IDENTITY POLITICS IN CENTRAL ASIA

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The five new republics of Central Asia – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan – were the least prepared for independence when the Soviet Union abruptly disintegrated in late 1991. None of the indigenous peoples of the region had had experience of formal statehood in the modern era. There was no tradition of representative governance, let alone liberal democracy. Prior to their incorporation into the Tsarist, and later, Soviet empires, the Central Asian lands had been home to steppe and mountain nomads and sedentary farmers subject, to a greater or lesser degree, to a shifting and overlapping patchwork of khanate and clan authority.

In contrast to the Baltic or even Caucasian Soviet republics, there was virtually no intellectual or organizational drive for independence in Central Asia during the era of
glasnost in the late 1980s. Crucially, as Mark Beissinger has argued (Beissinger, 2002), no significant caucus emerged within the Central Asian republics’ (CARs) own regional Communist Party (CP) structures to coalesce around a shared national idea that would at least prove capable of fulfilling a transitional function to a non-Party based regime.

In this context, three of the regional CP First Secretaries under Gorbachev – Nursultan Nazarbaev of Kazakhstan, Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan and Saparmurat Niyazov of Turkmenistan – were able to artfully reposition themselves as nationalist figureheads, rapidly jettisoning their CP backgrounds in the process. Nevertheless, they did not hesitate to mobilize existing CP infrastructure and resources to their advantage in order to consolidate their positions. All three, in different ways, promoted an image of themselves as bulwarks of stability and continuity in a bewilderingly fluid political environment.

In Kyrgyzstan, the incumbent CP boss, Absamat Masaliev, was eased out in favour of an urbane Russian-educated physicist and CP member, Askar Akaev. He promised, and to some extent delivered, some degree of political and economic liberalization in the first years and appeared to be a genuine reformer. Tajikistan, always the poorest and least accessible Soviet republic, fractured along regional lines and descended into a brutal five-year civil war that claimed 60,000 lives and displaced ten times that number out of a population of six million. Even there, the old guard managed to reconfigure itself and retain control (with Uzbek and Russian assistance), albeit with a change of leadership in late 1992 that catapulted a hitherto obscure kolkhoz (collective farm) manager from the Kulyab region, Imomali Rakhmonov, to the Tajik presidency. Ten years on and all five men remain in place.

The defining features of the first decade have been threefold. First, the CARs have sought to reduce their dependence on Russia and to reach out and form new political relationships both within and beyond the region, with varying degrees of success. In Turkmenistan, for example, President Niyazov’s frankly ludicrous personality cult and relentless promotion of a Turkmen nation forged literally in his own image have steadily eroded the visible symbols of Turkmenistan’s Soviet heritage. Walking around the huge Tolkuchka bazaar, situated on a desert plain outside the capital city of Asghabat, one cannot help but notice how teenagers struggle even to speak Russian. Uzbekistan, emerging as an important regional player in its own right and America’s favoured strategic partner in Central Asia, is widely accepted to have given Russia the slip and escaped from Moscow’s geopolitical orbit. Kazakhstan remains politically closer to Russia by virtue of their extremely long common border, the relatively large proportion of ethnic Russians in Kazakhstan and, possibly, the large shareholdings Nazarbaev’s family are reputed to hold in Russia’s big energy concerns. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have been dependent on Russian military assistance to guarantee their internal and external security. Until the establishment of the US military presence in both states in the past year, who else but Russia could deter any putative territorial designs of China, or provide the hardware and expertise to combat the itinerant Islamist rebels drifting seamlessly across the high passes and plateaux of the Pamir and Tian Shan mountains? In Tajikistan’s case the 201st Motorised Division of the Russian Army provides a degree of additional insurance against a breakdown of the fragile
internal peace brokered in 1997 to end the civil war. Tajiks are still learning the mechanics of being a nation-state and of living at peace together.

