Constructing Militant Opposition: Authoritarian Rule and Political Islam in Central Asia

Paper Prepared for the Yale Lecture Series on Central Asia
April 6, 2004

Paper Abstract: That Islamist movements have proliferated across Central Asia since the Soviet collapse is clear. What is less clear, however, is why tensions between state and Islam have been markedly more pronounced in some Central Asian regions than in others. Islamist movements, much like the authoritarian states they oppose, have rarely been differentiated in the social science literature. Thus, while scholars have helpfully devised theories to explain the recent upsurge in Islamic political mobilization, few of these theories can account the strong variation that exists in the degree of tension between autocratic states and the Islamic opposition. I address this variation in the following article. Specifically, I argue that the varying strength of Islamist movements is the result of decidedly local politics. Militant Islam, where it does emerge, is not a product of a clash of civilizations, but rather, is a response to local autocratic rule.

Eric McGlinchey
Department of Political Science
Iowa State University
mcglin@iastate.edu

Eric McGlinchey—Iowa State University—mcglin@iastate.edu

Constructing Militant Opposition: Authoritarian Rule and Political Islam in Central Asia

In Central Asia, as in other regions of the world with large Muslim populations, opposition groups are increasingly turning to the ideas of militant Islam in their efforts to challenge authoritarian rule. Political Islam, activists from Kokand to Kabul, from the Pamirs to Palestine have learned, provides an unusually potent language of opposition. And in Central Asia, a wide array of opposition movements—the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, the Islamic Renaissance Party, Hizb ut-Tahrir—have, with varying degrees of militancy, applied the banner of Islam to their struggle with local authoritarian rule. The March 2004 suicide bombings and gun battles in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, in which over forty people died and dozens were injured is only the most recent reminder that, despite seven decades of Soviet rule, Islam remains a potent mobilizing force in Central Asia.

That Islamist movements have reemerged in Central Asia in the wake of the Soviet collapse is clear.[1] What is less clear, however, is why tensions between state and Islam have been significantly more pronounced in some Central Asian regions than in others. Variations in the extent, militancy and intensity of Islamist movements, much like the many different and markedly varied authoritarian states these movements oppose, are rarely differentiated in the social science literature. Thus, while scholars have helpfully

[1] Gregory Massell has convincingly demonstrated that Islam provided the basis for mobilization against Soviet authoritarian rule in the 1920s. Today's Islamist movements by no means are a new phenomenon and the logic I develop here can equally be applied to explain past Central Asian Islamist based opposition movements. For more on Soviet-era Islamist opposition, see Massell, *The Surrogate Proletariat: Moslem Women and Revolutionary Strategies in Soviet Central Asia, 1919-1929*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974).

devised theories to explain the recent upsurge in Islamic political mobilization, few of these theories explain why Islamist movements are more pronounced and more militant in some authoritarian states than in others. Seeing these differences in Islamist mobilization to be of both theoretical interest to social science theory and of immediate import to state-society conflicts not only in Central Asia, but also in the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia and, more and more, in the Western world, I seek to explain the root causes of variations in political Islam.

Importantly, scholars have devoted considerable attention to the question of political Islam. Historian of the Middle East, Bernard Lewis, and political scientist Samuel Huntington, for example, write that the globalization of Western culture has sparked an Islamist backlash.[2] Central Asian scholars and political leaders, for their part, have argued that the Islamist opposition has been artificially crafted through the meddling of foreign "extremists" from Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey and Pakistan. Rashid Kadyrov, the Uzbek prosecutor general, said of the March 29-30, 2004 Tashkent bombings, for example, "the character and method of this act is not common to our people... It was probably exported from abroad."[3] Problematically however, while these clash of civilizations and foreign intervention arguments may capture part of the cause, they nevertheless treat Islamist opposition as an undifferentiated whole. That is, they provide few insights into why some Islamist movements are more militant and why conflict between state and Islam is greater in some countries than in others. In this essay I directly address this variation. More specifically, I seek to explain why tensions between

---

[2] Bernard Lewis, "The Roots of Muslim Rage," *The Atlantic Monthly*, (September 1990). Samuel Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations," *Foreign Affairs* 72:3.
[3] Seth Mydans, "19 Killed in Uzbekistan; Terrorism Blamed," *The New York Times*, March 30, 2004.

state and Islam have proven greater—and considerably more violent—in Uzbekistan than they have in Kyrgyzstan. Through a comparison of Islamist movements in these two countries, I find that international variables, be it the encroachment of foreign cultures or foreign missionaries and foreign financial support, indeed are important to the spread of political Islam in Central Asia. The varying strength of the Islamist movements, however, is a result of the decidedly local politics. Political Islam in Central Asia is a response to autocratic rule. And, problematically for the West and its newfound allies among the Central Asian leadership, the more autocratic this rule is, the greater resonance and popular support militant Islamist movements gain.

This article, in sum, provides an explanation for local level variations in political Islam. To achieve this, I proceed in four steps. In section one I discuss the literature on political Islam and outline the insights this literature holds for the current spread of political Islam in Central Asia. In section two I compare these leading hypotheses to the domestic level explanation I offer in contrast. In section three, I illustrate how, while the international context is important to social mobilization, the marked variation we see in Central Asian Islamist movements cannot be explained without reference to domestic politics. Comparing the Uzbek and Kyrgyz cases, I demonstrate how differences in the degree of autocratic rule shape both the resonance and the militancy of Islamist opposition. Lastly, in section four, I conclude by exploring the implications this finding presents both for Central Asian politics and for broader international relations.

I. The Comparative Study of Political Islam

Origins and Clashes

Political Islam, though recent to Central Asia, has long provided a language of mobilization for opponents of autocratic rule in Middle Eastern, North African and South East Asian countries. Political Islam as first conceived in the 1950s was a response to the "nationalist and chauvinistic ideologies which have appeared in modern times."[4] Mid twentieth century Islamists viewed the Middle East's post-colonial nationalist governments, along with their Western and Soviet backers, as "infertile," "defeated" and "degenerate."[5] Instead of freedom, they argued, post colonial independence brought servitude. The Middle East's post colonial nationalist governments, Islamist writers like Sayyid Qutb believed, introduced a new form of domination, simply made "some men lords over others." Qutb, seen as a threat by Egypt's Nasser government, was hanged in 1966. His ideas, however, particularly his belief that through a return to Qur'anic law, through "the Islamic way of life… all men become free from the servitude of some men to others," have continued to inspire Islamists throughout the world.[6]

Qutb and his contemporaries pointedly contrasted this Islamic ideal to what they saw as the "humiliation of the common man" at the hands of distinctly Western forms of governance—nationalism, communism and democracy.[7] And for many scholars and Islamists today Qutb's contrast between Islam and the West remains the wellspring of

---

[4] Sayyid Qutb, "Introduction," *Signposts in the Road.*
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid., p. 2.
[7] Ibid.

