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Countering Ethnic Violence, Extremism and Terrorism or Human
Rights Violations: A Case Study of Central Asian Republics

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Abstract

Central Asia has been declared as ‘not free’ region by most of the global human rights organizations. The region has been governed by the old socialist minded leadership since its independence. This style does not give room for the civil liberties and human rights. Furthermore, the region has been marked with extremism, terrorism and ethnic violence for a long period of time. The regimes are also supported by other ‘not free’ states especially Russia and China. Such kind of regional dynamics have encouraged the states to adopt oppressive policies in order to strengthen themselves. This research focuses; to understand the social and ethnic demography of Central Asian region; to understand the hyper-presidential political systems of the region; to understand the violent and non-violent movements against the ‘system’; and to analyze the state policies towards human rights and civil liberties.

Key words: Ethnic violence, Terrorism, Human Rights, Central Asia, Extremism

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Introduction

Central Asian states i.e. Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan got independence after the disintegration of former Soviet Union in 1991. Except Kyrgyzstan, rest of the states went with the old Soviet Socialist styled governance with minor changes especially in case of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. During colonialism, the region was disconnected from its eastern and southern neighboring regions thus, making it totally dependent on Russia. All the major land, rail, and energy transportation routes from Central Asia went to mainland Russia. Furthermore, Moscow deliberately kept the region underdeveloped that could not lead Central Asia towards self-sufficiency.

As this region is landlocked, it has to depend on its neighboring states for its international trade. The southern routes lead through Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan. As Afghanistan is facing instability and violence since last four decades, trade through Afghanistan is difficult for them. Iran is facing international sanctions for a quite long time, therefore, Central Asian dream to do international trade through Iran has also faced blow. In order to do their trade through Pakistan, Central Asian states have to cross Afghanistan, which is not feasible for them to cross right now or in near future. This situation has forced them to look towards east and north in the form of China and Russia. Dependence on Beijing and Moscow has further strengthened the “un-democratic” regimes in the region.

All kind of “real” opposition, secular or religious, is banned or is facing

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extreme hardships to operate. The Central Asian regimes have devised such a political system backed by favorable legal system that any political party, organization, and even individual cannot criticize human rights violations and undemocratic practices in the region. Those who are vocal are either in exile or in jails. The global War on Terrorism provided these regimes with a kind of legitimacy to crackdown the opponents alleging them as terrorists. The region is fragile, poor, and borders with instable Afghanistan. Such conditions have made it vulnerable for extremist tendencies. Some of the local, regional, and global terrorist organizations like Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), and Islamic State of Khurasan (ISK) have presence in Central Asia. Presence of these terrorist networks have given legitimacy to the regimes who violate human rights and curb civil freedoms.

Historical Background

Modern day Central Asia remained under the Soviet colonization for more than seventy years. Those seventy years are considered as the worst era of human rights violations during the history of this region. This region was cut off from its neighboring regions, primarily Muslim regions of Xinxiang, Afghanistan, South Asia, and Iran, thus depriving it of its historical religious, cultural, economic, and social ties. A hybrid political, economic, and cultural system was imposed on the Central Asian Muslims by Stalin's regime. It brought a paradigm shift in the whole structure of Central Asia. The region which was one of the seats of Muslim learnings in the form of Samarqand and Bukhara faced religious persecution. Except a few mosques, all mosques and

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madrasahs were shut down, demolished or transformed into stables, community centers, gymnasiums etc. In order to keep the Muslims away from their heritage, script of their languages was changed from Arabic/Persian to Latin and then to Cyrillic. It was done in order to force the new generations to forget about their Islamic history.

The Soviet authorities forced all the women of this region to get 'modern' education in a system that was not acceptable to the local population. Women were forced to work in the fields, offices, and factories and that too along with the men. Local population had to bear such atrocities throughout the Soviet occupation. Any movement against such oppression was dealt heavy handedly. Underground Islam kept its activities in one or the other form that kept Islamic teachings and rituals alive to some extent. Perestroika and Glasnost policies of Gorbachev regime in Soviet Union provided the Central Asian population with a chance to know about their religion and rights.

