SIGNS, SIGNS, EVERYWHERE SIGNS: THE USE OF BILLBOARDS AS A TOOL OF POLITICAL PENETRATION IN KARIMOV'S UZBEKISTAN

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ABSTRACT: *Billboards provide an important source of information for travelers along a road. For many years, businesses have used billboards as form of advertising. While this is the most popular use of billboards, governments have also used billboards as a tool to maximize political presence in a local space. Political presence refers to the methods a government uses to effectively transmit its messages and themes to the local population. The transmission of messages is obviously extremely important for a government to promote its ideas and successfully govern. Key messages from the government are often relayed on billboards as governments look to spread important themes widely through society.*

During the 1990s and early 2000s, Uzbekistan embarked on a dramatic process of nation building. Prior to 1991, the country had never existed in its present form. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent independence of Uzbekistan, the Uzbek government looked to begin a process of national development in a challenging political space fraught with ethnic, regional, and religious conflict. For Karimov's government to survive, it had to build a national identity that promoted its legitimacy against all other challengers and then pushed that message to the local population through a concerted program of increased political presence. Billboards were an important part of this program as the Uzbek government could control the message that people saw as they traveled. The Uzbek government used billboards to promote messages of unity, aspirations for the future and geopolitical decisions.

Keywords: Uzbekistan, Nationalism, Political Presence

INTRODUCTION

Billboards are important aspect of the roadside landscape. Companies and governments have used billboards for many years, as an important tool of information dissemination. Businesses use them for advertising, as highway traffic is somewhat of a captive audience, that will consume the message as it passes by. For governments, billboards provide a tool that facilitates their political presence, which refers to the government's ability to transmit their message as a tool of political development. Governments around the world use billboards to push important themes and messages to travelers as they pass the billboards and consume its content. These messages can be advertising, aspiration or informational, depending on the objective of the organization providing the billboard.

Political presence, or the process of effectively communicating the message of the government in an almost omnipresent state, was an important challenge for the government of Uzbekistan during the 1990s and the early 2000s. Not only did Uzbekistan only gain independence in 1991, but the modern country did also not have a history of independence or national unity at any time in history. The region of Uzbekistan was traditionally comprised of city states and foreign occupiers throughout its history until the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. At that point, the Karimov government entered a concerted process of nation building. This process of nation building was significantly contested by both secular and religious opponents of the Karimov government. The competition of national identity and political legitimacy reached its zenith in 2005, when the government cracked down on protestors in the Uzbek city of Andijon. After Andijon, the influence of secular and fundamentalist Islamic groups was significantly diminished.

Throughout the early 2000s, the Karimov regime used billboards as one of several tools to promote its political presence in various regions. Billboards provide a concise, location specific, regular and continuous medium to promote critical messages for the government. For the Karimov government, geopolitics, aspirational messages and messages of unity were three key themes in the billboards that the government placed along the side of major highways across the country in an effort to promote his political legitimacy and facilitate the political presence of his

regime. This research examines the use of billboards as a tool of political presence and links the messages on billboards to the larger themes of political development in Uzbekistan during its initial years of independence.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Billboards as a Medium for Message Dissemination

Billboards have been a popular form of message dissemination for many years. Their ubiquitous nature has made them a significant piece of roadscapes throughout the world. Most commonly, billboards are used as a tool for advertising. When evaluating a billboard, the most important assessment is the effectiveness of the billboard for conveying a message and influencing action on the part of the consumer, the one who reads the billboard. For Taylor, Franke and Bang (2006: 30), location is the most important aspect influencing the success of information dissemination. Businesses identify local presence as the most critical aspect in deciding to use a billboard for advertising Taylor, Franke and Bang, 2006: 32). In addition, clarity and readability are also identified in the research (Taylor, Franke and Bang, 2006: 29) as essential for successful message dissemination. This leads to the conclusion that any message must resonate with the local population and be clear and accessible to consumers passing by.

