

Mitigation, Recovery, and Response: Democracy in Post-Covid Central Asia

By

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Post-pandemic Central Asia has been challenged by the ineffectiveness of state response in the face of the Covid-19 crisis, excessive bureaucracy, and lack of public confidence in the state in the backdrop of a harsh winter and chronic energy crisis. The pandemic exacerbated pre-existing issues of lack of health infrastructure, an unstable economy unduly reliant on remittances, based on fluctuations in oil prices and restrictive human rights bringing into question citizen's rights to justice and democracy. Temporary security measures put in place to handle the crisis mostly remain in place while the possibility of the emergence of a viable civil society remains nascent in urban settings and practically non-existent in traditional rural locations. All of this would ideally amount to sufficient anti-establishment sentiments to create fertile grounds for the emergence of popular movements and populist sentiments in the region. The "crisis of political representation" and narratives of lack of good governance combined with the mismanagement of the pandemic, however, defined public response to the government only in Kyrgyzstan. Here, the crisis of representational government led to the emergence of a populist leader Sadyr Japarov, during the pandemic, whose idea of a strong Presidential government proved more attractive in terms of ensuring accountability and reflecting the voices of the people. There was also some change in the perception of sections of the youth in Kazakhstan, for instance, who for the first time questioned the results of the Parliamentary elections of 2021. Subsequent developments like the loss of majority by the ruling party in the Kazakh parliamentary elections of 2023 were significant as was the realisation of exaggerations in stereotypical understanding of centralised governments as being most effective during times of crisis.

However, the continuation of existing regimes in all states except Kyrgyzstan, given that the post-pandemic situation seemed to have all the possibilities of anti-establishment movements, raises certain questions about what triggers support for protests and popular movements across societies and under what conditions they are successful in realising them. In Central Asia,

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liberal democracy made a formal appearance only in Kyrgyzstan where it has been challenged by popular protests, even before the present one, where Sadyr Japarov and his supporters defied the existing government. What happened in Kyrgyzstan was a classic case of a crisis of representational government, where there is a loss of faith in institutionalised forms of representation and therefore a tendency to vote for populist representatives who support more direct forms of representation. However, this challenge assumes multiple forms and is the result of manifold possibilities. Principle among them is lack of citizen participation which is generally assumed to be the result of a lack of trust in associations and institutions. As Samaddar argues, “the problem then is not then how to represent people in power but how to make the people an organic and coherent collective.”¹ But how is this coherent collective formed and defined? This article argues that while the process of formation of the collective has certain generic requirements these encounter complexities that are specific to the societies where it is being formed and defined. It is this that truly defines the possibilities of the emergence and success of the myriad forms of popular movements that challenged established regimes and a move towards a more “just” society.

To understand this in the Central Asian context it is necessary to examine the network of relationships among people that allows for the functioning of a society, or social capital. In the generic Western understanding, social capital, which leads to greater interaction and awareness of social issues and greater citizen participation in public affairs, eventually results in the formation of a civil society. Strong networks therefore result in nurturing and encouraging civic engagement and create the possibility of social movements and movements of protest. In Uzbekistan, particularly in the post-Soviet context, most citizens were part of civil society organisations which in turn would have implied greater involvement in civic affairs. However, here, this direct correlation between civic engagement and political pluralism was questioned with the institutionalisation of the civil society form typical to Uzbekistan, the *mahalla*, and the understanding that the institution had become an instrument for the state.

In Central Asia, the transition to democracy that civic engagement was assumed to herald, has itself often been critiqued for the challenges it faced and for the state narrative that the orientalist form of civil society was different from the liberal Western one. Sabina Insebayeva argues that the dense network of social interactions, that is institutionalised through the *mahalla* in Uzbekistan for instance, has allowed for the socialisation of the people into norms, values and practices that are compatible with the existing system of governance. This she argues, has happened over several generations and has resulted in the legitimisation of existing systems of governance.² The “Uzbek path of development” that the post-Soviet state espoused translated to an understanding of the state as the principal reformer espousing an evolutionary form of development and movement towards democracy. The focus was on stability and ensuring the safety of the state and its people. In all of this, the *mahalla* acted as the interlocutor between the state and the people. And since the perception of reality is determined by social interaction, which in the Uzbek

case happened via the institution of the mahalla, it was also instrumental in defining the political sustainability of the existing regime.³

This was complicated by complexities like citizenship and youth involvement in the new nation states. The Arab Spring encouraged examination of similarities in terms of governance, economic development, corruption and wealth gap in their respective societies in the Middle East and Central Asia. Similarities were particularly evident in terms of the youthfulness of the population, encouraging ideas of the possibility of a challenge to the present governments in Central Asia. However, the way in which the post-Communist youth in the region adjusted to the newer notions of citizenship impacted the nature of collective action.⁴ Since the states did not gain independence as a result of political struggle, there was neither large-scale conflict nor movements of people, except for some Russians who initially moved back to Russia. What happened, was simply a readjustment to thinking of themselves as members of an independent state. Participatory politics could have induced them to think of themselves as members of an independent state but with the exception of Kyrgyzstan none of the states moved to a Parliamentary form of government. The rule of law did not allow space for any political participation or the creation of political communities. Democracy was managed by the ruling elites, who were the old Soviet ruling elites, as per their own definition of what democracy should be in their societies. Questions of identity were left largely unanswered and in turn, this meant the continuation of either attachment to clan or kin-based relationships or neighbourhood associations that took the form of the mahalla, which in turn was institutionalised by the state.

