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The Political Process in Central Asia and the System Question

Preliminary Considerations and Methodology

Authoritarian regimes, “clan-bureaucratic” capitalism, high levels of socio-economic inequality and social exclusion, precarious living conditions for large proportions of the population, the coexistence of traditional and modern socialization and value systems, the rapidly increasing influence of religion, above all Islam – this is how one could sketch an outline of the key socio-political characteristics that have taken shape in the Central Asian states in the twenty years since independence.

But this summary, rather problematic from a Western point of view, requires a significant, positive addendum: For the first time in their history, the Central Asian societies possess their own states and are able to determine their own national destiny. For the peoples of the region, this is a historical turning point. Their national self-actualization is revitalizing the traditional civilizational, cultural, and religious aspect of Central Asia. Particularly noticeable is the growing role of Islam, which is the faith of a majority of the population in these secular states. In geopolitical terms, the region is positioning itself as a bridge between Asia and Russia/Europe. The Central Asian states have close co-operative relations with China, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Turkey, and the Gulf states. Central Asia is thus increasingly returning to the fold of Islamic states to which it has historically belonged.

For two decades, the architects of Central Asia’s authoritarian model of government have been responsible for the character and course of the transition from Soviet state socialism to a market economy and a new model of state and society in their young nations. We should not overlook the fact that the simultaneity and parallelism of transformation, state building, and national identity formation create objective challenges for the leadership of any state.

Nonetheless, after 20 years of government responsibility, we have to inquire whether this autocratic type of rule¹ has evolved from being a transi-

1 “Authoritarian regimes are political systems with limited, not responsible, political pluralism: without elaborate and guiding ideology (but with distinctive mentalities); without intensive nor extensive political mobilization (except some points in their development); and in which a leader (or occasionally a small group) exercises power within formally ill-defined limits but actually quite predictable ones.” Juan José Linz, *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes*, Boulder, Co, 200, p. 159. For Linz, authoritarian regimes are not merely a hybrid of totalitarian systems and democratic governments, but a type of system

tional phenomenon to become the systematic constant of state power. There is a lot of evidence that this is the case: on the one hand, the direct and indirect dominance of the holders of political power over the political and economic spheres, and, consequently, in the social balance of power, their unlimited disposition of state power and consequent negation of the division of powers; on the other, a number of factors that currently still benefit the ruling class: the subordination and fragmentation of significant sections of the elite, who could form a counterweight, the traditional conservatism of the society, and the weakness of civil society. This complex of factors, which currently *still* favour the ruling elite, will change to the extent that the grave development deficits trouble relations between state and society and the latter becomes aware of this.

This is already occurring in several states, as the examination of the political process in the region by a group of Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Russian, Tajik, Uzbek, and German experts revealed in 2010/2011. The goal of this project was to gain a deeper understanding of the dynamics and inner logic of socio-political processes in Central Asia. That required an analytical approach that was not oriented on *a single* set of co-ordinates,² but sought rather to discover political, economic, socio-economic, cultural, value, and normative initial determinants and to grant the contradictions in the society an adequate analytical role as drivers of the relevant political processes. A holistic approach of this kind needed to be rooted in empiricism, to be built “from the bottom up”, so to speak. This involved understanding the relationship between those in power and the wider society from a perspective that sees the political process as a dialectical exchange³ between the “political community” (“the members of a political system and their fundamental value patterns”⁴), the “political regime” (“the fundamental structure of the system of institutions”⁵)

sui generis. The researcher therefore requires typologically relevant research parameters and precise criteria to differentiate such regimes from both totalitarianism and democracy. The key feature differentiating such regimes from democratic and totalitarian systems is what Linz calls “restricted pluralism”. See also Juan Linz, *Autoritäre Regime* [Authoritarian Regimes], in: Dieter Nohlen/Rainer-Olaf Schultze (eds), *Lexikon der Politikwissenschaft* [Dictionary of Political Science], Munich 1989, p. 62.

- 2 E.g. evaluation criteria that are economic, structural, institutional, or oriented on the behaviour of elites, or those that are interested in patterns of rapprochement or distancing of the Central Asian regimes towards the Western political order.
- 3 “The politico-economic structures of governance form the interface between politics and society. In the moment in which the relationship between the political regime and the structures of governance are involved in transformation, the social problems of the society that have become the object of political manipulation need to be looked at more closely. An approach of this kind takes the formal condition of the political system (polity) and political struggles (politics) seriously and applies them together to the political framing of social processes (policy)”, Michael Brie, *Ordnung aus Anarchie* [Order out of Anarchy], Berlin 2004, p. 19 (this quote and all other quotes from texts in languages other than English are translations by the author).
- 4 Susanne Pickel/Gert Pickel, *Politische Kultur- und Demokratieforschung* [Political Culture and Democracy Research], Wiesbaden, 2006, p. 79.
- 5 Ibid.

and the “holders of political power” (“specific holders of political authority roles”⁶), which, in their totality, create the political system. An approach of this kind should make it possible to reach conclusions regarding a political regime’s effectiveness, “measured in terms of its economic and political performance”.⁷ The latter reveals the congruence or incongruence between the interests of the political community and the political regime and makes it possible to draw conclusions on the stability or instability of the political system – in this case the authoritarian model of government that has evolved in Central Asia over the last two decades. Finally, the group of experts translated these considerations into detailed research criteria to carry out country analyses. General conclusions drawn from these country studies form the basis of the present contribution.

