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Of Anthems and Agriculture: A Deconstruction of Uzbekistan's Cotton Industry

The Republic of Uzbekistan is a country that has struggled to forge a democratic identity since its separation from the Soviet Union in September of 1991. Since the creation of the Republic there has been only one President, President Islam Karimov. Karimov has tight control over the country and its twenty five million inhabitants. He controls all decisions regarding the population, the economy, and the environment. Karimov cultivates the country's wealth by the growth and exporting of cotton. The world benefits from President Karimov's shrewd business practices, since Uzbekistan is the second largest exporter of cotton in the world, exporting 800,000 tons a year. (EJF 2005) Due to the totalitarian nature of Karimov's administration, the Environmental Justice Foundation, or EJF, has taken up interest in the Republic of Uzbekistan. They have voiced concerns regarding Uzbekistan's treatment of its citizens, the use of the land and water, and the structure of the economy. The official National Anthem of the Republic of Uzbekistan depicts sunny lands, happy children, and a free people living in a democratic society. (Embassy) But by deconstructing this official symbol, the true realities of the country's social, economic, and environmental conditions will be unearthed, revealing a truly broken land in need of genuine reform.

The Supreme Council of the Republic of Uzbekistan approved the National Anthem on December 10, 1992. The lyrics, originally written in Latin, are by Abulla Aripov, and Mutal Bourkhanov composed the music. Below is the English translation provided by the website for the Embassy of Uzbekistan to the United States. (Embassy)

*My country, sunny and free, salvation to your people,
You are a warmhearted companion to the friends
Flourish eternally with knowledge and inventions,
May your fame shine as long as the world exist!*

Refrain:

*These golden valleys-dear Uzbekistan,
Manly spirit of ancestors in companion to you!
When the great power of people became exuberant
You are the country that amazes the world!*

*Belief of generous Uzbek does not die out,
Free, young children are a strong wing for you!
The torch of independence, guardian of peace,
Just motherland be eternally prosperous!*

Refrain Repeated

The first line of the anthem, “*My country, sunny and free, salvation to your people*”, is a bold claim of not only ownership, but of refuge as well. The personification of the country as an oasis for its people is a serene image of sunny days and smiling citizens. This postcard image of Uzbekistan does not match the realities that the citizens of Uzbekistan are confronted with on a daily basis. The citizens are not free, nor are they able to claim ownership to the land,

as espoused in the first lyric of the anthem. Citizens of Uzbekistan suffer from strict travel restrictions within their own country. Uzbeks are required to register as a resident of a specific region in the form of an official stamp provided by the government. For any citizen to move to a different region, one must petition the OVIR, the government bureau that controls internal and external migration, for a visa in order to travel. These visas are usually only procured through bribery, and this is on top of the visa fee of one hundred dollars American. Between the fee and the bribe, average Uzbek citizens do not have the financial capability to move within their own country. (EJF 2005)

“My country” refers not only to ownership, but also to a sense of pride a citizen of Uzbekistan fosters for the Republic. The cultivation of national pride is an effective tool used by governments to shape the mentality of its people, and Uzbekistan is no exception. In order to retain its cheap labor source, the government of Uzbekistan run national campaigns to “promote a sense of duty towards cotton as ‘the wealth of our country’.” (EJF 2005) This manipulation of loyalty goes beyond the adult citizens and soaks into the young minds of the Uzbek children. One fifteen-year old girl was quoted saying “cotton is our national wealth and we are serving our fatherland...cotton is our white gold.” (EJF 2005) These ideas permeate the culture, creating an environment of loyalty to a government without any expectation of proper compensation or treatment in return.

“You are a warmhearted companion to the friends” invokes ideas of partnership and compassion to outsiders of Uzbekistan. The description of

Uzbekistan as a “*warmhearted companion*” creates images of an almost “buddy-buddy” relationship with foreign entities and media outlets. But on the contrary, if you are from a Non-governmental organization (NGO), a civil rights organization, or if you are a civil society activist you are treated as an enemy of the state.

