

The International Context of Mass Political Unrest in Central Asia: Conceptual Issues and Perspectives

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My paper will draw on relevant bodies of literature in political science and sociology to explore how the calculations and efforts of political protest movements in Central Asia are likely to be influenced by external actors. The external actors include foreign governments, foreign media outlets, international organizations, transnational movements, foreign individuals and groups, and other entities. Some of these actors might be trying to prevent or curb mass protests, whereas others might be seeking to instigate them.

Until recently, most of the contentious politics literature omitted the international context or came close to doing so. Charles Tilly's seminal work *From Mobilization to Revolution*, published in 1978, treats internal upheavals as mostly a self-contained phenomenon influenced only indirectly, if at all, by the external environment. Mark Lichbach's acclaimed *The Rebel's Dilemma*, a 500-page rational-choice analysis of the interactions between rebels and the ruling authorities, takes essentially no account of how the participants' decisions and actions are affected by external actors. The influential 1997 essay by Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly, proposing "an integrated perspective on social movements and revolution," largely excludes the international dimension when discussing protests and conflicts within societies. As Tarrow himself pointed out two years later, "much of the work [focusing on contentious politics] has been cordially indifferent to what happens beyond the water's edge until quite recently."

The separate but related literature on ethnic and civil warfare has tended to pay greater attention to the international context, but even in this literature the impact of external actors on internal conflicts has often been neglected. Although case studies of individual ethnic or civil conflicts touched on the role of foreign states in supporting one side or the other, no real effort was made until recently to study this phenomenon or other aspects of the external environment in a more systematic, theoretical way. That gap has been at least partly filled over the past decade or so with the publication of theoretical works on such topics as interstate signaling and the outbreak and duration of internal conflicts, the "marketing of rebellion" by insurgent groups to enlist foreign support, the "boomerang effect" as domestic actors try to gain the cooperation of transnational movements, and the impact of various global forces on self-determination movements. A recent study of violent internal conflicts concluded that even though most scholars who studied the topic had focused almost exclusively on domestic actors, "the global dimension is a critical component [of the insurgent movements] and must be factored into the analysis of contemporary internal conflicts."

Although my paper's discussion of the role of external actors in domestic protests and conflicts will deal with theoretical issues, I will also offer tangible illustrations and scenarios relevant to the Central Asian countries. The unexpected surge of mass protests in North Africa and the Middle East in the first four months of 2011 has raised the question of whether similar unrest could one day engulf Central Asia, replicating earlier patterns in Kyrgyzstan. My paper will discuss how external actors could fuel, provoke, or undermine mass political protests in Central Asian countries.