

A Soviet Republic Unchanged: U.S. Policy in Uzbekistan, 2001-2006

By Tim Eddy

Special Thanks to Sharon Werning Rivera



President Islam Karimov has ruled Uzbekistan since 1991 with an iron fist



By 2003, at which point the U.S. had achieved decisive military victory in Afghanistan, the State Department and the Defense Department began to shift its policy towards Uzbekistan. Aid plummeted, and the Defense Department was unwilling to negotiate a plan for long term use of the Khanabad airbase it used during Operation Enduring Freedom. The U.S. completely severed relations when the Uzbekistan Armed Forces opened fire on a crowd of demonstrators on May 13, 2005, in Andijon, killing 169.

In 1991, as the Soviet Union reached its demise, Uzbekistan declared its independence and elected its first president, Islam Karimov. But Karimov would prove no less repressive than his Soviet predecessors, especially in his treatment of the Muslim community. By 1999, Islamic fundamentalists began waging suicide attacks on the capital, Tashkent. He responded by blaming the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, his most feared opponent, incarcerating pious Muslims, and subjecting his prisoners to brute torture. Throughout the 1990s he would continually call on the international community to assist him in his war on Islamic fundamentalism. After the 9/11 attacks, the U.S. would provide him with the assistance he needed.

-Population: 27.3 million (largest in Central Asia); 88% of population Muslim
-Slightly larger area than California
-Rated "Not Free" by Freedom House
-Human Rights Watch estimates nearly 7,000 political prisoners of conscience

After 9/11, U.S. President George Bush vowed to eradicate the conditions that breed terrorism, placing democracy promotion atop the foreign policy agenda. But the military campaign in Afghanistan - the main event that brought the U.S. and Uzbekistan into closer liaisons - overshadowed any considerations of political reform in Uzbekistan. The U.S. tripled its aid to Uzbekistan from Fiscal Year 2001 to Fiscal Year 2002 amidst increasing repression of the Muslim community. Meanwhile, President Bush and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld continually praised Karimov as a steadfast partner in the war on terror. Instead of feeling pressure from the U.S. to reform, Karimov used Uzbekistan's new role in the U.S.'s war on terror to justify increased repression of his opponents.



Uzbek tanks roll into Andijon, May 13, 2005

As U.S.-Uzbekistan relations began to fray, Karimov's relationship with Russian President Vladimir Putin warmed. Putin lauded Karimov's response to the Andijon protests, signaling Russia's support for Karimov's repressive measures. Karimov has enlisted as his new ally a leader who explicitly endorses an authoritarian style of rule.



U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld with Karimov finalizing negotiations over U.S. use of Khanabad airbase, October 5, 2001



Russian President Vladimir Putin