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April 2, 1993
Who's Who in Central Asia: The Current Elite Struggle

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Prepared for
The Defense Academic Research Support Program (DARSP)
February 1993
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Introduction

This paper is the first of four that will explore various aspects of elite politics in Central Asia. As such, it is designed to set the stage for what will come and to introduce the reader to the main actors in Central Asia. Subsequent papers will focus on political parties and opposition figures, the religious elite, and the new generation of political leaders.

Normally, elite identity studies are a feature of analysis of societies undergoing a dynamic of growth, either physically, as in territorial expansion, or, more frequently, culturally, politically, or economically. In such cases, elite studies are essentially attempts to divine the direction in which a given society is likely to be lead, based upon the personalities and characteristics of the elites being identified.

What we are confronted with throughout the former Soviet Union, but even more especially in the case of Central Asia, is the opposite, a dynamic of collapse, of societies shrinking from perspectives they have until recently enjoyed. Although the collapse of the USSR made plain that the Soviet economic and social system was unworkable, the fact remains that for Central Asia at least it did work, providing funding and social services which the republics were unable to provide for themselves. One consequence of this was that, with the sole exception of Uzbekistan's Erk (Independence) movement, there were no indigenous independence movements; no national liberators were active in Central Asia prior to the abortive August coup.

Even after that, with the exception of Tajikistan, in which the opposition had a broad but unfocused political agenda which included a call for independence, Central Asia's new independence movements were all stage-managed by local republic communist parties, and the call for independence was a slogan intended to keep the old elite in power. The governing elite in Central Asia was not planning to break with Moscow; they just wanted the ties redefined.

However, none of the ruling Central Asians expected the type of redefinition that was ultimately offered. When the three Slavic republics unilaterally dissolved the USSR, effectively expelling Central Asia, the Central Asians were left with an independence for which they had not prepared, which they did not want, and which was not likely to bring them any tangible benefit for a long time, if ever.

What independence brought instead was acute elite awareness that the social "pie" would soon begin shrinking, greatly intensifying a struggle which had begun even before the dissolution, under the guise of a fight over sovereignty, about control of existing natural and man-made resources. Although there have been some efforts, even valiant ones, to take up the burdens and responsibilities of true nationhood, for the most part, elite studies of Central Asia present a picture of patrons and clients of a suddenly defunct empire, now scrambling to secure for themselves benefits and pleasures they had until recently taken for granted.

It is, however, inaccurate to assume that there is no support for independence, now that it has come. Soviet history and political discourse is full of references to "the masses," of whom all sorts of claims are made, but never substantiated. In fact the nature and dynamic of mass opinion is largely a cipher everywhere in the former USSR, but doubly so in Central Asia. There the masses are twice removed from the Russian or Russified elites who claim to interpret them or to speak in their name.
The Elites: An Overview

We may know little about these masses who ultimately will be the shapers of Central Asia's future. We do know considerably more about the elites upon whom they will be pressing, and who will attempt to shape and use them. There are five existing elite groups in Central Asia today. These are:

- the nomenklatura, former functionaries of the Communist Party;
- functionaries of the military-industrial complex, and the Russian elite more generally;
- members of the arts and intellectual communities;
- the religious establishment;
- participants in the "shadow economy," or black- and grey-markets.

Although these groups have distinct identities and agendas, both their memberships and interests can and do overlap, often within single republics, and not infrequently from republic to republic. None of the groups is tightly disciplined or closely controlled, nor are the sub-groups monolithic. There are distinctions which must be made for the generation and nationality of each group's members, as well as for the functions they fulfill.

There are striking differences in behavior between generations. Take for example the behavior of former Communist Party apparatchiks. Those that spent substantial parts of their careers working in the Brezhnev, Andropov, and early Gorbachev years still remain firmly oriented to Moscow, while those who came to power in the late Gorbachev years and "post-independence" have sought to create their power bases closer to home.

Moscow remains an important crutch to the senior members of the Central Asian elite. Many spent long periods of their careers working in Moscow. The most prominent example is Kyrgyzstan's President Askar Akaev, who spent all but a decade of his adult life in Moscow or Leningrad. Others, like President Sapurmurad Niazov of Turkmenia, were promoted to first secretary immediately after completing a "training" period in Moscow. Even those whose careers did not take them to Moscow often spent their time serving Moscow-based bureaucracies, such as Uzbekistan's President Islam Karimov and Gosplan (the USSR state planning agency).

In times of crises they still have a natural tendency to turn to Moscow for help. This tendency has become particularly pronounced since President Rahmon Nabiev of Tajikistan was deposed. Nabiev himself pleaded for help from the Russians. Since May 1992, when Nabiev was forced into a power-sharing relationship with Tajikistan's combined "democratic" and Islamic opposition, each of the Central Asian republic presidents has signed a security agreement with Russia.

