



Democracy and Human Rights in Uzbekistan

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Media Roundtable
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Assistant Secretary Craner: Let me first thank all of you for being here today. This is my second trip to Uzbekistan this year. It comes in the context of the renewed relationship with Uzbekistan, and in the context of the events of last September, of which you are all aware. I am following the lead of our President and our Secretary of State who believe if we are to have a deep and broad relationship with Uzbekistan, it cannot just rest on a security foundation. If we are to have a serious, long-term relationship, there have to be reforms, in both economic and political areas. These are things we will be looking for in Uzbekistan.

Those expectations were made clear on both sides in the declaration that was signed during President Karimov's visit to Washington earlier this year, in which we committed to assist the Government of Uzbekistan. As they opened up their society it became more democratic. Since my last visit there have been a number of changes. We are pleased to see that the ICRC (International Committee for the Red Cross) had again been granted access to prisons here in Uzbekistan. I note with great pleasure the registration of a human rights nongovernmental organization (NGO.) There have been, as I understand, two trials of security force personnel related to basically abusing their authority in the first case related to the torture to death of a prisoner. And to the extent that those decisions receive adequate publicity, it should begin to be clear to other members of security forces that that kind of conduct is not acceptable.

There was a final issue, but I look to you for your views on this. We've been told also that the [office of the] censor has been abolished. And I would be interested in your views on the effect of that. All that said, we continue to look for further progress here. And during the day here, in which I met with a number of officials, a wide variety of officials from a wide variety of ministries, I made it clear that on particular subjects and in general, as the President and the Secretary of State have laid out, we are looking for continued progress on human rights and democracy. I think I will leave it there and take your questions.

Question from Associated Press (AP): Have there been any signals from the Uzbek officials you've met today that they are willing to make more progress?

Assistant Secretary Craner: That's what I was told in line with the declaration that was signed in Washington. I did not receive particular commitments on particular issues that something would be done as a result of my visit. But it was the case that [results on] issues that I raised last time and issues that the embassy works day by day under the very able and concerned leadership of John Herbst came to pass after I departed the last time. And as you all know from Ambassador Herbst, he is very interested and concerned about these issues, and has done a lot of excellent work to try to advance things here.

Question from Agence France Presse (AFP): Did the Uzbek government officials admit the existence of brutal tortures during your meetings with them and do they plan to improve conditions in prisons?

Assistant Secretary Craner: They acknowledge that cases of torture happen here. And they highlighted a couple of things. One was the trials that I've mentioned. And they intend to publicize those both generally and also within the ministries. The second thing they said they want to do to address the problem is the kind of training that we and the OSCE are offering -- to offer alternative methods of trying to solve cases other than torture. They are also considering a visit by the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture, which I encouraged. In other countries, a visit by the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture has been very useful in outlining the scope of the problem and also methods on how to deal with it.

Question from AFP: Which department admitted that torture exists? What government office? The National Security Service or the Interior Ministry?

Assistant Secretary Craner: Pretty much at all the meetings I had it was acknowledged that cases happen here. And in pretty much at all the meeting I've had they thanked the United States and the OSCE for the training assistance we've offered so far. I should make clear that those statements were made in meeting with officials concerned in particular with these issues.

Question from British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC): The persecution of Hizb-ut-Tahrir party members is continuing. How much do you think the government's tough actions are justified and does the U.S. Department of State consider Hizb-ut-Tahrir a terrorist and extremist organization?

Assistant Secretary Craner: The point I made today, as I have made in other countries that are dealing with issues of terrorism is that, one's beliefs should not subject one to punishment. If people are violent then they should come into the justice system of the country concerned. If people simply believe something, then that should not subject them to punishment.

As you know from our reports and our statements, we have great skepticism that everybody who's in prison here is guilty of violent activity. I see a couple of you here have our Human Rights Report, and I think our words there are pretty close to our thoughts on this issue.

Question from United Press International (UPI): How could you characterize the current human rights situation in Uzbekistan with one or two words? Optimistic, pessimistic, grave, or serious?

Assistant Secretary Craner: Again, I will refer you to our report, which our office puts out. I believe the words we use are very "poor" on a litany of topics that are covered in the report. That said, I would note the changes that I mentioned at the beginning. This is the first time the Red Cross has been allowed into prisons. As far as I know there has not been a registered human rights group here in years. I imagine you would have to go back 10 years to find no censorship at least on paper. But we look very much for continued progress. We certainly would not say that that is enough. And by the agreement signed by both sides in Washington it would certainly not be thought enough. So we are looking very much for continued improvement.

