

CLANS, PACTS, AND POLITICS IN CENTRAL ASIA

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Central Asia is suddenly on the world map. Indeed, September 11 and the U.S. war against the Taliban and the al-Qaeda terror network in Afghanistan have drawn Central Asia from the periphery to near the center of that map. Policy makers forging strategies for Afghanistan have begun to realize that the entire vast region is plagued by increasingly weak states and regimes that are losing popular legitimacy. Thus a successful policy will have to take into account not only Afghanistan itself but also nearby countries that face the same challenge of building coherent and democratic states despite declining economies and fragmented, clan-based societies.

Viewed in this larger strategic context, the problem of Central Asia is sobering indeed. The lapse of a decade since the breakup of the USSR finds the former Soviet Central Asian republics not more but actually *less* stable, politically consolidated, prosperous, and free than they were in 1991. Some or all could follow the disastrous path taken by Afghanistan in the 1990s. Any effort to avert this frightening prospect must begin by asking why it is such a plausible scenario in the first place.

While much research has been done on the causes that drive transitions to democracy, we have a far shakier grasp of how transitions to authoritarianism or civil war can come about, as in fact they have in all too many places over the last ten years or so. Nor do we understand the types of authoritarianism that we now see emerging in what was once the Soviet world.¹ Yet as Afghanistan reminds us, we need to understand the nature and dynamics of these nondemocratic regimes.

Despite the relative homogeneity of the Soviet system and the similar circumstances that obtained across all five of the USSR's Central Asian republics, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan followed three distinct trajectories throughout the early 1990s. Kyrgyzstan experienced democratization. Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan saw a renewal of authoritarianism. Tajikistan slid into failed statehood and a bloody civil war. The Kyrgyz case at least seemed to suggest that there was hope both there and elsewhere in the region for elite-driven, "pacted" shifts toward democracy. Yet by the time that the midpoint of the decade had passed, all five new Central Asian states had settled down to one shade or another of authoritarianism in which informal, clan-based networks dominated political life. Aside from asking the particular question of why Tajikistan so quickly lapsed into severe disorder, it is also worth inquiring more generally into the nature of this informal politics, which in turn will require us to study clans and gauge their likely impact on the viability and stability of the Central Asian republics.

Transitions and Preconditions

The post-Soviet cases have sparked a growing debate about how important favorable preconditions are to democratization, yet the answers seem more elusive than ever.² The Central Asian cases are especially pertinent because they may shed light on currents not only in the post-Soviet sphere, but in Asia and the Middle East as well—regions that *prima facie* seem resistant to democratization.

Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan all started from about the same place with the same markers. These included clan and tribal divisions with deep historical roots stretching back before the Soviet era; a weak sense of national identity; an Asian-cum-Muslim cultural and religious climate; a 70-year history of oppressive Soviet rule; political institutions imposed by communism; ethnonational divisions between Turkic, Persian, and Slavic groups; and uneven economic development based on the exploitation of natural resources. The USSR's collapse in 1991 hurled them all into the same process of sudden and involuntary decolonization, independence, and putative political transition. While the conditions for democratization were not particularly favorable across the breadth of the vast former Soviet realm, Central Asia seemed the least likely region of all to become democratic.

Yet the early post-Soviet period found theorists of democratization heady with optimism. If Kyrgyzstan—a poverty-stricken Muslim land bordering on China—could make the move to democracy, then any place could, the "preconditions" theorists and their skepticism notwithstanding. In the summer of 1990, the Kyrgyz Supreme Soviet chose Askar Akayev, an intellectual, physicist, and protégé of Mikhail Gorbachev,



as the republic's new president. Riding the momentum of *perestroika*, Akayev began pushing for political and economic liberalization even before the Soviet Union's collapse. In December 1991, shortly after independence, Akayev was reelected to the presidency by a free and fair popular election. Known in the West for his frequent invocations of Toqueville and Jefferson, Akayev led a political and economic shock-therapy program designed to democratize the new state. With the support of the small Democratic Movement of Kyrgyzstan, he introduced a constitution modeled on that of the United States, pushed for the adoption of an extensive legal framework to undergird democratic institutions, and called on civil society to become the basis of a new democratic culture. The early years of the transition not only saw basic freedoms of speech, the press, and assembly outlined but also witnessed the creation of an independent judiciary and a representative legislature, as well as the adoption of legal protections for property rights. What did *not* happen was noteworthy as well: There were no outbreaks of angry ethno-nationalism and no military coups or other armed interventions in

politics. Between 1991 and 1995, there were free and fair local, parliamentary, and presidential elections. There emerged an active civil and political society, albeit one largely restricted to well-educated city dwellers. In just a few years, Kyrgyzstan had become a semi-liberal democracy.

