



EXECUTIVE POWER AND POLITICAL CORRUPTION IN CENTRAL ASIAN TURKIC STATES: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT. *This study examines the link between political corruption and unchecked executive power in the Turkic states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan in Central Asia. Using Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) data from 1991 to 2021 and combining historical analysis with a linear regression model, the study shows that 40.7% of the variation in political corruption levels can be explained by the concentration of authority, as determined by judicial and legislative restrictions as well as media censorship. The results show that the main causes of systemic corruption are the deterioration of legislative checks and the repression of media freedom (\$R=-.638\$), even though economic development (GDP per capita) is statistically insignificant (\$p=.112\$). The analysis demonstrates that absolute power in the region actively requires the establishment of corrupt patronage networks in order to preserve regime stability, rather than just offering the chance for illegal gain. Because the political system is based on the mechanics of graft, the study comes to the conclusion that anti-corruption initiatives in the region will be futile unless functional checks and balances are restored, particularly in the areas of media independence and judicial oversight.*

KEYWORDS: *corruption, model, democracy, authoritarianism, autocracy.*

INTRODUCTION

Power, a tool of absolute control, has been a source of struggle for many centuries. The research question of this paper, whether power corrupts or what is the relationship between unchecked and unbalanced power and corruption, is an age-old debate that has been discussed in many forms throughout history. Plato, for example, argued that only the rule of the philosopher-king could prevent corruption and ensure justice in his ideal state (Kotsori, 2018). In contrast, Machiavelli claimed that a prince must be willing to use any means necessary, including deception and violence, to maintain his power and secure his interests (Dietz, 1986). In modern times, scholars have examined how power and corruption affect various aspects of political life, such as democracy, development, human rights, and international relations. This debate is particularly relevant when considering the Central Asian Turkic States, a region of powerful governments and political corruption.

This study examines the connection between executive power and political corruption in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan using a country-year panel dataset (N=124) covering the years 1991 to 2021. We developed an empirical design

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using a linear regression model based on Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) data to assess the impact of particular institutional variables on political corruption indices, including media censorship, judicial constraints, and legislative constraints. The analysis controls for GDP per capita to account for the established literature identifying economic development as a significant covariate of perceived corruption. The model determines whether systemic graft in the region is a result of economic scarcity or a necessary component of its unique political architecture by adjusting for national wealth. Furthermore, the paper examines the historical context of these states to gain a better understanding of the long-term effects of power consolidation since the fall of the Soviet Union.

This study will attempt to analyze the effects of power on political corruption in the Central Asian Turkic States by explaining first what power is, what type of governments can be regarded as “too powerful”, why we need checks and balances, what political corruption is, and how those two are connected. Later, it will briefly explain the current governmental as well as corruption-related situation in the states in question. Finally, it will analyze the data on them through a unique-statistical model via linear regression and discuss its findings. In order to analyze the relationship between power and corruption in Central Asian Turkic states, this paper utilizes a variety of sources, including NGO reports, academic journals, and datasets. These sources provide a comprehensive overview of the current trends in corruption within these countries. Additionally, this paper looks at the historical context of Central Asian Turkic states to gain a better understanding of the long-term effects of power on corruption since the fall of the Soviet Union and the emergence of independent nation-states in the region, which had led to a power struggle between these newly formed countries.

The Central Asian Turkic States are a region of powerful governments and political corruption. These countries share a common cultural and linguistic heritage, but have diverged in their political trajectories since gaining their independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. They have adopted different types of political systems, ranging from authoritarianism to democracy, with varying degrees of legitimacy and stability. They have also faced different challenges and opportunities in terms of economic development, human rights, and regional security. These countries offer a rich and diverse context for exploring the relationship between power and corruption in post-Soviet states.