Gebreselassie and Bougie (2019) explore the importance of billboards as a tool of information dissemination in lesser developed countries (LDCs), using Ethiopia as a case study. Initially, they emphasize that the experience of information dissemination is different in LDCs due to limited access to various types of media, especially television and the internet (Gebreselassie and Bougie, 2019: 827). This will also impact the reach and frequency of advertisers within a certain region. (Gebreselassie and Bougie, 2019: 828). As a result, billboards tend to be the most used source advertising in LDCs (Veloutsou and O'Donnell, 2005). These observations were confirmed in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia by Gebreselassie and Bougie (2019: 831) where over half of all organizations surveyed used billboards for advertising. In addition, where people in "developed" countries are oversaturated with advertising, Gebreselassie and Bougie (2019: 833) found that in Ethiopia, due to limited access to television and internet, advertising oversaturation was not a major problem. This leads to an interesting implication for governments using billboards as a tool to increase the political presence of a regime. They often find a population that has limited access to information, especially in regions where the internet and new media are controlled. The government can leverage this lack of information oversaturation to deliberately promote place-specific messages that are regularly consumed by a population with limited access to alternative messages. Billboards provide an opportunity to disseminate, concise, clear messages that promote legitimacy and political presence to the local population at selected locations in a manner that requires limited access to technology.

Binder's Model of Political Development

The pervasiveness, location specific nature, and simplicity of billboards make them a useful medium for governments to employ for promoting specific messages. The critical issue in information dissemination is not just the medium, but the content of the message. For a regime, this message typically is an effort to explain and promote their vision of political development. To understand the various aspects of political development, a framework, initially developed by Leonard Binder (2015) is introduced here. Binder's approach to political development defines a basic framework for political development that divides up political development into five categories or networks (production, identity, legitimacy, participation and penetration). Scholars, like La Palombara (2015) and Fierman (1991b), who have extensively worked with Binders model added a sixth category known as allocation. The process of national development is a continuous evolution framed within Binder's six categories of political development and the interactions of Binder's categories both within the country and to the larger global political-economic system. Not only do citizens and non-citizens of a country influence the development of national identity in their country, but their outlook is also influenced by their involvement in the process of national development. As Giddens (1979) emphasized in his duality of structure, people influence the national identity conversation in a region and are changed as a result of interacting with the various networks. This duality needs to be at the heart of any analysis focusing on national identity. The six categories, defined by Binder, all provide insight into national development and work to organize the vast complexity that influences nationalism.

Political Presence and the Production of Space

Verba (1971) characterizes political presence, or as he refers to it, political penetration, as a measurement of how much effective control the government exercises. Coleman (1977: 3) defines it as the process by which a government "establishes an effective and authoritative presence." Fierman (1991b) views a government's political presence as closely related to a government's power and authority. Political presence is quite evident on the landscape

as seen in the built environment. The production of space on the landscape shows clues to the consumer (person viewing the environment) of the elements of nationalism that are identified as important by both the designer and the financier (or sponsor) of the cultural landscape. Typically, the government is a very active player in the development of the human landscape. As a result, elements of the built environment provide a tangible example of the network of identity for a region and the ability of a state to exert a presence on a local community with its political message of national identity.

This promotion of political presence in the context of a landscape is an important research agenda in political geography. According to Lefebvre (1991: 1), until recently, space had a "strictly geometrical meaning" in most traditional geographic scholarship. Basically, space was not something that was influenced by cultural or political actions, it was innocent and isolated from the political process. Outside of the mainstream, research started to emphasize that space was more than geometric and was strongly influenced by societal development. That space was designed with a specific political motive in mind. This emphasis on space being part of societal development is echoed by Duncan (1990: 20) in his conclusion that landscapes tell "morally charged stories," and Atkinson and Cosgrove (1988) when they conclude that large, public Roman monuments built during the late nineteenth century provide an object to locate and embody national and imperial identities and meanings in key metropolitan locations. Smith (1993: 88) also notes that "landscape is, in part a 'work' consisting in itself as the construction of specific individuals and parties in pursuit of specific technical, political and sometimes artistic goals. Ley and Duncan (1993: 329) echo this in their conclusion, "landscapes and places are constructed by knowledgeable agents who find themselves inevitable caught up in a web of circumstances - economic, social, cultural and political - usually not of their own choosing." Through these analyses, these authors demonstrate that the built environment can be used to identify the important elements of national identity within a place. The ideas and individuals that a nation values are commemorated in the cultural landscape of a region. The message that the architect and the leadership intend to communicate to the citizens of a region can be "read" and interpreted through a viewing of these elements of the built environment and an analysis of the history of the building.