When the region got independence after the disintegration of Soviet Union, 'Muslims' of the region hoped for Islamic revivalism as well as political and economic liberalism along with the protection of human rights and civil liberties. Since all the presidents of independent Central Asian states were 'elected' before independence, they continued with their chief executive positions. Moreover, they continued with the old Soviet styled economic and political system. Therefore, public dream of change in their lives could not come true. Young Islamists from Fergana Region of Uzbekistan and United Tajik Opposition (UTO) led by the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRPT) against Emomali Rehmanov regime in Tajikistan forced the regional states to chart out a hardcore policy towards the Islamists.

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Rise of Taliban regime in Kabul and the establishment of IMU in Afghanistan in 1998 were also not acceptable to Central Asian states. When IMU incurred into Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan in 1999 and 2000, not only Central Asian states but Russia and China also got worried. The fear of 'Islamic' extremism led to the creation of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in June, 2001. Similarly, after 9/11, Russian led Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) also established Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in order to combat terrorism in the whole extended region. CSTO is based in Tashkent. SCO established Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS) with its headquarters in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan which was moved to Tashkent later on in order to have coordination with CSTO.

Tajik Civil war of 1992-97 which killed almost 50,000 people and damaged the Tajik economy by \$1 billion forced Rehmanov regime to adopt strict policies towards the religion. Tashkent bombing of 1999, 2003, and 2004 and the Andijon incident of 2005 also forced the Uzbek regime to follow stricter policies so far democracy and human rights were concerned. Other regional states especially Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan also followed their counterparts in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. However, Kyrgyz regime remained a bit open towards 'freedoms'. Nevertheless, with the passage of time, Askar Akaev's regime in Kyrgyzstan also adopted harsh policies towards the political opposition. Kyrgyzstan faces worst ethnic crises in the whole region. The hot spot of ethnic crises are Osh and Jalalabad regions in the southern Kyrgyzstan which is part of Fergana Valley. The first Turkmen president Supramurad Niyazov had personality cult. He had also been declared as 'oppressor' by all international human rights

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organizations.

When NATO supplies to Afghanistan were disrupted in Pakistan, US had to strike a deal with the Central Asian regimes in the form of Northern Distribution Network (NDN) in order to provide a smooth NATO supply in Afghanistan. This deal has forced the West not to criticize Central Asian states for their undemocratic practices and human rights violations. All these local, regional, and global conditions have given a sort of free hand to the Central Asian regimes to violate human rights and curb civil liberties. The War on Terrorism is the most important tool in the hands of regimes in this regard.

Civil War in Tajikistan and Subsequent Human Rights Violations

Since 1992, Emomali Rehmanov is the president of Tajikistan. All the presidential and general elections have been “won” by Rehmanov’s Peoples’ Democratic party of Tajikistan. Being the poorest of all the Central Asian states, Tajikistan has long been plunged into economic crises. Furthermore, Tajikistan does not have any substantial natural resource or industry except hydroelectricity. The landlocked nature forbids it to even export its surplus electricity. Majority of its land is comprised on high mountains where cultivation is also difficult. Such conditions have worsened the socio-economic conditions of common Tajiki man.

In order to control the extremism and terrorism, Rehmanov regime has introduced several measures. Tajikistan has a hyper-presidential system where almost all the powers are directly controlled by the president. All the potential political opponents face severe consequences. Rehmanov wants everyone to see him as the only president. Overall, media is not free, judiciary is politicized and under the office of the president,

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elections are rigged, real opposition is banned, children less than 18 years of age are restricted from getting religious education, (US State Department 2011) controlled internet services, and *Majlis* (legislature's name) is a rubber stamp.

