

# Ignored Constitutions and Predatory Presidents



Askar Akaev (1990–2005)  
<http://tiny.cc/ympi5w>



Kurmanbek Bakiyev (2005–10)  
<http://tiny.cc/dovi5w>



**Kyrgyzstan Presidents**  
Roza Otunbayeva (2010–11)  
<http://tiny.cc/6ovi5w>



Almazbek-Atambayev (2011–)  
<http://tiny.cc/vpi5w>

In what turned out to be the waning decades of the Soviet Union, outside observers often suggested that the largely Turkic and Islamic population of Central Asia represented a threat to the USSR. Specifically, many expected that societal demands emanating from the region—whether in the name of nationalism, pan-Turkism, or Islamism—could lead to either a weakening of the Soviet Union or even its dissolution.<sup>1</sup> In line with these expectations, there is evidence that in the 1980s two countries with little else in common, post-revolutionary Iran and the United States, attempted to utilize Islam in order to mobilize the populations of Central Asia against the atheistic Soviet state. Yet as political scientist Mark Beissinger has shown in his magisterial treatment of Gorbachev-era protests and demonstrations, during the tremendous waves of mass mobilization that preceded the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the five republics of Central Asia were notably quiescent.<sup>2</sup>

Ultimately in 1991, the five states of the region—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—were given something that the elites, and seemingly much of the population, had not demanded, wanted, nor prepared for: their independence. This unanticipated “gift” forced the former communist bureaucratic elites of the region to reconfigure their political and economic systems while simultaneously establishing their legitimate right to rule—despite having never led a liberation campaign.

Overall, the region’s elites were fairly successful in navigating these challenges. Only in Tajikistan, which experienced a brutal civil war between 1992 and 1997, did the immediate shock of independence generate a reshuffling of executive leadership. In each of the other Central Asian states, the individual holding executive office at the time of independence emerged as the first president of the state and served in that position for more than a decade.

By the middle of the 1990s, it became increasingly clear to most observers of the region that, despite regularly holding elections, these new presidential regimes had little interest in permitting truly open democratic competition for political power. Figure 1, which charts the World Bank’s “Voice and Accountability” measure for each of the five states of the region during the sixteen years that data is available (1996–2011), visibly depicts the continued authoritarian tendencies of the Central Asian regimes since this period. The “Voice and Accountability” measure ranges from a high of +2.5, indicating that a given country’s citizens have a high level of opportunity to politically participate and express their viewpoint, to a low of -2.5, indicating the absence of political freedoms.

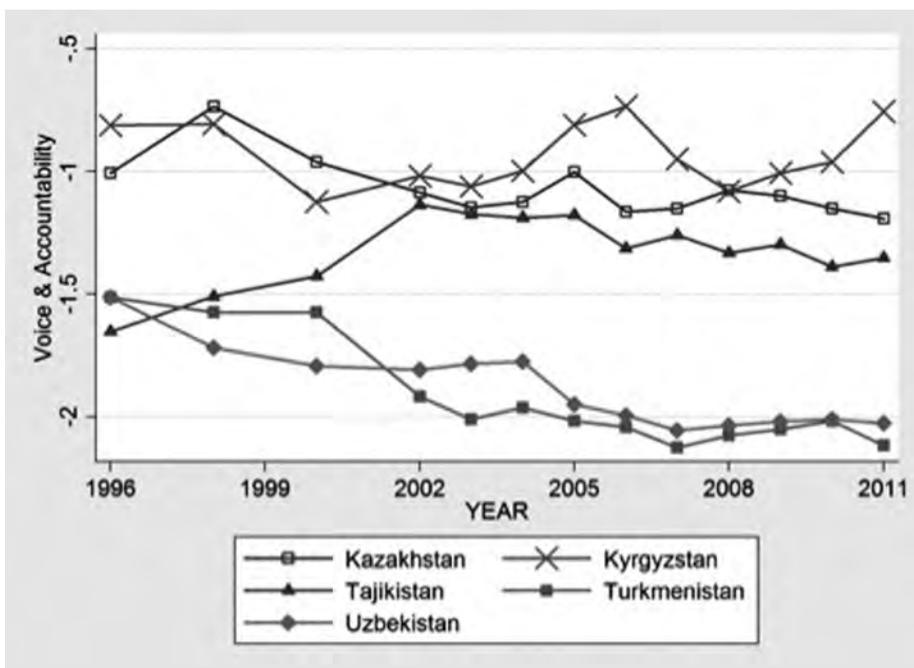


Figure 1: Voice and Accountability in Central Asia, 1996–2011: +2.5=High, -2.5=Low.  
Source: World Bank at <http://tinyurl.com/ox6pocp>.

