

U.S. Urges Democratic Reform in Central Asia

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WASHINGTON — The United States is using the recent uprisings in the Middle East to make the case to authoritarian Central Asian states to undertake democratic reform, the top U.S. diplomat for the region said.

Robert Blake, assistant secretary of state for South and Central Asia, said late last week that Kyrgyzstan held free and fair elections in October but other governments in the region remain "suspicious of democracy."

Blake said the United States cooperates with Central Asian governments on issues including counter-terrorism and counter-narcotics, and over the past year has instituted a strategic dialogue with each country. They have "good conversations" on the issues of democracy, human rights and religious freedom, but have not made much progress in encouraging democratic change other than in Kyrgyzstan.

He told a congressional hearing that the United States is trying to "leverage" the situations in Tunisia and Egypt in its dialogues to make the case that "all of them need to be sure that

their political and economic systems respond to the aspirations of their young people, and that they address things like corruption."

He said governments retain tight controls because of the volatile situation in Afghanistan. He said they are also concerned that they could face ethnic unrest like Kyrgyzstan — which has been tense since last summer, when more than 400 people were killed in clashes between ethnic Kyrgyz and minority Uzbeks in the south of the country.

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