
by

Martin C. Spechler

**Introduction.** Uzbekistan has had an authoritarian regime with a super-presidential government almost since independence in 1991. Ever since then, Islam Karimov has been president, re-elected without meaningful opposition on three occasions and likely to rule indefinitely without a constitutional replacement. Competing personalities and parties have been eliminated, exiled, or prevented from exercising any public opposition. Suspected revolutionaries have been dealt with brutally and punished, usually without a fair trial. Many younger Uzbekistanis, especially those who have visited the West, are aware of and embarrassed by their country’s poor human rights record and reputation.

The country’s reputation, never positive, has deteriorated further this year, as a result of the Andijan massacre. Karimov rose--if that is the word--to no. 5 on the “worst dictators” in recent *Parade* listing by David Wallechinsky. Only the Turkmenbashi joined Karimov among the top 20! Meanwhile, Kazakhstan has improved its image, thanks in part to large ads in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, as well as encomiums from high U.S. Administration visitors. This favorable publicity for the oil-rich country of Kazakhstan came despite a downward trend with respect to

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1 Prepared for the CESS conference, Ann Arbor, Michigan, September 24, 2006. Martin Spechler is professor of economics, IUPUI, and faculty affiliate of the Inner Asian and Uralic National Resource Center, Indiana University, Bloomington, which has supported this presentation. All opinions expressed are those of the author alone, not necessarily those of any sponsoring agency.

2 In 2002 the President’s term was extended to 2007.
democratization and freedom.³ In this essay I will argue that these shifting public
appraisals are not well anchored in reality. Little has changed lately in human rights
observance in these countries, and they’re all deplorable in their own ways.

Even so, Uzbekistan (and the other Central Asian republics) is no totalitarian
state, and its degree of freedom is better than under Soviet rule. The present essay
examines Uzbekistan’s record in the human rights area; it will show an uneven respect for
essential freedoms and a pattern of variation over time which correlates with
Uzbekistan’s economic policy and success and failures over the 15 years of
independence. Anyone concerned with improving basic freedoms in Central Asia must
surely need to take these variations into account when judging the possibilities and
targets of outside influence on these newly independent countries.

**Economic background.** Some of the basic indicators for Uzbekistan and four
other countries of Central Asia are presented in the Table. Overall Uzbekistan is one of
the poorer economies of the region, if judged at purchasing power parity conversion
rates, but relative to its GDP level just before independence, it has expanded the most.⁴

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³ Jeannette Goehring and Amanda Schnetzer, eds., *Nations in Transit 2005* (New York: Freedom House, 2006). Kazakhstan’s summary “democracy score” has deteriorated every year since 1997 and stands at 6.29 (1 is best; 7 is worst) for 2005. Uzbekistan stands at 6.43, having improved slightly last year. Kyrgyzstan is at 5.64, having been as good as 4.65 in 1997. Tajikistan is at 5.79, and Turkmenistan, 6.93.

⁴ This ranking would persist even if earlier, somewhat higher, estimates of the World Bank had been used. Indeed, the figure for Turkmenistan is extremely dubious and subject to revision. Angus Maddison gives GDP per capita at purchasing power parity for 1998 was $4809 for Kazakhstan, $2042 for Kyrgyzstan, $830 for Tajikistan, $1723 for Turkmenistan, and $3296 for Uzbekistan. Angus Maddison, *World Economy*, [citation to be completed], pp. 183-85. These differ considerably from the World Bank estimates.
## Basic Economic Data for Central Asian States

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<sup>a</sup> Includes industry.

<sup>b</sup> 2003 figure; no data presented for 2004. The IMF estimated growth in 2004 as 7.5%; the government figure of 21.4% for 2004 is widely regarded as unreliable.

<sup>c</sup> 1998 figure.

<sup>d</sup> 2000 figure.

Note: The EBRD, which adjusts official figures, gives 2004 GDP figures (with 1989=100) as Kazakhstan 103, Kyrgyzstan 80, Tajikistan 69, Turkmenistan 112, and Uzbekistan 113. Transition Report Update, May 2005, 13. With the exception of Tajikistan, these figures are roughly consistent with the above levels projected to 2004.

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True, oil-rich Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan have displayed more impressive rates of growth during the last few years owing to their export of natural gas and oil (or leases to explore for it). But neither Kazakhstan nor Turkmenistan has yet achieved the GDP it recorded in 1989 at the very end of the Soviet Union. This paradox can be partially explained by the fact that the figures above are at purchasing power parity, which adjusts for the cost of living. According to the CIS statistical committee, Kazakhstan had achieved 106.2% of its 1991 level by 2003, while Uzbekistan registered 112.3% of its real GDP in that last pre-independence year. No other CIS country exceeded Uzbekistan’s recovery mark. [www.cisstat](http://www.cisstat).
explained by the deep “transitional depression” suffered by those two countries during the early 1990s. Both Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan lost a great deal of their manufacturing base with the breakup of the Soviet market. Along with Kyrgyzstan, the agricultural sector in Kazakhstan has suffered from organizational disruption, environmental disaster, and lack of credit and cheap inputs.

