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Amy Swift

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Political Repression of Islam

Abstract

Central Asia, once one of the least known regions in the world, has become important to the United States since 9/11, the resulting U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, and the new "War on Terror." Tajikistan, often considered the poorest and most obscure of the five Central Asian "Stans," was thrust into the public view when it became useful to the United States in its 2001 invasion of Afghanistan.

Keywords

Human rights, Russia, Soviet Union, Central Asia, Islam

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Political Repression of Islam

By Amy Swift

Central Asia, once one of the least known regions in the world, has become important to the United States since 9/11, the resulting U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, and the new “War on Terror.” Tajikistan, often considered the poorest and most obscure of the five Central Asian “Stans,” was thrust into the public view when it became useful to the United States in its 2001 invasion of Afghanistan.

Relatively more open than most of the other Central Asian republics, Tajikistan is poised to join the rest of repressive Central Asia as President Rakhmonov solidifies his control over the country. While Tajikistan alone among the Central Asian republics has legalized an Islamic political party (the Islamic Renaissance Party), any activity outside that party is quickly labeled “extremist” and harshly repressed. In the months leading up to the November 6, 2006 presidential elections, where President Rakhmonov was reelected with 79 percent of the vote, repression of political opposition and non-state media sources greatly increased. Several opposition and independent newspapers were closed down over the preceding two years and access to international news websites was blocked by the government. No foreign broadcasts were accessible through regular television or radio, including the BBC news service.

A part of the Russian Empire since the 19th century, Tajikistan was fully under Soviet control by the early 1920s. As part of the Soviet anti-religion initiative, Tajikistan suffered through several cycles of religious repression. The 45-50 million Muslims in the USSR made it the world’s fourth largest Muslim state and this fact of such a large non-Russian, Muslim population worried Soviet leaders. In the 1920s, the Soviets, fearing a pan-Islamic opposition movement, fashioned the new Central Asian republics in such a way as to split up Muslim ethnic groups by placing them on different sides of the new borders. The repercussions of this program can be seen in the ethnic conflicts each of the Central Asian republics is facing today.

Independence from the Soviet Union was sudden and not particularly welcome by many of the leaders of Tajikistan. However, Muslims in Tajikistan saw independence as the chance to finally practice their religion in the open. Seeing a similar opportunity, an influx of Islamic missionaries, teachers and fighters from neighboring Afghanistan and other Muslim states entered Tajikistan. Tajikistan had always been somewhat isolated from the trends of the Muslim world and the version of Islam practiced in Tajikistan is more influenced by Turkic culture and Sufi traditions. Many local Muslims who initially welcomed the new Islamic “teachers” eventually lost their patience with these foreign fundamentalists and in some situations even came into conflict with them.

During the first years after independence and to a greater extent than in other Central Asian republics, a true political debate was taking shape and a free media seemed to be emerging in Tajikistan. However, by 1992, the overall struggle between nationalists, rival Islamists and Tajikistan’s old Soviet leaders broke-out into an open civil war that lasted until 1997 and effectively ended what had started to be termed the “Tajik spring.” The civil war was concluded with a peace treaty that promised a proportion of governmental posts to representatives from the Islamic party but this promise was not fully carried out.

The United States' "War on Terror" has significantly changed the political dynamics of Central Asia. The need to fight radical Islam has been used as an excuse by the leaders of the Central Asian republics to repress opposition from all Islamic groups. Even before 9/11, leaders in Central Asia, continuing a Soviet tradition, usually labeled any Islamic opposition as extremist or Wahabbist after the extreme puritan form of Islam that arose from Saudi Arabia and is practiced by Osama bin Laden. This is ironic because most Muslim activists in Tajikistan are avowedly anti-Wahabbist. While it is important to note that Tajikistan alone in Central Asia has legalized an Islamic political party, the current leaders still employ many forms of political repression against Islamic groups. Much of Tajikistan's political human rights violations are directed against alleged members of Islamist groups such as Hizb Ut-Tahir (HT), a radical Islamist political organization based in Uzbekistan. In the last year, members of HT have been tortured and beaten while in police custody. Dozens of other accused Islamic extremists have been harassed or detained by the police as the law allows for up to 15 months of pretrial detention.

