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Social Transformation in Central Asia

An Input for Modeling Social Change
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SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION IN CENTRAL ASIA

**An input for Modeling of
Social Change**

Ijaz Shafi Gilani

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INTRODUCTION

This paper has put together a few thoughts and furnished a check list of issues for the benefit of methodologists who are trying to model social change in Central Asia.

Firstly, we begin with a brief overview of the region (which can be ignored by the informed reader). **Secondly**, we place the emergence of the six Central Asian states into historical perspective. **Thirdly**, we identify seven transformations faced by the region and suggest that the methodologists should consider them as a check list during their modelling effort. **Fourthly**, we deal with the issue of gauging public reactions to social change and the use of opinion polls for that purpose. We identify the currently available polling activity in the last section of the paper.

(I)

BACKGROUND AND OVERVIEW

In a very broad sense Central Asian states are defined as the six republics of the former Soviet Union which had a Muslim majority. This may or may not reflect their accurate nomenclature in geography books. The six republics are: Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan. Together their population is around 70 million and their average GNP per capita ranges around 3000 USD. The land mass is quite large, possibly larger than the United States. The natural resource potential is estimated to be very attractive, comparable to the oil rich Gulf. But these are as yet untapped and the region is currently economically poor and underdeveloped.

The vast majority (*more than 90%*) of the people in this region speak different dialects of Turkish language; a smaller number speaks Persian (Tajik). As a legacy of the Soviet period, Russian is widely known and used in official and formal communication. The majority of people in this region profess Sunni Islam with varying degrees of observation of the faith.

Through a process of gradual encroachment which lasted for three centuries, this region was completely annexed into the Tsarist empire towards the end of the nineteenth century. After the Bolshevik revolution in 1917, this region (*referred to as Turkmenistan at the time*) was made part of the Soviet Union. It was during the period (1924-36) that the present boundaries of the six states and their current political identities were given formal shape by Soviet leadership.

When the Soviet Union broke up in 1991, the six republics declared their independence as sovereign states, and joined the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in that capacity.

Among the six states Uzbekistan is the most numerous (around 25 million), followed by Kazakhstan (around 20 million), and Azerbaijan (around 10 million). The remaining three: Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan are quite small in population, each of them slightly under 5 million.

The political boundaries of the various republics do not always correspond with historic cultural and demographic spaces. The **Ferghana Valley** is one example. It cuts across Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. The phenomenon creates a fertile ground for trans-state groups and activities when circumstances create their need.

Besides, the Soviet authorities had engineered large scale mass migrations or dislocation of certain populations due to security and economic considerations. This had created islands of forcibly implanted populations. During the last days of the Soviet Union, as the authoritarian control loosened, the enclaves of forcibly implanted populations brewed considerable tension and conflict. It was often triggered by contentions claims over scarce public resources such as housing, employment and welfare. The riots in Ush in the Ferghana Valley were one such example.

The inflow of Russian population in the Central Asian republics took place mostly during the Tsarist period. They account for under 10% of the total population in five of the six republics. Kazakhstan is the only exception where they account for as high as 40%. Even though the Tsars brought them to

colonize and settle in the rural areas, most of them later congregated in the capital cities and urban localities. As a result they are an important part, sometimes the majority, in the capital cities of the Central Asian republics. As one would expect they are concentrated in government jobs and in the professions.

Prior to their annexation into the Tsarist empire, this region comprised several small political entities or emirates. They were either part of, or lived alongside, the three major Muslim empires in the area at the time. These were the Ottoman (Turkish) the Safavid (Persian) and the Mughal (Indian). Together the territory of the three empires and Central Asian emirates corresponded with (*but went beyond*) what is today the ECO constituting ten states, including Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and six Central Asian States. They shared a common cultural, linguistic, historic and religious space and closely interacted through war and peace. There was active diplomatic exchange among them which is now well documented.