The built environment is a key marker of political presence. The effectiveness of a government's ability to promote its message, history and heroes is seen in the buildings, street names, monuments, and other landscape components of a region. The location and condition (well maintained and free of vandalism) demonstrates how well the government's influence penetrates a region. The use of landscapes as a tool to maximize political presence continues to be an important element of the cultural landscape in the modern world.

POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT IN CENTRAL ASIA AND UZBEKISTAN

The 1990s was a contentious era of political development throughout most of Central Asia. Most of the countries of the region had limited history of self-rule and none of them ever existed within their present boundaries. With the exception of Kyrgyzstan, the former Soviet leaders maintained their positions of leadership as the countries transitioned from the Soviet Union to independence in 1991. In addition, each of the countries faced significant political legitimacy and political presence issues. In order to overcome these issues, each state charted a unique course of political development.

In Kazakhstan, one of the most unique methods of creating political legitimacy and maximizing its political presence was to move the capital city from Almaty to Astana (present day Nursultan) in 1997. The Kazakhstani government provided many motives for the move north to Astana, but the government's ability to promote their vision of political development through the construction of a uniquely "Kazakhstani" city was the primary driving force for the movement. The "new" city of Astana, which means "capital" in Kazakh, was built not only to provide a uniquely "Kazakhstani" urban environment, but also provided Nazarbayev, the first president of Kazakhstan, a legacy to cement his legacy in the history of Kazakhstan (Wolfel, 2002).

Political development in Tajikistan was stunted by a civil war that last from 1992 to 1997. Many different explanations of the civil war exist, from clan politics to economic disparity to religion. According to Tuncer-Kilavuz (2011: 287), the war was fought for "control of the state." In other words, the leadership that existed at independence was not able to extend its political presence and promote its legitimacy over the entire population of Tajikistan. As a result of this power vacuum, other groups attempted to step in and seize power. Only with Russian involvement was the government able to maintain a level of legitimacy and bring an end to the civil war (Gretsky, 1995).

Turkmenistan took a different approach to political development, that focused on the development of a personality cult around the former Soviet leader, turned president, Saparmurad Niyazov, who increasingly was referred to as the *Turkmenbashi* (Leader of the Turkmen) (Anderson, 1995: 512). In the early years of his leadership,

farms, regions, cities, and streets were renamed after the president, his birthday became a national holiday, statues of his likeness were built in the capital. All of this was justified by the Turkmen government and media as necessary for the "needs of the native population for strong and respected leaders," and that multipower forms of government "would engender anarchy" (Anderson, 1995: 513).

In Uzbekistan, both religious and regional factors magnified the challenges of creating a unified national identity that extended into the Ferghana Valley where a significant portion of the population resided. In terms of the religious conflict, the influence of Islamic culture on the region is difficult to underestimate, even after the repression of the Soviet era. According to Critchlow (1991: 167), "[t]he hold of Islam on Central Asian society, even after decades of official atheism, makes that religion a political factor with formidable potential." The leadership of Uzbekistan during the late Soviet era faced a significant challenge when it came to using Islam as a source of legitimacy. They attempted to tie themselves to Islam in such a way as to promote their legitimacy as an anti-Soviet/pro Uzbek government, while at the same time trying not to promote the ideals of radical Islam, which was beginning to take hold in the Ferghana Valley, as well as neighboring Tajikistan and Afghanistan.

