national elite and subordinate regions to the centre, regional elites have continued to enjoy important areas of autonomy. This is particularly the case with large minority (Slavic) populations of the north and east. The issue of the Uzbek minority in the south has also restrained centralising tendencies. In both cases, powerful external actors with potential claims on a diaspora population have underlined the sensitivity of centre-regional issues.<sup>25</sup>

Reanimated or re-created social divisions (tribalism) have also served to weaken the centralising impulse.<sup>26</sup> Eventually, a territorial re-organisation of the state was undertaken – involving the transfer of the capital to the north and the amalgamation of several regions.<sup>27</sup>

In the Kyrgyz Republic, an important split between the north and south characterised the politics of the early years of independence. With the north displacing the south as the political centre of gravity in the country in the early independence period, extending

control over the southern territories was a primary goal of the Akaev regime. The presence of a large Uzbek minority in the south in territories bordering Uzbekistan added a further level of complexity to the situation. Although the centre was gradually able to promote its own personnel to leading positions in the regions, the president became dependent on the support of these powerful regional figures leading to the emergence of a system built around a ruling coalition of key regional and central personnel.

In Uzbekistan, the central authorities pursued a rigorous regional policy, destroying potential opposition to the new regime from the earliest period of independence. The regional leadership was replaced regularly by centrally appointed governors loyal to the President. In the space of a few years, a highly centralised vertically organised state was established.

**Table 1: Summary of Centre-Regional Relations**

	<b>Principal characteristic of centre-regional relations</b>	<b>Main Centre-Regional Division</b>	<b>Regional Elite Structure</b>
<b>Kazakhstan</b>	Dominant centre	Ethno-political/social divisions	Semi-integrated national elite
<b>Kyrgyz Republic</b>	Centre-regional bargaining	Ethno-political/Social divisions	Semi-integrated national elite
<b>Uzbekistan</b>	Highly centralised	Patron-client/religious	National elite

Economic Liberalisation: In the early years of independence Uzbekistan pursued an economic programme distinct from its neighbours in a number of respects. Eventually the set of policies applied by Tashkent was even presented as a model of transition by the Uzbek leadership. At the heart of the Uzbek ‘model’ was a continuation and indeed

extension of state involvement in the economy. Autarky and a lack of a convertible currency kept external engagement in the economy to a minimal level. As a result of these policies, the political economy of Uzbekistan emerged as one in which state and business were fused at almost all levels.

In the Kyrgyz Republic President Akaev made clear his commitment to market reform in the early years of independence. The President adopted proposals for reform advocated by the IMF, with the aim of attracting foreign investors to modernise the economy. In early 1992, an austerity programme was introduced to stifle inflation. Although the economy later suffered from indebtedness and economic decline, the policies of the first decade of independence served to break the state's monopoly over the control of economic resources. A diversity of resources, including the media, the service sector and small and medium size enterprises subsequently emerged as the basis for political opposition.

In Kazakhstan, a more cautious programme of liberalisation was adopted, although often making extensive use of the rhetoric of marketisation. The initial caution about economic liberalisation was moderated in the mid-1990s when economic deterioration prompted a more extensive agenda of privatisation. By the late 1990s, Kazakhstan's economy exhibited a diversity in patterns of ownership and control. Not only did this diversity provide the basis for opposition politics, but it also established important divisions in the ruling elite.

Ethno-Political Cleavages: All states of Central Asia contain large minority populations, generally located in peripheral areas bordering potential 'homestates'. The role of these populations in the development of authoritarian political forms has, however, varied in each country. Although containing significant and geographically concentrated minority populations, Uzbekistan did not face a serious ethnic challenge to the new state. The Tajik and Karakalpak populations have failed to mobilise significantly, while the sizeable Slavic population has opted from emigration rather than confrontation. Instead, religion has served as the main challenge to the central state.

In Kazakhstan and the Kyrgyz Republic, ethnic minorities have presented a far more significant challenge to the new regimes. Ethnic conflict in the Kyrgyz Republic was largely responsible for the political triumph of a counter elite in the late Gorbachev period. In the independence period, the issue of the Uzbek minority appeared a significant threat to the territorial integrity of the state. While the importance of the Slavic population in the north required significant shifts in national policy, notably a softening of the nation-building strategy through the adoption of Russian as a second state language.