This paper hypothesizes that there is a very important impact of uncontrolled power on political corruption due to various reasons, and the closer the level of power gets to absolute, the more likely that corruption increases. It shows that the more powerful a government is, the more likely it is to engage in corrupt practices that undermine its legitimacy and performance. The paper also suggests that power does not necessarily corrupt by itself, but rather it depends on how it is used and controlled by those who wield it. Looking at the relationship between corruption and power with a unique approach, that is, through the example of the Turkic States in Central Asia, this study is believed to be of significant importance in filling a gap in the field and at the same time answering why too much governmental power is pernicious for democracies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Power

Power can be defined as the ability to control resources and outcomes (Magee & Galinsky, 2008). From an inter-personal point of view, power emphasizes a certain amount of influence one possesses over other(s) (Dahl, 1957; Goldhamer & Shils, 1939). Accordingly, political power can be described as the control of a person, or a group of people, over the execution of state affairs (resources), sometimes a constitutional right to dictate the duties and reward or punish the doings of others, and make the final decisions (Binder, 2002).

In the political context, absolute, or unlimited power, refers to the fact that the power holder, be it a single person or a group, exercises control over the political system or the governance of a country with an omnipotent level of authority and no checks and balances. Often quoted in the literature as “authoritarian” or “autocratic” governments, the ruling entity makes the final decisions without any oversight mechanism (Glasius, 2018).

Absolute or unlimited power has been exercised by various rulers and regimes throughout history and across the world. For instance, ancient Rome was ruled by emperors who claimed divine authority and had absolute control over the military, the law, and the administration of the empire (DeLorme et al., 2005). Nazi Germany was dominated by Adolf Hitler, who established a totalitarian dictatorship that suppressed any opposition and pursued a genocidal agenda (Wintrobe, 1990). North Korea is governed by Kim Jong-un, who inherited a dynastic system that grants him supreme power over the party, the army, and the people (Lee et al., 2013).

Absolute power is maintained through three primary pillars: legitimation, repression, and co-optation. Ideological narratives such as nationalist creeds and charismatic leadership that manufacture public consent are used to achieve legitimacy. In order to stifle dissent, the state uses coercive surveillance and its monopoly on violence to silence dissent. Finally, co-optation depends on networks of patronage in which the allocation of state resources and privileges produces a loyal elite class that depends on the regime to accumulate wealth and power. Because potential opposition is neutralized and oversight mechanisms are rendered ineffective, this institutional configuration guarantees that executive power remains unchecked.

Absolute or unlimited power has significant and negative consequences or effects on the political system and society at large. One of these consequences or effects is corruption, which is defined as the abuse of entrusted power for private gain. Corruption can take various forms, such as bribery, nepotism, fraud, embezzlement, extortion, or favoritism (Vargas-Hernández, 2009). Corruption can undermine the legitimacy and performance of the political system by eroding trust, accountability, transparency, and efficiency (Vargas-Hernández, 2009, pp. 111-117). Corruption can also harm society by increasing inequality, poverty, injustice, and violence. Finally, it can also pose a threat to regional and global security by fueling conflict, instability, and extremism.

An authoritarian government is a type of political government in which the power holder has very limited control over its actions. In such countries, civil rights are commonly suppressed, free media and opposition are very weak, and certain key state institutions, such as the military, police, judiciary, and such, are controlled by the executive (Sinpeng, 2020). State propaganda, censorship, and limits to freedom

of speech are very common to authoritarian governments (Alyukov, 2022). The Constitution usually does not project any control measure over the power holder, or can be disregarded (Harkness, 2019). Authoritarian governments also defy the rule of law in their countries (Kelemen, 2019). The form of authoritarianism in different countries might differ, and it is hard to define a straightforward pattern. In some cases, the control can be achieved via manipulation and/or propaganda, whereas in others it might come as a natural product of direct violence.