The Political Regime and the Holders of Political Power

Michael Brie studied the process by which authoritarian democracy emerged in the context of transformation in the Russian province of Saratov from 1990 to 2000. He characterized the relationship between the “patrimonial power of the governor” and the population as follows:

1. The role of the supreme leader as the holder of all power, all responsibility, leadership, and representation of the common will and as the driving force of every change;
2. the role of the population – people whose support for the rulers contributes to stability and progress, whose activity does not, however, produce any kind of alternative centre of power or autonomous organization;
3. the assignment of responsibility for all problems that do not stem from earlier periods to the subaltern bureaucracy, which inevitably fail to mediate between the rulers and the people;
4. the personification of power (the “cult of personality”);
5. the historicization and traditionalization of power;
6. the reduction of the mass media to the symbolic production of the aforementioned features of patrimonial power.⁸

This characterization of “patrimonialism in times of transformation” applies well to the systems established by the rulers of Central Asia. How can such a total grasp on power be explained?

The uniqueness of power monopolization in Central Asia derives from the specifics of the transformation of ownership in the entire post-Soviet space and the typical behaviour of elites in the transformation process. The latter developed a “post-Communist understanding” of how to assert power

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid., p. 85.

8 Brie, cited above (Note 3), pp. 180-181.

under the conditions of the transition to a market economy, in which the key question concerned the rapid and irreversible transformation of political power into property. Consequently, political power was itself conceived of as a kind of property. Sharing political power was automatically seen as sharing economic power and vice versa, with the result that it is felt better not to share either. This paradigm continues to reign to this day.

With the exception of Kyrgyzstan, in which a second change of regime took place in 2010, the ruling elites of Central Asia controlled all political and economic transformation processes from the start. In the early stages, during the privatization of state-socialist and collective property, they used their resources of bureaucratic and political power to take control of key economic resources. This coupling of political structures with cartels not only helped define the specific nature of the new type of power elite in terms of “domains of personal individual rule”,⁹ it also meant that the political elite simultaneously became the leaders of the new bourgeoisie, establishing the “clan-bureaucratic” type of capitalists. From the very birth of the new states, therefore, power relations were set up to serve the interests of the new system in the economic sphere as well. It is this fusion of political, economic, military, not to mention normative power in the same hands that leads to a superabundance of power and its quasi-feudal features.¹⁰

It is therefore not surprising that all country analyses within the above-mentioned project agree in their evaluation of the status quo: In Kazakhstan, power has a “monocratic character”.¹¹ It is “currently dominated by a single grouping – the one that was formed by Nursultan Nazarbaev and which operates within boundaries staked out by him”.¹² The same can be said of Uzbekistan. “In Tajikistan, contrary to the constitution, the subordination of the formal separation of powers to the president is common practice. There is no event of the slightest social significance that does not come under the control of the president. The dividing lines between republic and monarchy, democracy and autocracy, popular sovereignty and state sovereignty in the hands of

9 Ibid., p. 47.

10 As well as vassalage, feudalism features a central authority that attempts to impose dominion on a territory via military, administrative, and economic means. Cf. Klaus-Georg Riegel, Feudalismus [Feudalism], in: Nohlen/Schultze, (eds), cited above (Note 1), p. 234. Further features that are typical of feudalism include a very slowly evolving society, strict rules governing all kinds of activity, a high degree of traditionalism, harsh controls on everyday life imposed by the church, and the dominance of ideology by religion. Cf. Gertrud Schütz et al. (eds), *Kleines Politisches Wörterbuch* [Compact Political Dictionary], Berlin 1988, p. 271.

11 K. L. Syroezhkin, *Sotsial'no-politicheski protsess v Kazakhstane (opyt rekonstruktsii)* [The Socio-Economic Process in Kazakhstan (The Experience of Reconstruction)], in: *Uchrezhdenie Akademii nauk, Institut vostokovedeniya RAN, Tsentr strategicheskikh i politicheskikh issledovani* (ed.), *Politicheski protsess v Tsentral'noi Azii: resul'taty, problemy, perspektivy* [The Political Process in Central Asia: Results, Deficits, Perspectives], Moscow 2011, p. 154, (hereinafter: The Political Process in Central Asia).

12 Ibid., pp. 153-154.

a single individual are becoming blurred.”¹³ The same concentration of power occurred in Kyrgyzstan under the first president, Askar Akaev, whose regime fell in 2005, and his successor, Kurmanbek Bakiev (2005-2010). Studies suggest that, in Kyrgyzstan, “the creation of the independent state [followed] the principles of family-clan capitalism”.¹⁴

The West’s responsibility for the development of this kind of system should not be overlooked. The strategic components in the West’s approach were: “the revolutionary installation of an entrepreneurial class”,¹⁵ the systematic and comprehensive privatization of state and collective property, the introduction of market-based instruments, the withdrawal of the state from its role as a social provider, and the reorganization of the political system on the model of representative democracy. The West miscalculated completely what the negative long-term political, economic, and social effects would be of insisting on comprehensive reform of relations of ownership by means of the fastest possible privatization of state-socialist and collective property and on the withdrawal of the state from its social responsibility in the context of a traditional society. The beneficiaries of this hasty privatization were the major clans, particularly those of the “first transformation generation”, which are our concern here. Only they possessed the administrative and financial resources, following the break-up of the USSR, to decisively influence the privatization in their interest. As a result, it was not possible either to keep political and economic power apart, or to create the social foundations for an “open society”. The opposite was rather the case: The “bureaucratic clan capitalists” created a type of government that reflected their hybrid socialization, which had both traditional and Soviet elements: the socially exclusive and essentially undemocratic clan hierarchy. “The old historical [...] body politic [...] is defined precisely by the fact that it – in contrast to the ‘political state’ – unites political and economic power in one hand.”¹⁶

It is doubtful whether the “first generation” of clan oligarchs will be able to maintain their rule in the long term. Which is not to say that their passing will expunge the cancer that is the symbiosis of political and economic power concentration. Competition is growing in the form of a new, now mature, entrepreneurial class in the second and third generations. They are interested in a share of power, as already demonstrated in Kyrgyzstan.

