



Written by [Thomas R. Eddlem](#) on August 5, 2009

## Communism Still Stands in the “Stans”

The mass media tells us that communism around the world fell with the tearing down of the Berlin Wall in 1989. It’s almost become a proverb. But in some places communism never fell.

Communism still stands in the central Asian “stans,” though often under a different name. The “Stans” are Asian, mostly Muslim former Soviet “republics.” Most of the nations’ names end with the suffix “-stan” in the English language (“stan” means “nation” or “land”), and without exception all are still burdened with one-party, brutal tyrannies — along with leadership derived from Soviet-era apparatchiks.



And they are all still completely in the Russian political orbit.

One confirmation of this is a 2006 state visit from Uzbek President Islam Karimov and Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev. “We have a lot of plans with regard to Russia,” Karimov told the press during the visit. “Russia is the anchor, the attracting force, the center around which we will ally within the framework of the Eurasian Economic Cooperation and promote our common interests with Russia’s aid.” Karimov and Nazarbayev pledged fealty to Putin’s Russia. “Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan see their future with Russia. From this standpoint, the Eurasian Economic Cooperation is the organization that will keep us on this track. Nazarbayev and I confirm it,” Karimov said.

In 2008, Freedom House listed nearly half of the countries in the world as “free” (46 percent), with 32 percent as “partly free” and 22 percent as “not free.” The former Soviet “republics” are definitely bringing the global average down. Five of the six nations are flatly listed as “not free,” while Kyrgyzstan was listed as “partly free.” Russia itself, which still includes some officially independent Muslim “republics,” is also listed as “not free.”

### **Kazakhstan: Atheistic Communists Become “Muslim” Communists**

Kazakhstan declared independence from the old Soviet Union on December 16, 1991, claiming that it was creating a separate secular state from the old Soviet secular state. The last Soviet “republic” to separate from the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan “elected” Communist Party First Secretary Nursultan Nazarbayev as its first leader. Nazarbayev had been a lifelong Communist Party functionary who publicly converted to Islam in the mid-1990s when he sensed a change in the political winds. And he’s certainly been able to tack with the political winds. Nearly 18 years later, Nazarbayev is still in charge of this one million square-mile central Asian nation. Nazarbayev was reelected with 91 percent of the vote in the 2005 elections, an overwhelming margin of victory principally owing to ballot boxes fraudulently stuffed on his behalf.

The U.S. State Department explains that Nazarbayev has successfully given himself dictatorial powers that any Soviet-era leader would have envied. “In 1995, President Nazarbayev called for a referendum



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that expanded his presidential powers: only he can initiate constitutional amendments, appoint and dismiss the government, dissolve Parliament, call referenda, and appoint administrative heads of regions and Astana and Almaty. The prime minister, who serves at the pleasure of the president, chairs the Cabinet of Ministers and serves as Kazakhstan's head of government."

This is not to say that things have not changed from the Soviet era to today's "independence" era. The Soviet-era KGB was abolished, though it was replaced with the equally vicious KNB (Kazakh National Security Committee). The Communist Party is no longer the only legal political party in Kazakhstan. Now the Nur-Otan Party ("Fatherland-Ray of Light" party) of Nazarbayev is the only political party allowed to win elections. Nazarbayev's Nur-Otan Party holds all the seats in the Majilis, the Kazakh legislative assembly.

Amnesty International found in September 2008 that "beatings by law enforcement officers, especially in temporary pre-charge detention centres, in the streets or during transfer to detention centres, are still routine." Amnesty International also found that "judges rarely exclude evidence elicited as a result of torture or other ill-treatment and often base their verdict on the confession of the accused."

Nazarbayev's Kazakhstan has been rewarded by the United States and the West for his dictatorial moves. The U.S. State Department acknowledges that "Between 1992 and 2005, the United States provided roughly \$1.205 billion in technical assistance and investment support in Kazakhstan."

The U.S./European alliance is also scheduled to give Kazakhstan chairmanship of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), making it the first former Soviet state to take the lead over this major international organization of industrialized nations.

## **Uzbekistan: Plantation ?Communism Continues**

In the United States, slavery is associated with the enslavement of African-Americans before the Civil War who were usually forced to work on cotton plantations as slave laborers. This is still the case in Uzbekistan today, where the government conscripts slaves to work for the cotton harvest every year. Slave labor in Uzbekistan, according to the U.S. State Department's *Country Human Rights Report* for 2008, includes child slave labor, mostly on an annual basis to harvest the government cotton crop: "The constitution and law prohibit forced or compulsory labor, including by children, except as legal punishment such as for robbery, fraud or tax evasion, or as specified by law; however, there were reports that such practices occurred, particularly during the cotton harvest, when authorities reportedly compelled medical workers, government personnel and others to pick cotton."

