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Clans, Pacts, and Politics in Central Asia

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Central Asia is suddenly on the world map. Indeed, September 11 and the U.S. war against the Taliban and the al-Qaeda terror network in Afghanistan have drawn Central Asia from the periphery to near the center of that map. Policy makers forging strategies for Afghanistan have begun to realize that the entire vast region is plagued by increasingly weak states and regimes that are losing popular legitimacy. Thus a successful policy will have to take into account not only Afghanistan itself but also nearby countries that face the same challenge of building coherent and democratic states despite declining economies and fragmented, clan-based societies.

Viewed in this larger strategic context, the problem of Central Asia is sobering indeed. The lapse of a decade since the breakup of the USSR finds the former Soviet Central Asian republics not more but actually *less* stable, politically consolidated, prosperous, and free than they were in 1991. Some or all could follow the disastrous path taken by Afghanistan in the 1990s. Any effort to avert this frightening prospect must begin by asking why it is such a plausible scenario in the first place.

While much research has been done on the causes that drive transitions to democracy, we have a far shakier grasp of how transitions to authoritarianism or civil war can come about, as in fact they have in all too many places over the last ten years or so. Nor do we understand the types of authoritarianism that we now see emerging in what was once the Soviet world.¹ Yet as Afghanistan reminds us, we need to understand the nature and dynamics of these nondemocratic regimes. **[End Page 137]**

Despite the relative homogeneity of the Soviet system and the similar circumstances that obtained across all five of the USSR's Central Asian republics, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan followed three distinct trajectories throughout the early 1990s. Kyrgyzstan experienced democratization. Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan saw a renewal of authoritarianism. Tajikistan slid into failed statehood and a bloody civil war. The Kyrgyz case at least seemed to suggest that there was hope both there and elsewhere in the region for elite-driven, "pacted" shifts toward democracy. Yet by the time that the midpoint of the decade had passed, all five new Central Asian states had settled down to one shade or another of authoritarianism in which informal, clan-based networks dominated political life. Aside from asking the particular question of why Tajikistan so quickly lapsed into severe disorder, it is also worth inquiring more generally into the nature of this informal politics, which in turn will require us to study clans and gauge their likely impact on the viability and stability of the Central Asian republics.

Transitions and Preconditions

The post-Soviet cases have sparked a growing debate about how important favorable preconditions are to democratization, yet the answers seem more elusive than ever.² The Central Asian cases are especially pertinent because they may shed light on currents not only in the post-Soviet sphere, but in Asia and the Middle East as well—regions that *prima facie* seem resistant to democratization.

Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan all started from about the same place with the same markers. These included clan and tribal divisions with deep historical roots stretching back before the Soviet era; a weak sense of national identity; an Asian-cum-Muslim cultural and religious climate; a 70-year history of oppressive Soviet rule; political institutions imposed by communism; ethnonational divisions between Turkic, Persian, and Slavic groups; and uneven economic development based on the exploitation of natural resources. The USSR's collapse in 1991 hurled them all into the same process of sudden and involuntary decolonization, independence, and putative political transition. While the conditions for democratization were not particularly favorable across the breadth of the vast former Soviet realm, Central Asia seemed the least likely region of all to become democratic.

Yet the early post-Soviet period found the orists of democratization heady with...

CLANS, PACTS, AND POLITICS IN CENTRAL ASIA

Kathleen Collins

Kathleen Collins is assistant professor of government and international studies at the University of Notre Dame and a faculty fellow of the Kellogg Institute for International Studies and the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies. She is currently working on a book, based on her 1999 Stanford University doctoral dissertation "Clans, Pacts, and Politics: Understanding Regime Transition in Central Asia."

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