DEMOCRATIC STRUCTURALIZING IN UZBEKISTAN: THE MULTIPARTY SYSTEM AND THE OPPOSITION

Farkhad TOLIPOV

Ph.D. (Political Science), Independent Analyst (Tashkent, Uzbekistan)

Introduction

At all times, a multiparty system and opposition have been regarded and are still viewed as a sign of democracy. To a great extent, the importance and functions of the multiparty system depend on the specific features of the political order in any given country, its type of election system, and its model of governance, etc. The sum-total of the above speaks volumes about the systemic nature of the country's politics.

In-depth studies of the issue reveal the nuances, specifics, and regularities of forming a multiparty system and opposition that frequently escape simplistic or one-track approach.

Any detailed investigation of the issue discloses new dilemmas and problems in the situational analysis of the Central Asian countries, especially in the East-West context. In this case, however, the Central Asian countries are placed in a *specific Eastern context* where building a new democratic society (complete with a multiparty system and opposition) has been struggling to surmount the "ontological" barriers that exist there.

On the Axiomatics of the Issue

One of the fundamental axioms of democratic theory says: "Democracy is unthinkable without opposition parties in the country's political system." It is generally believed that the level of democracy depends on the nature of the political struggle in a country; an academic approach, however, reveals an ontological flaw.

After watching the fairly slow process of democratic structuralizing[1] in Uzbekistan for many years, I had what can be rated as a minor "revelation": there is no clear understanding of theoretical terms (starting with "democracy") and practical concepts (such as "civil society," "NGOs," etc.). Not only has the term "opposition" failed to be specified as a theoretical concept in Uzbek political science, it is treated almost as "obscene."

The term "opposition" meanwhile is derived from the Latin *oppositio* and means the following:

(1) opposition of one's politics to the politics of others;

[1] I use the words "democratic structuralizing" instead of the commonly used "democratic construction" to emphasize not so much the practical process of moving toward democracy as a political system but rather the process of building an adapted conception of democracy at the theoretical level.

(2) opposition to the opinion of the majority or the prevailing opinion in legislature, party, and other structures which pose themselves as democratic.

Opposition can be moderate, radical, loyal (prepared to support the government), constructive (offering meaningful and constructive decisions), or destructive.[2]

Contraposition (in most cases a priori described as all-embracing) is the centerpiece of any opposition. The aim serves as the main distinguishing feature: different opposition forces have different ideas about the future of their countries—this is the meaning of their existence and functioning.

It seems that to be *"against"* is a special teleological characteristic of the opposition, which explains why the word "opposition" is frequently associated with the idea of "revolution."

The terminological fog (never dissipated by the terms "loyal," "constructive" and "moderate") scares authoritarian rulers. They look at the opposition members not as *"well-meaning others"* but as *"threatening aliens."* This serves as the starting point of my discussion.

I consider it my duty to clarify the political theory in the part it applies to opposition because, I am convinced, this term cannot and should not be applied to all forms of political rivalry.

According to prominent political scientist Joseph La Palombara, political parties appear when and where the government becomes convinced that the people should be involved in the life of the state. He writes that just as the bureaucracy appeared when society could no longer be ruled from the prince's palace, political parties, likewise, appeared when political power and political actions could no longer be executed by a narrow circle of people (who knew next to nothing about what the people really wanted).[3]

Axel Hadenius, in turn, has written: "The link between party development and the survival of democracy, it seems, is mainly taken for granted. There may of course be some sort of connection, but this remains to be demonstrated. It is an overstatement, in other words, to say that the 'to be or not to be' of democracy hinges on the development of a certain type of political party."[4]

Robert Dahl, a prominent American political scientist, introduced the concept of polyarchy to describe a form of government in which power is vested in three or more persons (democratic systems in today's parlance); democracy is seen as an ideal to be achieved through polyarchy. He went on to say that polyarchies, rather than democracies, should be built, the first being distinguished by the fact that the winning majority rules the country and respects the rights of the defeated minority.[5]

His theory has been confirmed, at least partly, at the practical level, where the term "good governance" seems to be gaining popularity.