In its *World Report 2009*, Human Rights Watch explained that "Uzbek authorities continue their unrelenting, multi-year campaign of unlawful arrest, torture, and imprisonment of Muslims who practice their faith outside state controls or who belong to unregistered religious organizations, with at least 6,000 currently incarcerated for nonviolent religious offenses."

The State Department documents that Uzbek government officials use a particularly perverse form of torture in order to extract confessions: boiling people alive. In some cases, hands or feet are placed into boiling water, and in other instances boiling water is poured over the victim in order to get him to confess to alleged crimes. The State Department concluded that security officers "routinely beat" prisoners to obtain confessions and "torture" is "common" in Uzbek jails.

The U.S. government used Uzbekistan as a location for its "extraordinary rendition" program for terrorism suspects in the years after 9/11, but after British Ambassador to Uzbekistan Craig Murray exposed some of the worst forms of torture in human history, even the Bush administration ceased



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Uzbekistan is like most tyrannies where the legislative and judicial branches are rubber stamps for the executive branch dictator, according to the State Department. “President Islam Karimov and the centralized executive branch dominated political life and exercised nearly complete control over the other branches.” Karimov is well on his way to being president for life, even though the Uzbek constitution explicitly prohibits presidents from serving more than two terms. President Karimov swore himself in for a third term in 2008 after a December 2007 “election” that, in the words of the State Department, “fell short of international democratic norms.” But the State Department notes that the Uzbek “constitution prohibits presidents from seeking a third term in office, an apparent contradiction never publicly addressed by the government.”

Uzbekistan has several political parties, but all those parties support Karimov. “The OSCE limited election observation mission (LEOM) noted that there were more candidates than in previous elections — four, including a female candidate and a nonpartisan candidate nominated by an initiative group — but all candidates publicly endorsed the incumbent’s policies.”

It almost goes without saying that freedoms of speech and press don’t exist in Uzbekistan. The State Department notes that “the law limits criticism of the president, and public insult to the president is a crime punishable by up to five years in prison,” and the press is tightly controlled by the state. “Government-owned printing houses printed the majority of newspapers.”

### **Azerbaijan: Dynastic Communism**

Moscow-educated President Ilham Aliyev is the dynastic “president” of Azerbaijan. He was first “elected” president in 2003, upon the death of his father, “President” Heydar Aliyev. The elder Aliyev rose to the level of KGB chief for Azerbaijan in the late Soviet era, and ruled Azerbaijan with an iron fist after “independence.” The younger Iliyev was “reelected” last October in an election boycotted by all major opposition parties.

The U.S. State Department’s *Country Reports on Human Rights* summarized the grip of Aliyev on the government:

In practice the president dominated the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government. Ilham Aliyev, the son of former president Heydar Aliyev, was reelected president for a second term in October in a process that did not fully meet international standards for a democratic election. Election shortcomings included serious restrictions on political participation and the media, pressure and restrictions on observers, and flawed vote counting and tabulation processes.

Human rights “remained poor and worsened” over the past year in Azerbaijan, according to the State Department. “Torture and beating of persons in police and military custody resulted in three deaths, and law enforcement officials acted with impunity. Prison conditions were generally harsh and life threatening. Arbitrary arrest and detention, particularly of individuals considered by the government to be political opponents, and lengthy pretrial detention continued.”

Amnesty International noted that pressure on the almost nonexistent independent media is crushing. Nicola Duckworth, Amnesty International’s Europe and Central Asia program director, explained: “Independent journalists are being intimidated, arrested and sent to prison after unfair trials. Attacks on and even murder of independent journalists remain unresolved.”

### **Kyrgyz Republic: Communist “Opposition” Coalition Takes Over**



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Kyrgyzstan was led for 15 years by Soviet-era apparatchik Askar Akayev, who was deposed in a 2005 coup. Akayev fled to Russia after the revolution, where he was welcomed by Russian President Vladimir Putin and given an academic position at Moscow State University.

Succeeding Akayev as president was “opposition” leader Kurmanbek Bakiyev, who had earlier served as Akayev’s prime minister. Bakiyev is head of a coalition of opposition parties called the “People’s Movement of Kyrgyzstan” that includes the old Soviet-era Communist Party. Bakiyev’s reign has been marked by perpetual corruption, assassination of parliament members, and sluggish progress on reform measures he promised when elected.

