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## MAKING A ROD FOR HIS OWN BACKFIRE

The recent massacre in Uzbekistan has prompted enquiries into President Karimov’s authoritarian and anti-Muslim policies and the potential for such policies to backfire.

The exact death toll may never be known but it already seems probable that the massacre in the Uzbek city of Andijan on 13 May this year will go down as the bloodiest since the Soviet Union’s Central Asian Republics gained independence in 1991.<sup>1</sup> In a country where anti-government sentiments are rife, the indiscriminate killing of unarmed civilians, seen as unjust and disproportionate,<sup>2</sup> has fuelled even greater antagonism. All things considered there is considerable potential for this recent massacre to backfire against President Karimov’s authoritarian regime.

On 13 May some 10,000 innocent civilians<sup>3</sup> demonstrating against Karimov’s authoritarian rule<sup>4</sup> were fired upon indiscriminately by Uzbek soldiers and paramilitary units. The bloodshed in Andijan followed months of peaceful protests over the unlawful unrest of 23 local businessmen falsely accused of membership to the banned Hizb-ut-Tahrir (Party of Liberation)<sup>5</sup> which Karimov believes has ties to

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<sup>1</sup> TOL, *Uzbekistan: A Valley Runs with Blood*, CIAO Week in Review, May 10-16, 2005, [http://www.ciaonet.org.ezproxy.uow.edu.au:2048/pbei/tol/tol\\_2005/may10-may16/may10-may16b.html](http://www.ciaonet.org.ezproxy.uow.edu.au:2048/pbei/tol/tol_2005/may10-may16/may10-may16b.html), visited 27/9/05.

<sup>2</sup> Conditions for backfire as defined by Brian Martin are “an action perceived as unjust, unfair, excessive or disproportional and communication channels.” (STS390 class Week 2). Martin is one of the originators of “backfire theory”, which analyses the political forces at play in cases where repression or injustice inflicted on vulnerable groups in society “backfires” against the perpetrators of the injustice. According to Martin’s theory, authorities commonly use five distinct methods to prevent injustice backfiring: cover-up, devaluing the target, re-interpreting events, using official channels and using intimidation and bribery.

<sup>3</sup> Exact numbers are difficult to determine but many sources have quoted the number of demonstrators as being roughly 10,000.

<sup>4</sup> Although Uzbekistan is technically a republic the political situation is that it is effectively under authoritarian rule. Democratic processes are prohibited and there are explicit limits on assembly, association, press speech and religion. Security and police forces are responsible for serious abuses, deaths and torture. The judicial system allows for arbitrary arrests and police bribery and corruption are widespread. Censorship is widely practiced, there is no truly independent media and journalists representing Western media organisations are frequently harassed and intimidated.

<sup>5</sup> This organisation, like the IMU, seeks to impose an Islamic state in Central Asia, however, does not promote violence in achieving this goal.

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the larger Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU).<sup>6</sup> The arrest of these men in June 2004 was followed by the closure of their businesses and the seizure of their assets<sup>7</sup> which resulted in a large number of citizens becoming unemployed in the already densely populated and poverty-stricken Ferghana Valley.<sup>8</sup> When tried in February this year they were imprisoned on charges of religious extremism.<sup>9</sup>

Whilst an armed group had attacked the local prison, freed over 2000 inmates overnight on the 12-13 May<sup>10</sup> and occupied government buildings, those thousands of civilians fired upon were unarmed, innocent civilians who had turned out in support of a number of causes related to Karimov's repressive regime including the use of the international war on terrorism to justify further clampdowns on religious and political dissent and the arbitrary arrest of suspected 'terrorists'.<sup>11</sup>

The first official news of the violence came on 14 May when Karimov held a press conference insisting that the police operation against the 'rebels', 'bandits' and 'armed criminals'<sup>12</sup> had done all they could to avoid bloodshed and that only nine people had been killed.<sup>13</sup> The official death toll was increased to 169 by 18 May.<sup>14</sup> Independent sources, however, estimate that the civilian death toll could be as high as

