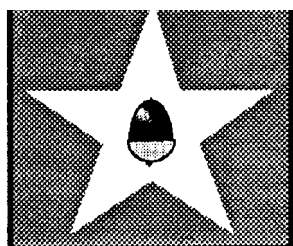


**Conflict Studies Research Centre**

**Ella Akerman**

**Power & Wealth in  
Central Asian Politics:  
Clan Structures  
versus Democratisation**

**May 2002**



**K30**

# Power & Wealth in Central Asian Politics: Clan Structures versus Democratisation

Ella Akerman

Since the Central Asian republics gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Western analysts have viewed them with a great deal of optimism, predicting a rapid shift to democracy, the creation of market economies and the establishment of enduring stability. At first glance it appears that these five states – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan – have succeeded in adopting many of the structures associated with Western-style democracy: secular governments, democratic institutions, legislatures, judicial systems and constitutional and legal statutes to safeguard the rights of individuals and ethnic minorities. However, closer examination of the political and economic processes in each of the republics reveals a system of authoritarian rule and suppression of any form of political opposition. Stagnation of the democratisation process appears to be connected not only to the impact of the Soviet era and inexperience of democratic government, but also to the Central Asian political culture and a power base that, over centuries, has been shaped by the predominance of clan structures. This article seeks to offer insight into this political culture and to demonstrate that any democratisation process is highly dependent on the ability and willingness of Central Asian governments to establish a power equation that incorporates traditional élites and new political forces.

Some analysts have questioned whether democracy will ever be attained in Central Asia,<sup>1</sup> 'whether democracy as such is unsuitable as a basis for legitimate political order in Central Asia, or whether democratisation projects live through hard times because the forms in which they were implemented failed to take into account Central Asian realities'.<sup>2</sup> *Nations in Transit*, a comprehensive, comparative and multidimensional study of 27 former communist states, divides the countries of the region into three broad groups.<sup>3</sup> The first set comprises democratic nations with competitive market economies. The second encompasses hybrid/transitional states in which limited institutional development and some democratic and free-market characteristics exist alongside a high degree of authoritarianism, corporatism, cronyism and state involvement in economic life. Such countries are either in the midst of abandoning the authoritarian, statist systems of communist times, or the programme of change has stalled or failed. The third category consists of consolidated autocracies and fully statist economic systems. Such nations are highly repressive, provide little or no space for opposition political groupings, suppress independent civic activism and are notable for state domination of the economy. Based on this breakdown, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are labelled hybrid/transitional states, while Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are viewed as consolidated autocracies. In Central Asia, political and economic processes are widely determined by clan structures, family ties and the presence of a strong president, leading to the consolidation of authoritarian rule rather than democratic governance.

## Regional Identities & Political Culture

Historically, all Central Asian nations are divided into clans and tribes that form large territorial factions. Until the twentieth century, the people of the region were split into nomads (Kyrgyz) and settled peoples (Sart). The Uzbek and Tajik peoples who have lived in proximity for centuries did not perceive themselves as two distinct nationalities, and only the division of the region into five Soviet republics in the 1920s led to the imposition of national 'labels'. Despite Soviet attempts to dilute tribal consciousness and to impose new ethnic (national) identities, tribal and regional identities remained intact, and a significant factor in social relations and politics.

Regional identity is powerful in Uzbekistan, often driven by the desire for local economic and political empowerment and the urge to wrest control of a potentially lucrative economy from the strong, centralised regime. The most powerful contemporary clan is the Samarkand, which has been directly linked with President Islam Karimov, a native of Samarkand. Members of the clan control key government positions. The clans are engaged in a continuous struggle to consolidate their power and influence; the main objective is to hold as many government posts as possible. In particular, the Tashkent region, the Ferghana Valley, Samarkand, Bukhara and the southern region have constituted the power base of leaders of the Communist Party of Uzbekistan. In the struggle for political control or access to economic resources regional alliances often take precedence over an all-Uzbek identity. In some parts of the country, ethnic ties appear malleable and less important than regional links. Thus, while at present Uzbeks and ethnic Tajiks insist on emphasising their differences, the two groups have tended to intermarry. Moreover, families frequently change their ethnic identification over generations, especially if they have a political incentive to do so.

