

In the heart of Central Asia, thermometer of an unchanging history

Uzbekistan, the navel of the world

Along the Silk Road, through the fabled cities of Bukhara and Samarkand, East met West. The imperial dreams were born and died here, from Alexander the Great to Genghis Khan, from Tamerlane to the Czars, from Stalin to Bush. The sad reality of today reveals all the lies of the "Great Game". The biggest current lie is called "Islamic terrorism fight"

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There is a map, on Uzbekistan Airways plane, which traces all the connections from the capital Tashkent with the rest of the world. It is awesome: taking Asia as a reference point, Tashkent seems truly the center of the world, with the rays in all directions, to the north (the vast Russia), east (China and Japan), south (India, Pakistan, Singapore), West (Middle East, Turkey and throughout Europe). The last link, the most recent goes straight towards the United States, like an umbilical cord, taking for granted all of Latin America. Completely ignored, as usual, Africa.

More than a map of the airline it seems a geopolitics lesson. It seems to point out that the world leadership game is played here, in the race for exploitation of energy resources and in the relationship with the impetuous growth of two future giants (China and India). Or, according to a more political reading, in the disclosed and touted "clash of civilizations" between West and Islam. Tashkent is in the middle, the center of everything, the capital of a land conquered by those who tried to establish a new world order, driven by the desire for domination, by greed, by a supposed civilizing mission, or by all of these things together.

These are the empires: a summary of brutality and extraordinary progress, stability and peace founded on war and massacres, on intents greatness and means inhumanity.

History is mixed with legend, and Uzbekistan is surrounded by the thousand-year charm of the past, the land of travel par excellence for caravans and armies, traders and conquerors, explorers and spies.

In the collective imagination, a remote country somewhere in Asia, wrapped in its mysterious aura of East, dangerously Islamic like every nation that ends with "stan" (in fact, it borders Afghanistan and it is close to Pakistan), a cauldron of ethnic and nationalist claims. Up to now, we are still on the plane, which incidentally is largely occupied by people of Bangladesh who only stop off in Uzbekistan (the flight is direct to Dhaka).

Just landed in Tashkent and exoticism for travelers and adventurers shivers end up. We return to reality, the sad ordinary reality of this so poor of ideals and full of lies century. Tashkent is primarily a post-Soviet city, the fourth largest after Moscow, St. Petersburg and Kiev. The architecture and urbanism of real socialism are alike everywhere: according to Kapuscinski ("Imperium") they were asked to express "triumphalism, power, monumentality, strength, reliability, weight, invincibility". Showing all the importance of the rule, the regime, and annihilating people. From the social point of view, getting rid of the traders and "replacing them with officials, humble and obedient instrument of power". From the ethnic point of view, pushing Russians in key positions, a policy initiated by the Czar, and keeping indigenous in subordinate positions, mixed with other deported peoples (Ukrainians, Koreans, Tatars and others).

Forced Russification first, then Sovietization.

That is why to discover the heart of Uzbekistan people you should go to the market, the *bazaar*. In the market, anonymous and empty cities come to life with people and voices.

Blond hair and blue eyes of Russians disappear, ubiquitous in trendy clubs and offices, and black hair and almond eyes of Uzbeks emerge, a mixture of European and Oriental (in fact, from an anthropological perspective, we speak of a Mongol-Turkish strain).

You immediately understand two things: that this is one of the most peaceful countries in the world

and that Islam is only a weak tradition. Women are a good indicator: you can not see a chador around, but at least it is not rare to meet a girl who walks alone even at night and in dimly lit places. They are the advantages secured by a police state, just as Uzbekistan is. Thirteen years of independence did not change one jota, from the point of view of democracy. Dictatorship was, dictatorship remains. The supreme leader, Islam Karimov, president elected with a regime percentage, was the last secretary of the Communist Party, now called People's Democratic Party. People that have never actually decided anything, even independence from the USSR. Uzbekistan, as it is configured today, is an invention of Stalin, dated 1924.

The "little father" created a Soviet republic by mixing ethnic groups and traditions, to discourage any national claim (see "Galatea", February 2002, Azerbaijan). Then he devoted himself to the deportations of entire peoples from one part of the Soviet empire and to the dismantling of Islamic religion and historical memory. Probably he had a very poor account of the inhabitants of these regions far from Moscow, where the "purgings" were less ruthless than elsewhere, and the oasis town along the ancient Silk Road were saved: Khiva, Bukhara, Samarkand.

Here you can still imagine the splendor of Islamic time, you can imagine for a moment the wonder of Marco Polo and many other travelers, not forgetting, however, that the glory was still the son of the ferocity of two empires, Genghis Khan's in the thirteenth century and especially Tamerlane's, up to 1405.