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<sup>6</sup> The IMU was officially created in 1998 calling for a Jihad to topple President Karimov, however its roots go back to the early 1990s when a number of religious groups and parties emerged following the collapse of the USSR. Following the bombings in the Uzbek capital Tashkent on February 16, 1999, Karimov's government has seen the IMU and other opposition organisations as a direct challenge to their authority. As a consequence repression of opposition has followed. The ideology adopted by the IMU is militant pan-Islamism and the organisation has a very wide support base and is active throughout Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The group operates largely in the Ferghana Valley. It hopes for a domino effect throughout Central Asia if Karimov is toppled. They received critical support from the Taliban and have been financed by Osama bin Laden.

<sup>7</sup> Vulliamy, Ed, *Death in Bobur Square*, The Guardian, 13 September, 2005, from website <http://www.guardian.co.uk/g2/story/0,3604,1568514,00.html>, visited 26/9/05.

<sup>8</sup> Sheila Heslin, *Assessing Central Asia's Role in the Anti-terror Campaign*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Watch #562, September 26, 2001, [http://www.ciaonet.org.ezproxy.uow.edu.au:2048/pbei/winep/policy\\_2001/hes06.html](http://www.ciaonet.org.ezproxy.uow.edu.au:2048/pbei/winep/policy_2001/hes06.html), visited 27/9/05.

<sup>9</sup> Ed Vulliamy, *Death in Bobur Square*, op. cit.

<sup>10</sup> Bukharbayeva, Bagila, Uzbek protesters killed as soldiers attack, Associated Press, May 13, 2005, <http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory?id=756816>, visited 4/10/05.

<sup>11</sup> Since coming to power in 1991 President Karimov has increasingly stepped up his anti-Muslim stance resulting in increased repression, harassment and torture. Focus has centred on the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), an ally of the Taliban, and the Hizb-ut-Tahrir (Party of Liberation), an unregistered Islamic organisation. The fact that Uzbekistan became a strategic partner to the United States after 11 September 2001 has, according to some human rights organisations such as Human Rights Watch, led the US government to turn a blind eye to rights abuses in Uzbekistan. In 2003 there were 6000 political and religious prisoners recorded (ICG report No.59 July 2003).

<sup>12</sup> Devaluing the target is one of the five key methods used to inhibit outrage in backfire theory as defined by Brian Martin. Terms such as "rebels", "bandits", "extremists" and "armed criminals" were frequently employed by government representatives to describe the innocent, unarmed civilians demonstrating basic democratic rights. Attempts to devalue the targets failed miserably as local Uzbeks knew the 23 businessmen too well to believe such claims. Furthermore, there have been so many cases in the past where Karimov has falsely arrested people for association with so-called terrorist groups that people are tired of Karimov simply using the anti-terrorist agenda as a means of suppressing opposition to his regime.

<sup>13</sup> TOL, *Uzbekistan: A Valley Runs with Blood*, op.cit.

<sup>14</sup> Reinterpretation of events such as the doctoring of official death tolls is another method used to inhibit outrage, however, in this case, due to the number of eye-witnesses such fabrications have only been met with further hostility, thus not inhibiting outrage at all.

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750 men, women and children<sup>15</sup> which is supported by the fact that it took three days to clear away all the corpses.<sup>16</sup> There are also many eyewitness accounts that security forces went around methodically afterwards finishing off the injured.<sup>17</sup>

The official story presented by the Uzbek government was that a group of armed religious extremists had tried to promote an Islamist coup in Andijan. These ‘terrorists’ had seized government buildings, taken hostages, murdered officials, and finally initiated a violent confrontation with the security forces that surrounded them. Karimov denied any military or internal troop involvement in the event despite the presence of soldiers and tanks.<sup>18</sup> He has also refused an international inquiry into the bloodletting and closed his borders to human rights organisations and journalists wanting to investigate the massacre.<sup>19</sup> On 25 May 2005 Karimov stated "Our view, my view, and our government's view is that we think that the idea of setting up an international commission on investigating the Andijan events is groundless, and we will never agree to this."<sup>20</sup>