Question from Turkiston-Press: I would like to know the following. Since you have released the report, which was a rather rigid one, did you receive any official response from the Government of Uzbekistan? Did the State Department receive anything?

Assistant Secretary Craner: Nobody went through and said, "Well, this fact is wrong, or that fact is wrong." I get a lot of reaction to these reports from different governments, both when I travel and in Washington. And I always tell the government if it feels that the report is not fair then it should point out particular inaccuracies to me. Nobody did that here. As you noted, I have heard the report characterized as tough. Both Colin Powell and his deputy Richard Armitage have made clear they want these reports to be honest. So we go to great lengths to make sure that what is in the reports is correct.

Question from Uzbek State Radio: Do you plan to visit any countries other than Uzbekistan? Is the agenda of your present visit different from the agendas of your previous visits to this country?

Assistant Secretary Craner: No, I think the agenda remains the same as when I came here in January, which is to encourage democratization and the observance of human rights here. Others, who visit like Colin Powell, like Elizabeth Jones, who is our Assistant Secretary of State for Europe, do the same. And as I noted before, John Herbst does it everyday.

This is the only country I am visiting in central Asia. But I am going on to a number of other Muslim countries in the Persian Gulf, which also face a threat of fundamentalism. In a number of countries that I will be visiting -- Bahrain, Oman and Qatar -- they are opening up their political systems, including allowing elections. They are beginning to have functioning parliaments, and allowing women in a number of cases both to vote and run for office. They are also granting expanded civil liberties at the same time. And that's something we want to encourage.

Question from Radio Liberty: Two opposition parties from Uzbekistan are in exile. The government does not recognize them. Did you talk to the government about this issue?

Assistant Secretary Craner: Yes, this is an issue again that was addressed in the Declaration, where it talks about ensuring freedom for elections, and I'm reading here, ensuring "political pluralism, diversity of opinion." And it talks about a multiparty system. Again, I'm quoting: "Improving the law-making process, increasing the oversight functions of the legislature, including through the establishment of a freely-elected and multiparty legislature." It also talks about establishing a genuine multiparty system. So these are the issues that have come up before.

Question from AFP: What will the U.S. do if Uzbekistan does not comply with the declaration, which was signed? Are there any concrete time limits for the implementation of these agreements? For example, when can the multiparty system be established?

Assistant Secretary Craner: There are no concrete dates in the declaration. But as I said before, we and, I think, the Uzbeks hope that the relationship rests on more than a security foundation. And I think both sides understand that if there is going to be a full relationship then both economic and political reforms need to be addressed.

Question from AP: You noted some positive steps adopted by the government, in particular trials of the Security Services employees. What would you say about the extension of the President's term for the next 7 years?

Assistant Secretary Craner: I would again go back to what we have said on that particular subject. We are looking for an opening up of the political system.

Public Affairs Officer Asquino: I can give you the exact statement the U.S. government made on the referendum.

Question from Pravda Vostoka: Would you say that the military and technical aspects of co-operation between the U.S. and Uzbekistan will be the priority in bilateral relations regardless of other factors?

Assistant Secretary Craner: No, what I am getting at and what the Secretary of State talks about when he talks to leaders here, and what the President has talked about, is that a relationship that exists purely on the foundation of security issues is not a durable relationship. If one does not address hunger and poverty and political freedom, then one does not rob terrorists of some of their arguments to gain adherents. So we need to have a broad relationship that takes those issues into consideration as priorities.

Question from AFP: Is it possible to have a copy of the declaration that was signed?

Assistant Secretary Craner: Yes, we can get that to you.

Question from BBC: There exists the view that the U.S. traded universal values and human rights for the military base in (Karshi) Khanabad. The changes you mentioned came about at the very time when the visit of President Karimov was about to take place. So, don't you think it was just due to the visit and not due to a genuine desire to improve the situation that these changes occurred?

Assistant Secretary Craner: I can answer both questions. Number one, if the first were true, I wouldn't bother being here nor would the Secretary of State or the President bother addressing human rights issues. I think a lot of us learned a lot of lessons when we looked back on the Cold War about the attention that needs to be paid to human rights.

To answer the second question, I note that many of the events I noted have occurred here subsequent to (President Karimov's) visit. If the liberalization only occurred before summits it would be a rather slow liberalization. We are hoping for much more frequency, which is part of why I am here today.

Thank you again.

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