In the absence of better, Tamerlane was transformed into a national hero, unlikely father of the country. His equestrian statue dominates Tashkent central square, and seems to call all the conquest of the west, indicating with the pride of winning. In Samarkand instead he sits in the opposite direction, to enjoy the spectacle of its capital, the "Pearl of the East", the "Garden of the soul", the "Jewel of Islam", the "Center of the Universe".

When he was not addicted to the massacres, Timur the Lame (this is the etymon of Tamerlane) favored arts and sciences in all the ways. Talent was a safest pass for that bloodthirsty leader who had never, however, the political foresight of Genghis Khan, the man who was able to impose "Pax Mongolica" in an immense empire that went from Moscow to Delhi from Beijing to Damascus. The descendants of the two leaders split the area, looking to expand the one against the other.

They were illuminated sometimes, more often greedy and cruel emirs, who ran the decline of the Silk Road until the advent of another great empire, that of the Czar of Russia. For almost a whole century (the nineteenth century), Russia and England faced each other in Central Asia without direct confrontation. It was the "Great Game" (definition of Rudyard Kipling, Russians spoke of "Tournament of Shadows"), a Machiavellian intersection of conflicting interests, led by spies, commercial agents, and military adventurers, who in the end only served to maintain the status quo. From this point of view, Central Asia today is remarkably similar to that of one hundred years ago.

Only the actors have multiplied, interest as well, and the "Pax Americana", two years after the intervention in Afghanistan, a year after the occupation of Iraq, looks really small thing.

If the twentieth century heralded momentous upheavals, which arrived on time (with the First World War and the October Revolution), now history seems mired in nothing, despite all the rhetoric about the "world that will never be the same after September 11".

In dramatic years between 1914 and 1924, the fate of this part of Asia was decided.

From the Caucasus to China, including the Middle East.

In that decade there was the only real attempt at revolt of Turkestan people (that was the name of the area which today is divided into five states) that tried to free themselves from the domination of the czars first and Bolsheviks' then, to create a big Turkish state of modern Islamic faith.

Leaders were called "Jadida", but they were later called "Basmachis" by Russians, a derogatory term which equated the guerrillas with the bandits. The revolt failed, the Revolution triumphed, and Uzbeks passed from the condition of subjects of the czar to that of Soviet citizens.

This means that from a political perspective that people have not known a single day of freedom; from the social point of view, there was an advancement ever seen, especially in terms of access to education and medical care; from an economic point of view colonial exploitation already

implemented by the czars was just completed to the exasperation: Uzbekistan had to produce cotton, cotton, cotton.

The economic logic of the czars was already successfully applied by England as well: looking for reservoirs of raw materials to fuel national industry. And the industry reference, in the nineteenth century, was the textile industry (in the twentieth century is the automobile and the raw material is oil). Russian expansion in Uzbekistan coincides with American Civil War, and with the blockade of the Confederate States exports of cotton. Central Asia was a good alternative, and the Czar did not lose this opportunity.

The Soviet Union carried out the colonialist policy inherited from the czars, but did much more: it built dams and canals, hydroelectric centrals and state farms. A giant, imperial system, handing out water and electricity to a huge area and tending to increase cotton production at all costs (including military uses of this agricultural product).

The final result of this exploitation is that Uzbekistan is now the second largest exporter of cotton, but it has to manage an unmatched environmental disaster, especially in the region of the Aral Lake (Karakalpakstan) and that deserves a closer separate look.

"During the cotton harvest, everything stops. Schools, colleges, government offices, everything closed for two or three months. (...). Farmers, gardeners, fruit growers, they all had to change jobs, becoming laborers in the cotton fields. (...). We are told that the more we produce cotton, the more the country becomes rich and happy! But the truth is that these people pay with their health, serenity the chair fastened to a handful of corrupt careerists"(Reznichenko G," The catastrophe in the Aral "). The "corrupt careerists" mentioned by Reznichenko form the hardy Communist leadership, especially during the long leadership of the party secretary Sharaf Rashidov. In his 23 years in power, Rashidov had established an elaborate system of falsification of data in cotton production, making money over money that arrived from Moscow with the protection of the same Brezhnev. The scandal emerges only after the death of Rashidov (1982), thanks to the policy of glasnost, wanted by Gorbachev. For the first time they start talking openly about the environmental catastrophe that is draining the Aral Lake, and for the first time appear the first timid national claims, by the infant movement "Birlik" ("Unity").

The Birlik joins part of the country's intellectuals (writers, journalists, scientists, academics and teachers), tries to oppose Uzbekistan Communist Party led by Islam Karimov through the denunciation of corruption, environmental problem, and asking for the introduction of Uzbek as an official language. "There were too many leaders in the Birlik – an Uzbek journalist says- all eager to come to power, ready to split into factions".

For Karimov is a breeze to neutralize the weak newborn opposition. As the period between the eighties and nineties is turbulent throughout the USSR just close to collapse, in Uzbekistan there is no trace of nationalism that inflame other Soviet republics, like Georgia or Armenia. The same government that had reaffirmed its will to remain part of the USSR in April of 1991, in August proclaimed the independence of Uzbekistan, of course, only after the coup that had deposed Gorbachev had failed thanks to Yeltsin (Karimov had initially supported the coup old guard).