Underlying the religious conflict in the Ferghana Valley was a regional conflict between the local citizens of the Ferghana Valley and the elite leadership in Tashkent, the capital. This conflict, according to Ilkhamov (2001) focused on a decline of economic opportunities in the Ferghana Valley and a perceived lack of representation in the government. Regionalism and ethnic conflicts were visible in the conflicts of the Fergana Valley during the late Soviet era (Fane, 1996: 274). Uzbeks clashed with Meskhetian Turks in 1989 and with Kyrgyz in Osh in both 1990 and 2010. The Uzbek government intervened on all three occasions to calm the violence, but the underlying causes remain unsettled, especially between the Uzbeks and the Kyrgyz. The multicultural nature of the Ferghana Valley, along with the religious conflict created a challenging situation for the Uzbek leadership, leading to increased interventions throughout the 1990s and early 2000s.

The conflict between the Karimov government and the local insurgents escalated in December, 1991 when Karimov went to Namangan and was forced to sit and listen to Tohir Yuldash's vision of government and Islam. Yuldash was a major political figure in the Ferghana Valley who would go on to become a leader in the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. Upon return to Tashkent, Karimov began a crackdown on the Islamic organizations in the Ferghana Valley including *Adolat* (justice) and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. The conflict continued throughout the 1990s, escalating dramatically with the beheading of police officers in Namangan in 1997. Conflict continued into the early 2000s as the Uzbek conflict became somewhat intertwined with American actions in Afghanistan under Operation Enduring Freedom. The conflicts in the Ferghana Valley have declined in the 2000s as the leaders of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan died fighting with the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan and because of the actions of the Uzbek government, police and military in Andijon in 2005.

While most of the leaders of the Islamic insurgency in Uzbekistan were eliminated, Karimov took no chances and attempted to fill the power vacuum left behind in the Ferghana Valley. In a classic example of promoting political presence, Karimov used various actions to push his message in the region. One of the most popular approaches was using billboards to promote his political messages and slogans.

BILLBOARDS AND POLITICAL PRESENCE

From independence through the early 2000s, the Karimov government set about developing its vision for identity, development, and governance in Uzbekistan. To convey their vision to the population, the government used billboards along the road as a major tool to increase its political presence. While it is difficult to quantify the exact number, interval, and placement of billboards due to the large number of billboards, the billboards were a significant feature on the roadscape, existing in very large numbers at regular intervals as one traveled on the major roads in both rural areas and within cities. The billboards seemed to be a long-term method of political presence as many of the billboards were there both times I traveled through the regions of Uzbekistan. Also, some of the billboards showed significant signs of wear and weathering, showing they had been in place for a significant period of time. The three billboards in this study were selected from 62 sampled billboards photographed while traveling through 12 of the 13 provinces of Uzbekistan. These three billboards are typical of the themes that the various billboards portray and represent important aspects of the Uzbek government's political development plan. The three selected billboards were from various regions of the country, both inside and outside of the geopolitically influential Ferghana Valley.

The billboards provided many different messages as one traveled across the country but based on a textual analysis of many billboards from many different regions, the general themes tended to be fairly consistent and focused on the major themes of Karimov's international and domestic political development program. For the most part, the government presented three major themes, geopolitical alignment, aspirational themes and themes of unity, to

communicate to the citizens of the country who traveled along the roads in an effort to increase the government's political presence and legitimacy.

Theme 1: Geopolitical Alignment after Andijon

Figure one shows Karimov and Vladimir Putin, the president of the Russian Federation, in a seemingly serious, but amicable, discussion as the two leaders of their respective countries, with iconic buildings in the background to increase the clarity and identification of the two leaders.   The billboard includes a caption, which translates as "our goal-peace through cooperation."   In 2008, when this picture was taken, this demonstrates an important pivot for Uzbek foreign policy as they were moving away from an era of increased cooperation with United States as part of the Global War on Terror. This shift towards Moscow was brought on by almost universal criticism of the Uzbek government's record of human rights abuses, culminating in a very vocal condemnation of the Uzbek response to the uprising in Andijon in 2005.

Western nations showed little interest in Uzbekistan until the early 2000s. This changed in late 2001, after the September 11th attack on the United States (US). The Uzbeks found themselves as a desired partner of the United States as the US began preparing for operations in Afghanistan. The Uzbek government seized the opportunity and partnered with the US in the Global War on Terror, allowing US use of the Karshi-Khanabad (K2) Air Base.

