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UZBEKISTAN

Analysis: Uzbek Eminence Falls From Grace

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Critical articles in Uzbekistan's timid official press are sufficiently rare that their appearance generally sparks speculation in the grand old spirit of what used to be called Kremlinology, with observers eagerly teasing out hints of hidden power struggles and coded references to coming policy changes.

This time, the spark came in the unlikely form of a lengthy article about agriculture that appeared first in Uzbek on 12 February in the newspaper "O'zbekiston ovozi," and then in Russian on 15 February in "Narodnoe slovo." Written by a prosecutor, the article details widespread wrongdoing in the agricultural sector and breaks the news of a criminal case against a onetime top power broker. While the resulting conjecture has left most of the questions unanswered, it provides a useful guide to some of the more vexing issues in Central Asia's most populous country.

Signed by E. Mengliev, a department head at the Prosecutor-General's Office, the article

presents a review of the agricultural sector in 2004 along with the results of a probe that led to the opening 1,296 criminal cases and saw more than 30,000 individuals face various forms of disciplinary action. In one instance of malfeasance, 475 officials illegally distributed more than 20,000 hectares of land to friends, relatives, and themselves. But the real revelation comes when the author turns his pen on Ismoil Jurabekov, until recently one of the most powerful men in Uzbekistan. Mengliev writes that Jurabekov's mismanagement and criminal negligence "caused production and harvests to decline and damaged the country's economy." For this and other crimes Jurabekov faced criminal charges, but the case was closed under a 1 December 2004 amnesty in light of Jurabekov's "full admission of guilt, age, and health."

Jurabekov rose to the upper echelons of Uzbekistan's power structure in the Soviet period. He maintained a high profile throughout the 1990s until his retirement in 1998. He reemerged in 1999 as a presidential adviser with far-reaching control of the agricultural sector until he was dismissed without explanation in February 2004. Seen as a key figure in Uzbek President Islam Karimov's Soviet-era rise to power and a powerful figure in the Samarkand clan, Jurabekov was commonly known as the "gray cardinal" of Karimov's court and reputed to be the second-most-powerful man in the country.

The unexpected news of a criminal case against Jurabekov confirms rumors that have circulated for some time, RFE/RL's Uzbek Service reported on 14 February. Moreover, the article's appearance in both Uzbek and Russian in two leading official newspapers indicates approval at the very highest level. Observers were quick to weigh in with reactions.

Arkadii Dubnov, a longtime analyst of Central Asian affairs, wrote in Russia's "Vremya novostei" on 17 February that the article may point to a new stage in the clan rivalries that pervade Uzbek politics. Dubnov noted that when Jurabekov was a top adviser, "he removed and appointed regional heads and initiated the dismissals and appointments of high-ranking officials and law-enforcement heads. Those dismissed were usually representatives of the Tashkent clan, while 'Samarkand clan members' were appointed." Dubnov concluded, "The final removal of the head of the Samarkand clan, now scapegoat for the authorities' missteps, from the political arena indicates a strengthening of the Tashkent clan. Moreover, [Tashkent clan] representative Rustam Azimov was recently appointed to the post of first deputy prime minister that once belonged to Jurabekov. Thus, Tashkent clan members now lead in the race for the right to succeed Karimov."

An article that appeared on 15 February on Erkinyurt, a website affiliated with the

banned opposition party Erk, suggested that Jurabekov's fall could serve a dual function, mollifying recent expressions of discontent while warning the upwardly mobile that no one is safe. The author opined: "The government needed to come up with some sort of response to recent protests by the Erk party and farmers. The fatted calf of 'Jurabekov & Co.' seems to have been chosen for sacrifice. On the other hand, the government that has so abused the common people now seems to have decided to strike fear into the hearts of mid-level businessmen who have come up somewhat in the world, farmers, and governors and their underlings who have escaped the president's gaze. The message is that they could be next...."

Others cautioned against reading too much into the event. Journalist Sharof Ubaydullaev told RFE/RL's Uzbek Service that the episode is exceedingly murky: How could Jurabekov have concealed his criminal misdeeds while occupying high posts for more than 20 years? Why was the public only informed of the criminal case in 2005, when it had already been closed? More importantly, Ubaydullaev stressed that while the Jurabekov affair will fade, there is no guarantee that similar events will not occur in the future.

What the affair and attendant commentary demonstrate, first and foremost, is the almost total lack of transparency in Uzbek politics. Against that backdrop, Dubnov's move to link Jurabekov's fall with the fortunes of the Samarkand clan represents an understandable, albeit speculative, attempt to seek insights in the informal sphere when the formal sphere yields few clues. The conclusion that attention in state-run media to official incompetence and wrongdoing comes as a response to discontent and a warning to others suggests a government that recognizes the existence of problems but lacks viable mechanisms for remedying them. And the prediction that the brouhaha may simply come and go while the underlying causes remain reminds us that when extreme opacity is the rule in criminally tinged affairs of the state, positive change tends to come as an exception.