Among Kyrgyzstan's neighbors, meanwhile, Kazakhstan barely attempted democratic reform, while Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan rejected it outright. They made transitions from communism to a new authoritarianism that jettisoned or substantially transformed their communist past, but not in a democratic way. Extremely strong presidencies displaced the old communist party structures, but there was no liberalization. Tajikistan's plight—one not much studied by theorists of transition—was grimmer still. Its government collapsed, plunging it by mid-1992 into a civil war from which it would not begin to emerge until 1995. A formal peace accord was not reached until June 1997, after 50,000 people had died (out of a population of just 6.6 million).

From Divergence to Convergence

As the 1990s drew to a close, the overall story line in Central Asia had switched from *regime divergence* to *regime convergence*. This was especially noticeable in the informal patterns of political behavior underlying the formal regimes. Kyrgyzstan had become a hollow electoral democracy by 2000. The year 2002 finds it a weak autocracy. In Tajikistan, postconflict talk of democratization has proven empty. With little glimmer of hope for democracy, scholars and policy makers have variously described Central Asia as a region plagued by Orientalism, Islam, or unreformed communists and stagnant Soviet institutions.³

The initial divergence of regime paths in post-Soviet Central Asia drew notice because it went against what the "preconditions" literature would have expected. Given their similar starting points, all five countries should have experienced similar transitions with similar outcomes. Observers who placed a premium on cultural preconditions would have expected "Asian values" to underwrite a new "Asian" despotism, or Islamic values to create a theocracy, or the "Leninist legacy" to perpetuate something like the Soviet regime. Theorists who saw democracy as presupposing economic modernization were likewise skeptical about prospects for popular government in the region. Although Soviet Central Asia's key economic indicators ranked it substantially higher than Africa or South Asia, it still came out near the bottom of the postcommunist world, with heavily rural economies and not much of a middle class. The predictions to be drawn from theories stressing social preconditions were more mixed. Central Asia's relatively high levels of literacy, although they suggested that democratic beliefs and civil society could emerge, seemed unlikely to outweigh other legacies. But "preconditions" thinking of every stripe anticipated a uniformity of re-

gimes—and uniformly nondemocratic regimes—across post-Soviet Central Asia. Whether the future would hold continued communism or conflicts swirling around ethnicity and Islam remained unknown, but one thing seemed certain: Democratic transition of any sort was not likely. Yet such a transition began in Kyrgyzstan.

As of 2002, however, all five Central Asian states are under one form or another of authoritarian rule. As Thomas Carothers has written, we need to stop looking at states such as these as if they must somehow be in transition to democracy.⁴ In fact they may not be moving at all, or if they are, it may be toward stricter authoritarianism, or perhaps even breakdown and civil war. To say that there are limits to the “transitions” model, however, is not to say that the preconditions theories are correct. For these theories still do not elaborate a causal mechanism that gets us to the outcome we are witnessing. Nor can they explain the initial divergence among the Central Asian cases. Indeed, any observer of the region who judged things by the favorite indicators of the “preconditions” schools would have rated Kyrgyzstan as one of the least likely of all postcommunist countries to embrace democratization to any degree or in any form.⁵

Clearly, we need to adapt our models so that they can account for the reality that has been unfolding before our eyes over the past decade. We need to describe the type of authoritarianism that has emerged as well as the reasons for its emergence, and we need to trace what all this means for the political stability of Central Asia. In-depth fieldwork in the region powerfully suggests that these cases do not easily conform to the predictions of our existing models and theories. Familiarity with Central Asia suggests that we need to reflect more thoroughly on the key, if informal, role that clans play in shaping events and driving formal political realities throughout the region.

What Is a “Clan” in Central Asia?

