

**The Rebirth of Uzbekistan: Politics, Economy,  
and Society in the Post-Soviet Era**

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It is very difficult to avoid the conclusion that instead of getting involved in the broader democratization process, the new post-Soviet states of Central Asia have resisted such trends. At present, many of them, including

the Republic of Uzbekistan, are considered the most authoritarian states in the world. The Uzbek authorities' savage and bloody suppression of a massive people's protest on May 13, 2005, shocked the international community. After the Soviet Union's disintegration, Uzbekistan became the only Central Asian state with a prepared long-term strategy of economic reform. However, the overwhelming incompetence of the Uzbek leadership and the prevalent corruption among Uzbek officials caused the Uzbek model of market economy, outlined by President Islam Karimov in the initial period of reform, to fail.

At first glance, it might seem rather ostentatious to claim that this book is a first attempt to study systematically the political, economic, social, and cultural changes that have taken place in this country for the last decade. Indeed, since the Soviet Union's collapse, hundreds of books and research articles on the current situation in the post-Soviet Muslim states have been published. However, as Bogdan Szajkowski's "Foreword" suggests, the author conducted his research with an acute and critical eye for facts and details (p. ix), which makes this book the first truly comprehensive study of contemporary Uzbekistan.

The first chapter looks at Central Asia's history, the period prior to its annexation by the Russian Empire, and (very briefly) the decades of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century prior to the Bolsheviks' takeover. The following chapters examine the main developments during the Soviet period and investigate the roots of Uzbekistan's totalitarian regime. The author stresses that from the beginning, the Uzbek government ignored the idea of a pluralist democracy. For example, the first manifestations of an independent Uzbekistan, the student protests at the capital's university in mid-January 1992 that, apparently, were triggered by the liberalizing spirit of the time and raised slogans of democratic political opposition, were brutally crushed.

The Law on Political Parties, which came into force in December 1996, introduced a multi-party political system. At the same time, the Uzbek party system held the prospective parties in check. Yalcin writes that in the first stage of multi-partisanship (1991-93), Uzbekistan had three parties and one political movement. By late 1993, two of them, the Erk Democratic Party and the Birlik Movement, were banned and most of the opposition leaders were exiled (pp. 54-56). Some prominent opposition figures were imprisoned and some simply disappeared from the political scene.

At present, with the exception of the People's Democratic Party of Uzbekistan (PDPU) that is the successor of the Communist Party of Soviet

Uzbekistan, the political system includes the Homeland Progress Party, the Adolat Social Democratic Party, the People's Unity Movement, and the Fidokorlar National Democratic Party. However, all parties except the PDPU are viewed as "puppets" because they exhibit no real difference in their ideologies and their stance regarding the regime's legitimacy. Moreover, none of them is willing to compete with the PDPU. Having ineffective structures, they are unable to propose realistic solutions for socio-economic problems, a situation that is replicated in their publications' lack of analysis with regard to social change and the processes of political and economic reform. At the same time, all of them publish the "historical" speeches of President Karimov and official documents that are far from everyday reality.

Undoubtedly, Islam plays a tremendous role in the Uzbek national revival. The author states that Karimov actively supported the revival of Islam as an Uzbek cultural landmark. At the same time, the Uzbek leadership is greatly concerned about the destabilizing character of an "Islamic rebirth," which is why all Islamic movements are now underground. In view of the current situation in Uzbekistan, the author's prediction of an increase in Islamic activism can be accepted. This is particularly true among young people who live in a condition of social uncertainty, for an Islamic awakening movement will proliferate along with growing socioeconomic problems. The author holds that it is unlikely that Islam will become a political factor in the near future. However, this point of view is far from reality, given that the absence of opportunities for free and open debate on political issues, not to mention the lack of a genuine secular opposition, seem to be factors that convert Islam into a political force.

Recent events have caused real opposition movements to appear, ones that can lead the country out of its crisis. One such movement is the Sunshine Uzbekistan Coalition, which seeks substantial change and reform in order to establish a society based on the idea of democratic capitalism. Yalcin's book highlights that the Uzbeks were, for many centuries, a nation with a great aptitude for commerce and trade. Unfortunately, the current regime has frustrated the nation's ability to create a vibrant and effective economy. In my opinion, the book's optimistic message is that the real rebirth of Uzbekistan is just beginning.

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