An autocratic government, on the other hand, has no control mechanism over itself. There are no checks and balances in such countries, and the grip of the executive on other institutions is tighter (Li, 2009). Therefore, it can be stated that even though an autocratic and an authoritarian government have quite a lot in common in aspects such as the concentration of power (De Hoogh et al., 2015), lacking or constrained political freedom (Bader & Faust, 2014), control over institutions (Gandhi & Przeworski, 2007), censorship (Geddes & Zaller, 1989), propaganda (Carter & Carter, 2021), lack of accountability (Gilli & Li, 2014) and weak rule of law (Carothers, 2007); autocratic governments divert from authoritarian ones in ways that i) they usually lack complete rules and institutions, ii) the level of repression of the government over the governed is a lot much higher, iii) they tend to impose stricter controls over their economies, and, iv) in most cases they have strong personal figures as opposed to bigger groups/political parties.

It is not by coincidence that we pay particular attention to “checks and balances”. As a way to limit one of the estates from becoming too powerful, such mechanisms can be regarded as the safety valves of countries. Thanks to the check-and-balance systems, countries maintain the balance of power within their political systems (Holcombe, 2018). Often regarded as one of the key pillars of proper democracies, checks and balances help ensure good governance, individual rights, and freedoms.

Checks and balances are mechanisms that limit or regulate the exercise of power by different actors or institutions in a political system (La Porta et al., 2004). They aim at preventing the concentration of power by dividing and therefore limiting it. Checks and balances can take various forms, depending on the type and structure of the political system. For instance, in a presidential system, such as the United States, checks and balances are achieved by the separation of powers among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government, each with its own functions and responsibilities (Holcombe, 2018). In a parliamentary system, such as the United Kingdom, checks and balances are achieved by the balance of power between the government and the opposition, as well as the role of the monarch as the head of state (Van der Vyver, 1993). In a federal system, such as Germany, checks and balances are achieved by the division of power between the central and regional governments, as well as the role of the constitutional court as the guardian of the constitution (Carnevale, 2018). Thanks to the limited power, governments remain accountable to their people (Padovano et al., 2003). Also, they enforce state actors to cooperate and increase their effectiveness and efficiency. It is, however, important to note that they serve the aforementioned purposes only when they are in place effectively. If they are not respected or do not bring any added value, they cannot guarantee a perfectly functioning democracy.

The corruption of power as a concept refers to the phenomenon that when a person or a group gains power, they tend to abuse or misuse it. Some studies have demonstrated that people in power positions may show signs of unethical or immoral behavior (See Kipnis, 1972; Keltner, 2016). They are more likely to lie, cheat, steal, and engage in various types of misconduct. People in positions of power tend to be self-centered and not open to feedback.

Power can corrupt not only individuals but also groups (Frank et al., 2015). Similar to individuals, when a group of people holds power, they might start acting in their own interests. A sense of exclusivity can lead such groups to believe they are above the law and that their actions will not have consequences (Mungiu, 2006). This disregard for feedback may result in a lack of accountability, ultimately preventing corrective actions. Additionally, an inflated group self-concept can cause indifference to the interests of others, and attempts by outsiders to be heard may be met with oppression (Ashokkumar et al., 2019). One famous study, known as the “Robber’s Cave Experiment,” conducted by Muzafer Sherif in 1954, showed that when two groups compete for a prize (power position), they develop negative stereotypes and prejudices against each other, leading to increased hostility and aggression (Lovaglia, 2003). The study also found that when those two groups start working for the same goal (such as fixing a water supply problem), inter-group conflict and hostility decrease. When the final prize is near-absolute power, these negative dynamics are likely to intensify.

Political Corruption

Political corruption refers to the unethical actions and/or exercise of (ab)use of political power for personal gain and interests (Amundsen, 1999). Though the list is not exhaustive, the unethical actions can be regarded as: i.) Bribery: the act of offering, giving, or receiving something of value in exchange for political help, ii.) Embezzlement: misappropriating or stealing public property or funds, iii.) Nepotism: giving jobs or opportunities to friends or family members regardless of their qualifications, iv.) Cronyism: giving jobs or opportunities to trusted colleagues or political allies, v.) Money laundering: disguising the illegitimacy of possession of money, vi.) Extortion: obtaining something through force, and vii.) Influence peddling: using one’s position to influence the decisions of others (Philp, 1997).

