

The massacre in May has been forgotten; it's almost never talked about anymore. There are many reasons for this. The first is linked to the role assumed by the country as regional stabiliser, a fact that showers it

The Great Uzbekistan War-game

POWDER KEG URALS 1

by Piero Sinatti

with the sympathies and support not merely of the ex-Soviet areas but also of Westerners. While the others are closely tied to the big business that is developing with Russia and China and...

“First armoured vehicles moved in close to the city square. Then another armed group appeared. They began to shoot, ruthlessly and indiscriminately, even at women and children. The crowd started to run in every direction. I jumped into a ditch and stayed there for a while. And from there I saw at least five bodies covered with blood. The rebels who were occupying the provincial administration building reacted by opening fire themselves... When I got out of the ditch I ran down some nearby streets where no one was shooting, but you could hear the shooting everywhere”.

This was the first eye witness account of the tragedy that occurred in Andijan thanks to the courage of Halima Bukharbaeva, local correspondent for the Institute of War and Peace Reporting. Andijan is the fourth largest city of Uzbekistan and the second major centre of the Fergana Valley, the great oasis that stretches from south-eastern Uzbekistan out to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

Revolt, Protest and Repression

Here, on 13 May, a mass popular protest broke out, the largest and most serious in the history of post-Soviet Uzbekistan. It was preceded and then accompanied by about one

hundred armed men who attacked the local jail during the night, freeing about 2,000 inmates and unsuccessfully attempting to occupy the barracks and office of the political police (SNB, ex KGB). They then barricaded themselves inside the building housing the provincial administration (*khokimjat*) which is located on Babur Square in the city centre. Within a few hours that same morning, an estimated crowd of 50,000 people had gathered. They demanded “work and democracy”; they called for the President and the government to step down, accusing them of starving and oppressing the people. Neither the authorities nor eye witnesses reported any Islamist slogans or demands, which referred to the Uzbek Islamic Movement, or to the Hizb-ut-Tahrir-al-Islam (Party for the Liberation of Islam), which is of Wahabite orientation. These were considered responsible for the bloody attacks in Tashkent in March 2004 (42 dead) and February 1999 (15 dead).

Towards evening, following negotiations between the rebels and the authorities, (President Karimov had meanwhile arrived in Andijan from Tashkent) armoured units from the army together with special forces intervened. The city had been sealed off since morning, and they had taken up positions near

the centre. They fired directly at the unarmed people and at the armed rebels. By late evening the *khokimjat* building had been retaken by the soldiers. The rebels fled in different directions, using militiamen they had taken hostages as shields, and, according to government sources, even women and children. The crowd that had massed around a theatre and a cinema near the main square was also fired upon, and both buildings burned. The next day, Karimov declared that Andijan was under control, that the revolt had been the work of terrorists, and that it had now been put down. Further, he declared that the rebels had shot first and that they had been in telephone contact with Taliban groups in Kyrgyzstan and Afghanistan: their goal was to

establish a caliphate in Central Asia. A similar version of events was given on numerous occasions by the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Lavrov, who at the beginning of June added a new detail: "Chechen terrorists" had participated in the revolt.

Not a single word was mentioned about the demands shouted in Babur Square for "work, bread and democracy". Nor anything about the request made by some of the rebel leaders for Russian President Putin to mediate in order to avoid a bloodbath. As far as the Kremlin was concerned this was "an internal matter for Uzbekistan". But again on 14 May, there was shooting in Andijan. Once again, unarmed demonstrators – approximately 2,000 – assembled in the central square. They wanted news of missing family members. There was talk of burials during the night in mass graves outside the city – this would later be verified. The city was shut down. Journalists and human rights activists were shut out. Even in nearby small towns like Karasu and

_The popular revolt that broke out in Andizhan, the fourth largest city in Uzbekistan and second largest centre in the Ferghana valley, on 13 May, was stifled in blood



Uzbekistan is the heart of Central Asia also in cultural and spiritual terms with its 26 million inhabitants spread out over 450,000 square kilometres



Contrasto_Reuter

Pakhtabad, near the Kyrgyzstan border, popular demonstrations were put down. Anyone seeking refuge in Kyrgyzstan was shot at, and more than 500 people fled there. On 17 May, the number of fatalities up to that point understated by Tashkent became known. The general prosecutor reported that there were 169 deaths: 32 policemen and soldiers and 137 armed rebels. No unarmed civilian victims. Karimov denied having given the order to open fire on the demonstrators. He exclaimed, indignantly, "How could I have ordered that my own people be shot? We only crushed the armed terrorists". The figures provided on the same day by Nihara Khidojatova, leader of the party "Azad Dehkanlar" (Free Farmers) are quite different. This party, illegal like all the true opposition parties, has about 100,000 members, all from the Fergana Valley. There were 745 dead. Of these 542 died in Andijan and 203 in Pakhtabad. The numbers were verified by party activists and militants of human rights associations who investigated, going from house to house. It is difficult to verify the authenticity of these figures. One fact remains: Karimov specifically and repeatedly refused to admit any international investigative commissions into Uzbekistan, as had been requested by the

United Nations, the EU Ministers of Foreign Affairs, and, belatedly by the spokesperson of the White House, Boucher, and the American Congress.

