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The Politics of Repression in Central Asia: The Cases of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan

Abstract

This paper explores the landscape of repressive politics in the three Central Asian states of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan with an emphasis on the phase of “transformative violence” and the patterns of inconsistent repression. It argues that repressions alone cannot guarantee the longevity of authoritarian regimes. It is for this reason that the Central Asian authoritarian leaders consistently come up with discursive justifications of repression, not least through portraying it as a necessary tool for progress or security. While the new Central Asian leaders’ discourses are characterized by liberal narratives, the illiberal practices keep prevailing across these countries.

Keywords: Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, repression, authoritarian regime, leadership change.

Introduction

Central Asia has been long treated as one of the most repressive regions in the world, characterized by inherently authoritarian regimes and extensive crackdowns on political freedoms and civil liberties (Lewis, 2012, p. 115). The region has been termed as a “hotbed” of violence, instability, extremism, with Zbigniew Brzezinski referring to it as the “Eurasian Balkans” (Kendzior, 2013).

Some commentators ascribe this phenomenon to the well-placed autocrats, former Communist party high-ranking officials, whose methods of state governance were largely informal and opaque (Ziegler, 2016; Starr, 2006). Others tend to emphasize weak and cautious international engagement in early 1990’s that would focus chiefly on energy projects (Melvin, 2008). Special attention has been devoted to inter-ethnic tensions (Melich and Adibayeva, 2013) and greater spread of radical Islam (Omelicheva, 2010) across the region.

By late 1990s, in all three states typical repression patterns took the form of “transformative violence” (Marat, 2016), that has been often regarded as “inconsistent repression” (Francisco, 2004). The latter redefined the ways in which governments treat opposition groups and the society in general. In 1998, Freedom House framed Uzbekistan as a consolidated autocracy and statist economy, Kazakhstan was referred to as an autocratic

state that tolerates only limited opposition, while Kyrgyzstan was designated a transitional polity and economy (Freedom in the World, 1998-1999).

In the past few years Central Asia has witnessed some significant changes, pertaining to leadership transitions in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan. Even though the new presidents tend to position themselves as “reformers”, they have not done much to overcome the authoritarian legacy and move beyond the politics of repression.

In Uzbekistan, where president Shavkat Mirziyoyev came to power in 2016, the closure of the notorious Jasyk prison and the improving state of press freedom provided grounds for cautious optimism. Meanwhile, thousands of people remain in prison on politically motivated charges, while the parliamentary elections held in December 2020 were marred by lack of pluralism (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

In Kazakhstan, President Tokayev’s discourse initially focused on political reforms, human rights, and civic engagement. Meanwhile, thousands of protesters have been arrested since Tokayev’s election.

After two revolutions that overthrew the authoritarian presidents in 2005 and 2010, the landscape of human rights experienced some positive changes in Kyrgyzstan. However, the Kyrgyz court upheld the life sentence for prominent human rights defender Azimjon Askarov who died in prison in July 2020, despite international calls for his release and changes to Kyrgyzstan’s criminal code. While freedom of assembly has been generally respected, the use of overly broad and vague definitions of criminal acts such as “incitement” or “extremism” remain the norm (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

This paper specifically addresses the following questions:

What is the relationship between the politics of repression and regime survival in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan?

Whether and to what extent have the leadership changes in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan influenced the landscape of repressive politics?

The paper starts with a general theory of state repressions. It further addresses the core manifestations of repressions in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan, focusing on the phase of “transformative violence”. Finally, it explores the implications of the leadership changes in the three Central Asian countries.

On the theory of state repression

Repression is largely defined as “the actual or threatened use of physical sanctions against an individual or organization, within the territorial jurisdiction of the state, for the purpose of imposing a cost on the target as well as deterring specific activities and/or beliefs perceived to be challenging to government personnel, practices or institutions” (Davenport, 2007, p. 2). Goldstein (1978) suggests that repression comes down to the violation of the First Amendment-type rights, including freedom of speech, press and assembly; freedom of association and belief without government reprisal, as well as the freedom to boycott, peacefully picket, or strike without suffering criminal or civil penalties (Goldstein, 1978).