A greater number of public structures; more elaborate relations among social groups; a high level of social demands and expectations; a wider range of uncertainties and risks; a stronger impact of international factors on domestic policy; widespread information awareness; plummeting popular trust in the central government, etc. brought about a revision of the traditional administrative methods, especially those which ignored the specifics of the public sphere.

This explains the growing popularity of the so-called network theories which look at governance efficiency through the "aims-processes" rather than "aims-means" prism. The policy network conception has modified the idea of centrally concentrated power or, rather, replaced it with the idea of mutual responsibility and obligations.[6]

According to Tanja A. Borzel, any policy network is a "set of relatively stable non-hierarchical … relations among a variety of actors united by common political interests who exchange resources to

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[2] See: *Politologia. Entsiklopedichesky slovar,* Publishers Publishing House, Moscow, 1993, p. 230.

[3] See: J. La Palombara, M. Weiner, "Political Parties and Political Development," in: *The Origin and Development of Political Parties,* Princeton, NJ, 1966, pp. 3-4.

[4] A. Hadenius, "Party Development: Russia in a Comparative Perspective," in: *The Political Party System in Russia in the Period of Yeltsin Presidency,* ed. by A. Hadenius, V. Sergeev, Letny Sad, Moscow, 2008, p. 6.

[5] For more detail, see: R. Dahl, *A Preface to Democratic Theory,* University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1984.

[6] For more detail, see: L. Smorgunov, "Setevoy podkhod k politike i upravleniiu," *Polis,* No. 3, 2001.

promote their interests and who know that cooperation is the shortest route to common aims."[7] In other words, the network makes use of formal and informal relations among actors united by common sectoral interests to arrive at a common political decision.

American political scientist Ian Shapiro has pointed out the dilemma: "An enduring embarrassment of democratic theory is that it seems impotent when faced with questions about its own scope. A chicken-and-egg problem thus lurks at democracy's core. Questions relating to boundaries and membership seem in an important sense prior to democratic decision-making, yet paradoxically they cry out for democratic resolution."[8]

The American political scientist suggests that the so-called causal principle of relevant interests related to political decisions should be taken into account. He deems it necessary to remind us that this approach undermined the arguments in favor of pushing aside the principle of citizenship as the main one when determining the right to democratic participation. It should be replaced with a system of intersecting jurisdictions where different groups are independent when making different categories of decisions (this is practiced in the European Union).[9]

The above suggests that the relatively novel policy network concept has already acquired an international character.

It seems that from the very beginning civil society has been potentially capable of developing into an elaborate entity of interconnected networks at the national and international levels.

This sheds new light on what Friedrich Engels said at one time: "As all the driving forces of the actions of any individual must pass through his brain, and transform themselves into motives of his will in order to set him into action, so also all the needs of civil society—no matter which class happens to be the ruling one—must pass through the will of the state in order to secure general validity in the form of laws."[10]

This idea about civil society, as well as the causal principle of relevant interests suggest questions about the nature of laws and political decisions (in addition to who passes them and for whom) and whether they are best suited to the prospects of democratic development.

The network nature of contemporary societies (and *"digital politics"* which can also be called *"digi-politics," "byte-politics," "or e-politics"*), which relies on the latest digital technology and other means to shape and conduct politics, is changing the theory and ideas about the forms and ways of manifesting oppositional political opinion.

Indeed, today the opposition can express its opinions or even criticize the government through global communication lines, the Internet in particular. Any opposition group can inform the public about its policy in the form of *"e-politics."*

This means that today the theory that regards a multiparty system and opposition as the main signs of democracy requires a certain amount of revision.

On the Democratic Experience of the Multiparty System

It is more or less commonly believed in Uzbekistan that division into left, right, and center will inevitably create what is called an opposition. Let's take a look at the multiparty system in developed democracies.