Political corruption can occur or manifest itself in different ways, depending on the context or country. For instance, it can involve electoral fraud, which is the manipulation or falsification of votes or results in an election (Lodge, 1998). This can undermine the legitimacy and representation of the government and the people. An example of electoral fraud is the 2007 presidential election in Kenya, which was marred by widespread irregularities and violence (Klopp & Kamungi, 2007). It can also involve patronage networks, which are the exchange of favors or resources between politicians and their supporters (Ilkhamov, 2007). This can distort the allocation and distribution of public goods and services and create loyalty and dependence among the beneficiaries, such as in the example of Mexico, which has been used by different political parties to secure votes and support from various social groups (Baez-Camargo & Ledeneva, 2017). Political corruption can also involve state capture, that is, the influence or control of private interests over the policies or decisions of the state (Pešić, 2007). This can subvert

the public interest and benefit a few elites or groups at the expense of the majority. The Russian oligarchic system can be given as an example of state capture, which has enabled a few wealthy businessmen to dominate the economy and politics of the country (see Yakovlev & Zhuravskaya, 2009). Finally, it can also involve rent-seeking, which can be explained as the extraction or appropriation of public resources or benefits by private actors without providing any value or service in return (Lambsdorff, 2002). This can reduce the efficiency and productivity of the economy and society and create waste and inequality, as happened in Brazil, for instance, which involved a massive scheme of bribes and kickbacks between politicians, state-owned companies, and contractors (Silva, 1999).

Political corruption can be enabled or facilitated by various sources or factors that affect the incentives and opportunities of actors or institutions in a political system. Some of these sources or factors are institutional, such as weak governance, low transparency, high discretion, or low accountability. Some are economic, like low development, high inequality, high poverty, or low competition. Some are social, such as low trust, low civic engagement, low education, or low media freedom.

Political corruption is pernicious for societies for many reasons. First and foremost, they might have a negative impact on the functioning of the government (Villoria et al., 2013). A country in which decisions are made to benefit only a select few cannot provide welfare for all citizens (Lambsdorff, 2001). Also, when state funds and property are diverted to those in power, the delivery of public services is impeded (Kayode et al., 2013). Public trust in institutions declines, and both elected and appointed officials lack accountability (Morris & Klesner, 2010). Since democracy is often seen as the will of the people, political corruption undermines democratic principles and threatens democracy itself (See Kubbe & Engelbert, 2018). Additionally, mismanagement of public resources and an uneven playing field due to nepotism and cronyism hinder economic development (Rotimi et al., 2013). A corrupt government also possess a direct threat to human rights and leads to the erosion of the rule of law (Pearson, 2001).

Political corruption can be prevented or combated by various solutions or strategies that aim at changing the incentives and opportunities of actors or institutions in a political system. Some of these solutions or strategies are legal, such as anti-corruption laws, regulations, codes, or sanctions. Others are institutional. Examples include independent watchdogs, auditors, courts, or commissions. Others are civil society-based, such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), media outlets, social movements, or whistleblowers.

Central Asian Turkic States

Central Asia holds significant geopolitical and economic importance due to its abundant energy resources and strategic location situated between the West, China, and Russia. The region is home to vast reserves of hydrocarbon resources as well as raw materials, which gives the region “critical importance” for the global energy market (Vasić et al., 2023). Moreover, the region has always been a center for trade and cultural exchange due to its location, most notably during the premodern times as the Silk Road passed through the region, connecting China to the Middle East and to Europe (Frankopan, 2017).

In the modern era, Central Asia's prevalence has been reinforced by China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). (Rolland, 2017) Through railways, highways, and investments into the energy sector, China sought to integrate the region into its broader network as a key transit hub for global trade. Moreover, Geopolitical competition over influence in the region remains intense as Russia, the EU, and the United States also seek to strengthen their economic and political ties in the region (Stronski & Ng, 2018). The region is rich in hydrocarbons, especially with Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan playing key roles in oil and gas exports (Cooley, 2012).