The second feature of independence has been the staccato attempt to introduce market economies and diversify trade relationships beyond the former Soviet space. The two processes have not necessarily complemented one another. Uzbekistan, for example, largely retains a command economy but has recast its trading partnerships successfully away from Russia. Kazakhstan opted for ‘shock therapy’ marketization which really only succeeded in enriching a small number of well-placed individuals at the expense of the many. Nevertheless, trade with China has expanded exponentially and Kazakhstan has managed to attract a relatively healthy volume of foreign direct investment, particularly in the energy and metals sectors. The eastern CARs have far poorer natural resources and are thus reliant on the mercy and largesse of international financial institutions to develop their economic infrastructure.

Thirdly, looming over the political landscape is the increasingly sultanistic and idiosyncratic rule exercised by the five big men at the top. Each president has developed his support base through the steady enrichment of his own regional, clan and family networks. Such endemic corruption now pervades all levels of society. Students in Kazakhstan routinely purchase their grades and references from their tutors. Donning a police uniform in Almaty is more or less a license to demand money with menaces. Customs officials across the region feel almost duty bound to extract their pound of flesh. In this respect, ordinary Central Asians are merely following the example of their political élites on a micro-level. Nazarbaev has allegedly embezzled billions of dollars from Kazakhstan’s state oil revenues. Akaev’s son recently secured a lucrative concession to deliver fuel to US forces based in Kyrgyzstan, thereby profiting to the tune of several million dollars. Niyazov wastes Turkmenistan’s gas revenues on expensive, ornate follies and monuments to his own omnipotence, whilst rural folk struggle to secure the basics for survival. Apart from Niyazov’s genuinely deluded megalomania, the other presidents depressingly appear to be concentrating on preserving their own political power (and legacies), whilst consolidating their ill-gotten gains, above attempts to build viable, inclusive and representative nation-states.

The four volumes under review go some way towards charting the journey made by three of the CARs, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, since independence. The accounts are by no means entirely as bleak as one would expect from studies of some of the world’s least free states. Essentially, they record a search – for identity through history, for more effective ways of thinking and doing, for stature in the international community and, most importantly, for the means to hold on to power, dignity and livelihoods endangered by rapid change. This quest encompassed, in the early years at least, elements of both the political élites of these countries as well as the people whose lives are affected by their decision-making. Soviet control left a powerful and contradictory legacy – political oppression and social order, economic security and ecological catastrophe. Gaining the unexpected and largely unwanted prize of political independence has required that Central Asians examine who they are, where they came from and what they want to be. The solutions they find to these dilemmas are fundamental to the processes of nation-building.

The collection of essays edited by van Schendel and Zurcher considers the issue of national identity through a historical lens and draws comparisons from the early
experiences of statehood in the wider region. It is an approach that works surprisingly well. Iran, Turkey and Pakistan all achieved statehood prior to acquiring a coherent sense of national identity. Nation-building thus became a political project executed by authoritarian élites ex post facto. The Pakistani case, in particular, provides an object lesson to the CARs on how this should not be done. Both Turkey and Pakistan pursued an aggressive, exclusionary national vision backed by military force that led minority groups – the Kurds and Bengalis respectively – to opt out of the state/nation-building process with tragic and, in the case of Bangladesh, almost genocidal consequences.

The essays by Bert G. Fragner and Suha Bolukbasi assess the contours of Soviet nationalities policy and its consequences for the post-Soviet republics. Fragner argues that Stalin reached the crucial, and decidedly non-Marxist, conclusion even before the October Revolution that nationality and land were inseparable. Within each of the Soviet republics, an identifiable territory and limited cultural freedoms were therefore granted which enabled each titular nationality to quietly reclaim and/or invent a national tradition. When infused with a contemporary salience, as was the case with the Karabakh conflict in Azerbaijan at the end of the Soviet period, the results could be combustible. However, Fragner argues that the incumbent political élites of the CARs have pragmatically accepted the premise of ‘Soviet nationalism’ by constructing national myths – such as that surrounding Tamerlane in Uzbekistan – set within the boundaries created by Soviet cartographers in the 1930s, notwithstanding the fact that these boundaries fail to correspond with any previous known political or national entity. The residue of Soviet multi-nationalist sentiment within élites has also militated against the pursuit of an aggressively exclusionary nationalist manifesto. Tajiks in Uzbekistan and Russians in Kazakhstan may not all like the consequences of independence but their situation in no way mirrors that of the Bengalis or the Kurds.