Two factors determine the government’s response to behavioral challenges: first, *the acceptability of the actions undertaken* (i.e., the number of challenges, their duration, the geographic range involved, the intensity of violence etc.); second, *the acceptability of the group involved* (i.e., its beliefs, objectives, and members as well as their connections with the existing power structure) (Davenport, 2009, p. 379). Clearly, the authoritarian regimes are quick to resort to repression when facing such challenges.

There is a considerable consensus among commentators that repression is a “hallmark of autocratic governments” (Tanneberg, 2020). Under the authoritarian regimes, the rulers are more inclined to rely on repressions to perpetuate their regime survival. Yet, Gerschewski (2013) concludes that repression alone cannot account for the longevity of autocracies. Thus, the stability of authoritarian regimes depends on three pillars: cooptation, repression, and legitimization (Gerschewski, 2013, p. 18-23).

Edel and Josua (2017) argue that autocrats often try to legitimize repressive actions against their own citizens through two types of discursive justifications: (1) social control under the name of ensuring stability and security, and (2) social change with repression framed as a necessary tool for “progress”. The justifications regarding social change are generally used in transitional societies, where the regimes need to mobilize the masses (Edel and Josua, 2017, p. 7).

To explain the effects of the legitimating messages in authoritarian regimes, March (2003) suggests that “the main strategy is to define the entire state in relation to common goals, to define the goals and aspirations as virtually constitutive of the nation as such, and to equate the regime with the proper articulation and realization of those goals through the state apparatus” (March, 2003, p. 229).

The authoritarian regimes that are characterized by certain elements of independent media and civil society are less reliant on repressive toolkits (Tilly, 2003; Marat, 2016). Rather they use a set of other (soft) strategies to further marginalize regime challengers, while “disseminating national counter-insurgency discourses and co-opting active civil society into a process that on the surface seems inclusive and pacifying” (Marat, 2016, p. 533). Hess and Martin (2006) identify five main tactics of repression:

- Covering up the situation, including censorship of media coverage.
- Stigmatizing the target so that the repressive action seems legitimate or less offensive to audiences.
- Reinterpreting the event as something other than an attack (e.g., presenting it as self-defense against protesters or as legitimate law enforcement behavior).
- Obtaining authoritative assessments, typically by marshalling statements by experts or officials, and thus legitimating the event.
- Intimidating and/or bribing participants and witnesses (Hess and Martin, 2006, pp. 251-252).

Markowitz and Omelicheva (2018) identify disciplined and undisciplined forms of repression (Markowitz and Omelicheva, 2018). In some countries, repressive politics is applied to many victims targeted based on their ethnicity, region, or religion (undisciplined). Meanwhile in other countries, the repression is selective, targeting individuals or organizations that are regarded as a threat to the regime survival (disciplined) (Markowitz and Omelicheva, 2018, p. 367).

A similar distinction is proposed by Levitsky and Way (2002) who identify high and low intensity repression based on the targeted people or institution and the form of the violence. High intensity coercion is defined as set of visible acts that target either well-known individuals, a larger number of people, or major opposition organizations, and often takes violent forms. Low intensity coercion targets groups of minor importance, it is less visible, and often takes more subtle forms (Levitsky and Way, 2002).

Repressive politics in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan under Karimov, Nazarbayev and Akayev

Uzbekistan’s ruthless autocrat Islam Karimov, who ruled the country for almost three decades, would consistently make promises and pledges of building a modern democratic

society. He constantly portrayed the Soviet era as a murky totalitarian period, asserting that there should be no nostalgia for the Soviet Union (BTI Report, 2018). Meanwhile in practice, Karimov's autocratic regime never overcame the Soviet authoritarian legacy.

Similarly, there was not much to reinforce President Nazarbayev's promises of fundamental reforms in Kazakhstan, characterized by centralization of power, erosion of civil liberties and political freedoms. As stated in Freedom House's 2014 report, "under President Nazarbayev's rule, Kazakhstan has mastered the rhetoric of reform and democratization without demonstrating any genuine commitment to these processes" (Nations in Transit, 2014).

Unlike Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan's first post-Soviet president, Akayev was not a former Communist leader. Following the break-up of the Soviet Union he would come across as a reform-minded leader, committed to democracy. Because of its economic weakness, in 1990s the country was largely dependent on foreign credits and loans, that appeared to positively affect the state of human rights and democracy across the country (Zhovtis, 2008, p. 21). Nevertheless, the country's fragile democratic system gradually became increasingly corrupt and centralized, while Akayev's re-election in 2000 was marred by serious irregularities (Kubicek, 2011, p. 116).

