

Uzbekistan: Britain's ambassador embarrasses Bush administration

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Last week, Baroness Symons, a Foreign Office minister, announced that Ambassador Craig Murray would go back to Tashkent. The Labour government hopes this will bring to a close one of the most embarrassing scandals to hit a British foreign mission in years.

Murray has been back in Britain for two months for medical reasons. It is widely believed—the Foreign Office does not give any details—that he was treated for stress-related illnesses caused by a witch-hunt against him aimed at silencing his outspoken attack on human rights abuses by the Uzbek government of President Islam Karimov.

Murray has been accused of drunkenness, womanising and “unpatriotic” behaviour. It was alleged that he seduced visa applicants in his office, had late night drinking sessions and drove an embassy Land Rover down a flight of steps. The accusations only came to light after he made criticisms of Uzbekistan that cut across the Bush administration's interests in the region, and that Washington sources described as “intemperate.”

The US government acknowledges that Uzbekistan's secret police “use torture as a routine investigation technique,” but it still funds the organisation to the tune of \$80 million. Uzbekistan has great geo-strategic significance and is seen as an important ally of the US in the so-called war on terror. American aid to Uzbekistan tripled to \$500 million last year. The country allowed the US military to use its airbases for its occupation of Afghanistan and later agreed to the building of a US military base at Khanabad where hundreds of US troops are now stationed.

It is believed that the British Foreign Office strongly intervened when Murray highlighted similarities between human rights abuses in Iraq and those in

Uzbekistan and warned that CIA intelligence from the country was likely to be tainted as it was obtained under torture. During the build-up to the Iraqi invasion, Murray stepped up his criticisms—comparing Uzbekistan's human rights abuses to those being used as ammunition against Baghdad. Yet Washington was financing Uzbekistan, rather than invading it, he said.

This summer, London launched an investigation into his conduct. After ignoring quiet counselling on the sensitivity of his diplomatic conduct, he was given an ultimatum to resign or be sacked. In the meantime, other members of his embassy in Tashkent have been disciplined in connection with separate allegations. A Third Secretary at the embassy has been made to resign and its deputy head of mission has returned to London.

The sordid episode started when Murray gave a speech in October last year that embarrassed and contradicted the American ambassador, John Herbst, and the Uzbek government. Murray described Uzbekistan as a country that “is not a functioning democracy, nor does it appear to be moving in the direction of democracy. The major political parties are banned; parliament is not subject to democratic elections and checks and balances on the authority of the executive are lacking.”

He went on to note that there are between 7,000 and 10,000 political and/or religious prisoners, who in many cases have been falsely convicted of crimes. He said that the use of torture by the police and security services is rampant, citing the case of Muzafar Avazov and Husnidin Alimov, who were tortured to death by the use of boiling water. Murray commented, “But all of us know that this is not an isolated incident. Brutality is inherent in a system where convictions habitually rely on signed confessions rather than on forensic or material evidence. In the Uzbek criminal justice system

the conviction rate is almost 100 percent. It is difficult not to conclude that once accused by the Procurator there is no effective possibility of fair trial in the sense we understand it.”

Murray’s speech was included in the Foreign Office’s yearly human rights report for 2003 and was fully in line with observations by organisations such as Human Rights Watch, which applauded him for raising these issues. Steve Crawshaw of Human Rights Watch said, “Everyone was aware that Murray was under huge pressure not to speak out, but to his credit he carried on. He clearly felt that if he couldn’t stand up and say those things, then what was he there for?”

But his public condemnation of Uzbekistan’s government created a rift within Britain’s political establishment that ran along the fissures that developed over the war on Iraq. Murray recognised this, and commented while recuperating in Scotland, “I may be the new David Kelly but I have every intention of staying alive.”

Government scientist Dr. David Kelly was the whistleblower who was viciously attacked for leaking criticisms to the BBC’s Andrew Gilligan and Susan Watts of the dossiers prepared by MI-6 in order to justify the Blair government’s support for Washington’s planned war against Iraq. He claimed that the highest government figures and Prime Minister Tony Blair’s top adviser Alastair Campbell were involved in misleading parliament and the public by “sexing up” the dossiers in order to claim that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction that were a direct danger to world peace. The witch-hunt launched against Kelly by the government and his public naming as the source for Gilligan’s reports led to his death.

The affair highlighted the concerns within the state apparatus over the government’s uncritical support for US foreign policy and a fear that this might undermine British imperialism’s own interests. The Foreign Office and the government found themselves in a similarly difficult position over Murray. They clearly did not want Murray to resume his post and cause further embarrassment for his US counterparts, but felt unable to sack him for raising human rights issues. The allegations made against him were part of a smear campaign that they could use to oust him, but they were so crudely executed that the offensive backfired.

Murray found support from several quarters, ranging from human rights campaigners in Britain, in the US and in Uzbekistan itself, to Conservative MEPs such as John Bowis—who asked the European Commission to challenge the Foreign Office on the reasons for Murray’s recall from Tashkent—and Clare Short, Labour’s former international development secretary who resigned over the war on Iraq.

In the end, the Foreign Office had to back down. In announcing Murray’s return to his post, Baroness Symons reaffirmed not only the support of the Foreign Office for the ambassador but also that of the prime minister. She also backed Murray’s stance on Uzbekistan’s human rights record, and admitted that Uzbekistan had no independent political parties, that it muzzles its press, controls religious activity and tortures its prisoners. She said that “appalling” deaths had occurred in custody, but concluded that Britain would maintain what she cynically described as a policy of “critical engagement.”

The affair once again reveals the nature of the special relationship between Britain and the US as well as the modus operandi and intent of Washington’s foreign policy. The Bush administration will support any repressive government no matter how great its human rights abuses if it is in the former’s political or economic interests to do so. If it is in the US’s interest to destabilise a country in order to attack it, however, then the abuse of human rights becomes a convenient excuse to do so. The British government, for its part, will fall into line whenever the vital interest of the US is concerned, in order to piggyback on America’s military might and thereby hopefully punch above its weight in its dealings with the rest of the world.



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