

JANUSIAN:THINKING

analysis assessment intelligence

Issue 13

May 2005

An analysis of international security issues compiled by security professionals for security professionals

UZBEKISTAN: REPRESSION AND THE RISE OF FUNDAMENTALISM

Key Judgements:

- Support for Uzbek President, Islam Karimov, in return for his co-operation as a regional ally in the 'war on terror' is proving to be counter-productive: the actions of his repressive regime have fuelled Islamist fundamentalism in Central Asia.
- While it remains unlikely that Karimov will be removed by the activities of a single radical organisation, a temporary alliance of groups and their exploitation of public dissatisfaction nevertheless presents a serious threat. There is no doubt that the strength of his position has been seriously compromised both domestically and abroad. While the recent crackdown may strengthen his grip on power in the short term, Karimov is likely to grow weaker over time as hatred of him deepens at home and he finds himself increasingly isolated internationally.
- Instability in Uzbekistan will have profound negative implications for security across Central Asia, heralding a new era of geopolitical jockeying for influence in the region.



With public unrest in Uzbekistan gaining momentum, Central Asia once again rises to prominence in international affairs. Uzbekistan lies at the heart of the region: Central Asian security is bound to its stability. Yet **what has commonly been perceived as a stable state is in fact a country mired in corruption and repression, threatened by a violent expression of public unrest, fuelled by Islamic fundamentalism and countered with a clumsy, provocative and indiscriminate use of force.**

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Central Asian states emerged as exciting new independent entities, thrust onto the world stage following decades of ferociously protective Soviet parentage. However, attempting to assert reinvigorated ethno-religious identities within the national boundaries that had been imposed on the region in the 1920s – a Soviet tactic of 'divide and rule' – presented the five states with a complex and fragile process of adjustment and transition to negotiate. Uzbekistan, under the rule of President Islam Karimov, asserted itself as something of a regional hegemon, perceived by external powers as the most reliable and stable regime with which to deal.

Recent years have seen the emergence of Central Asia as an area of crucial geo-strategic importance within the context of the global 'war on terror.' Maintaining stability in the region has become an imperative in the minds of certain interested external powers: predominantly the US, Russia and China, each with their own concerns about security in the region. Yet within the framework of shared interests lurks a geopolitical conundrum of unspoken ambitions and suspicions. The US has pursued operations in Afghanistan from bases in Uzbekistan, whilst unsettling both China and Russia with the proximity of its military presence to their borders. China does not want to see a safe haven for Uighur separatists become increasingly entrenched in Central Asian neighbours, while Russia – still dealing with a post-Soviet identity crisis – seeks to retain influence in her 'near-abroad.' The perennial issue of securing strategic natural resources in the region further complicates any co-operation between external powers interested in maintaining stability.

Uzbekistan lies at the heart of Central Asian security, and while in the past considered the stabilising anchor of the region, an unsettling reality is now revealing itself. Stability in Uzbekistan has merely been a chimæra: a façade that it has until now been convenient for external powers to believe in as the country continues to be of strategic importance to them. The truth is that Karimov's increasingly repressive regime has done little to preserve stability, but much to incite public discontent and cultivate Islamic fundamentalism in an area where an enduring characteristic of practised Islam in the past has been its tolerance. Uzbekistan's authoritarian regime has failed to implement desperately needed social and economic reforms, and political pluralism simply does not exist. Islamist militants have been able to recruit large followings from a public who find themselves with no alternative ways to

express themselves. Without real pressure on Karimov to carry out effective reforms, to address the corruption within his ruling elite and to alter his repressive approach to governing, the situation has become explosive.

The international community can no longer afford to ignore the reality of the situation in Uzbekistan, dangerously disregarding its potential impact on regional and global security. Not enough pressure has been applied to ensure that crucial reforms are made, political pluralism embraced and even the most basic of human rights respected. The donation of aid packages has not seen reciprocal improvements in the regime's conduct as has been ensured in other recipient countries across the world. Liberalisation, economic progress and greater religious freedom would do much to undermine the spread of Islamist extremism in the region – but is it too late? Are instability and conflict to become the defining features of Central Asia in future years?

