State Violence and Popular Resistance in Uzbekistan

On 13 May 2005 the security forces of Uzbekistan reacted to a protest demonstration that had gathered in the centre of Andijan, a town of about 320,000 people located in the Ferghana valley region of post-Soviet Uzbekistan. The previous night, a group of armed men had assaulted the local prison and freed several hundred inmates. Among them were twenty-three local entrepreneurs that the authorities had jailed over the summer of 2004 on the charge of being part of the “Islamist” organization Akromiya. They were awaiting an imminent verdict. Demanding their release, local citizens had assembled in the town centre several times in the preceding months, to no avail, but incidentally also exciting no particular reaction by the local authorities. In the morning of 13 May, the insurgents moved on to occupy the local city council (hokimiyat). At the same time a crowd of thousands took to the streets protesting against the government, as they had done many times in previous months. Then, abruptly, government forces began a swift crackdown on the demonstrators. Chaos ensued. Curfew was imposed, the region was sealed off from the rest of the country, and strict security measures were enforced. Indeed, order was restored at a very high price.

In the days following the events a large number of people fled the country. Most of them found temporary refuge in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan. At the same time demands for an independent investigation voiced by human rights organization were vehemently rejected by Uzbekistani authorities. Disputes over the course of events, the rationale behind government crackdown, the identity of the protesters, and especially the count of the victim opened a chasm between the Uzbek official version and that of international organizations. The relations between this post-Soviet Republican and Western states who, under the pressure of human rights organization had demanded that Tashkent allowed an independent investigation, reached the lowest point since independence. In short, the events of 13 May 2005 marked the climax of months, even years, of mounting tensions in post-Soviet Uzbekistan. The ruthless crackdown on the Andijan demonstrations together with the events of the preceding night should not be taken in isolation: understanding the context in which events have unfolded and their broader ramifications is essential.

The group's successful attempts to provide real-life alternatives... blatantly demonstrated the shortcomings of the regime.

State violence and violence against the state

In the weeks following the Andijan events, the government justified its actions as a necessary reaction to tackle a militant insurgency, organized by Islamic radical organizations. The protesters, but also international human rights organizations, countered the claim by arguing that unarmed civilians, including children, were being shot at. There is neither consensus as to what really happened nor why. That hours of intense shooting and street fight and killing occurred is not under dispute by any side; what is contested is the number and identity of people left dead on the ground. According to an official investigation 187 people, mostly “terrorists” died, whereas according to international human rights organizations many more, mostly unarmed, civilians lost their lives because of government action. What actually happened still remains wrapped in mystery, largely as a result of the Uzbekistani government’s refusal to allow an independent investigation into the dynamics of events.

The aftermath of the Andijan events was defined by a “war of figures.” The dawn of 14 May 2005 was truly a “dawn of the living dead” because of this irreconcilability between the two positions. Hundreds of Uzbeks, if not a thousand or more, were counted dead by some (human rights organizations), but never died according to others (Uzbek state authorities). Although there are insufficient verifiable sources to prove the exact number of casualties, by situating the events within the broader developments of state-society relations in Uzbekistan it becomes not only clearer how and why this eruption of violence occurred, but also what the short and medium-term implications will be.

One cannot make sense of this particular set of Andijan events without looking at the larger picture of the post-independence difficulties experienced by both state and society. Though the government allowed a limited multiparty system to develop soon after independence, democracy remained at a mere façade level, with power and decision-making being the domain of closed elite circles. The economic downturn plagued most Uzbeks in poverty while privatization benefited only a few. With the state failing to act as social safety net, many ordinary citizens had to resort to alternative means to cope with economic duress.

