

**GENERATIONAL CHANGE AND LEADERSHIP SUCCESSION IN
UZBEKISTAN CONFERENCE**

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BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

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BACKGROUND

In light of recent political revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia, an uncertain regime change in Kyrgyzstan, and electoral challenges in Azerbaijan, a study of the political environments and potential for stable transitions in other parts of Central Asia is timely. Indeed, Uzbekistan in particular poses the greatest potential for a volatile political transition in the region. A combination of an autocratic political regime, weak institutions, unstable economy, oppressive social and religious conditions, and a generally frustrated populace constitute ripe conditions for political instability. Uzbekistan's current population demographics will also play a critical role in the outcome of any political transition. With over 50 percent of the population currently under the age of 25, and over 35 percent in the impressionable 15 to 35 age cohort, the dynamics among future elites in the country will have significant implications for U.S. strategic interests in the region.

In an era of globalization, "generations" are not the static product of strictly domestic social changes. Rather, "generations" constitute a dynamic concept that can be affected in unexpected ways by the interaction of multiple external influences with national and local forces. Politically, the capacity of the Karimov regime to sustain itself against social challenges is deeply affected both by the regime's ability to attract young supporters—or at least demobilize young opponents—and by the attitudes and resources of young Uzbeks now living and working abroad in such countries as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and the United States. Economically, Uzbekistan's hopes for growth depend upon its ability to maintain ties with international investors and consumers, in Central Asia and beyond. In this context, the continuing loyalty of key elements within the emerging Uzbek elite, as well as the developing perspectives of Uzbek youth, will crucially influence the country's future prospects. Culturally, changing discourses of identity within and between generations shaped by international as well as local ideological influences—whether Islamic, nationalist, liberal, or nihilistic—may impact the very question of "What is Uzbekistan?", with concomitant implications for the country's political future.

To contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the impact of generational change on Uzbekistan's future elites and socio-political environment, on Thursday, March 2, 2006, The National Bureau of Asian Research organized a one-day conference on "Generational Change and Leadership Succession in Uzbekistan." The conference was held at the Army and Navy Club in Washington D.C., with a select audience drawn from the U.S. policy communities. Conference panelists explored generational differences in Uzbekistan, their potential impact on political succession, and the attendant implications for U.S. policy toward Uzbekistan. The conference sought to identify the defining events and experiences that shape the worldviews and political socialization of different age cohorts in Uzbekistan, as well as to demarcate political generations and identify their influence with current and future political leaderships in Uzbekistan.

INTRODUCTION

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In the wake of the tragic events of September 11, 2001 and the launching of the United States-led war against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, the newly-forged “strategic partnership” between the U.S. and Uzbekistan seemed to have great promise. Unfortunately, the Karimov government’s unwillingness to undertake serious political or economic reforms of its repressive and centralized regime, combined with the perception among influential Uzbeks that the United States was failing to deliver either international support or material benefits at the level initially expected, quickly generated bruised feelings on both sides. The series of popular uprisings that toppled post-Soviet presidential regimes in Georgia, Ukraine, and finally neighboring Kyrgyzstan further reshaped Karimov’s evaluations of the costs and benefits of the relationship with the United States. Thus, when Karimov’s government chose to fire indiscriminately at anti-regime protestors in Andijan in May 2005, and the West responded with outrage, the stage was set for a fundamental shift in Uzbek foreign policy in an anti-American direction. Indeed, relations between the two countries have deteriorated quickly over the past year, with closure of the U.S. base at Khanabad-Karshi, the shuttering of several Western NGOs and independent media outlets in Uzbekistan, and a dramatic upgrading of Uzbek relations with Russia and China.

It would be easy to conclude, given the rapidity with which bilateral relations have soured, that the U.S.-Uzbekistan partnership was simply fated to fail. Yet the initial geopolitical factors that prompted U.S. interest in that partnership remain in place. Uzbekistan is still the most populous country in Central Asia, and unlike most post-Soviet societies, it maintains a high rate of population growth. Moreover, Uzbekistan is strategically located in the very center of this vital part of the world. Its border with Afghanistan still represents a crucial access point to that country’s northern regions. The presence of large Uzbek ethnic minorities in Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan means that political and social changes in Uzbekistan will necessarily have ramifications for stability in Central Asia more generally. Recent terrorist incidents within Uzbekistan demonstrate the danger that radical Islamist groups may ultimately gain strength within Uzbek society, with unpredictable consequences for regional and global security. Moreover, the Uzbeks already have many reasons to distrust both of their two great power neighbors, Russia and China; there is still substantial elite and popular support for renewed ties to the West. And while Uzbekistan’s mineral resources do not compare in size to those of Kazakhstan or Turkmenistan, its natural gas reserves are substantial enough to have recently attracted increased Russian investment, while its gold reserves continue to be developed by major international companies such as Newmont Mining. It is certainly premature, then, to write off all future prospects for continued U.S. involvement in Uzbekistan.

Thus the subject of this report—generational change and leadership succession in Uzbekistan—is precisely the right issue to focus on at this juncture, when short-term prospects for cooperative relations are dim, but the medium to long run trends still point toward the potential for renewed

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U.S.-Uzbek collaboration on issues of joint concern. Will a new, post-Karimov Uzbek leadership be more favorably disposed to forging deeper ties with the U.S. and its allies? Would such leaders be willing and able to introduce democratic and economic liberalization in a serious and sustained way? Can we expect positive political and economic changes as a result of generational turnover in Uzbekistan, once the current Soviet-era leadership at last relinquishes its hold on power? Are younger Uzbeks more likely to embrace globalization, entrepreneurship, and independent political activism than their elders? On the contrary, might Uzbek youth rebel against growing political corruption, economic inequality, and cultural marginalization by embracing radically anti-Western ideologies?