Among the intellectual elite, which is predominantly of local nationality, there is an entire spectrum of affiliations, ranging from those who were completely intertwined with the old establishment, through those who were "sanctioned" nationalists and mild dissidents, to some who are genuinely independent of other elites.

Here, too, generational differences are quite profound. Take the case of Olzhas Suleimenov, Kazakhstan's most prominent poet who became a national political figure during the late Gorbachev years. Suleimenov was elected to the USSR Congress of Peoples Deputies. He used this as a platform to launch his anti-nuclear movement, Nevada-Semipalatinsk, and organization, which among other things, succeeded in getting the nuclear test-sites closed in Kazakhstan.

As a result of this popularity, in October 1991, Kazakhstan's president Nursultan Nazarbaev approached Suleimenov to form a Peoples Congress of Kazakhstan, which was intended to serve as a pro-government political movement. Suleimenov, whose writings are exclusively in Russian, and who himself speaks only pidgin Kazakh, found himself unable to translate his Soviet-period national hero-dom into the post-Soviet period.

This organization never got off the ground. And in November 1992, Nazarbaev tried again. He created a "new" organization, calling it the Congress of the Nationalities of Kazakhstan, and asked Erik Abdurahmanov to head it. Abdurahmanov, a former Komsomol secretary-turned-ecologist, is in his early forties, 15 years younger than Suleimenov, and speaks fluent Kazakh. It is obviously too soon to know whether this ploy will succeed.

The religious elite also possesses a spectrum, but here the greatest divide is not generational, but between those who served in the local branches of the Central Asian Spiritual Directorate of Muslims (SADUM), the all-USSR governing body for...
official Islam that was created by Stalin; those who worked as clerics in local communities, generally without official approval; and Islamic "fundamentalists" or revivalists. However, over time the gap between the positions of these two groups is becoming less.

The Party Elite

Each of Central Asia's presidents is from the nomenklatura of the CPSU. Even seemingly mild-mannered former academic Askar Akaev was a member of the Central Committee of the CPSU and served as president of the academy of sciences of his republic, a post always restricted to trusted party members. Islam Karimov, Nursultan Nazarbaev (Kazakhstan), and Sapurmurad Niazov (Turkmenistan) were all first secretaries of their respective republics when their respective supreme soviets chose them as Presidents after Mikhail Gorbachev's March 1990 election as President of the USSR by the Congress of People's Deputies. Absamat Masaliev, Kyrgyzstan's communist party first secretary, initially declined to seek the post of president. When he did finally seek it, in October 1990, an intra-party putsch within the legislature brought Askar Akaev to power instead.

Tajikistan's first secretary, Kakhar Makhkamov, was also initially elected that republic's first president by his supreme Soviet, only to be ousted by his predecessor as first secretary, Rahman Nabiev, who received popular election to the post. Currently, Tajikistan has no president, and the head of the Supreme Soviet, I. Rahmonov, also a former member of Tajikistan's nomenklatura, is functioning as head of state.

Masaliev, Niazov and Makhkamov all came to power as first secretaries to do Moscow's bidding in the party purges of the post-Brezhnev and early Gorbachev years. Nazarbaev and Karimov were not named first secretaries of their respective republics until June 1989, nearly five years later. But Nazarbaev in particular gained political position through advocating a pro-Moscow reform line.

Central Asian leaders have all tried to compensate for these political liabilities by trying to cast themselves as national leaders. The model chosen varies according to local circumstances and the temperament of the president himself.

The most common tack is for the leaders to define themselves as what they are not. Thus Karimov is not an Islamic fundamentalist, just as Akaev is not a partocrat. Positive definitions are much scarcer. Nazarbaev depicts himself and Kazakhstan as a bridge between Europe and Asia but without making obvious whether his country will cease to be a bridge without him. Niazov has taken a different approach, creating for himself a slew of new medals and honors to celebrate his personality and presidency, but this does no more to answer the question of why he, and not some other, should be president. Even Akaev's reputation as hero of "the silk revolution," while still untarnished, becomes less effective with time because of growing ambivalence to the blessings that revolution conveyed.

The most extreme case is that of Sapurmurad Niazov, who has created a crude Stalin-era style cult of personality to honor his own achievements. He became the first recipient of two new state "orders," and presides over a national portrait commission which is charged with quality-control and the nation-wide dissemination of his official photo. Large photos of Niazov were a mainstay of the lavish public display put on for Independence Day 1992 in Ashgabat.

Islam Karimov was also not shy about taking official credit for gaining and sustaining Uzbekistan's independence during first anniversary celebrations in September 1992. This occasion was marked in part by the publication of a pamphlet-size book of his speeches, which was distributed free to all school children and published in full in the press.

