In For Life
Leadership Succession in Post-Soviet Central Asia

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Central Asian rule today is moving more toward dynasty than toward democracy. During the past decade, Central Asian leaders have rewritten, manipulated, even jettisoned constitutions so as to ensure their continued hold on presidential power. Gone are the heady Gorbachev days when mass public demonstrations led to the downfall of more than a few Central Asian first secretaries. Indeed, not since the Brezhnev period have Central Asian leaders been so thoroughly insulated from grassroots pressure. Central Asia, however, need not repeat its Soviet past. As this memo argues, the foundations of Central Asian presidential power—selective repression, revitalized patronage networks, and new norms of executive unassailability—can be shaken by outside pressure. In short, a redirection of U.S. foreign policy in the region can help ensure that Central Asia's current presidents are not in for life.

Selective Repression

That Central Asian leaders repress political elites is not surprising. What is surprising, however, is that those who are most harshly treated are wayward members of the internal elite, not activists from the political opposition. Central Asian jails are home to fallen cabinet ministers and vice presidents, to deposed oblast' governors and recalled state ambassadors.

Of all the Central Asian presidents, the Turkmen leader, Saparmurat Niyazov, has been the most active in jailing his former appointees. Niyazov regularly uses "anti-corruption" sweeps to eliminate troublesome political elites. In the spring of 2002, for example, Niyazov purged the head of the National Security Committee (the successor to the KGB) as well as the country's central bank director, defense minister, and deputy prime minister. The message of these sackings and later imprisonments was clear: internal challenges would not be tolerated. Not surprisingly, reform-minded Turkmen officials today first defect before they detract.

Niyazov has been portrayed as mentally unsound by the Western press. Yet, although the Turkmen leader may be alone in his renaming of the months after himself and his mother, he is not an outlier when it comes to the persecution of within-regime political elites. Kazakh president Nursultan Nazarbaev and Kyrgyz president Askar Akaev, two leaders lauded in the West for their early support of political liberalism, have proven

equally intolerant of challenges to executive power. In 2002, Nazarbaev imprisoned his appointee, former Pavlodar oblast' governor Galymzhan Zhakiyanov, on charges of embezzlement. These charges quickly followed Zhakiyanov's creation of the *Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan*, a reform party staffed by elites from within the state administration. In Zhakiyanov's case, the fall from political insider to political prisoner took only four months.

President Akaev has been slower than his Kazakh counterpart in prosecuting former state elites. However, his deliberate prosecution in 2000 of Felix Kulov, Kyrgyzstan's one-time vice president and interior minister, demonstrates that choreographed public interrogations can achieve similar ends—the intimidation and disempowerment of Central Asian society. Society takes its cues from soft-line reformers within the regime. When soft-line reformers are repressed, society retreats. Central Asian leaders have discovered they need only repress the few to intimidate the many.

Revitalized Patronage Networks

The paradox of Central Asian rule is that despite these purposely crafted images of authoritarian power, Central Asia's presidents are fundamentally weak. Unlike their Soviet predecessors, today's Central Asian rulers have neither the party ideology nor the penetrating security services necessary for mass mobilization and repression. Central Asian states are sickly heirs of Soviet rule. They are brittle and would quickly collapse if it were not for patronage politics, the thin skin holding Central Asian states together.

Unlike executive-elite relations in Russia, relations that Kathryn Stoner-Weiss has described as "highly conflictual" and that Stephen Solnick has characterized as a collapse of "hierarchical authority," patron-client relations in Central Asia have remained stable and have even deepened throughout the post–Soviet period. As a result, although the Central Asian state remains weak in that it penetrates only shallowly into society, the Central Asian cadre system remains robust, policed by occasional show trials and, most important, greased by the perquisites of state rule.

In contrast to Russia, where wealth is considerably more diffuse, centered as much in the regions as it is in Moscow, Central Asian wealth resides almost exclusively with the state. The Turkmen and Uzbek states, for example, maintain centrally controlled economies. These command economies offer the Turkmen and Uzbek presidents a steady supply of rents for redistribution to loyal cadres. Importantly though, states need not maintain absolute control over the economy for viable patron-client relations to persist. As Robert Bates has described in his analysis of African countries, executives need only to control key sectors—for example, the oil industry in Kazakhstan or lucrative international aid portfolios in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan—for the effective perpetuation of clientelistic rule. Indeed, it is these unlikely partners—well-intended and democracy-oriented multilateral donors and investors—who have unintentionally bankrolled Central Asian patronage politics.

Norms of Executive Unassailability

The combination of stable patronage networks and the selective use of repression has provided Central Asian executives remarkable room for maneuver. Nowhere has this been more noticeable than in presidential redefinitions of personal power. All Central Asian presidents, for example, are, or at one time have been, constitutionally bound to limited terms in office. Repeatedly, however, Central Asian leaders have flaunted state constitutions in favor of uninterrupted personal rule. Today, electoral law manipulation is a constant of regional politics. And most troubling, successful machinations used in one country are quickly adopted—and thereby reinforced and legitimated—by executives in other Central Asian republics.