Imprisonment and harassment of the political opponents is a routine in Tajikistan. "Rustam Faizov and Mahmudi Iskandarov (Progressive Party), Dodo Jon Atovillojev (editor-in- chief of *Choraghi Rouz* newspaper) Nizamuddin Begmatov and Nasim Jan Shukarov (Social Democratic Party) and Tajuddin Abdur Rahmanov (IRPT)" have been imprisoned on different charges (Markowitz). The rival presidential candidate during 2013 presidential elections, Salimboy Shimsiddin disappeared right before the elections. Another renowned political opponent of Rehmanov was tortured to death in March 2011 in "Sino Police Station in Southern Dushanbe" (Asia Plus 2012).

Independent newspapers and magazines like "*Roz-e-Nao* (New Day), *Nerui Sukhan* (Power of the Word) and *Nejot* (Salvation)" had long been under fire from the regime (Hall 2006). Unwanted foreign journalists are deported from the country. Two female journalists of BBC were departed in 2012 (Human Rights Watch 2012). New media laws introduced in 2005 banned the then 'only' private TV channel *Somonian* besides ban on newspapers like "*Odamn Olan.*" (CPJ 2006) "Law of Public Association" asked all the Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) to re- register as per the new rules of 2006. Out of total 3500 'registered' NGOs, only 1040 were given registration (Markenwitz).

After the General Peace Agreement in 1997, IRPT was included into the government of Tajikistan. Nevertheless, it has never been able to

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win substantial seats in the Tajik legislature. IRPT alleges that the rigged elections and strict laws for a political party to operate have hindered the success of IRPT. The Party was banned in 2015 on the charges of terrorism (Asia Plus 2015). head of IRPT, Mohiyidin Kabiri went in exile to Iran and there are reports that he has been acquitted of the charges against him.

Since IRPT is the only “real” opposition political party which has public support in Tajikistan, Rehmanov regime has taken all measures to restrict and even ban its activities. The Party has always been under fire on the charges of contacts with the Islamists. However, the Party has gone through a radical transformation where it got rid of arms and took part in Tajik political system. It never stated to implement sharia laws in Tajikistan. Its manifesto always revolved around the socio-economic problems of Tajikistan. According to Steve Swerdlow, Central Asian specialist with Human Rights Watch, “the IRPT is nothing like the Muslim Brotherhood...It’s a much more moderate and democratically oriented group of people...Even during the civil war...party leaders were always adamant that they didn’t want an Islamic state modeled on Iran or Saudi Arabia. They wanted a secular state where Islam was given a more prominent position” (Lozovsky 2018) that means state accuses IRPT for its contacts with terrorists.

Tajik regime uses mixed strategy to defame and control IRPT. For example, “in the summer of 2015, using a combination of arrest, intimidation, and propaganda, President Rahmanov’s regime swept the party (IRPT) away, inflicting massive human suffering. Its local

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supporters are cowed while its activists are either imprisoned or scattered across the world” (Ilya Lozovsky 2018). Tajik regime also uses “state controlled” ‘imams’ for this purpose.

During March 2018, “imams at several mosques across Tajikistan urged Muslims to support the closure of the Islamic Revival Party, calling for a referendum to dissolve the party. A letter distributed to imams before Friday Prayers on March 27 said that dissolving the party would help Tajikistan ‘avoid the fate of other nations where Islamic extremists are disrupting peace and order” (Najibullah 2018).

Torture and killing of the Islamists in police custody is a matter of routine. One of such prisoner, Ilham Usmanov says that ‘we’ are given electric shocks besides being poured by boiling water on our bodies (Human Rights Watch 2012).