The Uzbek government not only reinterpreted the events of 13 May but carried out one of the most calculated propaganda schemes since the cold war. Uzbek authorities maintained a virtual blockade on news coverage of the event and expelled journalists from the town in order to obstruct foreign television news broadcasts.<sup>21</sup> Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty reported on May 14 that news broadcasts on Russian television channels carried by Uzbek cable were replaced either by still pictures or entertainment programs.<sup>22</sup> In response to journalists’ questions about restrictions on visiting Andijan, Karimov stated “Be patient, and you will find out everything you want.”<sup>23</sup> Sorry Mr Karimov but to date we still have many unanswered questions.

In the weeks after the massacre many individual reporters and specific organisations became targets of harassment and torture.<sup>24</sup> Several human rights activists who provided accounts of the events in Andijan were detained and subsequently charged with defamation and the “preparation or distribution of materials that pose a threat to

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<sup>15</sup> Human Rights First, *Uzbekistan: Stop Arresting Defenders for Reporting on Andijan Massacre*, 1 June 2005, [http://www.humanrightsfirst.org/defenders/hrd\\_uzbekistan/alert060105\\_andijan.htm](http://www.humanrightsfirst.org/defenders/hrd_uzbekistan/alert060105_andijan.htm), visited 4/10/05.

<sup>16</sup> Ed Vulliamy, *Death in Bobur Square*, op. cit.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid*

<sup>18</sup> Here we can see how the Karimov government has used both cover up and reinterpretations of the events, two of the five key methods used to inhibit outrage in backfire theory. These methods were used extensively by the Karimov government.

<sup>19</sup> Further cover up. This decision also resulted in further international furore over the event and poorer US-Uzbek relations.

<sup>20</sup> Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Factbox: Andijan Timeline, <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2005/09/43b12bfb-5f71-48cf-80c9-d712dce4855e.html>, visited 30/9/05.

<sup>21</sup> Kimmage, Daniel, Uzbekistan: Andijan and the ‘Information War’, September 11, 2005, [http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/civilsociety/articles/pp091105\\_pr.shtml](http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/civilsociety/articles/pp091105_pr.shtml), visited 4/10/05.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid*

<sup>23</sup> Alikov, Azamat, *Uzbekistan: Uncivil Clashes*, CIAO Week in Review, May 17-23, 2005, [http://www.ciaonet.org.ezproxy.uow.edu.au:2048/pbei/tol/tol\\_2005/may17-may23/may17-may23b.html](http://www.ciaonet.org.ezproxy.uow.edu.au:2048/pbei/tol/tol_2005/may17-may23/may17-may23b.html), visited 27/9/05.

<sup>24</sup> For example in early August, the US-based media organisation Internews announced that a court in Tashkent had convicted two of its Uzbek employees of a conspiracy to produce TV programming illegally.

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security.”<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, the Karimov regime is continuing to harass, arrest and torture the families of the 439 refugees who have since fled Uzbekistan.<sup>26</sup>

The trial of twelve Uzbek citizens and three Kyrgyz citizens accused of organizing the May uprising in Andijan, Uzbekistan, opened in Tashkent on September 15. The fifteen defendants have been accused of terrorism, murder, taking hostages, trying to organize an anti-constitutional coup, and receiving \$200,000 from Islamists to organize an armed uprising. If found guilty, the defendants could face long jail terms and possibly the death penalty.<sup>27</sup> Many have compared these to Soviet-era show trials<sup>28</sup> and have accused the government of torturing them into publicly admitting to crimes they did not commit.<sup>29</sup>

Karimov regularly cites or implies the threat of Islamic extremism, radicalism or terrorism to justify many of his harsh policies. However, what he seems to have failed to realise is that in denying his citizens basic human rights and subjecting them to a horribly repressive regime with practically no opportunities to participate in political life is pushing more and more Uzbeks to join the ranks of Islamic groups promising to deliver justice.