While Tajikistan compares somewhat favorably to the extremely repressive regimes of other Central Asian republics such as Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan (notably, the ones with large oil and gas resources), and Tajikistan's Muslims do have more freedom to practice their religion than they did at any time under the Soviets, it still cannot be considered an open and democratic country. Recent events seem to indicate that the country is starting to return to a more repressive society and therefore if the West is interested in preventing the rise of fundamentalist Islamic governments, it should keep an eye on Tajikistan and act before too much longer to encourage its leaders to be more inclusive of moderate Islamic groups.

Islam in Central Asia before the Collapse of the Soviet Union

Crews, Robert D. 2006. *For Prophet and Tsar: Islam and Empire in Russia and Central Asia*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Annotation: Detailed pre-Soviet history of Islam in Central Asia, concentrating on Tsarist rule over Muslim subjects. Also covers some of the early Soviet years.

Hunter, Shireen, Jeffrey L Thomas, and Alexander Melikishvili. 2004. *Islam in Russia: The Politics of Identity and Security*. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe.

Annotation: Detailed historical background on Islam in Central Asia before the Russian Revolution.

Islam in Central Asia in the First Decade after the Collapse of the Soviet Union

Tajikistan: From Independence through Civil War

Akiner, Shirin. 2001. *Tajikistan: Disintegration or Reconciliation?* London: Royal Institute of International Affairs.

Annotation: Extensive coverage and analysis of Tajikistan's civil war and the nation's path to recovery after the conflict. Some discussion of the rise of Islam in Tajikistan after the fall of the Soviet Union and the role of Islamic groups in its civil war.

Bliss, Frank. 2006. *Social and Economic Change in the Pamirs: Gorno-Badakhshan, Tajikistan*. New York: Routledge.

Annotation: Up-to-date and detailed, this book focuses on just one region of Tajikistan (Gorno-Badakhshan) but gives an excellent overview of the civil war in Tajikistan as well as its history under the Soviets and before (even covering the pre-Islamic period). The author goes into great detail about Tajikistan's economic collapse and the later influx of international development aid.

Denber, Rachel, Barnett R. Rubin, and Jeri Laber. 1993. *Human Rights in Tajikistan: In the Wake of Civil War*. New York: Helsinki Watch.

Annotation: Report on the status of human rights in Tajikistan at the outset of the civil war.

Djalili, Mohammad-Reza, Frederic Grare, and Shirin Akiner (eds.). 1997. *Tajikistan: The Trials of Independence*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Annotation: The articles in this book were written before the end of Tajikistan's civil war and are thus already dated. However, this book provides an excellent overview of the causes of the civil war and the situation in 1997. The final article in the book addresses the human rights situation from 1992-1993, focusing mainly on the political repression at the outbreak of the war.

Dudoignon, Stephane A., and Komatsu Hisao. 2001. *Islam in Politics in Russia and Central Asia: Early Eighteenth to Late Twentieth Centuries*. New York: Kegan Paul.

Annotation: Excellent chapter on Tajikistan that describes in detail the country's experience of independence at the collapse of the Soviet Union, the resulting unrest that led to the civil war and the position of Islam in the conflict. It also describes the current situation and the tension between Islamic groups and the government.

Jawad, Nassim and Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh. 1995. *Tajikistan: A Forgotten Civil War*. London: Minority Rights Group.

Annotation: Provides a brief background on Tajikistan and its civil war along with a description of Tajikistan's political parties.

Naumkin, Vitaly V. 2005. Radical Islam in Central Asia. Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc..

Annotation: Good coverage of the history of Islam in Central Asia, from the initial spread of the religion to the period under the Russian Empire and then under the Soviet System. Extensive coverage of the rise of activist Islamists in Tajikistan in the last few decades of the twentieth century. Detailed review of Tajikistan's civil war and the peace process.

Rotberg, Robert I. 2003. State Failure and State Weakness in a Time of Terror. Washington, D.C.: World Peace Foundation; Brookings Institution Press.

Annotation: Case studies of failure and collapse by weak states. Excellent detailed chapter discussing the causes of Tajikistan's collapse and its slow road to recovery.

