

## **ANDIJAN: RASHOMON REVISITED**

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May 13 marks the first anniversary of the tragic events in the Uzbek city of Andijan. The clash represents what the Economist described as “probably the worst atrocity committed by a government against demonstrators since Tiananmen in 1989” (November 3, 2005) This is true whether one accepts the official government death toll of 187, or the estimates of human rights groups that range up to 700.

Western opinion on Uzbekistan is divided – in part because of the absence of reliable information about what is actually happening in the country. Some observers still see President Islam Karimov as a reliable bulwark against Islamic radicalism and Russian neo-imperialism. A second group portray him as a ruthless dictator whose removal is a prerequisite for political and economic progress. A third group refuses to either exonerate or demonize Karimov, but views him through the prism of a complex and fluid local political culture.

These differing views can be found within the corridors of the US administration. Washington cannot make up its mind about Uzbekistan. The U.S. has poured \$350 million in aid into the country since September 11<sup>th</sup>, but human rights groups have vigorously protested President Karimov’s human rights record. The U.S. dilemma is all too familiar, from Algeria to Pakistan. Outside criticism could topple a secular strongman, opening the door to civil unrest and a possible rise to power of a hardcore Islamist regime. The European Union was only slightly more decisive. It imposed a visa ban on a dozen Uzbek leaders, but Germany continued to use the Termez airfield in Uzbekistan to supply its military contingent in Afghanistan.

The events in Andijan of May 12-13 2005 have become a litmus test of these diverging views. There is loose agreement about the raw sequence of events. Attacks on police posts on the evening of May 12, during which weapons were seized, were followed by the freeing of hundreds of prisoners and the occupation of official buildings in the center of the city. The following day government security forces stormed into the city center, killing hundreds of civilians in the process, and causing 500 or so insurgents and others to flee across the border to Kyrgyzstan. In July 439 refugees were transferred to Romania, in retaliation for which the Uzbeks cut off gas supplies to Kyrgyzstan. In June 2005 in the face of protests from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees four persons were returned for trial in Uzbekistan.

And there, the agreement ends. Shirin Akiner, a respected London academic who visited Andijan a week after the attacks, has written a report for the School for Advanced International Studies in Washington D.C. that describes the events as an attempted coup by Islamic terrorists from outside Uzbekistan. She estimates the civilian deaths at close to the official total of 187 (plus 295 wounded), and attributes them to the fact that the

insurgents circled the buildings they occupied with hostages in a vain bid to deter government forces from storming them. Since September there have been trials of alleged participants in the violence, in which the Uzbek authorities tried to show that they were the tools of foreign conspirators.

In contrast, most human rights groups, relying on reports from their own workers in the region, portray the events as a popular uprising against oppression. The jailbreak to free the unjustly imprisoned is reminiscent of the storming of the Bastille in 1789, and the massacre of peaceful civilians demonstrating in support of the insurgents was unprovoked. Their estimates of the number killed range up to 700.

The most detailed reports on Uzbekistan are those released by the International Crisis Group. They go to some length to refute the argument that radical Islamic cells are active in Uzbekistan, arguing that this is a bugbear invented by the Uzbek government to justify their repressive grip on power. They accuse the regime of jailing 7,000 people for the peaceful expression of religious beliefs, including 4,000 accused of membership in Hizb ut-Tahrir. Instead, the ICG reports describe the unrest as a “popular uprising” in response to pervasive poverty and the stifling state controls over the economy, such as new fees for bazaar merchants. Their policy prescription is a dose of economic liberalization, only possible if Karimov steps down.

A third approach suggests the Andijan events are the product of local politics, neither a symptom of Islamic revival nor an incipient popular revolution, but the product of extended families or the informal associations known as *jamiyats*. The insurrection came at the conclusion of a trial of 23 local businessmen. Their leader Akrom Yuldashev, had set up a self-help network *Akhramiya* in 1994. The group had some Islamic overtones, and was then accused of subversion. Yuldashev himself was arrested in 1998, and sentenced to 17 years in 1999. For months, as the trial of businessmen was progressing, hundreds of relatives and supporters of the men had surrounded the court in peaceful protest, rising to a crowd of 3,000 on May 11. Their goal was the freeing of their loved ones, not the toppling of Karimov, and not an Islamic caliphate.

