

UZBEKISTAN: SHALL WE FORGET ANDIJAN?

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May 13 marked the third anniversary of the bloody repression of riots in Andijan, a city in Uzbekistan nestled in the Ferghana Valley. Three years later, these bloody events seem to be on the point of being bypassed by gains and losses. The Uzbek President, Islam Karimov, has been surfing skillfully on the antagonisms between Russia and the West, on the contradictions in the policy of the European Union and on the silent, even active complicity of his neighbours. He takes comfort in being seen as a regional actor who, while hardly recommended, is unavoidable. Let us take another look at an event which still today exerts a strong impact on relations between this country and the Western democracies.

1. A brief reminder of the facts

The Andijan events began on May 13, 2005 when at around 1.00 A.M. a heavily armed group stormed the police station and a barracks. The group then headed over to a penitentiary centre and proceeded to free many hundreds of detainees, including a couple of dozen heads of local companies who were arrested for belonging to the Islamic group *Akramiya*, the local branch of the Islamist organisation *Hizb ut-Tahrir*¹. After that, the insurgents took over a building of the regional administration.²

According to the press agency *OuzA* (the National Information Agency of Uzbekistan), President Islam Karimov made a lightening visit to the site. After meeting with the local authorities, he gave the order to put an end to the situation and then went back to Tashkent.³ The real number of human lives lost will probably never be known. The authorities officially acknowledge that there were 169 deaths.⁴ For their part, independent observers and NGOs present on the spot estimate that the loss of human life was more than 800, of which nearly 200 died in the little town on the border with Kirghizstan, Pakhtaobod.

Many observers agree that the Andijan events constitute *'the grand finale of a series of protests expressing popular anger over the deplorable economic conditions in which the*

¹ The *Hizb ut-Tahrir* movement (Party of Liberation) is a Sunni political party. It says it is internationalist, anti-nationalist and pan-Islamic and its stated mission is to unite all Muslim countries within a single Islamic state (the Caliphate) under Islamic law and governed by an elected head of state (the Caliph).

² <http://www.rferl.org/content/Article/1058853.html>

³ <http://www.rferl.org/content/Article/1058869.html>

⁴ <http://www.rferl.org/content/Article/1058942.html>

*immense majority of the Uzbek population lives.*⁵ As proof, people cite the many recurrent demonstrations which took place in the preceding weeks in various localities of the country, in particular several days before in Tashkent. On the other hand, other observers support the exclusively Islamist explanation. For Shirin Akiner, co-director of NATO's advanced research programme into '*The security challenges in Central Asia,*' and the author of a report of the independent investigation *in situ*, the loss of life has been deliberately underestimated by the Western mass media and in reality the Uzbek authorities were countering an attempted Islamist coup d'état that was fomented with help from the outside.⁶

a) Some international reactions ranging between more or less tacit support ...

It should come as no surprise that the Russian authorities and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergei Lavrov, personally stand side by side with Islam Karimov. In a visit to Vienna, he said on May 16, 2005 that Russia had proof of involvement of the Taliban who were driven from Afghanistan and who came to cause disturbances on Uzbek territory with a view to seizing power.⁷ Two days earlier his Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Valeri Loshchinin, had mentioned economic and economic causes, though he, too, emphasized the '*Islamic factor*' as a multiplying the violence exponentially.

Such a reaction did not surprise Aleksei Makarkin, Deputy Director of the Centre for Political Technologies, a think tank based in Moscow. For Makarkin, ever since the fall of the Soviet Empire, the relations between Moscow and Tashkent have assumed the allure of a '*marriage of convenience.*'⁸ On the one hand, the Kremlin seeks stability above all in Central Asia. It was lukewarm to the '*Tulip Revolution*' in Kirghizstan at the end of March, 2005 and it has never lost hope of playing a major role in the region. On the other hand, we have a despot keen to hold onto the position he has single-handedly occupied since 1990.

In neighbouring Kirghizstan, the Acting President, Kourmanbek Bakiev, recently brought to power after the '*Tulip Revolution*' and the removal of Askar Akaiev, condemns the Islamist organisation *Hizb ut-Tahrir* without beating about the bush. However, this Presidential condemnation stands apart from the opinion that is widespread among his fellow citizens. They see in the Andijan events above all the results of '*social, political and economic difficulties.*'⁹

As for Turkey, its Minister of Foreign Affairs prudently emphasized the importance for Ankara that there be a stable Uzbekistan and he appealed to the common sense of the authorities and of the demonstrators to put an end to the disturbances.¹⁰

b) ... and differentiated degrees of disapproval ...

