

# Testimony :: Dr. Martha Olcott

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It is a great privilege to be asked to testify before you today.

The question of whether or not Uzbekistan should be certified as having made sufficient progress in the improvement of its human rights situation is a critical one. A decision to cut off foreign assistance to Uzbekistan, even if only for one year, is likely to have a major impact on U.S. relations with Uzbekistan and for the development of Uzbek society.

It also will have bearing on the future role that the U.S. will play in Central Asia more generally, an area which is on the "front lines" of the War on Terror.

There are no easy choices when deciding how to balance the use of "carrots" and "sticks" to attain the goals of U.S. foreign assistance, but I believe that in this case, the costs of cutting off foreign assistance to Uzbekistan far outweigh any benefits that would be derived from this action.

The decision by the U.S. Secretary of State to refuse to certify Uzbekistan as having made sufficient progress with regard to reforming human rights, got the attention of the government in Tashkent, and has already led to some small improvement, including a more open attitude toward the investigation of abuses in Uzbekistan's penal system.

By its actions in December the U.S. put the government of Uzbekistan on notice. To cut off funds now, especially given the rather small sums involved, would not "teach Uzbekistan a lesson" but instead would damage the cause of democracy building in Uzbekistan and would endanger U.S. security interests in Uzbekistan and in the Central Asian region.

## The Human Rights Situation in Uzbekistan

Although at first glance it may seem simple, the question of whether or not Uzbekistan has made progress in human rights is really a very complex and highly subjective one, particularly if the conclusion reached determines whether or not Uzbekistan is barred from receiving congressionally-allocated U.S. foreign assistance funds.

The conclusion one reaches very much depends upon the chair on which one is sitting.

I will not sit before you and pretend that Uzbekistan has a human rights record worthy of either praise or emulation. Certainly no non-partisan observer of the situation in that country would claim either to be the case.

Uzbekistan is quite obviously not a democratic country, nor is it not progressing towards becoming a democracy in what I would see as a satisfactory pace. I say that as a professional observer of

Central Asia and as a life-long student of political development more generally.

In my opinion, the human rights situation in the country is improving slowly, and the improvement is an uneven one.

Last week I heard very encouraging things about the work of Freedom House in Uzbekistan, both from the director of their Human Rights Training and Support Program in Uzbekistan, and the Senior Program Officer in charge of their Rule of Law Initiative here in Washington D.C. For the first time the Uzbek government allowed independent investigators to probe the death of prisoners who were alleged victims of torture.

The fact that Freedom House is receiving cooperation from the Office of the Procurator and the Ministry of Interior is a very promising sign that the government of Uzbekistan is now preparing to confront some of the abuses of its penal system, abuses which have been documented by various human rights organizations and by the U.N.'s rapporteur on torture.

By contrast, the new law on non-governmental organizations seems an unfortunate step backward. It gives the government of Uzbekistan an ability to block foreign funding for non-governmental organizations, and has forced foreign NGO's to seek re-registration. Not all foreign funded NGOs have managed to gain re-registration, including most prominently the Open Society Institute.

This law seems to be the direct product of Georgia's Rose Revolution, which many in Central Asia saw as the result of work by local NGOs that had received foreign funding, rather than the displeasure of the Georgian population with the increasingly more corrupt and remote regime of former Georgian President Eduard Shevernadze.

#### Cutting Off Aid Strands Reformers

The displeasure of the Uzbek population with the undemocratic regime of President Islam Karimov also seems to be growing, given the slow and erratic pace of both political and economic reform in the country, which has left many people in increasingly more dire economic straits and with little opportunity to channel their displeasure in peaceful ways that policy-makers are forced to take account of.

Media remains under heavy government influence, and although formal censorship laws have disappeared, prudent journalists remain very reluctant to criticize the government. Those writing critically in foreign media outlets remain subject to intimidation---or worse---sending a clear message to Uzbekistan's domestic media establishment.

The current parliament is still a virtual rubber-stamp of the government. Talk of opening the political process through the creation of a political party system which will compete in the next election has been a highly controlled process. Local governors are still chosen by presidential appointment, and rule in a non-democratic fashion. It is only at the local-most level, that of "neighborhood" or mahalle, that participatory politics is at all practiced, and this in a very paternalistic style.

Uzbek government officials often like to remind us that traditional Uzbek culture is neither democratic nor participatory in nature, and that this was reinforced during the decades of Soviet rule. It has also been reinforced by policies pursued by the Uzbek government for most of the period since independence.