Turkmen president Niyazov has gone furthest in declaring his permanent hold on power. In 1999, he accepted his handpicked national assembly's decision to elect him president for life, thereby eliminating any remaining constitutional constraints on executive power. Niyazov's behavior, however, is merely the most audacious of the Central Asian presidents. Others have achieved much the same, only through indirect manipulations of electoral law. Nazarbaev's control over the Kazakh parliament has won him extraordinary future powers in the event of his retirement—the right to address the legislature and state at will, the right to continued control over the National Security Council, and the right to advise future leaders. Moreover, the Kazakh, Uzbek, Kyrgyz, and Tajik presidents have all repeatedly delayed the question of retirement by using public referenda both to lengthen the duration of their terms in office and to eliminate restrictions on the number of times they can run for reelection.

This growing presidential discretion, moreover, has been reinforced by new norms of executive unassailability. Within the narrow circle of Central Asian rulers, unlimited presidential power is championed as a collective good. That is, not only do Central Asian leaders learn from one another how to manipulate institutions, they also chastise one another when these institutions are not manipulated for executive gain. Uzbek president Islam Karimov, for example, has faulted his Tajik counterpart Emomali Rakhmonov for allowing the Islamic opposition too much voice in the Tajik central government. Similarly, Karimov has chided Kyrgyz president Akaev for failing to crush Islamic insurrections in the Kyrgyz zone of the Fergana Valley.

Karimov has not been alone in airing such complaints. Kazakh president Nazarbaev has criticized his Tajik and Kyrgyz counterparts for laxity in dealing with regional drug lords. Alternative power centers, be they Afghanistan-like drug lords or democratic and Islamic oppositionists, are threats to executive rule. As a result, wherever these challenges to executive power emerge in the region, they must be repressed before their influence crosses state borders. In short, among Central Asia's narrow circle of autocrats, it is not accepted, but rather expected, that each will do whatever is necessary to limit challenges to presidential authority.

Policy Prescriptions

Despite their success thus far, repression, patronage, and mutually reinforced norms of authoritarianism remain poor foundations upon which to build stable political rule. They are poor foundations, moreover, not simply because they lead to autocracy, but also

because they can be easily shaken with only minimal pressure from external actors. In the remaining paragraphs I point to how and where such pressure might be exerted and to the real effects this pressure can have in eliminating illiberal Central Asian rule.

In the 12 years since the Soviet collapse, Western governments—the United States in particular—have devoted considerable resources to aiding civil society and political party formation in the five Central Asian successor states. At the same time, however, Western governments have imposed few sanctions against Central Asian leaders despite these leaders' frequent repressions of maverick state elites. The outcome of this approach—supportive of civil society while concomitantly tolerant of authoritarian repression—has been mixed at best. Soft-liner political elites in all Central Asian countries, instead of leading reform from within the state, are leading lives of solitary confinement within Central Asian jails. And the Central Asian political opposition, understandably fearful of a similar fate, has retreated to the less visible—though safer—hallways of internationally supported nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

Although Western efforts to promote civil society and NGO growth should be applauded, democratization proponents must question the efficacy of NGOs given the current absence of real Western pressure for Central Asian political reform. A vibrant civil society is typically seen, if not as an indicator, then at the very least as a precursor to democratization. Civil society growth, however, may equally be an outgrowth of increasing authoritarianism. In an increasingly authoritarian environment, people may turn to civil society as a safe haven—more out of alienation, disaffection, and fear than out of any true sense of political agency.

Ultimately, such safe havens from political repression are needed in Central Asia. They should continue to be actively supported by Western aid. At the same time, however, proponents of democratization must accept that the proliferation of Central Asian NGOs likely has little causal effect on the region's political liberalization. Indeed, Central Asian states have become more authoritarian despite the past decade's growth in associational organizations.

In contrast to the 1990s, when ruling elites proffered images of a democratic future, today these same elites are unabashed in their calls for autocratic rule. In a July 2003 interview with this author, for example, Kazakh presidential adviser Ermukhamet Ertisbaev stressed the need for an even greater strengthening of Nazarbaev's "authoritarian democracy." Similarly, in a June 2003 interview, Murat Ukushev, former presidential adviser on legal affairs and current head of Kyrgyzstan's Bishkek regional court, argued that, despite constitutional limitations on reelection, President Akaev must nevertheless remain in office so as to maintain strict order.

Such pronouncements from regional elites, long authoritarian in action and now authoritarian in rhetoric, suggest that the traditional channels of Western influence are failing. The U.S. war on terrorism, undoubtedly, has reshaped the Central Asian ruling elite's perception of self worth, emboldening them to call for even greater autocratic power. These perceptions, however, can quickly change. Central Asian rulers could quickly be convinced that their new sense of geopolitical importance is misguided.

Patronage-based Central Asian regimes cannot survive without Western investment and aid. The West, however, can survive without Central Asia's autocracies. Although

desirable, neither Central Asia's oil nor access to Central Asia's military bases is indispensable to current Western security concerns. Western leaders would do well to make this point to their Central Asian counterparts—both in words and in actions. Future Western aid and investment should be linked to demonstrated reform rather than promises of liberalization. And should state-led repression of political reformers continue, Western aid and investments, the lifeblood of these brittle Central Asian regimes, can easily be withdrawn. Admittedly, Western governments might lose basing rights in the region. This short-term inconvenience, however, would be considerably offset by demonstrating to would-be autocrats in Central Asia and the world over that economic engagement will arrive only with substantive political reform.

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