The entire area was subjected to decline and decay in political, economic and cultural status during the period of industrial revolution and the rise of European imperialism and nation-states. While the idea of secular nationalism and their corresponding states gained currency during the colonial period, the three former West Asian empires in the region saw the emergence of four states, Iran, Afghanistan, Turkey (*when the Ottoman empire broke up*) and Pakistan (*when the British left their Indian Mughal empire*). But the Central Asian emirates lay outside these developments. They saw corresponding movements for nationalism which never progressed far enough to be translated into the formation of nation-states similar to, for example Afghanistan. Instead the Central Asian emirates were absorbed into the Tsarist empire.

The national struggle in the (Central Asian) Turkmenistan district of the Tsarist Russia made strong alliance with the rising Bolshevik movement, hoping to use it as a vehicle for national self determination. It nevertheless felt betrayed when the Bolsheviks took state control in 1917 and forcibly subjected Central Asia to stay in the new Soviet Union. The Central Asians put up a strong resistance against it in the initial years (1920-1936) through what is remembered as the Basmachi movement. But the resistance was subdued, and Soviet control was consolidated through the formation of six republics based on a Soviet understanding of nationalities. Thereafter the area was cut off from its neighbouring region for the better part of the remaining seventy years in the 20th century. Since this was the crucial period for the success of nationalist struggles elsewhere in the region and the institutionalization of secular national ideology, **the Central Asian states simply bypassed the period of consolidating state nationalism. Curiously when they emerged out of the Soviet Union in 1991, the ideology of nation-state had already seen its climax and the world was getting ready to go beyond it to a yet unknown future.**

Given this background it becomes understandable that a nationalism based on communist ideology is discredited in Central Asia as colonial past, while secular European nationalism has a narrow and underdeveloped base.

(II)

SIMULTANEITY OF SEVEN TRANSFORMATIONS

As the six Central Asian republics of the former Soviet Union emerged out of Soviet control in 1991, they were faced with a number of transformations. These transformations were not unfamiliar to other societies. There was however one difference. In Central Asia all transformations were concentrated at the same time. The simultaneity of many transformations made them harder to face. These were:

1. Transformation of relationship with Russia
2. Transformation of Domestic Politics
3. Transformation of Economic System
4. Transformation of Defence and Security System
5. Transformation in the Role of Islam and Culture
6. Transformation of Role in the Region
7. Transformation of Role in the World

We will briefly touch upon the contours of each one of these seven transformations.

1. Transformation of Relationship with Russia

The Central Asian republics had to redefine their relationship with Russia, from that of an imperial center to one of a neighbouring country.

The leadership of the republics was not particularly keen on independence. They had waged no struggle for it. They were the products of the Soviet system and feared to become, as one author put it, “orphans” when faced with the prospect of dissolution of the Soviet Union.

The re-definition of this relationship has been and continues to be an important element of social and political transformation in Central Asia.

Approximately 25 million ethnic Russians found themselves to be residents of non-Russian newly independent states after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Nearly half of them or over 10 million, lived in the six Central Asian states. The largest number was in Kazakhstan (6.2 million), followed by other states: Uzbekistan (1.65 million), Kyrgyzstan (0.9 million), Turkmenistan (0.33 million) and Tajikistan (0.38 million). In terms of percentage of the total population, these were: **Kazakhstan** 38%, **Uzbekistan** 8%, **Kyrgyzstan** 22%, **Turkmenistan** 10% and **Tajikistan** 8%. (*Note: The figures on Azerbaijan are not immediately available to this author*)

Even though the Russian immigration to the area dated back to the Tsarist period, they had remained separated from local population. This is shown starkly by their inability to speak the local language. According to a survey:

Table
Percentage of Russian who can speak the local language

Russian living in	
Kazakhstan	1%
Kyrgyzstan	1%
Tajikistan	3%
Uzbekistan	5%
Turkmenistan	3%
Azerbaijan	14%

According to a public opinion survey carried out in 1990, around 80% of Russians living in Central Asia (*except Kazakhstan where the results were quite different*) thought it was likely that they would have to mass migrate out of the republics. But only half as many (30-40%) wanted to emigrate* .