These productive sectors, along with services, provide more jobs per dollar of output than does the energy sector. Much of the new wealth of the petroleum-rich states has accrued to the well-connected or entrepreneurial strata of these countries, perhaps one-fifth to one-quarter of the entire population, at most. These fortunate people are concentrated in the capitals and largest cities. Consequently, the petroleum-dependent countries all have high reported Gini coefficients and high shares of incomes going to the top ten percent of recipients, some of whom have enriched themselves illegally. This confirms the picture of substantial inequality.6

**Economic freedom.** As adopted by the United Nations in 1948 in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, every person has these important economic freedoms: (1) (2) the right to hold, use, and dispose of real or movable property ¶17, (2) the right to enjoy income, spend or invest, limited only by fair and reasonable taxes, as implied in ¶23 and ¶25, (3) right to work in any trade, place, and concern one chooses, either as an employee voluntarily hired or as a self-employed individual or group ¶23 and (4) the right to education ¶26.

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A neo-liberal version of the first two of these freedoms has been measured for many years by *The Wall Street Journal* and the Heritage Foundation in its yearly *Index of Economic Freedom*. This well-known publication emphasizes freedom from government interference, while passing over the degree of positive freedom, including equal opportunity to be educated and to thrive and exercise one’s capacities, matters rightly stressed by Amartya Sen. Nevertheless, the *Index* ratings—from 5 for worst to 1 for best—are relevant here. In the latest edition, Uzbekistan receives 3.91, second worst in Central Asia but still in the same ordinal class (“mostly unfree”) as Tajikistan (3.76), and Kazakhstan (3.35). Kyrgyzstan (2.99) barely qualifies as “mostly free,” and dictatorial Turkmenistan (4.04) is judged “repressed.” Interestingly, all the Central Asian states have improved in their economic freedom ratings recently. All except Turkmenistan receive exactly the same rating for defense of property rights (4 or “low”). Corruption, lack of independent judges, and non-enforcement of contracts are endemic in this region. The following commentary, quoted from the Economist Intelligence Unit, is rather typical for the Central Asian area:

“Observance of contracts…is poor and getting worse…Little progress has been made…on developing an independent judiciary…[Corruption] remains widespread, and the judiciary views itself more as an arm of the executive than as an enforcer of contracts or guardian of fundamental rights…[L]egislation severely curtails private land ownership.”

This was the entry for Kazakhstan, a particular favorite of Western investors for obvious reasons. That country is described in the introduction to the ratings as “politically stable and tolerant,” where “violations of civil rights and restrictions on the media” have been reported “in the past.” On the other hand, in Uzbekistan, “the Karimov government

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routinely violates basic human rights and has an estimated 6,500 political and religious prisoners in custody.” The neo-liberal authors of the report can hardly be accused of excessive sympathy for Uzbekistan.

Analyzing further the difference between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan in the Index shows that the difference of 0.66 points can largely be explained by Kazakhstan’s growth in the financial sector, a matter of importance for foreign investors and well-off Kazakhstani businessmen. Kazakhstan has had a convertible currency since the mid-1990s, while Uzbekistan returned to a convertible soum only in 2003. Regulation is also somewhat lighter in Kazakhstan than in Uzbekistan, but income taxes are judged “moderate” in the latter, while Kazakhs pay “low” income taxes, owing to the government’s abundant oil sources of revenue. I would conclude that for ordinary Kazakhstanis and Uzbekistanis—and other Central Asians—the difference in economic freedom is at most modest.

Uzbekistan was not always downgraded for lagging economic reform, as it typically is these days by the EBRD and other international financial institutions, on account of lagging privatization, excessive interference, and corruption. By 1995-96 Uzbekistan had completed its first round of market reforms. International agencies were reasonably satisfied. According to the World Bank structural reform index, Uzbekistan’s rating rose from 0.3 to 0.57 in 1993-95, with 1.0 as the ideal. But like most of its neighbors, Uzbekistan experienced setbacks during the rest of the 1990s. Uzbekistan’s World Bank rating fell off to around 0.50 by 1999. At that latter date Russia was at 0.64,

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8 2006 Index, p. 399. [emphasis added]
Kazakhstan at 0.72, Kyrgyzstan at 0.79, and Belarus at 0.37.⁹ The cause of this widespread retreat in Central Asia was over-optimism and monetary over-expansion, resulting in real appreciation of the post-Soviet currencies. In Russia, this was to lead to the 1998 crisis. In Uzbekistan, high cotton and gold prices early on, which induced government spending increases, led to a loss of foreign reserves and a build up of foreign debt. As we shall see, Uzbekistan has experienced seven good years and seven lean years since independence. During the good years—1992-96 and 2002-05—both economic freedoms and human rights improved.

More important than banks for ordinary Uzbekistanis are conditions for workers. Though residency permits are required for metropolitan Tashkent, in practice Uzbekistanis move freely from village to town or abroad.¹⁰ A permit for Tashkent reportedly costs $100 in bribes, for prosperous Navoi considerably less. Labor market reforms enacted in 1995-96 created a liberal set of rights for employers to hire and fire at their discretion, replacing the Soviet practice of effective “job rights.” The minimum wage is negligible, and pension payments, while nearly 40% on employer and employee, are required for only 11% of the workforce. After a probationary period, firing workers is still not difficult, though severance pay of two months’ wages is due if a contract is terminated. Unions are all centrally controlled and have little effectiveness beyond health and safety concerns. Special protections are extended by law, however, to pregnant

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¹⁰ School children and some peasants are often coerced to work in the fields during cotton harvests. Kazakhstan also requires residency permits for Almaty and Astana, and those Kazakhs—an estimated 70,000 to 100,000-- too poor to bribe officials live in shanty settlements just outside these cities, until police move in to clear them out for new construction. *The Economist*, August 5, 2006, p. 39.
women and the handicapped. Many Uzbekistanis participate in the informal sector, without apparent systemic inference. People are free to spend their incomes, sometimes frivolously as in all free societies, and taxes on the person are moderate. Enrollment rates at all levels of education continue to be fairly high, though one must now pay more than under the Soviet system. Many people have the impression that quality has deteriorated during the last fifteen years, however.