This domestic dynamic has largely been backgrounded in any understanding both of the nature of democracy and opposition to it, in the region, which is analysed largely in terms of a geopolitical matrix, that has always encompassed a combination of power politics and local elite interaction. An understanding of Central Asian society itself and how notions of justice and democracy are interpreted in Central Asian societies is often lost in the conundrum of vacillations between Russia's continuing political influence and China's emerging economic one. However, a deeper understanding reveals not only the significance of kinship and clan ties and local interactions as significant in determining both the structures of governance and the opposition to it but also the innovative ways in which the ruling elites dealt with these oppositions. A combination of social structures that support *burmat*, or respect for elders and legitimising state policies that project security and development as the immediate necessity rather than democracy has meant the delegitimisation of opposition and continuation of autocratic regimes. This article, therefore, begins with an understanding of the civil society discourse in the region with a focus on Uzbekistan where regime continuity has been a given factor of politics since Independence. It then moves on to examine two instances of protest in two of the most stable states in the region, one in Uzbekistan and another in Kazakhstan, that challenged existing regimes and the counter-narratives through which these were managed by the ruling regime. A key difference between the two is that Kazakhstan has powerful bureaucratic elites with economic interests whereas Uzbekistan has a security sector that wields

substantial power with its commercial sector. However, in both, a second generation of post-Soviet leaders had promised a “New” state where the voices of the people would be heard, an assurance that remained largely on paper. The final segment looks into a combination of external factors, including security backing from Russia and economic assistance from China, that has allowed for regime continuity.

The Discourse on Civil Society and the Transition to Democracy

In traditional Central Asian societies, the *masjid*, the *choikbona* and the *bazar* which was a part of the neighbourhood or the mahalla had been places of discussion among the community and therefore also potential sites for the launching of social movements. It was these that were the precursors to the modern notions of civil society in the region. The mahalla in particular gained credence in both official and non-official narratives in the region in the post-Soviet context. In Uzbekistan for instance, the official state slogan “from a strong state to a strong civil society” was interpreted as reinventing traditional structures of self-governance within the parameters of a constitutional state. The way in which this would be defined, however, assumed a particular Uzbek form with the core idea of establishing a constitutional democratic state and open civil society as expounded by independent Uzbekistan’s first President Islam Karimov, since the establishment of the state in 1991. The civil society discourse in Uzbekistan assumed the state to be an arbiter of competing interests, including non-state ones from trade unions to social movements. However, there is an emphasis on a difference between Western and Eastern notions about civil society that essentially emphasises the reformist role of the state in contrast to discourses from Eastern Europe where civil society is accepted as an alternative to the state. The Uzbek discourse derived from Karimov’s viewpoint that the break with the Soviet apparatus offered a way to rethink the past and revive cultural heritages including traditional civil society institutions. Here, there was a reflection of Eastern philosophy and values that determined an understanding of peoples’ aspirations towards social justice. However, there is also recognition of the fact that universal values of democracy, justice, equality, and freedom need to be incorporated into the discourse though the form it assumes would be determined by the knowledge and wisdom inherent in Uzbek society. Similarly, there is an emphasis on the fact that the clear distinction between the state and civil society which is a distinctive part of the Western discourse may not essentially be workable here since it is a strong state that creates the conditions for the flourishing of civil society.

According to Murad Ismailov, for Karimov, democratic processes were determined by certain laws and where civil societies were concerned, he identified a clear knowledge of local political realities within which eastern traditions of democracy and civil society are formed. These include a mature political culture at the grassroots level that is capable of imbibing democratic traditions and a clear understanding and articulation of the difference between

Western notions of ‘individualism’ and Eastern understanding of ‘collective’ culture. This definition resulted in debates among Uzbek theoreticians where scholars like Sharifkhodjaev argued that civil society can only emerge where there is political and ideological pluralism, where individuals are considered free and equal and can act in an atmosphere where legal and moral norms are not violated. This provides the binding forces of the social fabric and promotes social, cultural, economic, and familial ties.⁵ For Karimov however, civil society makes sense only within the process of democratisation and as such the two are closely interconnected. Democracy is determined by active citizen participation and while the legislative basis for this participation has been set up, citizens need to appreciate their right to participate in the management of the state. While the relationship between democracy and civil society is accepted, Karimov argues that democracy itself can flourish only when there is a healthy opposition. Unfortunately, according to him, this is yet to develop in Uzbekistan. However, as part of the process of democratisation this would emerge in time. Secondly, Karimov asserts the value of free mass media in the making of a truly democratic society. Here also, the Uzbek mass media has not been successful in fulfilling its role and identifying critical issues. However, Uzbek political analyst Farkhod Tolipov notes that this definition does not take note of the gap between *de jure* and *de facto* democracy in the state.⁶ Such gaps are evident for instance in the formation of the party system, an essential element of the civil society, where in reality the process of formation of an independent party is problematic. And this in turn impacts the legislative process. The relationship between the state and civil society in Uzbekistan, however, would necessarily need to take note of the traditional nature of civil society in the region.

