Book Discussion


State Erosion Grounded in Impressive Field Research
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Lawrence Markowitz’s State Erosion is an extraordinary book. It is exemplary in the richness of its field research, particularly given the challenges of studying Central Asia’s autocracies. We develop an immediate appreciation of these challenges in State Erosion’s preface. Here Markowitz describes a chilling encounter with Uzbekistan’s Surkhandarya police, an encounter that allows the reader to witness the pervasive reach of the Uzbek security apparatus. I was once again reminded of these challenges when, in response to an audience member’s query during a panel devoted to State Erosion at the 2014 Association for the Study of Nationalities annual conference, Markowitz candidly noted that the bureaucrats with whom he spoke more often than not responded to his questions with fantastic yarns rather than speaking the difficult truth about the patronage systems in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

Despite dissembling bureaucrats and predatory police, Markowitz’s extensive field research in Central Asia has yielded a book that offers an explanation for the diverging outcomes of state fragmentation in Tajikistan and state cohesion in Uzbekistan. The explanation Markowitz advances, moreover, is applicable not just to Central Asia, but to autocratic countries more broadly. State Erosion is a book that productively informs two literatures: the post-Soviet Central Asia politics literature and the larger comparative politics literature on autocratic regime change. As such, State Erosion will find eager audiences among area specialists and comparative politics theorists alike.

Markowitz’s central finding, concisely stated, is that resources matter; they matter both in their kind and in their concentration. Agriculture-based economies that require state involvement to bring goods to market—that is, economies that require considerable infrastructure and investment, such as Uzbekistan’s and Tajikistan’s cotton industries—generate extensive patron–client rent-seeking opportunities. In Uzbekistan, where cotton cultivation is spread widely across the country, these patron–client rent-seeking opportunities bind local elites and local security forces to the central government. In
Tajikistan, in contrast, where cotton cultivation is concentrated only in a few regions, local elites in cotton-poor areas have been locked out of the state’s patron–client rent-seeking apparatus and, as a result, have had little incentive to follow central government directives. These elites instead have turned to their local security forces to, in Markowitz’s words, “pursue alternative political orders that open up new avenues for rent seeking” (p. 6).

While diverging patterns in the kind and concentration of resources and the resulting rent structures associated with these diverging patterns can help us understand why Tajikistan devolved into civil war in the 1990s whereas Uzbekistan has remained stable since the Soviet collapse, Markowitz’s story is not merely one of structural endowments and constraints. Tajikistan has become increasingly stable over the past 15 years, while Uzbekistan has seen notable convulsions of instability. To explain these developments, Markowitz rightly notes the role of elite agency. President Emomali Rahmon of Tajikistan, faced with the task of rebuilding the state following the United Nations–brokered end to the civil war in 1997, strategically mixed patronage and coercion to coopt where possible—and silence when necessary—former civil war opponents. This strategy has not always worked, as the 2010 Rasht Valley and 2012 Gorno Badakhshan violent protests against the central government demonstrate. Nevertheless, Rahmon’s carefully calibrated strategy of coercion and cooption has proven sufficient to prevent a repeat of the state collapse and civil war that plagued Tajikistan in the 1990s.

Across the border, actor agency at the local level presented a challenge to Uzbekistan’s otherwise stable autocratic rule. This agency was most visibly on display in the 2005 Andijan uprising. From 1993 to 2005, Andijan was led by one man, Governor Kobiljon Obidov. Thanks to his long tenure in office, Obidov was able to cultivate and privilege his own group of local economic elites. These elites, the leaders of large enterprises, in turn commanded loyal followings from their many employees. This cultivation of Andijan’s economic elite, Markowitz demonstrates, led to situation in which, “by the mid-2000s, Obidov’s influence in Andijan was unparalleled and posed a threat to the central government” (p. 121). In late 2004 and early 2005, President Islam Karimov purged the Andijan elite, dismissing Obidov from office and jailing the region’s prominent businessmen. The purge elicited large-scale public protests that Karimov’s security forces ruthlessly repressed.

Markowitz is right to stress the role of actor agency in Rahmon’s rebuilding Tajik statehood following the 1992–1997 civil war. He is also correct to highlight Governor Obidov’s growing challenge to President Karimov’s otherwise stable autocratic rule in the early 2000s. Importantly, however, in raising the role of elite agency, Markowitz leaves his reader wondering when and where