

**TESTIMONY TO THE  
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
COMMITTEE ON INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON MIDDLE EAST AND CENTRAL ASIA**

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Good afternoon, Madam Chairman and members of the Subcommittee. I appreciate the opportunity to testify today on Central Asia, a region of the world that has not always received sufficient attention because of its distance and relatively short history of relations with the United States. Central Asia's proximity to Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan highlights its strategic importance to the United States. Among other challenges, the region faces such issues as illegal drug routes from Afghanistan, large flows of migrant workers, and potential for Islamist inroads into impoverished societies still bereft of a post-Soviet national ideology. Consequently, I am here today to make the case that Central Asia is worthy of carefully crafted and funded democracy-support efforts that are reinforced by a robust public diplomacy effort.

Fifteen years have elapsed since the countries comprising former Soviet Central Asia became independent. During this time, the region was the last to benefit from U.S. democracy assistance and still lags behind other former Soviet republics with respect to economic and political reforms. For years after the break-up of the Soviet Union, policymakers tended to treat the region as a whole. However, these countries are now sufficiently differentiated that they must be treated on the basis of where each stands in its development and relations with countries outside the region. This development dovetails with the International Republican Institute's (IRI) approach to democracy building in the region since we began work there in 2003.

Since that time, IRI has implemented democracy-building programs in three Central Asian countries: Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and the Kyrgyz Republic. Guided by a sense of cautious optimism, IRI has taken an equal-opportunity approach in its work: all democratically-oriented parties and groups are invited to benefit from IRI's technical assistance. IRI has built a non-partisan reputation through organizing hundreds of training events and round table discussions in the three countries, all designed to advance democratic institutions and practices.

Turning first to the Kyrgyz Republic, we note the positive dynamic that occurs when donor funds, sound technical skills and an eager beneficiary are fused together. Thanks in large part to development assistance from international, European and U.S. government-funded organizations during the past ten years, the Kyrgyz Republic is the least authoritarian of the five former Soviet Central Asian republics. With a population of five million, few natural resources and a continually struggling economy, Kyrgyzstanis

generally have been open to outside assistance. Following the March 2005 events in which long-time and increasingly authoritarian President Askar Akaev was chased from power by disgruntled citizens, the country is taking steps in the right direction, albeit with delays and intermittent setbacks. Positive developments are an unhindered press, vocal civil society and open public discussion of national issues. Furthermore, in a region of authoritarian, one-man rule, the democratically-elected “tandem” of President Kurmanbek Bakiev and Prime Minister Feliks Kulov has remained intact despite a difficult first year. IRI polling shows that the population is generally positive about the development of the country.

However, on major issues like unemployment, corruption and dealing with organized crime, there is only limited progress. President Bakiev has hesitated on fulfilling election promises about constitutional reform. Two Constitutional Councils formed in 2005 debated amending the national constitution to address the country’s political vulnerabilities, but they failed to reach a consensus or to sufficiently please President Bakiev. The core issue is the country’s future form of government: a parliamentary, presidential or mixed system. Subsequently, President Bakiev decreed that a national referendum on the form of government would take place in late 2006, preceded by a massive public education campaign. At this stage, IRI polling shows that a majority of people are not aware of the coming constitutional referendum and of those who are aware, 70 percent are not sufficiently informed to vote on it.

Clearly, much work needs to be done if the referendum is to be meaningful. Fortunately, the United States is assisting in the national education campaign. With U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) funds, IRI has developed “forms of government” information and training materials for political parties to disseminate throughout the country. Presently, IRI is sponsoring trips throughout the country for political party representatives to instruct their regional branches and the media on the basics of parliamentary, presidential and mixed systems.

While the referendum is the Kyrgyz Republic’s signal political event of 2006, the need for development of political parties remains a top priority if the country is to have a stable political system. Debate over constitutional changes in 2005 focused on the importance of political parties, and by 2010, it is possible that political parties will occupy at least half of the seats in a more robust parliament that is endowed with increased legislative and oversight powers. This would be an unprecedented development in Central Asia, where one-man rule has disallowed checks and balances.

The Kyrgyz Republic’s political transition is a long-term, generational process which requires steady U.S. support. Kyrgyzstanis are willing to learn and to progress. Democracy assistance there presents a relatively strong example of cost-effective use of U.S. taxpayer dollars. IRI concurs with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice’s message to Kyrgyzstanis during her short visit there last October: stay the course. This is a critical time in the country’s development as an independent nation, and I cannot emphasize enough the crucial role that U.S. assistance plays in the Kyrgyz Republic. We must do everything possible to help its citizens and their government build a more stable and

democratic society. IRI will continue to be there to provide this essential piece of development assistance.

Uzbekistan presents a far different and rather dark picture. The government's mass shooting of civilians at a public demonstration in Andijon in eastern Uzbekistan almost one year ago put the country's problems and backward direction into sharp relief. Andijon's aftermath also highlighted the fact that the country's 25 million people are effectively ruled by a dictator: not one of the 220 members of the two-chamber parliament uttered a word of condemnation or dared question President Islam Karimov's handling of Andijon. Since Andijon, independent activists have been jailed, hundreds of domestic and international organizations have been closed, and reform-minded Uzbekistanis have been silenced, isolated or forced into exile.

The government's deadly response in Andijon reflected its intolerance of public expression of grievances and the general absence of civil liberties. Citizen participation in the political process is severely limited due to a lack of legal standing for political opposition movements and parties, and no independent news media. There are no legally-registered opposition parties in Uzbekistan. The Karimov government has allowed five pro-government parties to hold seats in the parliament, but they have no independent capacity. In general, Uzbekistan operates on a Soviet-era model of centralized power and administrative command but with no social ideology to buffet the system. This has created fertile ground for the appeal of radical Islam, which sees opportunity in the ideological and economic poverty that prevails in the country's regions.