13 I.K. Usmonov, *Ternistyi put’ nezavisimosti (transformatsionnye protsessy v sovremennom Tajikistane)* [The Thorny Path of Independence (The Transformation Process in Contemporary Tajikistan)], in: *The Political Process in Central Asia*, cited above (Note 11), here: pp. 364, 347.

14 N.M. Omarov, *Kyrgyskaya Respublika* [The Kyrgyz Republic], in: *The Political Process in Central Asia*, cited above (Note 11), p. 222.

15 Claus Offe, *Der Tunnel am Ende des Lichts. Erkundungen der politischen Transformation im Neuen Osten* [The Tunnel at the End of the Light. Inquiries into the Political Transformation of the New East], Frankfurt/New York 1994, p. 60.

16 Dietrich Jung, *Tradition – Moderne – Krieg* [Tradition – Modernity – War], Münster 1995, p. 139.

Yet they will not give up their economic clout. And these struggles, in their turn, will drive and direct future disputes among the elites of the Central Asian states. But they will “abolish” neither the dominant type of capitalist, nor their aversion to the separation of political and economic power and to an open society and democracy of the Western type.

Additional long-term political consequences can also be observed: “The transformation of former state property did not, as was hoped, lead to the development of independent property ownership and a free market, well-ordered economic and legal relations and a broad middle class. On the contrary, giving priority to privileged groups with regard to property and other networks of relations divided society into a small minority of owners and a majority of the propertyless.”¹⁷

The Political Community – Specifics of Social Organization

The societies of Central Asia have a number of social, political, cultural, and religious features in common, in which elements of traditional, Soviet, and modern socialization are interlinked. The traditional is expressed primarily in the existence of social hierarchies, in which regional, clan, and tribal groupings exhibit a high level of socially integrative power. They develop their own interests, pursue them, and have real influence in society. This gives them the character and the significance of “primary” sub-systems in relation to the holders of political power.¹⁸ Communities based on bonds of solidarity, a relatively high degree of religiosity, and affinity for mystical phenomena are also expressions of a high degree of traditionalism.

The social sub-systems remain trapped within patriarchal mechanisms of rule.¹⁹ They resemble a social “pyramid”, led by a strong individual and councils of elders, who hold the system together by means of a mixture of traditional loyalties and material ties. The point of reference for the collective

17 Syroezhkin, cited above (Note 11), p. 125.

18 Cf. Volker Ronge, *Staatstheorie [State Theory]*, in: Nohlen/Schultze (eds), cited above (Note 1), p. 976.

19 “The strong tradition of family or ‘clan’ ties and community structures [...] became more important [...] during transition. [...] they also contributed to the non-transparent capture of political and economic power by various clans. Appointments to positions of political and economic responsibility tend to be allocated on the basis of trust and patronage, rather than through competitive selection. [...] Power structures are based on a delicate balancing of the allocation of privileges and power between clan structures to maintain political and social stability and the lack of dissent by rival clans. Apart from contributing to political exclusion, this balancing arguably contributes to the inability of economies to benefit from the efficiencies of market systems. It also encourages a preference for economic growth models that guarantee rents (unearned income) and control over rent allocation to people in privileged positions.” United Nations Development Programme, Regional Bureau for Europe and CIS, *Beyond Transition. Towards Inclusive Societies, UNDP Regional Development Report*, Bratislava 2011, p. 50, at: <http://europeandcis.undp.org/home/show/BCD10F8F-F203-1EE9-BB28DDEE6D70B52E1> (hereinafter: UNDP Regional Development Report).

consciousness of the largely rural population is less the *citoyen*, the bearer of civic rights, although this ideal does already exist in urban areas – both socially and politically – than the group, the extended family, the clan, and the region. These networks are the basis of political rule and foundation of its legitimacy. While, in their totality, these networks do form a kind of pluralism, it is not the unlimited pluralism of Western democracies. In political life, this stands in the way of the creation of independent civil and political institutions and restricts the autonomy of the individual. At present, the increasing impoverishment of the bulk of the population is driving them back into the groups and extended families that function for them as replacements for the vanished social security system.

A historical phenomenon that affects the specific values and behaviours of the political community in Central Asia can be glossed as the “burden of simultaneity”. In contrast to transition processes in the “old” developing nations, where traditional and capitalist elements of socialization co-exist and change has been evolutionary, so that these societies have relatively long periods of time for their adaptation, the Central Asian societies were plunged into an abrupt transformation of their political and economic systems with absolutely no warning. This brought a sudden end to the social egalitarianism that prevailed under state socialist conditions, whose collectivist “we” was more in tune with the traditional communal psyche than that of individualist bourgeois capitalism. Central Asians, with this collectivistic “we”, also feel obligated by the normative values of their traditional belief community, the Islamic “*Umma*”, which shaped their socialization from the end of the seventh century until the start of the Soviet period. Islam, in particular, is undergoing an intensive revitalizing of its influence in the context of state formation and retraditionalization. The consciousness of the populations has consequently had to undergo an enormous adaptation to several – in part mutually contradictory – value and norms systems simultaneously.