Similarly in Tajikistan, all of the post-Stalinist communist leaders have come from the province of Leninabad (now Khodjent), which was mostly populated by ethnic Uzbeks. The major factions are the Khujandis (north), Badakhshanis (east), Kulobis (southeast) and Kurgan-Tyubis (southwest). Following the failed coup in Moscow in August 1991, the communist-dominated Tajik parliament replaced its chairman with a Khujandi, Rahmon Nabyev, and in the November elections Nabyev secured 57% of the vote. Following past practice, the president formed a government composed of Khujandis and Kulobis. Nabyev was forced to give the opposition one-third of the cabinet seats, though, in recognition of its popular support. But the neo-communist leaders in Khujand and Kulob did not agree with this distribution of power, and, in mid-September 1992, an armed group claiming allegiance to the Islamic Renaissance Party forced Nabyev to resign. Civil war ensued. Russia and Uzbekistan helped the neo-communist forces to regain control of the capital on 24 October 1992, ending the bloodiest phase of a conflict that eventually cost some 20,000 lives. By then, neo-communist deputies in Khujand had replaced Nabyev with the current President Imomali Rahmonov, the former governor of Kulob.

Regional differences appear most profound in Kyrgyzstan, however, where the split between north and south critically undermines national identity. Those living in southern Kyrgyzstan (Osh, Jalalabad and Batken oblasts) see themselves as governed by the northerners. Kyrgyz identity is primarily determined by membership of one of the three clan groupings (known as wings) – ong (right), sol (left) and ickilik (neither) – and secondly by membership of a particular tribe within a wing. The ong contains only one clan, the Adygine, located in the south of

the country, whereas the sol includes seven clans in the north and the west of the republic. The southern ichkilik is a grouping of numerous clans, some of which are not of Kyrgyz origin, but claim Kyrgyz identity.

In Turkmenistan, meanwhile, the main clans are the Yomud (in the western and northern parts of the country), the Teke (around the state capital of Ashgabad) and the Goklan (situated west of Ashgabad). The Turkmen tribes remain relatively isolated and politically independent.

Finally, in Kazakhstan, the Kazakhs have traditionally identified themselves as members of tribes, known as hordes (juz). The Great Horde is concentrated in the south of the country and is associated with the aristocracy. The Middle Horde migrated across what is now northern and eastern Kazakhstan and is noted for its writers and intellectuals. Finally, the Lesser Horde controls western Kazakhstan and is characterised by its martial tradition. Clan and horde membership began to play an increasingly important part in the political and economic life of the republic after independence in 1991.

It appears that social organisation, deeply rooted in historical tradition, has a great impact on the political processes in the five Central Asian states. Strong tribal identity contributes to the formation of highly centralised governments whose composition reflects the strength of the clans. The consolidated autocracies of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are the result of this process. In turn, strong regional identity leads to the establishment of several power centres that control the economic resources and exercise power in their respective area of influence, allowing not only a certain degree of independence from the centre, but also participation in the political process. Consequently, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan were able to develop structures that, although centralised, allowed for a certain degree of political engagement.

## Wealth & Politics

Clans extend their political power by using wealth to gain access to important positions in government and industry. In many cases, government élites merge with powerful clans. Uzbekistan provides a good example of the interconnectedness between access to power and wealth, and shows the high level of dependency on political élites with a deep rooting in strong but nearly invisible clan, patronage and family relationships. A complex network of regional political interests intersects with commercial and industrial interests to reinforce the stability of Karimov's rule. In the area of economics, the Uzbek government regulates all activities. For instance, imported goods face a 100–120% mark-up, rendering trade impossible for the majority of firms.<sup>4</sup> However, there are exemptions for certain types of companies, such as the numerous 'charity' foundations that do not have to pay taxes or duties. At the same time, such foundations have the right to set up firms as financial sponsors, which are also exempt from tax and are supported by high-ranking government officials who serve the interests of the clans that promoted them. Another example is the cotton sector, the country's largest employer and exporter. The government pays cotton farmers a fraction of the value of their crop, in general between 15% and 25% of the world price.<sup>5</sup> As the government controls cotton exports, it can sell cotton to foreign buyers for around 85% of the world price, enjoying a profit margin of 60–70%.<sup>6</sup> Top ranking officials in Tashkent and in the provinces personally benefit from the low prices paid to the cotton farmers because they skim off the receipts from cotton exports.