The impact of repression is not simple. In some cases it frightens people but in many cases it merely radicalises people to fight back. In the case of Uzbekistan it seems repression is encouraging people to fight back. Thus if Karimov continues along the repressive path he is currently on then he will only continue to build a rod for his own back by breeding more of the type of people he aims to quash.

In the wake of the massacre in Andijan, we can only hope that the threat of backfire may cause Karimov, and other nations, to re-examine their authoritarian policies and use of anti-terrorist speak simply to target Muslims, minority groups or other groups they wish to persecute. After the recent transfer of power to the long-time opposition in Kyrgyzstan, many experts predict a domino effect in the region. The events in Andijan have shown that the people are willing to fight back and may be the final warning Karimov gets before backfire gets the better of him.

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<sup>25</sup> Kimmage, op. cit.

<sup>26</sup> Many of these refugees are being temporarily housed in Romania.

<sup>27</sup> Rotar, Igor, *Andijan trial opens in Tashkent with shaky government case*, published by the Jamestown Foundation, 4 October 2005, [http://jamestown.org/edm/article.php?article\\_id=2370300m](http://jamestown.org/edm/article.php?article_id=2370300m), visited 10/10/05.

<sup>28</sup> EurasiaNet, *Beyond Doubt: Human Rights Groups Document the Andijan Massacre and Cover-up*, posted 20 September 2005, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/civilsociety/articles/eav092005.shtml>, visited 4/10/05. The use of formal channels is another of the five key methods used to inhibit outrage in backfire theory as they give the appearance of dispensing justice.

<sup>29</sup> Intimidation and bribery is another of the five key methods used to inhibit outrage in backfire theory and whilst already being systemic in Uzbekistan, according to UN rapporteur Theo van Boven, was used even more extensively by the Karimov government following the attacks of 13 May.

### Wake up and smell the roses

Karimov must face up to the facts. His greatest threat is not radical Islamic movements but large-scale anti-government dissent resulting from his draconian political, social and economic policies. Andijan was not about terrorism as he claims, but rather about his inability to do anything about the country's low living standards, increasing economic instability<sup>30</sup>, rampant human rights abuses and widespread repression.<sup>31</sup> As Ed Vulliamy made clear ("Making a rod for his own backfire", 24/9) Karimov is willing to do all he can, including killing his own people, to remain in power. However, this will only buy him time. If Karimov wants to stay in power he must replace his authoritarian Soviet-like<sup>32</sup> regime with a truly democratic one that gives space for legitimate political opposition and broad-based public participation in politics. If he thinks otherwise he is only deluding himself.

- Fiona Hill, Senior Fellow, The Brookings Institution

### Where do I sign up?

Backfire and blowback are issues which have slowly been given a keener eye in international political circles. The recent events in Andijan have given rise to even greater anti-government sentiments and have proved to be the best recruiter radicals could hope for. Karimov, like the US, must be careful not to create more bin Ladens in his attempt to root out bin Laden himself. Karimov, like many others, has used the war on terror as justification for human rights abuses and extensive political and religious repression. In a Muslim-majority country this only fosters the radicalisation of Islamist movements and galvanises popular support behind them. Instead of subduing extremists, he is inciting them.

- Lawrence Uzzell, human rights activist

### Where's the support?

In Andijan, Karimov was merely testing the international community to see what he can get away with when viewed as a critical partner in the war on terror. Since the attacks, Russia and China have upped support for Karimov and whilst the EU's condemnation has been stronger than that of the US, there's hardly been a ripple on the international scene. Focus continues to be on the war on terror and Andijan merely part of the collateral damage. We cannot let this become another forgotten massacre. If we let Karimov get away with this then he and others will only continue with such injustices. The Uzbek people cannot conquer this tyrant on their own, they need international support. This support cannot be a matter of if, but when, or else we risk assuming a complicit role in the ongoing repression.