Karimov has shied away from establishing his own full-scale personality cult. But, he is encouraging the small-scale "cult-making" of others, including most prominently, Sharif Rashidov, the Brezhnev-era first secretary who became ignominious posthumously when Moscow's investigative teams revealed the existence of a republic-wide scheme for falsifying cotton statistics that was netting its participants tens of millions of (pre-inflationary) rubles. A main downtown street in Tashkent has been named "Rashidov Prospect," and the 75th birthday of the deceased leader was marked throughout the republic. Obviously, this is making Uzbekistan's "democratic forces" nervous. To them, Rashidov is not the "Uzbek national hero" currently being depicted, but the representative of a more corrupt and even less democratic political administration than the one currently in power.

Uzbekistan's political opposition objects to the
ways in which Karimov is manipulating nationalist themes. Leaders of Erk (whose leader, Muhammad Salih, a prominent poet-turned-legislator, ran against Karimov in the December 1991 elections) and Birlik claim that Karimov's policies are mere sloganeering. They argue that renaming streets after previously suppressed historical figures does not constitute the development of a national history and that eliminating Russian language announcements on the metro is not synonymous with the advancement of the Uzbek language. It is a sad irony, they argue, that though the democratic opposition is being attacked for exacerbating inter-ethnic tensions, it is the poorly thought-out policies of the government which are exacerbating the fears of local Russian, Tajik, and other minorities (nearly a quarter of Uzbekistan's population).

The language issue is a highly politicized one throughout Central Asia. Each republic president now makes public addresses in his native language (and where appropriate, frequently in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, in Russian as well). For Karimov, this meant that he was not infrequently making "blooper" on nation-wide television, for until he began working with a tutor he had only "kitchen" Uzbek.

Karimov, like Niazov, was raised in a state orphanage (since Central Asian society is rife with family-based patronage systems, Gorbachev apparently considered orphanship an ideal qualification for a potential reformer). Nazarbaev and Akaev, however, both come from traditional rural families, and each speaks his national language fluently. Furthermore, Nazarbaev really has played the dombra (the Kazakh national instrument) since childhood, so he is not just faking a skill to impress Kazakh television audiences.

Central Asia's leadership has also sought to carry out its institution-building in a "Central Asian context." Immediately after the collapse of the Communist Party, successor "socialist" (in Kazakhstan) and "national democratic" (in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) parties were formed, but none has become a strong republic-wide organization, nor do they control the former CPSU property, which reverted to the respective republican governments. This property, everywhere in the region, has been turned over to local hakim, appointed by the republic presidents to be simultaneously their personal representatives and the repository of local executive power. Each hakim heads a hakimet, which has replaced the functions of the local party committee.

The return to the vocabulary of the pre-conquest period is more than a mere symbolic exercise. The same party leaders who previously publicly decried that Central Asia still had "vestiges" of its traditional society, now praise the fact that Central Asia has managed to preserve parts of its traditional society. Moreover, they go to great lengths to demonstrate their own links to it.

**Tajikistan and Clan Politics**

A complex system of clan and regional ties exists which has always underlain power in Central Asia, before the Soviet period, during it, and on into the present. Forbidden to mention during the Soviet period, and in some republics discussed reluctantly even now, these ties of family, clan, and region of birth dictate patronage patterns in rural Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan.

Kyrgyz and Kazakh leaders now make open reference to their own ties, and those of others, and are pleased to accept the additional political loyalty that clan membership confers on them. After an September-October World Kurultay (Congress) of Kazakhs held in Alma Ata, one of the hottest items of Alma Ata became the family tree of all the Kazakh clans, which people proudly hang on their walls with their own ancestry traced.

The current state of near-civil war in Tajikistan is a much less pleasant demonstration of the power of clan and regional politics. Many see the civil war in Tajikistan as little more than an inter-clan struggle, which has been exacerbated by the presence of a large Islamic opposition. For most of the Soviet period, politics in Tajikistan's were dominated by three large clans: from Khojent (Leninabad), Kurgan Tiube, and Kulib, with the Pamiri Tajiks barred even from competing.

The current crisis has been slow to build. It began with small demonstrations when rumors spread that thousands of Armenians would be settled in Dushanbe in February 1990; then mass demonstrations that brought down the Makhkamov government in the September 1991 coup; then three months of nation-wide disturbances in spring 1992 prompted by Nabiev's refusal to grant political
concessions to the secular and religious opposition groups which had helped him come to power the preceding autumn; then three months of even greater mass disorder after the May 1992 accord between Nabiev and the opposition, which made Nabiev into a virtual puppet; then an all-out civil war after Nabiev's ouster in September 1992; and since late November, with the conquest of Dushanbe by pro-Nabiev forces from Kuliab and the return of the Islamic forces to armed opposition.