[7] L. Smorgunov, op. cit.
[8] *Democracy's Edges*, ed. by I. Shapiro, C. Hacker-Gordón, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999, p. 1.
[9] See: I. Shapiro, "Pereosmyslivaia teoriu demokratii v svete sovremennoy politiki," *Polis*, No. 3, 2001.
[10] F. Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, Part IV, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1973.

The concepts of "left wing" and "right wing" were born by the French revolution of 1789 which "de-Christianized" political culture and split society into the Catholic and anticlerical blocs that paved the way for two resilient sub-cultures,[11] the "right wing" and "left wing" of European politics.

The "right wing" consisted of clericals and legitimists who supported the *Ancien Régime;* the "left wing" consisted of anti-clericals and anti-legitimists, that is, republicans looking forward to the new ideal order that was expected to emerge as soon as the revolution had tapped its potential to the full.[12]

Later, the term "left wing" was applied to socialist and communist parties and movements intended to change the old order through revolutions.

This division still survives in the West, but the gradually changing society (*"digi-politics"*) and, to a great extent, the very developed culture of multiparty cooperation are gradually changing the Western political spectrum.

The quest for new organizational forms of political life based on close cooperation and interaction, rather than on the zero-sum game, is underway in the West and in the East.

Germany's two-bloc system (the CDU/CSU and SPDG) developed into a multiparty system when the Free Democratic Party, the Alliance 90/The Greens, and the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) emerged on the political scene. The presence of the Alliance 90/The Greens and the Party of Democratic Socialism, which are leftwing parties, provided the SPDG with room for maneuver: its ideology allows it to side with the left wing and the right wing.

The so-called "rightwing extremists" (the German People's Union, the Republicans, and the National Patriots) who speak in the name of German nationalists are not numerous; their electorates are fairly limited, even though they capture protest votes from time to time.

The rightwing extremist parties with extremist views and small electorates are unwanted partners; they balance on the brink of constitutional legitimacy and risk their official registrations much too often.

I had the opportunity to attend the Bundestag to observe its functioning at close quarters and talk to the members of its Central Asian Committee; during the general discussions and drafting of decisions, all of them (despite their different party affiliations) demonstrated a readiness to cooperate.

In the United States, the bi-party system goes back to practically the first day the state became established. At no time, however, did the Republican-Democratic rivalry assume unacceptable forms and split the nation. President Obama is functioning within this pattern: in his State of the Union Address of 26 January, 2011 he called on the Americans to put aside party disagreements and unite for the sake of the country's global competitiveness.

The democratic order in India, Japan, and Malaysia deserves special mention: there is a dominating party in these countries which can be described as a hierarchical structure of political patronage uniting the "upper" and the "lower" layers of the political system. In these countries the dominant party and the opposition form a single whole, while the individuals involved in the political process move between the two poles. It should be said that no one pays particular attention to the ideological identity of either the dominant party or the opposition.

This system has attracted a lot of sociological attention. A national poll carried out in Japan (with a high percentage of literate and politically aware people) during general elections revealed that in the Miyagi Prefecture (agriculture and fishing being the main local occupations) 77 percent were aware of the party affiliation of at least one candidate, while two-thirds of the population knew at least half of the candidates on the list. Only one out of four, however, had at least some idea about the programs of the two main parties.

[11] See: A.B. Zubov, *Parlamentskaia demokratia i politicheskaia traditsia Vostoka*, Nauka Publishers, Moscow, 1990, p. 269.

[12] See: Ibidem.

Any analysis of the parliamentary democracies of the East (including "post-industrial" Japan) creates the impression that few outside the group of Westernized intellectuals are interested in ideology and few take it into account, irrespective of its founders and prominent supporters.[13]

The table is based on an analysis of the way voters in the West and the East respond to parties' ideologies. It should be said that in Japan, India, Malaysia, and a few other countries the dominant parties are supported by all social groups even outside their electorate.