Islamist opposition. Hizb ut-Tahrir (the Party of Liberation, hereafter HT), for example, an Islamist movement active across much of Central Asia, advises its followers:

> The clash of civilisations is an inevitable matter.... Make the preparations required for the conflict, since the Capitalist Western civilisation has knocked you down militarily, politically and economically; however they will never defeat you intellectually.[8]

HT's clash of civilizations ideas are mirrored in much of the current Western literature on political Islam. Bernard Lewis, both a scholar of Middle Eastern history but also an adviser to the current Bush administration,[9] thus writes in his 1990 article, "The Roots of Muslim Rage," that political Islam is "perhaps [an] irrational but surely historic reaction of an ancient rival against our Judeo-Christian heritage, our secular present, and the worldwide expansion of both."[10] Lewis's thesis, echoed in Harvard political scientist Samuel Huntington's widely read *Clash of Civilizations*, has found support among scholars working in Central Asia. Ahmed Rashid concludes, for example, that in the Muslim post-Soviet states "there is a palpable cultural vacuum at the heart of Central Asia, which cannot be filled by consumerism or imitations of Western culture."[11]

---

[8] (p. 63) *The Inevitability of the Clash of Civilisation*, http://www.hizb-ut-tahrir.org/english/books/clashofcivilisation/clashofcivilisation.pdf

[9] Lewis has met privately with Bush political strategist Karl Rove, with National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice, and with Vice President, Dick Cheney. Emphasizing Lewis's influence on US foreign policy, the *Wall Street Journal* refers to the retired Princeton professor's ideas as the "Lewis Doctrine." And, as David Frum, Bush's former speech writer, noted to the *Wall Street Journal,* the President has been seen "carrying a marked-up article by Mr. Lewis among his briefing papers." Peter Waldman, "Containing Jihad: A Historian's Take on Islam Steers U.S. In Terrorism Fight," February 3, 2004, p. 1, 12.

[10] Bernard Lewis, "The Roots of Muslim Rage," *The Atlantic Monthly*, (September 1990), available on line: http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/90sep/rage.htm .

[11] Ahmed Rashid, "The New Struggle in Central Asia: A Primer for the Baffled," *World Policy Journal* (Winter 2000/2001), p. 33.

Curiously, at a time when many in the social sciences and in society more broadly are attempting to leave behind beliefs of primordial identity, scholars and a wide array of practitioners of political Islam continue to argue that not just nations, but entire civilizations are defined by immutable characteristics.[12] According to this view, Islam and the West—Western secularism, Western consumerism, Western democracy—are, by nature, incompatible. Thus, while political Islam itself may be relatively new, spurred by globalization, the growing encroachment of Western culture, and the spread, however imperfect, of Western forms of governance, the deep causes of political Islam are unchanging. Being a Muslim, by nature, demands a rejection of that which is rejected by the Qu'ran and a return to the *dar el-Islam*, the World of Islam.[13]

Rejecting Fundamentalism

This clash of civilizations hypothesis has not gone unchallenged. Edward Said, for one, equates the clash's depiction of the West and Islam to a "cartoon like world where Popeye and Bluto bash each other mercilessly."[14] Dissenters from the clash like Said argue that not all Muslims view Western society as antagonistic. Moreover, clash critics argue, not all Westerners share the belief, expressed by United States Under Secretary of Defense William Boykin, that the Judeo-Christian world will be triumphant because its God is somehow "bigger."[15]

---

[12] For more on the academic side of this debate, see Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, (New York: Blackwell, 1986).
[13] Qutb, "Introduction."
[14] Edward Said, "The Clash of Ignorance," *The Nation* (October 22, 2001).
[15] "Rumsfeld Praises Army General Who Ridicules Islam as 'Satan," *New York Times* (October 17, 2003), p. 7.

Clash critics argue that religion provides flawed justification for the thought dichotomy of Islam and the West. Indeed, Middle East scholars John Esposito and John Voll remind, lest we forget our own history, that the West's path to democracy, a journey which is still incomplete, required a wholesale "reconceptualization of premodern traditions."[16] Moreover, while clash theorists argue that "civilizations are differentiated from each other by history, language, culture, tradition and, most important, religion,"[17] political scientist Paul Corcoran observes of a perhaps not so different Western civilization:

> From the perspective of twenty-five hundred years of Western political thinking, almost no one, until very recently, thought democracy to be a very good way of structuring political life.[18]

Such critiques are instructive, for to preclude the possibility of political reform in Muslim societies, as clash of civilizations theories so often do, is to ignore the Western world's own troubled and protracted experience with political liberalization. Clash of civilization theories demand we ignore the many empirical realities that challenge what, in actuality, is the blurry divide between the Western and Islamic worlds. Judeo-Christian beliefs are not a guarantee for democracy and Islam is not everywhere a predictor of anti-democratic values. Turkish society, though Muslim, is supportive of democracy.[19] And, as survey research reveals, Central Asian Muslims, while they

---

[16] John O. Voll and John L. Esposito, "Islam's Democratic Essence," *Middle East Quarterly* (September 1994).

[17] Samuel Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations," *Foreign Affairs* 72:3 (Summer 1993), p. 25.

[18] Paul E. Corcoran, "The Limits of Democratic Theory," in G. Duncan ed., *Democratic Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 13. Quoted in Voll and Esposito (GET PAGE CITE).

[19] Clash theorists do address the Turkish case—but see it as a case of exceptionalism rather than as a harbinger of political reform in other Muslim societies. See, for example,

overwhelmingly dislike their current authoritarian leaderships strongly support democratic reform.[20]

Oddly, while Central Asians do not support their authoritarian leaders, the Western world has not always shared this distaste for these same autocrats. On his February 2004 visit to Tashkent, for example, the U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, thanked the Uzbek leader, Islam Karimov, for his "stalwart support in the war on terror."[21] This praise came only weeks after Human Rights Watch experts briefed the United Nations on Uzbekistan's "appalling human rights record,"[22] and after the State Department itself concluded the Uzbek leadership had made no progress in improving human rights.[23] Indeed, democracy activists in the Middle East, Central and South East Asia point to a long history of non-democratic US intervention: the CIA's involvement in Iran's 1953 coup, steady American relations with Saudi Arabia, U.S. support for Pakistan's Zia-ul

---

Bernard Lewis, "Why Turkey Is the Only Muslim Democracy," *The Middle East Quarterly* (March 1994).