Activists and members of NGOs are commonly harassed and threatened within the country. Usually these threats and violence go undocumented and unnoticed in other countries. But in 2004 the United States State Department “documented two cases where activists were severely beaten following threats from the government to stop their activities.” (EJF 2005) These outside reports are rare, but serve to illuminate the cruel lengths the Karimov regime will take to make sure human rights and speech are oppressed. The government instills laws to obfuscate paperwork and block activists coming into the country and organizing campaigns. Typically the best way for the government to keep out unwanted activists, as well as independent reporters, is to withhold legal registration.

Without registration the groups are rendered illegal, along with all of their activities. One of the only NGOs remaining is the Human Rights Watch organization, but they are routinely harassed and investigated by government officials. The organization must report to the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) the “content, agenda, timing, and place of any proposed activity, and to invite MOJ officials to attend.” (EJF 2005)

“*Flourish eternally with knowledge and inventions*”, the second lyric of the anthem, is full of lofty ideas of prosperity and intellectual ingenuity. The word “*flourish*” infers ideas of wealth and success, and the word “*eternally*” suggests a

type of sustainability of this wealth for generations to come. "*With knowledge and inventions*" suggests that the intellectual and industrial sectors of the economy are the two main resources for this wealth stability. These ideas may be interwoven within the anthem, but are not sewn into the fabric of the country. The government enforces child labor during the cotton harvest season that lasts between September and October. Children, some as young as seven, are forced out of school and sent to the cotton fields to pick cotton for the state. The teachers are also forced to pick cotton, and are responsible for his/her class to meet their assigned quota of metric tons of cotton to produce within the harvest. The children are forced to miss up to three months of school to involuntarily pick cotton for the state for little to no wages whatsoever. (EJF 2005) Interrupting a whole country's education process for three months on a yearly basis is only detrimental to the development and social and economic success of a country. A country cannot create and support a sustainable source of wealth by implementing child labor, because the country is effectively killing off the new generation of would-be entrepreneurs, business-owners, and independent skill workers that would help shoulder, and potentially solve, the burden of creating a system of sustainable and environmental-friendly wealth for Uzbekistan.

"*May your fame shine as long as the world exists!*" is the fourth lyric in the National Anthem of Uzbekistan. The sustained global reputation carries importance to the people of Uzbekistan, at least according to the National Anthem. The author of the poem, and in extension the Uzbek population, desires to see the country's "*fame shine*", inferring images of sun rays that have the

ability to touch every being on Earth. Uzbek citizens imagine their country's influence and prestige to last for as long as the "*world exists*", another reference to how important sustainability of power is to the country. Sadly, the only fame that the Karimov regime is going to receive will be for the destruction of the Uzbekistan region of Karakalpakstan, the North region of the country that contains Aral Lake. The destruction of the Aral Lake, due to government mismanagement of water and irrigation plumbing, has transformed the society of the Karakalpaks from a thriving fishing and resort community to a desolate waterbed of salt and pesticide residues. Before the decimation of the Aral Sea, Karakalpakstan trawlers caught an annual 40,000 tons of fish. Other members of the community worked in canneries or in the health resorts that lined the beaches of the Sea. The local economy has all but disappeared in Karakalpakstan, with unemployment as high as 70%, and 20% of the regional population as being severely poor. (EJF 2005)

Even more detrimental to the Karakalpaks is the salt and pesticide residue that is resting on the dried waterbed. Karakalpakstan is in a region with a prevailing northerly wind, and is located south of the saline mud flats. These winds blow in toxic dust that is part salt and part pesticides from crops. The region "receives much of the 43 tons of salt and pesticide laden dust deposited each year." (EJF 2005) Most likely due to the high exposure of dust, Karakalpaks suffer from increased cases of obstructive lung disease, bronchial asthma, and tuberculosis. It has also been reported by the EJF that 50% of deaths in this region are respiratory in nature. Traces of pesticides have been found not only in

the air, but also in foods like rice, potatoes, eggs, and beef. Studies have also found traces of pesticide in breast milk and treated water. Diseases linked to agrochemical use are the most prevalent in Karakalpakstan. There is a higher presence of incidents of immunological disorders, kidney disease, and reproductive pathologies in this region than any other in Uzbekistan. (EJF 2005)

The anthem desires fame for Uzbekistan for as long as the world exists, but that will be difficult to achieve if Uzbekistan doesn't survive its own government's systematic destruction of the land and the people that inhabit it.

