

## **Central Asia Faces Political Instability**

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Central Asian republics face serious political instability unless they become more democratic

Leaders of the former Soviet Central Asian republics frequently point out that the region, apart from Tajikistan, has remained free of military-political conflict. But in most other respects, stability can be measured only by the steadiness of the region's decline.

Economic health has worsened inexorably over the past 10 years. According to official statistics, production has declined by 30-50 per cent in Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan.

In Kazakstan and Tajikistan, the fall has been 60 per cent. Economic collapse on this scale is comparable with that of countries wracked by war. Yet there has been no major conflict in this part of Central Asia.

A few years ago, President Nursultan Nazarbaev of Kazakstan admitted that his country had been thrown back to pre-war level of development.

In education, health-care, culture and science, the Central Asian republics have been set back 20 years and more. In almost all of them, thousands of hospitals, clinics, kindergartens, schools, libraries, scientific institutions and arts institutions have been closed.

Hundreds of thousands of teachers, doctors, scientists and people working in the arts have found themselves out of work. Many of these losses are irreplaceable.

Mass emigration by those of 'Slavic' descent has not only caused demographic upheaval in Kazakstan and Kyrgyzstan, but also greatly strengthened the position of nationalists and traditionalists.

Corruption and theft, running like a cancer through the bureaucracy, are eating away at state systems. Massive power has been concentrated in presidential hands through manipulated referendums to extend the mandates of leaders.

Parliaments and constitutional courts have been disbanded, elections rigged and civil rights systematically suppressed. Opposition groups are hounded and unfriendly media shut down. These are the characteristics of Central Asian 'stability'.

Amid all this there are numerous allegations that ruling elites funnel tens of millions of dollars abroad to private bank accounts while their populations become increasingly impoverished.

This all makes for a recipe for dangerous instability. Western support for authoritarian regimes in Central Asia could help to hasten the onset of this instability. Propping up repressive regimes could backfire into an explosion of public anger.

The ruling elites have blithely ignored the interests of 90 per cent of their people. Their hardship and suffering, coupled with the absence of any democratic redress, have brought about mounting discontent.

Sooner or later this could lead to serious political conflict with a high risk of military confrontation.

Already more and more ordinary people support extremist actions against the authorities. In response, the political elites have become more and more prone to needless demonstrations of strength.

Opposition parties, once oriented to dialogue and compromise, now increasingly embrace extremist views. In Uzbekistan, the repression of opposition groups has led the government to the brink of war against its own people.

Further danger of destabilisation arises from conflicts within the political elites over state assets. For the time being such conflicts have not burst into the open but the danger lies clearly ahead.

In these conditions, it's inevitable that people will start demanding political reform. This has already been apparent in Tajikistan and neighbouring Iran, and is becoming more evident in Uzbekistan.

In Uzbekistan, conflict between the authorities and islamic groups opposing the leadership could spread to other Central Asian countries.

Unable to establish political dialogue with their own people, the political elites work strenuously to forge ties with the rulers of neighbouring countries.

Western democracies seem content to turn a blind eye towards the injustices rampant in Central Asia and to ignore the dangers of extremism and conflict. In supporting the existing regimes, the West is not only encouraging the prospects of future conflict but alienating them from democratic sections of society in Central Asia.

What's left of Central Asian democracy is in danger of dying out to be replaced by ethnic and religious extremism so abhorred in the West.

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