Akramiyah

One of the immediate causes of the revolt in Andijan was the trial of 23 city shopkeepers and businessmen. The city has suffered from a high unemployment rate and poverty and they were known and admired in the city as successful employers – with 2,000 employees – and as benefactors who helped the poor, financed day care centres and schools, and other social programs. All were devout Muslims who sought to introduce precepts of the Koran into economic and social life marred by corruption, poverty, and illegal profiteering. Arrested one year ago, they were subjected to moral pressures and torture, accused of imperilling the Constitution, illegal activity and terrorism. Some of their family members were apparently also arrested during the trial which took place behind closed doors with no guarantees for the accused and for the defence; it began in February and by May was clearly heading towards a guilty verdict. According to the prosecution, the defendants had formed an illegal



Contrasto

_In Uzbekistan, 37% of the urban population and 72% of the farming communities live below the level of poverty. In the photo above, the market of Chorsu. Next to it, soldiers guard the entrance to the local government building

sect called “Akramiyyah” inspired by the teachings of Akramzhan Juldashov, a former member of Hizb-ut Tahrir who for some time had converted to non-violent political action. He was serving a 17 year sentence in the Andijan prison for participation in terrorist acts and drug possession (which he denies). Now it’s difficult, given the contradictory and dubious versions of events, to establish if the 23 defendants were really members of this “sect”. According to sources close to opposition activists, the SNB simply made it all up. The fact is that the armed attack on the prison resulted in the freeing of the 23 *biznesmeny* and Juldashov himself. What is unclear is what has happened to them since the massacre of 13 May.

International Context and Alliances

On May 13, Putin and Karimov spoke on the telephone. The Uzbek leader and Putin had

agreed on the need to fight terrorism and preserve the stability of the region. We have already mentioned the official statements made by Lavrov.

On 13 May, the White House urged both governments and rebels to be moderate. The next day, Secretary of State Rice reproached the Tashkent government for being “too closed” and called for “liberal reforms”. Uzbekistan is the first former Soviet state to have offered a military base to the United States (in the south of the country) to fight the war in Afghanistan. Washington allocated several tens of millions of dollars to modernise the weak Uzbek army. It lavished loans and aid on Karimov amounting to several hundred million dollars. This was in recognition of the “stabilizing” role played by the Uzbek leader in the region and in the anti-terrorist coalition. So why not close an eye to the despotic nature of the regime?

And yet, it certainly seems no better than the government of the Batka, Lukashenko in Byelorussia, where Washington would like to export the so-called velvet revolutions – along with those others occurring in the region in the past eighteen months, in Georgia, Ukraine, and in Kyrgyzstan.

All the other Central Asian leaders are in solidarity with Karimov, in the name of regional stability and the fight against terrorism. On 26 May during an official visit to Beijing, President Hu Jintao offered Karimov his support. Beijing decided on making investments in Uzbekistan totalling 1.6 billion dollars. The CNPC, the national oil company of China, undertook to invest 600 million dollars in oil exploration in Uzbekistan. China and Uzbekistan are members of the Shanghai Treaty Organization along with Russia, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The goals are regional cooperation and especially the fight against international terrorism.

According to Beijing, it threatens the autonomous province of Xingjian where large Turanic Muslim minorities live.

Russia is the linchpin of the ODKB, the Collective Security Treaty Organisation that brings together Byelorussia, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, and which Tashkent should also be joining. It has armed forces, the KSBR – rapid deployment collective forces – tasked with intervening on behalf of any ODKB member state threatened from the outside.

Moreover, until a short time ago Uzbekistan was a member of the GUUAM (a group that takes its name from the initials of Georgia, Uzbekistan, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Moldova – the countries of the CIS that claim to be pro-West and that want to move away from Moscow's influence) but it has recently opted out and moved closer to Moscow. The Russian oil company Lukoil is participating in the exploration and development of Uzbek oil-fields. A few months ago Moscow and Tashkent signed an agreement on economic and military cooperation (oil and gas, aeronautics, anti-air defence). In light of this information, one understands the reasons why Karimov was offered such support. And not only in the former Soviet zone.