Thus, as Kandiyoti noted, the key to understanding “Andijan” lies in the breakdown of the social contract between state and society whereby the latter is experiencing a “crisis in provision, legitimacy and security.” The background to the 2005 tragic events lies mostly in the convergence of impoverishment of large sections of the population (economic insecurity), the lack of safety valves for “letting pressure go” (social insecurity), the state’s fear of any form of opposition and subsequent clampdown on it, and a decline of state authority and legitimacy (political insecurity). All of these factors have created a state of fear and powerlessness among the population which, deprived of any legal outlet for airing grievances has leaned towards various forms of opposition, some “silent” and non-violent, others more intolerant and violent. A glance at the post-independence era suggests that Uzbeks have typically resorted to limited forms of protest, due to over-arching structural constraints. When these have taken place, they have traditionally taken the shape of street demonstrations and pickets. Hence, taken in isolation, the lead-up to the Andijan events could be read as a typical example of “coping strategy.”

Nevertheless, it would be a misrepresentation to simply depict the relation between the government and its citizens in terms of violent state oppression and peaceful resistance. In rare, though visible cases,
radicalized elements of society have resorted to violence. Such radical dissent has been articulated in the language of Islam, as it is a key marker of Uzbek identity and a popular frame for political mobilization. During the 1990s, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) posed an increasing threat to the administration of president Karimov, which culminated in the assassination attempts in 1999 and clashes between Uzbek government forces and the IMU in 2000. These attacks were not fragments of government imagination, but real experiences of anti-government militancy, of violence against the state. Moreover, Hizb-ut-Tahrir, a transnational Islamist organization, also banned in Uzbekistan, has been reported to gain in popularity in recent years. Although this growing appeal of Islamist movements understandably unsettles the government, it should be stressed that manifestations of violent opposition remained the exception rather than the rule.

The Andijan events, regardless of one’s own reading of them, were thus not an isolated episode of repression in post-Soviet Uzbekistan. The bitter irony is that the entrepreneurs under arrest did not engage in any known violent activities. They were part of a group of networks that became known as Akromiya, whose members were engaged in mutual help activities and happened to share strong religious beliefs. Pooling resources for the common good constituted a way of getting around intense economic pressure from the state. It is likely that the group’s successful attempts to provide real-life alternatives to the failures of the government made them an even larger threat to the Karimov regime as they blatantly demonstrated the shortcomings of the regime. This suggests that the Andijan events have less to do with radical Islam, however much strength this may have gained in the country in recent years, and more with the state’s incapacity to comply with the expectations of its part of the social contract.

What can be seen here is the convergence of a discourse about “terrorism” propagated by the government, and the actual activities of opposition groups that are or are not violent. Explicitly linked to Islamic radicalism according to the authorities, but seen as an association of pious local entrepreneurs by others (including human rights organizations), Akromiya is perhaps more realistically an “informal association of like-minded individuals, mostly young entrepreneurs … [intent in] pooling their resources for the benefit of their communities.” This does not detract from the possibility that radicalism may have become radicalized elements of society have resorted to violence. Such radical dissent has been articulated in the language of Islam, as it is a key marker of Uzbek identity and a popular frame for political mobilization. During the 1990s, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) posed an increasing threat to the administration of president Karimov, which culminated in the assassination attempts in 1999 and clashes between Uzbek government forces and the IMU in 2000. These attacks were not fragments of government imagination, but real experiences of anti-government militancy, of violence against the state. Moreover, Hizb-ut-Tahrir, a transnational Islamist organization, also banned in Uzbekistan, has been reported to gain in popularity in recent years. Although this growing appeal of Islamist movements understandably unsettles the government, it should be stressed that manifestations of violent opposition remained the exception rather than the rule.

The Andijan events, regardless of one’s own reading of them, were thus not an isolated episode of repression in post-Soviet Uzbekistan. The bitter irony is that the entrepreneurs under arrest did not engage in any known violent activities. They were part of a group of networks that became known as Akromiya, whose members were engaged in mutual help activities and happened to share strong religious beliefs. Pooling resources for the common good constituted a way of getting around intense economic pressure from the state. It is likely that the group’s successful attempts to provide real-life alternatives to the failures of the government made them an even larger threat to the Karimov regime as they blatantly demonstrated the shortcomings of the regime. This suggests that the Andijan events have less to do with radical Islam, however much strength this may have gained in the country in recent years, and more with the state’s incapacity to comply with the expectations of its part of the social contract.