Shin, Milbert, and Rachel Denber. 1996. *Tajikistan: Tajik Refugees in Northern Afghanistan; Obstacles to Repatriation*. Human Rights Watch/Helsinki.

Annotation: Detailed report on the human rights issues arising from the refugee populations after the civil war. More a discussion of ethnic clashes than of governmental human rights abuses.

Struthers, Marie, Rachel Denber, Michael McClintock, and Dinah PoKempner. 1998. Tajikistan: Leninabad: Crackdown in the North. New York, N.Y.: Human Rights Watch.

Annotation: Post civil war report on human rights abuses with recommendations to the Tajikistan government and the international community on how to improve the situation. Discusses abuse of detainees and press censorship in the period after the civil war.

United States Congress. 1995. "Developments in Tajikistan." ed. House Committee on Foreign Affairs, 101. Washington, D.C.: U.S. G.P.O.: Supt. of Docs., Congressional Sales Office.

Annotation: Hearings on the civil war in Tajikistan and the human rights crisis arising from the war.

Other Central Asian Republics after Independence

Nissman, David. 1995. "Central Asia's Political Leaders Struggle to Control Islamic Influence." http://www.jamestown.org/publications_details.php?search=1&volume_id=1&issue_id=80&article_id=961.

Annotation: This article briefly discusses Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan governmental responses to rising Islamic militancy but does not address human rights violations by those nations. Somewhat dated already but useful for a historic overview of the situation by 1995.

Nissman, David. 1995. "Human Rights Not Doing Well in Central Asian States." http://www.jamestown.org/publications_details.php?search=1&volume_id=1&issue_id=47&article_id=576.

Annotation: Brief and somewhat dated overview of the problems of human rights in Central Asia in the mid 1990s, the period of Tajikistan's civil war.

Nissman, David. 1995. "Opposition Parties in Central Asia Remain under Fire." http://www.jamestown.org/publications_details.php?search=1&volume_id=1&issue_id=43&article_id=527.

Annotation: Brief overview of the status of opposition parties in each of the Central Asian republics. Somewhat dated but good for a historical snapshot of the situation in 1995.

Rashid, Ahmed. 2002. Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Annotation: Excellent overview of Islam in Central Asia with a good historical background, both pre- and post-Soviet Union.

Rywkin, Michael. 2001. "Militant Islamic Fundamentalism and Political Stability in Central Asia: Reviewing U.S. Policy Options." *American Foreign Policy Interests* 23 (10).

Annotation: This article discusses the Islamic traditions of Central Asia and the recent rise of more militant versions of Islam. The author analyzes the actions of the leaders of the Central Asian republics from the point of view of legitimate attempts to contain militant Islamic groups, rather than as human rights violations.

Takeyh, Ray and Nikolas K. Gvosdev. 2004. *The Receding Shadow of the Prophet: The Rise and Fall of Radical Political Islam*. Westport, CT: Praeger.

Annotation: The author's thesis is that radical Islam is on the decline worldwide because it has failed to deliver working governmental systems. The book covers many regions in the world with one excellent chapter to the Soviet Union with a good short overview of Central Asian Islam under both the Tsars and the Soviets. There are a few pages specifically on Tajikistan.

Tazmini, Ghoncheh. 2001. "The Islamic Revival in Central Asia: A Potent Force or a Misconception?" *Central Asian Survey* 20 (1): 21.

Annotation: Excellent overview of the status of Islam in Central Asia in 2001. The article provides a detailed background on the experience of Islam in Soviet times as well as after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The author argues that militant Islam will not succeed in Central Asia for cultural and historical reasons. The author also cites the actions of the leaders of the Central Asian republics as an effective block to militant Islam and does not discuss human rights abuses by those leaders.

United States Congress, Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe. 1993. *Human Rights and Democratization in the Newly Independent States of the Former Soviet Union*. Washington, DC: United States Congress Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe. Report.

Annotation: Compiled by the staff of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe in 1993. Includes a historical background and overview of Central Asia's experience with democracy in the first few years after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Weitz, Richard. 2004. "Storm Clouds over Central Asia: Revival of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)?" *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 27 (6): 25.

Annotation: The article focuses on the origins and organization of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and its activities in the Central Asian republics. The article reviews the policies of Russia, China and the United States toward the IMU.