Table

Attitude to the Differences between the Parties Depending on the Respondent's Preferences[14]

Attitude/Country	Level of Party Support, %		
	high	low	none at all
The parties are very different. Agreed			
India	36	34	20
Norway	85	60	47
Thee parties are not different. Agreed			
India	42	44	44
Norway	2	14	16

The above suggests that efficient democracy requires mechanisms through which the demands of the masses can reach the corridors of power and which ensure the state's adequate and timely decisions in the interests of the common people.

More often than not, political parties, being one of these mechanisms, act together, while the so-called opposition practically never identifies itself as an antagonist of the powers that be.

This means that the political systems in the developed democracies are not so much multiparty as pluralistic and that the conception of political opposition should be revised.

The Multiparty System in Uzbekistan

In Uzbekistan, the multiparty system and the entire process of political transformation is developing in a highly specific post-Soviet and regional context.[15]

During the course of the reforms, the state has been very concerned about preserving social and political stability. Today, after nearly twenty years of Uzbekistan's independence, it turns out that

[13] See: A.B. Zubov, op. cit., pp. 262-263.

[14] Ibid., p. 287.

[15] See: F. Tolipov, "Uzbekistan: Soviet Syndrome in the State, Society, and Ideology," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 6 (54), 2008.

stability is treated as the status quo. Here is what E. Wayne Merry, Senior Associate at the American Foreign Policy Council, has to say on this score: "One thing is certain: 'stability' is no answer to the problems of Central Asia: indeed, a focus on stability is the heart of the problem. Central Asia need profound political and economic transformations to escape its neo-Soviet morass—change, comparable to those of Eastern Europe—and the sooner the better."[16]

The desire to preserve stability explains why the party system in Uzbekistan (and Kazakhstan) has been built from top to bottom. The people in power, who remain in control in the parties (all of them being pro-presidential), have deprived the potential opposition (in the traditional sense of the word) of the leeway it needs to demonstrate more political activity.

The life-span of the opposition parties in Uzbekistan proved to be short: set up in the first days of independence, they disappeared in the mid-1990s. I have in mind the Birlik (Unity) and Erk (Liberty) parties, which were very critical of the people in power. Relentless persecution forced their leaders to emigrate.

Birlik and Erk were the only two parties in Uzbekistan built from the grass-roots level; no other opposition party has appeared in the country since then.

A. Shomanov of Kazakhstan put the pro-presidential parties into a nutshell by saying: "The party system in our country developed and became institutionalized with essentially no social content,"[17] which means that in Uzbekistan it was an exercise in keeping the situation under control and, at the same time, impressing the public at home and abroad with democratic developments.

A. Chebotarev, another analyst from Kazakhstan, said something which can be applied to Uzbekistan with certain reservations: "On the whole, party construction is highly ambiguous. There are two mutually exclusive, yet very obvious, processes: the number of parties increases and decreases. The resultant quantitative fluctuations make it hard to say how many parties exist in the republic."[18]

In Uzbekistan, practically all the political parties are opportunistic. As part of the state system, they have busied themselves with reproducing loyal functionaries rather than channeling social and political pluralism from the grass-roots level up. In view of what I said above about the opposition, this is normal—if pluralism is blocked the situation might develop into an anomaly.

Indeed, the parties in Uzbekistan are practically indistinguishable ideologically—they show no intention of achieving ideological pluralism. On the other hand, there are attempts to build a so-called parliamentary opposition to withdraw from the crisis; this does nothing but distort the idea of opposition still further. The environment of the opposition as a natural phenomenon cannot be limited to the parliament—it must function in civil society.

We are tempted to ask: Is it true that no opposition can emerge on the basis of the existing parties? Do we need new parties, or should we cut down the number of already functioning parties?