[20] My analysis of Kyrgyz and Kazakh public opinion, for example, demonstrates an overwhelming dislike of the authoritarian Akaev and Nazarbaev leaderships. See McGlinchey, "Paying for Patronage: Regime Change in Post-Soviet Central Asia," (Princeton: Princeton University, Ph.D. Dissertation, 2003). Regarding the question of democracy, Richard Rose's study of Kazakh and Kyrgyz public opinion demonstrates that 61 % of Muslim Kazakhs and Kyrgyz believe that "demoracy is better than any other form of government," and, moreover, that "being a Muslim does not make a person more likely either to reject democracy or to endorse dictatorship." Richard Rose, "How Muslims View Democracy: Evidence from Central Asia," *Journal of Democracy* 13:4 (October 2002), pp. 106, 110.

[21] BBC Monitoring International Reports, "USA's Rumsfeld Thanks Uzbekistan for 'Stalward Support' in War on Terror," (February 24, 2004), Lexis Nexis.

[22] Human Rights Watch, "Briefing to the 60th Session of the UN Commission on Human Rights," January 2004, available on-line, http://hrw.org/english/docs/2004/01/29/global7127_txt.htm .

[23] Peter Slevin, "U.S. Gives Uzbekistan Failing Grade on Rights," *The Washington Post* (January 11, 2004), p. A18.

Haq, America's acquiescence in the 1992 Algerian military coup.[24] Given this history of intervention, political scientist and Brookings Institute scholar Muqtedar Khan, writes, it is understandable that many in the region see the United States as "not opposed to Islam but to democracy and popular government in the Middle East."[25]

In short, although clash of civilizations hypotheses for the spread of political Islam abound both in the United States and abroad, empirical reality suggests a considerably more complex world than the simple binaries of the West and Islam. Regardless if the question is one of political liberalization or international relations (and clash theories often elide both), there is little evidence that religion is determinative of political outcomes. When geopolitically expedient, the democratic West has sided with illiberal and even fundamentalist regimes in the Middle East, Central and South Asia. And similarly problematic for clash theories, Muslims in the Middle East, Central and South Asia have expressed strong support for democratic reform and equal distaste for autocratic rule. Variation, not uniformity, defines political Islam. And although there are multiple cases of growing militant Islamist movements which seemingly conform to the clash of civilizations hypothesis, there are equal if not more cases where the West and Islam comfortably meet and where the boundary between the two is imperceptible.

If not a clash of civilizations though, what then explains the recent increase in political Islam in regions like Central Asia and the Middle East? In the remainder of this section I discuss two alternative theories to the clash of civilizations: (1) the idea that the growth of political Islam is the product of radical intervention on the part of transnational Islamic

---

[24] Muqtedar Khan, "Prospects for Muslim Democracy: The Role of U.S. Policy," *Middle East Policy* (Fall 2003), p. 80-81.
[25] Ibid., p. 81.

activists and (2) the hypothesis that the upsurge in political Islam is a grassroots response to local authoritarian rule. The first hypothesis views political Islam as something which is alien, fomented by radicals from the outside. The second hypothesis—the logic which I argue is driving the growth of Islamism in Central Asia—sees political Islam as indigenous, varied and instrumental—as a rational and powerful strategy for opposing autocratic rule.

Foreign Extremists

Evidence from Chechnya, Afghanistan, Central Asia and now Iraq confirms that foreign nationals are active in promoting a wide spectrum of Islamic-based mobilization movements. Al Qaeda, to take but one example, has supported militant Islamic movements in Afghanistan, Central Asia, Lebanon, Jordan, Malaysia, Pakistan[26] and now, in Iraq.[27] Thus, it is understandable that leaders the world over publicly denounce the intervention of foreign Islamists in domestic affairs. What is less understandable, however, is the claim these leaders often make—that the spread of political Islam is a direct product of foreign intervention and not a domestic response to local authoritarian rule.

Gauging the extent of foreign Islamic activity in a country is difficult. While many foreign Islamic activists are visible, working openly with neighborhood communities and, much like Christian missionary groups, establishing schools which incorporate religious teaching along with general education, a substantial portion of foreign aid, particularly

[26] Steven Simon, "The New Terrorism," *The Brookings Review* 21:1 (Winter 2003), p. 20.
[27] Walter Pincus, "Terror Suspect's Ambitions Worry U.S. Officials; Zarqawi May Be Looking Beyond Iraq," *The Washington Post* (March 3, 2004), p. A22.

aid to what state leaders label "radical" Islam, occurs outside of public view. Thus, the measures that we do have of foreign actors promoting Islamist movements are incomplete and, when reported by governments, often biased.

The Kyrgyz and Uzbek governments, as well as the leaderships in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, have all claimed that the activities of foreign "extremists" threaten domestic security. The Kyrgyz president Askar Akaev, addressing a roundtable meeting on Central Asian security at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland in January 2000, for example, concluded that foreign terrorists training in Afghanistan and their spread of religious extremism to Central Asia "is one of the key factors that may influence stability and security in our region."[28] Also speaking at Davos, the Kazakh Prime Minister, Kasymzhomart Tokaev, added "if Islamic radicalism spreads throughout Central Asia, all the peace plans will be endangered."[29] The Tajik president, Emomali Rakhmonov, addressing foreign news agencies prior to his December 2002 trip to Washington, reminded his American hosts that his country has long been on the "frontline" and that "it took the September 11 events for the world to realize the massive terrorist threat coming from the Afghan Taliban regime."[30] And in his 2002 New Year's Eve address to the nation, the Uzbek president, Islam Karimov, warned of a "huge evil -

[28] Konstantin Pribytkov and Alexander Stepanenko, "Kyrgyz, Kazakh Statesmen Speak of Religious Extremism Spread," *Itar-Tass* (January 28, 2000), LexisNexis.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Luc Perrot, "Help Us or Face more Terrorism, Tajikistan's Rakhmonov Tells West," *Agence France Presse*, December 2, 2002, available in Lexis-Nexis.

