

Constructing the Uzbek State: Narratives of Post-Soviet Years. Marlene Laruelle, ed. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books. 2017. 384 pp. (ISBN-13: 9781498538367)

Marlene Laruelle and her colleagues in *Constructing the Uzbek State: Narratives of Post-Soviet Years* provide a full account of differing views on a range of issues concerning the role of religion, cultural legacies, the ever-changing social fabric of society and political engineering in the formation of the modern Uzbek state.

There are several well-founded grounds for the importance of Uzbekistan in the 21st century. Most definitely, this edited volume sheds some light on its rising influence. Uzbekistan is a landlocked country with the highest population in the region and borders all other Central Asian states. The bulk of that population is located in the demographic and agricultural heartland of Central Asia, the Fergana Valley. Uzbekistan is also well-endowed with natural resources such as gold, natural gas, and oil. The Aral Sea basin in general and the Fergana Valley, in particular, make Uzbekistan an agricultural powerhouse in economic terms with a commanding role in the country's development path. These resources, as well as the country's centrality in terms of its geopolitical positioning at the heart of Eurasia, make it particularly important for China and other foreign powers in and outside of the region. China's "One Belt, One Road" initiative, which has become the centerpiece of China's economic diplomacy in Eurasia, has already started to transform the outlook of the region. Central Asia plays a crucial role in the success of this initiative. Consequently, Uzbekistan's most immediate geopolitical challenge is to retain the country's unity while establishing a well-tuned balance-of-power at the core of Eurasia.

In this regard, a sound historical rationale would affirm Uzbekistan's claim as an influential actor in regional politics in the coming decades. After the devastating Mongolian invasions, the current territory of Uzbekistan became the center of the mighty Timurid Empire. Cities such as Samarkand, Bukhara, and Khiva along the Silk Road went through an extraordinary period of cultural, scientific and economic rejuvenation, and still to this day, they play a dominant role in the domestic political scene, and are still significant political and population centers in the country. Even after the extension of the Russian Empire into Central Asia in the second half of the 19th century, Tashkent became the capital of the new territory of Russian Turkistan and retained its importance. After the collapse of the Soviet system in December 1991, the country gained independence.

The Fergana Valley is divided by a series of intricate and poorly defined borders among the three Central Asian republics of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. This ethnically and culturally complex core of Central Asia was established through territorial engineering during the early period of the Soviet era to prevent the materialization of a unified Turkistan. Consequently, since independence in 1991, these borders have witnessed a number of convoluted problems ranging from inter-ethnic tensions to border incursions to a number of socio-economic difficulties.

This edited volume consists of four main parts. Part I discusses the political construct of Uzbekistan under Islam Karimov's 25-year rule by calling attention to the interplay taking place between the state, the elite, and the people. Part II investigates the social and cultural transformations that took place in post-Soviet Uzbekistan as an outcome of the intensive labor migration due to the failure to reform agriculture in the country. Part III explores the role of religion in Uzbekistan at the state and societal level. The final part looks at the process of formation/reformation of Uzbek identity and gender identity and how they have been the driving forces beyond fundamental changes since independence.

Without a doubt, this edited volume on contemporary Uzbekistan highlights pressing cultural, economic, political and societal issues, combining insights from top academic experts in their fields with unique local encounters and linguistic aptitudes. Most certainly, this timely book has immeasurable value for Central Asia/Uzbekistan studies. It will benefit scholars and students of international relations, political and strategic studies, area studies, and Silk Road studies, as well as the general reader.

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