In Uzbekistan, civil society took the form of the mahalla, a neighbourhood of community-based associations that survived the Soviet period and continues to exist in the region. In post-Soviet Uzbekistan, the mahalla was recognised by Karimov as a unique indigenous form of local self-government that was the bedrock of Uzbek civil society. In the period of transition, the mahalla acted as the social organisation that filled the social vacuum.⁷ The mahallas helped shape local government, contributed to the development of a code of respect for elders and promoted ideas of mutual help, teamwork, and hospitality.⁸ Timur Dadabaev argues that the mahalla or the neighbourhood represents one of the few effective traditional organisations that creates a common identity for members of different groups based on shared residence and common problems. However, he argues that throughout the history of the institution, there have been attempts to manipulate these institutions for political expediency.⁹ In pre-Soviet times the mahalla was an institution that worked on customary norms and an informal basis. They were smaller groupings of residences where there was information sharing and voluntary support. The mahalla included support groups like *gap*, *guzar* and *chaihana* as institutions of social networking. In addition, there was the institution of *khashar* which provided voluntary mutual support in times of ceremonies or emergencies. In addition, the mahalla performed civic duties, collected taxes, and enforced order. While the mahalla administration retained

a certain level of independence in pre-Soviet times, but with the Soviet takeover of the administration the mahalla was reduced to providing support to the community and a means of dialogue between the communities and the Soviet system. On the one hand, the mahalla was co-opted to provide socialist propaganda and on the other, there were attempts to reduce its influence over the society.

This changed once again after Independence. The mahalla was identified as one aspect of the unique culture of the Uzbek people and as a means of inculcating traditional values and cultures. Later the mahalla was used to stabilise inter-ethnic relations and manage tensions due to declining living standards and post-Soviet anxiety.¹⁰ The mahalla was also institutionalised and the *aksakals*, or community leaders were elected and approved by the city councils and as a result, an informal institution assumed a more “official” status. In the late 1990s, the increasing radicalisation of society resulted in the neighbourhood watch systems being established and sponsored through the mahallas. Mahalla functions were later extended to semi-official functions like registration of residents, hosting house and apartment owners’ associations and acting as the medium of communication between the government and the citizens and with residents on behalf of the government but they have no financial independence. This complicates their position as they often seem to be acting on behalf of the government rather than the residents and as such residents see little distinction between the government and the mahalla which was traditionally an entirely informal institution.¹¹ Alisher Ilkhamov notes that the lack of a vibrant civil society is due to the imposition of a surrogate national ideology based on patriarchal values and monopolisation of national symbols to justify the structures of the ruling regime. This ideology is based on the myth of a national history of the nation and the self that has resulted in ethnocentric views. This has been a systematic effort on the part of the government rather than any effort at building consensus. He then goes on to argue that in Uzbekistan civil society should not be equated with social capital. The availability of social capital and strong social ties does not essentially mean the existence of a vibrant civil society. In fact, the very opposite. The social capital available in mahallas and kinship groups has not translated to engagement in the public sphere. This has meant that there has been no transformation of social networks into social movements and social action with the objective of social change.¹²

As in most post-Soviet states, transition has been the abiding theme in Uzbekistan over the last twenty years with the assumption that the transition would be from a command economy to a market economy and from authoritarianism to democracy. However, the transition is hardly ever a linear process, particularly in states like Uzbekistan where the political elite remained in place and were able to transform their political power into advantages for their immediate family, clan, or regional factions. It has been argued that Uzbek politics has been dominated by weak formal state agencies and disproportionately influential informal institutions. Historically, regional and clan affiliations played a prominent political and economic role. Uzbek identity in public and private life is traditionally determined by an individual’s belonging

to five distinct geographical areas that make up separate provinces: Tashkent, Samarkand, Ferghana, Surkhandarya-Syrdarya, and Khorezm. During the Soviet period, members of the Samarkand-Tashkent clans established dominant key economic and political positions. Because power and wealth are interlinked, and they developed reputations as the country's major oligarchs. The lower tier is made up of oblast governors, wealthy industrialists, landowners, and informal power brokers. Leaders of these lower tier groups are subordinate to those in groups linked to major oligarchs. Analysts argue that in post-Soviet Uzbekistan patronage groups are based on regional affiliations, as was the case during the Soviet period; Mirziyayev is said to represent the powerful Samarkand clan, Azimov and Ganiev the Tashkent clan, and Inoyatov the Surkhandarya clan. However, as Akhmed Said argues, the reality is far more complex and fluid. Regional affiliations do play a role in Uzbek politics however, patronage groups are now built on several factors, including individual loyalty to officials, common pragmatic interests, regional ties, family ties, and professional ties. In a clear sign of pragmatism, Uzbek officials maintain their membership with multiple patronage networks to hedge their bets and defend their economies and political resources.¹³ All this in turn translates into social contracts that tend to renew regime stability and inhibit actions against the state.

The civil society discourse has differed in states like Tajikistan, where the NGOs assumed the role of neoliberal civil society as the state transitioned from Soviet Communism and faced a prolonged civil war. As such, the NGOs became symbolic not just of Western developmental aid but also intermediaries in a process of civil society induced peacebuilding. According to Karolina Kluczevska and Payam Foroughi, development agencies in post-Soviet Tajikistan offered a space for the action of the Soviet era *intelligentsia* and members of former Soviet structures such as *Komsomol* or *Zhensovet* by incorporating them and teaching them new skill sets that would provide an opportunity to be part of the regional and international network of NGOs. They also offered them a new value system and its associated rhetoric which included the ideology of a neoliberal civil society replacing the vacuum brought about by the collapse of the Soviet system.¹⁴ However, they argue that this experiment with inculcating aspects of neoliberal civil society did not succeed since it had targeted only one group, the local Soviet activists who were then expected to share and support these ideas among the central and local governments and the people at large. Also, as financing for the NGOs was reduced due to a combination of international and domestic restraints it became apparent that the role of NGOs as neoliberal civil societies had been closely linked to the material benefits that they were able to distribute. However, with the reduced influence of Western funded NGOs, the space for local activism on apolitical issues is on the rise.¹⁵