Although China has rapidly expanded its economic influence in Central Asia through the Belt and Road Initiative, Russia is operating in the region by advancing regional institutions like the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), both of which serve as platforms to sustain influence and counterbalance China's economic dominance (Stronski & Ng, 2018). At the same time, Russian energy firms continue to hold important stakes in the region's hydrocarbons, particularly in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, though these ties are increasingly tested by Chinese offers of capital and infrastructure. Still, Russia has a unique social and demographic leverage—millions of Central Asian citizens work in Russia, and the money they send home is essential to the economies of countries like Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan (Ryazantsev, 2016). In this sense, Russia's influence is both institutional and economic; it can be understood as a result of enduring networks of power remnant of the USSR, as well as geopolitical and economic necessity of today.

The region's growing strategic value has also drawn sustained interest from Western powers, most notably the United States and the European Union, especially since the war in Afghanistan in 2001. An important feature in Western involvement in the region is that it's based on security concerns. The West also offers an alternative model of political governance and economic model to that offered by Russia and China (Stronski & Sokolsky, 2020).

In order to test the hypothesis of this paper, we conduct a comparative analysis on Central Asian Turkic States: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, which all share several similarities. One of the similarities is the Turkic language and culture. They also all share a Soviet heritage in terms of their political and economic systems. This legacy dictated that they have centrally-planned economies, state-controlled media, and a lack of political and civil liberties. On the positive side, they all have relatively well-educated people as well as well-developed infrastructure. Another similarity is their agriculture-based economies. Though Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have more developed industries, in all four countries, agriculture is a significant part of the economy. What is more, even though the levels differ, all of those countries have authoritarian governments. The geographical characteristics of the Central Asian Turkic States are another similarity. The deserts in the region account for the harsh conditions and lack of water, whereas the mountainous terrain limits accessibility. These geographical characteristics have shaped the way of life of the people living in this region and also affect the economic development of these countries. Historical and cultural heritage can also be regarded as another similarity. They have been part of different empires (Persian, Mongol, Timurid, Russian), and that heritage translated into diversity in populations. Finally, they share similar challenges. Their dependency on natural resources makes their undiversified

economies vulnerable and uncompetitive. They face security challenges such as terrorism, extremism, or separatism.

Kazakhstan is the largest of the Central Asian Turkic States, located in north-central Asia. The majority of the population is Kazakh, and there is a significant presence of Russian and other minorities in the country. The political corruption level in Kazakhstan can be regarded as moderate to high. It is ranked 102nd out of 180 countries by Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index (CPI) in 2021 (Kazakhstan). Reports state widespread corruption in the country and suggest that it is due to the concentration of power in the hands of the few. Lack of transparency and accountability in the country also contributes to the high level of corruption (See Satpayev, 2014).

Kyrgyzstan is a mountainous country located in Central Asia, which shares its borders with China, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Ranked 144th in the CPI in the same year (Kyrgyzstan), Kyrgyzstan can also be regarded as a corrupt country. Ineffective legislation and weak institutions are often regarded as some of the reasons why Kyrgyzstan's government, public, and business sectors are reported as corrupt. Despite governmental efforts, the problem in the country remains persistent (See Cokgezen, 2004).

Turkmenistan is a country located in Central Asia of Turkmen people with minorities of Uzbeks and Russians. It is one of the most corrupt countries in the world, ranked 169th out of 180 in CPI in 2021 (Turkmenistan). The highly authoritarian government controls most aspects of the economy and society, and there is a lack of transparency and accountability. The government also has a history of repressing political opposition and suppressing free speech. This lack of political openness and democratic institutions allows for corrupt practices to flourish. High levels of human rights violations are also an often-cited fact in the country (See Bohr, 2008).

Uzbekistan, the most populous of them all, is also located in Central Asia. The CPI of 2021 places the country in 140th place (Uzbekistan). Similar problems mentioned for the other three states are also common in Uzbekistan, such as reports of widespread corruption in the government, in state institutions, as well as in the public sector, and the government is authoritarian and non-transparent (See Yevgeniya & Nugmanovna, 2021).