Repression and the rise of fundamentalism

The rise of fundamentalism in Central Asia is an acute threat to the future stability of the region – a threat exacerbated by the emergence of a 'New Terrorism' with global networks and a sinister ability to inspire violent extremism throughout the Muslim world. Within the region, concerns about a rising tide of radicalism have been increasingly focussed upon Uzbekistan: violence in Tashkent and Bukhara last year signalled preliminary fractures in the country's veneer of stability. (See below)

Home to over half of the Central Asian population, and with a significant ethnic Uzbek diaspora throughout the region, the sentiments of the Uzbek people themselves and the way in which they chose to express them are vitally important. However, Karimov's regime is stiflingly oppressive: people find themselves with no voice, caught in social and economic depression and with no evidence of long promised reforms being implemented. While Karimov's authoritarianism has in the past been excused as a means to assert stability and suppress Islamist extremism in an uncertain post-Soviet world, **an ironic causal relationship between this repression and likely future conflict is now apparent: political repression and poverty have created a fertile breeding ground for violence, instability and increasingly active Islamist extremist groups.** Karimov's authoritarian approach to leadership may have postponed, but has certainly not defused, an inevitable economic and political crisis that may now be coming to fruition.



While democratic rhetoric appears to be the official language of choice for the Karimov regime, the reality behind the words is quite different. Political opposition parties are suppressed, their leaders forced into exile. More than a decade of independence provides little evidence of progressive development towards achieving a truly transparent secular democracy and efficient market economy. Karimov argues that the limited nature of changes that have taken place is the deliberate result of a broader policy of gradual reform to encourage more comprehensive long term improvements. Yet such deliberate gradualism might be understood to be little more than a thinly veiled attempt to disguise the maintenance of a stagnating status quo and excuse the failure to implement much needed reforms. Karimov's boast of

his regime as democratic has entirely undermined the very concept of democracy, and the pretence is wearing thin.

Essentially Central Asian states might be considered to be 'neo-feudal' with people treated less like free citizens and more like subjects of feudal principalities, exploited by a corrupted ruling elite. Uzbekistan's 'pseudo-democracy' is destroying confidence in real democratic processes. Democracy, far from being a hope or an aspiration is now seen by many as just another corrupted and unfair method of secular governance – encouraging the disillusioned to seek religious ideals to provide solutions for their problems. When the so-called democratic authorities are perceived to be doing what they like with impunity, Islamist ideologies can be presented as a far more attractive alternative.

Living standards in Uzbekistan are low with nearly half the population living in poverty. Uzbeks themselves consider unemployment, low living standards and drugs as the three largest problems the country faces. Yet little effort is made to improve the situation, despite aid from foreign donors pouring into Karimov's coffers. This in turn incites resentment of a broader nature, not limited to anti-Karimov sentiments: western governments are increasingly perceived to be supporting corrupt, dictatorial regimes with little regard for the domestic realities in their countries.

Some regions of Uzbekistan present a more critical problem than others. Extremist activity in the Ferghana Valley – a devout area historically deeply connected to Islam in Central Asia – has always been a particular cause for concern. Densely populated and largely neglected by the government and the international community, economic depression and high unemployment in the valley are acute. The situation there illustrates a common combination of poverty, unemployment and a demographic youth bulge generating a propensity for extremism. Indeed, throughout

Uzbekistan enormous numbers of young people are facing futures devoid of opportunity; discontented and directionless they provide radical movements with a rich source of recruits.

The trajectory of Uzbekistan's future may well prove to be deeply unsettling. A corrupt, secular and brutal regime that has supported enthusiastically US actions in Afghanistan and Iraq and allows the US a massive base on its soil is a prime target for radical Islamist ideology and its terrorist followers.

Currently, there are two Islamic movements of major concern operating in Central Asia. The highly secretive nature of such organisations precludes absolutely precise analysis, yet the threat they pose is clear.

The Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami (The Party of Islamic Liberation: HT)

- A highly secretive, truly international organisation, recruiting widely throughout the Muslim world, with a particular popularity among young Muslims in Western Europe.
- Embraces an idealistic vision of political Islam with the utopian, long-term aim to re-establish the Caliphate, ultimately uniting the entire global Islamic community (*Ummah*). This is to be done in three stages: a first stage of 'culturing to produce people who believe in the idea and the method of the Party,' followed by a stage of consolidation of the *Ummah* in which Islamic practices are absorbed into everyday life, completed with the establishment of an Islamic government and the implementation of *Shari'a* law. In so doing, the HT strives to restore the *Ummah* 'to her previous might and glory such that she wrests the reins of initiative away from other states and nations, and returns to her rightful place as the first state in the world.'
- Currently, the HT believes that, 'the danger that Muslims face today surpasses all the dangers they were subjected to throughout their history.' Yet the finer points of their ideology remain vague: many members do not understand how the Caliphate would work, how the economy would run, or how followers of other religions would be treated. In reality the HT's aims rank as some of the most abstruse and archaic among today's radical Islamic movements. Some commentators have categorised the movement as "outlandish".

The group's popularity has grown quickly in Central Asia, the late 1990s seeing a significant rise in membership. While it is impossible to obtain accurate figures it is understood that Central Asian membership is well into the thousands, with HT officials themselves claiming in excess of sixty thousand supporters in Tashkent, and tens of thousands elsewhere. Despite the extremist views propounded by the organisation – punctuated with anti-western, anti-Semitic and anti-Shia statements – the HT rejects violence as a method of pursuing its goals. For this reason, the group has attracted less international attention. Yet some of the organisation's rhetoric certainly appears not to preclude the use of violent means in the future. One HT official is reported to have commented that while the HT seeks 'a peaceful *jihad* that will be spread by explanation and conversion not by war... ultimately there will be war because the repression of the Central Asian states is so strong.' This factor, in conjunction with burgeoning membership is clearly a cause for concern: while the HT itself may not promote the use of violence, its young members – excited by Islamist ideology, mired in repression and poverty – are increasingly likely to reject peaceful means for more militant ones. Many have agreed that the HT is in fact a 'conveyor belt' for the production of terrorists.

The HT presents a specifically awkward challenge to anti-terrorist endeavours, expounding potentially volatile extremist ideals, while advocating non-violent methods to achieve its aims. The degree of the perceived threat posed by the HT is reflected in the fact that there are more HT prisoners in Central Asia than prisoners from any other organisations. The organisation is in fact banned throughout Central Asia and Karimov's attempts to suppress the group have been highly unpleasant and aggressive.

The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)

- The most widely known militant organisation of the region.
- Entered on the US State Department's list of foreign terrorist organisations under the Clinton administration in September 2000, it was again cited 'a terrorist organisation of particular concern,' by President George W Bush in the aftermath of September 11th 2001.
- The IMU emerged out of an organisation called Adolat (Justice) active in Namangan in the Ferghana Valley in the early 1990s. This organisation was run by two dedicated young men – 24-year-old Takhir Abdouhalilovitch Yuldeshev and 22-year-old Jumaboi Ahmadzhanovitch Khojaev, later Juma Namangani – and rapidly gained support. Adolat mosques and madrassahs appeared throughout the Ferghana region, with Yuldeshev, the spiritual leader of the organisation, imposing strict Islamic practices in Namangan and establishing vigilante groups to enforce law. However, following Adolat's seizure of the Communist Party of Uzbekistan's headquarters in Namangan, Karimov launched a harsh crackdown on the group. 1992 saw the arrests of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of members and sympathisers of all Islamic organisations, all of which were banned. Yuldeshev and Namangani escaped to Tajikistan, and in the late 1990s formed the IMU following a spate of activity by the Uzbek security forces in which numerous leading Islamists 'disappeared.' The movement maintained bases in the Tavildara Valley, Tajikistan and in northern

Afghanistan, uniting members with the shared desire of usurping Karimov's regime and replacing it with an Islamic government.