# Examining Central Asian Authoritarianism

By Brent Hierman



**Kazakhstan President**  
Nursultan Nazarbayev (1991–)  
<http://tiny.cc/w8vi5w>



**Uzbekistan President**  
Islam Karimov (1990–)  
<http://tiny.cc/m9vi5w>



**Tajikistan President**  
Emomali Rahmon (1994–)  
<http://tiny.cc/69vi5w>



**Turkmenistan Presidents**  
Saparmurat Niyazov (1990–2006)  
<http://tiny.cc/1awi5w>



**Turkmenistan Presidents**  
Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov (2007–)  
<http://tiny.cc/pbwi5w>

Although the figure shows that the five Central Asian states have negative scores for each of the sixteen years—indicating generally restricted levels of political freedom—it is important to note that it also displays that the constraints on freedom are not uniform across the region. Specifically, citizens in the low-performing states of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have consistently faced a far greater number of restrictions on their political freedom than citizens in the higher-performing states of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Thus, while it may be tempting, and even often useful, to group all of the contemporary Central Asian regimes into the category of “non-democracies,” one should not lose sight of the fact that not all “non-democracies” are the same. That is, there are interesting and important variations amongst authoritarian regimes that can be gleaned through a nuanced examination. To that end, in the next part of the essay, I offer a sketch of some of the similarities and differences between the five regimes.

### Regime Profiles

As noted, according to the World Bank’s “Voice and Accountability” measure, since 1996 the two Central Asian states with the relative highest levels of political freedom are Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. In both states, opposition political parties have been able to compete and win seats in Parliament, and most media outlets are privately owned. However, the formal existence of private media outlets and opposition parties should not obfuscate actual practices. For instance, Ak Zhol, the opposition party with the second-most seats in the Kazakhstani Parliament, has close ties to the regime, and in both states, media outlets critical of the government face intimidation and censorship. Similar discrepancies between formal laws and informal practices are pervasive across the region. While the authoritarian regimes of Central Asia generally have beautifully written constitutions that supposedly establish transparent rules about decisionmaking, the inconsistent enforcement of these laws has a tendency to erode faith in legal institutions. For instance, during fieldwork conducted in Kyrgyzstan in 2007-2008, many of my interlocutors told me that, should a crime occur, it was much better to rely on a *krysha* (literally a roof, but figuratively a powerful individual or patron) than call the police.

Within the Central Asian regimes, the executive possesses enormous powers beyond those delegated by the constitution. Through his ability to distribute resources to loyal elites or withhold resources from potential challengers, the president can make or break fortunes. Unsurprisingly, it is often the president’s own family who financially benefits the most. For instance, for several years the two companies contracted to supply aviation fuel to the United States air base in Kyrgyzstan were controlled by then-President Askar Akayev’s son and son-in-law, respectively, leading to the accumulation of great riches for the extended Akayev family.<sup>3</sup> Ultimately, however, Akayev’s fate illustrates some of the hazards an authoritarian executive must seek to avoid: the perception that Akayev’s actions were overly predatory and increasingly benefitted only a small inner circle (a perception partially shaped by the aviation fuel contracts) contributed to the elite-led protests that forced him out of office in 2005. Despite the example of Akayev, the temptation to use the office to advance private personal interests proved too great for Akayev’s successor, Kurmanbek Bakiyev; and in 2010, massive

**Within the Central Asian regimes, the executive possesses enormous powers beyond those delegated by the constitution.**

protests forced him to resign the presidency, as well. Following the ouster of Bakiyev, a new constitution was crafted, which weakened the relative powers of the presidency. While it remains to be seen whether Kyrgyzstan's new constitution will be enough to reduce the ubiquitous cronyism of the regime, the fact that a competitive but peaceful election brought new President Almazbek Atambayev

into power in 2011 through ballots rather than street politics should be seen as a promising sign for the future of the republic.

Kyrgyzstan's recent history of presidential turnover stands in stark contrast to the post-Soviet trajectories of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Atambayev is independent Kyrgyzstan's fourth president. More precisely, he is the fourth president since the beginning of 2005—while neither independent Kazakhstan nor Uzbekistan has experienced a presidential transfer of power. Both Kazakhstan's Nursultan Nazarbayev and Uzbekistan's Islam Karimov have held the highest executive office in their respective territories since 1989, initially as first secretaries of the Communist Party of their Soviet Socialist Republics and later as presidents. What can account for the durability of the Nazarbayev and the Karimov presidencies?