Despite the centrality of clans to social, economic, and political life in Central Asia, students of regime transition have generally ignored them. Many scholars mistakenly dismiss the concept as mere journalistic “primordialism,” or else hastily consign clans to the realm of the vestigial and irrelevant out of a misplaced belief that Soviet-era modernization did away with them. Recent coverage of Hamid Karzai’s interim government in Afghanistan has highlighted the critical role that clans play in this part of the world, suggesting that those who focus only on formal institutions are missing much of the story.

Clans in Afghanistan differ somewhat from clans in post-Soviet Central Asia, of course: Seven decades of Soviet rule did transform Central Asian clan identity, most notably by breaking up large tribal structures into smaller clan-based units during the Soviet campaign to turn the

nomadic herdspeople of the region into sedentary collective-farm workers. In the late 1920s, viewing even the smaller clan units as a threat to Soviet power and ideology, Moscow stigmatized them as “premodern” and drove them underground. Despite this history of suppression, clans remain a salient everyday reality. Since 1991, Central Asians themselves have repeatedly worried aloud about the corruption and destabilization sown by *klannovaya politika* (“clan politics”). The dangers of clans are a favorite theme not only of Kyrgyzstan’s President Akayev—who recently called for new, clan-free norms of political and economic behavior—but also of Uzbekistan’s President Islam Karimov.⁶ Clan politics is arguably only one of several challenges facing regime transition in Central Asia today; others include political Islam, human rights abuses, and the weakness of civil society. Nonetheless, “the clan problem,” as Central Asians often call it, is a central one. Indeed, the glaring problem of creating a functional central government in intensely clan-influenced Afghanistan compels us to address this issue. But to understand how clans act, we must first define what they are.

A clan is an informal social institution in which actual or notional kinship based on blood or marriage forms the central bond among members.⁷ Clans are identity networks consisting of an extensive web of horizontal and vertical kin-based relations.⁸ Clans have their roots in a culture of kin-based norms and trust that makes rational sense, particularly amid the semi-modern economies of Central Asia. Far from being irrational relics of a bygone age, the informal ties and networks of clan life reduce the high transaction costs of making deals in an environment where impersonal institutions are weak or absent and stable expectations are hard to form.⁹ Clans in fact serve as an alternative to formal market institutions and official bureaucracies. The particularistic ties and repeated interactions that characterize clans build trust and a sense of reciprocity, enabling the people involved to make contracts that extend over time.¹⁰

If clans can be seen as “horizontal” by virtue of their capacity to bind members through relations of mutual trust, they can also be seen as “vertical” by dint of their tendency to include both elite and nonelite members from different levels of society and the state. Clans boast powerful and often moneyed elites consisting of members who have risen to prominence through distinguished birth or notable accomplishment. These leaders may be regional governors and *kolkhoz* (collective farm) chairmen, or simply village elders. Whatever their formal stations, elite members are normatively and rationally bound to foster the well-being of their clan. They provide political, social, and economic opportunities to the members of their respective networks, and in return count on these members’ personal loyalty and respect to maintain their status. Ethnographic evidence indicates that clans today range in size from 2,000 to 20,000 members, which makes them much smaller than the large tribal confederations of the nomadic period. The numbers need not be static,

however, since kinship networks can expand through politically arranged marriage alliances.

As recent events in Afghanistan testify, politics in a clan-based society is largely about the dealings that go on within and between clans as they compete for state resources. An analysis of the politics of transition that focuses on the clan, its distinctive rationality and norms, and its position within the state structure suggests the following logic: If clans are the central actors, rationally pursuing the interests of their members, then the weakly institutionalized state will become an arena within which these informal social networks (rather than formal political or social organizations) jostle, contend, and combine in pursuit of their respective interests. Acting informally, competing clans will divide the central state's offices and resources among themselves. The upshot is a regime that might best be called a *clan hegemony*. While such a regime will hardly be a democracy, neither will it be a classically authoritarian political order.