Current Repression of Political Islam and Islamic Opposition in Tajikistan

Akiner, Shirin. 2002. "Prospects for Civil Society in Tajikistan," in *Civil Society in the Muslim World*, ed. Aryn B. Sajoo, 45. London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd.

Annotation: The author combines a historic overview of Tajikistan with the country's status as of 2002 to analyze its prospects for a civil society. The author examines the status of each of several facets of civil society, including the health of political parties, the media and NGOs and finds that the current conditions are poor but the outlook is more positive than any time in Tajikistan's past. No specific attention is paid to religious persecution.

Amnesty International. 2006. Tajikistan: Amnesty International Report.

Annotation: Report covers events in 2005 and primarily discusses the use of torture in Tajikistan. Excellent starting point to gather information on the current state of human rights in Tajikistan.

Committee to Protect Journalists. 2006. *Government Controls on News Compromise Vote in Tajikistan*. <http://www.cpj.org/news/2006/europe/tajik03nov06na.html>.

Annotation: The website follows the condition of press freedom around the world. This specific page is a report on the increase in media restrictions in Tajikistan in the period running up to the November 6, 2006, presidential election.

Greenberg, Ilan. 2006. "Media Muzzled and Opponents Jailed, Tajikistan Readies for Vote." *New York Times*, November 4, A7.

Annotation: Report about repression of political opposition, including restrictions on the media, leading up to Tajikistan's November 6, 2006 presidential election.

Helsinki Commission. 2006. *Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe: Helsinki Commission* Washington D.C.: Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe. <http://www.csce.gov/>

Annotation: Extensive collection of reports, hearing minutes, congressional testimony, press releases and speeches on human rights in Tajikistan and each of other four Central Asian republics.

Human Rights Watch. 2006. *Tajikistan*. New York: Human Rights Watch/Helsinki. <http://hrw.org/doc?t=europe&c=tajiki>.

Annotation: Collection of reports on the status of human rights in Tajikistan including up to the November 6, 2006, presidential election. Also has a link to a background report on human rights in Tajikistan and collections for each of the Central Asian republics as well as Russia.

Kanet, Roger E. 2005. *The New Security Environment: The Impact on Russia, Central and Eastern Europe*. Global Interdisciplinary Studies Series. Burlington, VT: Ashgate.

Annotation: This book focuses on Russia and Central/Eastern Europe but it does contain one good chapter on Russia's strategic relationship with Tajikistan that addresses the post-9/11 situation in that country. It names Tajikistan as Russia's closest ally in Central Asia and describes its intervention in Tajikistan's civil war. Tajikistan is described as an authoritarian regime that is

undergoing a slow process of democratization. The chapter also describes the secular, Islamic and ethnic political protest situation in Tajikistan.

Lawrence, James T. (ed.). 2004. Human Rights in Europe and Eurasia. Hauppauge, NY: Nova Science Publishers.

Annotation: This book presents a survey of the status of free speech and media in each of the countries of Europe and Eurasia, with specific sections on Tajikistan and each of the other Central Asian republics.

Lipton, Edward P. (ed.). 2002. Religious Freedom in the near East, Northern Africa and the Former Soviet States. Hauppauge, NY: Nova Science Publishers.

Annotation: Detailed section on the status of religious freedom in Tajikistan and in each of the other Central Asian republics, as well as for Russia and all of the former Soviet Union.

U.S. Department of State. 2006. Tajikistan: Country Reports on Human Rights Practice.

Annotation: Comprehensive report on the state of human rights in Tajikistan, including: torture and abuse of power by security forces, prison conditions, restrictions of freedom of speech, press and religion, registration denial of opposition political parties, imprisonment of political opposition (including journalists) and harassment of international NGOs.

Current Repression of Political Islam and Islamic Opposition in the Other Central Asian Republics

Amnesty International. 2006. *Human Rights Defenders in Eurasia*. <http://web.amnesty.org/pages/uzb-161105-action-eng>.

Annotation: Report on the threats to freedom of expression in Uzbekistan following the May 2005 Andijan massacre. The site has links to reports of human rights abuses in Turkmenistan and Russia.

Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe/Helsinki Commission. 2001. *Human Rights and Democracy in Kyrgyzstan*. http://www.csce.gov/index.cfm?Fuseaction=ContentRecords.ViewDetail&ContentRecord_id=204&ContentType=H&CFID=24502723&CFTOKEN=39325776.

Annotation: This hearing report is a series of statements before a U.S. Congress commission on the situation in Kyrgyzstan in 2001. Includes accounts by the Kyrgyz ambassador to the US, the People's Congress of Kyrgyzstan, the Director of the Bureau on Human Rights and Rule of Law

in Kyrgyzstan and the Deputy Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs. Extensive first hand accounts of the human rights situation in Kyrgyzstan, including political rights violations and the problems arising from confronting more activist Islamic groups.

Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe/Helsinki Commission. 2006. *Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe*. <http://www.csce.gov>.

Annotation: Press releases, hearing reports and articles on the member nations of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, including all five of the Central Asian republics. Categories of reporting include the status of political rights, free speech and media and religious rights.

Cornell, Svante E., and Regine A. Spector. 2002. "Central Asia: More Than Islamic Extremists." *Washington Quarterly* 25 (1): 13.

Annotation: Analyzes the conflicts in Central Asia as a dispute within Islam between traditional tolerant versions of the faith and more radical ideologies. The article discusses the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, the issues of importation of drugs and Taliban ideology from Afghanistan and the Huzb-ut-Tahrir and offers recommendations for U.S. policy in the region.

Council on Foreign Relations. 2006. *Central Asia*. Available from http://www.cfr.org/region/264/central_asia.html.

Annotation: This website contains links to primary documents (treaties, U.N. resolutions, speeches, etc.) and to news coverage from media sources as well as interviews with experts and agency reports. Some coverage of human rights violations in Central Asia, primarily in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.

Malashenko, Aleksei. 2005. "Islam, Politics, and the Security of Central Asia." *Russian Social Science Review* 46 (1): 14.

Annotation: The author analyzes the threat posed by radical Islam in Central Asia and gives an overview of the recent history, current status of and different responses to political Islam in each of the Central Asian republics. The author also discusses how the Tajikistan civil war has been used by leaders of the other Central Asia republics as an excuse in their repression of Islamic groups.

Pottenger, John R. 2004. "Civil Society, Religious Freedom, and Islam Karimov: Uzbekistan's Struggle for a Decent Society." *Central Asian Survey* 23 (1): 23.

Annotation: Extremely in-depth review of the position of Islam in Uzbekistan from Soviet times up to 2004. Outlines the challenges the government faces in dealing with radical Islam.

Rabasa, Angel. 2004. The Muslim World after 9/11. Santa Monica, CA: Rand.

Annotation: One section of this Rand report is dedicated to Islam in the Central Asia Republics and includes a brief historical background and a description of the Islamic groups in Central Asia. Discusses the governmental responses to Islam in each of the republics but does not go into detail about human rights abuses. Nice comparisons of the status of Islam in each of the Central Asian republics and a more accommodating view of the Central Asian leaders' attempts to deal with radical Islam.

Rall, Ted. 2006. Silk Road to Ruin: Is Central Asia the New Middle East? New York: Nantier Beall Minoustchine Publishing.

Annotation: Part travelogue, part graphic novel, part political analysis, *Silk Road to Ruin* is a vivid account of the severe dysfunctions of each of the five 'stans.' Rall covers the extreme political and religious repression practiced by most of the Central Asian leaders as well as the regional environmental catastrophes (Aral Sea, Nuclear tests), police corruption and the impact of oil and gas resources on the Central Asian republics. This is not an academic text but the book has the advantage of being written by a journalist who traveled to all five Central Asian republics several times beginning in 1997. Where the book lacks citations or references for some of the author's assertions, it makes up for in first-hand reporting. Rall is not a detached observer but this is still a good starting point for further research on the region.

United States Congress. 2002. *Democracy and Human Rights Trends in Eurasia and East Europe: A Decade of Membership in the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe*. Washington D.C.: U.S. Congress Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe.

Annotation: Four to five page overviews of human rights violations in each of the five Central Asian republics as well as for Russia. Short discussion of restrictions on speech, political action and religion in those countries.