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Riches, Fear Ensure Central Asia Stability

By Robin Paxton

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Kazakhstan, with a little over 3 percent of global recoverable oil reserves, is the biggest Central Asian economy. **Daniel Acker**

ALMATY, Kazakhstan — Central Asia's authoritarian leaders, having crushed dissent during decades in power, are likely to use a mixture of oil and gas revenues, repression and cosmetic reforms to meet any threat of Egyptian-style protests.

Few in the strategic region, which covers an area twice the size of Saudi Arabia, expect their entrenched and aging leaders to succumb to the wave of public anger sweeping parts of the Arab world.

However, in a region riven by ethnic tensions and poverty, where one country — Kyrgyzstan — has twice overthrown a president, authorities would be remiss in ignoring this warning, political analysts and opposition politicians say.

“The most important lesson? Don’t take your country to the brink,” said Mukhiddin Kabiri, chairman of the opposition Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan.

Authoritarian presidents rule four of the five ex-Soviet states in Central Asia, a resource-rich and majority Muslim region, which serves as a key supply conduit for U.S. military operations in Afghanistan.

Kazakhstan holds slightly more than 3 percent of the world’s recoverable oil reserves, while the world’s fourth-largest reserves of natural gas lie under the desert of Turkmenistan.

These resources generate prosperity. Kazakhstan, the region’s largest economy, boasts per capita gross domestic product of more than $9,000, four times that of Egypt.

In Ashgabat, capital of Turkmenistan, low utility bills help appease a population in a country where political dissent is not tolerated. “We have free gas, water and lighting,” said Aibibi, 34, a bookseller in an Ashgabat market.

Inflation remains a region-wide threat. Unrest in Kyrgyzstan led to a colossal 19.2 percent surge in prices last year, while in Kazakhstan food prices rose 3 percent in January alone. Turkmen pensioner Gulsenem, 57, said, “To cook with our free gas, we also need meat — and that’s becoming more expensive.”

The riches of Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan can be spread among relatively small populations, but Uzbekistan, a top-10 world gold miner and major cotton exporter, is home to 28 million people.

State figures portray a robust economy and the International Monetary Fund forecast 8 percent GDP growth in 2010. However, perhaps nowhere in Central Asia are fear and repression more apparent.

President Islam Karimov, 73, says tough measures are needed to curb the threat of Islamist militancy. Human rights activists speak of religious persecution and torture.

Mukhammad Salikh, 61, stood against Karimov in a 1991 election. He now lives in exile in Norway.

“The danger of a social explosion has not only existed for the last 20 years. It has grown bigger with every year,” Salikh said in a recent interview with Ferghana News Agency, a private, Russian-language agency covering Central Asian affairs.

Could an “explosion” take place in Uzbekistan, immune to Western criticism of its rights record, where state television is strictly controlled and a mainly rural population has limited access to the Internet? United Nations data show 36 percent of Uzbekistan’s population is urbanized, compared with 43 percent in Egypt. In Tunisia, whose president was ousted in a popular uprising in January, the figure is 67 percent.

Fear is a strong deterrent to would-be demonstrators. Uzbek government troops shot into crowds that took to the streets of Andijan in 2005. Witnesses say hundreds were killed.

In Tajikistan, protests in Dushanbe in 1992 lit the fuse for a five-year civil war in which tens

of thousands of people were killed. Taxi driver Turakul, 55, would rather swallow his discontent with President Emomali Rakhmon than risk a repetition. “I’ll never go out on the streets,” he said. “I have food on the table and my four sons work in Russia. We’ll tolerate this as long as we have our small wages.”

Tajikistan, where the average monthly wage of $80 is less than one-sixth of that in Kazakhstan, relies heavily on remittances from about 1 million migrant workers. Many young men, the core demographic for protest, live abroad in Russia.

Zardusht Alizade, an independent analyst in Baku, Azerbaijan, said developments in Moscow are more likely to define the direction of post-Soviet states than events in the Middle East.

“If people in Russia decide to raise their voices against the ruling elite, there will be a chain reaction,” he said.

Kyrgyzstan is the odd man out in Central Asia. The overthrow of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev last April was its second revolt in five years. As political tension simmers, the country is experimenting with the region’s first parliamentary democracy.

Widely acknowledged to have the region’s most politically active population, Kyrgyzstan had a vibrant opposition ready to seize on discontent with the pervasive cronyism of Bakiyev’s rule. A sudden rise in utility bills was the last straw.

“How do you grab power in Kyrgyzstan? Gather your relatives, friends and the unemployed. Regional frictions become revolutionary movements where there is no premise but the hatred of authority,” said Bishkek-based analyst Toktogul Kakchikeyev.

By comparison, political activism elsewhere is muted. Uzbek and Turkmen dissidents voice their opposition from abroad. Some countries, perhaps pre-empting the risk of popular discontent, have taken steps toward reform.

In Kazakhstan, 70-year-old President Nursultan Nazarbayev called snap elections after rejecting a referendum to let him rule unopposed for a third decade, winning U.S. praise.

In Turkmenistan, where schoolchildren and workers still line the streets to greet Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov, the president has given a superficial nod to democracy by advocating the creation of an opposition party.

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