Clan governance should not be confused with ethnic, clientelist, regional, or mafioso politics. To begin with, clans are subethnic and their critical bond is not language or culture (although, like ethnic groups, clans can provide a sense of identity). Nor can clans be reduced to clientelism, since unlike clientelist ties the horizontal and vertical bonds linking clan members persist despite changing economic conditions. Localism can help to maintain clan ties, but clans are not fundamentally regional entities, and two or more may well coexist within the same geographical area. Finally, one should not be confused by the use of the word "clan" to describe the networks of oligarchs that run Russia or Ukraine, for these tiny elites are highly fluid and bound together only by money or their leaders' whims, not by the long-term affective bonds that cement Central Asian clans—even if these latter may also engage in practices of favoritism and high-level corruption that give them a superficial similarity to Russian political "mafias."

The Soviet Period

In exploring the role of clans in Central Asia from the early 1900s to the late Soviet period we find—against the common assumption that Soviet-era forced modernization simply eradicated such identities—that clans and the state have in fact engaged in a "mutually transformative" relationship.¹¹ Whereas Czarist colonialism had generally left Central Asia's clans alone, Lenin declared in 1918 that the Bolsheviks would modernize the region and make its peoples into "Soviet nations." But the vast communist bureaucracy of the Soviet party-state often failed to provide the social and economic goods it promised, and Soviet-forged identities (whether ethnonational or communist) put down only the shallowest of roots in Central Asia.

Ironically, the Soviet institutions designed to destroy clans actually wound up making them stronger. The collectivization and “nationalities” policies of the 1920s and 1930s were meant to modernize clans out of existence by turning wandering herdspeople into sedentary Soviet subjects and overwhelming old clan affiliations with new and larger “national” identities such as Kyrgyz, Turkmen, or Kazakh. But clans adapted and survived. Collectivization, for example, did not wipe them out but instead pushed their members together onto the same state-run farms, a situation that put new levers of power into the hands of clan-based networks. Clan members also learned to use Soviet affirmative-action policies for titular nationalities as channels for promoting kinfolk within the Soviet system. During the three decades under Nikita Khrushchev and Leonid Brezhnev, moreover, Moscow intervened relatively little in Central Asia’s republic-level politics, and both larger and smaller clans were able to maintain their networks with resources from the Soviet state.¹²

After Brezhnev’s death in 1982, the decline of the Soviet regime brought new instability to Central Asia. From 1984 to 1988, Moscow staged massive purges of the dominant clans in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Mikhail Gorbachev installed a large ethnically Russian cadre from Moscow in most positions of economic and political power. All told, his efforts to shake up the traditional system of power resulted in the imprisonment of an estimated 30,000 Central Asian leaders.

But the deeper trend unleashed by Gorbachev’s *perestroika* eroded the power of the party-state. Clans reasserted themselves, seizing opportunities to coordinate against Moscow and show that they would no longer remain quiet under its heavy hand. In Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, clan elites brokered informal pacts to reclaim power. They used the ethnic unrest and riots of 1989–90 to delegitimize Gorbachev’s appointees and put forward their own candidates for the high post of republic first secretary, which in a nutshell is how both Akayev and Karimov first rose to power.

In Tajikistan, by contrast, there was never a serious Moscow-imposed purge, and hence no anti-Moscow reaction. The Soviet government’s longstanding suspicion of most Tajiks as too Islamic only grew deeper as fears mounted concerning ties between Soviet Tajiks and their ethnic cousins in northern Afghanistan. To combat the perceived threat, the Politburo and KGB relied solely on the dominant Khodjenti clan. With Soviet backing and hence no incentive to pact with other clans, the Khodjentis remained in control, but of a highly unstable system that they could manage only with Moscow’s help.

Pacts and Transitions

It is important to grasp that the Central Asian pacts just described took place in 1989 and 1990, *prior to* any regime transition. No transi-

tion came until late 1991, when the collapse of the Soviet empire forced the Central Asian republics to adopt new regime types. Moreover, while there was a pact in Uzbekistan and a pact in Kyrgyzstan, afterwards the two went in polar-opposite directions politically. The academic literature on pacts and transitions, based almost exclusively on cases from Southern Europe and Latin America, argues that pacts make democratization more likely.¹³ The evidence from Central Asia suggests something quite different. There, pacts have brought regime durability but seem to be a wash when it comes to promoting democracy.¹⁴ Each Central Asian pact preserved a certain balance of power among the clans in a given state and allowed for the imposition of a new regime type, but seemed to have no effect upon the question of whether the new regime would be democratic (as in Kyrgyzstan) or autocratic (as in Uzbekistan). And the conclusion toward which the uniquely unhappy case of Tajikistan points would seem to be that if no pact is forthcoming, any subsequent regime transition will probably be unstable.