To the presidential elections of December Karimov easily wins the ERK candidate, party born from a split of the Birlik (which in meanwhile was banned, the ERK suffered the same fate two years later). End of the political history of new Uzbekistan. As far as the new constitution provides for all civil and political liberties, Karimov controls with an iron fist all the press and opposition movements.

The Western countries are embarrassed by this autocrat opposed to any democratic opening. But Karimov quickly found a splendid pretext to legitimize his regime: the struggle against Islamic fundamentalism.

Karimov practically implement a "preventive repression", given that he has to wait until 1997 before there is an episode of Islamic armed struggle, in lost Fergana Valley. Now the president of Uzbekistan has his own Bin Laden, for the record called Juma Namangani, and his Al Qaeda, is the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan.

When, in February 1999, a series of bombs broke out in Tashkent (15 deaths), the policy of

repression does not look at anybody: from time to time are all any number of opponents are accused, from the Birlık to the Erk, from Islamic religious to troublesome intellectuals. All potential terrorists.

The ultimate legitimacy comes after September 11, 2001, with American intervention in Afghanistan. Karimov provides Bush Termiz Air Base, and enter the glorious anti-terrorism coalition, alongside another genuine democracy supporter, the former KGB policeman Vladimir Putin.

At present, Karimov is likely to break the record of staying in power of his predecessor Rashidov. And all this after the country passed (so to speak) from communism to capitalism. In fact, it would not be surprising if there was an Islam uprising. It is amazing that there is not.

In terms of freedom, Uzbeks have not earned virtually nothing with independence. On the other hand, they have lost much of the social security that communism guaranteed. The state, which is still owner of the land (except allotments granted to small farm families) continues to manage the production of cotton. It pays a very small amount to the poor producers and collects the incomes of exports without also investing in improving the quality of life.

Average wages (teachers, office workers, hospital doctors) are from 25 to 40 dollars a month. Trade, the historical vocation of the country, is largely prevented by a tough border policy and a protectionist regime. Translated into figures, this means that 27 percent of the population lives in absolute poverty, ie it fails to secure food needs in terms of calories. The vast majority of the population simply survives, doing every job, getting by in some way (in many parts of the country almost to the economy of barter returned). Who can, migrates, especially in Russia and Kazakhstan. Often these are professionals, graduates who have not the slightest prospect here, but lately Uzbeks go to do any work, just to earn the minimum to maintain the family at home. It remains perhaps a little twenty percent of the population, concentrated in the capital, who lives with Western standards.

In the most devastated areas, infant mortality is at Third World levels, and diseases such as tuberculosis have reappeared.

If you think that the country is self-sufficient in oil, with excellent reserves of natural gas, and it is in the top ten gold producing countries (Murantau mine, one of the largest in the world, is managed by Uzbek government in joint venture with an U.S. firm), it is really amazing that it is so quiet.

Or maybe not. The police are omnipresent, it gives the impression of a continuous control. The Silk Road was interrupted by dozens of checkpoints. Sometimes drivers get off with a 500 sum (half dollar) in the documents, and they leave quietly, as if they paid the toll.

Nobody complains, nobody stirs. There is practically no newspaper. The information, often completely contradictory, running from mouth to mouth: this is a country that lives on rumors.

In prison, there are at least 6,000 political prisoners, with sentences ranging from eight to fifteen years, often aggravated by the crime of "infringing internal regulations", perhaps because they rebelled against the mistreatment, they dared to protest or they simply defended themselves from common criminals.

The control of the government invades every area of life, from the prohibition of religious open air events to the grotesque prohibition of the game of billiards.

The system is monolithic, it does not show cracks, also because it invests most of its resources to maintain itself, despite Uzbekistan desperately needs reform, change. On the surface nothing moves, the minimum tension is not shown.

But in private, sitting on their carpet, drinking green tea, Uzbeks expressed their discontent, their open criticism of Karimov, in power. Most people seem to regret the past, others are ashamed of their condition.

In Bukhara and Samarkand they expect good season, which will bring some tourists. Maybe on summer Uzbekistan loses its cloak of sadness, and you can even delude yourselves to feel good. But the country, as it is, has no perspective, every year it sinks a little more, and maybe one day the so long evoked ghosts of fundamentalism could take root even among these so patient and resigned people.

What is certain is that history taught us nothing, and it seems to repeat itself as a curse, here.
The poet Omar Kayyam, a contemporary of Dante, nine centuries ago, already ceased to believe in human progress.

"With the seed I have sown the wisdom / and with my own hand I have worked to make it grow. /
and that's all the harvest I have reaped: /

"I came like water and like wind I go".

Cesare Sangalli