The actual events turned out to be less catastrophic. The emigration was on a small scale. It was spread over time, and many of those who initially emigrated later returned.

In the initial phase of the breakup of the Soviet Union, the question of ethnic Russians outside Russia was quite emotional issue in Russian politics. But, apparently it gradually lost that prominence.

Nevertheless, the relationship between Central Asian republics and Russia, including the issue of ethnic Russians will continue to be a significant point of social transformation in the region.

Apart from the political, demographic and emotional issues, the relationship has a strong economic underpinning. The Central Asian states are tied to Russia much more than to each other. The following figures are illustrative of that relationship. Aside from the volume of trade, the terms of trade settled under a combination of command and colonial relationship are a thorny issue.

* Details of survey data are available

Table

**Percentage of Central Asian
Exports to each other and to Russia**

Exporting Country	Percent exported to			
	Central Asia	Russia	Other CIS	Far Abroad
Kazakhstan	11%	65%	22%	11%
Kyrgyzstan	13%	34%	39%	14%
Tajikistan	7%	21%	15%	57%
Uzbekistan	10%	45%	24%	21%
Turkmenistan	23%	42%	19%	16%
Azerbaijan	7%	23%	19%	51%

In view of the space limitations in this paper, and because the purpose is to basically flag key issues for the consideration of methodologists, we shall only touch upon the remaining six transformations.

2 Transformation of Domestic Politics

A revolutionary change took place in the form of domestic politics in Central Asia without a revolution on the ground. The political leadership has been adjusting to that dilemma. It changed the name of communist party. It gave limited permission for competitive politics. But it wanted to retain the power relations of the old political system. So far, a decade after the breakup of the Soviet Union, the six republics have been successful in retaining or resurrecting the political status quo, although with varying degrees of success and by following different methods.

For the sake of generalization, we can say that in each of the six republics the competition for power is between the old **communist** structures of power, **reformist** referred to as democrats and **Islamists**. So far the indications are that the old communists are well entrenched in power. They might adjust some of the reformists, or the reformists might find a room to maneuver in the event of a political crisis. Considering that they are from

outside the established state structures, the chance of an Islamist replacement is quite slim in the short to medium run.

The **methodologists** would need to take into account the existence and the strength of various political parties in each republic and gauge their stabilizing or destabilizing effect at any given time.

The specialized media **monitoring sources**, in particular **FBIS**, provide regular updates on the activities of a wide spectrum of political parties and groups in each republic.

3. Transformation of Economic System

The key economic issue in post-Soviet Central Asia was to move (*in response to both internal, external and systemic pressures*).

- from a command to a market economy;
- from an economy in the soviet system to an economy in the global system;
- from a low income economy, with considerable untapped natural and human resources, to high income economy

The international agencies which advised the Central Asian republics set the following guidelines for them in early 19902.

1. Change the role of the state, i.e. privatization.
2. Establish legal and regulatory framework for property rights.

3. Improve public sector governance, since public sector is likely to dominate the economy in at least the medium term.
4. Create competitive environment: Demonopolize by opening up to local and international business.
5. **Reform Labour Markets:** In essence it meant redundancy as well as opening up labour mobility.
6. **Reform Financial Market:** Establish independent central bank and initiate securities market.
7. **Rationalize Social Protection:** Expenditure on social protection accounted for as high as 25% (*for example, in Uzbekistan*). International agencies recommended to rationalize and reduce the share of social protection in government budgets.

It is quite clear that each one of the recipes given above has a degree of merit to it. However all of them bear the seeds for disturbing existing economic and social power relationships. Thus it is not surprising that on occasions political leaderships have opted to trade off economic reform and growth for retaining the status quo politically and socially.

The methodologists might like to make a check list of the seven items of proposed economic reform and gauge their impact on a spectrum of growth/change and status quo.

4. Transformation of Military and Security System

Soon after independence all republics were faced with the problem of developing effective security apparatus. A joint military command was set up in a bid to save the Soviet armed forces from disintegration. Azerbaijan

and Turkmenistan, however, did not sign the agreement. A series of negotiations took place between Russia and other republics. The military of the Soviet Union, now the forces of CIS, was faced with the serious problem of restructuring the world's most numerous military setup. An eight year military plan was begun, and troops were demobbed, Many soldiers were compelled to go to Russia where housing, goods, and money were in short supply.

Initially, CIS troops in Central Asia were designated as part of CIS forces, but given a loose national status: they come under the joint command of officers from Russia and the respective republics. This arrangement was not very clear as each republic negotiated with Russia for itself rather than conducting these negotiations under a CIS framework.

The situation became more complicated in March 1992 when Russia said it would create its own army and defence ministry rather than rely on a united CIS force. This compelled the Central Asian leaders to go for creating their own national forces, even though some of them were reluctant to do so. Nazarbayev announced the setting up of a Kazakh National Guard. Uzbekistan said it would build an army of 25,000 men, while Turkmenistan said it wanted no more than 2,000 men and would rely entirely on CIS forces.

In the ensuing period, the Central Asian leaders debated various options of national security but were unable to reach a conclusion.

In June 1993 the CIS formally abandoned the Joint Military Command set up in 1991. The basic issues of defence remained unresolved. Clearly,

Russia was unwilling to bear the costs of combined CIS forces and the Central Asia states were also not in a position, psychologically or administratively, to decide to make heavy investment in national defence.

The Tajik civil war came as a watershed to change these attitudes. Russia decided to help Uzbekistan, and the Tajik neo-communists against their rival Islamic opposition. By 1993 the CIS high command had started taking an active interest in the security of Near Abroad on grounds of a supposed threat from the Islamic militants in the Muslim republics and the neighbouring Iran and Afghanistan.

The Central Asian states have so far formed small national armed forces. They have occasionally expressed the need to form common defence force, but political, economic and ethnic divisions, besides the complications of relations with Russian, have prevented them from making progress beyond pious intentions.

Military ties between Moscow and the Central Asian republics remain close, mainly because the Central Asian leaders look upon the Russian military as an ally and a safe-guard against their domestic opposition.

Russia and Kazakhstan have resolved the politically important issue concerning the joint use of the Baykonur cosmodrome, the largest space center in the world. Under this agreement Kazakhstan has agreed to lease the cosmodrome of Russia for twenty years with the option of an additional ten years. Russia will pay \$ 115 million annually to Kazakhstan. Significantly under the terms of the agreement, Baykonur is to be

considered” Russian territory for the duration of the lease period where all Russian laws will have equal force as in the rest of Russia.

National Armies: While Russian military continues to dominate the security scene in Central Asia, the national armies are also gradually developing.

The Methodologists need to carefully monitor and account for the impact of emerging military institutions in Central Asia, their place in the hierarchy of elites as well as their training and exposure to external military forces.

5. Transformation in the Role of Religion and Culture

According to Nazif Shahrani an expert on Central Asian society “The soviet system had targeted Islamic (*and other religious*) cultures for destruction. The targeting of Islamic culture was particularly acute because it was seen as the fundamental basis for self definition and organization of all forms of social and political relations in pre-Soviet Central Asia. The plans to realize this goal were systematic and comprehensive. They included ideological, legal, linguistic, institutional and educational methods, enhanced by politics of fear and favour”.

The relentless pursuit of this anti religion policy for over half a century created a “spiritual crisis in Central Asia”. It is quite clear that, a decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the society is still recovering from the scars of the period of religious repression.

Oliver Roy, a distinguished French scholar on Central Asian affairs suggests that there are three Islamic trends in the post Soviet Central Asia, namely **traditional Islam** as practiced by Ulema, Islam as practiced in **Sufism** (Saints) and **Political radicalism**. But he qualifies it to say: “These three poles are not mutually antagonistic in Central Asia.” One may belong to just one of the categories, or one may combine all three. He therefore recommends that “one should not overstate the opposition between (various) forms of Islam.”