The clan leaders who did the actual pact making were rational agents acting within the structures and constraints of particular networks. These networks in turn affected the power each clan elite could tap in order to shape the transition and press its own favored political and economic agenda. Akayev governed a tight-knit, kin-based pact. The higher levels of trust this gave him allowed him more political maneuvering room, and thus contributed to the more open and democratic nature of the Kyrgyz transition. In Uzbekistan, by contrast, President Karimov was holding together a more tenuous, loosely networked pact. The levels of trust both within and across the clan networks were low, and so there was less political space available to accommodate a democratic transition, had Karimov been willing to start one.¹⁵ In Tajikistan, with no pact to support his transitional program, President Rahman Nabiyeu rapidly lost control as an interclan power struggle broke out, followed by clan-based civil strife. It is at such critical moments that leadership and choices most matter. Akayev seized his opportunity in August 1991 and pushed through a democratic program before opposition could coalesce. Karimov acted with similar dispatch in imposing a renewed autocracy. While balancing clan interests, he began to create new institutions that depended upon him rather than on communist ideology and party structures. Nabiyeu attempted to do the same in Tajikistan, but with no clan pact to support him, he failed miserably.

Much writing on democratization assumes, implicitly or explicitly, that a process of democratic institutionalization and consolidation will follow the initial transition.¹⁶ In Central Asia, however, the story was not consolidation but its opposite, even after second sets of formal elections or referenda in the mid-1990s. Formal appearances, in short, were deceptive. For the effectual reality of Central Asian politics—at the crucial level of *informal* regime behavior—was nonconsolidation and a

remarkable regionwide convergence on what I call the politics of clan hegemony.

By 2000, most observers seemed to agree that there had been simple elite-driven *authoritarian* consolidation across the board in Central Asia, with the other four presidents imitating the example of Turkmenistan's Saparmarad Niazov, who had himself elected "president for life" in 1999. Niazov has created a cult of personality to bolster his regime, a distinctively Central Asian *mélange* of Soviet and Middle Eastern traditions in which he is fulsomely praised as "Turkmenbashi the Great," the "great father of the Turkmen." He has even erected an enormous revolving golden statue of himself in the capital city of Ashgabat. But blaming the failure of the transitions solely on individual elites is too easy. Akayev and Karimov have been the most visible instruments but not necessarily the deepest causes of democratic failure in the region. We must take into account the informal but tremendously influential "politics of clan" that brought each man into power, and with which each must deal in order to stay there. We should assess Central Asia's informal authoritarian convergence along several dimensions, considering how the clans have penetrated formal political institutions, how economic resources are divided up along clan lines, how clans (rather than formal institutions) link state and society, and how regime stability has declined in the region under both authoritarianism and democracy.

First, how do clans infiltrate and transform the workings of the central formal institutions of the regime? In Kyrgyzstan, clan networks have penetrated the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government. When Akayev got the chance, for instance, he named his distant kinswoman, Cholpon Baekova, to chair the constitutional court. While she was a leading democratic reformer and most of her decisions were impartial, Akayev relied upon her kin loyalties and other informal means of leverage when he needed judicial support in moments of crisis. Her judgments in 1995 and 1998 underwrote the "constitutionality" of his bids for reelection. In Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, powerful clans similarly have seized control of the executive apparatus, using the "power ministries"—the ones that control the flow of capital and assets—to feed their various networks.

Second, in both Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, where pacts created a rough balance of clan power and put legitimate leaders in place, post-Soviet politics is not about ideology or policy. It is rather about bargaining among three or four major clans for the control of economic resources. The presidents have maintained a relative balance in distributing those resources to competing clans. For example, Akayev's clan controls the national bank and the security forces, which are headed by a former academic whose sole credential seems to be that he is related to the president. Mrs. Akayev's more powerful clan controls the ministries responsible for gold mining and privatization. Other clans control

the hydroelectric power plants and oil refineries. In Uzbekistan, a similar division of the more profitable gold, gas, cotton, and Coca-Cola revenues has occurred. Clan networks and kin ties are essential to economic and political advancement.