For most Uzbeks, conditions during the lean years of retreat (1996-2003) were not favorable. Various administrative measures, like a 50% surrender requirement for hard currency proceeds, made exports very unprofitable and imports hard to obtain. Tariffs were raised—and sometimes collected. Banks were enlisted to register and in fact to regulate imports to prevent over-invoicing; withdrawals of foreign currency, even for NGO’s, became difficult to impossible. Authoritarian policies and bureaucratism grew during this phase, as prices became less meaningful and rational. Personal incomes in real terms declined about 1% per year on average, according to internal estimates. Profitability of the industrial sector actually declined during 1996-2000. Employment in the small- and medium-sized enterprise sector decreased by nearly half between 1995 and 1998,¹¹ and agriculture operated at a loss throughout. With police checkpoints along the roads, transportation of perishable fruits, vegetables, and meat to the cities often requires

bribes, and sale in Tashkent bazaars must be through the mafia-controllers there, but somehow food gets through.

During this period of retreat, real wages for most workers did not increase, owing in part to urban migration of secondary school graduates seeking employment. Towards the end of the period of inconvertibility, as the government was trying anti-inflation measures to prepare for a free rate for the soum, wages and pensions were not paid out regularly. As is common in Central Asia, people more often had to rely on the support of family and friends to meet material needs. Wage arrears led to several large strikes, unreported except by word of mouth. Three major work stoppages broke out in industrial plants in the sensitive Fergana Valley and elsewhere over wages not paid for the last six months. Such strikes, or any public demonstration of discontent, had been rare in Uzbekistan, thanks to a tough police force and a notoriously fatalistic and passive population. But one cannot repress a whole crowd in such places. Eventually, the government caved in and paid the workers. With cash withdrawals choked off, other plants had to distribute pay in chits or in kind. Newly intrusive and arbitrary regulations of bazaar traders sparked near riots in several parts of the country. Much more than any deprivation of political rights, these material abuses—along with corruption and arbitrariness of officials—are what are behind popular complaints.

Government figures indicate increased inequality between the well-kept capital and the western provinces, as well as between moderately prosperous cities and the impoverished countryside (where 60% of Uzbeks live). In the village (kishlak) people survive on subsidized bread, milk, fruit, and occasional meat. New clothes are usually beyond their reach. Discontent over economic hardship has not yet surfaced on any
scale, however. The suicide bombers of July 30, 2004, presumably Islamic militants opposed to the trials of earlier bombers, left no programmatic demands. Besides the procuracy, the other targets were the American and Israeli embassies. Though perceived economic hardship in the country may tempt the terrorists, their intent can hardly have anything to do with “human rights,” as understood in the West.

**Language policy and education.** The language laws of 1992 and 1995, as well as practice since then, have been fairly tolerant of non-Uzbek languages. Official documents can be in Russian, and unlike Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, no tests in Uzbek are required for official appointments. The Law on the State Language does say that managers are obliged to learn enough Uzbek to fulfill their responsibilities on the job. (¶ 4), though implementation was to take up to eight years. While personal documents are to be Uzbek, they carry a Russian translation. Gradually hours devoted to Uzbek in public schools have increased, at the expense of Russian. But the scarcity of trained teachers and textbooks has slowed the process of inculcating the Uzbek language, particularly in non-Uzbek schools. Poor salaries for teachers undoubtedly encourage corruption at all levels of education in the Republic, as it does elsewhere in Central Asia. From very early on, because of the costs to a country with severe economic problems,

“Uzbekistan’s government has shown far greater enthusiasm for implementing symbolic

12 A spontaneous demonstration in Kokand on November 1, 2004, occurred when tax officials tried to confiscate goods at the bazaar, but the crowd dispersed when the mayor promised to put off the offending regulation. Similar unrest was reported unrest in Jizzakh. RFE/RL, November 2, 2004.

13 Language policy in Kazakhstan has been moderated by the continued presence of Russian-medium schools, cost of replacing textbooks and teachers, and President Nazarbaev’s realization that Russian remains the lingua franca of the Kazakhstani state. Fierman reports “few sanctions for failure to comply with language legislation.” William Fierman, “Language and Education in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan: Kazakh-Medium Instruction in Urban Schools,” *The Russian Review*, vol. 65 (January 2006), p.112.
over substantive change.\textsuperscript{14} In Samarkand many registered “Uzbeks” are Tajiks by ancestry and loyalty, but they speak Uzbek fluently, I am told. Some materials in Tajik for teachers are available, but literature printed in Kazakhstan or Tajikistan is not.