Regressive policies, total suppression of opposing views, and the virtual elimination of a civil society has closed off almost all channels of outside assistance. The Karimov administration has effectively restricted the activities of international organizations like IRI by enforcing new decrees and amendments to existing laws that are contrary to the U.S.-Uzbekistan Bilateral Agreement. Restrictions on foreign non-governmental organizations are so severe that IRI has had to cancel training seminars and has lost valuable program time to tend to bureaucratic and cumbersome re-accreditation and registration processes.

While there is a genuine demand for IRI's technical support throughout Uzbekistan, unfortunately there is no relief on the horizon for the country's pro-reform groups. Moreover, since Andijon, Moscow and Tashkent have forged closer commercial, political and military ties. During a recent series of high-level Russian delegations to Uzbekistan, Russian officials have repeatedly confirmed their support for President Karimov's handling of Andijon. Change may have to wait until a post-Karimov generation begins to lead the country along modern, international norms.

The situation in Kazakhstan falls somewhere between the promise of the Kyrgyz Republic and the dire situation in Uzbekistan. Like their Kyrgyz cousins, Kazakhstani political activists have taken advantage of U.S. development assistance with a relatively open attitude. However, such assistance has been carefully scrutinized by Kazakhstani

authorities. Unlike their poorer neighbors, Kazakhstan's natural gas and oil revenues have funded the country's robust economic development and to some extent its political and social development, making it less dependent on outside assistance. For instance, while political parties still have not yet matured in Kazakhstan, they do not suffer from a chronic shortage of funds as do their counterparts in the Kyrgyz Republic. Kazakhstani political activists have shown themselves enthusiastic students of Western democratic principles and practices.

With a population of 15 million, Kazakhstan has transitioned from a post-Soviet republic to a semi-authoritarian, semi-free market country with quasi-independent political parties and an elected lower chamber of parliament. President Nursultan Nazarbaev's administration failed, however, to permit truly competitive elections both in 2004 and 2005, and to allow a free media, possibly endangering his country's bid for the 2009 chairmanship of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Additionally, persistent corruption has been progressively undermining past progress in political reform. Yet, OSCE Chairman-in-Office and Belgian Foreign Minister Karel De Gucht struck an optimistic note during his recent visit with President Nazarbaev, noting that the OSCE deems it "very important that it be headed by a country located to the east of Vienna" and positively appraising Kazakhstan's democratization prospects and President Nazarbaev's stated commitment to advance them.<sup>1</sup>

In 2005, President Nazarbaev announced a "national program of political reforms" that is designed, in theory, to introduce the election of regional governors and city mayors and establish local self-government structures. In 2006, this message was reinforced with the creation of a new State Commission on Democratization. However, President Nazarbaev assumed the chairmanship of the Commission, which likely signals his intent to control it and certainly detracts from the Commission as a venue for real debate and free expression of democratic views and ideas. It remains to be seen whether the Commission's expanded mandate is part of President Nazarbaev's strategy for Kazakhstan to ascend to the OSCE chairmanship or a genuine step toward democratic reform.

In Kazakhstan, IRI's assistance has focused on political party strengthening and candidate training for local and parliamentary elections. IRI has built a reputation with the parties as being objective and impartial. Percentages of candidates with party affiliation increased greatly during the last three years, and IRI was optimistic that steady progress was being made. However, regressive tendencies and administrative interference with some of the parties have tempered the country's political development. Mass media remains largely controlled by media holding companies owned by the president's family. Opposition newspapers are periodically sued, closed and reopened under other names.

Going relatively unnoticed in Kazakhstan is the legal and illegal migration of hundreds of thousands of workers from other Central Asian and Caucasus countries. This trend presents a growing challenge to the country's national security and internal stability. So far, the issue is not generating sufficient evaluation or discussion.

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<sup>1</sup> RFE/RL Newline, Vol. 10, No. 57, March 28, 2006.

U.S. assistance to Kazakhstan should help support political reform to the greatest extent possible. Our government must be ready to lend technical expertise to the various components of the democratization plan that the State Commission on Democratization recommends, and particularly for helping local municipalities establish self-government. As with the Kyrgyz Republic, a U.S. policy of steady democracy assistance will help Kazakhstan chart a course of democratization that will gradually become institutionalized and sustainable.

In each Central Asian country there is, at various levels, a genuine desire for democracy assistance. To help desire become reality, the United States should encourage the region's leaders to adhere to the letter and spirit of bi-lateral agreements. The United States must also, perhaps through the State Department's public diplomacy initiative, do a better public relations job of explaining America's support for popular political and economic reform and participatory democracy. It is imperative that civil society activists understand that IRI does not favor working with only a select few, but will consider assisting any democratically-oriented group that encourages citizen participation. This fact is sometimes lost on pro-democracy groups in a relatively isolated part of the world that have little access to accurate news and information and therefore feel ignored by the United States. If this perception persists, radical Islamists are ready to fill the void, and U.S. foreign policy will face yet another far-flung and growing ideological foe.

In summary, the United States has critical interests in the countries of Central Asia and we have distinct challenges in each country. We must provide the financial assistance necessary to help Kyrgyzstanis continue their democratic transition. In Uzbekistan, the United States must insist on adherence to democratic principles and the rule of law. In Kazakhstan, we must remain engaged in the development of democracy.

Thank you, Madam Chairman.