Throughout the whole drama, clan/regional ties have played a critical role. Nabiev himself is from Khojent, the province (adjoining Uzbekistan) from which the republic of Tajikistan has long been ruled. This is the most developed of the provinces: it is the center of what industry exists in Tajikistan (most of which was run by various branches of the USSR defense ministries). These are the enterprises the Russian army was sent in to protect. Obviously, it is the wealthiest of Tajikistan's oblasts. The poorest was Kuliab, whose party organization had been the major rival of the Khojent group. It is their forces who retook Dushanbe and are now in control.

The center of the opposition was Kurgan Tiube, a region of disparate Tajik and Uzbek family groups. For most of the Soviet period, it was the part of Tajikistan in which forcibly resettled peoples were placed. This has been the center of the Islamic opposition. There has been a loose alliance between those in Kurgan Tiube and those from the Pamirs (democratic opposition leader Davlot Khudonazarov is from the Pamirs).

Most local observers do not see clan struggles by definition as unhealthy, and similar struggles are to be expected throughout Central Asia. Turkmekistan also has three powerful tribally-based groups. Uzbekistan has four or five major regional (and partially kin-reinforced groupings), and seven families are said to control the political and economic life of Tashkent.

Kazakhstan has three hordes, but two clans in the Great Horde dominated old nomenklatura lists and post-independence appointments, although Nazarbaev himself does not come from either. This fact has undoubtedly contributed to his independence of mind, but it has also made it harder for him to implement his policies, particularly at the local level, where patterns of personal loyalty are more important than a commitment to abstract policies of reform.

Clan politics have also reasserted themselves in Kyrgyzstan. In the decades before perestroika, Kyrgyzstan was dominated by a clan from Naryn oblast; Masaliev's people came disproportionately from a Talas oblast clan; and President and Mrs. Akaev are said to be related to both groups, although the Akaev government includes representatives from every major clan in the republic. Although Akaev is working to insure the "representativeness" of the republic government, he has acquiesced to the need to play clan politics at the oblast level.

New oblast hakims all come from prominent families of the region. In fact, in Dzhellalabad, there was nearly a "battle of the families," when the Usmanov family took over virtually all posts of prominence in the republic. In order to oust Usmanov, Akaev had to bring in someone with strong family connections as well, which necessitated him moving the head of privatization (Tagaev) to Dzhellalabad as hakim. Though this was a good solution for Dzhellalabad, it had negative consequences for the republic's privatization effort.

The Younger Generation of Partocrats

Less firmly entrenched than their elders when the Soviet Union collapsed, the younger generation of Party elites is now in a precarious situation. They, too, have lost their former inter-republic ties, while ties to their respective local populations are weak. Not having the lucrative Moscow connections their elders enjoy, these younger apparatchiks have no choice but to attempt to form new political, economic, and structural linkages for themselves.

They face three choices: either they can mortgage themselves to the old family structures and work to serve their family interests above all; they can become strong advocates of economic reform and aspire to dominate a new competitive market economy; or, they can try to strike a balance between the two. Generally speaking, few young people born to privileged families are willing to oppose the family/clan structure in its entirety.

However, it is also true that throughout Central Asia, the "young partocrats" have pushed hardest for economic reforms, provided they emerge in economic control. They are most in evidence in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in both the agricultural and industrial sectors, but they also exist in good number in Uzbekistan, particularly among the emerging "foreign trade" elite. In fact in Uzbekistan,
two distinct foreign policy elites have emerged, one tied to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the other to the Ministry of Foreign Economic Relations. The former is dominated by the partocrats and the latter by the "golden youth". The deputy prime minister of foreign relations juggles the competing interests of the two, and a former partocrat, Bahtiar Hamidov, was just ousted from this position.

The Shadow Elite

The only elite which can truly be called age-indifferent and nationality-blind is that which staffs and controls the shadow economy. This elite also is the least tied to any particular region, with ties and contacts throughout each republic, all across Central Asia, and all across the former USSR. There are enormous differences by nationality, which are discussed below in the section on Russians.

Like the dissident intellectuals, the elite of the shadow economy is an "alternative" elite as well. However, unlike the anti-establishment elite, most of this group emerge from the local traditional leadership and represent a conservative, traditional view. They are closely and directly tied to the masses but are equally well connected to the other elites. In the Soviet period, the shadow economy essentially subsumed the kolkhoz structure, which now leaves this elite in firm control of agriculture, particularly in the most productive areas. The subject of most direct concern to this group is land; they support continued public ownership of agricultural land, with rights for themselves to rent or lease the best.