international terrorism, extremism and fanaticism, which has been posing a threat to our peaceful and calm life over the past few years."[31]

These pronouncements, moreover, have been backed by wide spread arrests of activists whom Central Asian leaders label "Wahhabis"—adherents to what, in the state press, is depicted as foreign, extremist Islam.[32] In Uzbekistan, an estimated 5,000 of the country's 6,000 political prisoners are thought to be sympathizers of the Jordan-based extremist group, Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT).[33] In Tajikistan 142 HT sympathizers were arrested over a ten month span in 2002.[34] And in Kyrgyzstan, the State Committee on Religious Affairs estimates that there are 2,000 HT activists in country.[35]

Though at best a crude measure, these arrests demonstrate that foreign ideas of political Islam have taken hold in Central Asia. What these numbers do not establish, however, is why political Islam has won admirers in Central Asian society. Of course, the intent of these government pronouncements is to link the growth in political Islam with outside intervention. After all, if foreign meddling cannot be blamed, then Central Asian leaders would be forced to confront an alternative causal explanation—the domestic roots of Islamist opposition.

---

[31] "Uzbekistan Keeps Threat of Terrorism From the Door--Leader's New Year Message," BBC Monitoring International Reports, January 1, 2003 (from Uzbek Television first channel, December 31, 2002), available in Lexis-Nexis.

[32] Whahhabism is the strict form of Sunni Islam practiced in Saudi Arabia. In Central Asia, however, the term "Wahhabi" is shorthand for any form of religious extremism.

[33] US Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, "Uzbekistan: International Religious Freedom Report 2003," available online, http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2003/.

[34] US Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, "Tajikistan: International Religious Freedom Report 2003," available online, http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2003/.

[35] US Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, "Kyrgyzstan: International Religious Freedom Report 2003," available online, http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2003/.

II. Variation and the Domestic Roots of Political Islam

Troubling for clash of civilization and foreign intervention hypotheses, the local reality of Central Asian political Islam is considerably more complex than either theory would predict. Both the clash of civilizations and foreign intervention arguments are at their roots, structural explanations for the rise of political Islam. As such, we would expect, all things equal, that these structures would have similar affects across Central Asia. That is, if political Islam were indeed, as Bernard Lewis argues, an "irrational but surely historic reaction of an ancient rival against our Judeo-Christian heritage, our secular present, and the worldwide expansion of both,"[36] we would expect this reaction to be more or less uniform across Islamic society. Similarly, if political Islam were a product of aid and proselytizing by radical foreign Islamists, we would expect political Islam to be strongest in those areas where foreigners enjoy the most freedoms. Neither of these predictions, however, is borne out by Central Asian reality. The Central Asian rejection of Western culture has neither been uniform nor complete. Neither, moreover, has the resonance of political Islam been most pronounced in those areas where foreign actors have been most free. Just the opposite has proven true; the growth of Islamist movements has been most marked in areas where foreigner intervention has been most restricted.

This does not mean, importantly, that conflicting cultures and foreign intervention have had no causal role on the spread of political Islam in Central Asia. Foreign ideas and proselytizing as well as a real uneasiness with Western consumer culture have indeed contributed to the popularity of Islamist movements in the region. Crucially, however,

[36] "The Roots of Muslim Rage."

these structural variables have been mediated a more salient and considerably more local reality—the domestic politics of individual Central Asian states. More specifically, I argue, Islamist movements in Central Asia are first and foremost a response to local authoritarian rule: the more authoritarian the state, the more pronounced political Islam will be in society.

The causal link between Islamist opposition and the degree of authoritarian rule might at first glance seem odd. Indeed, would not *all* opposition, not just Islamist opposition, increase as authoritarian rule increased? Curiously, in Central Asia, this has not been the case. Pro-democracy opposition groups, for example, have been most active in Kyrgyzstan, the least authoritarian of the Central Asian states. At the same time, the Islamist movement in Kyrgyzstan is arguably among the least active of all Islamist opposition movements in Central Asia. In Uzbekistan, the exact opposite prevails—democracy-based opposition movements are weak while Islamist opposition movements are strong.

These varying forms of opposition, as I detail in section three, result from the varying natures of Uzbek and Kyrgyz authoritarian rule. More specifically, domestic opposition groups adjust their strategies according to the degree of contestation allowed under a given authoritarian regime. In authoritarian states where limited contestation is allowed, where opposition groups can find voice in the parliament or in the press, these opposition groups are more likely to see their interests as best served by lobbying for incremental reform and liberalization within the existing institutional context. In totalitarian states, in contrast, where contestation is not allowed and where the opposition is fully disenfranchised from the political system, opposition movements are more likely to press

for revolutionary change.[37] More specifically, the Islamist call to revolution will find greater resonance in totalitarian regimes which exclude all political competition within state institutions and the press than in authoritarian states which, even to a limited extent, allow some contestation.[38] In the two by two below I summarize the prevailing form of political opposition which I argue we would expect given variations in the nature of non-democratic rule.

Figure 1. Opposition Movements and the Degree of Political Contestation

		Form of Non-Democratic Rule	
		Authoritarian (Limited Contestation)	Totalitarian (No Contestation)
Type of Opposition	Reformist Opposition (Pro Democracy Movements)	√	
	Revolutionary Opposition (Islamist Movements)		√

The transitions literature, to the extent that it does address non-democratic political outcomes, tends to lump these outcomes into a non-differentiated residual category of

[37] By totalitarian states, I mean states in which power is monopolized by a single party and reinforced by absolute control over the media and the military. For more on the totalitarian state, see Carl Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* (New York: Praeger, 1965).
[38] Donald Horowitz demonstrates a similar dynamic in states where a single ethnicity controls all the spoils of political rule. In such states, Horowitz argues, those excluded from power are likely to seek radical rather than incremental change: "When democratic elections produce ethnic exclusion, undemocratic reactions to it can be expected." Horowitz, "Democracy in Divided Societies," *Journal of Democracy* 4:4 (1993), p. 28.

"authoritarianism."[39] As I illustrate here in the case of Central Asia, however, non-democratic states, like democratic states, vary and these variations have profound consequences. More specifically, I argue that variations in the type of authoritarian rule lead to variations in the nature of domestic political opposition.