Interplay between socio-psychological mentality and socio-economic tension inevitably contributes to politicization among the population, while also charging the whole political process with emotion. Taking that into account when attempting to steer socio-political processes requires a greater level of awareness in the selection of policy and their tactical implementation. Central Asia’s political regimes and rulers are already caught between two stools “in the process between the ideal-typical polar opposites of traditional and bourgeois-capitalist socialization”.²⁰ That is because a traditional society affected by a high level of social exclusion and a lack of opportunity will inevitably focus its anger on those who provoke it via the exclusivity of their political and economic monopoly of power and their exclusive mechanisms of rule. Social unrest, driven by the aggregation of expectations regarding the obligation of the ruler (the state) to make social provision, and hence

20 Jung, cited above (Note 16), p. 162.

a “personifiable” ascription of responsibility for impoverishment, contains the potential for a high level of aggression focused on very specific targets.

Traditionalism should by no means be understood as a fossil, but rather as an evolutionary phenomenon. In the societies of Central Asia, it is based on an “understanding of legitimacy based on [traditional – author’s note] customary law and the norms of Soviet administrative law. Yet it is precisely this peculiar synthesis that determines the ground rules both within the political class and in its relations with society.”²¹ This hybrid logic effectively makes possible the “strong leader” characterized by both economic and political power. Both the traditional and the Soviet hierarchies encourage the population to internalize this figure. However, the traditional community burdened him with obligations – he was “responsible for the physical and material security of the body politic [author’s note: today, we would likely say ‘political system’]”.²² The social psyche of the community is therefore oriented towards an inclusive balance of power and rejects long-term exclusive ambitions for power on the part of *one* of its *sub-systems*, which may be regional, such as Kulob or Danghara in Tajikistan, or north and south, as in Kyrgyzstan. It becomes even more exclusive when the leader does not fulfil his duties of guaranteeing the reproduction of the material basis of existence of the (“pyramidal”) society as a whole. The great difficulties that a particularistic and authoritarian model of government can expect in Central Asia grow out of this combination of traditional duty and the failure to guarantee the survival prospects of the majority of the population.

Political Regime – Holders of Political Power – Political Community

The socio-political effectiveness of a political regime can be measured in terms of how it copes with two central criteria – its ability to guarantee the reproduction of the material and immaterial conditions of existence and development of the society, and its co-ordination of the interests of a variety of “primary” social (sub-)systems. The critical point here is “to balance the desire for centralized governance with the desire for autonomy on the part of the other systems”.²³ This is a key issue for relations between the holders of state power and the societal sphere: How do they cope with the inner logic of the “pyramid”? How the holders of power deal with these factors and the results that they achieve reveal the extent to which an identity of interests exists between them and the political community that is able to ensure the stability of the state they share.

In order to evaluate effectiveness, it is necessary to take account of a further key factor: the historical experience of the societies. They have direct

21 Syroezhkin, cited above (Note 11), p. 165.

22 Jung, cited above (Note 16), p. 141

23 Linz, *Autoritäre Regime*, cited above (Note 1), pp. 61-62.

experience dating from as far back as the first quarter of the twentieth century, and one must not forget that, before independence 20 years ago, there was a long period of state socialism, which was characterized by state and collective ownership and full employment. During this time, the central budget of the USSR was used to subsidize the finances of the Soviet Central Asian republics. As late as 1990, as much as 40 billion US dollars flowed into the region from this source. Uzbekistan, for instance, covered some 75 per cent of its social expenditure (six billion US dollars) by this means.²⁴ “All in all, the population of the Central Asian republics had a relatively high standard of education, healthcare, culture, art, and prosperity. Literacy stood at nearly 100 per cent. Middle school attendance was compulsory. Incomes were not high, but at least they were secure and stable.”²⁵

The level of development achieved in 1991 was the result of the first transformative leap taken by the Central Asian societies, which, if one takes the 1920s as the starting point, had led them out of feudal conditions only around 70 years previously. What feudal conditions meant for the bulk of the population can be demonstrated with reference to Tajikistan.

The elite in the eastern part of the emirate of Bukhara, which became Tajikistan, was largely focused on the Emir’s divan (council), his administration, and the Islamic clergy. In 1926, merely 2.2 per cent of the overall population were literate, falling to 1.2 per cent in rural areas, and only 0.3 per cent of women and girls.²⁶ In the period from 1927 to 1929, only 16 boys and nine girls out of every 1,000 children attended primary school. Compulsory education was not introduced until 1932-33. Following a major literacy effort, 71 per cent of the population were able to read and write by 1939, although by 1940 only 3.3 per cent of teachers had a tertiary qualification. In 1926, the Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic (then part of Uzbekistan, from 1929 the Tajik Socialist Soviet Republic) possessed 20 engineers, eight agriculture specialists and 23 doctors, mostly of Russian origin.²⁷

The shock caused to the societies of Central Asia by the breakup of the Soviet “common home” and its aftermath was thus all the more drastic. The first years of independence saw a catastrophic deterioration in economic productivity caused by the collapse of the USSR and its economy, which was based on the division of labour among the constituent republics. The destruction of the system of social reproduction under state socialism as a consequence of the privatization of state and collective property with no replacement was particularly damaging. The collective sector, in particular, played a vital function in providing the population with consumer goods, housing,

24 Cf. V.V. Paramonov, *Respublika Uzbekistan v kontekste transformatsii* [The Republic of Uzbekistan in the Context of Transformation], in: *The Political Process in Central Asia*, cited above (Note 11), p. 239.