This doesn't mean that democratic practices are antithetical to Uzbek traditional culture. In fact the population of Uzbekistan showed as much enthusiasm for the political opening of the late Gorbachev years as any in the region. This in fact is one of the reasons that the Karimov government choose a non-democratic path of political development, at the time of the Civil War in neighboring Tajikistan, as they saw independent political groups as leading the Uzbek populace to move in unpredictable directions, something that might threaten public order in the country and that would certainly threaten the consolidation of political power by President Karimov and his political and familial entourage.

Although democracies often move in unpredictable directions, the power of dictatorships always wax and wane. They are dependent upon the perceived strength of the man at the center. Islam Karimov was never a totalitarian leader in the fashion of Josef Stalin, or even Saparmurad Niyazov--Turkmenbashi the Great--in neighboring Turkmenistan. Karimov was, of course, an extraordinarily powerful figure at his prime, but political power was diffuse, and shared with a number of national and regional insiders.

As Karimov has aged, and become seemingly more physically frail, his dictatorship has begun to decay as well. The population in Uzbekistan is now much less frightened of voicing their displeasure than was the case only a few years ago.

This makes supporting the work of many Freedom Support Act projects all the more critical. This is the time for western governments to come to the aid of those in Uzbek society trying to work in the institutions that dominate in secular societies. Projects that help those organizing the populations at the grass roots level on social as well as political issues, projects that deal with legal reform, with reform of the penal system, that support education, and media training are all critically needed in Uzbekistan.

What of the Country's "Islamic Threat"?

One of the long-standing concerns of the Uzbek government has been that radical Islamic groups will take advantage of any political opening to gain recruits. But while it is true that Islamic groups would almost certainly use all the tools available in a democratic society to propagate their message, the appeal of these groups would be muted in a democratic society, for secular political alternatives would become increasingly more credible.

The risk of Islamic extremism in Uzbekistan is not an abstract one. Radical Islamic groups have been actively recruiting members in the country since the late 1980s, as the revival of Islamic fundamentalist thought occurred hand in hand with the revival of more traditional forms of Islam during the period of "perestroika" and the first years of independence. Traditional believers far outnumber those in fundamentalist groups, and even the majority of the latter are peaceful and law-abiding citizens. A small minority of adherents of fundamentalist Islamic teachings do support the

violent overthrow of the secular Uzbek state.

For many youths the repressive nature of the regime has made peaceful radical and militant Islamic ideas more appealing, in the way that any "forbidden fruit" becomes attractive. Groups like Hizbut Tahrir use their illegal status as demonstration of the corrupt and anti-Islamic nature of the regime. This does not mean that Hizbut Tahrir, or groups like them should be legalized, but the Uzbek government which claims that this group is essentially seditious in nature, would be on far stronger grounds in denying them registration if independent religious groups were able to achieve registration.

Church and state are not separate in Uzbekistan. Religious authorities are answerable to the government's state council on religion, which certifies all clerics, houses of worship, and religious schools in the country, and the government has used its authority to appoint religious leaders who are seen as supportive of the existing regime.

The current situation is one which is problematic for religious believers and although defended as necessary to insuring that Uzbekistan remains a secular state, in the long run it is working to the detriment of the country developing into a strong secular democracy in the country.

#### An Aid Cutoff Hurts Reformers Most of All

The relatively small number of independent secular political outlets insures that religious organizations will continue to draw young people to them. Independent groups have great difficulty in organizing in Uzbekistan, and many who participate in non-governmental organizations that receive US or other western forms of funding are not independent actors, but are in some way tied to the existing political order.

But the position of these groups will only worsen if the U.S. restricts foreign assistance to Uzbekistan. The presence of U.S. and other forms of foreign funding serves as a spur to the formation of such groups, and in many cases keeps organizations alive that would otherwise fold for lack of financial support.

There is obviously a down-side to such foreign dependence. Some NGOs are more reflective of foreigner's agendas than those of local citizens, and this is particularly true of groups dealing with "gender" issues. A professional class of NGO workers is also developing, whose members are more interested in perpetuating their own income than promoting activities that would lead to the perpetuation of other (and potentially competitive) informal groups. Some NGOs are as corrupt as the government that they are criticizing, while others are little more than a privatized form of government.

Yet for all these flaws, taken as a group non-governmental organizations in Uzbekistan remain the only real arena of political competition in the country, and collectively they have played an enormous role in pressuring the Uzbek government to be more responsive to the norms of rule by law.

The position of people serving in the Uzbek government is also not static, and over the past few

years in particular, the number of people who are eager to see the Uzbek government institute political as well as economic reforms has increased. Most of these people are not interested in becoming political activists, but are willing to use their official positions to quietly push for changes. If the U.S. cuts off funding from Uzbekistan, the position of these people will become more difficult and then will have little or no incentive to push for democratic reforms in the country.