The very first reactions of the Western democracies showed that their leaders did not fully appreciate the importance of the event. They underscored above all their sense of embarrassment.

In the days following the September 11, 2001 attacks, President Islam Karimov immediately took the side of the Western powers in the war on terror. He showed himself to be an important ally by placing at the disposal of the United States and the coalition the air base at Karshi-Khanabad, a key element in the military operations directed against Afghanistan. If

⁵ <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1058880.html>

⁶ <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/pubs/ph/details.cfm?v21=106904&click53=106904&lng=en&id=30294>

⁷ <http://www.rferl.org/content/Article/1058884.html>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

one were to condemn him a bit too openly, one could lose a major ally at the heart of a highly strategic region for the coalition's operations.

The United States felt it was enough for the White House's spokesman Scott McClellan to say that it *'deplored the violence and expressed its concern over the announcement of the escape of members of a terrorist organisation.'*¹¹ The French and German Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Michel Barnier and Joschka Fischer, asked respectively for *'the opening of a political dialogue'* and *'the dispatch of missions of the Red Cross and humanitarian organisations on the ground.'*¹² The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe called for an end to the violence and respect for human rights, and it offered *'its services to contribute to calming down the situation and analysis of the causes of the problem.'*¹³

The only country to distance itself very clearly from these harmless criticisms was Great Britain. Its Minister of Foreign Affairs, Jack Straw, described the situation as being *'particularly serious'* and he believed *'that the evident lack of democracy and openness combined with a situation of abuses against human rights led to this drama.'*¹⁴

Once the gravity of the events became known, the Western powers corrected their aim. While admitting in the background the need for firmness against terrorism, they concentrated the essential part of their criticisms on excessive use of violence, the absence of progress in the area of political and economic reforms, as well as in the area of human rights and the state of law.¹⁵ Dropping his prudent reserve, the Secretary General of the United Nations at the time, Kofi Annan, called upon the protagonists to show restraint and to show respect for human rights.¹⁶

The United States announced that it would maintain the freeze on \$18 million of assistance to Uzbekistan that came into effect in the summer of 2004 in the face of slight progress in the area of human rights. The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) did the same in 2004 when it froze, for the same reason, most of the funds intended to finance development projects in the public sector.

The most virulent criticisms of the regime of Islam Kasimov were made by the NGOs defending human rights, especially Amnesty International and the Finnish International Federation for Human Rights. Both of them condemned *'the authorities for disproportionate use of violence'* and further denounced *'a dictatorial regime which practices torture, which violates all civil and political rights, which denies freedom of religion and of thought and which forbids all forms of political pluralism.'*¹⁷

In the end, and it is so rare that it deserves mention, the European Union set the bar much higher than the United States with respect to disapproval and condemnation. It imposed an embargo on importation of arms intended for Uzbekistan and on visas for a dozen high officials suspected of having been involved in the brutal repression of the riots. The EU also set as its indispensable condition for lifting sanctions, the opening of an independent international investigation into the events, into the practice of torture and the show trials that followed.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ <http://www.rferl.org/content/Article/1058896.html>

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

c) ... for a very doubtful effectiveness

Fifteen days after the start of the events, President Islam Karimov traveled to China on a state visit. Though this had been planned long before, the visit gave Beijing the opportunity to show its support for Tashkent. The visit ended in the signing of a treaty on partnership and cooperation relations, as well as in the signing of two dozen agreements on cooperation in trade and energy matters. The key element was the promise of some 1.5 billion dollars of Chinese investments. Immediately afterwards, he went to Moscow, where he received a very friendly welcome from his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin.

In the weeks that followed, the United States had to end their stationing of forces on the Karshi-Khanabad¹⁸ military base and American NGOs were asked to pack their bags. As for the local NGOs suspected of being potential trouble makers, they were simply shut down. European sanctions came into force in a piecemeal manner in November 2005 while one of the main officials responsible for the massacres, Minister of Internal Affairs of Uzbekistan, Zokirjon Almatov, who clearly occupies a place on the list of those '*banished*' from the EU, was ostensibly being looked after in a German clinic.