In terms of contacts with other elites, the ex-Party elite to some degree overlaps with the shadow economy, with which it has strong and growing ties, at the all-union level and at the republic level. At the republic level the degree of interconnection varies, according to the background of each republic's leader.

In Uzbekistan, for example, initially ties between Party elite and members of the Tashkent shadow economy were weak because of a personal feud between President Islam Karimov (whose roots are in Samarkand) and former Vice-President Shahrullah Mirsaidov (a former mayor of Tashkent). However, this was an intolerable situation for Karimov, who was not content with Mirsaidov's withdrawal from the government. Karimov pushed Mirsaidov out of the legislature and placed him under virtual house arrest, while simultaneously offering strong financial incentives to Mirsaidov family members and former business partners to serve the President.

The Russian Elite

The key constituent group of the Russian elite is those who are attached to the military-industrial complex, which is prominently represented in the economies of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Of nearly equal importance is the Russian-dominated management of the remaining (civilian) heavy industries still present in the respective republics. Ownership is unclear but is uniformly under the control of local Russians, who remain in close contact with the Russian ministerial and industrial associations which replaced the all-union ministries, or through the military directly.

The ex-Party elite also shares an interest in controlling a perceived "Islamic threat" with members of the industrial-military elite, but in most other issues the industrialists are oriented toward Moscow and all-union concerns, not toward their immediate surroundings.

There is some overlap in most of the republics between the old Party elite and the military-industrial elite. In Uzbekistan, this overlap also encompasses a portion of the all-union elite of the shadow economy. Some of its members, though, are "local" (far more frequently local-born Russian than local nationals), while others have no ties at all to the region where their factories or troops happen to be located. It was that sort of connection which probably kept Tajikistan's just-ousted President Rahmon Nabiev in office through summer 1992; Nabiev is said to be connected to people in the military-industrial plant in Khojent, which is protected by the Russian army.

Karimov has obvious close ties with the military-industrial complex in general, and Uzbekistan's aircraft industry in particular. In addition, both he and Niazov in Turkmenistan, have turned over control of their "national" armies to the Russians stationed in place.

Of all the republic leaders in the region, Nursultan Nazarbaev of Kazakhstan probably enjoys the strongest ties with the old USSR military industrial complex. Prior to the beginning of the conversion process in the late 1980s, some 80 percent of industry in northern (and Russian-dominated)
Kazakhstan was tied to the Soviet defense industries. This not withstanding, Nazarbaev had few Russians in prominent places in Kazakhstan’s government. But in December 1992, his deputy prime minister charged with supervising the defense sector (Soskovets) went from his government into Yeltsin’s.

The military-industrial elite is but one of the various Russian groups in the region. It must be remembered that the Russians of Central Asia are almost as various as are the Central Asians they live among. The most obvious group to differentiate is the Cossacks, who claim large territory in six separate regions of northeast, northwest, central and southeast, and southwest Kazakhstan, based on their descent from tsarist frontier troops who were first sent into the area 400 years ago. Suppressed by the Soviets in the 1920s, the Cossacks secretly maintained their military formations and ranks, carefully preserving records of the lands given to them for communal usage by various Russian Tsars, which they now claim for their exclusive control.

However there are also distinctions to be made among non-Cossack Russians. The descendants of Stolypin-era “homesteaders,” found throughout Kazakhstan and in central Kyrgyzstan, see Central Asia as Russia’s “Wild West,” the frontier their ancestors helped “civilize.” Though none have assimilated, such Russians know something of the local history, many respect the local culture, and some even speak the local language.

The descendants of the next wave of Russian migration, the children of exiled kulaks and World War II evacuees who are now to be found throughout Central Asia, also have few ties left to mainland Russia. Many consider themselves to be Uzbekistanis or Kazakhstans, and live on good terms with their Central Asian neighbors. Most of Central Asia’s Jewish residents spring from this group, although there are Bukharan (Sephardic) Jews who have lived in Central Asia since the time of the Arab conquest. Most of the Russians in the universities, academies of sciences, and other “white-collar” and intellectual professions generally come from this emigration.

The generally positive attitudes towards Central Asians of these two groups contrast sharply with the views of the Khrushchev-era Virgin Land “enthusiasts” and Brezhnev-era “industrial refugees.” Like the ex-kulaks and evacuees, they are also to be found throughout the region, especially in the cities. Economic “marginals” who left Russia in search of economic opportunity, they consider themselves ex-Soviet, now Russian citizens, who are stranded in a foreign country dominated by an alien culture which they fear.

In general, Russians have not organized national political parties. An exception is Edinstvo (unity) in Kazakhstan, which has ties with similar Russian nationalist groups outside of Central Asia. Branches of the various Russia-based democratic groups are also present in the region, but their influence is rather insignificant.