The summers of 1999 and 2000 saw cross-border armed incursions of IMU militants from Tajikistan into Uzbekistan and Krygyzstan – manoeuvres designed to exploit the fragile relationship between the Central Asian states' security forces. Predictably the attacks were followed by brutal responses from Karimov, who had previously advocated the arrest of any father whose son was a member of the IMU following bombings in Tashkent in February 1999: 'If my child chose such a path, I myself would rip his head off.' By the beginning of 2001 most IMU members were based in northern Afghanistan under the protection of the Taliban, and receiving funding, training and equipment from Al Qaeda – with whom relations had been forged by Yuldashev. Then, contrary to expectations, rather than launching further attacks into the Ferghana region in the summer of 2001, Namangani, himself now located in Afghanistan, ordered his troops to fight with the Taliban against Northern Alliance and US forces.

The threat posed by the IMU is difficult to assess. Militarily they suffered enormously during the war in Afghanistan. The charismatic military commander, Juma Namangani, is believed to have been killed in fighting around Mazar-i-Sharif, while the military infrastructure of the organisation was itself largely destroyed. It is believed that Yuldashev remains active on the Afghan-Pakistani border, where he has been involved in engagements with Pakistani security forces in the region of Waziristan. In recent clashes with US forces it is believed that the 'high value al-Qa'eda target' was Yuldashev. Yet evidence indicating the intensity of IMU activity remains confused and sometimes contradictory. Siadamir Zuhurov, Tajikistan's Deputy Prime Minister has commented on a lack of information to indicate any intensification of IMU activity in Tajikistan. However Tajik border-guards are aware of the presence of terrorist groups operating just across the border in Afghanistan, within easy reach of any part of Tajikistan. The war in Afghanistan has certainly weakened the IMU, yet it is highly unlikely that the organisation has been entirely decimated: US pledges to continue to pursue IMU elements and the recent clashes reflect the belief that the group is still active and potentially dangerous. Without Namangani, Yuldashev is now in control of the organisation. Throughout his career he has worked on forging relations with external Islamist groups in the Middle East and Pakistan, embracing militant Wahhabi Islam and its associated virulent, anti-western sentiments. It might be that under Yuldashev's leadership, the IMU becomes more deeply embedded in the global terrorist network that it is so difficult to penetrate. In future, this could make the organisation a greater long-term threat than Namangani's more localised and criminally involved leadership might have posed.

History of Karimov's crackdowns



Karimov's response to the threat from Islamic extremism has been violent, an attitude he has not been afraid to articulate: 'Such people must be shot in the head. If necessary I will shoot them myself.' The country's internal security apparatus is immense and pervasive. With the corruption of democracy and the censorship of all opposition voices and the press, the violation of human rights by the security forces seeking to suppress the 'Islamist threat' has for long been the norm in Uzbekistan.

In 2003 it was estimated that 7,000 people were imprisoned in Uzbekistan on political or religious grounds – the majority supposedly linked to the HT. Possessing HT literature is an offence punishable with at least ten years in prison. In the mid-1990s leading Islamic (note Islamic not Islamist extremist) figures began to disappear and unrest in the Ferghana Valley in 1997 prompted thousands of arrests to be made. Courts administered long sentences of 15-20 years to those convicted, characteristically using unreliable evidence or confessions extracted by torture.

In May 1998, the amendment of the 1991 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations paved the way for another crackdown on any type of Islamic activity. The law contrived to ruthlessly restrain the freedom of religious organisations and their adherents, requiring all places of worship to register with the state – the members of those failing to were liable to be prosecuted. The preaching of Islam outside of government sanctioned institutions became illegal, women wearing the *hijab* were liable to be arrested, men with beards or multiple wives were questioned and fathers became imprisonable for the actions of their sons. The law in fact represents repression of the harshest and most arbitrary nature.