In Uzbekistan, there is no free competition and no free exchange of currency – the government's policy is officially justified as a means to reinforce the national currency. In 1998, foreign companies operating in Uzbekistan were issued with currency exchange licenses. The government later announced that these licenses were invalid and it froze the accounts of foreign firms. The owners of this money were offered the choice of spending it on goods made in Uzbekistan or investing it in the development of the country's manufacturing industry – in which case the money was likely to disappear into the pockets of the various clan members. New currency exchange licences were issued to a small number of selected companies in which top officials held interests.

Those clan members who are in power, as well as people in partnership with top government officials, enjoy favourable conditions to accumulate wealth. The Coca-Cola company of Uzbekistan – whose regional director, Mansur Maqsudi, was married to Karimov's daughter, Gulnora – provides a good example of the importance of family ties for a successful business and the potential pitfalls of this strategy in the event of a deterioration of relations. In 1991, shortly after his marriage, Maqsudi and his brother approached Coca-Cola, offering to bottle the company's products in Uzbekistan. In 1994, Coca-Cola and Maqsudi established a joint business enterprise, which in 1995 became one of the leading foreign ventures in the country.<sup>7</sup> However, immediately following Gulnora's separation from her husband in 2001, the government launched a series of legal investigations into the company.<sup>8</sup>

Family ties are a significant factor in Central Asian politics. In Kazakhstan, for example, 'the relatives of the head of state have taken such extended positions that [soon one will be able to speak] of almost complete "familisation" of the government apparatus'.<sup>9</sup> The potential successor of President Nursultan Nazarbayev is Rakhat Aliyev, head of the country's internal security apparatus and son-in-law of the president. Also in contention is Nazarbayev's eldest daughter, Dariga, who owns the largest media company – 'Khabar' – in the republic. The former Minister of Health Protection of Kazakhstan, Mukhtar Aliyev, is the father-in-law of the president. The director of Khazakhtransoil (an oil company), Timour Koulibayev, is the second son-in-law of Nazarbayev. General of the National Security Forces Talgat Koulibayev is the brother of Timour Koulibayev; and the former Minister of Construction and Housing and the First Secretary of the Oblast Committee, Askar Koulibayev, is their father.

The close connection between power and wealth in Central Asian politics contributes to the consolidation of political systems that lack transparency, democratic decision-making and justice. As long as this connection persists there is little hope for change. While the situation in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan is particularly bad, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (once considered 'outposts of democracy') are gradually sliding towards autocratic rule by adopting similar political practices.

## **The Role of the President**

Following national independence, institutional reforms aimed to eliminate the duplication and wastage associated with public administration during the Soviet era and to establish basic democratic institutions. However, the former communist nomenklatura did not leave the political scene, but instead moved into the new non-party institutions. Consequently, the composition of the ruling élite changed

less than the institutional system.<sup>10</sup> This is especially true with regard to the president: four of the five leaders of the Central Asian states are former communists.<sup>11</sup> While maintaining the rhetoric of democratisation, each of them – with the exception of Rahmonov in Tajikistan – has taken steps to extend his initial term in office, and has actively worked to subvert the electoral process and to develop strategies to suppress political opposition. Kyrgyzstan (considered the most liberal country in Central Asia) and Kazakhstan were initially committed to political reforms but have subsequently backtracked. In the near future they are likely to go down the same autocratic path as Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

In Kazakhstan, a national referendum was held in 1995 that extended Nazarbayev's term in office until 2000.<sup>12</sup> In June 2000, he secured a permanent place in Kazakh politics when both houses of parliament unanimously approved a bill that granted him lifelong powers and privileges in order 'to prevent an erosion of the country's achievements' after he steps down. Furthermore, the legislation guarantees Nazarbayev membership of key advisory bodies and control over future presidents and governments. The president appoints the prime minister, members of the cabinet, the chief justice of the Supreme Court, the heads of the central electoral commission and the constitutional court, as well as regional leaders (akims). Since 1995, the Nazarbayev regime has acquired extensive control over most strategic resources and distribution networks. The president's unlimited powers have been enhanced by the concentration of political power in a circle consisting of the president himself (a member of the Great Horde), close family members and other trusted kin. For example, Nazarbayev's eldest daughter, Dariga, heads the state news agency and controls three television and two radio stations. Her husband, Rakhat Aliyev, runs the Karavan media group, which controls the largest non-government newspaper in the country, KTK television, radio stations and a major publishing house.<sup>13</sup>