Nazarbayev's and Karimov's longevity can, in part, be explained by their ability to access and distribute economic resources. With thirty billion barrels of proven oil reserves (according to the CIA's 2013 *World Factbook*), Kazakhstan has developed a significant oil industry with a great deal of foreign investment since independence. Oil revenues have been robust enough for Nazarbayev to keep subservient elites in line, coopt or marginalize the opposition, and even provide some public services that minimize societal grievances. While Kazakhstan's executive has access to "black gold," Uzbekistan's president has access to "white gold" (cotton). According to the National Cotton Council of America, Uzbekistan was the fifth-largest exporter of cotton globally in 2012. Additional wealth is derived from Uzbekistan's modest gold and natural gas sectors. In contrast to its two neighbors, mountainous Kyrgyzstan possesses limited resources, making it much more difficult for its president to keep the patronage machine greased.<sup>4</sup>

The ready availability of economic resources has permitted both Nazarbayev and Karimov to engage in forms of nation-building that mythologize their own personal importance to the independence of their citizens. In Kazakhstan, the celebration of Nazarbayev is quite explicit. For instance, on a spring day in 2011, a Kazakhstani citizen in the capital of Astana (a city that was nearly named after Nazarbayev in 2008) could walk past the then soon-to-be-opened Nazarbayev University; have lunch at a café underneath one of the ubiquitous billboards with Nazarbayev's image peering down; then visit the Museum of the First President to see a variety of memorabilia from Nazarbayev's past; and in the evening go to a movie theater to watch *The Sky of my Childhood*, a cinematic depiction of Nazarbayev's early years. In Uzbekistan, the mythologizing of Karimov has been more implicit; Laura Adams, in her book *The Spectacular State: Culture and National Identity in Uzbekistan*, argues that the regime has established a "cult of personality by proxy" through the elevation of the fourteenth-century conqueror Amir Timur as a national hero. A visitor to an Uzbekistani school will likely encounter schoolchildren learning about the historical greatness of Timur (affectionately referred to as "bobomiz" [our grandfather]), who

established Samarkand—currently the third-largest city in contemporary Uzbekistan—as the capital of his Timurid Empire. Karimov is presented as Timur's heir, and parallels are drawn between the contemporary Uzbekistani state-building project and the Timurid Empire.<sup>5</sup>

Both Nazarbayev and Karimov are in their seventies, and it is likely that they will either retire or die in office relatively soon. To date, neither has publicly named a successor, and after more than twenty years of personalistic rule, their deaths will represent a tremendous shock to their respective regimes. While this shock may ultimately prove destabilizing for one or both states, the case of Turkmenistan's peaceful succession in 2006 following the death of founding President Saparat Niyazov demonstrates that this may not necessarily be the case. In the decade and a half that he ruled

## While Kazakhstan's executive has access to "black gold," Uzbekistan's president has access to "white gold" (cotton).



Open pit gold mining operation in Kazakhstan. Source: *Kazakhstan travel and tourism blog* at <http://tiny.cc/cm5i5w>.



Kazakhstan oil and natural gas industry. Source: *About Kazakhstan* website at <http://tinyurl.com/mg8quka>.

as president, an extreme cult of personality was built around Niyazov, who was declared by his press secretary to be a national prophet of the Turkmen people. Not only did Niyazov adopt the name Turkmenbashi (the father of the Turkmen), but he renamed months after himself; his mother; and the spiritual book he authored, the *Ruhnama* (Book of the Soul), a bizarre book divided into two volumes that combines questionable history with statements of moral philosophy. The *Ruhnama* was treated by the regime as a sacred text and forcibly interjected into everyday life while Niyazov was alive. Copies of the *Ruhnama* were placed prominently in mosques, the *Ruhnama's* teachings were a compulsory school subject, and Turkmenistanis had to demonstrate sufficient knowledge of the text in order to receive something as mundane as a driver's license.