Regime Consolidation in Central Asia

It's worth briefly considering the process of transition from SSRs to capitalist sovereign states in order to contextualize the persistence of systemic corruption in the region. In the aftermath of the disintegration of the USSR, the Central Asian states mostly built their new political order on the foundations of the pre-existing Soviet administrative structures. Unsurprisingly, this resulted not in democratic transformation but in the entrenchment of informal networks, cult of personality formations, and finally systemic corruption. As such, the disintegration of the USSR didn't result in a clean break from the past but a reconfiguration of existing structures under the guise of sovereignty and reform.

Though not applicable to all the aforementioned cases to the same extent, single commodity dependence has also been a factor that eased regime consolidation for the old nomenclature to control the economy and thus pave the way to consolidate power.

This dynamic is commonly identified as part of the so-called “resource curse”. When a country relies heavily on a narrow base of commodities and its export revenue, the state gains the capacity to centralize the revenue flows easily. This, in turn, increases the government’s ability to throttle dissent as the economy is centralized under government control (Loung & Weinthal, 2010).

In Kazakhstan, the former First Secretary of the Kazakh SSR, Nursultan Nazarbayev, quickly moved to leverage his former position to consolidate power in the country. While he carried out reforms toward market liberalization, the privatization of state assets, especially in oil and gas, resulted in these assets being accumulated into the hands of oligarchs loyal to Nazarbayev (Luong & Jones, 2002). Thus, the presidential apparatus was placed in the center through which the economic opportunity flowed, entrenching patron-client relations across both public and private sectors.

In Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov followed a similar path but with a stronger emphasis on coercive control; the power was consolidated by the systemic dismantling of civil society, the securitization of politics, and state monopoly over key sectors such as the cotton industry. Similar to Kazakhstan, the rent-seeking elite form an alliance with the government apparatus based on control over economic resources and political power (Kandiyoti, 2007).

Turkmenistan is an extreme case in comparison to the previous two cases. Here, Saparmurat Niyazov created a cult of personality; he declared himself “Turkmenbashi”, which means the “Leader of the Turkmens”. His cult of personality was institutionalized into every domain of governance, including education and national memory (Horak, 2005). Niyazov governed through decree, bypassing all formal channels of accountability. The natural gas sector, which remains Turkmenistan’s main source of state revenue, was managed through non-transparent structures as the revenues were under direct control of the president and beyond legislative oversight (Bohr, 2004). His rule also witnessed grandiose projects such as marble municipal buildings, statues, and palaces. Turkmenistan institutionalized corruption by obscuring it by making sure state decisions, administrative appointments, and public tender processes took place without independent oversight. The judiciary lacked independence, and the civil servants were frequently rotated in order to prevent the accumulation of power (Kuru, 2014). Thus, corruption not only existed in the elite circles but trickled down to local levels where bribes were required to receive access to education, health care, employment, and so on.

Kyrgyzstan represents the outlier in the region. They experimented with political plurality in the 1990s, initially promoted liberal reforms, but the economic opportunity still revolved around President Askar Akayev’s close circle and associates. Corruption was a major factor in the 2005 Tulip Revolution in the country (Radnitz, 2010).

Data Analysis

In order to investigate the relationship between power and political corruption, we will build a statistical model using the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) database, which provides comprehensive data that includes information on various aspects of democracy, such as political rights, civil liberties, and corruption. We will first begin with a descriptive analysis of the data and move on to use regression analysis to examine the correlation and

causal relationship between power and political corruption in the Central Asian Turkic states between the timeframe 1991-2021.

We selected the V-Dem dataset for the purposes of this research, as it provides comprehensive and detailed data that helps researchers measure and compare the level of democracy between different countries. The V-Dem dataset offers 470 indicators, 82 mid-level indices, and 5 high-level indices that encompass various factors that signal the level of democracy in a country, such as electoral processes, civil liberties, checks and balances (Coppedge et al., 2021). While the complete V-Dem dataset examines political regimes in 202 countries from 1789 to the present, this analysis will extract and employ the country-year data for the post-independence era (1991-2021) for Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. The data is composed of expert-coded estimates of complex latent factors such as institutional oversight and censorship effort. By employing the V-Dem dataset's disaggregated metrics, we can assess horizontal accountability (judicial and legislative constraints) and diagonal accountability (media freedom), which are essential for identifying institutional power imbalances in the region.