None of these regimes has been able to combat the widespread practice of voting for personalistic leaders or the consequent ability of clan-based factions to subvert the workings of parliament from the inside.

Coca-Cola's monopoly was assured when the head of its Uzbek subsidiary married President Karimov's daughter. In Tajikistan, by contrast, one clan's monopoly of political power and thus of economic prizes has spurred the disaffection of other clans from the regime and has fueled a civil conflict that has persisted despite the 1997 peace agreement.

Third, clans have to a large degree subverted or replaced the formal institutions that link state and society. The

presidential and parliamentary electoral results and the widespread failure of parties to gain power are particularly interesting in this respect. In Kyrgyzstan, where the first set of post-Soviet elections was considered free and fair, and where the legal and actual conditions of party competition were open and competitive, the results show that it is not election-rigging or corruption as such that undermines the most basic process of democracy, but the practice of clan-based voting.

In Kyrgyzstan, numerous election-monitors' reports from 1994 through 2000 note that local elders typically determined the vote of everyone in their family networks. Even in a region of weak parties, the strength of personalized voting in Kyrgyzstan is noteworthy. Parties, including the communists, gained just 19 percent of the seats in parliament in 1995 and only 15 percent five years later. The main opposition-party candidate for president garnered just 24.4 percent in 1995 and 19.5 percent in 2000. Elections in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have betrayed similarly odd patterns. In the former, which is the strongest and most authoritarian of the three states, the government sponsored five parties from which people could choose. Yet in the March 1999 parliamentary balloting, not even half the seats went to parties. The rest went to independents supported by clan networks. In Tajikistan, low turnout during the war made government manipulation obvious, but in the 2000 election, only 22 party candidates were elected to the 63-seat lower house of the national legislature, and 15 of these belonged to the "president's party," which is wholly a creature of his clan.

None of these regimes has been able to combat the widespread practice of voting for personalistic leaders or the consequent ability of clan-based factions to subvert the workings of parliament from the inside. Trade unions, corporatist structures, and religious or ethnic groups

have also failed to gain support. Ethnic Russian citizens are by definition clanless, and thus have little or no real political representation. The formal institutional mechanisms linking state and society throughout Eastern Europe, the Baltics, and even Russia have been all but insignificant in Central Asia. Instead, at the social level, clan networks have become increasingly active in the villages, and have largely usurped both the interest-aggregation role of parties and the role of the state in distributing resources, jobs, and social benefits.

The Danger of Breakdown

As the plight of Afghanistan makes tragically clear, perhaps the most urgent danger for Central Asians is not the democracy deficit with which they must live, but the sheer threat they face from regime instability and state breakdown. During the past decade, each Central Asian republic has seen its total resources decline under the pressure of economic contraction, drought, the Russian financial crisis, and most of all, the paucity of both foreign and domestic investment. Today, Central Asia's clans are grabbing all that they can as fast as they can, before state collapse takes hold. This feeding frenzy has placed mounting strains on the various clan pacts, with a consequent rise in coup attempts by clans that feel unhappy with their shares of the state spoils. A particularly vivid manifestation of this dangerous dynamic broke out in seemingly stable Uzbekistan in February 1999, when a string of nine bomb explosions narrowly missed killing President Karimov. Several major clans whose respective shares of power Karimov had recently cut are thought by some to have been behind the incident. Karimov's efforts to knock these clans down a peg were an example of one of the strategies that Central Asian presidents have adopted in order to put a damper on the competition both between one clan and another and between clans and the state. In general, all these approaches seem to rest on each president's ability and willingness to apply force. To date, unfortunately, they seem to have increased the prospects of instability more than they have tended to consolidate existing regimes.

In Kyrgyzstan, the situation has been most worrisome. President Akayev has relied ever more heavily on both his own clan and the larger and more powerful clan to which his wife belongs in order to keep his grip on the levers of power. This has two big drawbacks. First, it is costing him popular legitimacy. From the press to taxi drivers, people now openly accuse him of clan cronyism. His response has been to attack the press and civil society, thereby undermining what little remains of Kyrgyz democracy. In 2001, four major independent newspapers were subjected to lawsuits that threatened to shut them down, or else found themselves taken over by Akayev's relatives.