In Kazakhstan, the large Slavic population concentrated in the north, east and the former capital (Almaty) played a critical role in shaping the politics of the early independence period. Concern about possible secessionist movements and the importance of predominately Slavic networks of power helped to shape fundamentally the political system in Kazakhstan. Caution toward the north and east in the early years of

independence permitted the emergence of a more liberal politics in the country as a whole.<sup>28</sup> In recent years, while the issue of the Slavic population has retreated in importance, the issue of the Uzbek minority in the south has continued to make the central elite sensitive to ethnic issues.

**Table 2: Summary of Ethno-political Cleavages**

	<b>Principal Minorities</b>	<b>Size (as percent of total population)*</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>External Actor</b>
<b>Kazakhstan</b>	Slavic Uzbek	40.9% 2.2%	North and East (capital) South	Russia/ Uzbekistan
<b>Kyrgyz Republic</b>	Uzbek Slavic	12.9% 21.5%	South North (capital)	Uzbekistan Non-state actors
<b>Uzbekistan</b>	Tajik Karakalpak Kazak Slavic	4.7% 0.6% 4.1% 8.3%	South West North, West Capital	Non-state actors

\*

Elite Structures: All of the Central Asian states have developed elite structures built around the person of the president. The nature of these structures varies from state to state. In Kazakhstan, the elite is characterised by important fissures. The main divisions are between centre and regional elites and between political and economic actors. In the early years of independence, although there was little stability in terms of post-holding, circulation of leading figures between important positions coupled with stability for key posts provided the basis for the elite system

In the Kyrgyz Republic, in the early independence period the president's support base was gradually expanded to incorporate key actors from other strategic groups. Crucial in this respect was the co-option of the regional elite – particularly representatives from the south – within a ruling coalition in the mid-1990s. This coalition of key figures provided

the basis for the concentration of power within a relatively stable network and the exclusion of other important figures, notably the leaders of parliament and the opposition.

In Uzbekistan, an elite structure was forged quickly after independence that was subordinate to the person of the president and fluid. Competing figures were purged and replaced with loyalists. All positions, except the president himself, were subject to high degrees of turnover. Institutions similar to the former Communist Higher Party School were established to train up a new national elite. In recent years, a younger generation of technocratic figures has begun to enter the elite.

**Table 3: Summary of Elite Structures**

	<b>Main Characteristic of Elite Structure</b>	<b>Main Divisions</b>	<b>Elite Stability</b>
<b>Kazakhstan</b>	Fragmented/ Competitive	Economic/regional	Mobile
<b>Kyrgyz Republic</b>	Coalition	Regional	Elite circulation
<b>Uzbekistan</b>	Hierarchical	Generational	High turnover

Coercion: Throughout the 1990s, the use of coercion expanded considerably in Central Asia and in many places the employment of state agencies to intimidate groups and individuals became commonplace. The role of coercion, however, was different in its extent and the forms employed in each republic. In Kazakhstan and the Kyrgyz Republic methods such as harassment through legal manipulation and tax pressures formed the primary instrument of coercion (although violence was also employed), whereas in Uzbekistan torture and execution became an essential element of the means of rule.

**Table 4: Summary of Employment of Coercion**

	<b>Employment of Coercion</b>	<b>Dominant Forms of Coercion</b>
<b>Kazakhstan</b>	Regular	Imprisonment, harassment, violence

<b>Kyrgyz Republic</b>	Sporadic	Imprisonment, harassment
<b>Uzbekistan</b>	Systematic	Imprisonment, harassment torture, execution

**Sources of Authoritarian Politics:** The important differences between the forms of authoritarianism in the Central Asian states points to a diversity of factors influencing the political development in the region. Five interrelated factors appear to explain the principal differences amongst the political systems of the Central Asian states:

Patterns of State Formation: Prior to incorporation into the Russian imperial system, Central Asia had little experience of modern statehood. While the region had been the centre for a number of empires, by the late eighteenth century Central Asia consisted of a patchwork of multi-ethnic principalities and tribal confederations scattered over thousands of kilometres. Colonial rule began a process of reshaping notions of identity and community and of establishing distinct borders where overlapping divisions of language, ethnicity, tribalism and economic relations had previously existed.