What can be seen here is the convergence of a discourse about “terrorism” propagated by the government, and the actual activities of opposition groups that are or are not violent. Explicitly linked to Islamic radicalism according to the authorities, but seen as an association of pious local entrepreneurs by others (including human rights organizations), Akromiya is perhaps more realistically an “informal association of like-minded individuals, mostly young entrepreneurs … [intent in] pooling their resources for the benefit of their communities.” This does not detract from the possibility that radicalism may have contributed to the events in Andijan: “[w]hen the people are hungry and rebel against the state, it is not terrorism, but when the state kills its own people, then that is terrorism!” This seems to suggest that the very definition and popular perception of what constitutes terrorism back to the very actor that has branded any form of opposition groups that are or are not violent. Explicitly linked to Islamic radicalism according to the authorities, but seen as an association of pious local entrepreneurs by others (including human rights organizations), Akromiya is perhaps more realistically an “informal association of like-minded individuals, mostly young entrepreneurs … [intent in] pooling their resources for the benefit of their communities.” This does not detract from the possibility that radicalism may have contributed to the events in Andijan: “[w]hen the people are hungry and rebel against the state, it is not terrorism, but when the state kills its own people, then that is terrorism!” This seems to suggest that the very definition and popular perception of what constitutes terrorism back to the very actor that has branded any form of opposition as being part of a terrorist threat. Whether such threats are real or imagined has lost its significance as the government’s increasing appeal of Islamist organizations in the country in recent years. Although this growing appeal of Islamist movements understandably unsettles the government, it should be stressed that manifestations of violent opposition remained the exception rather than the rule.

The Andijan events, regardless of one’s own reading of them, were thus not an isolated episode of repression in post-Soviet Uzbekistan. The bitter irony is that the entrepreneurs under arrest did not engage in any known violent activities. They were part of a group of networks that became known as Akromiya, whose members were engaged in mutual help activities and happened to share strong religious beliefs. Pooling resources for the common good constituted a way of getting around intense economic pressure from the state. It is likely that the group’s successful attempts to provide real-life alternatives to the failures of the government made them an even larger threat to the Karimov regime as they blatantly demonstrated the shortcomings of the regime. This suggests that the Andijan events have less to do with radical Islam, however much strength this may have gained in the country in recent years, and more with the state’s incapacity to comply with the expectations of its part of the social contract.

What can be seen here is the convergence of a discourse about “terrorism” propagated by the government, and the actual activities of opposition groups that are or are not violent. Explicitly linked to Islamic radicalism according to the authorities, but seen as an association of pious local entrepreneurs by others (including human rights organizations), Akromiya is perhaps more realistically an “informal association of like-minded individuals, mostly young entrepreneurs … [intent in] pooling their resources for the benefit of their communities.” This does not detract from the possibility that radicalism may have contributed to the events in Andijan: “[w]hen the people are hungry and rebel against the state, it is not terrorism, but when the state kills its own people, then that is terrorism!” This seems to suggest that the very definition and popular perception of what constitutes terrorism back to the very actor that has branded any form of opposition as being part of a terrorist threat. Whether such threats are real or imagined has lost its significance as the government’s increasing appeal of Islamist organizations in the country in recent years. Although this growing appeal of Islamist movements understandably unsettles the government, it should be stressed that manifestations of violent opposition remained the exception rather than the rule.

Andijan and rebel against the state, it is not terrorism, but when the state kills its own people, then that is terrorism!” This seems to suggest that the very definition and popular perception of what constitutes terrorism back to the very actor that has branded any form of opposition as being part of a terrorist threat. Whether such threats are real or imagined has lost its significance as the government’s increasing appeal of Islamist organizations in the country in recent years. Although this growing appeal of Islamist movements understandably unsettles the government, it should be stressed that manifestations of violent opposition remained the exception rather than the rule.

Andijan and rebel against the state, it is not terrorism, but when the state kills its own people, then that is terrorism!” This seems to suggest that the very definition and popular perception of what constitutes terrorism back to the very actor that has branded any form of opposition as being part of a terrorist threat. Whether such threats are real or imagined has lost its significance as the government’s increasing appeal of Islamist organizations in the country in recent years. Although this growing appeal of Islamist movements understandably unsettles the government, it should be stressed that manifestations of violent opposition remained the exception rather than the rule.

