

**A Renewed Sense of the Possibility of Change:
The Peoples of Central Asia Respond to the Arab Spring**

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Nowhere in the world has the Arab Spring given greater promise of real political change toward democracy and freedom than in the authoritarian states of post-Soviet Central Asia. The reasons for that are clear but not always clearly understood. It is not because these countries are also Muslim majority states, and it is not because they too are ruled by brittle authoritarian regimes. There are Muslim majority states where the Arab Spring has not had an impact, and there are authoritarian regimes which, either by brutality or accident, have blocked the spread of the idea people in the Middle East are seeking to promote.

Rather it is because the events in the Arab world have dispelled the myth promoted by these governments that fundamental change is impossible or dangerous and that the populations must put up with the status quo because these regimes enjoy international support as bulwarks against Islamist fundamentalism and supporters of the international effort against terrorism in Afghanistan and elsewhere.

Those arguments did not save the authoritarian regimes in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and elsewhere in the Middle East, and they will not save the authoritarian regimes in post-Soviet

Central Asia. The peoples of those countries have been transfixed and transformed by the Arab Spring. They see that the arguments of their rulers no longer are convincing, and they see that the West and above all the United States, which often has pursued a policy of convenience with regard to these regimes, has changed as well. As a result, an increasing number of the people of these countries are ready to try to gain what is their natural right, freedom and democracy.

But just as the Arab Spring has affected the people, so too it has impressed the rulers in Central Asia. It has convinced them that they must take even more draconian measures in order to retain their hold on power. And the changes the Arab Spring have wrought in the consciousness of the peoples of Central Asia thus pose a serious challenge to Western governments including our own. Some of the regimes in that region may believe that they can get away with suppressing the opposition with extreme violence and that as long as they blame Islamists or outside agitators, as Uzbekistan President Islam Karimov did this week, all will be well. Consequently, the United States must find a way of encouraging these governments to give way to democracy rather than taking actions to defend their own power that will ultimately lead to a conflagration.

That is no easy task, but the Obama Administration deserves a great deal of credit for the way in which it managed the situation in Egypt. And that approach, one that led to the exit of an increasingly weak authoritarian president and opened the way to the possibility of genuine democratic change, in which the next elections will not be the last ones, provides a serious model for how the United States should behave when, as I hope and believe, the Arab Spring will be succeeded by a Central Asian Spring, allowing the peoples of that region at last to gain what they were denied in 1991 – genuine freedom, real democracy, and the human rights that all peoples should enjoy.

In my brief remarks today, I would like to focus on three things: first, the way in which the Arab Spring has affected thinking in Central Asia both among the populations and among the powers that be, underscoring the differences among the peoples of those states; second, the particular risks of regime change in the countries of that region, again country by country; and third, the way in which the U.S. and the international community can best proceed to ensure the next step toward genuine freedom for the peoples of this region.

Spring is Not an Impossible Dream

The peoples of the post-Soviet countries of Central Asia have been told by their rulers that they must accept the status quo both because it is the only one that can prevent still worse things, including the imposition of Islamism, and because it enjoys widespread international support from Western democracies who for one reason or another believe that such authoritarian regimes are either useful or even more necessary for peoples like themselves. But the events in the Arab Spring have made such arguments less compelling than they were. After all, the governments that have been toppled in the Arab world made exactly the same arguments with perhaps even greater effect – until it became obvious that the peoples of that region no longer accepted them and that the West had begun to recognize that these claims were unjustified and wrong.

The reason that authoritarian leaders use such arguments and come down so hard on any display of collective demands for freedom is that such demands are contagious. When people in country dare to be free, to live not by lies, and to not be afraid, others elsewhere are inspired to do the same. That is why there have been waves of democratization across large parts of the world at various points in the last generation, and it is why there is a new wave which has started in the Middle East but which will not end there.

In defense of their positions, authoritarian regimes rely not only on propaganda and police methods. They also rely on direct control of what people can find out about what is going on elsewhere. But the ability of these regimes to do that is small and declining. The Internet and other forms of social media mean that it is almost impossible to cut key groups off from learning what others are doing in other countries. That does not mean that regimes won't try – almost all of the regimes in Central Asia are doing so – but rather it means that they will not succeed. And the splash effect of such knowledge is larger than many understand.

Statistics on Internet penetration are less important than the fact of such penetration. If a few people can learn the truth, they can tell others. And that process means that even if the number of Web surfers in Central Asia is still small, the number of those who benefit from such knowledge is far larger. Indeed, one can argue that in many of these countries, it has reached critical mass. And to the extent that the Internet is supplemented by international broadcasting, both radio – and for obvious reasons, it has to be shortwave – and direct-to-home television broadcasting, the expansion in the spread of information will lead over time to the expansion of human freedom.

On this as on all other measures, there are enormous differences among the countries of this region, just as there are enormous differences among the countries of the Arab world. Consequently, just as the outcomes at any one point in the Arab world have ranged from quiescence to peaceful demonstrations to mass violence, so too the range of patterns in the Central Asian countries is likely to be large. At the same time, however, because within the Arab world and within the Central Asian world, people in one country often take their cue from what is happening in another in their region, so too a breakthrough in one Central Asian country,

such as Kyrgystan, in response to developments in the Arab world, is likely to play out across the other Central Asian states more or less quickly.