Popular Protests, Social Aspirations, and Regime Continuity

Any narrative of popular protest in the region that is identified as Central Asia today should begin with a reference to the romantic endeavours of Enver Pasha and Ibrahim Beg, and their band of Basmachis, who waged a guerrilla war in

support of the disposed Emir of Bukhara and Khiva against the advancing Soviet troops. The fortunes of this popular revolt, fluctuated between 1918–33 as most elements of it had either been neutralised by the death and capture of leaders or by Soviet concessions in social and religious matters. It is interesting because the cause they supported was not anti-establishment. In fact, they wanted to preserve the Emirate against the advance of what is generally acknowledged as a modernising force that was in favour of redistribution of land and water rights from the landowners or the *beks* to the people. This combination of disposed feudals, clergies and tribals nobilities continued to obstruct Soviet efforts till about 1930 when they lost popular support which signalled the end of Basmachestvo.¹⁶ The Basmachi revolts along with the protests of 1916 against the draft remained the only recorded popular protests in the region till the reforms initiated by President Gorbachev's policies unleashed popular forces across the Soviet Union.

These mostly centred around economic grievances and inefficiency but also reflected aspirations for the renewal of national traditions and languages. High prices, unemployment, inadequate housing, and consumer shortages were some of the causes of the disturbances. In Kazakhstan, in July 1989 there were protests against the high prices charged by the cooperatives run by the immigrants from the Caucasus and demanding their expulsion.¹⁷ Similarly, rumours that Armenian refugees were being settled in Tajikistan caused disturbances in the winter of 1990 about the stress that this would cause on the already limited housing situation.¹⁸ In fact, a wide range of professionals (the Kazakh Writers Union), environmentalists, (the Green Front in Alma Ata) and other groups were formed with a range of objectives including national rejuvenation, a focus on national languages and demands for greater political and economic freedom.¹⁹ *Birlik*, the nationalist front in Uzbekistan had among its demands agricultural reforms, the creation of textile industries, control over local resources, reform of language policy, reinstatement of old Uzbek names, and a revival of Uzbek history and culture among others. There were similar groups in the other republics including *Rastakbix* or resurrection in Tajikistan, the Alma Ata Popular Front in Kazakhstan, and *Og'zibirlik* in Turkmenistan. In addition to domestic issues, these popular fronts also grappled with how to deal with issues regarding their transnational historical connections including pan-Turkism.²⁰ However, while significant in the transitional stage they failed to develop a vision for the type of society they hoped to create and were reduced to becoming appendages to the Soviet system.

The movements for a revitalised civil society in Uzbekistan, for instance, began in the post-1985 period when certain crucial cultural, ecological, and social issues were addressed. During this period of transition, the CPUz (Communist Party of Uzbekistan) had to contend with the emergence of two organisations: *Birlik* and *Erk*. An examination of the programme of these two organisations shows that most of the issues addressed here were later appropriated by the Independent Uzbek state and the ruling party the PDP (People's Democratic Party). However, even in Uzbekistan marginalisation of these forces has been attempted. This is evident from the fact that even an independent evaluation of the activities of these organisations is difficult as they have been declared illegal

and as such no official press or newspaper documents their activities. Writings that document the multiparty nature of the state, they are cited only after detailed reports on officially recognised parties. An interesting example of this is an article in the *Obshchestvennoye Mneniye v Uzbekistane*. The article points out that the Uzbek state today grants the right to democratic participation and formation of associations. Pluralism is now an accepted part of the state. It then goes on to talk of the rights accorded to the People's Democratic Party and the *Vatan Tarakki* to choose their candidates for elections. The election platforms of both are recorded in detail which includes that of a "strong state with a humanitarian policy." Other parties like the Social Democratic Party and the *Adolat* are also examined. It then only incidentally mentions the formation of two other political parties and the development of the movement *Khalk Birligi*. In the post-Soviet context, the challenges of moving away from the remnants of the Soviet system including the command economy and political institutions resulted in alternatives that often challenged the regimes. These principally included movements that aimed at social/economic/ecological issues like the Nevada Semipalatinsk anti-nuclear movement. However, most were unsuccessful in instituting change, the exception being the popular movements in Kyrgyzstan. Two protests that were exceptions also failed to institute change. A combination of the continuation of elite Soviet leadership supported by security structures and business elites ensured both continuity and stability which remained undisturbed by mass protests in Andijan (Uzbekistan) in 2005 and Zhanaozen (Kazakhstan) in 2011.

The Andijan incident proved to be somewhat of a watershed both in terms of the opposition to the state as well as in the way the events were interpreted by the state. The incident, a popular protest against the arrest of 23 local businessmen, that led to a jailbreak was portrayed as orchestrated by a trained (and foreign-aided) group of terrorist/criminal elements who were attempting to destabilise the state and was dealt with by opening fire on the protestors. In the aftermath of the incident, a booklet was published from Tashkent that summarised the statements and responses of President Karimov to the local and international press about the Andijan events of May 12–13, 2005. Entitled, *The Uzbek People Will Never Depend on Others*, the booklet sought to provide an explanation of the Government's actions during the incident and show that this incident had nothing in common with the "revolutions" that had led to changes in governments in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan. Examining President Karimov's account of the events of May 2005, Nick Megoran argues that four key themes have been deployed in the narrative to delegitimise the government's opponents: terrorism and criminality; inauthentic Uzbekness and deviant masculinity/religiosity; constitutional illegitimacy; and the subversion of the scientific laws of the state.²¹ What remains common with most writings of the President in the post-1997 period is the portrayal of the image of a "nation under threat."