25 Usmonov, cited above (Note 13), pp. 300-301.

26 Khanna N. Driker, *Formirovanie klassov sotsialisticheskovo obshchestva v Tajikistane* [The Formation of Classes in the Socialist Society of Tajikistan], Dushanbe 1983, p. 72.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 73.

medical care, recreational facilities, nurseries, educational and cultural institutions, and senior care. These social consequences of the Western focus on neoliberal “shock therapy” hit the economically weaker states like Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan especially hard. They have not been overcome by most Central Asian states to this day.

Comparing the two phases of transformation that have swept through Central Asian societies in around three quarters of a century – from the deepest oriental feudalism and sultanism into Soviet-type state socialism, and from there into capitalist modes of production and appropriation – leads to the following preliminary conclusion: If economic and social development followed an upwards path through most of the twentieth century, the second, current phase of transformation has meant stagnation or even regression for the bulk of the population.

The System Question – The Divergence of the Interests of the Political Community and the Holders of Political Power

The rule of Central Asian societies by political regimes and leaders of the same type under similar social conditions has produced a number of parallel serious development deficits. These deficits illustrate in which areas and to what extent the interests of two foundational pillars of the political system – the political community and the holders of political power diverge. This clash of interests, its recognition, transformation into desires, demands, and actions in the political community, and the reaction and actions of the holders of political power will determine and energize political processes in the region for years to come.

The development deficits can be assessed with reference to the following general questions: In 20 years of transformation and state formation, were the holders of political power effective enough to steer their states onto the path of modernity (which requires us to pose and answer the question of the “modern Central Asian state”), to enable the dynamic growth of productive forces, and to offer the population satisfactory quality of life and prospects?

Framed in *these terms*, the system question is not identical with the question of power. However, the latter would be provoked by the rulers themselves if they excluded critical and self-critical reflection on the effectiveness of their regimes and the consequences that can be drawn from it.

What development deficits could disturb the internal stability of the political systems?

Weak Economic Fundamentals for Self-Sustaining Economic Development

With the exception of Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, where the presence of oil and gas grants both rent income and a limited boost to industrialization,

the young states of Central Asia find themselves in the same initial position as most developing countries: They are dependent upon the mining and export of raw materials and energy, i.e. fossil fuels and hydroelectric power, precious metals, cotton, ore, aluminium, and uranium. The export of workers and their remittances are currently a “lifeline for the Central Asian countries of origin” Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, which demonstrates that the economic foundations of these states are too weak to support a significant proportion of their working-age population.²⁸

The strategic risks of this one-sided economic profile are well known: technological underdevelopment, a high degree of dependency on the fluctuating market price of raw materials, unemployment, and environmental degradation. Furthermore, the profits from the export of raw materials are appropriated by small groups of entrepreneurs, which suppresses domestic growth and exacerbates social polarization.

Unacceptable Living Conditions

The entire region is today confronted by a fundamental deterioration in social living conditions. This is no longer primarily about the negative *quantitative* parameters of low per capita income, high levels of poverty and unemployment, and poor or non-existent social security systems.²⁹ It is now more about the *qualitative* leap in terms of mass social exclusion and division within society. This “depth effects” are described in the UNDP’s 2011 report on social development indicators in the period since the start of transformation:

The Social Exclusion Index shows that people in Central Asia face a particularly high risk of social exclusion. [...] Economic growth has not led to the creation of decent jobs for the large rural populations of Central Asia, leading to widespread underemployment, large concentrations of rural poverty, and the emergence of labour migration – internal and external – as a dominant coping mechanism. Economic exclusion in turn contributes to exclusion from social services, due to the inability of the people with low-incomes to make informal payments, which augment

28 In the boom years from 2004 to 2008, some 500,000-800,000 Kyrgyzstanis, 600,000 Tajikistanis, and more than two million Uzbekistanis left their homelands to search for work. Of these, around 60 per cent of Uzbekistanis, 80 per cent of Kyrgyzstanis, and 90 per cent of Tajikistanis went to work in Russia. In 2008, the estimated total value of remittances sent to Tajikistan amounted to 49 per cent of GDP; in Kyrgyzstan, the figure was 27 per cent; in Uzbekistan, 13 per cent. Their enormous importance becomes clear if one considers that they represent a far greater source of income than official development assistance and foreign direct investment. According to a 2007 survey of economic migrants in several Russian cities, between 17 and 29 per cent of their families at home were wholly dependent on their transfers of money, 35-50 per cent depend on remittances for half their income, and 11-26 per cent for a quarter. Cf. Brigitte Heuer, *Harte Zeiten für Arbeitsmigranten* [Hard Times for Economic Migrants], in: *Zentralasien-Analysen* 27/2010, 29 January 2010, pp. 2-6, here: pp. 2 and 4.

