

Human rights and our allies

Human rights F. Post. 12.3.02
Jim Hoagland

Islam Karimov's harsh and pervasive repression of political dissent has made Uzbekistan a pariah state for more than a decade. Even in the rough neighbourhood of the former Soviet republics of Central Asia, the Uzbek president's crackdown on Islamic moderates and fanatics alike has seemed extreme. This is Uzbekistan, described in the laconic prose of the State Department's admirably honest annual report on human rights, released earlier this month: "On October 16, in Tashkent, police arrested two brothers, Ravshon and Rasul Haitov, on suspicion" of belonging to Hizb ut-Tahrir, an outlawed fundamentalist organisation.

"On October 17, police returned the body of Ravshon Haitov to his family, which showed clear signs of torture; authorities informed the family he had died of a heart attack. His brother Rasul was beaten so severely that he became an invalid." The report notes several dozen reported cases like this in Uzbekistan last year. It also notes that a police investigation into the handling of the Haitov case was opened, at least in name.

Uzbekistan's failure to move out of the Soviet era and toward modern democracy and free markets was for 10 years a peripheral matter for US foreign policy. Now that failure is one of the most urgent items on the Bush administration's agenda, for three overlapping reasons: Uzbek Muslim warriors are almost certainly helping command and fight in Al-Qaeda's bitter-end resistance against the current US offensive in eastern Afghanistan.

The leaders of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) played key roles in pro-

moting the rule of the Taliban and Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. They helped found and run the terror camps there and propagate Osama bin Laden's nihilistic and savage version of jihad. Karimov's most dangerous enemies are George W Bush's enemies as well.

Karimov will arrive at the White House to be honoured by Bush for his quick decision

Uzbek Muslim warriors are almost certainly helping command and fight in al-Qaeda's bitter-end resistance against the current US offensive in eastern Afghanistan. The leaders of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan played key roles in promoting the rule of the Taliban and al-Qaeda. They helped found and run the camps and propagate Osama bin Laden's savage version of jihad

to let US planes use Uzbek air bases in the war on terrorism. Karimov will use this rare high-profile welcome to seek US help in what he will describe as a fresh political and economic start. Karimov has earned a hearing from the administration and the American public. But that hearing must nonetheless be sceptical -- and conditioned on the Uzbek's political actions at home matching his words in Washington.

Uzbekistan and Central Asia will help

establish -- for better or worse -- a new balance between US support for human rights abroad and the price local regimes demand for help in prosecuting the war on terrorism. In the wake of September 11, many have assumed that human rights would be subordinated to the war on terror and would lose any meaningful role in US foreign policy.

It is just possible that it will work the other way -- that the expanding American presence in Central Asia, the Caucasus and Africa will push repressive governments in more moderate directions. That case is made articulately by Karimov's deputy foreign minister and special envoy, Sodyq Safaev, who said in Washington that his government has just given legal recognition to Uzbekistan's first human rights organisation in Tashkent. This is part of a modernisation drive that will

include Uzbekistan's currency becoming convertible this July, Safaev said.

"Our problem has been the non-presence of the United States. We needed practical steps of cooperation as well as lectures to enable us to move forward," Safaev said of the period of isolation and turmoil that began when Boris Yeltsin cast Central Asia adrift by abruptly dissolving the Soviet Union in 1991.

Similar arguments, of course, were used throughout the Cold War to justify US aid and short-term fixes that turned around to bite Americans. An example of the latter is detailed in Ahmed Rashid's illuminating new book on Central Asia titled "Jihad." It says the CIA helped draw Uzbeks and other Asian Muslims into its anti-Soviet war in Afghanistan -- and was therefore present at the creation of the Al-Qaeda-IMU terror nexus.

But even in the Cold War, when US financial and security support was at times lavished on murderers and thieves who possessed only disdain for democracy, the argument contained this paradoxical truth: The arrival of American troops, bureaucrats and/or politicians brought a new concern and visibility for human rights and reform locally, even if it was only to record their absence.

September 11 and the war on terrorism do not bring an end to the human rights era or, conversely, automatic progress in Uzbekistan or elsewhere. The Bush administration will have to resist such blanket judgments and sort out, nation by nation, those who would use American involvement to move ahead or simply to cling to power.