The key development in the division of Central Asia was the process of ‘delimitation’ in the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>29</sup> This process established the main borders for the modern states of Central Asia. Delimitation extended and institutionalised much of the pattern of colonial rule that had been introduced with Russian conquest of the region. At the same time, delimitation established new centres and sources of political power, reshaped relations between territories and established the principal framework for the Soviet project of modernisation in the region.

The creation of proto-states, notably the inclusion of certain minority populations and regions within the newly fashioned republics, provided important and different legacies for the Central Asian government at independence. In particular, the previous Russian and Soviet approaches to the organisation and administration of the region shaped the nature and possibilities for state-building in the post-Soviet period.<sup>30</sup>

Modernisation: In addition to determining the broad parameters of the state-building projects in the Central Asian states, the legacies of the Russian and Soviet colonial periods played a critical role in shaping the direction of policies at independence. Not only did the colonial period establish the external borders and ethnic composition of the Central Asian states, it also inscribed crucial divisions on society; between urban and rural communities, industry and agriculture, 'high' and 'low' cultures (including languages). The legacies for each Central Asian state in terms of the combination of issues involved in transforming the economy, addressing national and ethnic aspirations, managing developmental issues, and the different resources available to meet these challenges crucially shaped the different directions of development.

The breakdown of the Soviet system: The reconfiguration of the political elite in Central Asia as a result of *perestroika* also had a profound impact upon the nature of the political order in the region. The creation of a new elite grouping in the Kyrgyz Republic in the late 1980s following ethnic conflict in the south established the basis for liberal politics to emerge in the republic in the early 1990s. The fragmentation of Soviet era elite networks led to intense competition as various groups sought ascendancy. While Akaev eventually established considerable control over much of the elite in the Kyrgyz Republic, the



regime remained fractured along a number of fault lines, notably the north-south axis, urban-rural tensions, and inter-ethnic fissures. These fault lines provided important spaces for forms of liberal politics to emerge.

In Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, the late Soviet elite was more successful than in the Kyrgyz Republic at retaining its former position and coherence in the post-independence period. In Uzbekistan, Karimov used the former Communist republican level elite networks of the Communist Party to quickly extend his control over the territory of the country. While many of the former leading members of this network were subsequently purged, the nature of the political relations, and the coherence of the network represented a continuation of Soviet era arrangements.

In Kazakhstan, while the new national leadership was drawn extensively from the former leadership of the Republican Communist Party, the country lacked an integrated elite network.<sup>31</sup> Western regions had only ever been loosely linked to the central Republican structures, while north and east regions had been more closely tied to All-Union networks and to Moscow. At independence, President Nazarbaev and his supporters thus faced not only the problem of a large and potentially secessionist ethnic minority populations but also a fragmented elite network. The extension of centralised control over different parts of Kazakhstan was thus slower and more problematic than was the case in Uzbekistan.

Personality of the Leader: While much of the nature and direction of political development in Central Asia was shaped by the structural constraints of state-formation, social and economic legacies and elite structures, the individual leaders have also been of

importance. Given the enormous powers of discretion available to the chief executive in Central Asia, the personality of the president played a critical role in shaping political developments. Akaev's background outside the Communist Party apparatus helped to foster the relative freedoms in the Kyrgyz Republic. In Uzbekistan, President Karimov was prepared to employ coercion as the policy of first choice from the earliest days of his reign.

Post-independence Policies: An area where the character of the individual presidents has been particularly important is the policies adopted in the post-independence period. Particularly significant have been the policies adopted towards economic development. Kazakhstan and the Kyrgyz Republic have been far more willing to adopt economic liberalisation, particularly privatization and foreign direct investment, than has been the case with Uzbekistan. In the latter case, the emergence of a political economy built upon autarky and an extension of state control over the economy provided the basis for the creation of a strong centralised state and a unified elite structure.

The adoption of policies of economic liberalisation in the early years of independence in Kazakhstan and the Kyrgyz Republic (even if many of these policies were poorly implemented) fostered divisions between economic and political power in these republics. While many of the economic elites were not committed to political liberalisation and were associated with corruption, the creation of a range of diverse interests and the distribution of economic resources beyond a narrow political elite provided the basis for competition, criticism and opposition.

