

US Support for Repression in Uzbekistan Belies Pro-Democracy Rhetoric

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Recent revelations that the United States successfully blocked a call by NATO for an international investigation of the May 13 massacre of hundreds of civilians by the government of the former Soviet Republic of Uzbekistan serves as yet another reminder of the insincerity of the Bush administration's claims for supporting freedom and democracy in the Islamic world and the former Soviet Union.

A recent report from Human Rights Watch, based on interviews with scores of eyewitnesses, determined that government troops in the city of Andijan used "indiscriminate use of lethal force against unarmed people," killing more than 500 people. And, while HRW noted that a small number of armed men were apparently present among the demonstrators, the report asserted that the Uzbek government's use of force against the crowd was "neither proportionate nor appropriate to the danger they posed."

By contrast, rather than condemning the massacre, the Bush White House called for "restraint" from both sides in an apparent effort to convince Americans that unarmed pro-democracy demonstrators were somehow just as guilty as the those who shot at them. A Bush administration spokesman also claimed that Islamic "terrorist groups" may have been behind the protests that prompted the shootings.

Such claims are contradicted by those familiar with the political situation in the eastern Uzbek city as well as by the Human Rights Watch report, which noted that there was "no evidence that any of the speakers at the protest promoted an Islamist agenda. According to numerous witnesses, their grievances were overwhelmingly about poverty, corruption, and government repression." Similarly, Amnesty International reported that "The vast majority of the thousands of protestors gathered in the town's main square calling for justice and an end to poverty were unarmed and peaceful."

Uzbek troops reportedly killed an additional 200 demonstrators the following day in the nearby city of Pakhtabad and still more civilians were shot while attempting to flee into neighboring Kyrgyzstan. The British newspaper The Independent reported that Uzbek dictator Islam Karimov had flown from the capital or Tashkent into the area Friday morning "and almost certainly personally authorized the use of...deadly force."

Dictators and Double Standards

The massacres took place not long after an overseas trip in which President George W. Bush extolled the democratic revolutions in the former Soviet republics of Ukraine and Georgia. American NGOs which supported these pro-democracy movements, such as Freedom House and George Soros' Open Society Institute, have been threatened and expelled by Uzbek authorities. The ongoing U.S. support for the repressive Karimov regime, then, stands as yet another example of the crass double-standards in U.S. policy.

Such double-standards are not new. During the Cold War, both Republican and Democratic administrations would bewail the human rights abuses of Communist and other leftist governments while sending arms and economic assistance to even more repressive right-wing allies. In Central Asia during the 1980s, the U.S. government was even willing to back extremist Islamist groups as part of its anti-Communist crusade.

Now, however, the United States is using Communists to fight Islamists.

Karimov became leader of the Uzbek Communist Party in 1989 and backed the unsuccessful coup by Communist Party hard liners against reformist Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in 1991. Soon after Uzbekistan became independent later that year, he banned leading opposition parties and has since held onto power through a series of rigged elections and plebiscites. Though acknowledging such votes "offered Uzbekistan voters no true choice," the Bush administration has yet to call for free and fair elections. And while supporting "human rights training," the U.S. government has refused to give

the kind of support to pro-democracy groups challenging the pro-American dictatorship in Uzbekistan as it did for similar opposition groups challenging less compliant regimes in Ukraine and Georgia.

The Karimov dictatorship has received over one billion dollars in U.S. aid, the vast majority of that coming under President Bush, who has justified the U.S. invasion, occupation, and ongoing counter-insurgency wars in nearby Iraq because of the need to promote democracy in the Islamic world. An estimated 1,000 American troops are currently stationed in Uzbekistan and U.S. forces have engaged in military training exercises with Uzbek forces as far back as 1995.

Karimov was invited to the White House in March 2002, where he and President Bush signed a strategic partnership agreement, which included an additional \$120 million in U.S. military aid. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld has praised Karimov for his "wonderful cooperation" with the U.S. military. President Bush's former Secretary of the Treasury Paul O'Neill spoke admirably of the dictator's "very keen intellect and deep passion" for improving lives of his people.

George Bush's 'Man in Central Asia'

Uzbekistan is the largest country in Central Asia in population and its capital Tashkent is the region's largest city, with a subway system and an international airport built during the Soviet era. As an independent state under Karimov's rule, Uzbekistan remains one of the poorest of the former Soviet republics despite its generous natural resources, including one of the world's largest sources of natural gas and sizable but largely untapped oil reserves. Karimov pockets virtually all of the revenue generated by the country's natural endowments. Corruption is rampant and his brutal militia routinely engage in robbery and extortion. Businessmen who refuse to pay bribes are frequently labeled as Islamic extremists and then jailed, tortured and murdered.

Uzbekistan's jails hold more than 7000 political prisoners, where torture is widespread and systematic. Not long after the Bush administration provided Uzbek police with \$79 million worth in assistance in 2002, two prominent political prisoners were found to have been boiled to death. The elderly mother of one of the victims was sentenced six years of hard labor when she protested.

Despite this, Craig Murray, who served as the British ambassador to Uzbekistan from 2002 until last year, observed how "Karimov is very much George Bush's man in Central Asia" and that no Bush administration official has ever said a negative word about him.

As a result of growing criticism for its support for such repression, the Bush administration reduced its support for "security and law enforcement" last year to \$10 million, though much larger amounts of indirect funding from the American taxpayer continues to flow. The State Department has emphasized that, despite the reduction in U.S. aid, Uzbekistan remains "an important partner" and has pledged "continued cooperation."

Indeed, U.S. intelligence officials have privately confirmed widespread reports that the Bush administration has been sending suspected Islamic radicals arrested in third countries to Uzbekistan for detention and interrogation.

As a result of the Karimov regime's imprisonment and torture of nonviolent Muslims who dared to worship outside of state controls, a radical armed group known as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan has emerged to challenge the regime. The Bush administration blamed a series of IMU suicide bombings in Tashkent last year on al-Qaeda, though British and other intelligence sources report no direct links between the IMU and Osama bin Laden's terrorist network.

Attacks by the dictatorship's armed forces have resulted in widespread civilian casualties, not just within Uzbekistan, but also in neighboring Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Amnesty International documented widespread human rights violations during a 2001 counter-insurgency campaign, where "villages were set on fire and bombed, livestock were killed, houses and fields destroyed." By contrast, the Bush administration went on record supporting what it called "the right of Uzbekistan to defend its sovereignty and territorial integrity" and praised the army's measures "to minimize casualties and ensure the protection of innocent civilians."

Since even this spring's massacres have not led to a lessening in the Bush administration's support for the Karimov regime, it is unlikely that there will be a change in policy until the American people demand it. Campaigns in recent decades against U.S. support for repressive regimes in Latin America and Southeast Asia were often successful in limiting or cutting off aid to dictators. Similar campaigns could emerge to challenge the Bush administration's support for dictators like Karimov. Indeed, given that the U.S.-led counter-insurgency wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and U.S. support for the Israeli occupation of the West Bank have been justified in the name of advancing the cause of freedom and democracy, the Bush administration is perhaps more vulnerable to criticism than previous administrations for its support of autocratic regimes in the Middle East and Central Asia. The question is whether the American people care enough to make it an issue.