Niyazov was able to build his peculiar cult of personality through the exploitation of the state's sizeable natural gas reserves (estimated by the CIA's 2013 *World Factbook* to be the fifth-largest in the world). The reasons why his sudden death in December 2006 did not instigate a scramble for economic resources that undermined the stability of the regime remain somewhat murky. Despite not having been publicly named Niyazov's successor, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, a trained dentist who had served as health minister and deputy premier, became president in late 2006. In the intervening years, many elements of the Turkmenbashi cult have begun to fade. For instance, there are currently no compulsory exams on the *Ruhnama* in secondary schools, and there are signals that under Berdimuhamedov the authoritarian regime structure more closely resembles Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan than it had in the past.<sup>6</sup>

As surprising as the smooth transfer of power was in Turkmenistan, Emomali Rahmon's successful rebuilding of the post-Civil War Tajikistani state may be even more so. The war, which led to at least 50,000 deaths, is best understood as a conflict fought between regional elites over wealth and power rather than a war fought between clashing ideologies. Soon after independence, networks of elites (many of whom could be called "warlords") mobilized their supporters against one another in an effort to gain control of existing state institutions and resources. On the one side was the Popular Front, a makeshift alliance of elites representing regions that had historically held significant political and economic positions within the republic. On the other side was a loose opposition coalition composed of forces from regions that had historically been excluded from economic and political power. An Islamic organization, the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP), did represent a significant



Monument to the *Ruhnama* in Ashgabat. The book rotates and opens each night. Source: <http://tiny.cc/o45i5w>.



**CONFUCIUS: ETERNAL SAGE**

Edited by Zu-yan Chen

This exciting new volume of current research into Confucius and Confucianism charts the formation and transformation of China's greatest cultural tradition by showing how Confucianism has moved beyond its origins to become part of an emerging cosmopolitan ethos enabled and enhanced by globalization.

978-1-59265-159-7

\$29.95 Paperback



**CHINA LAW READER**

Lawrence Foster, Tiffany Yajima, Yan Lin

Intended for intermediate to advanced Chinese language learners, this unique book is an indispensable tool for all universities, schools, government, and non-government agencies dealing with Chinese laws and its legal system. The book provides key vocabulary, definitions, and usage for contemporary Chinese legal terminology in a variety of applications. This is a must-have reference work for students and professionals.

978-1-59265-151-4

\$49.95 Paperback

*New From Sinomedia*



**Sinomedia International Group**  
360 Swift Avenue Suite 48  
South San Francisco, CA 94080

**China Books | Long River Press | Cypress Books**  
T (650) 872-7076 F (650) 872-7808  
[www.chinabooks.com](http://www.chinabooks.com)



Tajik Aluminum Company Tursunzoda, Tajikistan. Source: <http://tiny.cc/4m6i5w>.

faction within the opposition coalition. However, the support base of the IRP was regionally concentrated in the politically underrepresented Rasht Valley, located in the center of Tajikistan, and IRP fighters were often motivated more by material concerns than ideological ones.

Rahmon was an unlikely choice to serve as a postwar unifier. As the former manager of a collective farm, he had limited high-level political experience prior to the war and was initially seen as a puppet of the powerful Popular Front warlord Sangak Safarov. Furthermore, Rahmon's unification task was greatly complicated by the fact that Tajikistan, like Kyrgyzstan, has limited economic resources. Around 70 percent of the country's foreign currency is provided by a single large aluminum plant, the Tajik Aluminum Company (TALCO), located about thirty-seven miles west of the capital Dushanbe. Not surprisingly, employment opportunities are limited across the country; at any given time, around 12 percent of Tajikistan's population is working abroad, and remittances from labor migrants represent nearly 50 percent of the country's GDP, the highest such percentage in the world. However, Rahmon has proven adept at using the modest resources at his disposal to replace rivals (or potential rivals) with loyal supporters. A visitor to Tajikistan today will often hear complaints about the "Dangharization" of

the country, referring to the perceived preponderance of officials born in the rural region of Danghara—the region about sixty miles southeast of Dushanbe where Rahmon was born—holding positions across the territory. In certain circles, one can also hear complaints that Rahmon never honored the full terms of the UN-brokered General Peace Agreement, which stipulated that the opposition forces were guaranteed representation within government. Despite these complaints and the general impoverishment of the population, the regime has been quite stable since the war ended.