As a result of the attempts at economic liberalisation, both Nazarbaev and Akaev subsequently faced difficulties in forging a cohesive and powerful ruling bloc capable of integrating political and business elites. In Uzbekistan the lack of reform in the first years of independence provided the political elite with control of economic resources and so stifled the emergence of competing interests, and gave the regime the resources to undertake widespread repression and control.

**Conclusions:** In the 1990s, authoritarian politics became dominant within Central Asia. While many observers have located the source of this dynamic in a continuation or reanimation of cultural values and political traditions, it is argued here that the contemporary regimes of Central Asia were fundamentally new. As the Soviet order broke down, the legacies of state construction, and social and economic development structured political development in important ways, but it was the interaction of new interests and elites with the challenges and opportunities created by these legacies that determined the both the overall drift to authoritarianism and the particular forms of political evolution in the region.

Authoritarianism was constructed in Central Asia, from the past (both real and imagined) and through the policies of the present. The post-Soviet regimes did not grow up to reflect ancient cultural patterns and preferences but the interests of rentier elites that construed their own interests as the interests of the whole population and used their position to extract resources from the wider society. In forging the authoritarian regimes

of Central Asia, the elites of the newly independent states sought to establish images of the region in terms of values and history that gave preference to authoritarian elements rather than stressing the potential basis for liberal politics in the region.<sup>32</sup>

The accounts of the historical basis for authoritarianism have also been accompanied by particularistic accounts of the region's current problems. Writers within the region have presented 'strong rule' as the only, and indeed the natural, way to solve the region's problems. Such ideas have their clearest expression in the speeches and writings of the regional leadership under the rubric of stability, the fight against radical Islam, and inter-ethnic and inter-tribal conflict. In these works, state collapse and civil war in Tajikistan and Afghanistan are linked to democratisation and a break with traditions of centralised rule. The leadership of the Central Asia states has thus sought to construct a seamless link between a certain definition of the region's problems and the use of culturally and historically legitimated forms of authoritarian politics. At the same time, democratization has been discredited in the region itself by a campaign to link it to 'instability'.

In fact, the authoritarianism that was constructed in the region did not reflect the needs of introducing stability and providing the basis for development. The regimes did not serve as developmental dictatorships as was often argued by their proponents. Ten years after the collapse of the Soviet order, there was little indication that the prerequisites for an economic modernisation of the region had been created. Indeed, the regimes of Central Asia have had precisely the opposite effect – to refute the increasingly popular calls both

within and beyond the region for authoritarianism as the first step to economic modernisation and liberalisation.<sup>33</sup>

Instead of development, after a decade of independence the Central Asian regimes were characterised by inefficient administrations, widespread corruption, low levels of foreign direct investment (concentrated in raw materials sectors), a process of de-institutionalisation across the region as informal networks became the dominant mode of organisation, as well as a de-industrialisation. At the same time, social problems grew more acute.

The emergence of diversity within the authoritarian regimes in Central Asia in the first decade of independence suggests, however, that political development in the region can follow various paths. The adoption of liberalising policies in the early years of independence in the case of Kazakhstan and the Kyrgyz Republic established a set of interests and elite alignments that initially served to prevent the creation of the sultanistic politics that quickly developed within their neighbour Uzbekistan.

In recent years, however, there has been a convergence of authoritarian forms in the region, indicating that authoritarian rule in the region is being transformed and sustained by new factors; the engagement of key sections of the elite with international capital and political interests, geo-politics and the struggle with terrorism and radical Islam. The authoritarian systems of Central Asia have not achieved equilibrium. The fragility of the

authoritarian orders in Central Asia may well offer opportunities to establish a more liberal tradition of politics.

## Endnotes:

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<sup>1</sup> In 1998 Freedom House identified four former Soviet republics as consolidated autocracies and statist economies: Belarus, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Kazakhstan was categorised as an autocratic state that tolerates only limited opposition, while the Kyrgyz Republic was designated a transitional polity and economy. *Nations in Transition: From Change to Permanence* (Freedom House, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991) and Francis Fukuyama, 'The End of History', *National Interest*, no. 16 (Summer 1989), pp. 3-18. In contrast with Huntington, who identified three historical waves of democratization, Laurence Whitehead sees the process of democratization in Eastern Europe as a 'fourth wave'. Laurence Whitehead, 'Three International Dimensions of Democratization' in Laurence Whitehead, ed., *The International Dimensions of Democratization: Europe and the Americas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 3-25.