Opposition movements gravitate to those strategies which they perceive as most effective. Democratic strategies are viable in authoritarian states which allow some degree of dialogue and contestation. Through dialogue and political contestation opposition movements can nurture the hope that, someday, they too may win power. In states where political control is absolute, however, opposition movements maintain no such hope. Instead, revolutionary change is seen as the only viable strategy for effecting political change. Thus, while the clash of civilizations and the intervention of foreign activists have, perhaps, provided the ideas and ideology of political Islam, the prominence of political Islam is by no means uniform across the region, but rather, varies in response to the local nature of authoritarian rule.

III. Contestation and Political Islam in Central Asia

No Central Asian state is democratic. In its annual *Freedom in the World Country Ratings*, Freedom House has consistently rated all Central Asian states as *not free*.[40] Within this broad category of *not free* or not democratic, however, significant variation exists in the nature of authoritarian rule and, most importantly, in the extent of political

---

[39] Several authors have faulted the transitions literature for failing to address non-democratic outcomes. See, for example, Thomas Carothers, "The End of the Transition Paradigm," *Journal of Democracy* 13:1 (2002), and Michael McFaul, "The Fourth Wave of Democracy and Dictatorship: Noncooperative Transitions in the Postcommunist World," *World Politics* (January 2002).

[40] For more on the Freedom House scores and Freedom House's methodology, see http://www.freedomhouse.org/research/freeworld/FHSCORES.xls .

contestation. For example, the Kyrgyz and, more recently, the Tajik leaderships have been careful to allow the opposition some degree of voice, particularly in the national parliaments and in the news media. The Uzbek leadership, in contrast, has effectively barred the domestic opposition from all government offices, from national and local newspapers, and from the electronic media. As I next illustrate, these differing degrees of political contestation have been central to rise of political Islam in Uzbekistan and to the comparatively muted Islamist opposition movement in Kyrgyzstan.

Kyrgyzstan—Contestation, Ethnicity and Political Islam

Kyrgyzstan, once the darling of the West and the country which appeared most likely democratize in Central Asia, has become more rather than less authoritarian over the past decade. Following a brief period of liberalization in the early 1990s in which the parliament proved a strong counterweight to executive power, Kyrgyzstan's checks and balances gave way to executive dominated political control. Today the Kyrgyz legislature serves at the pleasure of the president. Indeed, the recently amended Kyrgyz constitution stipulates that the parliament can be dismissed by the president:

> If so decided by a referendum; in the event of three [subsequent] refusals by the [parliament] to accept a nominee to the office of the Prime Minister; or in the event of another crisis caused by an insurmountable disagreement between the [parliament] and other branches of state power.[41]

Importantly, however, the Kyrgyz parliament, as well as the Kyrgyz press, afford what, for Central Asia, is an admirable degree of political contestation. The parliament, for example, while its formal powers pale in comparison to those of the president,

[41] Article 63.2 of the Kyrgyz Constitution, quoted in OSCE/ODIHR Political Assessment Report "Kyrgyz Republic Constitutional Referendum 2 February 2003," (Warsaw: March 20, 2003), p. 8.

nevertheless does provide a venue for competition and political dissent. Thus, of the 33 members of parliament who express a party affiliation, more than one third of these deputies belong to the political opposition.[42] These opposition MPs, because they can criticize executive rule from within the formal institutions of state government, enjoy a political efficacy that their colleagues in totalitarian Uzbekistan do not. Independent Kyrgyz media outlets, moreover, ensure that this parliamentary opposition maintains a real voice in the national political debate.

This ability publicly to contest power has led to the Kyrgyz opposition's investment in and its acceptance of existing state institutions. Given this investment, the Kyrgyz political opposition has more often than not sought to achieve change from within the existing institutional framework rather than, as in the case of Islamist opposition in Uzbekistan, to press for the wholesale overthrow of the government. Granted, publicly challenging President Akaev's authoritarian rule is not without its risks; several Kyrgyz oppositionists have been jailed for their activities. Even when behind bars, though, Kyrgyz oppositionists are ensured a political influence that would be unimaginable in Uzbekistan.

Parliament deputy Azimbek Beknazarov, to take one example, was imprisoned in January 2002 after repeatedly stating that the Kyrgyz president's decision to cede disputed border lands to China was tantamount to treason.[43] The state officially charged Beknazarov with "abuses of power," the charges dating back to his work in the mid

---

[42] OSCE/ODIHR, "Kyrgyz Republic Parliamentary Elections, 20 February and 12 March 2000," (Warsaw: April 10, 2000), p. 20.
[43] For more on the Beknazarov case, see Ulugbek Babkulov and Kubat Otorbaev, "Rasplata za krikiku," *Navigator* (24 January 2002), available online, http://www.navi.kz/oldnavi/articles/war240102a.shtml .

1990s as a regional prosecutor. Challenging these official charges, both the speaker of the Kyrgyz parliament, Abdygany Erkebaev, and the U.S. Department of State concluded that Beknazarov's arrest was politically motivated.[44] More telling than the circumstances surrounding Beknazarov's arrest, however, is the wave of protest it sparked both in the parliament and in Kyrgyz society. At an emergency meeting of parliamentary deputies called to discuss Beknazarov's imprisonment, opposition MP Topchubek Turganaliev repeatedly called on President Akaev to resign. Parliamentary deputy Doronbek Sadyrbaev added that if Beknazarov were to remain in jail, all MPs should "leave the country before it is too late."[45] Matching the opposition MPs' indignation in the parliament building, Beknazarov supporters gathered outside and warned that if the opposition deputy were not freed, they were prepared for "even more decisive action."[46]

The Bishkek protestors' warnings proved true. Demonstrations quickly spread from the capital to the regions and, on March 17, 2002, Kyrgyz interior police shot and killed five Beknazarov supporters in the southern Jalal Abad oblast. Confronted with growing condemnation for the killings and fearing further protests, the Akaev government released Beknazarov on March 19th. Restored to his seat in parliament and now the head

[44] For the U.S. Department of State's interpretation of the Beknazarov case, see: Kyrgyz Republic, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices -- 2002 (U.S. Dept. of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 31 March 2003), http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/krrpt/2002/18374.htm. For more on the official charges against Beknazarov, see Babkulov and Otorbaev. For more on Erkebaev's interpretation of the Beknazarov charges, see Alisher Khamidov, "MP's Arrest Focuses Attention on Executive-Legislative Struggle in Kyrgyzstan," (January 9, 2002), www.eurasianet.org .
[45] Babkulov and Otorbaev.
[46] Ibid.

of a new coalition, the Movement for the Resignation of (President) Akaev, Beknazarov and his opposition colleagues continue to challenge authoritarian rule.[47]

As the Beknazarov example illustrates, Kyrgyz opposition movements can effectively challenge authoritarian rule using the independent media and existing political institutions. Revolutionary, antiestablishment strategies, for example the strategies of political Islam are, as a result, of little attraction to mainstream Kyrgyz opposition. This is not to say, however, that Islamist movements do not exist in Kyrgyzstan. Indeed, political Islam has made inroads among some portions of Kyrgyz society, most notably, among the Uzbek population in the Osh and Jalal Abad oblasts.