On the one hand, the rhetoric sought to rally popular feelings of patriotism and on the other, international legitimacy for state violence. Suda Masaru argues that to counter the imagery of development and the threat of radical extremism as well as international criticism of uneven human rights, the state

identified the transition to democracy as a “target” to be achieved eventually at some future date. Civil obedience was identified as an essential element along with freedom in civil society.²² Since the late 1990s, there has been a shift in President Karimov’s sense of the geopolitical identity of Uzbekistan, from a self-confident polity at peace with itself and its neighbours to a besieged island of civilization in a sea of anarchy that threatened to submerge it. Nick Megoran notes that the portrayal of “a nation under threat” was reflected in Presidential writings, media reports and even in popular culture. The rhetoric was aimed at both the domestic audience who are urged to maintain public order to allow the state to move towards a path ruled by democracy and at the international audience who are informed that the inability of the state to do so would be due to the threat faced by the state because of external extremist forces. The first channel that inculcated a sense of danger was the Presidential writings themselves. The same geopolitical visions were conveyed through the national news media (*Halk Soʻzi*) which presented opposite images of a happy and prosperous Uzbekistan in contrast to consistent images of neighbouring states as spaces of chaos. There is also the suggestion that the chaos in the neighbourhood is threatening to engulf Uzbekistan. State narratives in the aftermath of the protests, therefore, are equally significant in terms of understanding regime continuity.

The aftermath of the Andijan events however did not affect the “image” of a state. Nor did it hinder Uzbekistan’s international legitimacy as a state with enormous geopolitical significance. On the other hand, there is a continuing state effort to foster a more progressive image. One such effort is through government allocation of funds for sports youth programmes. It is argued that this is impelled by the desire to keep the Uzbek youth occupied and apolitical and to foster a “positive international image of Uzbekistan.” This according to some is an effort to promote through sports an image of themselves as a progressive, modern country as well as regional power.²³ Similarly, the *Millennium Development Goals Report* (2015) argues that despite all challenges posed by an unstable economy Uzbekistan was able to maintain a balance between the most important key development goals, i.e., ensuring rapid economic growth through structural reforms and improving the welfare of all strata of the population. It goes on to argue that because of this balanced development paradigm, the country has on the one hand seen the rapid development of technical, technological, and financial foundations required for long-term and stable economic growth. On the other, there has been a steady reduction in poverty including the most vulnerable groups and an overall improvement in standards of living. This however remains questionable given the large volumes of labour migrants to Russia.

Similarly, in 2011 a limited protest by disgruntled oil workers in the town of Zhanaozhen (Kazakhstan) transformed into a broader labour movement which became an embarrassment for the government. Their demands for higher pay and a greater participation of their union in the government were typical of such protests but unique in Kazakhstan where a tacit political arrangement had meant that protests were largely unknown. The demands were largely ignored, and leaders identified and subject to swift reprisals. A crackdown that resulted in unarmed protestors becoming the targets of security

forces, however, meant that the carefully cultivated image of the Kazakh state where stability and higher than the regional living standards were accepted in return for regime continuity was brought into question. While security narratives allowed the Uzbek ruling elite to manage protests in Kazakhstan a developmental narrative that emphasises that regime instability results in issues of development have extended regime continuity. Situated in the heart of Asia, the most persistently pursued goal for Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev since the country gained independence in 1991 has been to promote integration at various levels not only within Central Asia and the former Soviet space but also within global markets and institutions. Nazarbayev's intense support for globalisation partly results from his perception that Kazakhstan would benefit from enhanced ties with other countries and organisations. In the economic sphere, greater integration would allow Kazakhstan and other neighbouring states to better exploit their natural resources and pivotal location. Kazakhstan's ability to realise its potential as a natural crossroad for east-west and north-south commercial trade depends on reducing obstacles to the free flow of goods and peoples among the Eurasian nations. Deeper economic integration would also make these countries more attractive to foreign investors and enhance collective leverage with external actors. In the security realm, greater integration would provide Kazakhstan with room to manoeuvre among the great powers active in the region and reduce the risks of becoming a pawn in the emerging great power condominium. There is emphasis on the fact that instability provides opportunities for external meddling and conflicts can spill across borders, either directly or through refugee flows that discourage international capital markets from investing in the region.

The success of legitimising politics in Uzbekistan has meant that after 2005 the ruling regime faced contestation in the peripheries only in 2022. In Uzbekistan, protests broke out in Karakalpakstan in July 2022 against proposed changes to the Uzbek constitution that would have adversely affected its right to secede from Uzbekistan and removed its "sovereign" status. Karakalpakstan is today an autonomous republic within Uzbekistan. However, it was not originally a part of Uzbekistan. During the Soviet period, control of the territory occupied by the Karakalpak people was transferred a total of three times in slightly less than a decade. The Karakalpaks were first granted a titular territory in 1925. Then the Karakalpaks were administratively separated between the Uzbek SSR and the Kazakh ASSR and awarded the status of Autonomous Oblast. In 1930 the Karakalpak AO was transferred to the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic. In 1936, it was joined to the Uzbek SSR and given the status of Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. The Republic of Karakalpakstan has its constitution and laws but these are subservient to the Uzbek state. Chapter 17 of the Uzbek Constitution contains six articles that deal directly with the legal status of Karakalpakstan. The first article states that the sovereign Republic of Karakalpakstan is part of the Republic of Uzbekistan and that the sovereignty of the Republic shall be protected by the Republic of Uzbekistan. The second article states that the Republic shall have its own constitution which would be in accordance with the constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan. It is also clearly stated that the laws of the Republic of