There are no legal or constitutional obstacles to the formation of political parties and to their participation in elections, but the president has the right to ban any party. All pro-regime parties pledge allegiance to the president, who serves as their ultimate patron and benefactor. Some observers believe that there is a growing regional inter-tribal struggle at all levels of government, with the Great Horde being increasingly challenged by officials from the Lesser Horde who are concentrating finances in their hands and attempting to ensure support from the media.<sup>14</sup>

In the early 1990s, Kyrgyzstan was praised for being an 'island of democracy' in the region.<sup>15</sup> However, it gradually turned away from democratic reforms as a result of President Askar Akayev's measures to ensure his political survival.<sup>16</sup> The parliamentary and presidential elections of 2000 resulted in a parliament that contained few opposition figures and a renewed five-year mandate for the president, who enjoys strong executive powers and the ability to appoint all key government officials, including the prime minister. The presidential election was marked by the exclusion of prominent opposition leaders, harassment of opposition candidates, restrictions placed on monitoring efforts by non-governmental organisations, and overt bias in the state-owned media in favour of Akayev.

In Uzbekistan, meanwhile, Karimov, who assumed the highest office in the Communist Party of Uzbekistan in mid-1989, was able to defeat the nationalist and Islamic opposition partly by adopting their policies and partly through suppression.<sup>17</sup> As a party leader at the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Karimov easily withstood challenges from political opponents to win Uzbekistan's first presidential election in 1991.<sup>18</sup> His first five-year term was extended to 2000

by a referendum in 1995. Subsequently, the country's parliament voted to interpret the extension as part of Karimov's first term in office, thereby allowing him to run successfully for re-election in 2000. An authoritarian figure, he remains the sole repository of power in the most strategic and populous state in the region.

An effective strategy used by Karimov to suppress the opposition is to heighten international concern about Islam, convincing Moscow and Washington that, if he were to lose power, Islamic fundamentalists would take control. The 'war on terrorism' – launched by the US following the 11 September attacks on New York and Washington – has strengthened Karimov's position. In return for the use of Uzbek air bases, transport facilities and military capabilities for strikes on Afghanistan, the US Congress passed a bill in September 2001 granting Uzbekistan \$25 million for weapons and other military purchases. Furthermore, in January 2002, Washington announced that Uzbekistan would receive \$100m of the \$4 billion that Congress has allocated for fighting terrorism.<sup>19</sup> Apart from military purchases, this aid is supposed to help Karimov re-build the country's economy, which is in severe crisis. However, giving Uzbekistan uncritical support and the prestige of being a regional leader will encourage Karimov's regime to continue suppressing its political opponents, impacting negatively on any democratic efforts in the country.

Turkmenistan is the Central Asian republic that has changed least in political and economic terms since the disintegration of the Soviet Union. After independence in 1991, it embodied the worse case scenario in relation to post-Soviet development, as one of the most repressive countries in the world. Its economy remains state-owned and centrally planned, suffering from a large trade deficit and foreign debt. It is the only country among the post-Soviet states to have a one-party system – President Saparmurad Niyazov, who was a Communist Party leader during the Soviet era, heads the National Democratic Party. The government does not allow any form of political pluralism and has prohibited and oppressed opposition movements, religious minorities and the press. In December 1999, Niyazov proclaimed himself president for life, deepening his already omnipotent cult of personality encapsulated in his adopted title of Turkmenbashi (father of the Turkmen). The president's birthday is a national holiday, monuments to Niyazov are found across the country, and the state-controlled media constantly praise the president and his policies.<sup>20</sup>