The Kyrgyz government estimates that 5,000 members of the radical Hizb ut-Tahrir Islamist party are active in southern Kyrgyzstan.[48] Like other Central Asian governments, Russia and Germany, the Kyrgyz government has banned Hizb ut-Tahrir due to the group's extremist views. Nevertheless, the radical group remains active and, in 2000, 150 HT members were temporarily detained.[49] In 2001 this number increased to 400.[50] And, in the first eight months of 2003, the Kyrgyz state began investigations into a further 1,650 Islamic "agitators."[51] The overwhelming majority of these arrests and investigations have been concentrated in the Ferghana Valley, among the Uzbek populations of the Jalal Abad and Osh.

---

[47] For more on the Movement for the Resignation of Akaev, see: Charles Carlson, Kyrgyzstan: Embattled Opposition Mulls Election Strategy, Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty (August 25, 2003).
[48] Roman Streshnev, "Voenno-politicheskoe obzorenie," *Krasnaia zvezda*, 28 October 2003.
[49] Charles Carson, "Kyrgyzstan: Hizb ut-Tahrir Accused Of Increased Militancy," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* (March 3, 2003).
[50] Ibid.
[51] A. Galich, "Islam.... s listovkoi," *Slovo Kyrgyzstana* (August 15, 2003), p. 12.

Of course, incarceration rates alone do not establish that Islamist movements have gained in popularity. The level of Islamist opposition, for example, may have remained constant between 1999 and 2002 while the Kyrgyz state simply became more aggressive in its pursuit of perceived agitators. Hizb ut-Tahrir and other Islamist opposition groups, alas, do not release their members lists. As such, establishing a definitive measure of changes in the Islamist opposition is difficult.

Nevertheless, despite these imperfect measures, that Islamist opposition movements have gained more support among Kyrgyzstan's minority Uzbek population is increasingly clear. And just as cross-state variations in political Islam in Central Asia can be explained by differences in the nature of authoritarianism, so too is within state variation the product of local differences in autocratic rule. More directly stated, the Akaev regime has proven far less welcoming of minority Uzbek political contestation than it has been of ethnic Kyrgyz contestation.

Kyrgyzstan's minority Uzbek's are disproportionately underrepresented in state institutions. Ethnic Uzbeks hold only five out of the parliament's 105 seats and the Uzbek language, unlike Russian, is not an official state language—this despite the fact that Uzbeks, who constitute more than 20 percent of the Kyrgyz population, are a larger minority than are ethnic Russians.[52] President Akaev's recent efforts to promote Kyrgyz nationalism, moreover, have further exacerbated ethnic Uzbek feelings of exclusion. In October 2002, for example, the Akaev regime sponsored a celebration to commemorate

[52] For the parliamentary data, see: "Age, Ethnic Profile of Newly-Elected Parliament," BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, 24 March 2000 (from *Slovo Kyrgyzstana*, Bishkek, 21 Mar 2000), available in LexisNexis. For figures on the ethnicity and composition of the Kyrgyz population, see: Alisher Khamidov, "Ethnic Uzbeks Stoke Unrest in Southern Kyrgyzstan," 26 June 2002, www.eurasianet.org .

the 3,000-year anniversary of the founding of the Silk Road city, Osh. Similarly, in August 2003, President Akaev declared a national holiday to commemorate 2,200 years of "Kyrgyz Nationhood." Both celebrations, Uzbeks protested, championed Kyrgyz culture while ignoring what, in reality, is the culturally Uzbek heritage of much of southern Kyrgyzstan.[53]

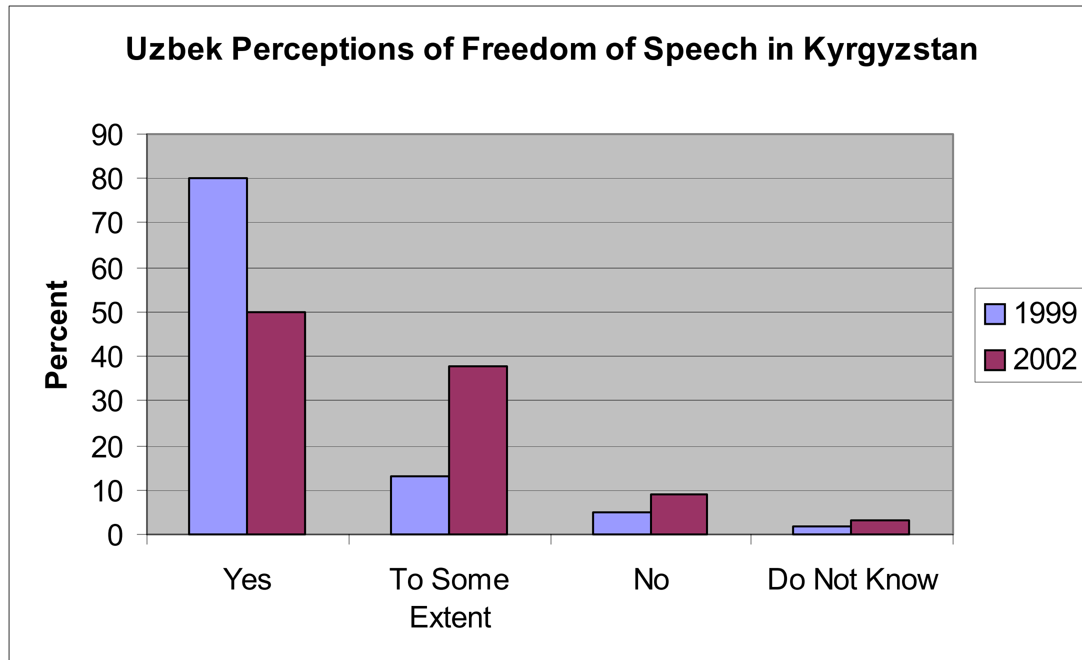
Survey data, moreover, further documents a growing sense of alienation and disenfranchisement among the Uzbek population. As the below data on freedom of speech reveals, Kyrgyzstan's southern Uzbeks, the population which has been most drawn to political Islam, clearly sense that their ability to openly oppose the Akaev regime has eroded in recent years. In 1999, for example, 80 percent of Uzbeks surveyed reported that they enjoyed freedom of speech. Three years later, this number had dropped to 50 percent (see Figure 2, below).[54]