The Intellectuals

Independence has also wreaked havoc among the Central Asian intelligentsia. All products of a system which specialized in social engineering, the Central Asian leaders continue to use intellectuals to assist in creating stable popular support, believing in the efficacy of political image building. Now the goal is to create “democratically-rooted” nationalist ideologies, and it is hoped that the national intellectuals can play a constructive role in the process.

Thus, many of the intellectuals who always depended upon republic patronage to survive, even if largely discredited because of their past associations, continue to occupy the posts they always did, as can be demonstrated by a simple comparison of the tables of contents of pre- and post-independence editions of local Academy of Science social science publications.

The groups which disdained local support and found it instead in Moscow from an all-union audience, and which once seemed to be a nationalist “loyal opposition,” articulating national concerns during the Soviet period, have now both fallen into the classic dilemma of post-colonial intellectuals. Educated and shaped by Russians, often unable even to read or speak their putative “native” languages, to say nothing of creating or doing scholarship in them, these intellectuals inevitably view the future through they eyes of the Russians who shaped and once supported them. Their former teachers and audience, consumed by other worries and concerns, now tend to see these intellectuals as foreigners, not fellow Russians.

In reality, most of the intellectuals in these groups are neither Russian nor native. Their interests
situation wholly rationally. This is especially true in other minority populations. Nationalists with the sensibilities of Russians and aspirations strike a balance between the rule multi-national societies, sensitive than the other leaders to the fact that they Russian minorities, like Kyrgyzstan in extraordinarily divisive issues.

The former "loyal oppositionists" are particularly visible in the new governmental bodies, the parliaments, and the press, where they hope to create new identities for citizens of the Central Asian republics which are neither Soviet nor traditional. In this way they hope as well to forge new linkages between themselves and their non-elite countrymen. Some of these figures have gained real political prominence. They include Kazakhstan's Olzhas Suleimenov, former USSR deputy and leader of the anti-Nuclear Nevada-Semipalatinsk Movement, who lacks direct political influence in Kazakhstan's current political scene. They also include Davlat Khudonazarov, the former head of the USSR Union of Cinematographers who ran as the opposition candidate in Tajikistan's 1991 presidential elections and received less than full support from the Islamic opposition. Muhammad Salih, who ran against Karimov for president in 1991, is an Uzbek-language poet who has gone from being an establishment to an opposition figure. But he, too, has been pushed out by the course of events.

Of much higher concern to non-intellectuals however are, for example, laws mandating obligatory use of the native language. Nor do they share the intellectuals' desires to switch from a Cyrillic-based alphabet to a Turkish-style, Latin-based one, rather than to their languages' original, Arabic-based alphabets.

The fights over language law are potentially extraordinarily divisive issues in societies with large Russian minorities, like Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Both Nazarbaev and Akaev are more sensitive than the other leaders to the fact that they rule multi-national societies, and that they must strike a balance between the aspirations of local nationalists with the sensibilities of Russians and other minority populations.

One problem is that neither community views the situation wholly rationally. This is especially true in Kazakhstan, where there is currently a major fight over the language provisions of the draft constitution. Kazakhs demand their language be recognized as the sole official language; Russians demand both languages have identical legal status. In reality, both languages have virtually identical status if Kazakh remains the official language and Russian remains the language of inter-nationality communication (which is the state of current legislation).

Russians would have to develop some minimal linguistic competence in Kazakh. But the Kazakh nationalists are prepared to substantially modify current provisions which require all potential government employees to be able to demonstrate this by 1995. Russian nationalists argue that the Russian population need not learn Kazakh at all. The Kazakhs maintain that Kazakhstan is their homeland, and so their language, culture and history must be accorded a place of prominence in the republic.

Kazakh history has already conquered the streets of the republic capital of Alma Ata. All the old Soviet street names are gone, and the new names honor the great figures of Kazakh prerevolutionary history, including those who organized the anti-Russian uprisings of the nineteenth century. However, most local Russians know so little Kazakh history that these names are merely unpronounceable and not threatening. Moreover, in the current free-for-all that is post-Soviet education, it is not clear how soon Russian children (enrolled in Russian-language schools) will have to learn a new pro-Kazakh history.

With local school officials gaining greater discretionary authority, Russian language schools will either retain the old Soviet-era curriculum or adopt experimental programs "imported" from the Russian republic. However, any efforts to do this on a formal basis are sure to be controversial. Askar Akaev discovered this in October 1992, when he announced plans for the opening of a Slavonic University in Bishkek. This project was designed to address the concerns of Central Asia's large Russian population (some 12 million people across the five republics) that their children would not be able to get a "proper" Russian language university education. The local state universities had all introduced state-language competence provisions of varying severity for admissions, and access to
Russia's universities was no longer free or automatic for residents of Central Asia.