29 As is the case in Tajikistan.

the extremely low shares of GDP spent on health. Economic exclusion is in many cases being passed on to future generations, as urban/rural differences mean, for example, that children are denied access to decent secondary schooling, and may face pressures to stay at home to help with the household. Younger children lack access to pre-school education, which would help give them a good start and make up for disadvantages they may face at subsequent levels of education. Lack of investment in social infrastructure has left rural populations without guaranteed reliable sources of energy, heating, or running water, compounding income and employment insecurities.³⁰

According to this report, 32 per cent of the population of Kazakhstan and 72 per cent in Tajikistan can be described as “socially excluded”.³¹

A large “informal employment sector” has developed, which already accounts for more than 50 per cent of the job market in Central Asia.³² Those who work in it lack formal contracts, insurance, or pension rights. This last factor means that impoverishment will continue to increase in the future. These workers form a class that inhabit socially fragile, slum-like suburbs that surround the urban centres with a potential social “crisis belt” and whose often ethnically mixed population is also a further source of conflict potential.

Youth Problems

The population of the Central Asian states is growing steadily younger. With overall growth currently at 1.7 per cent, 30 per cent of the population is now under 15. This structural problem is becoming acutely apparent in terms of youth unemployment, which, with the exception of Kazakhstan, is estimated to be above 20 per cent.³³ A quarter of the population of Kazakhstan was born after 1991. Children (0-14 years old) and young adults (15-29) make up 33 and 28 per cent of the socially excluded population in Kazakhstan, respectively; and 73 and 72 per cent Tajikistan.³⁴ In 2005, the proportion of children in households with daily per capita consumption below 2.50 US dollars was 90 per cent in Kyrgyzstan, 80 per cent in Uzbekistan, and 75 per cent in Tajikistan.³⁵ Of Tajikistan’s 1.5 million economic migrants, 15-

30 UNDP Regional Development Report, cited above (Note 19), p. 50. The report counts as social exclusion: “poverty, lack of basic competencies, limited employment and educational opportunities, as well as inadequate access to social and community networks and activities.” Ibid., p. 8.

31 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 38.

32 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 25.

33 Cf. Andrea Schmitz/Alexander Wolters, *Revolutionen in Zentralasien?* [Revolution in Central Asia?], in: *Zentralasien-Analysen* 43-44/2011, 29 July 2011, pp. 2-5, here: p. 2.

34 Cf. UNDP Regional Development Report, cited above (Note 19), p. 43.

35 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 18.

29-year-olds make up 53 per cent.³⁶ In the Tajikistani agricultural sector, under-40-year-olds comprise 83.6 per cent of the unemployed.³⁷

An analysis of the situation in Kazakhstan characterizes youth unemployment in the following terms:

Many of the youth unemployed have a university education, often acquired abroad.

Yet no one needs these young specialists. On the one hand, those already established in their fields see them as unnecessary competition. On the other hand, a process of consolidation is underway among the marginalized youth, at least among internal migrants. They have begun to settle in the suburbs of major cities where they are less subject to control. More than 60 thousand migrants of this kind live in the suburbs of Almaty alone. Many of them join radical groups. Recently, it has been observed that young people are increasingly joining pseudo-religious groups – including groups classified as extremist.³⁸

Sociological research in the region has determined that the critical socio-economic situation and increasing archaization of social relations, particularly among young people, has a deformational effect on the value system and the socio-cultural sphere. The weakness of the productive sphere and the high rate of unemployment threaten the position of work as the central source of income and raise the attractiveness of non-productive, parasitical sources of income. “Dependency, compulsion, the absence of a sense of responsibility, vertical hierarchies, authoritarianism, subordination [...] A socio-cultural archaization process is taking place in social relations and the way human life is lived. [...] The impoverishment of the world of work is the social price that we are paying for the reforms.”³⁹

The Political Exclusion of the Majority

The majority of the population was subjected to the sudden irruption of forces outside their control not only in the economic and socio-economic spheres, but also in a political sense. The “masses” received no opportunity to have a democratic voice in the decisions that would determine the socio-political orientation of their young state, the nature of its political system, or in any other reforms. The political management of the transformation processes lay in the hands of forces whose social and political concerns were not conducive to the goal of creating a more just society. The new political power

36 Cf. Khojamakhmad Umarov, *Krisis v Tajikistane* [The Crisis in Tajikistan], Dushanbe 2010, p. 217.

37 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 218.

38 Cf. Syroezhkin, cited above (Note 11), p. 146.

39 Shonazar Shoismatulloev, *Tajikistan v zerkale preemstvennosti i smeny pokoleni* [Tajikistan in the Mirror of Continuity and the Changing Generations], Dushanbe 2008, p. 195.

was, like its Soviet precursor, undemocratic. It proved to be monocentrist, authoritarian, only limitedly pluralistic, lacking an ideology that could forge a national identity, and uninterested in a democratic mobilization of its population to co-determine state-formation processes. In the area of religion, it continued the Soviet conception of secularism. This separated the state from the *religion* followed by its population, in contrast to the European understanding of secularism, which separates the state (state power) from the *church*. The new secular power subjected religious life to its control; it has restricted religious freedom, and tends to see Islamic political figures as opponents. On the whole, these features of the regime made it harder for democratization and political flexibility, which are necessary to reduce inner tension and to create the broadest possible social consensus on central questions of transformation, state formation, and domestic conflict prevention.

