

# **Testimony to the U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe**

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## **“Central Asia and the Arab Spring: Growing Pressure for Human Rights?”**

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Mr. Chairman, I want to thank you for inviting me here to testify about the potential impact of the Arab Spring on Central Asia, a region vitally important to American interests, but one that is poorly understood and often neglected by scholars and policy makers.

The Arab Spring is a watershed event in the history of the Middle East, a part of the world that was unfortunately bypassed by the global trend of democratization of the past several decades. The events in Tunisia and Egypt offer new hope to millions whose future prospects have long been stifled by a corrupt and repressive elite that monopolizes political and economic power. The tremendous force behind these grassroots uprisings caught many off guard—not least the rulers themselves.

The people of post-Soviet Central Asia have also endured hard times over the past two decades. These countries are led by some of the most repressive rulers on the planet. Human rights abuses are rampant and basic freedoms are severely curtailed. Due to the decline in their living standards beginning in the early 1990s, many people are nostalgic for the old Soviet system, where they could at least count on basic physical and economic security, if not political freedom.

People in Central Asia, like others around the world, yearn for democracy yet face many challenges to attaining it. Could this be their time? I believe, unfortunately, that the barriers to democratization in Central Asia are overwhelming. The grassroots uprisings in the Arab world, while inspirational to many, are unlikely to take root in Central Asia due to the region’s inhospitable soil.

I want to highlight two sets of factors that I believe make uprisings like those in the Middle East unlikely to occur in the near future in Central Asia. First is the weakness of the personal and technological linkages between the Middle East and Central Asia. Second is the capacity of authoritarian regimes in Central Asia to withstand challenges from below. I’ll close with a brief comment on the prospects for political change in Central Asia in the longer term.

A critical feature behind the tendency of protest movements in one Arab country to migrate to another is the dense cultural and economic ties between societies. Like the Eastern European revolutions of 1989, the Arab spring is being driven by citizens separated by national borders, who have never met, but who nonetheless face similar challenges and see themselves as sharing a common predicament. Their political systems are characterized by presidents who have held power for decades, economies that are dominated by a narrow ruling elite, entrenched corruption that needlessly raises the cost of public services, and a pervasive but antiquated apparatus of

propaganda that people encounter on a daily basis on television, in newspapers, and on billboards on their way to work.

In addition to sharing similar life experiences, Arab citizenries are also connected to one another through various channels of communication. People in one Arab country could rapidly learn of protests in other states through international travelers such as businessmen and labor migrants; by telephone and e-mail; and through blogs, social networking websites, and cable channels like al Jazeera. The effects of these dense networks of communication were visible in the spread of protests from Tunisia to Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, and beyond. Protesters in different countries, sharing common cultural references and life experiences, framed their grievances in similar ways, in terms of demands for justice, of the people against the ruling class, and as an expression of the frustrations of the young generation, which has been prevented by older generations from sharing in the benefits of the system.

There was also a common repertoire of protest that included an emphasis on non-violence and a visible role for people who would draw a sympathetic reaction from the public. Demonstrations involved humor directed against cloistered, out-of-touch autocrats; and posters and signs highlighting injustice and the illegitimacy of the incumbent regime. Clearly, the perception of common identity among Arab citizens, especially youth, was crucial in the rapid and unrelenting spread of uprisings across national boundaries.

But these forces run up against major obstacles when they reach the former Soviet Union (FSU). Even 20 years after the breakup, the attention of ex-Soviet states and their citizens is still largely directed inward, toward the territory of the former empire. States in Central Asia, the Caucasus and the Western part of the FSU share similar regime types and forms of corruption. Their citizens still speak Russian as a first or second language and watch Russian television, including pro-government news broadcasts. Russian news, unsurprisingly, portrayed the events of the Arab Spring as chaotic, violent, and provoked by Islamic radicals. People throughout the FSU continue to interact through ties of trade and labor migration, and virtually, through the Russian-language blogosphere. They commiserate by relating their experiences of post-Soviet social disruption and financial hardship, and find common cause in joking about their dysfunctional political systems.

When events happen in the Middle East, dissidents and opportunistic politicians in post-Soviet states may take advantage by organizing rallies, as they have done in Armenia and Azerbaijan, and are rumored to be planning in other states. But the Arab Spring is unlikely to embolden the mass public. Whereas a success in one Arab nation has a galvanizing effect on other Arab societies, in the post-Soviet region, people have no reason to believe that the institutional constraints on protest and freedom of expression in their own countries have changed significantly.

Even the societies of Central Asia, which are predominantly Muslim, tend to look north rather than south or west. Economic, cultural, and political ties with Russia remain strong, despite the sporadic efforts of the region's leaders to distance themselves from their former imperial core. Young people who intend to seek work abroad learn English, or sometimes Turkish—but rarely Arabic. Central Asians see Turks as cousins, albeit patronizing ones. Central Asians consider

Arabs distant ancestors, not relatives. Religious Central Asians feel somewhat insecure in comparison to Arabs, whom they consider “good Muslims” while calling themselves “bad Muslims” due to the Soviet legacy of atheism. But the dominant view among Central Asians is to see themselves as culturally more advanced than Arabs or Afghans. They see Arab Islam as too extreme and fundamentalism as retrograde and dangerous. I am, of course, generalizing about the opinions of diverse groups of people, but I believe this reflects the views of the majority, who would be in the vanguard of a pro-democracy revolution.