Plans for the new Slavonic University became an immediate cause célèbre in Bishkek, as Akaev was pilloried for "selling-out to Russia" in Respublika, Kyrgyzstan's popular opposition newspaper. Given the vituperative nature of the criticism, the university soon changed from being Slavonic to being "Kyrgyz-Russian," and the whole project became less of a priority for the government.

More serious, though, is the growing trend for former communists to make common cause with the nationalists, which has been happening with greater frequency in both Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. These groups joined together in Bishkek in summer 1992 to block passage of Akaev's draft constitution, which would have formalized the existing presidential system. Both allied against Akaev to push for a document which would introduce a parliamentary government in Kyrgyzstan; each of the two groups was calculating that their group would best the other in parliamentary elections. Moreover, the democrats (from the Democratic Movement of Kyrgyzstan, now an umbrella for nearly 50 different parties and groupings) continue to believe that they will have greater political influence after new parliamentary elections. This is true even though the last three bi-elections have resulted in the victory of prominent former communists, including two of the three surviving first secretaries of the Communist Party of Kyrgyzstan.

Those close to Nazarbaev confide that they are nervous about the "nationalist potential" of former partocrats. The scenario they project is that some of the old nomenklatura will usurp the nationalist agenda of the secular opposition (the Azat [Freedom] movement and the Republic party) and charge Nazarbaev with selling out Kazakh patrimony through an economic reform package which largely benefits distant capitalists as well as local Russians and Jews. The recent electoral victories of partocrats-turned-opposition figures in two predominantly Kazakh oblasts (Taldy Kurgan and Dzhambul) is cited as proof that this scenario is not wholly imaginary.

The Religious Elite

Connections between the Party elite and the religious elite vary from republic to republic. In

Uzbekistan, both generations of partocrats have strong ties to SADUM; all three groups are interested in controlling a popular "Islamic threat," not because such a threat necessarily exists, but because suppressing it gives them a reason to exert control. Neither generation of partocrats has much other contact with the Central Asian masses, but to some degree no other is necessary, because Central Asians are also enmeshed from birth in local traditional power structures.

However, even in Uzbekistan, relations between President Islam Karimov and the local religious establishment have become strained. He was on very good terms with Mufti Muhammad Yusuf through 1991 and much of 1992. He even kept the head of SADUM in power at a point (in mid-1991) when it seemed that the mufti's opponents would oust him. But in the wake of the unrest in Tajikistan, relations between the two have become strained.

Karimov finds the activities of the non-SADUM elite wholly alien, agreeing with the Russians about the "fundamentalist threat" to Central Asia, and he has consistently refused to register the Islamic Renaissance Party in his republic. Nazarbaev has also refused to register the IRP (which unlike in Uzbekistan is an insignificant group) as well as the pro-Islamic Alash (a much larger and potentially politically significant movement).

The only intellectuals who have good contacts with the religious opposition are the dissident or anti-establishment figures who began to appear when it first became possible to publicly discuss republic sovereignty in the last years of Gorbachev's rule. In Tajikistan, the anti-establishment intellectual elite was able to enter into a long-term political alliance with the Islamic Renaissance party. Ties between Birlik (Unity), Uzbekistan's major opposition group, and local religious elites are more informal but certainly seem to be pervasive.

Their relationship to the locally banned Islamic Renaissance party is harder to ascertain. However, as a rule, the dissident intellectuals have good connections both with the non-SADUM clergies and, in many cases, ties with the local members of the shadow economy. In Tajikistan, this opposition was able to join with the local power structures, which could happen in Uzbekistan as well. The role of SADUM has changed since the collapse of central authority. The Spiritual Directorate no longer enjoys a monopoly on the religious life of the Central
Asians, even formally; Nazarbaev has formed a separate Kazakhstan Religious Board to usurp the functions of SADUM in his republic. On a practical level, the local communities themselves now play a much greater role in regulating and funding local religious life. On the other hand the role religion plays in society has significantly expanded, which gives the formal religious establishment a whole range of new responsibilities which previously they did not have. SADUM is responsible for distributing hajj pilgrimage trips to Mecca, and receives funds from foreign governments for religious education and the construction, renovation, and repair of mosques.

The "government" clerics have also begun to play a certain role in government. In Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, there is formal, if limited, clerical participation in the government. Both Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan are determinedly secular in their government philosophy, but the Akaev government's draft constitution specifically recognizes the Islamic heritage and nature of Kyrgyzstan.