Here are tentative names for new parties:

- The Islamic Democratic Party (along the lines of the CDU/CSU in Germany)
- The Conservative Party (critical of any political, social, and, especially, cultural changes)
- The Republican Party (working in the interests of a stronger state)

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[16] E.W. Merry, "The Politics of Central Asia: National in Form, Soviet in Content," in: *In the Tracks of Tamerlane: Central Asia's Path to the 21st Century,* ed. by D. Burghart, T. Sabonis-Helf, National Defense University, Washington, D.C., 2004, p. 41.

[17] A. Shomanov, "Problemy i perspektivy razvitia grazhdanskogo obshchestva v kontekste politicheskoy modernizatsii," in: *Materialy mezhdunarodnoy nauchno-prakticheskoy konferentsii: "Perspektivy politicheskikh reform v Respublike Kazakhstan: obshchestvennye ozhidaniia i mezhdunarodnye standarty,"* Central Asian Foundation for Democratic Development, Almaty, 2007, p. 47.

[18] A. Chebotarev, "Partiynoe stroitelstvo v kontekste provedenia politicheskikh reform v Kazakhstane na sovremennom etape," in: *Materialy mezhdunarodnoy nauchno-prakticheskoy konferentsii "Perspektivy politicheskikh reform v Respublike Kazakhstan: obshchestvennye ozhidaniia i mezhdunarodnye standarty",* p. 26.

- The Liberal-Democratic Party (based on Western liberal values)
- The Environmental Party
- The Turkestan Party (working toward regional integration of Central Asia)
- The Agrarian Party.

I am not suggesting that these parties should be created, I am merely offering food for thought. Regrettably, political scientists in Uzbekistan are not discussing this topic, a sure sign that Uzbek political science is languishing.

This appears even stranger when we consider that the opposition is a vehicle of alternative political ideas and the driving force behind corresponding decisions. It cannot appear out of blue: "there was no opposition yesterday—there will be an opposition tomorrow."

Before the opposition can come to the fore, different opinions must be positioned as oppositional *at least at the expert and public level. This has not yet happened.*

Those interested in forming an opposition (parliamentary, constructive, etc.) are erroneously trying to reinvent the wheel. But they are forgetting that the opposition as a form of existence of the other *cannot be built on order; it is an immanent feature of any society which is pluralistic by nature. Moreover, the opposition* as an organized action of the other *cannot be created by a government not initially interested in it.*

On the other hand, let me contradict myself: the opposition presents no threat to the leaders of Uzbekistan because it does not exist (just as it does not exist anywhere else) in the sense described at the beginning of this article. The concept of "opposition" (in the absolute meaning of the word) does not fully reflect the real political process, which might more aptly be described as "rivaling groups" or even "cooperating political entities."

Today, the people in power need to create a technical form of representation of "opposition" in the government; we need a social context for the pluralistic frame of mind, an a priori requirement of any society, to move it into the political context.

On 12 November, 2010, speaking at a joint plenary session of both chambers of the parliament, President Islam Karimov suggested that the Constitution be amended. He formulated one of the amendments as follows: "In the event the president of Uzbekistan is unable to fulfill his duties, his power shall be transferred to the Chairman of the Senate of the Oliy Majlis." The majority interpreted this as a new stage in the development of the republic's party system.

The president went even further: he suggested that the parties with the largest number of seats in the parliament nominate the prime minister and that the deputy corps acquire the right to pass a vote of no confidence against the government.

This stirred up a lot of interest among international observers and in the media: people began wondering whether the president's suggestions were related to imminent reshuffling of the country's top leadership.

No matter how logical, these speculations are a bit premature: this is not the first time the president has come forward with similar "breakthrough" initiatives. Back in November 2006, he said that the country needed a Constitutional Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Strengthening the Role of Political Parties in the Renovation and Further Democratization of State Governance and Modernization of the Country,[19] its focal points being:

1. The factions of political parties and deputies elected from initiative groups who disagree with the course and program of the newly elected government or with specific aspects of its plans may describe themselves as the opposition;

[19] See: *Doklad Prezidenta Islama Karimova na torzhestvennom zasedanii, posviashchennom 14-letiyu Konstitutsii Respubliki Uzbekistan,* available at [www.uzreport.com].