Uzbekistan shall be binding on the territory of the Republic of Karakalpakstan. The constitution also allows the Republic to secede based on a nationwide referendum held by the people of Karakalpakstan. It guarantees that the territories and boundaries of the Karakalpak Republic shall not be changed without the consent of the Republic and that it has the right to determine its administrative and territorial structures. While in reality, the legal and administrative structures in Karakalpakstan are subordinate to the central government in Tashkent. It is interesting that in the large numbers of new writings on Karakalpakstan it is referred to as the *National Republic* of Karakalpakstan, an interpretation of the reality, which may well, be at variance with that of the Uzbek state. Thus, there may well be different levels of interpretation of current history, as well as resentment about unequal development in the regions away from the center. This is particularly evident, once again in the Karakalpak region as the proximity to the Aral Sea has meant that the area has been worst hit by the environmental changes affected by the shrinking of the Sea. While this was once again interpreted in terms of “forces from abroad” aiding efforts to destabilise the state, the protests were induced by dire living conditions more than simply the status of the Republic. However, they were “managed” by security forces whose actions belied the promise of President Mirziyoyev’s “New Uzbekistan” where the voices of the people would make a difference.²⁴ Good governance and liberal democracy along with a focus on public grievances to strive towards economic and social justice were the stated goals of what was supposed to have been a responsive government in the post-pandemic era. Interestingly, a combination of external factors, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, the conflict in Ukraine and its social and economic fallouts including reverse migration and a more engaged China has meant regime stability and reduced tolerance for alternatives.

Good Governance, Liberal Democracy, and Populism

A combination of external factors in the post-pandemic era once again raised questions about the manoeuvrability of the states given their high-level engagements with both Russia and China in May 2023. The fact that the conflict in Ukraine did not play out the way it was predicted meant that for most observers of Central Asia, its fallout was anticipated to be adverse both in economic and security terms. The fact that most of the states were part of the Eurasian Economic Union and had deep economic and social ties with Russia was assumed to signal further economic chaos which in turn would call for political and social unrest and possibilities of protest. However, for the most part, these predictions proved unwarranted as the conflict opened avenues for both foreign businesses and skilled labour to move into the region from Russia and created labour opportunities for Central Asians as more Russian men were drawn into the protracted conflict. While few from the region actively sought a quick fix in Russian citizenship by joining the Russian side, others were drawn into the conflict, either because of the monetary aspect or occasionally support of the Russian position.

Post-pandemic recovery inevitably involved emerging vectors of foreign assistance, consequent foreign influence, and disputes about intrusions into national sovereignty. China, for instance, packaged aid as “gifts” reflecting the Chinese nation’s tradition of internationalism and its ideal of universal harmony. Projected in terms of South-South cooperation, these have been accompanied by a narrative and an evolving set of practices that stress the parity of relationships that beguile reality and aim at creating influence. Challenging universal principles of democracy and human rights as Western, it has also supported local interpretations of democracy that converge with her own understanding and serve Chinese interests. While the pandemic had questioned China’s role in the region the generally accepted position is that the Russia-Ukraine conflict would act as a strategic enabler of a shifting power balance where China would once again emerge with a clear advantage. Trade with the Central Asian states expanded to USD70 billion in 2022 and increased by 22 per cent in the first quarter of 2023. In the China Central Asia Summit, Xi’an China pledged CNY26 billion (\$3.8 billion) of finance and grants to the region as a parallel summit of G7 leaders in Japan debated on how to control Chinese coercive diplomacy.²⁵

While this advantage is being measured in economic terms, Beijing’s tacit support for restraining anti-regime activism remains an undocumented factor exacerbating the uneven human rights record in the region. There is also the general understanding that Central Asian elites tend to be pro-Chinese while anti-China sentiments are rampant among people who see no advantage in the investments. The lack of local employment opportunities in Chinese-funded infrastructure projects has been a constant cause of concern. Along with this, border settlements made by Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have been questioned for ceding land to the Chinese under pressure from Beijing. The counterargument by Kazakh authorities claimed that these were useless tracts of land which were uncultivable and had no mineral reserves. This faced opposition from critics like Murat Auezov and his democratic platform *Azamat* in Kazakhstan, who along with others like Olzhas Suleimenov and the anti-nuclear Nevada Semipalatinsk movement and other ecological movements like *Tabigat* questioned the border agreements and settlement of issues like the sharing of water from cross border rivers, the Ili and Irtysh.²⁶ The Chinese Question has in recent times become an economic one where Kazakh economic interest groups in the metallurgical and agricultural sectors have petitioned for the protection of the social interest of workers engaged by Chinese firms. Concerns have also been raised about local textile and weaving industries that have suffered in competition with Chinese products and about the drain of resources like minerals and gas. While largely unstructured, the opposition has extended to issues like migration where the immigration of Chinese workers on the borders has raised concerns.²⁷

The post-pandemic context was also affected by global concerns around the withdrawal of American troops from the neighbourhood and apprehensions about increasing Russian influence, followed by the fallouts of the Russia-Ukraine conflict impacting the region as a whole but also bilateral relations among individual states. The Russia-Ukraine conflict has been the

most definitive incident to influence the course of developments in post-pandemic Central Asia with the conflict impacting what had been worst hit by the pandemic, the economy. Instability in the global economy, and unstable prices for oil and agricultural produce meant concerns about inflation. Russian ban on the export of Ukrainian grain to members of the Eurasian Economic Union further exacerbated these concerns. There was some recognition by Russia that excessive pressure on the region, given the state of the economy, would be counterproductive. The states, for instance, were not required to recognise the two provinces of Donetsk and Luhansk or show support for the Russian “special operations” but enough that they remained neutral and not supply weapons and equipment to Ukraine which states like Kazakhstan suspended almost immediately. However, to a very significant extent, there has been Central Asian support for Ukrainian sovereignty among the people and this has irked Russia even though the governments have shown reduced tolerance for anti-war propaganda and negative media reports of the conflict.