A second and perhaps more critical consequence of Akayev's strat-

egy has been its tendency to enrage those clans that feel excluded. Akayev's maneuvering to keep his main rival, Feliks Kulov, from running for president in 2000 angered not only Kulov's clan but also other opposition clans. While Kulov is no great democrat, the other clans saw this as a sign that Akayev and his clan have little intention of sharing power. Tensions are rising as both rival clans and Kyrgyzstan's tiny democratic opposition seek a share of the pie. Many in Kyrgyzstan now fear that a full-scale clan-against-clan civil war could explode in their midst. An open sign of how bad things could get appeared recently when police fired on unarmed demonstrators for the first time in independent Kyrgyzstan's history during a dispute over the arrest of a parliamentary deputy from a clan opposed to Akayev.¹⁷ The international community's response had increasingly been to give up on and even shun Akayev's regime, and the cause of democratization seemed lost beyond hope of recovery. Since September 11, however, revived international interest has begun to make Akayev feel new pressure to adopt reforms.

In Tajikistan, meanwhile, President Imomali Rakhmonov—"elected" in 1994 through the backing of the Russian government—has adopted a strategy much like Akayev's. He has been spared the mobilized unrest with which his Kyrgyz counterpart has had to contend, however. In a war-weary land that shares 1,200 kilometers of border with still-unstable Afghanistan, most people seem resigned to letting Rakhmonov's clan rig elections and steal what few state assets have managed to survive the civil broils of the 1990s and the economic devastation they left behind (Tajikistan currently has the lowest per-capita GDP of all 15 former Soviet republics). Also bolstering Rakhmonov is a peacekeeping garrison of Russian troops based in the capital city of Dushanbe. The government has succeeded in coopting certain leaders of the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) and the United Tajik Opposition into a power-sharing arrangement that at least gives them a share of the spoils, if not all that was promised by the 1997 peace agreement. Other leaders of the IRP remain in opposition, angry over what they see as Rakhmonov's illegal moves to thwart their chances in the 2000 election, but unwilling so far to start another armed rebellion. The most worrisome development of all, perhaps, has been the rise since about 1998 of a new Islamist opposition movement—the underground Hizb-ut-Tahrir al-Islami (Party of Islamic Liberation). Although not much is known for certain about this group's strength, it seems to be attracting young people disaffected by war, poverty, and the clan-based corruption of the current regime.

Uzbekistan has undoubtedly been the most successful of the Central Asian republics in creating a unified state and regime. Even so, the means by which it has done so may be stabilizing only in the near term. The regime received two wake-up calls in 1999, first from the February bombings in Tashkent that threatened President Karimov's life, and then from an August 1999 guerrilla incursion (drawing support from then-Taliban-

controlled Afghanistan) by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. The Karimov administration has since taken more care in balancing the interests and representation of certain powerful clans within the government. On the other hand, maintaining this informal pact has meant clinging to economic policies that hamper prospects for reform and development. By mid-2001, the regime was worried about financial collapse. As in Kyrgyzstan, clans are now competing more intensely than ever over dwindling resources.¹⁸

The Specter of Islamism

Karimov has also pointed to the 1999 bombings and guerrilla attacks and the danger of Islamist terrorism to justify his intense buildup of the state-security services and a policy of far-reaching crackdowns on political opposition and even small-scale dissent. Thousands have fallen victim to this repression. There is no question that the Uzbek state is in a sense stronger than ever, with greater capacity for armed coercion on the president's command. Yet there are costs in the form of higher popular support for Islamism and lower tolerance for the regime. Whether the U.S.-led war on terror has enhanced or undermined sympathy for Central Asia's Islamists is still uncertain. In the short term at least, increased U.S. military and economic aid and the likelihood of a new agreement with the International Monetary Fund—all now available as a result of Uzbek support for U.S.-led military operations in Afghanistan—look as if they will help hold the forces of Islamism at bay. Over the longer term, the prospects are much less clear.