Islam Karimov and the Worst Human Rights Violations in Uzbekistan

Islam Karimov regime in Uzbekistan had been a symbol of terror. Uzbekistan had been included into the top ten countries for human rights violations. Like most of his counterparts in Central Asia, Karimov remained extremely critical to his opponents. Since Uzbekistan is the most populous of Central Asian states, many political parties and civil society groups emerged right after the independence. Nevertheless, in order to bring “order” in Uzbekistan, Karimov regime banned all kind of opposition and civil society groups soon after the independence. Young people from Namangan region of Uzbekistan came out on the streets and demanded that Sharia laws must be implemented in Uzbekistan. The violence in the region forced Islam Karimov to visit Namangan and negotiate with the Islamists. However,

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negotiations failed as Islamists wanted Islamic laws to be implemented on the spot while Islam Karimov stressed that their demands to be put in front of the parliament. While reaching back in the capital Tashkent, Karimov ordered a crackdown on the Islamists. Some of the leaders were captured while other fled to Tajikistan and joined UTO in the Civil War. (Saud 2010)

Tajik Civil War, rise of Taliban in Kabul, establishment of IMU, 1990 and 2000 incursions into Uzbekistan, and Tashkent bombings of 1999, 2003, and 2004 were the major causes that the Uzbek regime dealt the Islamists heavy handedly. Not only the Islamists but also the secular opposition political parties were banned and their leadership went into exile. Human rights activists are under watch and are usually tortured and imprisoned.

Under Article 54 of the Uzbek constitution, all the opposition political parties like *Erk*, *Birlik*, and Islamic Renaissance party of Uzbekistan were banned. The article states that no political party or group is allowed to function in Uzbekistan if it has “nationalistic or religious principles.” The Law on Freedom and Conscience and Religious Organizations (1998) says that all anti-state activities against are illegal. The human rights activists question this Law on the grounds that without an independent judiciary, who will decide that which activity is anti-state and which is not.

Article 61 of the Constitution says "Religious organizations and associations are separate from the state and equal before the law. The state does not interfere in the activities of religious associations"(Bayram & Kinahan 2017). However, the laws in

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Uzbekistan “prohibits the private religious teachings, bans religious education in schools and forbids wearing of religious clothes in public except for clergy” (US State Department 2010). ‘Prisoners of Conscience’, a human rights group stated “opposition in Uzbekistan, whether religious or secular, is banned. Efforts of few independent human rights activists are inadequate. Their protests are few and inefficient and all are scattered. The authoritarian policies force common man not to come on streets against the brutalities” (Stracansky 2011). The former British ambassador to Uzbekistan, Craig Murray says that “Uzbekistan does not have any democracy nor is pursuing the democratic process. There are no checks and balances on the authority of president. Parliament is like a rubber stamp and real opposition political parties are banned” (Murrey 2006).

State is clear about its policies. Islam Karimov said that “we will never allow religious slogans to be exploited in the struggle for power...in this we see a serious danger to the stability and security of our state” (Karimov 1998). In the name of state’s security and stability, political opponents are under wrath. Many of the Islamists from Uzbekistan have been missing (Rashid 2002). Forced confession statements of the political opponents and Islamists are produced before the courts and media. According to Momina Whitlock, the BBC correspondent in Tashkent “long confession could lull the listener into a sort of mesmerized acceptance; a sudden job of the unbelievable jolted is awake. Sometimes, it seemed as though at least some of the young men in the cages might be guilty and at the same time their confessions seemed to be pure fabricated (Hiro 2009).

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Relatives of the most wanted terrorists of Uzbekistan, Tahir Yuldashev and Juma Namangani (Mohanty 2006) is a good example in this regard. Tahir's mother was forced to curse his son in public. She had to say that "may Tahir be swallowed up by the earth, may he and his accomplices rot in their graves" (Mohanty 2006). Namangani's mother was publicly defamed by the relatives of 1999 terrorist attack deceased with black paint on her face. His brother was sentenced fourteen years imprisonment in the same case (Mohanty 2006).