Internally, as the first decade of the 2000s progressed, Uzbekistan struggled with severely declining economic conditions and government crackdowns that led to increased discontent amongst its population (Frickenstein, 2010: 89). The crackdowns against opposition groups also increased the strain between the US and Uzbekistan. In response to the increased concerns over human rights violations, the US cut funding in 2004 and delayed funding for upgrades at K2 (Nichol: 2). The relationship was further strained by the Uzbek government's demand that the US pay for the use of K2, after finding out that the US was paying for the use of the Manas Airbase in Kyrgyzstan. While no direct payments were made, the US did pay for significant upgrades at K2.

The human rights conflict came to a head in May, 2005 as protestors stormed a prison and took to the streets in the eastern Uzbek city of Andijon. Karimov, who feared an extension of the colored revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, moved quickly to end the uprising. While there is great debate over the actions of both the insurgents and the Uzbek government forces (Hartman, 2016), the result was over 200 deaths on both sides, and a call for an inquiry on the incident. While the actions on all sides continue to be debated to the present, one result of the action that cannot be debated is a further degradation of US-Uzbek relations, which were already seriously troubled. The relationship took another hit when the US airlifted Uzbek residents, who fled across the Kyrgyz border to escape the violence, to Romania. The day after the airlift, the Uzbek government sent formal notification (*demarche*) of their intent to cancel the status of forces agreement, giving the United States 180 days to leave K2.

Most of the "western" states emphatically condemned the Uzbek response in Andijon in 2005. This created an opportunity for Russia to step back in, after its influence waned a bit during the early days of US military involvement in Afghanistan. Both the Russians and the Chinese classified Andijon as an "internal affair" and therefore, "off-limits to international inquiry (Nicol, 2005: 4). The support from Russia and China was welcomed in Uzbekistan, especially by the Karimov government, and the billboards were used to convince the local population that a new era of Uzbek-Russian relations was at hand. Cooperation is a key component in promoting the narrative of legitimacy for the Uzbek government's move back towards a closer relationship with Moscow as many Uzbeks were not interested an old Soviet style relationship, where the Russians dominated. The billboard takes great effort to show Karimov and Putin talking as equals and cooperating on global affairs. While the reality of the balanced nature of the relationship could be debated, the message being presented for consumption is clear: cooperation with Russia was achievable and would help promote peace in Uzbekistan.

Theme 2: Aspirational Themes

The contentious nature of political and national development during the 1990s led the Uzbek government to work to unify the country behind several themes. Many of the billboards use aspirational, noncontroversial themes to potentially open the door for discussions and acceptance of more controversial actions. Figure two shows an example of one of these themes.   The billboard, showing Karimov, in front of an Uzbek flag, holding a young girl and surrounded by youth, in traditional Uzbek clothes, western attire and athletic uniforms, with a caption that translates as, "our children must be stronger, more educated, wiser and happier than we are." The message is very clear for the Uzbek passing the billboard, the future of Uzbekistan is bright, if we unify to help improve the wellbeing of the youth.

While the message in billboard is very noncontroversial and almost impossible to oppose, the methods to achieve the message are fraught with challenges and controversy, especially in the early days of Uzbek independence. In the late 1980s, oppositional movements started to grow, and support calls for autonomy and individual rights (Fierman, 1991a). The first of these movements, *Birlik* (Unity) was established in 1988, mostly from the literary

community in Tashkent. Overtime, differences in the approaches to protesting and personality clashes led to the split of the oppositional movement into a *Birlik* and a more moderate *Erk* (Freedom) Party (Yalcin, 2001). *Erk* grew into one of the largest oppositional parties in the early 1990s and its leader, Muhammad Salikh, ran against as the primary opponent to Karimov in the first presidential election. Overtime, the *Erk* party moved towards democracy and economic liberalization, which stood in contrast to Karimov's plan for political development in Uzbekistan, which was more conservative and state centered. By 1993, both *Birlik* and *Erk* were outlawed by the Uzbek government and their leaders were either forced into exile, harassed, or imprisoned, effectively limiting their future influence in Uzbekistan.

Figure 1. Billboard demonstrating the increasing alliance between Russia and Uzbekistan (photo by author).

