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## U.S. supports repression in Uzbekistan

By STEPHEN ZUNES

In the city of Andijan in the former Soviet republic of Uzbekistan, a large demonstration took place May 13, protesting government corruption, repression and the country's worsening poverty. Soldiers fired into the crowd, killing more than 500 civilians.

Rather than condemning the massacre, the White House called for "restraint" from both sides and claimed that Islamic "terrorist groups" may have been behind the protests that prompted the shootings.

Coming so soon after a recent overseas trip in which President George W. Bush extolled the democratic revolutions in the former Soviet republics of Ukraine and Georgia, the ongoing U.S. support for the repressive Uzbek regime of Islam Karimov stands as yet another example of the crass double standard in U.S. policy.

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 anticommunist crusade.

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

President Karimov became leader of the Uzbek Communist Party in 1989 and backed the unsuccessful coup by Communist Party hardliners against reformist Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in 1991. Soon after Uzbekistan became independent later that year, President Karimov banned leading opposition parties and has since held on to power through a series of rigged elections and plebiscites. Though acknowledging that 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 that it gave to similar groups in Ukraine and Georgia.



- AFP/Paul J. Richards

President George W. Bush welcomes President Islam Karimov to the Oval Office in 2002.

The Karimov dictatorship has received over \$1 billion in U.S. aid, most of that coming under President Bush. An estimated 1,000 American troops are currently stationed in Uzbekistan.

President 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 President Karimov for his "wonderful cooperation" with the U.S. military.

Craig Murray, who served as the British ambassador to Uzbekistan from 2002 until last year, observed, "Karimov is very much George Bush's man in Central Asia."

Uzbekistan's jails hold more than 7,000 political prisoners. Torture is widespread and systematic. Not long after the Bush administration provided Uzbek police with \$79 million 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 to six years of hard labor when she complained.

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

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 IMU has emerged to challenge the regime. The Bush administration blamed a series of IMU suicide bombings in the capital of 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 counterinsurgency 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."

It is time to stop any pretense that the Bush administration and its supporters care about freedom and democracy in the former Soviet Union and in the Islamic world. Just as Americans of conscience spoke out against U.S. support for repressive regimes in Latin America and Southeast Asia in previous years, we must similarly challenge the Bush administration's support for dictators like President Karimov. As President John F. Kennedy cautioned, "Those who make peaceful evolution impossible make violent revolution inevitable."

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