The government has a "Black List" of the religious figures. They are frequently interrogated and are banned to travel abroad. Many of the imprisoned on religious grounds are charged with false and vague charges of fundamentalism. When a court sentenced eleven suspected extremists to imprisonment in May 2017, Surat Ikramov, a human rights activist severely criticized the 'fabricated' charges (Human Rights Watch 2017). According to Forum 18, a human rights activist group in Uzbekistan, "with followers of all religions and beliefs -- with no exceptions -- face freedom of religion or belief violations" (Roach 2018). Although, there has been an improvement in the overall human rights conditions in Uzbekistan after the regime change in late 2016, Tashkent has to go long to improve its human rights and civil liberties. The falsified accusation on the terrorism and extremism charges must be stopped. Religious freedom rights "cannot be sacrificed in preventing or countering violent extremism" (World Watch Monitor 2017) said Ahmad Shaheed, UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief after an eleven days long tour of Uzbekistan.

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‘Democratic’ Kyrgyzstan and Human Rights

Kyrgyzstan is the only democratic state in the entire Central Asian region. It’s a beacon of hope in the authoritative sea. However, despite such characteristics, civil liberties and human rights have never been safeguarded in true letter and spirit. Political opponents are usually harassed.

The potential political competitors are either banned or are under strict surveillance. There is ban on religious political parties in Kyrgyzstan. The first president Askar Akaev, when consolidated all powers in his hands, started oppressive styled government. He became one of the corrupt regimes. When Zamira Siddikova wrote about presidential corruption she was sentenced to twelve years in prison (Olcott 2005). The ex-Prime Minister of Kyrgyzstan Flex Kulov was given seven years sentence on different charges.

Peaceful protests against the presidential corruption in 2002 in Aksu were dealt heavy handedly by the regime. Security forces killed six peaceful demonstrators (Pinar Akcali 2006). Such harsh policies provided popularity to the underground Islamist groups like Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HTI). In December 2016, a constitutional amendment declared that nationality of those Kyrgyz who join international terrorist organizations will be revoked (Human Rights Watch 2017). This has been done in the wake of Kyrgyz nationals joining the ISK.

Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan is ruled by NurSultan Nazabaev since its independence in 1991. Corruption and nepotism are the features of Kazakh political system. Opposition political parties and media have to face strict

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policies. During 1997, strict laws were introduced which banned almost all the independent TV channels as well as newspapers.

President NurSulatan Nazarbaev was given lifetime immunity from prosecution in 1998 (Olcott 2005). Strict laws were imposed on the recognition of political parties. Every political party has to get minimum of 7000 members from each Oblast (region). Similarly, every political party must have at least 50,000 members across the whole country (Emmanuel 2010). While those political parties which endorse the presidential policies and “evolutionary democracy” are given recognition even without complying the minimum number law. The Democratic Party of Kazakhstan is one such example. Media, civil society, and religion are under strict state control. Activists critical to government are constantly under oppression. Courts conviction on falsified ground is a matter of routine. Activists like Maks Bokaev, Talgat Ayan, and Vadim Kuramshin are imprisoned. Journalists critical to regime also have to face wrath of the regime. Zhanbolat Mamay and Seitkazy Mataev are in prison (Human Rights Watch 2017).

Since a presidential candidate has to show 100,000 signatures in his support to contest elections, oppressive policies force the citizens to refrain doing so. One of the candidates, Hasan Kojahmadov got the required number of signatures before the elections but could not contest because the secret agencies snatched that list from him. All the potential political opponents face hardship in Kazakhstan. The president was critical to even his own daughter Dariga Nazarbaeva’s political party *Asar* (Hiro 2009). All the presidential elections are one man show.

The constitution pf Kazakshtan provides its citizen with religious

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freedoms. However, on December 22, 2017, President Nursultan Nazarbayev introduced new amendments “on countering extremism and terrorism” bringing more restrictions on religious groups and more powers to the anti-terrorism forces (US Embassy 2016).