While a true multi-party system was curtailed in Uzbekistan, Karimov still needed to gain legitimacy and push his message out to the population. To promote legitimacy and increase political presence, the government used aspirational messages, like this one (figure 2) to justify their actions in limiting dissent. Maintaining stability was a critical message from the leadership and they used stability to push their agenda and eliminate the opposition (Kokan, 1992). These messages of stability, paired with aspirational messages, like making the world better for our children, increases the legitimacy of the government and its ability to push a development program that is more state centric than the oppositional parties were supporting. Also, by tying political development to aspirational messages, like making the world better for our children, can help minimize public reaction to a restriction of certain liberties.

Aspirational messages provide a source of legitimacy and political presence that is difficult to argue for oppositional forces. Obviously, most people want to see a better world for their children. The key issue becomes how does the government execute such a program? Does happier justify action against opponents of the government? The crackdown against opposition during the 1990s has often been justified as keeping peace in a very unstable region. The use of political slogans and billboards help to promote aspirational message and peace during an era of strong political crackdowns.

Theme 3: Themes of Unity

Figure three shows another theme of billboards in Uzbekistan, unity. One of the most important problems facing the Karimov regime in its first several years was creating a unified national identity for the nation. Prior to 1925, the Uzbeks never had either a nation or state, when the Soviets created the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic (Bell, 1999: 185). Consequently, the country of Uzbekistan never existed prior to independence in 1991. As a result, many groups looked to step into the void in 1991 to create the modern Uzbek nation Karimov inherited when he moved from leader of the Soviet republic to the leader of independent Uzbekistan.   This billboard again uses children as a medium to promote, what seems on the surface to be a non-controversial goal of unity and solidarity. The children are dressed in traditional Uzbek clothing. Behind the children is a backdrop of flowers and a porcelain plate, painted in a traditional Uzbek craftsmen style. The slogan on the billboard is translated as, "our power is in unity and

solidarity." As with the previous theme, this slogan is extremely non-controversial as it reads. However, the process of creating unity and solidarity has been extremely problematic for the Uzbek government.

Figure 2. Photo showing aspirational message (photo by author).

To create a unified nation, Karimov looked to remove Soviet themes from Uzbek national identity and tie Uzbek national identity to the historical themes, like the Silk Road, Uzbek crafts, and historical figures, like Amir Timur (Tamerlane). This follows the idea of creating unity through a strong leader, something that is fairly common through the post-Soviet sphere.

The 1990s saw challenges to Karimov's political and national development programs from both secular and religious groups. In terms of secular challenges to political development, initially, the *Birlik* movement led the movement towards the development of Uzbek nationalism in the late 1980s during the later stages of *Glasnost*. As Karimov solidified power, his regime wrestled control of the nationalist narrative from *Birlik* and began to marginalize the *Birlik* movement. After Uzbekistan's independence, *Birlik* was outlawed by the Karimov government and its offshoot, *Erk* failed to make a significant impact in the first presidential election. By 1992, both parties were outlawed, and their prominent members are either continually harassed by government officials, imprisoned, or exiled.

The religious challenges to national identity initially came from the spiritual leadership in Uzbekistan (muftiate). In the early 1990s, Karimov worked with the Islamic leadership in Uzbekistan as Karimov moved to solidify his power in the country (Zelkina, 1999: 359). However, as the Mufti began to clash with Karimov politically, Karimov removed the Mufti from power and replaced him with a government sanctioned leader (Zelkina, 1999: 360).

With Karimov bringing the muftiate under government control, the *Adolat* (justice) party became the primary voice of Islamic political opposition in Uzbekistan. *Adolat* was formed initially a group of volunteers who provided security in the Ferghana Valley. Over time, the group moved into the political arena with a declaration of a goal to establish a "just Islamic State" (Zelkina, 1999: 361). In 1992, the leadership of *Adolat* sent a list of political demands to Karimov. The list included the official recognition of the Islamic Renaissance Party and the declaration of Islam as the official religion of Uzbekistan. The list of demands was also signed by the Imams of the mosques of the Ferghana Valley. This presented Karimov with a crisis of legitimacy in the Ferghana Valley as the security and religious leaders of the region stood united against Karimov. To limit their influence, Karimov traveled to the Ferghana Valley and met with the leaders of *Adolat*. Karimov was met by a large crowd that tried to force Karimov to accept *Adolat's* demands. In a move of self-preservation, Karimov agreed to some of the demands on the spot, but later went back on the agreement, outlawed *Adolat*, and arrested several of the key leaders (Rotar 1998).

