

**The speech by Muhammad Salih, leader of the democratic ERK party of  
Uzbekistan,  
at the US Congress on problems in Central Asia  
Washington DC  
July 25, 2006**

We have always been in favor of a dialogue with the regime of President Islam Karimov and we have always welcomed any attempts from the West to establish such a dialogue.

This is the case not only because the West has made democratic reforms in Uzbekistan the main priority in that dialogue, but also because we see that cooperation with the West would create opportunities for the country's economic development and for strengthening our sovereignty.

However, President Karimov has dealt a blow to the interests of the people of Uzbekistan and has turned away from the Western democracies and made it clear that democratic transformation is unacceptable for his regime.

Today some advocates of the renewal of dialogue with Karimov's regime say that it is still necessary, arguing that the West will lose a great deal, both politically and economically, if it is tough on Karimov's government and isolates it internationally.

I would like to reassure them. The West has nothing significant to lose in Uzbekistan as it never gained anything tangible in the political, economic and military fields. However, the West has now lost even those humble gains that were achieved over the course of 15 years of cooperation with Tashkent.

Let's take the political field. The democratic institutions that were created over the past 15 years of cooperation with the West were always dependant on the Uzbek president's whim. He could ban them, eliminate them at any moment – and this is what happened when the West had called for an independent inquiry into the Andijan massacre.

Over 15 years of cooperation with the Uzbek regime, the West was never able to persuade it to legalize opposition parties and to hold fair elections with participation of the opposition and independent candidates.

Not a single political party in opposition to Karimov has been registered over that period. Two human rights organization were granted registration, only to be banned soon thereafter.

Western countries and international organizations have made great efforts to support economic development, strengthen democratic institutions, and eliminate poverty. They brought in significant financial and human resources to achieve those goals and provided generous humanitarian aid. But all these efforts were in the end brought to nothing because of one person.

Despite its sincere efforts, the West has not seen improvements in the human rights record of Karimov's government. The West's efforts have included condemnation of torture and persecution based on political or religious beliefs.

Of course, Western pressure regarding these problems worked as a restraining factor, but it was not sufficient enough to change President Karimov's internal policies.

The same is true with regards to military cooperation, the fight against organized crime and drugs, and the illegal trade in weapons.

The Khanabad airbase – though there was a lot of discussion surrounding it – failed to become a staging point for U.S. and NATO's long-term plans in Central Asia. Its was limited to carrying out tactical tasks rather than strategic ones. And the saddest thing is that its fate also depended on the will and caprices of the same Uzbek ruler.

The technical and military aid provided by the West to Karimov's regime to fight terrorism, drugs and illegal arms trade was instead used by Karimov to suppress opposition and dissidents. And not only in Andijan.

Uzbekistan remains a major transit point for drugs from Afghanistan: this illicit trade is controlled by Uzbek criminal groups that closely cooperate with law enforcement and high-ranking government officials. Part of the money provided to fight terrorism was used to ensure personal security of the president and his family.

The economic situation looks even worse. During his entire time in office, President Karimov failed to create conditions for foreign investment. Uzbekistan remains a high-risk zone for Western investment. Any business involving foreign partners is controlled personally by the president or by members of his family and inner circle.

For the handful of foreign companies that are still working in the country, there is no guaranty that their Uzbek partners will fulfill their obligations and will observe terms of the contracts that they had signed. The only western companies that operate in the country are there because they have personal guaranties from President Karimov. All economic decisions depend again on the will of one person.

A recent example is the government's scrapping of tax breaks for more than 30 major joint ventures with foreign capital. Among them are the gold mining company Zerafshan Newmont, Texaco, Nestle and others. Tax breaks remain in place for the Russian companies LUKOIL and GAZPROM.

As you can see, the guaranties of the government and the president himself are not trustworthy. The same goes for his foreign policy priorities. Yesterday his priority was the West; today it is Russia; we cannot foresee what it will be tomorrow. We can only guess that tomorrow Russian companies may face the same problems that Western ones are facing today. And then one day no one will be surprised to see that Karimov's best partner is North Korea and that the terrorists that he is fighting today ensure his personal security.

Karimov's unpredictable personality has an impact on the stability of the country. A leader with such traits cannot be a guarantor of security.

In closing, I would like to clarify that perhaps I was not quite right in saying that the West had nothing to lose in Uzbekistan. The West did lose something. The West lost time. Time was wasted trying to understand the nature of the Central Asian dictatorship. To understand that you cannot rely on a regime whose foundation is violence and state-sponsored terror.

We fully agree with Presidents Bush and Putin when they say in one voice that dialogue with terrorists is impossible! But we do not understand when some leaders want to hold a sincere dialogue with the chief architect of state terror in Central Asia.

Please allow me to sum up what I have said with the following conclusion:

There is no state in all of Central Asia that depends on the will of just one person like Uzbekistan does. But on the other hand this is what makes dictatorship so weak: by replacing one person you can change not only the situation in Uzbekistan, but in the entire region. As Karimov himself likes to say: "No man, no problem."

I am not calling for a violent overthrow of the Uzbek ruler. I am saying aloud what could happen if the international community finally takes real measures to weaken the Uzbek dictator's regime.

Allow me to put it more precisely: would it not be more logical to concentrate efforts on weakening the unlimited power of one person, rather than concentrating efforts on building and developing democratic institutions that would anyway depend on the will of just one person?

Muhammad Salih,  
Leader of the democratic ERK party of Uzbekistan