The first two lines of the chorus are "*These golden valleys-dear Uzbekistan; / Manly spirit of ancestors in companion to you!*" There is a tone of reverence in the phrase "*golden valleys-dear Uzbekistan*", emphasizing ideas of royalty and prosperity with the invocation of the color gold paired with the idea of fertile valleys. It is a safe haven for the spirits of Uzbekistan ancestors to take refuge and commune with the land. This closeness with nature that is implied in the first half of the chorus is far from existence in Uzbekistan. The destruction of the Aral Sea has negatively impacted the Uzbekistan environment in a catastrophic way, from toxic dust to drastic climate changes, forever tearing a people from their land. Before its destruction, the Aral Sea was once known as the fourth largest land-locked body of water in the world. It has now shrunk to 15% of its former volume. The area uncovered due mostly to faulty irrigation is a total of 40,000 square kilometers. The uncovered seabed is now a series of dried mud flats contaminated with salt and pesticide residues, which create toxic dust when the winds pick up. The climate has changed drastically as well. The

summers are shorter and drier, and winters are longer and colder, and annual rainfall has decreased. (EJF 2005)

The Uzbekistan has done very little in ways of improving the situation of the Aral Sea. President Karimov has not addressed the issues of deteriorating irrigation pipelines that loose over 60% of the diverted water meant for the cotton fields. This staggering number is a shocking testimony to how unsustainable the Uzbekistan cotton industry is in its present form. If the anthem were true, the Uzbekistan government would become concerned over the ecosystem it has irreversibly damaged with their inefficient irrigation systems. The Aral Sea was once home to twenty-four native species of fish, and its waters formed numerous lagoons and shallow straights. The rising salinity of the water due to a rapidly shrinking shoreline has greatly affected the ecosystems that inhabit the sea. In the early 1980's the native fish species began to disappear, and within a few years the trawlers could no longer make a viable living off of fishing. Of course, native flora and fauna are disappearing in widespread numbers due to the drastic change of environment. Endemic plants are replaced by invasive species more fit for a dry, saline environment. (EJF 2005) The destruction of the sea is a direct action of disrespect and disregard by the Uzbekistan government towards the natural environment it has sworn to protect.

“When the great power of people became exuberant/You are the country that amazes the world!” These are the lines of the second half of the chorus. The second half of the chorus clearly celebrates the citizen of Uzbekistan with such flattering, uplifting words as *“exuberant”* and *“amazes”*. It recognizes the people

as the power behind Uzbekistan, and thus they are truly the ones that amaze the world. In reality, the “*great power*” of the people is denied through laws that restrict free speech and the right to protest, and encourage corrupted political elections and systematic torture. The most well known example of power being stripped away from the people is the massacre at Andijan in 2005. A peaceful protest in Bobur Square soon turned to bloodshed as Uzbek troops fired indiscriminately into the crowd of over a thousand people. The troops sealed off the area, shooting down protestors that attempted to flee. The government lists the official death total at 187, while other estimates show that a total of 700 men, women, and children were killed. (EJF 2005) This is just a glimpse of the systemic repression of human rights taking place in Uzbekistan. It is amazing at how violent and aggressive the government is towards people of varying religious and political beliefs, who are often harassed and tortured without recourse.