In all the republics, the growth of religion has increased the role of the non-SADUM clerics even more than it has that of the SADUM clerics. Local clerics now derive real power from their communities, both in the cities and, even more so, in the countryside. The religious authority of most of the formerly "unofficial" mullahs, most of whom are conservative traditionalists, has been formally recognized by SADUM. Though these clerics often lack the formal religious education which the "fundamentalists" enjoy, the sort of society they are promoting is no more modern than that of the fundamentalists. This is particularly true in Uzbekistan. Throughout Central Asia, local religious elites are emerging as leading figures in local political life, and are likely to wield increasing influence in communal affairs. In Tajikistan, the opposition government includes clerics or clerical influence in the management of all spheres of the republic's social life.

Distinct from the newly recognized "unofficial" mullahs, but often working parallel, are the medresseh-trained "fundamentalists," who are opening religious schools and trying to increase public observance of Islamic tenets. They often deal easily and share common purposes with SADUM-recognized officials. In rural areas, local political authorities tolerate their activities as well.

However, it is the local clerics actively involved in trying to bring Islam into village schools who are in closest contact with the populace. This group is influenced by the fundamentalists, with whom they share the goal of returning their people to Islam. The influence of both the fundamentalists and the village clerics is expanding locally as the two groups develop economic bases and build mosques and other structures through contributions and businesses.

There has been considerable speculation in the Western press about foreign Islamic actors in Central Asia's religious revival. There are two groups of Muslim missionaries functioning in Central Asia. One works with the fundamentalists and is financed by fundamentalist organizations from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and opposition groups from Egypt and Syria, funded through the United Arab Emirates. The other, which is much richer, is sent by Saudi Arabia and Kuwait and has been working through SADUM.

With the exception of Tajikistan, the influence of Iran is not great, and even in Tajikistan, religious activists take their spiritual orientation from Sunni (and not Iranian Shiite) sources. Since the fall of Najibullah, emissaries from Afghanistan to various republics of Central Asia have been exerting some influence as well, particularly in Tajikistan. But it is hard to evaluate whether they are missionaries or political pragmatists, interested in using a neighboring state to advance their own local interests.

The Masses

Obviously, the major reason for everyone's concern about Islam is the fear of the existing elite, partocrats and non-partocrats alike, that Central Asia will become engulfed in a fundamentalist wave.

It should be specifically noted that the theme of "Islamic revolution" is sounded loudest by the Russians and their Russified native dependents, who use their discussions of the need for a "secular society" to obscure the fact that under the new governments they are losing privileges they once enjoyed. Talk of secularism plays well in the west (the intended audience), because western societies have grown so accustomed to their own Christian cultural heritages that they no longer perceive the
Christian underpinnings of what we now call "secular society." In fact, to non-Christian eyes, much of secular society is simply Christian culture in which people do not attend church.

To make a gross example, we call societies which declare Friday or Saturday a day of rest and closure "religious," while our own, which closes on Christian Sunday, we call "secular." Similar points may be made about dress, societal roles, and other features of Islamic society which disturb "secularists."

All evidence suggests that the bulk of the Central Asian population, especially the rural part who are the majority, lived through the Soviet period in traditional social structures, to a high degree shaped and controlled by traditional Islam, with ethnic and religious identities firmly shaped by events and territorial configurations which could be as much as hundreds of years old.

What little we can know of this mass of rural laborers and herders suggests that, while they may not have not articulated or even been conscious of a need for sovereignty or independence, they are not now adverse to having it, especially as independence has made it easier to live in openly traditional ways, with no need to pay even lip service to Soviet-era slogans.

This is particularly so in regard to Russians and Russian domination. From the pastures and cotton fields of Central Asia Soviet Russia was unambiguously a colonizer, and the masses are highly reluctant to permit any arrangement which leaves Russians in any sort of control of their societies. Religion is important too; regardless of oddities of practice, or even lack of practice, the one thing that all Central Asians "knew" about themselves was that they are Muslim. Now that identity can be openly embraced again, people are hostile to anything which seems a return to the non-denominational society of the past.

Thus the masses present a kind of mute but implacable pressure, defining a vague limit beyond which the elites can not pass in their internecine struggles to retain control. This is not to suggest that an "Islamic revolution" is inevitably threatening in Central Asia. Rather it is to remind that Central Asia is already Islamic, and has been for centuries. What exists now is the potential for elite groups to make use of the wide-spread sense that Islam has suffered enough indignities and limitations, and that people are prepared to fight to preserve an identity they already have.

Nevertheless, it is also true that there is a growing distaste for, even disgust, for the degrees to which present elites are willing to go to preserve their privileges. That distaste is certainly exacerbated by the failure of the governments to provide basic services and deliver on other promises that they made when independence was first announced. This combination of disillusion and scorn creates fertile ground for alternative elites, who in their struggle for power may wish to turn this distaste to their own advantage. If they do, the most immediately useful weapon will be the accusation that the existing elites are Russified or, what in place amounts to virtually the same thing, anti-Muslim.
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