Given this growing sense of alienation combined with their under representation in the national parliament, that Southern Kyrgyzstan's Uzbek population is attracted to the antiestablishment ideology of political Islam is understandable. Authoritarian rule is more severe for Kyrgyzstan's ethnic Uzbeks than it is for the titular population. Accordingly, ethnic Uzbeks, with few opportunities to achieve political change from within existing political institutions, are increasingly drawn to revolutionary groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir, to Islamist movements which seek the complete overthrow of the state.

[53] Ahmedjan Saipjanov, "Kyrgyzstan 'Statehood' Festiviities a Potential Source of Interethnic Tension," August 26, 2003, www.eurasianet.org.

[54] I have just begun analyzing these data sets. Surveys were commissioned by the United States Department of State and conducted by the polling agency, *Brif*. For more on *Brif* and its survey methodology, see www.brif.kz.

Figure 2. Survey Question: Do you believe freedom of speech exists in Kyrgyzstan?



N (1999) = 162
N (2003) = 268

These mixed outcomes—little Islamist opposition among the broader titular population while growing Islamist opposition among minority Uzbeks—illustrates the local logic of political Islam. In Kyrgyzstan the resonance of political Islam varies at the substate level. In regions where meaningful contestation is absent, people turn to revolutionary ideologies. In regions where the opposition can contest politics through existing institutions, revolutionary ideologies find less support. The Kyrgyz case demonstrates, in short, that the strength of the Islamist opposition varies inversely with political contestation.

Uzbekistan—Totalitarian Rule and Militant Islam

Uzbek state rule closely matches what political scientists Carl Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski define as totalitarianism.[55] Uzbekistan's heavy handed president, Islam Karimov, maintains monopoly control over which (pro-presidential) parties contest parliamentary elections, the media, large portions of the economy and, perhaps most notoriously, over a terrorizing police force. Not only are would be Uzbek oppositionists prevented from contesting national elections, they are routinely jailed, tortured and forced into exile. Unlike their colleagues in Kyrgyzstan, the Uzbek opposition cannot participate in meaningful political discourse. Prevented from contesting power in the parliament or, for that matter, in any institution of state governance, a growing number of Uzbek oppositionists have turned to non state institutions, most notably to the radical Hizb ut-Tahrir party (HT) and to the militant Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), in an effort to overthrow Karimov's dictatorial rule.

In contrast to the Spring 2000 Kyrgyz parliamentary ballot in which two opposition parties—the Party of Communists and the People's Party—were able to contest elections, no opposition parties were allowed to participate in Uzbekistan's December 1999 parliamentary vote.[56] Moreover, in addition to being excluded from organs of state power, the opposition is also denied a voice in the national media. Describing this absolute state control over the press, the Geneva based media watch-dog, Cimera, writes:

---

[55] Carl Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski, 1965.
[56] The two opposition parties which sought to participate—Erk and Berlik—were denied registration by the Uzbek Central Election Committee. See Galima Bukharbayeva, "Uzbeks Vote for New Parliament Under Intense Security," *Agence France Press* (December 5, 1999), available in LexisNexis.

> Despite the large number of newspapers and a relatively developed electronic media network, there is not a single independent newspaper, television or radio station that can offer an alternative view to that of official news and analysis.[57]

It is not only the opposition, however, which is denied a voice in Uzbekistan. Members of Non Governmental Organizations and human rights groups are also intimidated and denied legal status. In April 2001, Tashkent police committed Elena Urlaeva, a member of the Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan, to a psychiatric hospital.[58] At the time of her arrest, Urlaeva was organizing protests against the rerouting of a city road through private homes in Tashkent.[59] While Urlaeva was ultimately released, other activists have faired less well. Popular writer and champion of minority Uiger interests, Emim Usmam, as well as human rights proponent, Shovruk Ruzimuradov, both died while in police custody in 2001.[60]

In short, forms of political contestation tolerated in authoritarian states like Kyrgyzstan are harshly repressed by the totalitarian government in Uzbekistan. Barred from traditional—and as we saw in the Kyrgyz case—moderating avenues for political dissent, a growing number of Uzbek oppositionists have turned to militant Islamist movements in the hopes of destabilizing President Karimov's totalitarian regime. Indeed, the Uzbek government, in contrast to the other Central Asian leaderships, has had to confront frequent armed attacks carried out by Islamists. Uzbek soldiers, for example, have repeatedly clashed with armed IMU militants seeking to cross the Kyrgyz-Uzbek

---

[57] Shahida Tulaganova, "Report on the Media Situation in Uzbekistan," (London: Cimera, 2001), p. 3.
[58] Human Rights Watch, "Uzbekistan: Dissident in Psychiatric Detention," (New York, April 12, 2001), available online, http://www.hrw.org/press/2001/04/uzbekistan041201.htm .
[59] Ibid.
[60] Gregory Gleason, "Uzbekistan," *Nations in Transit* (New York: Freedom House, 2002), p. 424.

border. Moreover, the IMU, according to the U.S. Department of State, is "believed to have been responsible for five car bombs in Tashkent in February 1999" which killed 16 people[61] and, more recently, for the March 2004 Tashkent suicide bombings and gun battles which left more than 40 people dead.

The Uzbek government has responded harshly to these attacks, indiscriminately jailing those whom it suspects of links to Hizb ut-Tahrir and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. The U.S. Department of State estimates that 5,000 Islamists were in Uzbek jails in 2002[62], this compared to 4 Islamists in Kyrgyz jails for the same period.[63] Suicide bombings and comparative incarceration rates, admittedly, are imperfect measures of the strength of political Islam. New research, including what will be a five year longitudinal survey to be conducted in all five Central Asian states, promise to provide a clearer picture of the varying resonance of political Islam in the region.[64] Indeed, exploratory interviews of government elites conducted in preparation for this study demonstrate a much stronger perceived threat of political Islam in Uzbekistan than in Kyrgyzstan.[65] The Uzbek leadership, moreover, fearing a growing Islamist opposition movement, has,

---

[61] United States Department of State, *Patterns of Global Terrorism, 2002*, (April 2003), p. 109.

