

## **US Campaign Poses Threat to Central Asia**

**Author:** [Vladimir Davlatov](#)

Washington's quest for allies in its war on terrorism risks democracy and human rights across Central Asia.

The US defence secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, praised Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan for their "extraordinary spirit of cooperation" late last month and said relations would be maintained at their current level in the interests of all concerned.

Both countries have provided airbases for the US in its on-going campaign in Afghanistan. Tajikistan has also offered the Americans use of military facilities.

But by lending support to authoritarian political regimes, the US-led anti-terrorist coalition is weakening civil society across Central Asia.

Emil Aliev, leader of the Kyrgyz opposition party Ar-Namys, believes the Bishkek authorities are exploiting the struggle against international terrorism as a cover to attack political opponents and the independent media.

"The Americans make statements that don't tie them down to anything and which are ignored by the Central Asian regimes," Aliev said.

In Kyrgyzstan, the conflict between the government and its opponents is worsening. Some voices in the independent media predict the virtual breakdown of society in the near future.

Aliev claims the prosecution of opposition politicians Felix Kulov and Azimbek Beknazarov is directly linked to Washington's new willingness to turn a blind eye to political oppression.

On February 7, after 22 days of a hunger strike in support of Beknazarov, the human rights activist Sheraly Nazarkulov died. This was followed by calls from some deputies for the president's resignation.

"Washington has come to an agreement with Bishkek on not interfering in Kyrgyzstan's internal conflicts," said Aliev.

"The West is only talking about its wish to assist in the democratisation of the region," said Nurbulat Masanov, a prominent political analyst in Kazakhstan. "The political and economic interests of the US have priority over those values - that is what has become clear in recent times."

In Uzbekistan, President Islam Karimov has taken steps to extend his term of office from five to seven years via a referendum on constitutional reform. It is the second time Karimov has used such a device. The January 27 vote was carried out in the worst traditions of the Soviet era and secured a predictably favourable result.

Karimov, one-time general secretary of the Uzbek Communist Party, is expected to run for a third term in 2005.

In January, during a visit to Uzbekistan, Elizabeth Jones, US assistant state secretary for European and Eurasian affairs, signed a declaration on the conditions for cooperation between Washington and Tashkent.

And in a remarkable turn-around the International Monetary Fund, IMF, which closed down its Uzbek operation in 2001, is to return.

At the time, Kristof Rozenberg, the IMF's representative to Uzbekistan, was unequivocal in his explanation for the move.

"The economy of Uzbekistan is corrupt through to the core," he said. "Any system of this kind only makes a select few rich - those that have the ear of the government. And those select few become very influential."

In 2002, US aid to reform Uzbekistan's law enforcement bodies, health system and education systems is to treble to some 160 million US dollars. Further aid has been given to the Uzbek military. Three rapid response battalions have been created for special operations.

The US has also assured Karimov it will encourage European Union countries to step up their cooperation with Uzbekistan. Washington wants to develop several programmes already in operation in Central Asia, involving institutions like the World Bank and the World Health Organisation.

Previously, as witnessed by the IMF, the international community was sceptical about the worth of collaborating with the Uzbek authorities.

The US has, of course, continued to voice concerns about democracy, human rights and freedom of speech, but local journalists, politicians and analysts are deeply sceptical.

"The problems of human rights have been put on the back burner. The American experts regard Central Asia as a region where the opportunities for creating democracy are very limited if not entirely absent," said Alexei Malashenko, Central Asia specialist at the Carnegie Foundation in Moscow.

The Russian journalist and Central Asia expert, Arkady Dubnov, believes the US is paying little more than lip service to democratic values. "It seems the US has demanded that the leaders in the region at least give the impression that they are following democratic principles," he said.

In Tajikistan, for example, the controversy over the 1999 presidential elections appears to have been quietly forgotten. At the time, Washington was highly critical of the election process, which produced a 98 per cent vote for President Emomali Rakhmonov.

"Now the US has simply forgotten that the elections were carried out with massive infringements and so this is very favourable for the current leadership of the country," commented one Tajik expert.

The Tajik opposition was the first to fall victim to the warmer relations between Dushanbe and Washington. In January, Rakhmonov, under the guise of reforming the government, removed several former leaders of the United Tajik Opposition from the cabinet.

The appointments were made as part of the peace agreements signed at the end of the Tajik civil war. Independent journalists believe US support emboldened Rakhmonov to make the move.

Nurbulat Masanov believes there are parallels with US policy in the Middle East, where Washington has lent strong support to undemocratic regimes in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. He says that in Central Asia a direct correlation can be drawn between increased Western influence and growing pressure on opposition politicians and the independent media.

Chinara Jakypova is IWPR director in Kyrgyzstan and Vladimir Davlatov is a pseudonym of a journalist in Tajikistan

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