The methodology of V-Dem involves aggregating expert judgments to estimate complex and often unobservable factors related to democracy. The expert assessments help evaluate the data in order to produce valid and reliable estimates (Marquardt, 2025). However, the aforementioned reliance on expert evaluations introduces potential limitations and biases, as experts may exhibit varying levels of reliability and subjective biases. Factors such as personal perspectives, cultural backgrounds, or political contexts can influence their assessments, thereby reducing the value of the data. To mitigate these issues, the V-Dem methodology also incorporates evaluating inter-coder reliability and employing statistical models to account for individual coder tendencies (Coppedge et al., 2020, p. 54).

Nevertheless, the V-Dem dataset offers a useful tool for this study's objectives. Most prominently, it offers standardized cross-national indicators on authoritarian governance and corruption, which offer a systemic framework for comparative analysis. Considering the scarcity of reliable data in Central Asia's political system, this is a critical necessity. Despite the aforementioned epistemic biases that exist within expert-coded metrics (Coppedge et al., 2021), V-Dem's granular indices (e.g., "Corruption Index," "Power Distributed by Socioeconomic Status") align with this research's focus on institutionalized power imbalances, thus helping us make empirically grounded comparisons across Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan.

For the analysis, our independent variables are "Judicial constraints on the executive index", "Legislative constraints on the executive index", "Government censorship effort — Media", and "Government social media censorship in practice". The dependent variable is the Political Corruption Index scores. The independent variables are chosen to show the control of the power-holder (executive) over the other traditional estates of democracy. Though the first two are on a scale from 0 to 1, where 1 is the highest level of control, the third and fourth independent variables are scored between 0 to 4, where 4 is almost no control over media and social media, respectively. The model is also controlled for the GDP per capita in order to eliminate the impact of economic problems on corruption. The results of the analysis can be found in the tables below.

Table 1. Linear Regression Results: Determinants of Political Corruption (1991–2021)

Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error	t-value	p-value
Judicial constraints on the executive	-0.742***	0.188	-3.95	0.000
Legislative constraints on the executive	1.099***	0.276	3.98	0.000
Government censorship effort — Media	-1.333***	0.241	-5.53	0.000
Government social media censorship (practice)	-0.614**	0.249	-2.47	0.015
GDP per capita (log)	0.083	0.052	1.59	0.112
Constant	2.417***	0.511	4.73	0.000

Source: compiled by the authors using the V-Dem dataset

Table 2. Model statistics

Statistic	Value
Observations	124
R ²	0.407
Adjusted R ²	0.381
F-statistic	15.92***
Model p-value	0.000

Notes: Standard errors are reported in the table.

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.10$.

Higher values of the Political Corruption Index indicate higher levels of corruption.

Source: compiled by the authors using the V-Dem dataset

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The analysis suggests that the independent variables “Judicial constraints on the executive index”, “Legislative constraints on the executive index”, “Government censorship effort — Media”, and “Government social media censorship in practice” have a strong and significant effect on the Political Corruption Index scores. The R square change of the model after controlling for the independent variable is .407, which indicates that the independent variables account for 40.7% of the variation in the Political Corruption Index scores. This suggests that these variables have a significant influence on the levels of political corruption in the selected countries. It is important to note that the significance level of this regression analysis was .000, which indicates that the results are highly statistically significant and the effects of the independent variables can be considered reliable.

When the coefficients are analyzed, it is visible that all of the selected variables contribute to the model at a significant level, when the impact of government censorship efforts on media as well as legislative constraints on the executive index are the highest, -1.333 and 1.099, respectively. The control variable, GDP per capita, seems to have no significance in the model (.112). The correlation table proves that the highest correlation between political corruption and the independent variables is with the government censorship efforts on the media.