- Craig Murray, Britain's former Ambassador to Uzbekistan

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<sup>30</sup> The Uzbek economy has been strangled by drought, falling cotton prices and the lowest level of foreign investment per capita in Central Asia.

<sup>31</sup> Torture, corruption and repression are widespread and the state actively targets political dissidents and Muslims who worship outside state controls.

<sup>32</sup> Karimov was the former head of the Uzbek Communist Party. Despite gaining independence in 1991, Uzbekistan has retained much of its Soviet legacy. For example it has no independent political parties, no free and fair elections and no independent news media.

Uzbekistan President Mohammad Solih and Ed Vulliamy  
13 May 2011, Tashkent, Uzbekistan

President Mohammad Solih<sup>33</sup> and Ed Vulliamy<sup>34</sup> are sitting opposite each other talking over coffee following the 5 year anniversary proceedings celebrating the toppling of President Karimov.

**Ed Vulliamy:** Thank you for inviting me to this momentous occasion.

**Mohammad Solih:** It is my pleasure, Ed, to share in the celebrations of one of the most important political victories in decades. After all, your story *Death in Bobur Square* greatly assisted our struggle against Karimov by revealing to the world the truth about his frightful authoritarian rule. Six years on, Ed, I must ask you why you chose to write this powerful piece and became so passionate about our struggle.

**Ed Vulliamy:** After reporting for four years on the war on terror I had been exposed to many stories on about ‘war’ but felt that Central Asia had been sidelined from mainstream media coverage. Backfire theory had long interested me and whilst much had been written about the potential for US anti-terrorist policies to backfire, very little had been written about the potential for this to occur in Central Asia, the home of the Taliban, Al Qaeda, the IMU<sup>35</sup> and other militant pan-Islamic organisations. My interest in this had led *The Guardian* to post me in the Ferghana Valley in 2003 to report on issues in Central Asia. When the massacre occurred in Bobur Square I was there on the ground and in the perfect position to piece together a range of eyewitness accounts, including my own.

**Mohammad Solih:** Considering the attacks on journalists in the area you were very brave to remain in the area and continue interviewing eyewitnesses. At what point did you leave Andijan and how did you get your information about ongoing events there after this time?

**Ed Vulliamy:** *The Guardian’s* policies to protect employees required me to re-station myself in Kyrgyzstan on May 15. I was among over 500 refugees who fled Andijan and spoke to many witnesses at this time. By the end of July, 439 of these refugees had been moved to temporary living quarters in Romania but the heat over the issue had not died down. Whilst the mainstream press continued to provide little coverage of the event there was an extensive and ever-growing amount of electronic media resources which I used for my ongoing writings including *Making A Rod For His Own Backfire* published later the same year. Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International wrote extensively on the issue and issued two very powerful reports. The 73-page Human Rights Watch report titled *Burying The Truth: Uzbekistan Rewrites the Story of the Andijan Massacre* and the Amnesty International report titled *Lifting the Siege on the Truth about Andijan* were both well-researched and well-written reports which proved to be integral in raising global awareness of the Andijan

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<sup>33</sup> Mohammad Solih was the head of the banned opposition party Erk. He was exiled and lived outside Uzbekistan for a decade before becoming President of Uzbekistan in 2006 following the fall of Karimov during the Blue Revolution.

<sup>34</sup> Ed Vulliamy published *Death in Bobur Square* in *The Guardian*, 13 September, 2005. He then continued to cover the subsequent events in Uzbekistan.

<sup>35</sup> Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan.