Nearly 15 years after Gorbachev launched the Soviet world on the path of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, Central Asia's five ex-Soviet republics are not in transition to democracy, but are heading down a political and economic trajectory that can only be called sharply negative. The Central Asian cases demonstrate that the lack of certain democracy-friendly preconditions does not preclude elite-driven democratization or even social support for democracy. But elite pacts do not cause democratic transitions nor even make them probable. Pacts simply enhance regime viability—and the regime thus reinforced can as easily be autocratic as democratic.

Whatever their utility elsewhere, conventional theories about what shapes political transitions are not of much help in this part of the world. Instead, a focus on crucial "informal" factors such as clans, their pacts, and their conflicts with one another gives us a better sense of what is really at the heart of these cases of post-transitional nonconsolidation, and why, after an initial period of divergence, all these republics began to move along more or less the same path toward weak, clan-based authoritarianism.

The distinctive nature of clan politics makes the Central Asian re-

publics particularly vulnerable to instability. As the international community turns greater attention to this strategic region, it must develop models of reform that take these conditions into account. Any scheme for reform that ignores the sociopolitical and socioeconomic realities of clan politics is bound to fail. As the international community seeks to build a democratic Afghanistan, it would do well to keep in mind the lessons of failed—or in the case of Uzbekistan, nonexistent—democratic transitions just up the road in neighboring Central Asia. Civil conflict in Afghanistan and Tajikistan has already wreaked terrible havoc in those lands and sent shock waves far afield. With more sustained and context-sensitive international intervention, we may have better hopes of avoiding additional disasters in this long-suffering corner of the globe.

NOTES

1. Thomas Carothers, “The End of the Transition Paradigm,” *Journal of Democracy* 13 (January 2002): 5–21.

2. See the collection of ten essays collectively titled “Ten Years After the Soviet Breakup,” *Journal of Democracy* 12 (October 2001): 19–94.

3. For example, Ken Jowitt, *The New World Disorder: The Leninist Extinction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992). For an example of actor-based explanations of post-Soviet authoritarianism, see Michael McFaul, “The Fourth Wave of Democracy and Dictatorship: Noncooperative Transitions in the Postcommunist World,” *World Politics* 54 (January 2002): 212–44. See also Michael McFaul, *Russia’s Unfinished Revolution: Political Change from Gorbachev to Putin* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).

4. Thomas Carothers, “The End of the Transition Paradigm.”

5. For comprehensive data on the preconditions indicators, see Kathleen Collins, “Clans, Pacts, and Politics: Understanding Regime Transition in Central Asia,” Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 1999, ch. 2.

6. For examples, see the UN Development Programme’s *Kyrgyzstan Human Development Report 2001* (draft version), December 2001; and Islam Karimov, *Uzbekistan on the Threshold of the 21st Century* (Tashkent: Uzbekiston, 1997).

7. Kathleen Collins, “The Political Role of Clans,” *Comparative Politics* (forthcoming).

8. On clans in Central Asia, see Adrienne Edgar, “Genealogy, Class, and Tribal Policy in Soviet Turkmenistan, 1924–1934,” *Slavic Review* 60 (Summer 2001): 266–88; and Olivier Roy, *The New Central Asia: The Creation of Nations* (New York: New York University Press, 2000).

9. Douglass C. North, *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); and Avner Ben-Ner and Louis Putterman, eds., *Economics, Values, and Organizations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

10. Kathleen Collins, “Clans, Pacts, and Politics,” ch. 3.

11. Joel Migdal, Atul Kohli, and Vivienne Shue, eds., *State Power and Social Forces:*

Domination and Transformation in the Third World (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

12. Moscow's hands-off policy was known in Soviet parlance as "maintaining the stability of cadre." See Valerie Bunce, "The Political Economy of the Brezhnev Era: The Rise and Fall of Corporatism," *British Journal of Political Science* 13 (April 1983): 1355; and Ronald G. Suny, *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1993).

13. Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe C. Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

14. Kathleen Collins, "Clans, Pacts, and Politics," ch 2.

15. Author's interviews with governmental advisors, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, July 2000.

16. Guillermo O'Donnell, "Illusions About Consolidation," *Journal of Democracy* 7 (April 1996): 34–51.

17. These events, which took place in the village of Ak-sui, were recounted to me by a Kyrgyz journalist during a personal interview in March 2002.

18. Author's interview with a member of the Uzbek government, June 2000.