Reading the divergent accounts of the outside observers, one wonders if they are talking about the same country. The situation is reminiscent of the 1950 movie *Rashomon*, directed by Akira Kurosawa, in which four witnesses offer diametrically opposed accounts of an encounter in the forest which led to a samurai's death. In *Rashomon* each report is plausible and internally consistent, but selects the facts to suit the moral message that the witness is trying to convey about their own honor. A similar process is at work in debates over Andijan. Each observer interprets the events through the prism of their prior understanding of what is happening in Uzbekistan – and of what needs to be done there.

Akiner's account glosses over the trial of the businessmen. However, the preceding pattern of peaceful demonstrations suggests that the crowds on May 13 were present voluntarily and not as hostages. The events began on May 12 with an attack on a traffic police post: the weapons gained thereby were used to assault another police station, and then the prison. This sounds more like a spontaneous, local action than the picture of

dozens of armed guerrillas in Akiner's report. Similarly, the local clan explanation fits uneasily with the ICG's portrayal of Uzbekistan as on the brink of a nationwide popular uprising. Although there was unrest elsewhere in Uzbekistan, over land seizures and unfair taxes, the picture of families agitating for the reversal of a specific injustice falls far short of a program of regime change. For its part, the government of Uzbekistan has rejected calls for an independent international enquiry into the Andijan events.

Even before the Andijan events, Uzbekistan had been moving away from its strategic partnership with the US. Karimov opposed the war in Iraq, and welcomed the creation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's anti-terrorism center in Tashkent in June 2004.

During a visit to Tashkent in February 2004, US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld had praised Uzbekistan as a "key member" of the anti-terrorism coalition. But in July of that year the State Department declared that Uzbekistan was no longer in compliance with human rights norms, revoking \$18 million in aid. But the Defense Department resisted pressure for a suspension of the Partnership for Peace program with Uzbekistan, and in August visiting US General and Chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Richard Meyers announced \$21 million in new military assistance.

After the international condemnation of the Andijan crackdown, Karimov moved quickly to cement ties with Russia and China, who supported his actions. Just two weeks after the shootings he was in China on an official state visit. On July 29, 2005 – one day after the airlift of refugees from Kyrgyzstan to Romania – President Karimov served the U.S. six months to vacate the Karshi-Khanabad airbase. Though according to some informed sources, this was triggered not by the Andijan events, but by a dispute over the introduction of open tenders for services at the base, which meant less money would be channeled to companies connected to the president. The Uzbek government has pursued a systematic policy of intimidation and revocation of permits to drive Western media and NGOs out of the country.

In the US, the debate continues, though it is overshadowed by more pressing concerns, such as the war in Iraq. A panel discussion "US-Uzbekistan: Can this relationship be saved?" at the W.P. Carey Forum of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute of Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) on March 2, 2006 saw a back-and-forth between Lt Col Kurt Meppen and the State Department's Jim DeHart, with Meppen arguing that US diplomacy in the wake of the Rose, Orange and Tulip Revolutions had spooked leaders like Karimov, leading them to assume that the U.S. was bent on toppling their governments.

On May 5, just one week before Andijan, Karimov had withdrawn Uzbekistan from the pro-Western GUUAM alliance of Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova. And during a visit to Moscow on June 28 Karimov said "The events in Andizhan were organized by the scriptwriters and directors of the 'colored revolutions.'"

Perhaps the support from Karimov's friends in Beijing and Moscow will suffice to keep him afloat. But when a dictatorship starts to massacre its citizens, it is vulnerable. The

Chinese leaders understand this all too well – that is why Deng Xiaoping launched a vigorous new wave of economic reforms shortly after the Tiananmen crackdown. No such initiatives have been forthcoming from Karimov. Forceful and swift international condemnation can cause an autocrat to back off, to stop the killing, launch investigations, and deny responsibility. This is what happened to the Shah of Iran in 1979, to Mikhail Gorbachev in 1988, and to Kyrgyz President Askar Akaev, in the wake of the killing of five demonstrators in the southern city of Aksy in March 2002. Such a retreat sends an important signal to the main protagonists. It reassures the opposition that resistance is not hopeless, stimulating them to try again. Perhaps even more important, the men in uniform start to doubt the wisdom of gunning down their own people, in the name of a leader who now seems ready to disown them - perhaps even blame them for the “unauthorized” use of force. However, the international community did not put sufficient pressure on President Karimov to force him into stepping back, and he seems determined to continue ruling through brute force.

## **Sources**

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