Essentially, the Central Asian incumbents have had a strong tendency of resorting to repression when seeing actual or perceived challenges to their authoritarian rules.

On May 13, 2005, the Uzbek government violently dispersed thousands of demonstrators in Uzbekistan's eastern town Andijan, killing and wounding hundreds. At least five hundred people fled to neighboring Kyrgyzstan. According to Human Rights Watch, the events marked some of the worst political violence in Central Asia since the dissolution of the Soviet Union (Human Rights Watch, 2005).

Kazakhstan experienced a marked deterioration in human rights record in December 2011, when violent clashes broke out in Zhanaozen, killing several people, and wounding dozens. In the aftermath of the violence, the government launched a massive crackdown on independent media outlets and government critics and even sentenced an opposition leader for seven-and-a-half years in prison (Human Rights Watch, 2016).

The major instances of violence in Kyrgyzstan were the result of ethnic tensions and the inability of central authorities to fully sustain their power in all parts of the country. The ethnic violence between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks, that broke out in 1990 and 2010 respectively, in the Uzbek-populated southern part killed hundreds and displaced thousands (USAID

report, 2013). In Kyrgyzstan it acquired a lasting effect and led to further marginalization of the religious groups. The 2016 survey by the NGO Search for Common Ground suggests that the collective acts of repression have led to “an increased fear of arbitrary arrests, especially among members of non-Kyrgyz ethnicities. . . [and] a high level of distrust in law enforcement and government authorities...” (Search for Common Ground report, 2016).

All three governments used discursive justifications to reduce the cost of repression and frame the state response as an “inclusive process that was sensitive to the grievances of the affected populations and the general public” (Marat, 2016, p. 531). The justifications had much in common; they were mostly referring to “social control”, security and stability of the state and society, while the protestors would be largely labeled as criminals, terrorists, or extremists.

The government of Uzbekistan justified the repressions in Andijan by the claims that it was necessary for protecting large groups of people from armed criminals. The main narrative was revolving around Islamism. Journalists and human rights activists whose reports of the bloody events did not feed government’s narratives, would be accused of being the supporters of terrorism, while some independent news websites were shut down (Edel and Josua, 2018, pp. 20-21).

Unlike his Uzbek counterpart, the President of Kazakhstan called for an investigation into 2011 events despite severe violations of due process. Remarkably, no high-level government official has been brought to justice for their involvement in violence Nations in Transit, 2013).

As for Kyrgyzstan, the government’s response to the violence entailed serious human rights violations, including arbitrary detentions and torture (Human Rights Watch, 2012).

Not surprisingly, following mass repressions in those countries, Freedom House and other reputable organizations lowered the democracy scores for all three countries.

In Kazakhstan, the scores have been downgraded mostly due to the shortcomings related to civil society, judicial framework and independence, independent media, and national democratic governance. According to Nations in Transit reports, “The space for independent activism and public debate shrank, as the government continued to coopt nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), businesses, and public associations into the state sphere... The media sphere is largely under the control of business groups affiliated with the ruling regime... Kazakhstan's judiciary is loyal to the regime and protects the interests of the

state rather than those of individuals, minorities, and the weaker strata of society” (Nations in Transit Reports, 2013-2016).

The situation is even worse in Uzbekistan. This particularly applies to the civic activists and critical journalists who face physical violence, prosecution, hefty fines, involuntary hospitalization, and arbitrary detention. In line with other Central Asian countries, major media outlets and related facilities are being strictly controlled by the state. The government tolerates the approved Muslim, Jewish, and Christian denominations, while treats unregistered religious activity as a criminal offense (Freedom in the World, 2016).

The Uzbek government has had a strong tendency of silencing dissent, not least through arbitrary detentions. Meanwhile, the jails in Uzbekistan have been notorious for rampant torture, inhuman and degrading treatment of inmates (Open Democracy, 2017).

