

Democracy in Central Asia: Authoritarian Regimes or Hybrid Regimes?

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The issue concerning the state of democracy in the five former Soviet Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan not only draws the worldwide interest but also in some cases leads to heated discussions. With the exception of Kyrgyzstan, which since 2010 has been implementing comparatively successful political reforms following the overthrow of President Bakiev's regime, the Central Asian region is considered by many Western analysts "as one of the most repressive regions in the world".¹ Some commentators assert that in comparison with two other former Soviet regions of Eastern Europe (Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine) and South Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia), "Central Asia shows the least inclination towards democratization".²

On the other hand, those who are in favor of the current leaders of Central Asian states would be inclined to depict the picture in a more positive light. Their main argument would be based on a notion that despite certain impediments, leaders of Central Asian states are moving their countries towards building a modern democratic state based on rule of law, but because of historical and cultural factors it would take time for this process to be accomplished. To Central Asian leaders, the most important priority is stability and they are of view that democratization is achieved through stabilization.

However, it seems that neither of the above-stated two explanations is completely satisfactory and both do not show the whole picture of the state of democracy in the region. Transformations and level of democratization processes in Central Asian countries make it difficult to define them in simple categories of totalitarianism, authoritarianism and democracy.

The level of transformations taking place in these countries varies. If Kyrgyzstan is considered by the West as a model of democracy in Central Asia or sometimes dubbed as "Switzerland of Central Asia", Kazakhstan's model can

¹ See for example: Jos Bunstra, Democracy in Central Asia: Sowing in unfertile fields?, EUCAM Policy Brief, No.23, May 2012, *Eucentralasia.eu*, <http://www.eucentralasia.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/PDF/Policy_Briefs/PB-EUCAM-23.pdf> (accessed on 12 April 2013)

² Ibid.

be defined as “authoritarian modernization”,³ whereas Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan show no signs of serious reforms with the latter two being labeled by democracy watchdog Freedom House as two of “worst of the worst” nine countries in the world.⁴

Therefore, this brings us to a need to make distinctions between countries in the region in terms of their political systems as well as degrees of their adherence to constitutionalism and rule of law. Nartsiss Shukurاليةva eloquently captures the essence of the debate on labeling and determining the degree of democracy in Central Asian countries by arguing that

Contradictory types of democratic and nondemocratic regimes are creating unusual political systems that can be defined as “hybrid regimes”, “imitative democracies” or “delegative democracies”. The ambiguity of these regimes is making it difficult to classify them according to the well-known categories. On the one hand they contain many elements of an authoritarian state, while on the other, they appear to be close to democracy.⁵

Thus, it could be stated that political regimes in Central Asian countries consist of both traditionally authoritarian and hybrid regimes, which is characteristic of today’s complex situation in the region. In order to elaborate more on the subject, one must focus on origins and cultural environment existing in the region. There is no doubt that Central Asian countries are different from each other, yet despite differences in their socio-political development, there are common features and trends that unite them. Most importantly, as observers indicate, the political culture of the region is very much influenced by traditional communal way of life making it distinctive, for example, from the European one, which in turn is characterized by a high sense of individualism.

Societies in Central Asian countries consist of pyramids at the top of which exists the main pyramid headed by a single strong leader. In reference to the nature of political regimes in the twelve successor states to the USSR beyond the Baltic countries, Kirill Nourzhanov asserts that they all without exception belong to the genus of sultanism.⁶ Political scientist Alfred C. Stepan defines sultanism as a generic form of leadership where the private and the public are fused, there is a strong tendency towards family power and dynastic succession, there is no

³ Андрей Медушевский, Политические режимы Центральной Азии: конституционные реформы в рамках авторитарной модернизации, *Сравнительное конституционное обозрение*, 2012. № 4., стр.50

⁴ Bunstra, *Democracy in Central Asia: Sowing in unfertile fields?*

⁵ Nartsiss Shukurاليةva, *Problems of Constitutionalism in the Republic of Kyrgyzstan, Central Asia and Caucasus*, No.6 (48), 2007, p.7

⁶ Kirill Nourzhanov, ‘Coloured Revolutions’ as Elite Circulations: The Case of Central Asia, in Fethi Mansouri and Shahram Akbarzadeh, (ed.), *Political Islam and Human Security*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle, UK, p. 205

distinction between a state career and personal services to the ruler, there is a lack of rationalized impersonal ideology, economic success depends on the ruler and, most of all, the ruler acts only according to his own unchecked discretion, with no larger impersonal goals for the state.⁷

Although this ideal type does not exist in pure form anywhere in the world, as Nourzhanov further elaborates, and there is a great deal of variation in the former Soviet Union as far as the level of institutionalization of authority and the extent of the rule of law concerned, nevertheless there is a host of common trends characteristic of all former Soviet republics including Central Asian states. According to Nourzhanov, personalization of power, the endemic patronage networks, the opaqueness of the rules of the political game, and the reduction of political contestation to capturing the centre of political authority represent hallmarks of sultanism.⁸

As observers point out, the similarities inherent in ruling elites of Central Asia could be attributed to their common totalitarian past. In this connection, it would be useful to remind that presidents of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have been in power since 1990, which means from the Soviet period having had stints as first secretaries of local communist parties. Only Kyrgyzstan is an exception to this rule by experiencing ousters of their presidents in 2005 and 2010.

All leaders of Central Asian states are trying to expand and enhance their personal power by assigning to themselves the role of “the father of the nation”. Moreover, almost all of them prolonged the powers, with a very insignificant part of power shifted to legislatures. The lack of meaningful mechanism of a peaceful transfer of power adds to the anxieties regarding the future of these countries.

Regionalism and localism also pose serious challenges to instilling democratic values in the region. Tajikistan is one of the countries where regional division of society manifests itself most clearly. As Russian expert Irina Zvyagelskaya notes, Tajik society is still rather fragmented.⁹ Their identity is foremost based on regional lines, and the fact that the struggle for power and access to resources of regional elites - has led to the civil war in Tajikistan in early 1990's. The change of elites that occurred after the Civil War brought about a more balanced relationship, while stability for the new elites stability is of utmost importance today.¹⁰

In conclusion, as noted earlier, the ruling elites of the countries of Central Asia all declare their commitment to the democratization and modernization of society. However, their so-called “special path of democratic development” to a larger

⁷ Alfred C. Stepan quoted in *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Нигора Бухари-заде, *Какая демократия нужна в Центральной Азии?*, *Dw.de*, <http://dw.de/p/Gb0Z> (accessed on 10 April 2013)

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

extent serves to the purpose of covering a retreat from democratic principles. Although mechanisms of democratic government can vary, its basic principles such as free and fair elections, transparent government and vibrant civil society should all be there. It is important for each Central Asian country to find their own way to build a democratic system that fits their socio-cultural specifics and values. And therefore, it is too early to state that they need to move forward to a liberal democracy as the only possible way of their development, because the imposition of a single value system of another society, even European, will not lead to a positive result. Taking into account the fact that Central Asian countries consist of significant portions of educated populace, they are prepared to take much larger steps towards democracy. This would help them to avoid having their political systems being labeled as either authoritarian or hybrid.

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