There is a recent precedent for the spread of protest throughout the FSU, and that is the so-called color revolutions in Georgia in 2003, Ukraine in 2004, and Kyrgyzstan in 2005. These uprisings happened in a short time period and involved similar demands and tactics, in part because activists monitored events in neighboring countries and communicated across national boundaries. All three revolutions involved unpopular autocrats, fraudulent elections, and large protests in the central squares of national capitals. All three caught their nations’ leaders off guard and ended in a peaceful transfer of power. Protesters acted with the knowledge of what had happened in previous revolutions, and demonstrated the ability to learn from their predecessors’ triumphs and mistakes. At the same time, the region’s incumbent autocrats also showed a willingness to apply lessons from the missteps of *their* counterparts. And this brings me to my second point—the resilience of Central Asian regimes.

After the overthrow of Kyrgyz President Askar Akaev in March 2005, the next domino that may have fallen was Uzbekistan, which faced an unprecedented large and peaceful protest in the city of Andijan in May of that year. As you know, it resulted in a humanitarian tragedy when the army opened fire on the crowd and killed hundreds of people. This was only the most severe of the measures that rulers took around the time of the color revolutions to shore up their power. Other examples included the closure of Western non-governmental organizations; the expulsion of the Peace Corps from Russia; the arrest and harassment of journalists and human rights activists; the use of violence against peaceful demonstrators in Azerbaijan and Belarus on several occasions; the Kremlin’s creation of the pro-government youth movement *Nashi* and copycat groups in other states; the investment in building up ruling parties in Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Georgia and Azerbaijan; the use of surveillance technology to monitor public gatherings and Internet activity; and the nationalization or increased state control of private businesses.

The upshot of these measures was more resilient authoritarian regimes. Regime strength can be viewed as a kind of natural selection, in which the weakest ones were overthrown while those that could adapt would live on. Having endured a trial by fire in the last decade, incumbent post-Soviet regimes are highly adept at staving off opposition challenges without using overt repression, allowing them to preserve stability and even claim popular legitimacy. This is most apparent in Kazakhstan, where President Nursultan Nazarbaev appears to be genuinely popular despite closing off all space for independent voices. His soft touch enabled him to win the most recent presidential elections with a reported 91% and 96% of the vote without facing street protests. Kazakhstan’s chairmanship of the OSCE, whatever its merits, also provided his regime an international stamp of approval. This is in contrast to the Mubarak and Ben Ali regimes, which had seemingly grown complacent from their many decades of successfully managing

power. They appeared to have underestimated their citizens' frustration and their willingness to brave violence to make their voices heard.

Central Asia also suffers from a deficit of civil society in comparison with Middle Eastern states. Despite their limited political freedoms, Tunisia, Egypt, and others have organized trade unions, a history of student activism, Islamic movements, and political parties with grassroots appeal. These organizations, although debilitated, aided in attracting ordinary people once protests began. Mobilization against authoritarian regimes is a high-risk activity, so the trust that held these groups together was a vital asset for the opposition.

In contrast, civil society in Central Asia is very weak. In large part due to the Soviet legacy, there are few independent organizations with popular support through which people can be recruited to join protests. With the exception of Kyrgyzstan, people in the region lack collective memories of bottom-up political change, and have few cultural resources to draw on to build support for mass protests.

This leads me to bring up one caveat to the premise of Central Asia's political stagnation—and that is the exceptionally tumultuous nature of politics in Kyrgyzstan. Some might even argue that Kyrgyzstan offers a way forward for the region. Unfortunately, though the country has seen many protests, these are mostly not grassroots demands for greater democracy. Instead, as I show in my book *Weapons of the Wealthy*, the 2005 Tulip Revolution occurred when businessmen and politicians launched protests against President Akaev after they had lost their parliamentary races, and inadvertently caused his downfall. Since then, politicians have continued to mobilize mobs to assert their interests; most street protests are elite struggles over spoils, not grassroots demands for democracy. The violence that occurred in April and June 2010 stemmed directly from these struggles.

The Kyrgyz case, rather than Egypt or Tunisia, can be most instructive for the future of Central Asian regimes. As Kyrgyzstan demonstrated, opposition to the incumbent need not emanate from below, or occur through conventional channels such as political parties or NGOs. Threats to regimes can also be latent, undeclared, and informal, and can come from above: rival political elites within the regime, or businessmen who have pledged their loyalty but also have their own power base. A president's coalition can hold together for a long time, but it can also unravel abruptly, for example, as a result of imminent succession and the failure of officials to rally around a successor who can assure their privileges. Struggles over power can also occur over a shrinking economic pie, or from personal disagreements between influential figures. If such a struggle leads a regime to collapse, the unraveling will not necessarily lead to democracy and may in fact be violent. For 20 years, the rules for managing power in countries such as Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Azerbaijan have worked well within the limited domain of satisfying elite interests. But these elites have no experience dealing with rapid change, and may not be able to resolve their differences peacefully when the old rules cease to function.

In the coming decades, there is reason to expect Central Asian regimes to become increasingly vulnerable. With the partial exception of Kazakhstan, leaders have neglected to invest in maintaining capital inherited from the Soviet Union. The degradation of education systems, in particular, is causing a crisis in human capital. When the last generation of Soviet-educated

professionals retires, it will be difficult to find qualified people to replace them. Young people today either seek to leave the country or invest in connections to help them to gain access to the state's diminishing spoils, rather than develop the skills needed to make a positive economic contribution. Unless governments in the region make basic investments to replace decaying capital, not only regimes, but also state institutions are at risk of collapsing. In the long run, the U.S. might be forced to reassess how it can best assist Central Asia: not by jumpstarting a stalled democratization process, but, more urgently, by helping to stave off state failure. There is a closing window of opportunity for the leaders of the region and their external partners to avert this scenario.