The Soviet period has also bequeathed important structural legacies to the CARs, which have been highly influential in the process of post-independence institutional design. Luong’s work attempts to discover why three adjacent states – Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan – sharing common historical and structural starting points, have experienced divergent institutional outcomes. Luong’s answer is that central and regional leaders firstly concluded an “élite pact” not to share power with new political actors, such as emerging parties and democracy movements. They then engaged in a bargaining game between themselves over the content of new national constitutions, the results of which reflected each group’s perceptions of their own and their adversaries’ power capabilities. In Kyrgyzstan, the regional leaders emerged triumphant due to the initial inexperience and consensual approach of President Askar Akaev, whereas in Uzbekistan, President Islam Karimov had the foresight to create local State Control Committees to oversee implementation of government policy, which considerably strengthened the hand of the centre. The outcome in Kazakhstan was less clear-cut, although subsequent events appear to reinforce the impression that the presidential apparatus now ‘calls the shots’.

Luong’s fieldwork is meticulous and impressive but her methodological assumptions may require refinement. First, her thesis is underpinned by the notion that “only regional identities acquired an enduring political significance in Central Asia”. Is that really the case? Surely the intra-regional ethnic violence in Uzbekistan in 1989, and between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in the Osh region of Kyrgyzstan in 1990 that left
hundreds dead, attests to an ethnic dimension running through political identity. The success of the southern regional leaders in the Kyrgyz constitutional debates surely owes a great deal to a desire to avoid a repeat of communal violence and to head off the prospect of possible secessionism by the Osh region from the state altogether. Secondly, Luong’s definition of “regional” is also dangerously imprecise. In Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, it is sited variously at oblast (county) level and at substantially extended parameters congruent with the different economic sectors or larger regions of the republics. Thirdly, it is questionable whether the states are both as similar and distinct as Luong makes out. Certainly, their pre-Soviet histories, which Luong does not factor in at all, are hugely varied. The forms of social organization were sedentary in Uzbekistan and nomadic in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The relative engagement with Islamic practice differed, as did the structures of clan and tribal authority and patterns of subsistence. To take the institutional arrangements prevailing during the Soviet Union as the point of departure without considering cultural or sociological issues is a somewhat mechanistic approach.

It is also questionable how different the constitutional outcomes turned out to be. The republics are, after all, different places with their own topographies, peoples, customs and beliefs, so some variation ought to be expected. Did Luong really expect them to have identical outcomes based purely on their Communist Party structural heritage? In that case, why not compare Uzbekistan to Estonia? Ironically, it would appear that the practical consequences of the constitutional settlements have not been too dissimilar in any event. All three states are highly personal regimes, with an arbitrary and deeply corrupted ‘fear and rewards’ culture based on patronage rather than legal–rational norms.

Luong assumes that the regional leaders in each republic acted as a unified bloc with identical aspirations throughout the bargaining process, despite the fact that many regional akims (governors) owed their appointment, and were thus beholden, to the centre. Recent research on centre–periphery relations in Kazakhstan reveals substantial nuances in the behaviour and priorities of the akimat (Cummings, 2000). Akims in oil-rich oblasts, for example, resent the subsidies extended to their poorer counterparts. Those in northern border areas focus their attention on building cross-border trading relationships with Russian regions. Some have closer relations to central government than others. Notwithstanding these criticisms, Luong’s work, is, nevertheless, exceptional on the Soviet period, theoretically illuminating and constituting an important template for further research in the region.

The persistence of Soviet mentalities is also evident in Erika Weinthal’s brilliant analysis of environmental co-operation in the Aral Sea Basin during the first years of CAR independence. Apart from the absence of detailed and good quality maps, this study is one of the best doctoral theses published on Central Asia that this reviewer has yet seen. Theoretically rigorous, innovative in content and refined in focus, it not only provides insight into the motivations behind interstate co-operation between the Central Asian regimes but also raises searching questions on the role of International Organizations (IOs) and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in developing and transitional states.