A switch to an altered Latin alphabet (instead of the Arabic script used until the 1920s) has proceeded. While geographical towns are supposed to be in Uzbek, individuals have the right to render their own names according to “national-historic traditions.” In 1997, my neighborhood in Tashkent was still “Druzhba narodov,” though since about 2000, it has been renamed “Khalklar dostligi,” both meaning “friendship of the peoples.” But teaching of Russian (indeed, of Korean and even Armenian) continues. Broadcasting of Russian TV programs, especially in Navoi and other towns with large russophone populations, has been increased. Though Uzbektelecom is the sole provider of telephone connections within and outside the country, cellphone and internet activity is common, despite attempts by the government to monitor communications.

**Religious policy.** It is sometimes said that President Islam Karimov merely restores the Soviet method of controlling Islam. That is only partly true. Besides embracing Islam as the Uzbek national religion, he made the haj, took his oath on the Koran, and allowed the opening of 5000 new mosques and madressas in the country.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{14}William Fierman, “Independence and the Declining Priority of Language Law Implementation in Uzbekistan,” in Yaacov Ro’i, ed., *Muslim Eurasia: Conflicting Legacies* (London: Frank Cass, 1995), p. 211. Quite a few residents of Tashkent and other major cities have satellite television reception to English, Russian, or Turkish channels, and internet connections are only ineffectively blocked by the government.

\textsuperscript{15}Quite a few were built with Saudi money and may promote “Wahhabism,” a puritanical version of Islam not favored by Uzbek regime. At first, aid from Saudi Arabia was permitted, but more lately the “Wahhabi” orientation of that assistance has been resisted and foreign contacts with Islamic figures are under surveillance.
Attendance on Fridays is large and uneventful; sermons on personal and ethical themes are encouraged. The Muslim Spiritual Board and the muftiate are controlled, it’s true, but Islamic studies have been supported. The Shah-i-Zinda burial complex in Samarkand was returned to Muslim authorities.\(^{16}\) Owing to the adverse policy of the Uzbekistan’s Communist regime, however, there are not now sufficient trained imams to teach the tolerant (Hanafi) and Sufi forms of Islam. The regime tolerates non-official Islam throughout the country as long as dissenting Muslims don’t get involved in politics.\(^{17}\) Men with beards and women with more cover than the traditional colorful scarves are sometimes harassed. The mahallah neighborhood councils are used by the authorities to monitor local activities, preventing mobilization by Islamists or other trouble-makers. According to one informant, there are secret police informants in every official mosque. Quite a few have been closed recently because of suspicious activities. According to U.S. State Department estimates, about 5000-5500 persons are in Uzbekistan’s prisons accused of religion-motivated extremism or secular opposition. This represents a decline from the previous estimate of 7000, owing to amnesties and fewer arrests.\(^{18}\)

\(^{16}\) Martha Brill Olcott, *Central Asia’s Second Chance* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment, 2005), p. 153. Olcott writes that Shah-i-Zinda was “built around the tenth century under Tamerlane.” Note 91, p. 321. Since Tamerlane was born around 1336, this must have been a miracle. Unfortunately, Olcott’s hastily edited book is filled with numerous questionable, unsubstaintiated, and extreme statements both of fact and of interpretation, particularly about Uzbekistan, which she apparently knows less well than Kazakhstan.

\(^{17}\) Eric McGlinchy, “Islamic Leaders in Uzbekistan,” *Asia Policy*, no. 1 (January 2006). People continue to be detained for suspected religious extremism, sometimes on flimsy evidence, such as praying five times a day. *Hearings, 2004*, p.12.

\(^{18}\) *Nations in Transition*, p. 746 [check this]. Use of torture and capital punishment has been limited in the last few years in Uzbekistan, according to this report.
The accepted view is that Sufi Islam tends to reduce radicalism, even in the settled areas of the Fergana Valley. Some Kyrgyz and Uzbek observers attribute the rise in Islamist activity to foreign meddling, missionaries, and activists for extremist organizations. In Sufi belief, there is no difference among Christians, Muslims, and Jews as believers in the One God.

Broad tolerance of “native” non-Islamic religions, including Judaism and Orthodox Christianity, has been noted by many visitors and journalists. Baptist and Jehovah’s Witnesses missionaries are not welcome, and required registration of Protestant congregations is made difficult. This would appear to be a violation of ¶18 of the Universal Declaration and has led to criticisms of several Central Asian states by evangelical co-religionists in the West.

**Political democracy.** This is of course the weakest element in Uzbekistan’s human rights record, as well as Kazakhstan’s. Truly opposition parties have been essentially disenfranchised since the 1991 elections, a violation of ¶19, which requires periodic and genuine elections. Various parties of farmers, independents, and so forth are all pro-presidential and can be depended upon to endorse the President Karimov’s program in the Olij Majlis. As in Kazakhstan, Islamist parties are not permitted in

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21 This view is supported in the Koran: “We believe in God, and in what has been revealed to us, and in what had been sent down to Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and their offspring, to Moses and to Jews and to all other prophets by their Lord. We make no distinction between them, and we submit Him and obey.” Sura 3:34. Other, later suras, qualify this equality somewhat.
Uzbekistan. Small meetings of unregistered political parties are permitted. The Presidential apparat dominates policymaking, and non-Uzbeks are excluded from the very top positions (above deputy minister).