This balance, while fragile, however, could not endure the Russian announcement of partial mobilisation, forcing the Central Asian states to take a more decisive stance. Mobilisation caused two problems for the region. With the announcement in Russia, large numbers of Russians began to cross borders into neighbouring states, and it is estimated that in the first week, as many as one hundred thousand arrived in Kazakhstan alone.²⁸ On the other hand, Central Asian migrants in Russia were encouraged to join the army with offers of good pay and a fast track citizenship. This caused alarm, as the prospect of armed fighters trained in the Ukraine conflict returning to the region became a possibility. All states issued warnings to nationals that fighting abroad was a criminal offence. This was complicated by the fact that many held dual citizenship which raised legal ambiguities regarding their status as veterans or criminals depending on the state concerned and also regarding their status as prisoners of war in case they were captured.

The large numbers of Russian migrants also raised issues. In an interesting reversal of trends, there has been in recent months, a significant migration of Russian men to Georgia, Armenia, and the Central Asian states with the Russian announcement of a compulsory military draft for men in the course of the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. For decades the movement used to be in the reverse with Central Asian men travelling to Russia and Moscow for work. As the movement of Russians was restricted across European borders, the significance of the open Eurasian Economic Union borders became apparent. Since the beginning of the war, thousands of Russians had already inundated states like Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. The announcement of the compulsory draft exacerbated it with chaos at the Kazakh-Russian borders and cities flooded with *relokanty* that posed problems for the locals.²⁹ The migration narrative was reversed when local landlords evicted Kazakh families for affluent Russian tenants and local workers were replaced with skilled Russian migrants. While the scale of this displacement is yet to be quantified, this has polarised local societies.

Most sympathise with the Russian migrants on a personal level but are wary of Putin’s future actions. Those more accommodating are being accused

of colonial mentality and the fact that for years the reception of Central Asian workers in Russia has been less than welcoming. Government positions have been more restrained in balancing traditional relations with Russia with support for the migrants. Most have declared that as signatories to the CIS, they would need to extradite Russian nationals if they were on the international wanted lists. There is also the understanding that this is a short-term migration and that eventually the migrants will relocate to other regions within the former Soviet space. However, the recent US warnings that Kazakh banks and companies would face sanctions if they were found to be aiding Russian individuals and companies by helping circumvent sanctions and getting access to dual-use technology, has meant that the “financial services companies have said that it will not, as of April 27, assist Russians and Belarusians in trading on the KASE in non-Kazakh tenge-denominated securities issued by foreign companies.”³⁰ However, in a move that is being noted as a “deferral” to the Russian President, all five Central Asian Presidents attended the Victory Day Parade in Moscow on May 9, 2023. For most, it was a last-minute decision and a change from 2022 when none of them had attended. There are also stricter residency rules being implemented in states like Kazakhstan, with undocumented persons being allowed to stay for a maximum of ninety days.³¹ In states like Uzbekistan, this is restricted to fifteen days without relevant papers.

This recent migration has come at a time when the maelstrom of domestic and international conundrums including the January 2022 Street protests in Kazakhstan, and spiralling public violence was firmly controlled by a combination of domestic and Russian troops garnered under the auspices of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Kazakhstan is therefore in an unsettled state. Economic and political uncertainties loom on the horizon. Probably no country is experiencing greater anxiety about the Ukrainian conflict and the deterioration of EU-Russian relations. Both subjects threatened to reduce some of the pillars on which the Kazakh President built independent Kazakhstan. The country’s economic sovereignty is in question and there is a general impression that Astana now is an unwilling participant in the Eurasian integration process with the recognition that changing course will not be easy. In Kazakhstan apprehensions about the possibility of Russian aggression is acute and there is a history of ultranationalist Russian sentiments about northern Kazakhstan. The Russian reaction and the arguments used to question the Ukrainian borders were seen by many as being those that could be used to justify a similar intervention on Kazakh territory. In fact, northern Kazakhstan has been as present in Russian ultranationalist rhetoric as the Ukrainian territory. This is part of the reason why the economic integration with Russia arouses suspicion among significant sections of the Kazakh population.

Being aware of such reactions in a televised interview with a local channel *Khabar* on August 26, 2014, the then President of Kazakhstan Nazarbayev said, “If the rules set forth in the agreement are not followed, Kazakhstan has the right to withdraw from the Eurasian Economic Union. I have said this before and I am saying this again. Kazakhstan will not be part of organi[s]ations that poses a threat to our independence.”³² Apprehensions are not unfounded as Moscow’s immediate response showed. On August 28, 2014,

in response to a question at the *Nasbi* youth nationalist movement, President Putin questioned the historical legitimacy of Kazakhstan as a state, insinuating that it was a “Soviet error” and indicating that an overwhelming majority of the Kazakh population was committed to the strong relations with Russia and staying within the Russian sphere (*Russki mir*). However, he did not clarify where the conviction about the will of the majority came from. 24 per cent of Kazakh citizens are ethnic Russians, concentrated in the north of the country that shares a border with Russia. Till date, Kazakh Russians have little interest in secession, and it was generally assumed that they are well integrated within the new Kazakh state. At that point, the Kazakh Government opted for a discrete response and announced the celebration of the 550th anniversary of the Kazakh state in 2015. However, events in Ukraine have indicated the capacity of inter-ethnic issues to divide society.