[62] US Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, "Uzbekistan: International Religious Freedom Report 2003," available online, http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2003/.

[63] US Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, "Kyrgyzstan: International Religious Freedom Report 2003," available online, http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2003/.

[64] This research is being conducted in conjunction with Beth Kolko's (University of Washington) National Science Foundation-funded study into the internet and Central Asian society.

[65] Author interviews with Kurmanbek Dykanbaev, Chairman of the Association of Local Self Governance, (Bishkek, Kyrygzstan, March 16, 2004) and with Abdulkhai Abdullaev, Vice Rector of the Tashkent Islamic University Under the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Uzbekistan, (Tashkent, Uzbekistan, March 20, 2004).

much as its Soviet predecessor did, begun to directly manage religion. In 1999 the Karimov government opened the *Tashkent Islamic University Under the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Uzbekistan*. In addition to training Uzbekistan's future imams and conducting attestation exams for current imams, the Tashkent Islamic University prepares and airs nationwide weekly television shows designed to educate the population on "tolerance and religion."[66]

The government's call for tolerant Islam is understandable. However, as the recent March 2004 suicide bombings and shootings in Tashkent demonstrate, efforts to shape the dialogue of Islam will likely have little effect as long as the Karimov leadership maintains totalitarian control and prevents all forms of meaningful political contestation.[67] The March bombings were carried out in Tashkent's Chorsu bazaar, a location in the center of the Uzbek capital which frequently has been the site of distraught women protesting the imprisonment of husbands charged with Islamist extremism. Revealingly, the March suicide bombers were women and the target of their attacks were policemen at the bazaar, not merchants and shoppers. Militant Islam, while deplorable, is not without its causes. And the markedly stronger presence of militant Islam in Uzbekistan than in other Central Asian countries is, to a large degree, the product of the Karimov regime's intolerance of peaceful political contestation.

IV. Conclusions and Implications

Hours after the March 2004 Tashkent bombings, U.S. State Department spokesman Richard Boucher condemned the attacks as a "senseless act of violence" and, emphasized

---

[66] Author interview with Abdulkhai Abdullaev.
[67] Reuters, "Nineteen Killed in Uzbek Bombs and Shootouts," (March 29, 2004).

the "importance of continued cooperation against those who would stop at nothing to achieve their misguided goals."[68] If the logic outlined in this essay is correct, however, one must question the extent to which continued cooperation with oppressive regimes like Uzbekistan furthers stability and limits the spread of militant Islam. That is, if as the Kyrgyz and Uzbek comparison suggests, political Islam takes root when other, more moderate forms of political contestation are prohibited, then it is possible that thee U.S. partnership with the Karimov government might encourage the very threats Washington hopes to prevent.

Of course, suspending relations with totalitarian states, while perhaps ethically attractive, may pragmatically be of little benefit. Uzbekistan's partnership with the United States, unlike its long history of oppressive rule, is a recent development, the product of September 11th and the coalition military campaign in Afghanistan. Thus, just as the Karimov government was totalitarian prior to U.S. engagement, there is little evidence to suggest that the Karimov government would not remain totalitarian if Washington were to withdraw its support. Indeed, by continuing its partnership with Uzbekistan, the United States maintains not only of a geopolitically strategic military base in Central Asia, but also a channel of communication through which it can encourage greater moderation on the part of the Karimov leadership.

Nevertheless, while America's divesting itself of all relations with the Karimov regime would be unproductive, a reorientation of U.S. engagement away from government to government military support and toward education programs, humanitarian relief and media reform would be a productive policy change. Following

---

[68] Associated Press, "US Forces Still Using Uzbek as Base for Afghan Operations," (March 29, 2004).

September 11, 2001, U.S. aid to Uzbekistan increased four fold, from $85 million in 2001 to $297 million in 2002.[69] The largest single component of this aid – between one third to one half of total aid depending on how one interprets the State Department's figures – was devoted to Uzbek military, security and law enforcement support.[70] In 2003, as the United States stepped down military operations in Afghanistan, American aid to Uzbekistan dropped to $86 million.[71] Military and security support, however, at over $30 million, remained the largest component of U.S. assistance.[72]

Military aid, while often directed toward laudable goals such as increased border security and narcotics interdiction, can readily be appropriated for coercive ends.[73] Aid for humanitarian assistance, education support and media reform, though it too can be captured by ruling elites for questionable, often self-enriching ends, rarely increases the coercive capacity of autocratic states. And, as the peaceful revolution that brought Mikheil Saakashvili, a Columbia University Law graduate, to power in post-Soviet Georgia, along with his Hunter College educated Minister of the Economy, American University educated Minister of Justice, and University of Illinois educated Deputy

[69] For statistics on U.S. aid to Uzbeksitan, see "U.S. Assistance to Uzbekistan – Fiscal Year 2002," (Washington, DC: Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, December 9, 2002) available online, http://www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/fs/15683.htm and "U.S. Government Assistance to and Cooperative Activities with Eurasia -FY 2002," (Washington, DC: Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, January, 2003) available online, http://www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rpt/23630.htm .

[70] $79 million out of a total of 297 million was directly targeted at security and law enforcement. Uzbekistan received an additional $78 million for what the State Department calls "U.S. Defense Department excess and privately donated humanitarian commodities."

[71] "U.S. Assistance to Uzbekistan – Fiscal Year 2003," (Washington, DC: Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, February 17, 2004).

[72] Ibid.

[73] For more on how states can apply military aid to domestic oppression, see Talukder Maniruzzaman, "Arms Transfers, Military Coups and Military Rule in Developing States," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 36:4 (December 1992).

Minister of Finance, aid for education programs can, over time, create a reformist domestic opposition capable of overthrowing authoritarian rule.[74] Granted, scholarships to support study at Western universities, along with humanitarian aid and support for media reform, may only marginally better the odds for political liberalization in post-Soviet Central Asia. This long shot, however, is better than aiding those coercive institutions which, I have argued here, give rise to an equally coercive militant Islam.

[74] All four members of the new Georgian leadership were supported by the U.S. Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs.