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POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN CENTRAL ASIA: INSIGHTS FROM KAZAKHSTAN, KYRGYZSTAN, AND UZBEKISTAN

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Abstract: *The objective of this paper is to explore the political implications of the Covid-19 pandemic in the Central Asian countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. Studies displayed that although these governments varied in their initial response to the pandemic, all three underwent a uniform experience as to its broader effect of amplified authoritarianism. The public health crisis was utilized as a pretext to consolidate autocratic power, suppress regime criticism, and restrict the political rights and freedoms of citizens. Of particular concern were implications on media and civil society organizational efforts, statuses of detainees, ethnic minority rights, and freedoms of assembly and speech. This paper is an in-depth case analysis that uses policy analysis and process tracing to examine the Central Asian countries' response to Covid-19 and its effects on human rights and political freedoms in the named countries. It concludes that despite the changes in leadership and relative progress towards democratization, authoritarian patterns ensued and changed form during the pandemic period in these Central Asian countries.*

Keywords: *Central Asia; Covid-19 Pandemic; Authoritarianism; Political Freedoms; Leadership Change*

INTRODUCTION

Amongst the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic was providing governments with an opportunity to assess their overall efficiency. Political regimes worldwide underwent a test in the backdrop of the global pandemic. Expressly, their capabilities to deal with the crisis democratically, without undermining the citizens' rights and freedoms or advancing authoritarian agendas under the guise of combating the pandemic were tried. While most countries with healthier democratic institutions ensured that any restrictions on rights and freedoms were necessary and proportionate, a number of their peers pursued clumsy or ill-informed strategies. In several cases, the crisis has been exploited by dictators to suppress opposition forces and fortify their power (Repucci and Slipowitz 2021, 46).

Central Asian countries also faced new challenges because of the Covid-19 outbreak. Governments have adopted a variety of policies to limit the spread of Covid-19, many of which restricted the political rights and freedoms of citizens. The health crisis became a source of further social tensions, which also disturbed interethnic relations in these countries.

This paper specifically addresses the following questions:

1. How do the governments of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan exploit the Covid-19 pandemic to impede the political rights and freedoms of citizens?
2. Has the leadership change in Central Asia served as a redirection from past authoritarian patterns?

This paper is an in-depth case analysis that uses policy analysis and process-tracing to examine the Central Asian countries' response to Covid-19 and its effects on human rights and political freedoms in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan.

AUTHORITARIAN PRACTICES AND THE EFFECTS OF THE LEADERSHIP CHANGE IN KAZAKHSTAN, KYRGYZSTAN, AND UZBEKISTAN

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Central Asian countries took certain steps towards democracy with the adoption of new constitutions, the creation of political parties, and the holding of elections (Haerpfer and Kizilova 2020). Nevertheless, this movement soon weakened, and most Central Asian states refocused on the implementation of an authoritarian rule, with wide-ranging power vested in the executive.

In particular, the state of human rights in Central Asian countries has become a cause of great apprehension among the observers of the region. Some observers attribute the worsening record of human rights to the authoritarian rulers of the region (Edel and Josua 2017, 7), others emphasize weak international engagement and poor contact with the outside world during the 1990s (Melvin 2008, 2), whereas a group of commentators believes the cause to be due to the Soviet authoritarian legacy combined with local conservative political culture (Matveeva 1999).

Recently, Central Asian republics have experienced leadership changes. The authoritarian rulers in power before the collapse of the Soviet Union are, in most cases, no longer in power, and some countries are now led by their successors (Olmos 2020). There are certain positive inclinations towards the protection and promotion of human rights with new rulers attempting to portray themselves as 'reformers'. Nonetheless, it can be argued that the rhetoric of change fails to coincide with genuine reforms undertaken. Since gaining its independence, Kazakhstan has put forth a concerted effort to portray itself as Central Asia's success story. In some respect, it is indeed considered a regional leader, such as in rapid modernization, economic growth, political stability

compared to its regional neighbors, etc. (Marat 2009). However, as it pertains to the landscape of human rights, the records prove to be unsatisfying, to say the least. At times, relative political stability is achieved by sacrificing individual rights and freedoms. This said, the 2019 leadership change in Kazakhstan brought about only some positive changes but did not significantly improve the environment.

During the first months of his presidency, Kazakhstan's newly elected President Tokayev tried to retain continuity with Nazarbayev's legacy on the one hand, and on the other hand, he offered systemic reforms in response to the growing requests for change. He described his approach as a 'listening state' - a state which listens to the comments and criticisms of society (Starr 2019). Meanwhile, in the context of Nazarbayev's ongoing influence, in both a formal and informal sense, his room for independent policy-making was limited. His influence over the state's bureaucracy has remained significantly weak, even before the crisis that descended upon Kazakhstan and the world a year after he arrived in the presidency (Hug 2021, 9).

Independent Kyrgyzstan's first President, Askar Akayev, a representative of the same Soviet nomenclature as Nazarbaev, has managed to undertake more drastic attempts at democratization, compared to the leaders of his Central Asian neighbors. This was, in part, possibly due to the country's poor economy. As a result of it, during the 1990s the country became increasingly dependent on foreign credits and loans, which led to a positive international influence on the speed of democratic reforms (Zhovtis 2008, 20). The outcome of this dependence was the securing of the country's reputation as an "Island of Democracy" (Terzyan 2021). Nevertheless, throughout post-Soviet history, there have been noteworthy concerns about its political health. Despite the initial objectives of becoming a sound democracy where human rights are respected and protected, actual reforms to obtain said objective never took place. Cameron (2021) describes the country's elements as being endemically corrupt, lacking political will, and possessing a culture of impunity, or 'legal mentality' - a mindset where people believe that there will be no consequences for ignoring or subverting the legal process (p. 111). Beyond this, every elected president in Kyrgyzstan has either been removed from office by protests or been subsequently imprisoned after their term of service had expired (Hug 2021, 6). The parliamentary elections held in Kyrgyzstan on 4 October 2020 led to the third revolution in the history of independent Kyrgyzstan. Whereas the primary demand of the October protests was to denounce election results, Japarov's rise to power gave rise to rushed efforts amid the pandemic to introduce far-reaching constitutional reforms in Kyrgyzstan. A key component of the constitutional changes was the transfer of powers back to the president, including the right to appoint and dismiss the cabinet, initiate draft laws, and other functions that were stripped from the executive in the aftermath of the 2010 constitutional reform. These efforts to return Kyrgyzstan to a presidential-oriented system were largely viewed as an attempt to monopolize formal power in the hands of a future president (Freedom House 2021).

As for Uzbekistan, under the authoritarian dictator Islam Karimov, the country was ranked alongside North Korea for its disregard of political rights and civil liberties (Financial Times 2021). However, after Uzbekistan's current President Shavkat Mirziyoyev assumed the presidency in 2016, the government has taken some progressive steps to better its human rights record and to engage with the outside world. Although some progress has been made regarding human rights, the political system remains largely authoritarian. Uzbek leadership has introduced central aspects of the Western model to tackle human rights concerns. Unfortunately, this introduction continues to face strong resistance. Uzbekistan remains an authoritarian state with a presidential system, where authoritarian practices and attitudes determine the behavior of relevant political actors. Especially where conflicts occur, it is apparent that the past - which the new leadership strives to bury - is far from dead (Schmitz 2020, 6).

To varying degrees, these political problems have been exacerbated during the pandemic. As Gleason and Baizakova (2020) aptly note, while Covid-19 challenges all societies and all countries in the same way, some unique conditions place individual countries in comparative advantage, and some place them at a disadvantage (p. 102). From the beginning, Central Asian governments have adopted different approaches to the pandemic, but the broader effect of it on human rights and freedoms has been similar across the region. The crisis has resulted in growing restrictions on political rights and freedoms, as regional authorities have limited those freedoms in ways that surpass public health concerns.

POLITICAL FREEDOMS IN KAZAKHSTAN, KYRGYZSTAN AND UZBEKISTAN AMID THE PANDEMIC

The year 2020 was turbulent for Kyrgyzstan not only due to the pandemic, but also due to the parliamentary elections rife with fraud, and the following political upheaval. These events have greatly shaped the course of other events that occurred during the year. They also demonstrated the weaknesses of civil society and state institutions, particularly those tasked with protecting human rights and ensuring inclusive and transparent processes in the decision-making process (Nations in Transit 2021). The crisis mismanagement and the worsening of the socio-economic situation have also largely contributed to the decline of confidence in the authorities (Doolotkeldieva 2021, 161-162).

Equally, Tokayev's presidency in Kazakhstan commenced with continuous public protests, interethnic violence in Korday, a failure of dam construction, and massive flooding on the border with Uzbekistan, and eventually ended by the Covid-19 pandemic. Against this framework, the newly elected president, who depicts himself as a reformer, initiated a range of political changes that were either fundamentally superficial or failed to meet international standards (Terzyan 2021). Moreover, in 2020, authorities

further narrowed the space for government critics by cracking down on oppositional movements, independent media, civil society organizations, and activists, often under the pretext of fighting the pandemic (Nations in Transit 2021).

As for Uzbekistan, President Mirziyoyev's reform agenda decelerated during the pandemic, since no substantial changes were presented, and the government appeared to lose momentum. Although the country did not experience critical setbacks, there are warning signs that the reform agenda could regress in the coming years. In part, this is due to security services reasserting themselves through media pressure and episodic internet blocks, as the country responded to the Covid-19 crisis (Freedom House 2021).

Overall, the political challenges (stemming from the crisis) originated in various forms in those countries. Mostly affected were the freedom of assembly and movement, freedom of expression, the work of civil society organizations and mass media, as well as the rights of minority groups.

The emergency regime featured a series of restrictions on the freedom of assembly. In May of 2020, the president of Kazakhstan signed into law new legislation supposedly reforming the right to protest in the country (HRW 2021). Nevertheless, authorities have ignored the calls to reopen channels for public consultation and to collaborate with international human rights experts. As a result, the new law falls short of meeting international human rights standards in several facets, including by "*de facto* retaining the requirement to obtain approval from local authorities before protests, setting out a cumbersome procedure for doing so, allowing assemblies only in venues designated by local authorities" (IPHR 2020), and providing for an extensive list of grounds on which authorities may refuse to allow assemblies to take place (IPHR, KIBHR, LPF, TIHR, HRCA 2020, 6). Rather, authorities allowed an opposition rally in mid-September and one for political reforms on 31 October to take place, but hundreds of people who tried to exercise their right to peacefully protest on other occasions in 2020 were detained, fined, or even sentenced (HRW 2021).

Throughout the pandemic, the government of Kyrgyzstan also used public health concerns as a pretext for preventing peaceful protests (US Department of State 2021). Interestingly, the country informed the UN Secretary-General about its derogation from the provisions of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, thus becoming the only Central Asian country to take the exceptional step of derogation under the ICCPR in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic (IPHR 2020). Nevertheless, the restrictions did not prevent the change of power in October 2021. The mass mobilization resulted in the removal of the incumbent president from office and Sadyr Japarov's transition from 'political prisoner' to acting president in a matter of just ten days.

These events led to a sharp decline in the country's status in international rankings. Its status plummeted from 'Partly Free' to 'Not Free', given the fact that "the aftermath of deeply flawed parliamentary elections featured significant political violence

and intimidation that culminated in the irregular seizure of power by a nationalist leader” (Freedom House 2021). Still, its status stands above the three of its Central Asian neighbors, which is based on the evaluation of its civil liberties score exceeding its score for political rights.

In Uzbekistan, the freedom of association and peaceful assembly remains tightly regulated. In August of 2020, the government published the Draft Law on Public Assemblies, which requires organizers to apply for permission at least 15 working days before the planned date of a mass event, despite promises made by Uzbek officials to bring the law in line with international rights standards (HRW 2020).

Under the guise of combating the pandemic, Central Asian governments also prosecuted the regime’s critics and weaponized existing laws to limit the freedom of expression. In June of 2020, a court in Almaty sentenced prisoner of conscience Alnurlyyashev, a human rights activist, to three years of restricted freedom and a ban on political and civic activism for five years for criticizing the government’s handling of Covid-19 (Amnesty International 2020).

Similarly, in Kyrgyzstan, from the time of interethnic clashes of 2010, human rights defenders remain as perpetual outcasts to the authorities. For example, human rights organizations, including Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and International Federation for Human Rights, called for the release of an imprisoned human rights activist and journalist, Azimjan Askarov, who consistently documented abuses during the interethnic violence in 2010. Despite complaints from his lawyer and human rights organizations that he was gravely ill, Askarov died in prison in July likely due to Covid-19, and was only moved to the prison hospital two days before his death (US Department of State 2021). The death in custody of the wrongfully imprisoned human rights defender left an irreparable mark on the country’s international human rights record.

Comparably, in Uzbekistan, the freedom of expression remains rather fragile. There has been increased governmental pressure on media and civil society in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The government exercises official and unofficial restrictions on citizens to criticize the government or to discuss matters of general public interest. The law restricts criticism of the president, and publicly insulting the president is a crime for which conviction is punishable by up to five years in prison (US Department of State 2020).

The abusive effect cloaked as an effort to contain the pandemic has been predominantly evident by the approach to independent media, which has become a crucial platform of interaction, as a result of lockdown measures and lack of alternative mediums. On 23 August 2021, President Japarov signed into law a ‘fake news’ bill approved by the Kyrgyz parliament in late July. The law, titled ‘On Protection from Inaccurate (False) Information’, had been sharply criticized by human rights organizations, which said it would threaten free speech in Kyrgyzstan (Putz 2021).

The parliamentary deputies who proposed the bill claim that it is necessary to fight the spread of false information about the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the Law's all-encompassing reach, vague terminology, and redundancy with existing legislation suggest that its true motivations run deeper (Simpson 2020). The critics of the Law argue that the new law poses a serious threat to free expression and media freedom in Kyrgyzstan and would deeply mar the country's human rights reputation (HRW 2021). It was also assumed that a series of controversial social issues, such as LGBTQ rights or women's rights, would likely be the target of complaints (Putz 2021).

Regardless of some reservations, the progress towards the expansion of media freedom has been traced in Kyrgyzstan. In June 2020, the authorities decriminalized defamation. This was an important step in abolishing the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan on Mass Media (in force since 1999), which established strong bureaucratic control over freedom of expression. Meanwhile, 'defamation' has instead been replaced from the Criminal Code to the administrative penalty. Journalists face a serious fine and a maximum of 30 days in prison in case of proven defamation (Azhenova 2021, 57).

As for Uzbekistan, media freedom has slightly improved under the rule of President Mirziyoyev (IPI 2021). Nevertheless, mainly since the pandemic, the media has been tightly controlled by the authorities. After instituting a harsh public lockdown in March 2020 with significant restrictions on the movement of citizens, President Mirziyoyev justified his approach by saying, "If we are not heavy-handed, the situation will worsen (...) Japan prevented the rapid spread of the virus. Why? Because of strict orders" (Hashimova 2020). Before and during the Covid-19 pandemic, journalists presented daily reports of harassment of media personnel such as journalists and internet bloggers. Some journalists said they believed the security services used the pandemic to remind media that 'they are still in charge', despite the president's public claims that journalists and bloggers are a vital part of the country's reform process (US Department of State 2020).

In the shadow of the pandemic, Central Asian governments have also initiated new measures to constrain the region's already narrow space for civil society. The authorities sought to control NGO activity, internationally funded NGOs, and unregulated Islamic and minority religious groups. The operating environment for independent civil society human rights defenders remain under strict state control. Meanwhile, in the case of Uzbekistan, several activists reported improved cooperation with government officials (US Department of State 2020).

Furthermore, counterterrorism and anti-extremism legislation are misused to target and criminalize the work of the civil society. In "Kazakhstan nonviolent criticism of State policies can effectively constitute a criminal offense" (US Department of State 2021), wrote the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms, "as the provisions on extremism and terrorism have

been applied to criminalize the peaceful exercise of freedom of expression and thought” (US Department of State 2021).

Amid the pandemic, prisoners have also appeared to be at a heightened risk. Since the beginning of the emergency, prisons and other detention institutions in Kyrgyzstan have been completely closed to lawyers as well as to monitors from the National Center for the Prevention of Torture, which Kyrgyzstan established to help prevent ill-treatment under its obligations as a party to the protocol to the International Convention Against Torture (HRW 2020).

Likewise, human rights defenders in Kazakhstan complained about the inaccessibility of correctional institutions for treatment monitoring and urgent visitation during the quarantine period. Pandemic restrictions further undermined the access to justice and legal support for defendants, including unequal rights of parties in online courts, noncompliance with the requirements of court proceedings, and compromised confidentiality of communications (Freedom House 2021).

In Uzbekistan, more than 50 people imprisoned for politically motivated charges have been released since September 2016, including human rights activists, journalists, and opposition activists. Uzbekistan has also reportedly released hundreds of independent Muslims, who practice Islam outside strict state control (HRW 2020). Whereas prisoners have been especially vulnerable during the Covid-19 pandemic, authorities have failed to undertake significant efforts to reduce the prison population by implementing early, temporary, or short-term release schemes for relevant categories of prisoners (IPHR *et al.* 2020, 17). In its statement following the annual Human Rights Dialogue with Uzbekistan, the European Union called on Uzbekistan to “take further commitments to eradicate torture, which include granting unhindered and independent monitoring to detention facilities” and “emphasized the need to rehabilitate former prisoners” (HRW 2021).

In the wake of Covid-19, the protection of minority rights also became a subject of concern. As the UN Special Rapporteur on minority issues suggests, “Covid-19 is not just a health issue; it can also be a virus that exacerbates xenophobia, hate, and exclusion” (UN Department of Global Communications 2020). This lack of tolerance towards minorities mainly manifested in Kyrgyzstan, since the country’s southern region is considerably different in terms of political culture from the north.

In a submission to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination in October 2020, human rights groups expressed their concern about the heightened plight of ethnic minorities at a time of social and political instability following mass protests, the president’s resignation, and the postponement of parliamentary elections. Ethnic minorities living in crowded settlements have faced additional risks during the pandemic. Several factors can explain this phenomenon, including linguistic reasons that many ethnic minorities do not speak the Kyrgyz or Russian languages fluently, lack access to the internet and social media, and follow certain religious and traditional

practices that make social distancing difficult (Ismailova 2021). Overall, ethnic minorities, who make up 26.3 percent of the population, remain underrepresented in both elected and appointed government positions, particularly Russians and Uzbeks - the two largest ethnic minority groups (Abdukhalilov 2021, 69). The participation of minorities in public life in Kyrgyzstan is extremely limited compared to the proportion of these minorities to the country's total population (Abdukhalilov 2021, 69).

During his presidential campaign, Japarov joined the Agreement on Rights and Freedoms, pledging to guarantee freedom of speech, democracy, rule of law, and human rights in Kyrgyzstan. In his inauguration speech, he stated that he has a dream that Kyrgyzstan will become an economically developed, dynamic, strong, and free country, where human rights are respected, rule of law is supreme, and the youth are optimistic about their future (HRW 2021). Sadly, genuine reforms have not been implemented.

Rather, the Kyrgyz authorities initiated amendments to the Criminal Code that is believed to place the political opposition and human rights groups at heightened risk. The government has proposed to broaden the scope of criminal prosecution for organizations deemed 'extremist' to include those found to incite 'political enmity', along with national, ethnic, or racial enmity, and to make financing such 'extremist' organizations a criminal offense (HRW 2021). These changes would undermine the universally protected rights to freedom of association and expression in Kyrgyzstan. Such concerns are further compounded by Kyrgyzstan's lack of an independent judiciary system (HRW 2021).

As for Kazakhstan, in February 2021, the European Parliament passed a resolution largely criticizing the condition of human rights in the country. The concerns particularly refer to its human rights record, the plight of ethnic minorities, women, and LGBTI residents, a crackdown on opposition groups, the deteriorating situation of political prisoners, etc. (EP Resolution 2021).


In June 2021, President Tokayev, as partly a response to the resolution, signed a Decree entitled 'On Further Human Rights Measures in Kazakhstan', which he said represents an important step in the political modernization of the Central Asian country (The Astana Times 2021). According to the decree, the human rights priority action plan includes developmental measures for cooperation with the United Nations (UN) treaty bodies and the UN Human Rights Council. The elimination of discrimination against women, protection of freedom of association, and freedom of expression are highlighted as areas of priority. Moreover, an increase in the efficiency of interaction with non-governmental organizations and bringing forth the human rights agenda in the criminal justice system to prevent torture and ill-treatment are also incorporated in the action plan (The Astana Times 2021).

In Uzbekistan, despite the decrease of the reformation because of the pandemic, President Mirziyoyev continues to call for democratization and speaks repeatedly about

the need to protect freedom of speech and end abuse by officials (Freedom House 2021). This raises the expectations of citizens and instills hope that they will enjoy greater political freedom. The question of whether the authorities can meet these expectations remains to be seen.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the pandemic uncovered deeply ingrained human rights issues in Central Asia. Whereas the governments of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan have adopted varying policy measures in response to the crisis, its wider influence has been similarly reflected across the region. In the shadow of the Covid-19 pandemic, authorities prosecuted regime critics and used the existing legal measures to limit their political rights and freedoms. Additionally, concerns mainly refer to the freedom of assembly, freedom of expression, the working environment of media and civil society as well as the situation of detainees. Lastly, the pandemic has indirectly affected certain ethnic, national, regional, and other groups. This is apparent in the case of Kyrgyzstan, where ethnic minorities not only do not fully enjoy political rights and freedoms but remain largely underrepresented.

Overall, notwithstanding the leadership change in the named Central Asian countries and some progress towards democratization, authoritarian tendencies continue to ensure and take on different forms during the pandemic period. Amongst other non-democratic regimes, the Central Asian governments tended to curtail political freedoms and human rights during extraordinary times, whilst invoking the facade of justification as the need to fight the pandemic crisis. 

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