The context is provided by the desiccation of the Aral Sea, an ecological disaster, second perhaps only to Chernobyl in its severity. Along the Amu Darya (Oxus) and Syr
Darya (Jaxartes) rivers that thread through Central Asia, and empty in to the Aral, the Soviets created a vast monoculture of intensive cotton production. The accompanying irrigation system has all but destroyed the Aral Sea. In 1960, 55 km³ of water flowed in to the sea annually. By 1982 there was nothing. The rivers now peter out many miles from the shoreline. The surface area has reduced by half, the volume by two-thirds. Toxic salt residues blow across godforsaken former coastal towns. The little fresh water available is polluted by agricultural run-off and herbicides. Respiratory diseases and cancer have reduced life expectancy to below sub-Saharan African levels and a whole way of life for the Karakalpak people who used to fish the sea has vanished.

Weinthal wants to know why the regimes in Central Asia appeared to co-operate so rapidly in order to manage the crisis when it would be natural to assume that they would jealously guard their newly acquired sovereignty. She also seeks to evaluate the role played by IOs and NGOs, such as the World Bank, the EU and USAID, within this process. She argues that the World Bank saw the project as a propitious opportunity to link environmental and conflict issues with political and economic reform in the aftermath of the Rio Earth summit and the collapse of the Soviet Union. For their part, co-operation by the Central Asian regimes enhanced their image abroad, confirmed their status as sovereign political actors and increased their revenue streams without challenging their political authority. NGO/IO strategies had, in Weinthal’s view, mixed consequences. On the one hand, side-payments made by these organizations greatly assisted the process of co-operation and the careful expansion of the “negotiating set” to link in energy issues ensured that upstream states did not divert the water courses for their own uses. On the other hand, the continual dispensing of payments by Western NGOs may have engendered a scenario where, as one donor official put it, “professional givers are creating a nation of professional takers”, thereby creating an international welfare mentality that not only inadvertently propped up the regimes of extremely corrupt political élites, but also relieved them of the necessity of undertaking root and branch economic reform during a period in which the population might have been receptive to radical change.

The Aral Sea crisis principally affected Uzbekistan, the subject of Yalcin’s survey. This, like the books by Luong and Weinthal, is a published doctoral thesis, although Yalcin’s work comes replete with an effusive foreword from his supervisor. Unfortunately, its aspiration to be a standard text on post-Soviet Uzbekistan is unlikely to be realized. The decision to advance the narrative from the Tsarist period straight to independence is bizarre and chapter headings such as ‘The Transition to Democracy’ tend to make one’s heart sink. The infamous corruption scandal over falsified cotton quotas that framed relations between Moscow and Tashkent in the late Soviet period barely rates a mention. The personalism that increasingly characterizes President Karimov’s rule is not broached, nor are the regional dynamics of élite politics. A barrage of official statistics on the economy is not subjected to either rigorous interpretation or supplemented by reference to patronage networks, clan structures or the crucial role the informal economy plays in post-communist societies. A smooth and linear progression to a market economy and liberal democracy is assumed to be in train although virtually all political opposition has been eliminated, and Uzbekistan now resembles a police state far more closely than the decaying Soviet empire from which it broke free.
Yalcin is sympathetic to the notion that the Oliy Majlis (Parliament) is not yet mature enough to acquire significant legislative powers, yet ironically he is strongest when discussing the flowering of civil society and vibrant political discourse around the time of the Russian Revolution. Discussion of foreign policy is largely restricted to a recitation of co-operation agreements and protocols, most of which remain unfulfilled, whilst analysis of Uzbekistan’s expanding regional profile, and the consequent unease felt by its close neighbours over unilateral border demarcations and the tactical responses to Islamist militancy, is sadly absent. President Karimov is variously described as a “champion of peace in the region” and “the man who can introduce democratic values in Uzbekistan”, statements that say more about the author’s perspectives than the subject’s actions.

REFERENCES