After the Georgian revolution of November, 2003, which America had seemed to promote, President Karimov began to limit democratic reforms. In early 2005 Freedom House was suspended for six months and has now been forced to leave; the BBC, IREX, the Eurasia Foundation, and Internews were forced out. Eurasia Foundation was accused of “encouraging NGOs to pursue democratic changes,” instead of “financial assistance for market reforms.” Eurasia disputes the charges. In March of this year, Sanjar Umarov, head of the opposition Sunshine Uzbekistan coalition, was sentenced to ten years in prison and a large fine for a variety of “economic crimes,” including speculation in gasoline, foreign currency, etc.  

The situation elsewhere in Central Asia is not much better. Kazakhstan’s 2004 parliamentary elections showed some formal progress. Electronic ballots were introduced, for example. Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan, composed of members of the elite, was permitted to register, (but now has been forced to disband). Evidently, as in Putin’s Russia, the independent business elite are not permitted to enter politics. Other Kazakhstani opposition parties were denied registration altogether on various “technical” grounds. Independent media critical of President Nazarbaev’s government were harassed by lawsuits and threats in the run-up to the election, according to Human Rights Watch. So despite some improvement over past practice, the OSCE described those elections as “falling short of international standards of free, fair and transparent.”  

More recently the opposition leader Altnbek Sarsenbaev, co-chair of Naghyz Ak Zhol (True Bright Path) and influential member of the united opposition movement (For a Just Kazakhstan-FJK) was found shot to death execution-style near Almaty along with his bodyguard and driver. More than 2000 people joined his funeral processing through the center of the former capital on February 15th. Sersenbaev was an elder of the Alban, a part of the Elder Horde, one of the three great divisions of Kazakh society. FJK leader Zharmakhan Tuyakbai has called this murder “political terror.” Not long afterwards, a big reward was offered, and the arrest and confession of the top administrative official of the Senate announced-- to the disbelief of many.

Direct criticism of the President, unheard of in public in Uzbekistan, seems increasingly common in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. President Nazarbaev, who can rule until 2013, clearly wants to persuade the OSCE to grant Kazakhstan its presidency in 2009 and will make as many cosmetic changes as necessary (and run as many full-page ads in The New York Times) to achieve this prestigious prize. True, as in Uzbekistan and

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24 The Economist, February 18, 2006, p. 44. Another opposition leader, Zamanbek Nurkadilov, a former mayor of Almaty, was found dead last November. He was also a member of Alban.

25 After relating the arrests and trials of former officials M. Ablyazov and G. Zhakqiyanov in 2003 on charges of abuse of office, Olcott writes, “The fact that these people [Ak Zhol and some candidates of the Democratic Movement of Kazakhstan and Communists] continue to survive and play a role in Kazakh political life makes it clear that Kazakhstan is not an authoritarian country. Although Kazakhstan is certainly not a democracy, its people enjoy a large measure of personal freedom…” She continues, “Although he is a dictator…the Kazakh president also recognizes there are restraints on his power.” p. 143 [emphasis added] To my mind, particularly in light of exiles and murders of prominent politicians, one would certainly be justified in calling Kazakhstan an authoritarian country, like Uzbekistan and several other countries in the region. None of them, however, is totalitarian in the sense of Friedrich and Brzezinski’s classic definition.
Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhs enjoy a measure of personal freedom, even extending to criticizing the President in private.

In Kyrgyzstan, parliamentary elections of early 2005 brought protests from candidates prevented from running. The first protesters were reportedly relatives and friends of these candidates, organized in rural areas. The Supreme Court invalidated the election. Government region buildings in the Osh oblast were the scene of sit-ins. Then they were taken, a process soon repeated in Bishkek. While the costs of using force were low, the government did not use it, and later the international pressure increased. President Askar Akaev resigned April 4, 2005. The political situation in Kyrgyzstan has not stabilized as yet. Early last year the new premier Feliks Kulov says twenty-two criminal gangs are active in that country. His government remains at odds with the parliament.

In Tajikistan things have not improved much for the last five years, except for prospective Russian investments in the hydropower and aluminum industries. Since signing a peace accord with the Islamist United Tajik Opposition, the government of President Imamali Rahmonov has neither extended democratic processes nor succeeded in overcoming the regional and class income gaps in the country. Registration of opposition parties is blocked, and the pro-government People’s Democratic Party continues to rule, monopolize the media, and harass the opposition. Corruption and widespread poverty in the southwest allow increased smuggling of illegal drugs from Afghanistan on their way to Russia and Europe.

In Turkmenistan only the failing health of the megalomaniacal dictator can provide relief from arbitrary rule, criminal activity, and diversion of the country’s natural riches to the prestige projects of the Turkmenbashi Himself.

In sum, all these countries retain their authoritarian character. Freedom House rates Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan as 6 (from 1 to 7 worst), Kazakhstan as 6.5, and Uzbekistan 6.75 in 2005, with one-man rule in Turkmenistan earning a perfect 7.27

**Freedom of the press**, as required by ¶ 19 of the Universal Declaration. There is no prior censorship any more in Uzbekistan, but journalists know their limits, unless and until those limits shift. Uzbek television and the semi-official press continue Uzbekistan’s self-congratulation, though there has been a noticeable, if still modest, rise in frankness. The real situation is not reported, except on Russian television and internet sites, which regularly also feature highly critical broadsides from dissidents residing abroad. Uzbekistan suffers from incomparable secrecy laws. Data routinely available in other post-Soviet countries, not to mention the West, are hidden here. The list of secret data is indeed codified in a law—but the law itself is secret!