Oliver Roy believes that “religious revivalism which emerged onto the scene in 1989 after a period of development underground is not of foreign import. It is the public appearance of a culture and a religious practice that never entirely disappeared. This revivalism was moulded in earlier cultural spaces. It is very fundamentalist in Ferghana and the south of Tajikistan, and elsewhere and is much more linked to a simple return of traditionalism.”

From a methodologists perspective it is very important to use a discerning eye for filtering information on the role of religion in Central Asia. It is a popular, emotion laden and interesting subject, and is hence an easy prey to too much writing by too many who are unable to absorb the complexity and the depth of the issue. The methodologists should consider different variants of Islam and their changing role in the society and politics of Central Asia. However they must be very discriminating in differentiating between reliable and respectable sources of information from those which do not so qualify.

6. Transformation of Role in the West Asian Region

The Central Asian people were once the main characters of great empires in the region. But for nearly one century they remained completely closed to the outside world. They knew the world as well as the region through Moscow's eyes. All direct communication links with the neighbours in the region, such as travel, trade, information and intellectual contact had been severed.

The Central Asian states are thus faced with the issue of reviving historic links and rebuilding their individual and institutional capacity for that purpose. This is however not an easy task and might take a couple of decades before normalcy is achieved.

The methodologists should take into account the transition through which Central States are passing for re-entry into their immediately neighbouring region.

7. Transformation of Role in the World

The Central Asians view themselves to be the beneficiaries of a changing world order. In a way this distinguishes them from several other third world and Muslim nations, who are quite sour about changes in the world order.

There are two reasons why the Central Asian states look favourably upon the new international environment. Firstly, the Central Asian states attribute their independence from the Soviet Union, and rightly so, on the

breakdown of the previous order. The final outcome of the cold war, culminating in the dissolution of the Soviet Union, led to the birth of the Central Asian states. Without the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Central Asian states would still be cut off from the rest of the world. Secondly, the continued independence of Central Asian states requires various kinds of guarantees from world powers. By themselves, the Central Asian states are not in a position to militarily safeguard their national boundaries. It suits their interest to enter into security arrangements with Western military powers. However, they are also not in a position to annoy Russia. Hence what suits them best is to enter into security arrangements which include both Russia and Western powers among its members. The landlocked states of Central Asia who have just emerged from centuries of colonial domination are forced by circumstance to play a number of balancing acts in order to preserve their newly won independence. This phenomenon lies at the heart of their relationship with the world.

The methodologists should take into account the difference between Central Asian states and other neighbouring countries as far as perceptions on changing world order and the United States is concerned.

(III)

PUBLIC PULSE
and the availability of Opinion Polls in Central Asia

Considering the immense changes in society and politics of Central Asia it is vitally important to know how various sections of the population are reacting to them. Hence the need for public opinion surveys. Various published reports as well as those with restricted circulation suggest that opinion polls sponsored by Western countries, particularly the United States are being carried out in Central Asia since the early 1990s.

As an example we take the key findings of poll results published by the **“International Foundation for Election Systems (Washington DC) in 96-7.** They constitute a set of nation-wide surveys conducted independently in four states: Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

These polls were carried out with statistically sound samples. The introduction to the Report describes the sampling as below:

“Face to face interviews were conducted with a sample of 1830 adults (*18 years and older*); the sample was of a stratified random probability design (*the margin of error being $\pm 2\%$*). The design of the sample and the weighting ensured that respondents represent the adult national population of Uzbekistan.” The sample size was 1830 in Uzbekistan 1500 in Kazakhstan, 1500 in Tajikistan and 1494 in Kyrgyzstan.

The Questionnaire comprised around 70 questions spanning a wide range of social, economic and political issues including political affiliations, rankings of political leaders and political parties as well as opinions on foreign policy questions.

For the sake of example, some of the key findings of the IFES surveys were the following.

The Uzbekistan survey classified the population into 5 major groups and assigned them a share in the total national adult population. These were: **Contented Democrats** (25%), **Pro-Reform Dissidents** (19%). **The Bewildered** (19%), **Frustrated intelligentsia** (19%), **Old Guards** (18%).