As for Kyrgyzstan, ethnic minorities and especially Uzbeks are among the main victims of repression. The law enforcement agencies would be either unable or unwilling to protect the Uzbek population from everyday discrimination and violence (Nations in Transit, 2011). Azimjon Askarov, a journalist of Uzbek ethnicity, was arbitrarily arrested and received a life sentence after he documented and reported police abuses of detainees, along with the prison conditions in his hometown of Bazar-Korgon, in southern Kyrgyzstan (HRW, 2020).

Certain positive changes were registered in the northern part of the country, related to the activities of NGOs, though some NGO leaders are still unable to work in the southern part of the country (Nations in Transit, 2011).

Overall, all three countries have seen numerous surges of violence and repression, with the autocratic leaders’ heavy reliance on repressive toolkits.

Leadership transition in Central Asia: Toward a new social contract?

According to widely - held beliefs the dictatorial rule in Uzbekistan would likely continue after Karimov (Schmitz, 2020). Meanwhile, the reform agenda adopted by Karimov’s successor Shavkat Mirziyoyev suggests a real break with the past. The new President has strived to distance himself from the former regime not least through releasing some political prisoners, setting forth a five-year development strategy, as well as through his tolerance of a relatively open media. Mirziyoyev’s government released several human rights defenders and journalists, including Muhammad Bekjanov, who had served 18 years in notorious Jaslyk prison (Nations in Transit, 2018). The prison, that had been labelled “House of Torture was shut down in 2019 (Eurasianet, 2019).

President Mirziyoyev has positioned himself as a democratic leader, committed to protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms. The 2017 visit of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to Tashkent was remarkable. The high commissioner highlighted “certain positive developments”, including the government’s commitment to empowering civic advocacy in Uzbekistan, as well as the Action Strategy’s emphasis on religious freedom. In his remarks, he urged the local authorities to “allow a strong, vibrant, and dynamic civil society and media to operate without fear of repression or reprisal, and to release political prisoners as soon as possible” (Bowyer, 2018, p. 63). Notably, in May 2018, a presidential decree was issued “On Measures on Profound Increase of the Role of Civil Society Institutions in the Process of Democratic Renovation of the Country.” The decree identifies main problems of civil society institutions and prescribes new rules concerning registration, financial support, taxation, office rental, and coordination of activities beneficial for NGOs and other public associations (BTI Report, 2020).

Despite these positive changes, “The government remains firmly in the hands of President Mirziyoyev and his allies. In 2019, he took further steps to consolidate his control over state apparatuses, purging rivals and installing family members in high-level positions... Although authorities officially welcome nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), the civil sector remains under strict government supervision in practice... A number of formal improvements were made to the justice system during the year, and the notorious Jaslyk prison was closed, but informal abusive practices like torture and forced confessions persist...” (Nations in Transit, 2020).

A question arises as to if Mirziyoyev will change the Central Asian style “social contract”, by which citizens trade their rights and political freedoms for economic stability. “He neither fully preserves the pillars of the previous system nor does he build a totally new system. He is not intent on speeding up democratization, nor can he freeze the Karimov-made status quo. On the one hand, he seems to perpetuate Karimov’s memory by naming streets and Tashkent airport after the former president, on the other hand, Mirziyoyev seems to only pay tribute to his predecessor while going his own way” (BTI report, 2020).

Kazakhstan has been undergoing a gradual handover of power since March 2019, when President Nazarbayev resigned while continuing to exert unique influence over the country through his tailor-made position of the chairman of the Security Council (Olmos, 2020). The Senate chairman Kasym-Zhomart Tokayev became acting president and won a full term in

June elections. The new president positioned himself a reformer (The Wall Street Journal, 2019), offered a dialogue with civil society (Inauguration speech, 2019), promised to liberalize restrictive legislation governing the right to protest (Radio Azattyk, June 30, 2019) and improved the freedom of assembly (Radio Azattyk, June 17, 2019). “Different views, but one nation” was the slogan set forth during his inauguration, while stating that the Kazakh government is “overcoming the fear of alternative opinion” (Fernandez, 2020).

In resource-rich Kazakhstan, Nazarbayev’s discourse on economic accomplishments has been the main pillar of the social contract, as the government’s main mission was to provide material benefits to its citizens (Ibadildin and Pisareva, 2020). However, since 2010s, there was public discontent with this type of contract due to several socio-economic factors (Terzyan, 2020). Even though Tokayev’s discourse focuses more on liberal ideas, the deeply - rooted “authoritarian social contract” continues to guide actions.