<sup>3</sup> Archie Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 310-15. The five factors are (1) the supreme authority and unchallengeable hegemony of the Communist Party (2) a high degree of centralization and discipline within that organization with very narrowly-defined rights of intra-party debate – 'democratic centralism' (3) state, or at any rate non-private, ownership of the means of production, with exceptions sometimes made for agriculture, but not for industrial, production; (4) the declared aim of building communism as the ultimate, legitimising goal; and (5) a sense of belonging to – and, in the Soviet case, of leading – an international Communist movement.

<sup>4</sup> Archie Brown and Jack Gray, eds., *Political Culture and Political Change in Communist States*, Steven White, *Political Culture and Soviet Politics* (London: Macmillan, 1979), A. Brown, ed., *Political Culture and Communist Studies* (London: Macmillan, 1984).

<sup>5</sup> G. A. Almond, 'Communism and Political Culture Theory', *Comparative Politics*, vol. 13 (1983).

<sup>6</sup> Chazan et al. identify neo-patrimonialism in almost all regimes in Africa, but they note differences between administrative-hegemonic, pluralist, party mobilising, party centralist, personal coercive, populist, and ambiguous regimes. Naomi Chazan, Robert Mortimer, John Ravenhill and Donald Rothchild, *Politics and Society in Contemporary Africa* (London: Macmillan, 1988), pp. 129-46.

<sup>7</sup> Juan J. Linz, 'Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes' in F. I. Greenstein and N. W. Polsby, eds., *The Handbook of Political Science* vol. 3, *Macropolitical Theory*, (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Welsey, 1975), pp. 175-411. See also Leonardo Morlino, 'Authoritarianism' in Anton Bebler and Jim Seroka, eds., *Contemporary Political Systems: Classifications and Typologies* (Bolder Colo.: Lynn Rienner, 1990) and Archie Brown, 'The Study of Totalitarianism and Authoritarianism' in Jack Hayward, Brian Barry and Archie Brown, eds., *The British Study of Politics in the Twentieth Century* (The British Academy, in association with Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 345-94, especially the concepts of totalitarianism and authoritarianism, pp. 354-60.

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<sup>8</sup> For a classification of nondemocratic regimes see Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996, chaps. 3 and 4.

<sup>9</sup> Karl Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957).

<sup>10</sup> John Anderson, 'Elections and Political Development in Central Asia', *Journal of Communist and Transition Politics*, vol. 13, no. 4 (December 1997), p. 47.

<sup>11</sup> Anderson, *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>12</sup> Anderson, *Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>13</sup> Gregory Gleason, *The Central Asian States: Discovering Independence* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1997), p. 38.

<sup>14</sup> Shirin Akiner, *Central Asia: Conflict or Stability and Development?* (London: Minority Rights Group, 1997,) p. 40. Akiner does, however, note that change may be coming to the region through a new generation with modern skills and the erosion of traditional culture through the expansion of western culture.

<sup>15</sup> Gleason, *op. cit.*, (1997), p. 179.

<sup>16</sup> Gregory Gleason, 'Fealty and Loyalty: Informal Authority Structures in Soviet Asia', *Soviet Studies*, vol. 43, no. 4 (1991), pp. 613-28.

<sup>17</sup> Nancy Lubin, *Central Asians Take Stock: Reform, Corruption, and Identity* (Peaceworks, No. 2: United States Institute for Peace, February 1995).

<sup>18</sup> Lubin, *Ibid.*, p. v also pp. 4-5.

<sup>19</sup> Lubin, *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>20</sup> McChesney argues for the influence of historic forms of legitimation and law rather than some abstract notion of culture as providing the link between past and present. But he notes that Central Asia has been characterised by a struggle between competing forms of legitimation in the past. 'The future of Central Asia lies, as it always has, in re-establishing legitimate institutional forms. Legitimacy is expressed through the consensus of the governed, or those constituencies of the governed who count, and is formalized in written and unwritten laws and constitutions'. R. D. McChesney, *Central Asia: Foundations of Change* (Princeton, New Jersey: The Darwin Press, Inc., 1996), p. 147.