### The Environment for Political Reform in Uzbekistan is Improving

Getting the Uzbek government to take seriously the need for political as well as economic reforms has been an uphill battle, filled with occasional successes and then generally with relatively long periods of decline.

The development of a closer strategic relationship between the U.S. and Uzbekistan in the aftermath of September 11 led to the Uzbek government committing itself to making steady progress towards political and economic reforms. The goals the Uzbeks set for themselves were very ambitious, and unfortunately they have not been met.

This said it is important to note that the political environment in Uzbekistan is steadily changing, and over the past two and a half years it has changed far more for the better than it has for the worse.

This is quite different from the pattern in 1993-2002, when political openings were few and far between, and the arenas of political competition were sharply curtailed.

In my opinion, progress in economic reform since 2002 has been more disappointing than political reform, as the government of Uzbekistan chose to introduce greater currency convertibility but did not eliminate restrictive trade policies. This has served as a real damper on the development of a market economy in the country, and is leading to considerable economic hardship, which in turn is creating greater political dissent.

That makes it all the more important for the U.S. to continue to support the process of civil society building in Uzbekistan, without interruption. For now more than ever it is important that ordinary Uzbek citizens find peaceful and secular outlets to make their displeasure known.

Moreover, if the government of Uzbekistan makes satisfactory progress towards improving the human rights situation in the next six months, I would strongly urge that the U.S. Congress increase funding for civil society projects in Uzbekistan in the coming years. I would especially urge that there be substantial increases in funding for projects relating to the reform of the penal and judicial sector, as ending corrupt practices in this sector and introducing strong western-style professional norms would create a dramatic reduction in human rights abuses.

Furthermore, this is an area that the Uzbek government now realizes must be reformed, and they appear to be strongly supportive of foreign-supported efforts in this sector. The U.S. should take advantage of this opening, rather than slam shut a "door" that so many inside and outside of Uzbekistan worked so hard to open.

## Cutting Off Aid Works to the Advantage of Critics of the U.S.

It goes without saying many of us (Uzbeks and non-Uzbeks) expected more of the government of Uzbekistan in the wake of improved U.S.-Uzbek relations that occurred in the aftermath of September 11.

In a series of bilateral documents the government of Uzbekistan made a series of pledges about the pace of political and economic reform that it has been very slow to keep.

In this context it is easy to understand the current level of frustration felt by many in Washington with the government in Tashkent.

But for their part, there is also a sense of disappointment with Washington in Tashkent. Many in Uzbekistan, both in government and in the country more generally had unrealistic expectations of what the new improved U.S.- Uzbek relationship would mean in terms of the amount of U.S. foreign assistance that would be ear-marked for the country.

Moreover, their disappointment comes at a time when Vladimir Putin has come courting, in Uzbekistan and in the Central Asian region more generally. Geopolitics in Central Asia is not a zero-sum game.

But Russia does not have the same interest in either economic or political reform of the Central Asian states that the U.S. does. Even the partial or seeming withdrawal of the U.S. from Uzbekistan that an aid cut-off would represent, would likely be used by Putin to Russia's advantage, and to the disadvantage of those seeking the development of a democratic Uzbekistan.

The Central Asian societies, including Uzbekistan, are all beginning to prepare for the political transitions that must inevitably occur. Kyrgyzstan has a presidential election scheduled for 2005, Kazakhstan in 2006, Uzbekistan in 2007, and only President Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan has announced plans to run for an additional term in office.

This is a particularly critical time for the U.S. to be highly visible in all three countries, pushing for opening political systems rather than closing them. And we must be sensitive to the pictures that we convey.

Traveling in Central Asia one frequently hears complaints that the U.S. has a double standard, that Washington holds some states to norms that other allies are not required to meet, or to standards that the U.S. occasionally falls short of as well.

The entire world saw pictures of prisoners being abused by U.S. soldiers or employees in Iraq. This occasioned a great deal of comment in Central Asia, by Islamists who claimed that it was a plot to humiliate all Muslims. It also led to a sense of disappointment by secular supporters of the U.S. in these countries as well. Now, obviously, it would be a mistake to equate the abuse by a few to the systematic abuse of prisoners that has occurred in Uzbekistan (and in much of the former Soviet Union). But understanding the difference is easier here than where abuse of prisoners is more

systemic.

The television images make us look more like them, which is all the more reason why U.S. sponsored programs designed to eliminate such abuses in Uzbekistan are particularly important to continue.

Cutting off funds from Uzbekistan might silence some critics in the U.S. that claim that Congress and the Administration are too friendly with dictators. But the cost of doing so will be losing a number of critical friends abroad. Not just government officials but ordinary citizens in Central Asian states, the very people whose support we will need to win in the War on Terror.