Economic-Social Overview

Uzbekistan, with 450,000 square kilometres, bordering the four other Central Asian countries and with 26 million people, is at the "strategic heart of Central Asia". This is equally true culturally and spiritually, as well as for some of its cities, famous for their artistic treasures – like Samarkand, Bukhara and Kiva; they are seats of secular emirates of the Farsi culture and language occupied by the Russians



in the 19th century but at one time great centres along the "silk route".

Over 30% of the population lives in the countryside. The Soviet system imposed the widespread cultivation of cotton, and created irrigation systems along the Amu Darja and Syr Darja rivers. They were impressive, but had disastrous results. One was the drying up of a large part of the Aral Sea, at one time an important tourist centre and source of fish. Uzbekistan has sacrificed thousands of square kilometres of valuable crops (in particular fruits) that used to supply the markets of Central Asia, in order to grow cotton, becoming the third largest producer in the world. According to the World Bank, 37% of the urban population and 72% of the farmers live below the poverty level. The average monthly income of the *dehkenin*, the Uzbek peasant,



Grazia Nerl/AFP

_In the name of regional stability, of the war on terrorism and of economic interests, Karimov (above with Putin and on the side with Hu Jintao) has the solidarity of the leaders of all the Central Asian states.

who lives in miserable and semi slave-like conditions, varies between four and ten dollars. 85% of the cotton picked by the peasant farms, some of which are still collective, must be handed over to the State at well below market prices. Soviet style. Similarly, workers from other sectors and students are forced to offer annual *corvées* for the harvest. In the cities, wages and salaries range from 30 to 60 dollars per month. Uzbekistan has oil and gas deposits capable of guaranteeing its energy self sufficiency and

can even export gas to its neighbouring countries. In the Province of Navoi lies one of the major gold deposits in the world, Muruntau, with an annual production of between 50 and 60 tons. It is managed by a joint Uzbek-American company, the "Sarafshan-Newmont Mining Corporation".

An important aviation industry built up near Tashkent during the Soviet era assembles components supplied by Ukraine and Russia. There are not enough orders. The South Korean company Daewoo assembles the "Nexia" and "Matiz" models in Andijan for the major export markets. Textiles and chemicals are two other important sectors. Privatization began late and is proceeding slowly. It benefited the President's circle and his own family rather than the economy. The annual growth rate of GDP is the lowest of all

the Central Asian countries, around 3.5% in 2004; in 2004 GDP was 10.8 billion dollars, with per capita GDP at 420 dollars. Karimov's beautiful daughter, Gul'nara, a Harvard graduate, controls a mobile phone company, a cement factory, commercial networks, travel agencies and even nightclubs.

Through its rich and privileged oligarchy which remains faithful to Karimov, and a gargantuan, corrupt and inefficient bureaucracy, the State administers the country's economy either directly and/or through joint ventures with foreign companies. The economy has suffered from the rupture in its inter-relationships with the other former Soviet countries following the catastrophic collapse of the Soviet Union. Particularly damaged were the cotton sector (a victim of the decline in international demand), and the textile, chemical, and aeronautical industries. The infrastructure is inadequate and inefficient for lack of investments. Especially the Soviet-era canals.

In the Autonomous Republic of the Karakalpakis on the Aral Sea, drought and environmental degradation have lowered life expectancy to under 60 years and made infant mortality and genetic deformities among the highest in the world.

Power and Political Structure

Karimov defines his system as "democratic collectivization". The country is divided into eleven provinces (*khokimjat*) led by governors appointed by the President, and one autonomous republic, the unfortunate Karakalpakistan. The cities are subdivided into *makhalla*, traditional neighbourhood communities, governed by people appointed by the national administration. The *makhalla* is an instrument of widespread control, even over one's personal life. The state is non-confessional. The mufti and the mosques are controlled by the central power. The 1992 constitution which provides for the separation of powers and the major democratic and civil liberties is a fiction. The totality of powers is in the hands of Karimov backed up by the power structure which includes the former KGB, now called the SNB (National Security Council – with its own troops), and the Ministry of the Interior. Television is under strict government control as are the press and the Internet. There is ongoing repression of those journalists and media that attempt to provide independent news.