It is in this context that the fact that for the first time in thirty years, the CSTO led by Russia had been called to action at the request of the Kazakh President is significant particularly because he then publicly acknowledged its role in restoring order. This raised questions both about Kazakh sovereignty and whether civil unrest in one part of a country, fuelled by rising energy prices warranted action that could be called upon only in case of armed external aggression. The protests were interesting in that there was no political party or platform behind the mobilisation of the people who gathered to protest fuel and commodity prices to begin with and then moved on to demand the removal of the corrupt government. There were no banners, no leaders leading the protests, no symbol of resistance and was spontaneous heterogenous street activism closer to the Gezi Park protests than the Colour Revolutions familiar to the region. Anti-elitist and anti-establishment to begin with they suddenly became violent and a target for harsh reprisals. Following the restoration of order, President Tokayev called for the installation of a revamped political system for what he termed *Jana Kazakhstan* or New Kazakhstan which would reflect the voices of the people more effectively. The first anniversary of the clashes coincided with the realisation that the proposed changes were largely on paper. In reality, any individual or group critical of the government stood a very slim chance of entry into the political space. And it is still the elite leadership and not the voting public who determine whether a person continues to hold his legislative position despite several allegations of serious crimes against his close family politicians like Zhiguli Dayrabayev can hold on to their posts in the newly elected Kazakh Parliament.³³ Despite changes in leadership and relative progress towards greater responsiveness to public concerns in some states like Kyrgyzstan, authoritarian tendencies remained in place.

The sweeping reforms implemented by President Japarov, most notably a constitutional change that reverted to the Presidential form of government, which had existed in Kyrgyzstan before 2011 and his disregard for the rule of law has meant that his once popular image as a reformer has been brought into question. Japarov had risen to power based on his support for the nationalisation of the Kumtor gold mines and the protests and demonstrations that were organised for nationalising the mines. The mines account for about 12.4 per cent of the state GDP making the making ownership by Canadian

Centerra Gold a point of contention in the state.³⁴ Chinese ownership of mines like Chatkal has also led to protests against exploitative mine extraction and Japarov's support for these demonstrations led to his popularity. Along with this, his agenda to deal with corruption in the bureaucracy and induce them to donate money had created a support base that had allowed him to come to power as a populist leader. Given that Kyrgyz's economic situation had suffered during the pandemic with a devalued currency and an external debt that meant that a large part of the GDP had to be used for debt payments these populist moves led to acceptance of his style of governance. However, his inability to tackle real issues of governance and border clashes with Tajikistan for instance in Batken in April 2021 that led to over fifty deaths raised questions about his performance in other areas like debt reduction as well. Japarov's success was based on a popular understanding that the Kyrgyz system was so mired in corruption that the only way to rescue it would be through a strong leader backed by popular support who would overhaul the system even with a temporary disregard for the rule of law. It was believed that once this was achieved the former system based on the rule of law would be restored. However, Japarov's recent actions against any criticism from civil society and his attempts to control the narrative in the mass media have raised questions about his real intentions. His inability to navigate the pandemic, economic and border crisis could well signal another mass protest.³⁵ Japarov's anti-elitist stance and his insistence that he belonged to the common man and was keen on addressing their issues had become critical in his rise as a populist leader. The waning of this image could well signal a return to the parliamentary form or the emergence of an alternative leader.

Conclusion

Limited largely by the restricted issues that they addressed, socio-economic difficulties, electoral fraud, restrictions on rights or endemic corruption, popular protests in the region have largely failed to stimulate political change to any significant extent. Regime survival has been ensured through a process of domestic political structures, patterns of global interaction and strategies against the diffusion of the rhetoric of protests. Highly sensitive to the possibility of change most protests have been curbed by pre-emptive actions to ensure regime survival. The protests in the region in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, in Kazakhstan among oil company workers in Zhanaozen, and in Tashkent demanding compensation for houses that had been demolished, remained largely restricted to those directly affected and rarely involved any political leadership or even large segments of the youth. Rarely did they expand into becoming national issues that affected the states as a whole. In the exceptional instance that they did, like the protests in Kazakhstan in 2022, they were challenged by a combination of domestic and external forces. The role of external support for the regimes has also impacted the lack of success of popular protests as there has been support for the stability that the ruling regimes ensured in a region that has been geopolitically identified as unstable

and prone to conflict. On the other hand, given the limited economic potential of the region, there has been reduced interest from the global community in the domestic events that have been managed with Russian support. The possibility of change in the collective consciousness is also limited by paternalistic social norms and supported by institutionalised social structures like the mahalla. Yet, as Erica Marat argues, regimes based on elite networks rather than institutions are inherently unstable creating possibilities of protests given the growing capacity for self-organisation in the region.³⁶ All of these leave questions about the possibility of regime change and the impact of social mobilisation in the future open to various possibilities. Given the history of previous experiences of protests, one is left to grapple with the prospect that these may portend the nature of mobilisation for the future as well where strategies to contain popular demands ensure regime stability.

Notes

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