In November 2002, under increasing international pressure, Karimov allowed the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture to visit Uzbek prisons. His report verified the 'systematic' use of torture by security forces. However, the situation appears to have improved little since. The US Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor confirmed that in 2003:

'Both police and the National Security Service [NSS] routinely tortured, beat, and otherwise mistreated detainees to obtain confessions or incriminating information. Police and the NSS allegedly used suffocation, electric shock, rape and other sexual abuse; however, beating was the most commonly reported method of torture...and the severity of torture did not decrease during the year.'

The Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan provides details of prisoner deaths and disappearances. Infamously, on August 8th 2002, two HT members are reported by reliable sources to have been killed by being boiled alive – the account is widely accepted as true.

Warning signs overlooked: Violence in March – April 2004

Violent attacks in Tashkent and Bukhara last year clearly revealed the growing unrest in Uzbekistan and a pervasive sense of desperation among the population. Karimov was swift to condemn the IMU and HT for the attacks, yet the truth is far from clear. Conspiracy theories abound. Some believe that the government orchestrated the attacks in an attempt to excuse itself for failing to implement effective reforms due to the over-riding need for stringent anti-terrorist measures, while many maintain that the so called female suicide bombers were relatives of imprisoned people, merely protesting against the police. Perhaps the truth will never be known, but certainly there does appear to be a degree of consensus of opinion in one area: Karimov has attempted to use the attacks to his advantage by linking them to the global 'war on terror.' The *New York Times* articulated such a view shortly afterwards:

'Uzbekistan has been quick to portray itself as the latest American ally to be targeted for retaliation by international terrorism. There is truth to that...but that is hardly the whole story. Uzbekistan's ruthless dictator...uses his country's role in the campaign against global terrorism as cover for repression that only foments further terror, of the home-grown variety.' (New York Times editorial – April 5th 2004)

The future is now

With the eruption of violence in Andijan on Friday 13th May it is no longer possible to ignore the reality of Karimov's Uzbekistan. Crucial indicators of the potential for violent unrest have been overlooked as the Uzbek president has positioned himself as a vital regional ally in the global war on terror. However, the support lent to his repressive regime may now prove itself to be embarrassingly counter-productive. While it remains true that the majority of Uzbekistan's population is reluctant to politicise Islam for use as an instrument to address their problems, quite a few others feel there is little alternative.

Whilst it remains unlikely that Karimov's administration will be toppled by the activities of a single radical organisation, alliances of Islamist groups present a more worrying problem. Such organisations are also vulnerable to exploitation by political configurations from rival clans seeking to grab power in any potential vacuum that might emerge. The heavy handed approach of the security forces in dealing with the protestors in Andijan has fuelled anti-regime opposition, playing into the hands of Islamist groups. While the present crackdown – blatantly signalling that Karimov is willing to kill to stay in power – may have secured the president's position in the short-term it is unlikely to have secured him in the long-term. As hatred deepens at home and Karimov finds himself increasingly isolated internationally his position will be increasingly unsustainable. With opposition groups beginning to co-operate, their better organisation and the orchestration of a coherent anti-regime movement in the future, Karimov may well see power slip from his grasp – although he is unlikely to let it go without a bloody fight. However, without a prominent and appealing alternative to Karimov, any future power vacuum could be filled by Islamist extremists or a "war lord" type contender from a rival clan eager to line his own pockets and those of his family rather than address the social and economic problems that beleaguer the Uzbek population. Failing that, Karimov may take the decision to stand down under pressure only to allow another member of his Samarkand based clan to take his place – thus ensuring the status quo is maintained, but with a less hated face at the helm.

The past inflation of the threat from terrorism as a means of legitimising the brutal repression of the Uzbek population has ultimately furnished Karimov with an even bigger foe. As public unrest grows, Islamist fundamentalism will find itself increasingly at home among a dissatisfied population ready to be mobilised. The consequences of Karimov's repressive regime on peace and security in Uzbekistan can now be seen. Discontent is palpable and dangerous religious extremism is likely to emerge in a region where it has traditionally had no home. Ironically, the west's Central Asian ally in the war on terror has become one the main threats to stability in the area.

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