Understanding and Withstanding the 'Stans'

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Tentative results

My research is intended to tackle a rarely asked but politically relevant question: what explains people's participation in collective action in Central Asia? While accepted as a given that civil society is weak in the former Soviet Union, the assumption of a weak and battered society is partially belied in Central Asia. Despite the lack of overt opposition and weakness of political parties and interest groups, Central Asian societies have strong foundations. These potentials can be found in the form of dense networks, whether traditional, Soviet, or post-Soviet, in which people rely on each other, rather than the state, for the resources necessary for survival. People obtain from these networks a sense of sub-national identity, a cohort of like-minded people with which to air grievances, and a source of social insurance in the form of revolving credit or welfare. My research investigates under what conditions these networks of exchange can be also used for collective action in general, against the state, or not at all. I have selected three types of networks – *mahallas*, mosque/religious collectives, and villages – to study, which there is some basis to believe have the largest potential for collective action.

The question of collective action is not new, and is in fact one of the central questions in political science and sociology: why do people participate when it does not appear to be in their rational interest. The collective action problem, famously posed by Mancur Olson, states that people should not rationally invest their time in the production of a public good when they would receive just as much a share in the output if they did not participate. Yet people often do participate in various types of collection. Scholars have tried to explain the puzzle in various ways. One school of thought says that people must be offered selective incentives (private payoffs) by the organizers of the movement – in fact Olson's solution to the collective action problem. Another set of theories argues that the emotional and psychological satisfaction that people get out of participation is sufficient motivation to join even if there are no financial benefits. A third school of thoughts involves social networks, arguing that people who share some identity of a collective tend to act likewise when some members of their group act. If a small number of actors participate for their own reasons, be they emotional or financial, others will be coaxed, coerced, or „guilted" into joining as well.[1]

I am doing research in two republics of former Soviet Central Asia, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Arguably the most inscrutable and least understood part of the USSR from the West's point of view, the region's social and political changes are only now being explored. These two republics have gotten of to a difficult start since their independence in 1991. Both former recipients of generous subsidies from Moscow, the economies of these two republics were shaped to produce only one component of the USSR's overall economy – cotton in the case of Uzbekistan and animal husbandry in Kyrgyzstan – with devastating results in the post-independence period. Yet though both poor and economically dependent, the two countries have taken different strategies toward economic growth: Uzbekistan has only partially privatized its industries, maintains centralized planning in agriculture, and pursues an import-substitution strategy of putting up barriers to trade in favor of developing its own industries; Kyrgyzstan liberalized much of its economy in the early 1990's and threw its doors open to international investment and aid. These differences also parallel political reform (or lack thereof). Uzbekistan has concentrated all power in its executive branch, and there is neither a legal opposition nor an independent parliament. The state controls all media activity and an enormous police force keeps watch over its citizenry. Kyrgyzstan has made partial democratic reforms. An actual opposition exists that is challenging the presidency in 2005, the media is relatively free and often openly criticizes the regime, and people can legally organize demonstrations. In both countries corruption is pervasive, infesting the educational system and every level of the bureaucracy.

I have spent time in Osh, Kyrgyzstan, and Namangan, Uzbekistan, recently made a foray into Jalalabad Oblast in Kyrgyzstan. In Osh and Namangan I investigated the *mahalla* and the mosque, to understand what functions they perform and how they are used for collective action. The *mahalla* is a traditional institution, loosely defined as neighborhood, consisting of densely populated streets usually arrayed around a mosque and more recently with stores, clinics, and sports facilities. The people of the community both help each other and monitor one another to maintain order and traditional norms. In the Soviet period the *mahalla* was made part of the state, with local elites often co-opted into the party apparatus. In the post-Soviet period, the state has continued to rule through the *mahalla* as an official administrative entity, using it to distribute resources and collect taxes and information.

My respondents mostly cite the importance of the *mahalla* as a protector of traditional norms which they fear are eroding in society as a whole. They also speak of good neighborly relations and unity between members of the *mahalla*. At the same time, however, when pressed to cite concrete cases of sharing or trust within the *mahalla*, people find it difficult to give an example. As in any residential community, people know their close neighbors and associate with them, but rarely socialize with those

several streets away in the same mahalla. Many were hard-pressed to name the *rais* (head of their *mahalla)*, who supposedly attains the office by being known and respected by the community. Most people always lock their doors or leave a family member home to guard against theft, and do not voluntarily give their time or money to help other members of the *mahalla*. Those who cite having participated in a *hashar* or doing voluntary work did so for a friend or relative and not simply for a neighbor. The *mahalla* is used for collective action, but top-down and state-led, rather than bottom-up, when, on order of the *rais* or *hokim* (mayor), people are told to clean their neighborhood or work on a public project.

The mosque, though containing historical roots in Central Asia, provided no function as a network for 70 years while the Soviet Union prohibited open worship. In the 12 years since independence, the region has seen a massive reawakening of interest in religion and mosque attendance. There are several reasons to believe the mosque may be a locus of opposition or collective action. First, mosques provide a basis of coordination for people with otherwise diverse social or economic social positions; the same people meet every Friday for noontime prayers, providing a forum for discussion or other social activity. Second, religion provides a source of authority separate from and greater than the state, which in an authoritarian country may be the only respite from state propaganda and policies that regulate daily life.

My research thus far indicates that the mosque has not been a source of collective action. Religion in Central Asia has for the most part remained separate from politics, both because of the lack of ideologies that in other countries have fused Islam and politics, and because the state, maintaining the Soviet practice of regulating mosques and Imams, has shaped the content of Islam being propagated. Respondents call themselves religious, and many do in fact attend mosque regularly, but with the exception of some underground oppositionists, whose numbers are difficult to discern, Islam has not been used as a vehicle for mobilization. During and after Ramadan, people are urged to give to charity, and some people actively proselytize, urging non-religious Muslims to give up alcohol and lead a pious life, but mosques are not used for any remotely political forms of collective action. One caveat that must be mentioned is that my research has only dealt with official, registered mosques. It may be that technically illegal mosques that evade the state's supervision have a greater potential for generating opposition.