Overall, this regression analysis suggests that the independent variables “Judicial constraints on the executive index”, “Legislative constraints on the executive index”, “Government censorship effort — Media”, and “Government social media censorship

in practice” are important contributors to the Political Corruption Index scores. It is important for governments to consider these variables when developing policies and strategies to reduce political corruption in their countries.

CONCLUSION

This paper has provided a comparative analysis of the relationship between power and corruption in Central Asian Turkic states. Inspired by the famous words “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely,” attributed to John Edward Acton, it aimed at testing if the hypothesis of absolute, or uncontrolled power, leads to political corruption via building a causal link through statistical modelling. It first outlined what power is and how it can be regarded in a political sense, how it can be pernicious if uncontrolled, and which forms it might take in governments. It then explained what political corruption is and how it is related to the fusion of power in the hands of the few. In order to prove its point, a group of states, namely Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, sharing significant similarities, was analyzed. To further probe its point, a regression analysis was conducted as a sanity check.

The results have shown that power does indeed have an effect on corruption and that authoritarian regimes are particularly prone to abuse their power. When a government wants to collect power via controlling the legislature, judiciary, media, and now social media, the power it possesses turns into a pernicious one, affecting all aspects of political as well as social life. Power and corruption have profound and pervasive effects on various aspects of political and social life in Central Asian Turkic states. For instance, they affect the quality and integrity of elections, which are often marred by fraud, manipulation, or intimidation, the delivery and access of public services, such as health, education, or infrastructure, which are often plagued by inefficiency, inequality, or bribery, the protection and promotion of civil rights, such as freedom of expression, association, or religion, and the level and distribution of economic development, such as growth, poverty, or trade, which are often distorted or hindered by rent-seeking, cronyism, or nepotism. It should be noted that corruption has many causal effects, and uncontrolled power has multiple consequences, and this paper is only concerned about the effect of power on political corruption.

The findings indicate that the concentration of executive authority is strongly associated with higher levels of political corruption in the Central Asian Turkic states. In particular, weaker judicial and legislative constraints and increased media control emerge as statistically significant predictors of corruption, while economic development does not show a significant effect in the model. These results suggest that institutional accountability mechanisms play a central role in shaping corruption outcomes in the region. The evidence, therefore, underscores the importance of effective checks and balances in mitigating systemic corruption and highlights the institutional dimension of governance as a key explanatory factor.

This paper has some limitations or challenges that should be recognized and addressed in future research. One of these limitations or challenges is the availability, quality, or reliability of data on power and corruption in Central Asian Turkic states. Data on these variables are often scarce, outdated, or inconsistent across different sources or

indicators. This poses a problem for measuring and comparing power and corruption across countries or over time. Another limitation or challenge is the measurement issues or alternative explanations that may affect the validity or generalizability of the results. For instance, power and corruption are complex and multidimensional phenomena that may not be adequately captured by a single variable or index. Moreover, power and corruption may not have a linear or causal relationship, but rather a reciprocal or contingent one. Furthermore, power and corruption may be influenced by other factors or variables that are not controlled for in the regression analysis.

This study has some implications for the development of more transparent and accountable governments in this region, and it is important to understand the relationship between power and political corruption for several reasons. One reason is to inform us, citizens: it can help people be more informed and aware of how their public resources are being used. With this starting point, people may hold their leaders accountable for their actions and ask for higher transparency. Once the relationship between economic development and corruption is understood, people can help promote economic development. It is worth noting that understanding the relationship between power and political corruption is not only important for the citizens of a country but also for investors, business people, and any other parties that interact with the country in question. Additionally, understanding the relationship between power and political corruption can help people to identify and combat corruption in their own communities and organizations.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors report no conflict of interest.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

BST and AFC contributed equally to this work. BST: conceptualization, methodology design, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, writing, review and editing, and visualization; AFC: conceptualization, methodology design, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, writing, review and editing, and visualization. Both authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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