The Fragility of the Political System

The fact that the Central Asian political regimes appear as monoliths with features of police states cannot disguise the fact that they are only supported by a narrow section of the population. The development deficits outlined above will inevitably undermine the trust of the population in their governments. According to the UNDP, this is already the case in the region: “People don’t trust [...] government institutions, which are supposed to protect their interests. [...] a lack of trust in institutions leads to a breakdown in the social contract between citizens and the state.”⁴⁰

According to the *habitus* of traditional society, this means that the “social contract” between clans and families, on the one hand, and the state, on the other, has been broken. The social pyramid has, in a way, been reversed, as the holders of political power do not represent the overarching interests of the political community or fulfil the expectations placed in them to create for the former real gains in their quality of life and conditions of reproduction. If the aim of transformation is to replace one type of society with a better one, there is no denying that this has not been achieved.

There are many reasons for this, some of them objective and irresolvable in the short term. But regardless of this, these basic expectations of the political community and the ability or inability of the holders of political power to fulfil them create the fundamental contradiction in the political process. As long as the holders of political power and the political community do not begin to resolve it, the political system will be in a state of latent crisis. This will manifest most strongly where economic weakness, socio-

40 UNDP, Regional Development Report, cited above (Note 19) pp. 3, 32.

economic upheavals, and failings of political leadership overlap and reinforce each other. This already seems to be the case in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.⁴¹

Whether and in what form the crisis is transformed into open conflict depends largely on two factors: First, on the subjective perception of the contradictions and their translation into language that the majority of the political community can relate to; and second, on the balance of power between the conflict parties. The character of the contradictions is also crucial: whether they can be resolved on a peaceful, consensual basis, or are more antagonistic, i.e. based on seeking the exclusion of other parties.

The contradictions concerning the resolution of the *social questions* and the conflicts that can be expected to arise from them can easily have a broad impact on society and may lead to the questioning of fundamental issues, such as the political order and orientation of the state as a whole. This cannot be ruled out in Central Asia with its Muslim majority. The coupling of social protests and religious (i.e. Islamic) values is already well under way. It seems likely to be only a matter of time before political Islam comes into play with language demanding social justice. The mechanisms by which such a development could become manifest are well known: First, the social hopes of the population are expressed in religious guise, to be transformed, in a second stage and under certain conditions, into concrete political goals – the demand for an Islamic state.

A development of this kind would compensate for the fact that, in the Central Asian political scene, there is a shortage of influential social movements, trade unions, and left-wing parties and movements with alternative projects for social justice. Furthermore, the broad appeal of the secular political parties is in any case relatively small and continues to decline.⁴² As a consequence of this, the enormous human protest energy produced in response to the social question benefits political Islam.

41 Youth unemployment in Tajikistan is estimated by local experts to be around 60 per cent. In 2007, 17.4 per cent of the population were unable to meet their basic nutritional requirements. Both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan do poorly in the UNDP's Human Development Index, with Kyrgyzstan placed 126th and Tajikistan 127th of 187 states (with the Democratic Republic of Congo at 187 and Norway at 1); see *UNDP Human Development Index (HDI) – 2011 Rankings*, at: <http://hdr.undp.org/en/statistics>. The Fund for Peace's Failed State Index gives Kyrgyzstan a score of 91.8 (out of a maximum of 120) and places it 31st (of 177 states), while Tajikistan ranks 39th with 88.3 points (the highest position is held by Somalia with 113.4 points, while the least failed state is Finland with a rating of 19.7); see The Fund for Peace's Failed States Index at: <http://www.fundforpeace.org/global/?q=fsi>. Indicators contributing to the overall score include the massive movement of refugees or internally displaced persons, uneven economic development, poverty, and violations of human rights and the rule of law.

42 The UNDP's Regional Development Report concludes: "Participation in any kind of association, club or leisure group is lowest in Central Asia (Tajikistan {21 percent} and Kazakhstan {21 percent} [...]). [...] Six percent of respondents in the Social Inclusion Survey reported taking part in some political party activity (a distant second behind participation in cultural events). Politically active men in Tajikistan [...] account for 14 [...] percent of survey respondents [...]. At 4 percent, Kazakhs reported the lowest participation in political parties. Women are strongly under-represented in political life." UNDP Regional Development Report, cited above (Note 19), pp. 31-32.

The overthrow of two rulers in Kyrgyzstan enriches the political process in Central Asia with new experiences and questions regarding two further fields of conflict: property law and the ability of the rulers to co-ordinate the interests of social (sub-)systems so as to reduce the likelihood of conflict.

The Property Question

The conclusive and constitutionally guaranteed de facto protection of ownership is a key conflict factor among the Central Asian elites. In the region, the de jure legalization of private property by no means guarantees de facto ownership rights. These depend critically on tolerance from the authorities. Arbitrary expropriation by “interested” members of the ruling class is still the norm. In Kazakhstan, a sociological study found that 56 per cent of entrepreneurs were unhappy with their dependence on the ruling political elite.⁴³ In Kyrgyzstan, the assumption of power by the second president Bakiev led to the large-scale confiscation and redistribution of property.⁴⁴ This type of conflict has become a highly contentious political issue owing to the intertwining of political and economic power. This is because, in the two revolutions in Kyrgyzstan, the simultaneous, well-nigh “automatic” loss of political rule *and* economic property – for the first time in Central Asia – resulted in genuine form of political competition and fragmentation both within and between the elites. The extent to which this new reality has encouraged the holders of political power to consider how they will secure at least their economic property remains uncertain. It may therefore be assumed that the new bourgeoisie as a whole would be prepared to agree to uphold the principle of the separability of political and economic power, which has already become the norm, if only in the form of a set of universally applicable ground rules. If this should not prove feasible, the property issue will not only continue to have the power to divide the elite, it could also mushroom into a genuine conflict.