During 2003, at the beginning of the thaw I mentioned earlier, a somewhat wider range of issues could be discussed in Uzbek newspapers, which are not widely read, probably because of their cost and the soporific nature of incessant praise of the regime. In 2004 the OSCE mission remarked that local newspapers and television were making public information about candidates and parties allowed to contest the parliamentary election. Foreign journalists usually barred, however. More recently, the long-time editor of Pravda Vostoka, the old Russian-language paper from Soviet times, was dismissed,

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apparently for printing conclusions of a report from the International Business Council to the effect that business conditions in Uzbekistan are unfavorable. A retraction was demanded by the Council of Ministers and President Karimov. Now business conditions are excellent.

**Security of the person.** Without a disinterested investigation, we cannot know even approximately what happened in Andijan in May, 2005, the most serious loss of life in Central Asia the last two years. Media coverage in the West often mentioned only the “hundreds” of casualties from government repression of a peaceful demonstration. This was hardly the whole story. Nevertheless, the summary offered by Margarita Assenova, Executive Director of the Institute for New Democracies and formerly of the Central Asian program Freedom House, strikes me as fair:

“It is likely that Islamic extremist organizations, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and its various offspring, executed the operation. At least some of the insurgents must have received training in terrorist camps abroad; this kind of military operation usually takes careful planning and preparation, reliable intelligence, and recruitment of collaborators. Shortly after midnight on May 13, roughly 50 armed insurgents attacked a police station and a military garrison, seized hundreds of weapons, broke into a high-security jail to release about 600 prisoners, armed the inmates, engaged in a fierce gun battle with officers in the local National Security Service station, took over the municipality headquarters, burned down the local cinema and theater, set cars ablaze, and captured about 20 hostages. According to eye-witness, there were scores of dead, including civilians, before the government deployed security reinforcements to the area. [emphasis added-MCS]

“To secure their no-go territory, the insurgents applied another classic guerrilla tactic, using the civilian population to serve as a human shield while they presented their demands to the government. It may have proved easy to attract the local population to the main town square; peaceful protests against the trail of 23 local businessmen [the Akramists—MCS] had taken place for a week before they were sentenced for religious extremism on May 12. Moreover, the Uzbek population is so frustrated by poor economic conditions, corruption, and incompetent officialdom, that the insurgents could easily rally protesters. …At the end of the tragic day of May 13, when the insurgents pushed the hostages to
the front in order to break out of the cordon established by the government forces around the square, the security units started shooting indiscriminately, killing first the hostages, many insurgents, and scores of civilians.”  

Of course, neither Assenova nor anyone else would excuse the government’s use of live fire against a crowd of civilians, resulting in between 187 and 700 deaths. One should remember, though, that Uzbek troops were employing Soviet-style tactics, which involve use of overwhelming force against opposition, as we have also seen in the Russian Federation response to numerous terrorist attacks in the North Caucasus (Beslan) and even in Moscow. Uzbekistan has not trained its internal forces in less violent tactics against guerrilla warfare or suicide attacks—and it’s hardly likely that they will now get much assistance in this from the West. However, other mob protests—for example, over unreasonable restrictions on the essential bazaars in the country—have been handled with less violence, mere beatings and brief detentions.

Dr. Shirin Akiner, a British researcher with usable Russian and Uzbek language skills, who has visited Central Asia regularly for more than two decades, broadly supports this version of events. Based on an estimate of the number of graves dug in and around Andijan and the number of funeral prayers led, Akiner estimated the death toll was under 200, close to the government figure of 170, rather than the figure reported in the media of 500-1500. Akiner reported that the economic situation in Andijan was

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28 Margarita Assenova, “Uzbekistan Is Running Out of Time,” Internationale Politik, no. 3 (2005), pp. 56-60. On the role of well-prepared Islamists in the uprising, another expert agrees. Vitaly Naumkin, “Uzbekistan’s State Building Fatigue,” The Washington Quarterly, vol. 29, no. 3, p. 134. Naumkin adds that when the long-time governor of Andijon was replaced, the new man began a purge of the 23 businessmen said to belong to the Akramiya group who refused to sell their enterprises to allies of the new governor, Saydullo Begaliev. Jailed, they may have helped finance the armed resistance.

29 Shirin Akiner, “Violence in Andijan,” mimeo, London, June 7, 2005. © S. Akiner. Her visit to Andijan was accompanied by the hokim of the town throughout the day but talked to people alone, too. She also visited several cemeteries and the morgue.
probably better than elsewhere in Uzbekistan, but people complained to her about corrupt local officials, who have to be bribed for many services.

Russia has consistently backed the repression in Andijan. Said Vladimir Putin at his annual news conference on January 31, 2006:

“I do not think these approaches [European culture and values, support for regimes which do not share these values] are incompatible. Moreover, we know better than you what happened in Andijon. We know who, where, and how intensively trained the people who enflamed the situation in Uzbekistan and, specifically, in that town….We don’t need another Afghanistan in Central Asia. We will tread very carefully there. We don’t need revolutions over there, we need an evolution which should lead to the establishment of the values you have mentioned but would not bring about the explosions which we have seen in Andijon.”

Russia regularly extradites alleged Hizb ut-Tahrir “terrorists” to Uzbekistan, according to Sergei Smirnov, first deputy director of Russia’s Federal Security Service. President Karimov responded to the Andijan affairs by lowering taxes and liberalizing small trade. Such concessions to protesters are common in Uzbekistan, as we have already seen.