Given the fact that generational change directly affects the political evolution of every country, one might have expected mainstream social science theory to help us address these critical questions. Remarkably, however, this topic has largely disappeared from contemporary political science analysis; it plays little or no role in contemporary economics; and those sociologists who specialize in demographic analysis rarely focus explicitly on the political effects of generational turnover. Moreover, the three major theories that have been developed to explain how generational change affects politics in other parts of the world—modernization theory, civilizational theory, and institutionalism—do not appear to fit the Uzbek case very well.

Modernization theory predicts a general global shift away from traditional social values of community, personal loyalty, and fidelity to inherited cultural worldviews, toward modern social values of individualism, legal proceduralism, open-mindedness and tolerance. From this point of view, younger generations in societies that have undergone substantial urbanization, education, and industrialization should generally be more modern in their political orientation than their elders. The spread of modern means of mass communication should also promote the modernization process. Thus many modernization theorists initially predicted that young people in the former Soviet Union would quickly embrace Western ideals of democracy and capitalism, while the older generation raised in the Soviet period would resist Westernization. However, such expectations have been contradicted by growing recent evidence of rising ethnic nationalism, intolerance, and anti-Western sentiment among the younger generation in post-Soviet Russia—despite the fact that Russian youth are highly educated, urbanized, and culturally sophisticated. In Uzbekistan, by contrast, despite its comparatively lower levels of urbanization and higher degree of cultural traditionalism, surveys continue to show relatively high levels of secularism and low levels of anti-Western sentiment; it is precisely among the urban youth, meanwhile, that one finds the greatest degree of support for Islamist radicalism. Clearly, the post-Soviet environment does not fit our standard conceptions of the modernization process.

A second approach to understanding generational change rejects modernization theory's emphasis on socio-cultural transformation to argue instead for the underlying permanence of deep-seated cultural values—especially those rooted in ancient “civilizations.” From this point of view, the basic civilizational values of different regions of Eurasia, originally derived from the great world religions and philosophical systems of Western Christianity, Orthodoxy, Islam, and Confucianism, are unlikely to disappear despite the dramatic political and economic changes of the 20th and 21st centuries; for this reason, international partnerships among countries with different civilizational backgrounds are prone to failure. Such an explanation for current tensions between the United States and Uzbekistan seems tempting at first glance. Here, too, however,

the Eurasian context in general, and the Uzbek experience in particular, do not seem to fit theoretical expectations very well upon closer examination. The desire to join the European Union, for example, has decisively transformed the political and social expectations of youth in similar ways in Protestant Estonia and Latvia, Catholic Lithuania and Poland, Orthodox Bulgaria and Romania, and Muslim Turkey. Meanwhile, young people living in the non-Baltic former republics of the former Soviet Union, whether in historically Orthodox, Muslim, or Buddhist regions, appear to share a remarkably similar culture of materialism and general political alienation. In Uzbekistan, too, most surveys demonstrate widespread secularism and cynicism among youth. Few young Uzbeks today, in fact, even possess much detailed or accurate knowledge about the country's Muslim civilizational heritage.

Such anomalous and contradictory evidence has led many mainstream political scientists and policy analysts to reject the importance of generational change for political outcomes altogether, arguing instead that new institutional rules can quickly transform the political and economic behavior of young people from diverse cultural backgrounds. Supporters of this "institutional" approach to politics hold that if policymakers can just enforce well-designed "rules of the game," stable democracy and efficient capitalist markets will emerge in any country. The conduct of political elites, according to the institutionalists, is determined not so much by the inherited cultural values of their generational cohort, but by their basic incentives to maintain power and increase state revenues. Here, too, however, the experience of the former Soviet Union introduces problematic counterevidence. Early efforts by institutionalists to design programs for rapid market reform ran aground at least in part because of the basic unfamiliarity of most former Soviet state administrators and ordinary citizens with even basic concepts of Western capitalism. Western support for political parties and non-governmental organizations, too, has generated unanticipated consequences in the post-Soviet milieu, detaching civil society activists from their surrounding society and creating widespread resentment against pro-Western elites who have received foreign funding. Again, the Uzbek case, where President Karimov continues to preside over a neo-Soviet regime fifteen years after the collapse of the USSR, provides a telling example of the limited influence of institutional advice from the outside over the course of domestic politics and social change. Apparently, before even very well-intentioned institutional designs can be accepted and implemented, there must be an elite in place that is open-minded enough to embrace institutional reform. This brings us directly back to the problem of generational change and leadership succession with which we began.

In sum, we are faced with the task of analyzing a crucial topic for the future of U.S. policy toward a key country in Central Asia, concerning which existing theories and assumptions provide little if any useful guidance. In such a situation, easy stereotypes and deductive approaches must be jettisoned in favor of a careful examination of facts on the ground. Fortunately, for this report, we have assembled a remarkable team of scholars—one American, five Uzbek—whose diverse personal as well as professional experiences give them deep insight into the underlying forces shaping generational change in Uzbekistan. Their six reports cover a range of critical factors affecting values and political orientations in diverse sectors of contemporary Uzbek society, providing a comprehensive overview of the social environment within which Uzbek generational change is now taking place.