Bakiyev was a low-level Communist Party functionary at independence in 1991, serving as chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the city of Kok-Yangak, but rising with appointments to governorships and eventually the prime minister’s position under the Akayev regime. Bakiyev resigned from the number-two position in the Akayev regime in 2002, officially in protest of security forces shooting anti-Akayev protesters. But perhaps he merely sensed the coming change in administrations that has served him well.

The U.S. State Department’s *Country Reports on Human Rights* has a more harsh assessment of freedom in Kyrgyzstan than Freedom House (which lists the nation as “partly free”):

Restrictions on citizens’ right to change their government; torture and abuse by law enforcement officials; impunity; poor prison conditions; arbitrary arrest and detention; lack of judicial independence; pressure on nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and opposition leaders, including government harassment; pressure on independent media; government detention of assembly organizers.

### **Tajikistan: Stalinism ?With an Islamic Name**

Tajikistan is dominated by Soviet-era Communist Party functionary Emomali Rahmon, who publicly converted to Islam in 1997. The U.S. State Department’s *Country Reports on Human Rights* calls his regime “authoritarian” and observed: “The government has not substantially altered the Criminal Procedure Code (CPC) since the Soviet period, and the criminal justice system failed to protect individuals from arbitrary arrest or detention. There were few checks on the power of prosecutors and police to make arrests.”

The State Department stresses that Soviet-era socialism continues unabated, with “property law ... weighted against private property holders.” Tajik government officials seize private property at a whim under secret proceedings, and without advance notice “notified residents that they must leave their property and offered very little compensation. If residents did not comply, city officials took them to court; court hearings generally resulted in an eviction order. Property owners who challenged evictions in the courts generally were unsuccessful and were subject to retribution — some were charged with criminal violations.”

The independent Human Rights Watch explained that there was “impunity for rampant torture in Tajikistan” and that “Tajikistan’s human rights problems are numerous and chronic, including lack of access to justice, due process violations, and ill-treatment in custody. The government also exercises excessive control over NGOs, religious organizations, political parties, and the media.”

### **Turkmenistan: More Soviet-style Tyranny Under a New Name**

Turkmenistan was headed by Soviet-era Communist Party First Secretary Saparmurat Niyazov until his death in 2006. Niyazov renamed the Communist Party to the “Democratic Party of Turkmenistan” and



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ran a brutal Stalinist state based upon the cult of his personality. He even had the months of the year renamed after family members.

Niyazov was succeeded upon his death by Deputy Prime Minister Gurbanguly Berdymuhamedow, after Berdymuhamedow imprisoned the presidential successor specified by the Turkmen constitution. Berdymuhamedow was “elected” in a six-way race for president in February 2007, in which all six candidates were “Democratic Party of Turkmenistan” members.

Turkmenistan adopted a new constitution in September 2008, which Human Rights Watch noted “strengthened the already dominant institution of the presidency. The president appoints and dismisses judges without parliamentary review, forms the central election commission, and has the right to issue edicts that are mandatory. There are no presidential term limits. Political parties can be created, but a residency requirement would automatically prevent all members of Turkmen opposition movements who have been driven into exile from running for office.”

Human Rights Watch says, “Turkmenistan remains one of the most repressive and authoritarian countries in the world because the government has not altered the institutions of repression that characterized Niyazov’s rule. Hundreds of people, perhaps more, languish in Turkmen prisons following unfair trials on what would appear to be politically motivated charges. Draconian restrictions on freedom of expression, association, movement, and religion remain in place.... There is no possibility to establish and operate an independent NGO or media outlet, and independent activists and journalists face government threats and harassment.”

Indeed, the State Department’s *Country Reports on Human Rights* describes Turkmenistan as a police state, one which closely monitors citizens for political opposition. “The law does not regulate surveillance by the state security apparatus, which regularly monitored the activities of officials, citizens, opponents and critics of the government, and foreigners. Security officials used physical surveillance, telephone tapping, electronic eavesdropping, and informers. The government reportedly intercepted surface mail before delivery, and letter packets and parcels taken to the post office had to remain unsealed for inspection.”

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The United States has been criticized — partly for good reason — as a nation that has unjustly interfered with the sovereignty of Islamic nations. But the Russian-aligned post-communist states that now dominate the Islamic areas of the old Soviet Union are clear testimony to the fact that Russia — and not the United States — remains the most oppressive occupier of Muslim nations.



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