## Conclusion

This short analysis of the Central Asian political culture shows that the democratisation process has been hindered by the predominance of clan structures in Central Asian politics. Kazakh analyst Nurlan Amrekulov argues that 'the clan (in contrary to parties, professional organisations, etc) again became the dominating form of organisation of the élites in Central Asia'.<sup>21</sup> Access to, and exercise of, power in Central Asia depends to a great extent on clan and family ties and is directly connected to wealth. Not surprisingly, the top officials in the government of these countries are primarily concerned with increasing their personal benefits and are not interested in any changes to the political system that would lead to transparency. The efficiency of government based on this type of élite organisation is questionable, not least because tribal and clan ties are still more important than state building.<sup>22</sup> Not only do such power élites hinder political, economic and social transformation, but they also make internal stability highly dependent on the status quo.

It can be argued, therefore, that the existing political culture in all five republics poses serious challenges to any democratisation efforts, as well as to the stability of the region as a whole. On a rhetorical level, Central Asian governments commit themselves to the objectives of secularism, market-oriented economies and democracy. Yet, in reality, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have long abandoned democracy in favour of consolidated autocracy, while the prospects for a transition to democracy in the hybrid/transitional states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are extremely poor. It appears unlikely that, in the near future, these three countries will diverge from the autocratic path already followed by Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Meanwhile, the global war against terrorism and US policy towards the Central Asian republics only contribute to the maintenance of authoritarian rule and further destabilisation in the region. And regional problems, such as drug trafficking, organised crime, illegal arms sales, water disputes and refugee flows will further test already shaky relations between Central Asian governments.

The first step towards change must begin with a reassessment of the role of Central Asian states in the international community, and the identification of a policy that would address core issues in the region. Such a policy should be oriented towards encouraging these states to open up their political systems and to observe human rights, while taking into account the particularities of Central Asian political culture and social structures. Second, economic aid should be prioritised over military assistance, and aimed at achieving real economic reforms within the Central Asian states, as well as regional economic co-operation. Finally, the future of the Central Asian states depends on the international community's ability to offer constructive assistance that benefits the people of the region and creates a stable and peaceful environment.

## ENDNOTES

- 
- <sup>1</sup> Efrati, C, *Is Democracy Possible in Central Asia?* Project of Intercultural Communication and Negotiation Group, Fall 2000, available at [www.maxwell.syr.edu/maxpages/faculty/gmbonham/2000-Fall-IR-Projects/Website-Group/ICN/Copy%20of%20ICNweb/index.htm](http://www.maxwell.syr.edu/maxpages/faculty/gmbonham/2000-Fall-IR-Projects/Website-Group/ICN/Copy%20of%20ICNweb/index.htm).
- <sup>2</sup> Matveeva, A, 'Democratisation, Legitimacy and Political Change in Central Asia', *International Affairs*, Vol 75, 1999, pp23-44.
- <sup>3</sup> *Nations in Transit Report 2000*, New York: Freedom House, 2000.
- <sup>4</sup> Degtiar, M, *Clans, Cotton and Currency*, available at <http://www.wysiwyg://63/http://uzland.narod.ru/2000/special36.htm>.
- <sup>5</sup> Apostolou, A., *The Uzbek Model Confronts a Crisis*, EurasiaNet Business and Economics, 5 October 2000, available at [www.eurasian...business/articles/eav100500.shtml](http://www.eurasian...business/articles/eav100500.shtml).
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>7</sup> In 1998, the Coca-Cola company opened its fifth bottling plant in Uzbekistan, creating jobs for 160 people. Altogether the five plants created 1,800 direct jobs and 20,000 more jobs for distributors.
- <sup>8</sup> *The Wall Street Journal*, 21 August 2001 and 24 August 2001, quoted in Uzbekistan News Online, available at <http://www.wysiwyg://186/http://www.uzland.uz/2001/august/21.htm>.
- <sup>9</sup> Khlupin, V & Grosin, A, 'The "Nomadic Elites" of Post-Soviet Asia', *Asia and Africa Today*, Vol 525, No 4, 2001, p12.
- <sup>10</sup> Verheijen, T, Sirotkin, S & Kozakova, A, 'Reforms on the Silk Road: Institutional Reforms in Central Asia', Local Government Brief, Open Society Institute, Budapest, 2001.
- <sup>11</sup> At present, Nazarbayev (Kazakhstan) is associated with Otan Party; Imamali Rahmonov (Tajikistan) is the leader of the People's Democratic Party of Tajikistan; Saparmurad Niyazov (Turkmenistan) is the leader of the National Democratic Party of



Turmenistan; Islam Karimov (Uzbekistan) is associated with the People's Democratic Party of Uzbekistan. Unlike his counterparts in the region, Askar Akayev (Kyrgyzstan) did not head the Communist Party during the Soviet era. He is associated with The Union of Democratic Forces.

