

Central Asian Elites, Suddenly, Shift Into Revolt

By Ahmed Rashid

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For much of the 1990s Boris Shikmuradov was the most acceptable public face of Turkmenistan's dictatorial regime, traveling the world as Foreign Minister. An Armenian by birth and a former journalist, the suave and jovial Shikmuradov spoke English fluently. He made a sharp contrast to his dour boss, President Saparmyrat Niyazov, who goes by Turkmenbashi the Great (Father of all Turkmen) and presides over an extreme Soviet-style personality cult. Shikmuradov countered this bizarre image of Central Asian governance. Now—like other former elites—he is opposing it.

Today Shikmuradov, who fled to Moscow in late 2001 from his last job as ambassador to China, is in revolt. In January he set up the Turkmenistan Popular Democratic Movement, which he calls an "open movement," and is currently touring Europe and the United States to drum up international support for a program to topple Niyazov.

Shikmuradov is not alone. In the past three months, other prominent Turkmen—ambassadors to Turkey and the United Arab Emirates, a former Deputy Prime Minister, and a senior diplomat from Turkmenistan's Washington embassy—have joined him in exile. In March, Niyazov sacked 20 top officials from the security, intelligence, and defense services, for allegedly plotting a coup against him. Whether the paranoid Niyazov had reason to suspect a plot or not, his iron grip has driven out his former deputies. "Turkmenbashi was choking out

any fresh air among the elite," says Martha Brill Olcott, a senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. "Everything had to be his way and the country was becoming more isolated."

According to Shikmuradov, anyone who would change Turkmenistan or any other Central Asian regime must first leave it. "There has been stagnation in Central Asia for ten years and now all the presidents are trying to extend their political life," he said from Vienna, where he is lobbying the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

Uzbekistan's President Islam Karimov laid the groundwork for a lifetime presidency in a January referendum. Kyrgyzstan's Askar Akayev, who once cultivated a progressive reputation, has stifled opposition activity and popular protests. And Kazakhstan's Nursultan Nazarbayev, despite promising broader democracy in speeches, battles efforts to let citizens directly elect regional governors or support politicians outside the Nazarbayev family. "The more opposition [there is], the better," Shikmuradov says, "but we are all in exile because there is no legal environment to operate in, and that's true for all Central Asia."

With no operable legal environment, these countries also have limited independent journalism. This has enabled Niyazov and other presidents to portray their regimes as essential to regional coherence. Niyazov accused Shikmuradov of corruption and selling arms

abroad—charges Shikhmuradov strongly denies.

In Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, presidential power has not changed hands since 1991. After the terrorist attacks of September 11 focused global attention on the region, elites hoped that presidents would act to shore up their countries' political and economic future. Instead, all five countries' presidents have sought to continue ruling indefinitely. Elites are increasingly fed up with their leaders' lack of vision and unwillingness to promote sounder currencies, fairer voting, or true freedom of speech.

The terrorist attacks, and the American-led war on al Qaeda that followed, brought Central Asia onto the global stage. As the U.S. rushed in to establish military bases for its campaign in Afghanistan, many voiced hope that international attention would force their leaders to carry out long-neglected reforms. Instead, the United States has treated the region primarily as a convenient staging base for its Afghan campaign, and all regimes have felt confident enough to use the threat of Islamic fundamentalism and al Qaeda to continue in their old ways. Repressive measures have continued or increased dramatically, receiving only mild criticism from Washington.

Even if elites were silent about abuses in the past, they had reason to view American forces' arrival as a turning point in the region's history. After

September 11, Washington and its allies quickly signed treaties with Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan to lease bases. This marks the first arrival of Western armies since Alexander the Great conquered the region in 334 BC.

It has paid off. The U.S. established a major operations base at Khanabad airbase outside Tashkent in Uzbekistan, from where it ran the air war in northern Afghanistan and coordinated Special Forces operations throughout Afghanistan. Eleven coalition countries have set up a 1,500-man base at Manas airport in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, which now serves as the main transportation hub for supplies to allied forces inside Afghanistan. U.S. officials have surveyed the airbase in Chimkent, in southern Kazakhstan. And in southern Tajikistan, French aircraft are using the Kuliab airbase. Yet American strategy still seems to focus on keeping the regimes, which either harbor oil and gas or could transport these resources to American allies, stable.

And the regimes have all tied stability to further repression of opposition parties, Islamic groups, and the media. "Twelve years have passed but the undemocratic, human rights abusing, one-party states have not changed and neither has Western support for them," Mohammed Solih, leader of Uzbekistan's banned Erk or Freedom party, wrote in the *New York Times* on March 11. Solih, who has been in exile in Norway since 1992 says, "Karimov shows it is

possible to gain prestige and money and extend your rule on a whim—and still gain American support in the post-terrorism world."

Dissidents like Solih and Shikhmuradov are speaking out more strongly. The question they are pressing is whether the United States will use its presence to push regimes toward political and economic reforms—or will merely take advantage of their strategic assets. So far, reformists see few hopeful signs. Washington has pledged \$160 million and \$125 million to Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, respectively. But it has not conditioned that aid on a timetable or checklist for economic and political reforms. Instead it has sought verbal assurance of reform from the regimes. That tactic leaves veterans like Solih and Shikhmuradov—who know the value of presidents' public statements—to agitate for dramatic change.

(Ahmed Rashid is a journalist and the author of two books, Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia and Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia. This is part one of a two-part series. Part two will focus on how unreformed Central Asian states affect the United States, Russia, and China—and how they promote Islamic extremism and violence. This is reprinted by permission from EurasiaNet (online at www.eurasianet.org.)