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massacre and thus the eventual support for the toppling of the Karimov regime. Other key sources of information came from EurasiaNet, Columbia International Affairs Online, Forum 18, the Brookings Institution, and The Institute for War and Peace Reporting, to name a few. I was also in contact with other journalists present in Bobur Square such as Balima Bukharbayeva of the Institute for War and Peace Reporting and Marcus Bensmann, a German freelance reporter. One of the most shocking things I found in all my research though was that due to the lack of coverage of the massacre in mainstream media circles the general population, including all my family and friends back home, had no idea that the massacre had even happened.

**Mohammad Solih:** Even where I was living in Kyrgyzstan at the time I had the same problem. People just didn't know about Andijan at all, and if you didn't know it had happened in the first place you wouldn't go researching it on the internet anyway.

**Ed Vulliamy:** No that's right. In fact I remember one of my friends in Australia writing to me and telling me that she had actually read the story unexpectedly four months after the even in her local newspaper<sup>36</sup> but had found nothing in the national papers.

**Mohammad Solih:** Sometimes I wonder about mainstream media's priorities you know. As a journalist trying to piece together eyewitness accounts, electronic media and government reports how did you compensate for contradictory accounts of the massacre.

**Ed Vulliamy:** Having reported from Central Asia since 2003 I had gained a lot of insight into the way the media was run, especially the links between the Russian and Uzbek media services. At the time there was no legal independent news media in Uzbekistan which resulted in a general vacuum of information. Those who had access to cable television used Russian news bulletins as their information source. However, on the day of the massacre, Russian broadcasts were stopped in the country. Neither the local or national television reported any of the events. Two national channels broadcast films about the life of sea fauna and happy life in Uzbekistan itself. The situation was very Orwellian, very Soviet. The months following the massacre resulted in an 'information war', to quote Karimov himself, and provided some of the best examples of propaganda since the Cold War.

**Mohammad Solih:** Yes, I remember how the official story presented by the government was that a group of armed religious extremists tried to promote an Islamist coup in Andijan and that these so-called terrorists had connections to bin Laden and Al Qaeda.

**Ed Vulliamy:** Despite being sentenced to the death penalty, we know now that these people had no terrorist links but were merely citizens trying to bring about political and economic justice in a corrupt and repressive regime.

**Mohammad Solih:** What a completely different image of the attackers the latter description paints. Ed, whilst there was a lot of information out there about the

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<sup>36</sup> A copy of Ed Vulliamy's report *Death in Bobur Square* was published in The Illawarra Mercury on 17 September 2005, titled *The massacre the world forgot*. All credit for the story was given to Ed Vulliamy, *The Guardian*.

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massacre very few people chose to write about the event in relation to the backfire theory framework of Dr Brian Martin.<sup>37</sup> Whilst I knew that the massacre in Bobur Square would inevitably arouse further anti-Karimov sentiments thus increasing the likelihood of a revolution, using the backfire theory framework really helped make sense of the whole event. Over the past six years I think backfire theory has become as prominent as the New World Order theories of Noam Chomsky<sup>38</sup>, Stephen Kaposi<sup>39</sup> and others. Wouldn't you agree?

**Ed Vulliamy:** Yes, I would have to agree that since the war on terror began that backfire theory has become increasingly employed in international political speak. I remember talking to Craig Murray, Britain's former ambassador to Uzbekistan,<sup>40</sup> about the lack of understanding of the backfire process early in 2004. We both agreed that at the time too little attention was given to the potential of backfire when coordinating foreign policy. Since the start of 2005, Uzbeks had become increasingly bold in protesting against the government's authoritarian rule. The Tulip Revolution in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan in March 2005 seemed to have heightened Karimov's sense of political insecurity and yet he failed to adjust his course to quell anti-government sentiment. Instead he unleashed a 'military/counter-terrorist operation' against unarmed civilian protestors who had gathered to call for economic and social justice. In all honesty I think he thought that brutal force, fear and repression would bring dissent to end. Not the best long-term approach is it Mohammad.