In November 2005, during his second trip to Moscow since the tragic events of May, President Islam Karimov signed a treaty that was presented as a '*natural extension of the treaty of strategic partnership of June 2004.*'¹⁹ He also used the occasion to announce his firm intention to join the Eurasian Economic Community and the 'Organisation of the Collective Security Treaty.'²⁰

As one can confirm in view of the results immediately obtained, the sanctions did not have the effect that the Western powers expected from them. The contrary was indeed true. Such results augur badly for relations with the EU and the United States. They also show the limits of Western influence in Central Asia now that the situation in effect has changed completely.

2. Was this a final victory for Islam Karimov?

a) The roots of the disenchantment

The '*falling out of love*' between Islam Karimov and the United States clearly originated in disappointment over seeing the delays in implementation of the promised investments offered to him during his visit to Washington in 2002.

Morover, the verdict rendered by the Court of the State of New Jersey against Gulnara, his daughter, after many years of legal proceedings, certainly contributed greatly to his disenchantment. Sentenced in absentia in 2003 for kidnapping her children in a trial brought by her ex-husband, Mansur Maksudi, an American citizen, she became a '*wanted criminal.*' The Karimov family was certainly not prepared to say in its case that American justice is an independent justice.

Additionally, the various coloured revolutions – the Orange Revolution in the Ukraine, the Rose Revolution in Georgia and the Tulip Revolution in Kirghizstan - all contributed to reinforcing the distrust of the Uzbek leaders. They were even encouraged to join in a Sino-Russian orientation that would protect them from this kind of misadventure. For them, there could be no doubt that the change of regime in Kirghizstan was the work of the Western chancelleries and that Uzbekistan could be the next target.

¹⁸ They were redeployed on the base of Agram in Afghanistan and the Manas base in Kirghizstan.

¹⁹ <http://www.rferl.org/content/Article/1062922.html>

²⁰ Uzbekistan joined these two organisations in January and August 2006 respectively.

b) Western powerlessness

Despite many repeated requests for setting up an international commission of investigation into the Andijan events, the United States, the OSCE and the EU came up against a refusal. After three years of glacial relations, Washington and Brussels are now trying, for better or worse, to repair what can be repaired.

The sober telegram of condolences addressed to the Uzbeks by the Embassy of the United States in Tashkent, on the day of the third anniversary of the Andijan events illustrates perfectly Washington's new diplomatic orientation. During his stop in Tashkent at the start of June, Richard Boucher, an Assistant Secretary of State, clearly announced the new line. The reestablishing of contacts between the two countries will proceed by way of a '*pragmatic approach*.'²¹

Drawing bitter conclusions from the errors of the past, the Western chancelleries are now returning to Realpolitik. Quite removed from democratic and humanitarian considerations, quite far from the issues of human rights, the reality of the Westerners getting bogged down in Afghanistan and the generalised and fierce struggle for the energy resources of Central Asia make it necessary to re-launch relations with Uzbekistan.

Seizing upon what the Ministers of Foreign Affairs have considered to be progress with respect to human rights²², at the end of April the EU renewed the suspension of sanctions for a second period of six months due to expire in October. One may remain skeptical over such a decision, which rest on just simple verbal promises. All the more so as once the announcement of the extension of the suspension of sanctions was issued, Tashkent cancelled *sine die* the EU-Uzbekistan seminar on '*human rights and democratisation of the media*.'

c) The ambiguous game played by Germany

Obsessed by the necessity to diversify its energy supplies, Germany has, from the beginning and during the whole crisis, played an unclear role that contributed to weakening the European position with determination and effectiveness.

Berlin is betting on the possible contribution that Uzbekistan could make with respect to gas. This is a risky gamble, since it is based on tentative but never proven resources which some experts believe could be much smaller than the Uzbek authorities have let us believe. The United States, Europe and especially Germany are placing much hope on the *Nabucco*²³ pipeline project which is supposed to initially link Europe and Azerbaijan, then later to bring in Central Asia.

The problem is that this project has undergone serious reversals in 2007 following two successive agreements concluded by Russia with Vienna and Rome. As an American expert on the region emphasizes, '*History will record that in May 2007 the energy ambitions of the Western countries in Central Asia collapsed. During that month, Russia seemed to have reduced to zero the American and European projects for importing energy resources directly from Central Asia. This defeat of the American strategy of direct access to immense reserves nips in the bud the similar efforts made by the European Union ever since 2006.*'²⁴

²¹ <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eavo62308.shtml>

²² The Uzbek state is committed to abolishing the death penalty, adopting *habeas corpus* and ratifying international treaties against child labour.