Elections Rather Than Bullets Defeat Islamism

As an increasing number of American commentators are now pointing out, the execution of Osama bin Laden is likely to have a smaller on the future of terrorism than are the actions of Egyptians, Tunisians and Libyans who are pressing for democratic rights. Indeed, the least reflection will lead to the conclusion that the actions on the streets of Cairo are a more definitive defeat of Al Qaeda than even the liquidation of bin Laden. This message is increasingly being absorbed among U.S. government leaders, who are ever more inclined to recognize that the purchase of short-term stability through reliance on authoritarian rulers gives a false sense of security.

That eliminates one of the key arguments that authoritarian rulers in Central Asia have advanced, many Central Asian populations have accepted, and that many Western governments including our own have made the basis of policy. Supporting a dictator who claims he can hold off Islamist extremism is a fool's errand: Such regimes are more likely to produce Islamist responses than are democratic ones. That does not mean that managing the transition from dictatorship to democracy is easy: It is obvious that those who support democracy must ensure that no free election will be the last one in any country.

But as Washington's approach in Egypt has shown, that is not an impossible task. There are ways to develop safeguards against backsliding, and there are ways to marginalize the extremists. That is one of the things that democracy truly understood does best. Another thing democracy does extremely well is allow for succession, an issue that arose in the first instance in Egypt and that will arise soon in many Central Asian countries whose presidents are aging

Soviet-era officials. If such individuals can be led to see that they will be remembered as fathers of their countries if they allow the emergence of a genuine opposition via elections, they will be more likely to take that step than if they are encouraged to “keep the lid on” Islamic assertiveness.

Everyone Needs Friends

As the events of the Arab Spring show, people who aspire to democracy need friends abroad, but they need friends who understand that support from abroad must be carefully calibrated lest it allow authoritarian regimes to claim that the democratic movement is a cat’s paw for foreigners or it provoke the regimes into even more violent action in “defense of the nation.” The United States showed that kind of understanding in the case of Egypt, carefully calibrating its statements and actions to the situation on the ground. But it has been less successful elsewhere in the Arab world not only because the leaders are less willing to see reason and yield to the people but also because the United States has either immediate interests it wants to protect or has less knowledge of the situation.

Unfortunately for the peoples of Central Asia, both of those factors are even more on view there. The US relies on several of the Central Asian countries for the passage of logistical support to the US-led effort in Afghanistan and not surprisingly does not want to see anything happen that might disrupt the flow of needed military supplies. And the US knows far less about Central Asia than it does about the Arab world. Few American representatives there speak the national languages, instead continuing to rely on the former imperial one; few US officials appear to view the Central Asian countries as independent actors in their own right, instead viewing them as part of Moscow’s *droit de regard*. (The infamous case in which an American

president thanked the Russian president in public for allowing a US base in Uzbekistan but did not thank the president of Uzbekistan is a symbol of this.)

There is little appreciation of the nature of Central Asian societies and the opportunities they have for development in a positive way. Instead, the focus in Washington is almost exclusively on the problems they represent: drug flows, human trafficking, corruption, violence, and unemployment among the urban young. All of these things are true, but they are neither the whole story nor can they be adequately addressed by authoritarian measures. Indeed, addressed in the ways that the regimes of this region have, these problems collectively can be the breeding ground for further violence and the replacement of the current authoritarian regimes by perhaps even more authoritarian Islamist ones.

That is something that the US does not yet appear to grasp, but if we are to be a friend to these peoples, we must understand that the only approach which gives hope of a truly better future for them is a commitment by us to the careful and continuing promotion of human rights and democracy. Our doing that will add to the courage of those who are already inspired by the Arab Spring and will thus promote a change of seasons in Central Asia as well.

The authoritarian governments of Central Asia have maintained themselves not only by pointing to the threat that any change would bring Islamist regimes to power – something they

make more likely the longer they are in office – but also by arguing that they have provided security and increasing prosperity for their peoples. In fact, they have provided neither. The peoples of Central Asia are less secure and less well off than they were. But even if it were true that they had done so, that is not enough for the peoples of the region, and it should not be enough for us.

In thinking about the situation in the post-Arab Spring Central Asia, one cannot fail to recall a Soviet anecdote from 1968. The story has it that two dogs meet at the border of Poland and Czechoslovakia. The Polish dog is sleek and fat, while the Czechoslovak dog is skin and bones. The Czechoslovak dog who is heading toward Poland asks the Polish dog why he is heading toward Czechoslovakia. The Polish dog replies he is doing so because he would like, for once in his life, to bark.

That message reverberated through Eastern Europe and then through the USSR with increasing power. It convinced many that, in Mikhail Gorbachev's words, "we cannot continue to live like that" – and more important still it led them to conclude that they didn't have to any more. That is what the peoples of Central Asia are learning from the Arab Spring. They want what all people want and deserve, and with the help of the people and government who pioneered human rights, they have a chance to gain sometime soon what they were promised but did not get twenty years ago.