According to Freedom House, “Freedom of expression remains significantly restricted in Kazakhstan. There are criminal penalties for libel and defamation, and journalists are obliged to verify all published information and seek consent from the subjects of their reports. Subsequently, media critics of the regime are almost nonexistent... Although Kazakhstan officially professes to be a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional country, the state in fact restricts religious expression” (Nations in Transit, 2020).

In contrast to Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan stands out for its relatively vibrant civil society, that played a major role in deposing President Akayev during the Tulip Revolution in 2005 and President Bakiyev in 2010. After the two revolutions, Kyrgyzstan adopted a parliamentary form of government. Nevertheless, “Governing coalitions have proven unstable, and the ruling Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan (SDPK) has consolidated power, using the justice system to suppress political opponents and civil society critics... The media landscape is relatively diverse but divided along ethnic lines... Southern Kyrgyzstan has yet to fully recover from the ethnic upheaval of 2010, which included numerous documented instances of government involvement or connivance in violence against ethnic Uzbeks in the region, with the aim of tipping the political and economic balance in favor of the Kyrgyz elite...” (Freedom in the World, 2020). Moreover, worries remain about the prison conditions, plagued with torture and ill-treatment of inmates (Ibid).

As a matter of fact, the ruling elites’ concerns over the states’ international image seems to affect the dynamics of the repressive politics across the Central Asian countries. Kazakhstan’s aspirations of rising to global prominence have prompted the authorities into

paying more attention to the country's international image. Not surprisingly, the government would constantly confirm its commitment to democratic values when speaking to the Western audiences. Within its multi-vector foreign policy agenda, Kazakhstan strives to strengthen ties with the West, while keeping good relations with its authoritarian neighbors China, and Russia. Meanwhile, the promises of building a democratic society, aim at pleasing the Western partners (Ziegler, 2015, pp. 11-13).

Unlike Karimov, Mirziyoyev seeks to boost the country's image and portray it as a reforming state. Along with the discursive commitments to liberal and democratic values, the Development Strategy for 2017–2021 introduced by the new government is a timely response to the expectations of international donors (Schmitz, 2020).

As for Kyrgyzstan, even though it has gained the reputation of the “island of democracy” the frequent revolutions and ensuing turbulence suggest that it can be fairly treated as “island of instability.” Thus, the biggest challenge for the new Kyrgyz leadership includes developing democratic institutions, while building resilience in turbulent times.

Conclusion

This paper concludes that the politics of repression has been long dominating the political landscape of Central Asia, with the Central Asian autocrats coming up with discursive justifications of repression.

Out of the three countries under study, the most extreme patterns of repressive politics have been traced in Uzbekistan. Despite the constitutional guarantees, freedoms of speech and press were severely restricted under President Karimov. The major victims of repressive politics include civic activists and critical journalists who are constantly faced with physical violence, prosecution, and arbitrary detention.

The situation was not much different in Kazakhstan under President Nazarbayev. Even though Nazarbayev would adopt a discourse of reforms and democratization, there was not much to reassure or reinforce his promises of significant democratic reforms. On the contrary, Nazarbayev's regime has been characterized by a series of authoritarian malpractices, including but not limited to erosion of civil liberties and political freedoms, as well as suppression of dissent and pluralism.

Unlike its two Central Asian neighbors, Kyrgyzstan has been less characterized by repressive politics, due to its vibrant civil society and stronger ties to the International

community. Remarkably, the growing dependence on foreign credits and loans positively affected the pace of democratic reforms and softened the authorities' repressive policies.

The leadership changes in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan have not significantly improved the state of human rights and political freedoms in the three Central Asian states. Rather, there are still considerable gaps between normative principles and political practices.

Despite a series of reforms carried out by President Mirziyoyev, informal abusive practices keep persisting across Uzbekistan. Similarly, despite Tokayev's discursive commitment to democratic and liberal values, the authoritarian malpractices are lingering across the country. As for Kyrgyzstan, even though it has gained the reputation of the "island of democracy" the frequent revolutions and ensuing turbulence suggest that it can be fairly treated as an "island of instability." A question arises of whether the Kyrgyz leadership will be able to develop democratic institutions, while building resilience in turbulent times.

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