One final type of network of great significance in Central Asia is villages. Villages often lie farther from the centers of state power and are predominantly rural, so their residents often have less interaction with the state. Additionally, unlike in cities, people in villages have much denser face-to-face contact with one another, where monitoring by other citizens (rather than the state) is easier, therefore the potential for shame to induce conformity is greater. A third consideration is that people in villages tend to be related or at least believe that they are descended from a common ancestor. My research in Aksy (Kyrgyzstan), where sustained anti-regime demonstrations took place in 2002, supports the hypothesis of the internal pressures of village life. Protests arose when the district's deputy was arrested on dubious grounds. His native village and those nearby produced many more demonstrators than in farther villages. My research uncovered a strategy by unofficial leaders to organize people based on close (though not necessarily familial) relations and community pressures. I plan to compare this case with rural areas in Uzbekistan, to see whether the same potential for organization exists in that country. From my case studies I hope to reach some general conclusions about the mechanisms used in different types of networks, differentiating the traditional from the totalitarian, and about the potential for mobilization from below in Central Asia.

Secrets of Research

While the products of our research are always presented in a clear-cut and logical fashion, the process is often much messier and more chaotic, especially in a region in transition (to what, still not clear), with decaying infrastructure and a declining economy, nostalgic about the Soviet welfare state and yet in the process of defining new national identities, becoming more acquainted with religion yet reluctant to part ways with it's ever-faithful friend, vodka, stuck deep in Asia yet desperately searching for ways to move closer to the West, and where opposition presidential candidates openly vote for the sitting president. Though the complexity of the region creates too many variables to sort through and find order, it provides for good stories from the field.

One of the striking cultural aspects of Central Asia is the emphasis on treating guests well, which is a source of personal pride for the host as well as prestige in the community. Indeed, much of the difficulty of being a traveler in strange land is relieved by the great lengths people go to in order to provide for their guests. Hosts make sacrifices such as giving up their sleeping quarters and spending beyond their budgets to feed guests. Some customs, such as filling up the guest's tea cup with as little tea as possible, in order to fill it up as many times, are designed to show off the host's generosity. Likewise, at a major life-cycle event in which sheep are slaughtered, the guest is presented the choicest part – the head. At some point, as it should become apparent, an honor becomes a burden. At a gathering where there is alcohol, the guest is pressured to participate in and lead toasts, insulting others if he refuses, and ends up drinking more than anyone else. At an Uzbek wedding, guests are traditionally called to the stage to congratulate the bride and groom, then to dance solo in front of the head table. At the risk of insulting the people who try so hard to please you, you are often forced to choose between shirking your responsibility as a guest and humiliating yourself in public.

Like tradition, certain new behaviors that result from contemporary political and economic change repeat themselves with predictable frequency. People I have interviewed have an uncanny ability to turn any question into a lament about unemployment, impoverishment, and nostalgia for the Soviet system. In some sense, my subject matter, though important especially for predictive purposes, is hardly relevant in their daily lives. Who can think about politics when they live without heating or electricity and struggle simply to make ends meet? It is often said that all politics is local, and in Central Asia, politics is absent entirely, or at least participation in the process. Another common refrain is distrust of authority, which manifests itself in conspiracy theories of all types and degrees. Among those I have heard, at least several times, is that Gorbachev worked for the CIA, which is why he dismantled the USSR; the US never landed on the moon – it was a staged event to embarrass the USSR after launching the first man in space; gas prices rose in Kyrgyzstan because the president's son lost $50 million while gambling; the president of Uzbekistan caused a commercial airliner to crash because a UN representative was on board; the Pentagon carried out the September 11, 2001 attacks in order to invade Afghanistan and have a pretense to place US bases in Central Asia; and everything governments do, anywhere, can be explained by their interminable lust for oil.

Finally, on the topic of distrust, one encounters a Soviet attitude toward social science which is very different from that in the West. Western academic institutions exist to provide resources for individual scholars to design research agendas and gather data to add to a stock of a social scientific knowledge. The information and insight acquired in the course of research provides no direct financial gain to the scholar and does not directly benefit any government or individual, yet we consider it a worthwhile investment for its overall contribution. This concept is completely lost in the post-Soviet region. In a region where teachers earn $20 dollars a month and academics pay out of their own pockets to publish their research, people cannot fathom the idea of institutions that fund scholars to go to Central Asia for a year to do pure research. Consequently, I have on several occasions been perceived by my respondents as a journalist or a spy. These professions are well known in the region and explain why a young man from the West would ask probing questions about political matters – he or his bosses must have some immediate financial or strategic interest. Cutting through suspicion and convincing people of my innocuous intentions (which include publishing interesting research and getting a job some day) requires an explanation of how Western social science functions and self-consciousness about how I am perceived – a simple introduction of myself and my research topic is not sufficient. All in all, these challenges make doing research more difficult, but the ironic result is that the process of doing research often turns out to be more educational for understanding the region than the results we came there to find.

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[1] For these three schools of thought, I name here only one work that is representative of the whole, and is considered a good example. For selective incentives, see Samuel L. Popkin, The Rational Peasant: The Political Economy of Rural Society in Vietnam, University of California Press 1979. For psychological mechanisms, see Elisabeth Jean Wood, Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador, New York: Cambridge UP 2004. For social networks, see Roger Peterson, Resistance and Rebellion, New York: Cambridge UP 2001.