Uprisings and repression are not new in post-Soviet Uzbekistan. In January, 1992, student demonstrations in Tashkent broke out, probably in support of that city’s leading politician, Shukrulla Mirsaidov. This led to an anti-Karimov opposition movement less than a year after his election. At its beginning that summer, the lethal Tajik civil war also alarmed Karimov and his people, who feared it might spill over the

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30 JRL #30, February 23, 2006. Questioner was an AP journalist, speaking Russian.


border. In this situation they cracked down on dissent until well into 1993. During this period Karimov was able to dispose of Mirsaidov, who had been vice president. Contemporaneously, intervention by Uzbekistan and Russian troops assured the victory of the northern elite along with their Uzbek allies from the south of Tajikistan.

In mid-2004 suicide bombers, both men and women, bombed the police station, the Office of the Prosecutor-General, and the embassies of the United States and of Israel, both highly fortified installations, killing a number of Uzbek guards. Apparently the attacks were sponsored by the IMU, illegal in all of Central Asia as a terrorist organization, not the supposedly non-violent Hizb-u-Tahrir, which is also outlawed everywhere in Central Asia. This was followed some arrests, but pressure by the US prevented a mass crackdown, such as had occurred before. 33

Pressure from outside agencies can work in Central Asia. Several Uzbek informants have told me that they would welcome rhetorical pressure from international agencies, even the USA, on the Uzbek regime. During President Karimov’s visit to Washington, according to diplomatic sources, he was seemingly quite complaisant about the need for reforms, and some of his entourage urged the State Department to toughen the Declaration to be issued on completion of the visit. On the eve of his visit the Independent Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan was allowed to register.

Anyone who visits the national museum in Uzbekistan—which is usually empty and not labeled in any Western language—will notice how eager the authorities are to picture President Karimov greeted by friendly foreign leaders. Acceptance in the UN and other international bodies is obviously very desirable for him. A yearly international

33 *Hearings*, p. 36.
tennis tournament with participants from Mexico, Israel, Russia, and Asia in Tashkent is widely publicized as a sign of acceptance in international society.

The U.S. government has been divided and inconsistent in applying pressure to improve human rights in Central Asia, especially Uzbekistan, which has backed American strategic objectives in the area even before 9/11, and even more so from 2001 through 2005. Here is Rep. Dana Rohrabacher in 2004:

“We are in the middle of a war, and it is a war on radical Islam in which Uzbekistan on the front line. Oftentimes, at war, people’s civil liberties are violated. Now, to be fair about it, Uzbekistan, long before the war on terrorism, was engaged in policies that violated people’s civil liberties. There is no doubt about that, but when we are looking for change in the middle of a conflict situation where we have $2 billion worth of drug money being poured into that region from Afghanistan financing radical Islam, which is our enemy in the war that we are fighting, we have to realize that we have got some complicated decisions to make.”

At the same hearings, Mira R. Richardel, acting assistant secretary of defense for international security policy, characterized US-Uzbek cooperation in the security area as “exceptional.” Six non-commissioned officers are instructing their Uzbek counterparts on military matters, as well as “the rule of law in the military and human rights.” She cited successful cooperation in narcotics and border control, non-proliferation, and was reluctant to see funding cut. Other officials cited new legislation on human trafficking adopted in Uzbekistan. Zeyno Baran, Director of the International Security and Energy Programs at the Nixon Center, testified: “If [the radicals] manage to overthrow the Karimov regime, even through peaceful means, the results could be disastrous for the Uzbek people, the region, and the United States….An Uzbekistan ruled by followers of a

radical Islamist ideology would certainly not improve human rights or democracy, nor would it cooperate with its neighbors or the United States.”36 Baran urged the U.S. to help the few pro-reform people within the Uzbek regime. At the same 2004 Hearings, Assistant Secretary of State Lorne W. Craner testified that the 2002 Strategic Partnership and Cooperation Agreement has led to “some important gains.” He cited doubled assistance for democratic development, including funding of law firm and clinic for human rights law. He mentioned that some independent opposition parties have held national meetings, but did not succeed in registering. He added that an independent team had been allowed to investigate a suspicious death in cooperation with Freedom House. Amnesties have reduced political and religious prisoners to an estimated 5300 to 5800 (though some had been rearrested). Only two independent human rights group registered; OSI not reregistered. Craner asserted that pressure by US Embassy did get all other US-funded NGOs reregistered. Of course, not all was yet well. Even though prior censorship abolished, a new amendment to media law would “encourage self-censorship,” and the Uzbeks had not passed habeas corpus legislation.

According to B. Lynn Pascoe, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, testifying in 2004, there had been “at least on the human rights side …some developments that have been positive.”37 While the practice of beating or otherwise abusing prisoners to obtain confessions has been common, according to State Department reports as late as February 2004, laws on torture have been brought more into conformity with international standards, and dozens of policemen have been prosecuted for violations. Pascoe’s

36 *Hearings, 2004*, p. 33.

testimony made clear that the State Department’s refusal to recertify Uzbekistan for some $18 million in aid was related mostly to lack of progress on electoral democracy. The Defense Department quickly countered by reassuring the Uzbeks that military and security assistance would continue. Even after the Karshi-Khanabad air base had to be terminated, at the request of the Uzbek government, the U.S. Defense Department is continuing various kinds of assistance for non-proliferation, training, and so forth.

