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EXPLORING ASIA:

POLITICAL CHANGE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Central Asian Challenges Since Independence

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The Central Asian countries of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan never expected to become independent states. Before 1991, they were part of the Soviet Union and did not seek to separate from it. But when the Soviet Union dissolved into 15 republics, the five Central Asian states became independent for the first time in their history.

Initially this was a problem. Their economies and political systems were designed to be part of a larger country, like states in the United States, rather than to be on their own as an autonomous state. For example, these countries did not have their own armies, embassies or currencies. They were also very poor. Their economies were designed to produce a single crop, such as cotton, and there were few factories with which to produce goods of high value.

However, there were also some positives to their newfound statehood. Almost 100 percent of the population of Central Asia was educated and able to read. Women were highly educated and active in the workforce, far more than in poor countries in other regions. And these countries had natural resources including oil, gas and gold that could be exported for profit.

It took several years for these states to find their way and create stable political systems, but problems still persisted. It took years for their economies, which collapsed with the fall of the

Soviet Union, to recover and begin to grow. Leaders who were able to take power were unwilling to let go of it. Four of the five first presidents in Central Asia were also heads of their respective republics in the Soviet era. They were skilled at making deals with the right people and were good at management, but they were not natural democrats. Indeed, most presidents remained in power for more than a decade. Two — the presidents of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan — are still in power today after 22 years.

In some respects, the Central Asian states all followed similar paths. They remained authoritarian rather than becoming democratic. Corruption grew to be rampant because people in power were able to reward their friends, while ordinary people without connections were forced to pay bribes for everyday things, such as getting a job, obtaining a driver license, receiving medical treatment or getting into college. With the end of a war in Tajikistan in 1997, all the countries had become stable by the late 1990s.

In other respects, the countries are very different today. Kazakhstan was able to develop its oil and gas resources. Despite being poorer than Uzbekistan in 1991, it is now the wealthiest Central Asian state. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are mountainous and rural, with few resources, so they are the poorest. The countries also have different levels of ethnic mixing. For example, whereas Uzbekistan's population is more than 90 percent Uzbek and Turkmenistan's is more than 90



Buk Kalon Juma mosque. Photo taken by Marta Mikkelsen, UW Ellison Center Associate Director

percent Turkmen, Kyrgyzstan's is very diverse; only about 65 percent of the country is Kyrgyz, while 15 percent is Uzbek and 10 percent is Russian. The ethnic tensions in Kyrgyzstan became a problem in 2010, when rioting broke out between Uzbek and Kyrgyz groups, and more than 1,000 people were killed. Yet since then, Kyrgyzstan has held the freest elections of any Central Asian country and, thus, is the closest to democracy.

Although 22 years may seem like a long time, it is a very short span when we are talking about countries. Central Asia had little time to prepare for independence and was forced to learn quickly. Since then these nations have undergone many changes, some positive and some negative. Even though they are stable today, their people still lack political freedoms, and corruption and unemployment are very high. The only certainty about the future is that more changes will happen, but no one knows exactly what kind.



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