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President Karimov

Islam Karimov, 68 years old, is from Samarkand, an engineer and economist, a science scholar. He built his career in the Communist Party and the Uzbek government: Minister of Finance, head of the Gosplan, First Secretary of the Uzbek Communist Party (but also member of the Politburo of the CPSU during Gorbachev's last years), President of the Supreme Uzbek Soviet (1989) immediately following independence, and elected President in 1991 with 81% of the vote. He used two referenda to extend the length of his terms (since 2002 each term lasts seven years). According to international observers, including the OECD, presidential and parliamentary elections violate international standards. The Uzbek Communist Party has become the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and is a mere tool for Karimov and his circle (which is periodically dismissed). The parliament – Oli Majlis – even includes fictitious opposition parties alongside the majority PDP – and limits itself to ratifying the President's decisions.

The two major secular opposition parties, "Erg" (Determination), democratic, and "Birlik" (Unity), nationalist, were outlawed and their leaders persecuted and forced into exile during the first half of the 1990s. So popular opposi-



Contrasto_ | Corbis

_In the Ferghana valley, scene of two armed raids by Islamic guerrillas, the repression is greater than in the rest of the country

tion developed within the Islamic communities, and was strengthened at the end of the 1980s by the fall of Communism and with assistance from Saudi “charitable” circles and organizations (and the families of old Uzbek emigrants to Saudi Arabia. Religious literature spread, mosques increased, and the number of pilgrims going to Mecca grew rapidly, especially in the Fergana region.

The Fergana Valley

Uzbek Islam is particularly developed in the Fergana Valley, in the provinces of Namangan and Andijan. In the 1920s, it was the centre of a strong and widespread Basmachi movement against the Bolsheviks. It is in this valley that the opposition to Karimov is concentrated, and here that the Uzbek Islamic Movement and the Hizb-ut-Tahrir-al-Islam (Party for the Liberation of Islam), influenced by radical Islam, were created. The regime accused them of being linked to Al Qaida. In the Fergana, where one third of the

Uzbek population is concentrated, the high population density (up to 400 inhabitants per square kilometre), the very high birth rates, high numbers of young people and the high rate of unemployment (above the national average, equal to 30% of the working population) when combined with high religious energy, form an explosive mixture.

In July 1999 and August 2000, the Fergana Valley was the site of two armed raids carried out by Islamist guerrillas of Zhuma Namangani and Tahir Juldashiev. They were crushed by Uzbek and Kyrgyz soldiers. In this vast oasis repression is greater than in the rest of the country. Human rights associations report between six and seven thousand citizens arbitrarily arrested, mistreated and/or tortured, tried and often given long prison sentences. Frequently for their political and/or religious convictions or for the ever more common manifestations of social discontent, like that of the Dzhizak farmers last March or the Kokand street vendors a few months earlier. Finally, as evidence of the social-political explosiveness in the entire Fergana Valley, it was in the two Kyrgyzstan provinces of Osh and Dzhahalal-Abad that the popular movement began which forced President Akaev to step down last March.

The revolt in Andijan was above all a great popular demonstration against a regime of economic backwardness, mass unemployment and political oppression. A massive, peaceful protest preceded and accompanied by armed action. It is not known exactly if the action was attributable to this or to that radical armed Uzbek group or to local opposition groups determined to obtain the liberation at any cost of their so-called Akramiyyah. Some accounts refer to possible ulterior motives, to police provocation, hypothesised for the Tashkent terrorist attacks as well, and to plots by Andijan or Fergana clans hostile to Karimov.

There are some grounds for believing that it was a revolt that was supposed to spread to the rest of the region and throughout the country and that Karimov nipped it in the bud, bloodily suppressing it to the great relief of Moscow and the other capitals of former Soviet Central Asia – where it might have caught on.

There is no doubt that the mass gathering in Andijan could not but recall the “velvet revolutions” that, thanks in part to support from Washington, had driven out the Shevardnadze regime in Georgia, Kuchma and Yanukovitch in Ukraine, and Akaev in Kyrgyzstan. All of

these were by far less despotic and repressive than Karimov. In his Tbilisi speech on 10 May, George W. Bush had called for the spread of the “velvet revolutions” to other “undemocratic” countries, including those in the post-Soviet area.

But the American President was not thinking of Uzbekistan, his ally in the anti-terrorist coalition. And in fact the reaction of the United States to the events in Andijan was quite moderate. The despotic nature of Karimov’s regime, the drama of the social situation, the absence of known and respected opposition leaders and the presence of radical Islamic factions make a “velvet revolution” improbable in Uzbekistan. Nevertheless, “stability” obtained by force and in an environment of bad government and poverty has no merit. It will not last long. On the contrary, extremism, fundamentalism, and terrorism in places like Uzbekistan find fertile ground in which to proselytize.

_More than 30% of the population lives in rural areas. The income of Uzbek farmers comes to between four and ten dollars per month