In 2005, at similar hearings, Ambassador Michael Kozak testified: “U.S. assistance has led to some positive steps to address torture and other law enforcement abuse in Uzbekistan; the U.S. is providing Kazakhstan with technical assistance to support the implementation of jury trials; and across the region, governments are now actively combating trafficking in persons.”

By the hearings of 2005, Craner had become President of the Independent Republic Institute (IRI). In his testimony then, he clearly implies that the Defense Department, the Department of State, USAID, and the embassies are not fully behind the President’s policy for promoting democracy. Clearly Central Asian policy of the United States—hardly a top-priority matter—is pushed and pulled by several interest groups. The International Crisis Group (ICG), a human rights organization active throughout the world, argues that Uzbekistan’s repression increases Islamic militancy or drives it elsewhere. On the other hand, the American-Uzbekistan Chamber of Commerce, representing Case, Newmont, Siemens, Caterpillar, and other firms, lobbies for continuation of the business relations.

38 Hearings, 2005, p. 12.

These officials emphasized that the United States government is determined to fund NGO’s, which are “the frontline of implementing our committed policy to promote democracy and human rights. We will continue to fund programs designed to strengthen political parties, independent media, advocacy civil society groups, human rights defenders and the rule of law.” These American-funded NGOs, such as Freedom House, are able to do things diplomats and the President cannot do, they explained.

Employing American-funded NGOs set up to fight for human rights and/or democracy without responsibility to the US Embassy is hardly without its problems. These organizations are correctly seen as agents of the USA. Human rights activists in Uzbekistan, a brave and sincere group fighting against abuses of human rights, are often paid and hosted abroad by outside agencies and are sometimes accused by other activists of making a business of providing negative information. Absent many other sources of information—our embassies are short of area experts—organizations like the ICG and OSI provide negative, inexpert, and sometimes dubious estimates of the economic and political situation in the country. NGO’s like the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs want to show their positive influence on events in places like Kyrgyzstan, but still insist that the citizens of those countries are responsible for whatever advances can be perceived. As for the succeeding mob-violence and chaos, of course, no one wants to take credit!

It might be noted that the State Department report released on March 8, 2006—after the Andijan events (which are featured on the first page) and the expulsion of

40 Kozak, Hearings, 2005, p. 11.

41 Akiner, p. 19.
American servicemen (which is not mentioned)—took a much more negative view of Uzbekistan’s human rights record. Few improvements are cited for 2005.  

**Conclusion.** Though Uzbekistan has been an authoritarian country throughout its short history, its human rights record has varied, depending on the external situation of country and its economic strength. From about 1993 through 1996, growth and security were favorable, and economic reforms proceeded. Although numerical scores are subjective and less exact than they may appear, Freedom House gave Uzbekistan its best score in 1997—the first year of publication of its annual reports. Then there followed seven lean years, during which authoritarianism deepened, particularly with respect to economic freedoms. From 1998 to 2003, Freedom House showed significant deterioration in its evaluation of Uzbek electoral process, media independence, and governance. Then the economy improved, and so did reforms, despite the Georgian revolution. Freedom House noticed an improvement in “judicial framework and independence” for 2005, improving its overall democracy score for that year. Other modest improvements are noted, too.

Uzbekistan’s official growth rates for 2004 and 2005 have been over 7%, with both industrial and agricultural growth similar. The IMF mission adjusted the 2004 figure slightly downwards to 6.9%. Cash shortages and wage arrears have almost ended,

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43 Freedom House gave Uzbekistan its best rating during 1997, the first year of publication of Nations in Transit, the rating then rose, only to fall in 2005, as a result of modest improvement in “judicial framework and independence.” Nations in Transit 2005, p. 701. The Uzbekistan chapter was authored by Margarita Assenova.
though domestic inflation continues at 9 to 15%, not the 3.9% officially claimed.\textsuperscript{44} Nevertheless, this is a lower rate than earlier in the decade. With a budget surplus, an end to off-budget credits, and a stable exchange rate, inflation will depend largely on salary increases decreed for government workers. Foreign reserves are at least $2.7 billion, and registering a substantial surplus on current account, Uzbekistan is not at present in bad shape internationally and is not pressed domestically to increase repression.

The Kyrgyz “tulip revolution” and the unfavorable (and somewhat unjustified) international reaction to the Andijan massacre have again turned the Karimov regime more authoritarian. However, past patterns indicate that economic progress may again lead to better times for Uzbekistan’s abused citizenry. Let us hope so. Authoritarian rulers in the past have chosen to reform their economies--as President Karimov has promised to do--even when they are not constrained to do so.\textsuperscript{45} Russian support may delay democratic reforms, in which President Putin has little interest. But President Karimov has never wanted to depend exclusively on any outside power, so that we in the West need not be held a bay for long if we wish to re-engage. Perhaps fading memories and shifting interests of human rights groups in the West, as well as other interest groups, will permit the United States to pursue a policy of quiet persuasion within the regime and support of progressive tendencies in the country. Western-trained elites, as well as small business people and Westernized professionals, are the hope for eventual progress on human rights in this remote country.

\textsuperscript{44} IMF Mission Report, March 9, 2005.

\textsuperscript{45} South Korea’s regime up through 1980 is perhaps the best example. Singapore is another successful one.