Andijan and rebel against the state, it is not terrorism, but when the state kills its own people, then that is terrorism!” This seems to suggest that the very definition and popular perception of what constitutes terrorism back to the very actor that has branded any form of opposition as being part of a terrorist threat. Whether such threats are real or imagined has lost its significance as the government’s increasing appeal of Islamist organizations in the country in recent years. Although this growing appeal of Islamist movements understandably unsettles the government, it should be stressed that manifestations of violent opposition remained the exception rather than the rule.

Andijan and rebel against the state, it is not terrorism, but when the state kills its own people, then that is terrorism!” This seems to suggest that the very definition and popular perception of what constitutes terrorism back to the very actor that has branded any form of opposition as being part of a terrorist threat. Whether such threats are real or imagined has lost its significance as the government’s increasing appeal of Islamist organizations in the country in recent years. Although this growing appeal of Islamist movements understandably unsettles the government, it should be stressed that manifestations of violent opposition remained the exception rather than the rule.

Andijan and rebel against the state, it is not terrorism, but when the state kills its own people, then that is terrorism!” This seems to suggest that the very definition and popular perception of what constitutes terrorism back to the very actor that has branded any form of opposition as being part of a terrorist threat. Whether such threats are real or imagined has lost its significance as the government’s increasing appeal of Islamist organizations in the country in recent years. Although this growing appeal of Islamist movements understandably unsettles the government, it should be stressed that manifestations of violent opposition remained the exception rather than the rule.

Andijan and rebel against the state, it is not terrorism, but when the state kills its own people, then that is terrorism!” This seems to suggest that the very definition and popular perception of what constitutes terrorism back to the very actor that has branded any form of opposition as being part of a terrorist threat. Whether such threats are real or imagined has lost its significance as the government’s increasing appeal of Islamist organizations in the country in recent years. Although this growing appeal of Islamist movements understandably unsettles the government, it should be stressed that manifestations of violent opposition remained the exception rather than the rule.

Andijan and rebel against the state, it is not terrorism, but when the state kills its own people, then that is terrorism!” This seems to suggest that the very definition and popular perception of what constitutes terrorism back to the very actor that has branded any form of opposition as being part of a terrorist threat. Whether such threats are real or imagined has lost its significance as the government’s increasing appeal of Islamist organizations in the country in recent years. Although this growing appeal of Islamist movements understandably unsettles the government, it should be stressed that manifestations of violent opposition remained the exception rather than the rule.

Andijan and rebel against the state, it is not terrorism, but when the state kills its own people, then that is terrorism!” This seems to suggest that the very definition and popular perception of what constitutes terrorism back to the very actor that has branded any form of opposition as being part of a terrorist threat. Whether such threats are real or imagined has lost its significance as the government’s increasing appeal of Islamist organizations in the country in recent years. Although this growing appeal of Islamist movements understandably unsettles the government, it should be stressed that manifestations of violent opposition remained the exception rather than the rule.

Andijan and rebel against the state, it is not terrorism, but when the state kills its own people, then that is terrorism!” This seems to suggest that the very definition and popular perception of what constitutes terrorism back to the very actor that has branded any form of opposition as being part of a terrorist threat. Whether such threats are real or imagined has lost its significance as the government’s increasing appeal of Islamist organizations in the country in recent years. Although this growing appeal of Islamist movements understandably unsettles the government, it should be stressed that manifestations of violent opposition remained the exception rather than the rule.

Andijan and rebel against the state, it is not terrorism, but when the state kills its own people, then that is terrorism!” This seems to suggest that the very definition and popular perception of what constitutes terrorism back to the very actor that has branded any form of opposition as being part of a terrorist threat. Whether such threats are real or imagined has lost its significance as the government’s increasing appeal of Islamist organizations in the country in recent years. Although this growing appeal of Islamist movements understandable