Other important findings from the 4 country surveys, especially those with some relevance for our modeling colleagues were the following:

1. There was a widespread perception in Central Asia that **Quality of Life had declined** since independence from the Soviets. Nearly 80% of respondents in three of the four surveyed states believed that quality of life had declined. The exception was Uzbekistan where 32% felt it had declined, against 56% who believed it had improved.

Nearly half of the respondents (*except in Uzbekistan*) believed that their quality of life was poorer than their parents.

Most significantly, nearly 80% of the respondents in all 4 states said they did not have enough money to buy food for the month.

2. Despite the frustrations expressed in the above item, more than 50% of the respondents said **the effect of independence** was good (around 50% in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, 70% in Kyrgyzstan and 80% in Uzbekistan).
3. Popular opinion was not very happy with **privatization**. Approximately 50% supported return to state control. At the same time, 50% of the respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the pace of reforms and believed they were too slow.
4. Only 10% were very keen on seeking **foreign investment** and an equal number strongly opposed it. A majority of 60% supported cautious approach towards allowing foreign investments. They said: “Allow it with limitations” or “allow but do not encourage”.

There was outright opposition to ownership of land. Nearly 80% strongly opposed it and around 15% supported it.

5. The Central Asian looked upto USA, Germany and Japan as three **models** for economic development.

USA was perceived as a key model for political development. It was named by one quarter of the population in 3 of the 4 states (excepting in Tajikistan).

From among the Muslim countries, only Turkey appeared on the list with around 5% support as an economic model (*except Uzbekistan where Turkey scored 13%*).

6. Except in Uzbekistan, state institutions were strongly distrusted. Nearly 60% distrusted the judiciary and public prosecutor's office. The distrust in Militia was even higher at around 80%.
7. Concerning religion the poll found that "belief was high but practice was low". More than 80% of Muslims said they believed in God. But, as for practice, less than 10% claimed they attended a weekly prayer and nearly 50% did not even attend the once a year prayer.
8. Notwithstanding the above item, a majority of Central Asian Muslims supported an extended role for religion and the introduction of religious education in public schools. Irrespective of their own level of practice, 50% of the respondents in the poll believed Islam was the solution to problems faced by them.

Another example of opinion polls carried out in Central Asia is a chapter on Central Asia authored by Elaine El Assal in a Report Titled "In the Eye of the Beholder", a special Report issued by the USIA office of Research and Media Reaction in August 1995.

It describes its research methodology as: "This analysis is based primarily on USIA-commissioned surveys among national samples of the adult population (18 years and older) in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in August/September 1994, among urban Azeri's in March 1994, and in Kyrgyzstan in February 1993, supplemented by focus groups conducted in that country in October 1994."

The Report qualifies opinion surveys in Central Asia by saying: "Public opinion research in the Soviet successor Central Asian states is of recent vintage.

Furthermore, in these states, there is no tradition of free public discussion, democracy and independent political participation. It is likely that some respondents in such societies would be inclined to tailor their responses to what they believe is politically acceptable or socially correct. Therefore, although great care has been taken to ensure the validity of USIA-commissioned surveys in the Central Asian successor states, the results should still be interpreted with caution.”

This particular study summarized its poll findings as under:

“Recent USIA-commissioned surveys suggest that support for the social and cultural dimensions of Islam in Central Asia is very much in evidence, despite half a century of official atheism and enforced secularization under the former Soviet Union. But even Muslim “believers” in the former Soviet republics of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Azerbaijan are generally wary of a political role in their countries for Islam. Moreover, few Muslim believers in these former Soviet republics show even “mild” tendencies toward beliefs compatible with political Islamic fundamentalism.”

Continuing Opinion Polls: According to the sources at Gallup International and the ESOMAR (*European Society for Marketing and Opinion Research*) there is regular polling activity in the Central Asian states. The polls are carried out by professional organizations often run by professionally trained researchers.