When Karimov outlawed *Adolat* and cracked down on its leadership, the *Adolat* began to evolve into a more extreme religious movement, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. During the 1990s, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan conducted a series of terror activities, including the beheading of government police officers in 1997 and a series of bombings in Tashkent in 1999. As the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan gained influence in the Ferghana Valley, Karimov moved to challenge their influence, culminating in actions against Islamic protestors in Andijon in 2005. After Andijon, the influence of Islamic nationalism wanes in Uzbekistan.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, the lack of economic development and the rise of secular and religious protest movements threated the Karimov government. In an effort to promote his legitimacy and push their political message (political presence) the Karimov government took a two pronged approach. On one hand, they ruthlessly pursued, arrested and punished oppositional figures to the Uzbek government. On the other hand, the government pushed a series of messages promoting unity in the country. Figure three is an example of this more positive approach to promote political presence in the Ferghana Valley. The billboard shows children in Uzbek dress with a simple, non-controversial slogan written on the billboard. However, as the message is unpacked, the message becomes more complex. In a region with conflicting themes of unity, which theme will become dominant? What will happen to the followers of other themes? How will they be integrated into the national development program of the nation? The answers to these questions are all fraught with challenges and controversy and helped generate the increased instability in the Ferghana Valley during the 1990s and early 2000s.

Figure 3: Message of unity (photo by author).

EFFECTIVENESS OF THE BILLBOARDS AND KARIMOV'S PROGRAM OF POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT

As part of a wider political development process, the billboards were an effective tool that promoted the political presence of the government and their legitimacy. People cannot help but consume the message as they travel. As emphasized by Gebreselassie, A., & Bougie, R. (2019), billboards are an essential method of information dissemination in lesser development countries. Simple messages, whether product advertising or pollical slogans are highly effective in communicating to the local population.

When compared to Tajikistan, Tuncer-Kilavuz (2011) emphasizes that the Uzbeks avoided regional conflicts and potential civil war because of a strong, pervasive program of political presence that promoted political legitimacy. While the methods used by the Uzbeks can be debated, the political development program did promote stability in the country. Also, it is important to note that the billboards were not subjected to graffiti or vandalism. Other than weathering, the billboards were unaltered. This shows that the billboards were not a seen as a medium of resistance to increasing the increasing political presence of the Karimov government in all aspects of Uzbek society.

CONCLUSIONS

The Uzbek government used billboards to promote their legitimacy and disseminate their message of political development during the challenging early years of independence in Uzbekistan. The 1990s and early 2000s were an

era of intense competition in terms of national and political development, as the government faced challenges to its legitimacy from both religious and secular organizations. In addition, Uzbekistan found itself as an important point of geopolitical competition as the United States and Russia both sought to expand their influence in Central Asia in general and Uzbekistan in particular, during the early 2000s.

In the context of increased geopolitical and domestical political competition, the Uzbek government took direct action to promote their legitimacy and increase their political presence. Billboards were one of the many tools and approaches they also used to push messages and information to the local population, who travel the roads regularly. The messages of geopolitical alignment, aspirational themes and messages of unity were three clear, concise, and important concepts the Uzbek government looked to push to the local population to gain support and legitimacy.

Billboards have long been an important medium for information dissemination. They are especially effective when they present messages that are clear, concise, and focused on a specific location. For many years, business have used billboards as an effective tool of information dissemination, focusing on product advertising. Governments have also used billboards, especially in regions where other forms of information dissemination are limited, to increase their political presence and legitimacy.   As the world continues to develop more advanced forms of information dissemination, billboards continue to remain an important medium, both for business and governments. Their location specific nature, low technology and clear, concise messages makes billboards ideal for a near continuous spreading of information to various groups.

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