**Mohammad Solih:** Definitely not.

**Ed Vulliamy:** I think Karimov's downfall revealed to many the need to assess the potential for backfire and how to better manage internal and external dissent in order to avoid outrage from occurring.

**Mohammad Solih:** Yes. In particular I think that Karimov's downfall forced the US to rethink its own policies in the war on terror especially the problem of fighting a war on terror and promoting democracy at the same time.

**Ed Vulliamy:** Indeed. I think in many ways the massacre in Andijan also backfired on the US because although Uzbekistan was an important ally in the war on terror, it had an appalling human rights record which the US tended to ignore due to its priorities on the war on terror. Unfortunately, such policies only discredit the US and put into question the legitimacy of its actions. By failing to condemn the Karimov regime the US was increasingly criticised of propping up brutal regimes in its war on terror. By the end of 2005 many countries had withdrawn troops from Iraq and public support for the US had decreased dramatically which became evident when many of its proposals were challenged at the UN Summit in New York in September that year.

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<sup>37</sup>This theory has been explained in detail in *Making a rod for his own backfire*.

<sup>38</sup>Chomsky has written many books on this topic including *World Orders Old and New* (1996)

<sup>39</sup>Kaposi's publications on this topic include *The New World Order: Project for the New American Empire* (2004)

<sup>40</sup>Craig Murray made headlines when he spoke out publicly about Uzbekistan's poor human rights record. He accused the US for helping prop up a brutal regime and was subsequently suspended from his post in October 2004. He has since resigned from his position with the British Foreign Office.

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**Mohammad Solih:** Viewing the radical Islamist threat as primarily a military problem requiring a military response will not mitigate the threat. You cannot fight fire with fire, instead you need to reach people at the grass roots level if you are to bring about any long-term solutions.

**Ed Vulliamy:** Indeed. I would like to underscore the fact that although there is certainly a link between terrorism and religious extremism in Central Asia, much of the extremism that we have seen is fueled by the radicalization of politics in the region rather than by political Islam. I would suggest that harsh government repression of dissent is as much, if not more of, a threat to Central Asian stability today and in the immediate future as the radical Islamic movements that have developed indigenously or moved into the region.

**Mohammad Solih:** I totally agree. I remember that this was one of the big topics of discussion when on 20 July 2005, for the first time in 15 years, representatives of the various Uzbek opposition parties and unregistered movements<sup>41</sup> met in Alexandria, Virginia, to discuss a common strategy for achieving a democratic revolution.<sup>42</sup>

**Ed Vulliamy:** Yes, it was quite an historical event.

**Mohammad Solih:** And a very successful one in which a cooperative strategy was formulated that saw us collectively topple the Karimov regime by peaceful means in May the following year. When President George Bush asserted in 2003 that people across the Caucasus and Central Asia “are demanding their freedom – and they will have it.”<sup>43</sup> Seven years on, this has become a reality, no thanks to Bush of course.

**Ed Vulliamy:** No. All thanks to you and the workings of the backfire process.....

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<sup>41</sup> The gathering brought together representatives of such parties as Birlik, Erk, Ozod Dehkonlar (Free Peasants), and the independent human-rights organization Ezgulik.

<sup>42</sup> Pannier, Bruce, *Uzbekistan: Opposition Leaders Meet Outside Washington*, <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2005/07/a9b1d257-5c9a-4b3a-810d-d2483490c26d.html>, visited 30/9/05.

<sup>43</sup> TOL, *Uzbekistan: Blood-Red Lines*, CIAO Week in Review, May 24-30, 2005, [http://www.ciaonet.org.ezproxy.uow.edu.au:2048/pbei/tol/tol\\_2005/may24-may30/may24-may30a.html](http://www.ciaonet.org.ezproxy.uow.edu.au:2048/pbei/tol/tol_2005/may24-may30/may24-may30a.html), visited 27/9/05.

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