Twenty two people were convicted by the courts on religious charges in 2017. The Forum 18 reported that during 2017, “authorities brought administrative charges against 279 individuals, religious communities, charities, and companies for attending worship meetings, offering or importing religious literature and pictures, sharing or teaching faith, posting religious material online, praying in an unapproved manner in mosques, bringing a child to a religious meeting, maintaining inadequate security measures at places of worship, or failing to pay earlier fines”(US State Department 2017). Law on Religious Activity and Religious Associations of 2011 “increases state controls on the exercise of freedom of religion or belief still further [and] will ban state officials being founders or members of religious communities” (World Watch Monitor 2017). They also include; no religious literature, even approved by authorities, can be distributed outside of the mosques and public places; all kind of religious material needs official permission; and ban on every kind of “unregistered missionary activity (OSCE 2014).

Turkmenistan

The first president of Turkmenistan, Supramurad Niyazov created a personality cult in his country. He had controlled ‘everything’ in Turkmenistan into his hands. He was declared as one of the worst dictators of the time. Turkmen parliament gives him and his family life

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time immunity from prosecution. Like its counterparts in Central Asia, ‘real’ opposition and ‘independent’ media is banned in Turkmenistan. Criticism to president means criticism to state.

Durdimurad Khojamukhammad stated that “wiretapping, provocation, dismissal from jobs, all kinds of intrigues and telephone threats” is a routine in Turkmenistan (Central Asia Monitor 1992). In order to run Turkmen state and society according to his own thinking, President Niyazov wrote a book *Ruhnama*, which provided “guidelines” for the whole life. Status of this book was declared to Quran and Bible. Clergy opposed to this move which resulted in imprisonment of Nasrullah Ibn Abdullah, former chief *imam* of Turkmenistan (Eric McGlinchy 2005). There is no ‘genuine’ political opposition the country. Any political party or group against the existing political system has to face legal procedures (*Ashqabat Vecherni* 1992). Niyazov was “declared as lifetime president in 1999 by the legislature which was comprised of 100% membership to Democratic Party of Turkmenistan headed by none other than Niyazov” (Rashid 2002). Former foreign minister of Turkmenistan, Boris Sheikmuradov, Khudaiberdy Orazov, ex-Central Bank’s head and Mukhammad Khanamov, ex-Ambassador of Turkmenistan to Turkey were given different years of sentences under “Betrayers of the Motherland” Presidential decree (Ollcot 2005). 9/11 and the subsequent war on terrorism gave a freehand to Niyazov regime against political opponents.

Ethnic minorities, especially Uzbeks and Russians are treated as second grade citizens. Corruption is rampant. Religious figures are no more exception. Turkmen constitution provides religious freedoms to its citizens nevertheless, religion is under tight control. Religious prisoners

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have to face the infamous Ovadan-Depe prison. It is assumed that "many individuals convicted of religious crimes are presumed to be sent to the notorious desert prison Ovadan-Depe, where prisoners regularly die from torture and starvation"(David Roach 2018).

All 'unregistered' religious groups are banned and their members and activities are liable to heavy punishments and fines. All religious material needs to be scrutinized by the authorities. No formal religious education is allowed in Turkmenistan. Very basic instructions about religion and an institution to train imams is allowed. Pilgrimage to Macca is also under state control. The scars population of about 5.2 million, oppressive regimes, and economic stability of Turkmenistan do not allow its citizens to adopt extremist ideologies. Nevertheless, situation in neighboring Afghanistan and the rise of ISK has rung the alarm bells. The strict religious policies may lead the Turkmen youth towards radicalization (Hiro 2009).

Conclusion

Although, Central Asian region faces few genuine security issues which need to be addressed, majority of security measures by the regime are to counter the potential political opposition and consolidation of power. The constitutions and few laws of the lands ensure rights of the citizens, it is the discretion of respective regime to implement, change, suspend, or abrogate those. The War on Terrorism, US presence in Afghanistan, and creation of CSTO and RATS have strengthened the local regimes against their opponents. It is pertinent to note that until these states are not integrated to the international society and global markets, chances

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for the improvement of human rights conditions and success of democracy are minimal. Stability in Afghanistan will surely provide them this opportunity.

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