The supposedly democratic elections held in Uzbekistan are rife of corruption on the part of President Karimov. The Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) reported on Uzbekistan’s 2004 December elections. The report claimed that the elections were “significantly short of OSCE commitments and other international standards for democratic elections”. One major part of this corruption is the fact that “parliamentary candidates are vetted for loyalty to the government and screened for signs of independent thinking.” (EJF 2005) General opposition groups are denied registration, so no independent voice is even given the chance to run. The Karimov regime disrespects if not outright ignores the statements of the National Anthem, and repeatedly uses these registration tactics

and more to strip the power away from the people who labor so arduously for the government.

“Belief of generous Uzbek does not die out/Free, young children are a strong wing for you!” The first half of the second verse credits children as a source of inspiration and support. The use of the word *“wing”* creates images of stability and support, like the steady wings of a bird of prey. But one cannot miss the underlying message of commodification present in these lyrics. The words *“free”* and *“young”* seemingly describe the children as a free resource of labor for the government to use to pick the fields. The anthem almost sounds like it is begging the children to *“not die out”* for they are a cheap source of labor, and are needed to sustain the wealth. Children are treated in this manner in Uzbekistan, forced to pick cotton for three months out of the year, jeopardizing not only their education, but their health as well. Local children are allowed to return home in the evenings, but children that were bused to the fields are forced to live in unsanitary dormitories that have no running water, electricity, or windows. The children do not eat if they did not pick enough cotton to pay for food and supplies. Numerous children claim that they do not receive a profit once they pay for food, supplies, and transportation. The reason that children stay in the fields is because their teachers threaten them with expulsion or failing grades if they do not produce enough cotton. (EJF 2005) The use of children as labor is intentional in Uzbekistan, and ironic and unintentional in the National Anthem. It is surprising how much these two lyrics reveal about the deploring treatment of the children of Uzbekistan.

“The torch of independence, guardian of peace. / Just motherland be eternally prosperous!” These are the last two lines of the second and final verse of the National Anthem. The anthem ends on images of a feminine description of the land as a *“motherland”*, and again this land is deemed to be *“eternally prosperous”* through some type of economic and perhaps environmental sustainability. But as has been discussed earlier, none of the actions that Uzbekistan has taken lead to any type of sustainability. The cotton industry continues to destroy over 64% of the soil in Uzbekistan by increasing the salinity of the water supply. The government is rapidly nullifying the land without any strategy to revitalize it. (EJF 2005) The message in the last two lines is also one of independence, justice, and peace. These are the cheerful ideals of a free democracy, but there is no fair form of democracy in Uzbekistan, but instead a totalitarian regime lead by President Islam Karimov. Systematic torture of activists is widespread throughout the country, and is often shrouded in mystery, as a way to inflict the most damage on the psyche of the tortured person’s family. Elections are corrupt and suppress any true independent voice. There is no peaceful life for Uzbeks while under the control of President Karimov and his regime of crooked politicians. (EJF 2005)

For Uzbekistan to become truly independent and peaceful, the government would adhere to its own description of Uzbekistan that is given on the Ambassador’s website. It states that “the new country appeared on [the] world map and its priorities were to establish a free democratic society and to develop a market economy...since the first days of independence the

government of the country has found the way to meet the interests of the Uzbek Nation and provide social, political, and economic stability.” (Embassy) Not until more people choose to see past this thin veneer of “respectability” will the Uzbek people, and in extension the land, receive the justice they so rightly deserve.

The Environmental Justice Foundation has done great work compiling countless studies to form these reports on Uzbekistan and its cotton industry. EJF has also made strides in publicizing the actions of the Uzbekistan government led by Islam Karimov that are revealed within the reports. Despite the vigilant efforts made by the EJF, more voices are needed to change the fate of a country, and by questioning a country’s actions or ideas, be it through criticism of an anthem or simply the writing of a blog post demanding that clothing companies label their clothes with the name of the country that grew the cotton, people must come together to communicate and act effectively to end the plight of slave labor in the Republic of Uzbekistan.

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The National Anthem of the Republic of Uzbekistan

*My country, sunny and free, salvation to your people,
You are a warmhearted companion to the friends
Flourish eternally with knowledge and inventions,
May your fame shine as long as the world exist!*

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Map of the Republic of Uzbekistan