<sup>21</sup> Reuel Hanks, 'Civil Society and Identity in Central Asia', in M. Holt Ruffin and Daniel Waugh, eds., *Civil Society in Central Asia* (Seattle and London: The Center for Civil Society in association with the University of Washington Press, 1999), pp. 158-79.

<sup>22</sup> Authoritarian regimes are here understood as 'political systems with limited, not responsible, political pluralism, without elaborate and guiding ideology, but with distinctive mentalities, without extensive or intensive political mobilization, except at some points in their development, and in which a leader or occasionally a small group exercises power within formally ill-defined but actually quite predictable ones'. Juan J. Linz, 'An Authoritarian Regime: The Case of Spain', in Erik Allardt and Yrjö Littunen, eds., *Cleavages, Ideologies and Party Systems* (Helsinki: Transactions of the Westermarck Society, 1964), pp. 291-342. Reprinted in Erik Allardt and Stein Rokkan, eds., *Mass Politics: Studies in Political Sociology* (New York: Free Press, 1970), 251-83, 374-81.

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<sup>23</sup> Neil J. Melvin, 'Patterns of Centre-Regional Relations in Central Asia: The Cases of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic and Uzbekistan', *Federal and Regional Studies* (forthcoming 2001).

<sup>24</sup> Olcott and Ottaway suggest that Kazakhstan should be considered as a 'semi-authoritarian' regime. Although they note that Kazakhstan is undergoing a process of 'decay' toward 'full-fledged authoritarianism'. Martha Brill Olcott and Marina S. Ottaway, *The Challenge of Semi-Authoritarianism* (Carnegie Endowment for Peace Working Papers, No. 7, 1999).

<sup>25</sup> Neil Melvin, *Russians Beyond Russia* (London: Pinter, 1995) and Neil J. Melvin, 'Elites of North-eastern Kazakhstan in a New Geopolitical Context, 1989-95', in Richard Sakwa, ed., *The Experience of Democratization in Eastern Europe* (London: Macmillan, 1999), pp. 91-117.

<sup>26</sup> Edward Schatz, 'The Politics of Multiple Identities: Lineage and Ethnicity in Kazakhstan', *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 52, no. 3 (2000), pp. 489-506.

<sup>27</sup> Sally N. Cummings *The Dynamics of Centre-Periphery Relations in Kazakhstan* (London: RIIA, 2000).

<sup>28</sup> Martha Brill Olcott has suggested that a consequence of the process of politicization of ethnicity in the late 1980s in Kazakhstan there was a general increase of political sophistication with which the development of democracy has brought to the republic. Martha Brill Olcott, 'Democratization and the growth of political participation in Kazakhstan' in Karen Dawisha and Bruce Parrott, eds., *Conflict, cleavage, and change in Central Asia and the Caucasus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) p. 218.

<sup>29</sup> Steven Sabol, 'The Creation of Soviet Central Asia: the 1924 National Delimitation', *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 14, no. 2 (1995), pp. 225-41.

<sup>30</sup> Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post Communist Europe* (Baltimore: The John's Hopkins University Press, 1996), chap. 18.

<sup>31</sup> Melvin, *op. cit.*, (1999).

<sup>32</sup> Starr identifies six key arguments that are used to suggest that civil society cannot develop in Central Asia. He suggests, however, that these arguments do not preclude the emergence of civil society. He points to the high levels of literacy and education in Central Asia (especially for women) and also the integration of the region into international channels of communication as factors to promote liberalisation. Starr also highlights a history in the region that could be used to support the further development of civil society. Thus, while local rulers dominated in the oasis settlements there was also a tradition of guilds and independent associations of artisans in the region that were subsequently suppressed by the Soviet authorities. S. Fredrick Starr, 'Civil Society in Central Asia' in M. Holt Ruffin and Daniel Waugh, eds., *Civil Society in Central Asia* (Seattle and London: The Center for Civil Society in association with the University of Washington Press, 1999), p. 31.

<sup>33</sup> Paul Kubicek, 'Authoritarianism in Central Asia: Curse or Cure', *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 19, no. 1 (1998), pp. 29-43.