<sup>12</sup> Presidential elections took place in Kazakhstan in January 1999. Nazarbayev obtained 79.78% of the vote, remaining president of the republic. For a detailed account, see Grigoryan, M, 'Alternative, but not Democratic Elections', *Central Asia and Caucasus*, Vol 3, No 2, 1999, pp17-22.

<sup>13</sup> Kazakhstan: Press, International Journalists Network, available at [www.ijnet.org/Profile/CEENIS/Kazakhstan/media.html](http://www.ijnet.org/Profile/CEENIS/Kazakhstan/media.html), 5 March 2002.

<sup>14</sup> Kurakbaev, S, *Kazakh clans fall out*, Institute for War and Peace Reporting Central Asia, No 49, 27 April 2001, available at <http://www.listserv.iatp.kg/pipermail/announcements-l/2001-May/000202.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Pannier, B, 'Albright finds little to praise', Radio Liberty, Prague, 17 April 2000, available at [www.rferl.org/nca/features/2000/04/F.RU.000417135518.html](http://www.rferl.org/nca/features/2000/04/F.RU.000417135518.html).

<sup>16</sup> Abazov, R, 'Political Transformations in Kyrgystan and the Evolution of the Presidential System', *Central Asia and Caucasus*, Vol 2, No 2, 1999, pp23-32.

<sup>17</sup> One of the strategies to suppress the opposition involved clamping down on the free media. The state-run newspapers, *Pravda Vostoka* and *Narodnoye Slovo*, continue to act as official organs promoting Karimov's personality cult. In this atmosphere, the small number of independent publications and local television stations feel pushed towards self-censorship. Journalists expressing critical or dissenting views receive harsh treatment.

<sup>18</sup> The two main opposition movements, Birlik and a splinter group of Birlik, Erk (Freedom), were suppressed and strictly controlled by the authorities. The government kept all opposition figures under surveillance.

<sup>19</sup> Jones Luong, P & Weinthal, E, 'New Friends, New Fears in Central Asia', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol 81, No 2, 2002, p62.

<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, in May 2000, Niyazov designated his father who died in 1942 a 'Hero of Turkmenistan' in recognition of what was described as his bravery and courage during the Second World War.

<sup>21</sup> Amrekulov, N, *Pouti k ustoytchiwomou razwitiu, ili razmyshlenia o glawnoum (The ways to a stable development, or consideration about the important)*, Almaty, Beren, 1998, p71.

<sup>22</sup> Khlupin, V & Grosin, A, 'The "Nomadic Elites" of Post-Soviet Asia', *Asia and Africa Today*, Vol 525, No 4, 2001, p12.

Ella Akerman is a Research Associate at Scottish Centre for International Security, University of Aberdeen. She graduated from the University of the Sorbonne in Paris in Contemporary History and International Relations; her main research interests include Russian foreign policy, in particular with regard to central Asia and the Middle East.

This paper was formulated for the Political Studies Association Conference in Aberdeen, Scotland, in April 2002. Other versions have been published by *The Journal of Conflict, Security and Development* and *The Dialogue*.

### **Disclaimer**

The views expressed are those of the  
Author and not necessarily those of the  
UK Ministry of Defence

ISBN 1-903584-82-5

**Published By:**

**The Conflict Studies Research  
Centre**

Royal Military Academy Sandhurst  
Camberley  
Surrey  
GU15 4PQ  
England

Telephone : (44) 1276 412346  
Or 412375

Fax : (44) 1276 686880

E-mail: [csrc@defenceacademy.mod.uk](mailto:csrc@defenceacademy.mod.uk)  
<http://www.csrc.ac.uk>

**ISBN 1-903584-82-5**