**Conclusion**

A cursory assessment of the region may give the impression that Central Asian politics are not particularly unique. After all, corrupt authoritarian regimes can be found across the globe. However, the fact that the five states of Central Asia share similarities with so many other authoritarian states makes the region particularly amenable to being taught in a comparative fashion. In particular, I find it useful to compare the five post-Soviet Central Asian states with other majority Islamic states. For example, a comparison of the politics of the region with those of Afghanistan helps highlight the tremendous transformation that occurred in Central Asia under the Russian Empire and later the Soviet Union. Historically and culturally, northern Afghanistan could be considered a part of Central Asia, yet throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the territory of Afghanistan did not

The Wm. Theodore de Bary and Ainslie T. Embree

## AAS Fund for Education and Outreach

The Wm. Theodore de Bary and Ainslie T. Embree Fund for Education and Outreach will support the preparation and dissemination of AAS publications to make knowledge about Asia widely available for general education courses and will strengthen the Association's commitment to educational goals through such publications as *Education About Asia* and *Key Issues in Asian Studies*.

For further information about these publications, please visit the AAS website at [www.asian-studies.org](http://www.asian-studies.org).

**PLEASE DONATE**

A secure donation to the fund may be made at <https://www.asian-studies.org/about/donate.htm>.

Checks can be mailed to AAS, indicating that the gift is for the de Bary-Embree Fund:  
 Association for Asian Studies, Attn: CFO,  
 825 Victors Way, Suite 310, Ann Arbor, MI 48108 USA

experience nearly the same amount of infrastructural investment or penetration of the state as the territories of post-Soviet Central Asia. Through this comparison, students would gain an appreciation of the fact that the stability of the contemporary Central Asian regimes, the high level of educational attainment in each of the societies, and the region's relatively well-developed physical infrastructures are all Soviet legacies.

An additional legacy that can be fruitful to explore is the tremendous transformation of the practice of Islam that occurred under the Soviet Union. During this period, the public and political spheres were secularized, and Islam became associated with customary practice.<sup>7</sup> As a result of this transformation, in stark contrast to the demonstrated ability of religious organizations in other parts of the Islamic world such as the Middle East and North Africa to mobilize large masses of followers, Islamic organizations across the region, including Tajikistan's IRP, remain quite weak today. Despite the fact that Islamic organizations do not currently pose a threat to the region's authoritarian leaders, the Central Asian regimes are clearly fearful that independent Islamic expression may eventually produce challenges to their ability to rule. This fear motivated Tajikistan's 2011 laws, which forbid children from partaking in religious activity, including attending mosque, before the age of eighteen. Thus, interesting comparisons and contrasts can be made between heavy-handed Central Asian efforts to limit the opportunities for religious expression and efforts to promote the public prominence of Islam made by former authoritarian leaders in other predominately Muslim states, such as Libya's Muammar Gaddafi and Pakistan's Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq.

Given the interest in Central Asia from global great powers such as the US, China, and Russia, as well as smaller players like India, Turkey, Japan, and Iran, understanding the nature of domestic politics in the region is increasingly important. Through these comparative exercises, students will have the opportunity to better assess the similarities and differences between Central Asian political dynamics and those found elsewhere. ■

### SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Khalid, Adeb. *Islam After Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006.

McGlinchey, Eric Max. *Chaos, Violence, Dynasty: Politics and Islam in Central Asia*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011.

Radnitz, Scott. *Weapons of the Wealthy: Predatory Regimes and Elite-Led Protests in Central Asia*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010.

### NOTES

1. Alexandre Bennigsen and Marie Broxup, *The Islamic Threat to the Soviet State* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983); Hélène Carrère d'Encausse, *Decline of an Empire: The Soviet Socialist Republics in Revolt* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981); Michael Rywkin, *Moscow's Muslim Challenge: Soviet Central Asia* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1982).
2. Mark R. Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 2.
3. Congress House Committee on Oversight United States, Subcommittee on National Security Government Reform, and Foreign Affairs, "Mystery at Manas Strategic Blind Spots in the Department of Defense's Fuel Contracts in Kyrgyzstan," (Washington, DC: US House of Representatives, 2010). Available at <http://tiny.cc/h5wt7w>.
4. Eric Max McGlinchey, *Chaos, Violence, Dynasty: Politics and Islam in Central Asia* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011).
5. Laura L. Adams, *The Spectacular State: Culture and National Identity in Uzbekistan* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).
6. Nicholas Kunysz, "From Sultanism to Neopatrimonialism? Regionalism within Turkmenistan," *Central Asian Survey* 31, no. 1 (2012): 1–16.
7. Adeb Khalid, *Islam After Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 162.

**BRENT HIERMAN** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of International Studies and Political Science at Virginia Military Institute. He has extensive experience living and working in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. His current research includes projects on the politics of land reform and cross-ethnic trust in Central Asia. Brent has previously published some of his research in the publications *Nationalities Papers: The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity and Problems of Post-Communism*.