2. The president of the Republic of Uzbekistan shall nominate the prime minister of the Republic of Uzbekistan to be approved by the Legislative Chamber and the Senate of the Oliy Majlis after consultations with all the parliamentary factions;

3. The prime minister of the Republic of Uzbekistan shall be dismissed by the president of the Republic of Uzbekistan, in particular, on the initiative of the factions of political parties in the Legislative Chamber submitted to the president of the Republic of Uzbekistan.

   The president of the Republic of Uzbekistan may dismiss the prime minister if a fully substantiated initiative is supported by the leading factions of the political parties of the parliament and if, when submitted by the president of the Republic of Uzbekistan for voting, it is supported by over two-thirds of the votes of the total number of deputies of the Legislative Chamber of the Oliy Majlis and members of the Senate.

   Dismissal of the prime minister is followed by resignation of the government of the Republic of Uzbekistan.

From this it follows that the parliament, which has been enjoying vast powers for a long time, never acquired a parliamentary opposition. Moreover, it failed to express any opinion about the prime minister and the Cabinet even when a new parliament was elected in 2010.

Can we expect anything new from the deputies?

The presidential administration controls and coordinates all the state structures, albeit not openly; just as in the past, this may reduce all democratic innovations to naught.

This means that the latest presidential initiatives are nothing more than a continuation of what was said four years ago.

The latest initiative was largely prompted by the tragic events in Osh, in the south of Kyrgyzstan. On the other hand, Uzbekistan badly needs a better international image to develop its contacts with the West. Reshuffling at the top cannot be ruled out either.

In any case, the legislative initiatives are much more than mere propaganda; they are intended to prepare the public for possible democratic changes.

Despite the wide gap between the de jure and de facto of the political process, one thing is clear: the democratic legislative innovations mean that the government cannot deviate from its own course toward democracy. The republic's laws will contain even more provisions that can be used to criticize the government or register certain achievements on the road toward genuine democracy.

The terms "factions" and "opposition" introduced into the new draft Law on Strengthening the Role of Parties… reflect the widely shared delusion about them; the "shop window" opposition is pushing these delusions deeper into people's minds. The formula: "…deputies elected from some of the political parties will represent the majority and from others the minority in the Legislative Chamber and the local Kengashes elected by popular vote, while some parties might prefer to oppose the course announced by the newly formed government" throws the artificial nature of the new construct into bolder relief.

Conclusion

Here are the preliminary conclusions about party-building in Uzbekistan and its neighboring countries:

At all times society has been brimming with ideas, interests, opinions, and even decisions, the number of which by far exceeds the number of parties able to articulate them in the course of political activities or struggle.

An excessive number of parties does not allow any of them to negotiate the 2%, 3%, or 5% barrier to get into the parliament on its own, outside a coalition. The right to set up a party should not be driven

to the extreme (the same applies to the right of nations to self-determination up to and including formation of an independent state).

We should go deeper into the functional-problem, rather than ideological approach, which will help us to identify social problems and channel them toward the power structures.

These are my preliminary conclusions. This problem calls for wide-scale comparative studies of party-building and the phenomenon of the opposition in different countries. It is important to find out which deeply rooted driving forces cause politicization (party-zation) of social groups and how they become the opposition. The role of ideology deserves special mention.

It is even more important to look at the means and forms for stirring up sociopolitical plurality of the problems, ideas, interests, requirements, and demands and translating them into effective political actions.

While I was writing this article, several Arab countries (Tunisia, Egypt) were shaken by events of historic dimensions that led to the overthrow of their long-term authoritarian regimes. The world started talking about similar developments in Central Asia.

This is probably unfounded, but the events in the Arab world should be treated as a warning.

The political order of the Republic of Uzbekistan must be radically changed; the "semi-artificial" party system should be reformed—this is one of the fundamental tasks of very much needed perestroika.