²³ From the name of the king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar II, who restored the network of irrigation in his kingdom.

²⁴ http://www.regard-est.com/home/breve_contenu.php?id=797

Another reason for the ambiguous posture of Germany is purely military. It in fact has a base in the South of the country, at Termez, for its operations in Afghanistan. This is the only forward post in Central Asia at the disposal of Germany and since January 2008 other European NATO members have access to it. This is why the German Defence Ministry considers it to be strategically indispensable. Though the German authorities admit that for a time they envisaged and studied a possible repositioning of their troops, they finally came to the conclusion that Termez was and will remain the best possible position for support missions to operations on Afghan territory and security conditions.²⁵

The example of the expulsion of the US Air Force from the base at Karshi-Khanabad has, most assuredly, served as a lesson to German diplomats.

3. An iron fist in a glove of the same metal

Aside from the fact that the signal sent by the international community could serve as an *'encouragement'* to other despots around the world (Zimbabwe, Belarus or Myanmar, by way of example), it offers President Karimov the possibility of going on as if nothing had happened. He does not seem to have any wish of depriving himself of anything.

To be sure, on June 2 he gave conditional release from custody to Mutabar Tajibayeva, a militant defender of human rights, and to Ahmadjon Odilov, who at 83 is the oldest political prisoner, having been incarcerated for 20 years. Sadly these are the exceptions that prove the rule.

According to the NGO *Human Rights Watch* (HRW), a dozen defenders of human rights are still imprisoned²⁶ for having *'peacefully criticised the authorities and defended human rights.'*²⁷ HRW goes on to say that there are between 7,000 and 10,000 persons in detainment who are charged with *'terrorism'* or *'religious' extremism.*

Independent or foreign journalists are daily tracked down and are under constant surveillance. In October 2007, the Uzbek journalist Alisher Saipov was killed by unknown persons in Osh, a city in the south of Kirghizstan where he had taken refuge. Known for his investigations into corruption within the elite Uzbek leadership, for his exposure of violations of human rights and for his investigation into the Andijan events, he had, shortly before his death, denounced the collusion between the secret services of the two countries so as to operate freely and calmly on both sides of the frontier. According to his father, this assassination bears the mark of the Karimov regime and must have received the active support of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the State Committee for National Security of Kirghizstan²⁸.

At the beginning of June, the national television broadcast a special programme *'targeting'* journalists working for Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty (RFE/RL). It accused them of subversive activities against the state and put in public space a certain number of details about their personal lives. As for Solijon Adburahmonov, a former employee of RFE/RL who later became an independent journalist, he was arrested at Nukus, a city in the West of the country, and he has been prosecuted for *'using drugs.'*

Accreditations are granted by the medicine dropper. The reason for refusal that is most frequently advanced is *'ignorance of the mentality of the Uzbek people.'*²⁹ Speaking in the most serious manner possible, the authorities insist that their citizens have a special

²⁵ <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav090705.shtml>

²⁶ Including one hospitalised in a psychiatric asylum.

²⁷ <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav062308.shtml>

²⁸ <http://www.rferl.org/content/Article/1144649.html>

²⁹ Ibid.

mentality which it is difficult for a foreigner to grasp. Furthermore, fearing that foreign journalists might surreptitiously enter Uzbekistan under the guise of tourists, the government passed a law on *'the sojourn of foreigners.'* It reinforces and extends controls over visitors.³⁰

Nothing seems to stop the regime in this policy of repression. Naubet Bisenov, an analyst for the Central Asian Institute of Economic Strategies, summarizes the situation as follows: *'The weakness of the EU in defending its values in the area of democracy and human rights has given comfort to the feeling of impunity held by the Uzbek authorities and they have maneuvered remarkably so as to ensure that dialogue is resumed without any preconditions.'*³¹

4. Conclusion

Several days after the Andijan events, a dignitary of the regime said confidentially *'that there is no reason to be concerned with the protests or threats of sanctions issued by the Western countries'* and he added with a touch of cynicism *'that their leaders will come to us one day on their knees to beg for a resumption of the dialogue.'*³²

The facts seem, unfortunately, to prove him right. Though all roads may lead to Rome, it clearly appears that for the EU the road to Tashkent passes through Canossa.

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³⁰ <http://www.iht.com/articles/2008/05/09/opinion/edbukharbaeva.php>

³¹ <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav062308.shtml>

³² <http://www.iht.com/articles/2008/05/09/opinion/edbukharbaeva.php>