Co-ordinating the Interests of Social (Sub-)Systems

With the abolition of the presidential system and the transition to parliamentarianism, the group that came to power in Kyrgyzstan in 2010 drew the consequences of the failure to resolve the conflict of interests between the regional elites of northern and southern Kyrgyzstan by peaceful means. The previous presidents, Akaev (from the north) and Bakiev (from the south) had failed to deal with this, which had led to two coups d'état – one by the south against the north, one in the opposite direction. This raised an issue of general regional relevance: the tendency for the formation of “individual centres

43 Cf. Syroezhkin, cited above (Note 11), p. 133.

44 Cf. Omarov, cited above (Note 14), p. 213. The same phenomenon was observed in Ukraine during Yulia Tymoshenko's short tenure as prime minister.

of gravity with pretensions of socially rooted validity. [This] threatens to upset the balance between the various centres and leads to conflicts of interests between nearly all the groups within the political establishment. As a consequence of this, the political landscape, which had appeared rather homogeneous up to now, will, in view of the lack of regulated succession mechanisms, be transformed into an arena for conflicts of interest and rivalry between groups and alliances.”⁴⁵

By raising the question of the coherence of the political regimes of Central Asia, the Kyrgyzstani decision placed a critical issue on the Central Asian and European political agenda, and particularly the agenda of the OSCE. This is especially true if we bear in mind that the states of the OSCE region committed themselves in 1990 to “to build, consolidate and strengthen democracy as the only system of government”.⁴⁶

This creates a dilemma: On the one hand, the West is not happy with the form of the presidential regimes in Central Asia, which do not conform to its understanding of democracy. On the other, these regimes appear to clash with the specific nature of the traditional organization of their own societies. The Central Asian regimes are thus caught in a bind both domestically and internationally.

Central Asia specialists already expressed their doubts about the choice between presidential and parliamentary forms of government under Central Asian conditions in their analyses of the 2010 change of regime in Kyrgyzstan: “For the still relatively weak states of Central Asia, the presidential form of government, with its concentration of power in the hands of the head of state and the lack of a system of separate powers and counter-powers, has proved less than optimal. However, precisely evaluating the pros and cons of presidential and parliamentary republics is extremely difficult. For all the negative aspects of presidential government, furnishing the parliament with greater powers would – in view of the fragmentation of society, inevitable conflicts of interest, and electoral manipulation – make a country ungovernable.”⁴⁷

On the other hand, the current situation in which power is monopolized by societal minorities intensifies the contradiction inherent in the “pyramid” between the obligations of the ruler towards society as a whole (responsibility “for the physical and material security of the body politic”⁴⁸) and the permanent competition and mistrust between the sub-systems of the political community and towards the holders of power. The traditional system corres-

45 Syroezhkin, cited above (Note 11), p. 189.

46 Charter of Paris for a New Europe, Paris, 21 November 1990, in: Arie Bloed, (ed.), *The Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe. Analysis and Basic Documents, 1972-1993*, Dordrecht 1993, pp. 537-566, here: p. 537.

47 Arne Seifert/Irina Zvyagelskaja, *Razvitie politicheskoi situatsii v gosudarstvakh Tsentralnoi Azii v kontekste transformatsii* [The Development of the Political Situation in Central Asian States within the Context of Transformation], Moscow 2010, pp. 9-10.

48 Jung, cited above (Note 16), p. 141.

ponded to these two different directions of tension, which mutually exclude and complement each other and, in fact, embody a specific variety of powers and counter-powers by means of informal, not (yet) institutionalized mechanisms for the co-ordination of interests (“*Mahalla*” and other forms of consultation) between clans, extended families, tribes, and recognized leaders. In this way, a “social contract” on key strategic questions came into being, which could claim to be grounded in and legitimized by traditional structures. By contrast, the current situation, in which power is more or less monopolized by a minority, turns this system on its head, provokes the social habitus of the traditional society, and robs it of its “natural” ability to manage conflicts.

This raises the question of the “strong state” – an indispensable precondition for the management of the complex transformation and state-formation process – its character and compatibility with democracy, and the specifics of the latter’s implementation in Central Asia. The answer can be found in the expression “strong state” itself. Under the given circumstances, this has to be a regime that is capable of placing the “pyramid” back on its feet, i.e. on a broad social base. An “intermediary” system of government is most likely to be able to do this. It would have to be in a position to create constitutionally well grounded mechanisms for compromise between the sub-systems and the political regime. That would have the advantage of taking into account the transitional nature of society, in which traditional and emerging bourgeois forms of socialization coexist and come into conflict. This would open the way to a form of representative democracy specific to Central Asia while also preparing society to take this step. Thanks to its mechanism of compromise, it would have the advantage of being able to react flexibly to social tensions. In an evolutionary process of this kind, a style of government can develop that is more focused on the interests of the political community, which will also affect the character of political rule – away from direct, authoritarian interventions in society, from a single source of power (based on particular interests), and from the autonomy of the state. “As a result, transparent ground rules emerge, politics become more open, and society’s control of its rulers improves. A process of this kind increases the legitimacy of power and property, gives the political system an injection of energy, and raises the stability of the country. Society is empowered to contribute to solving existing problems and thus assumes its share of responsibility for the future of the country.”⁴⁹

49 Syroezhkin, cited above (Note 11), p. 156.