

## Is Kyrgyzstan's New Political System Sustainable?

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Speaking in July 2011 on the occasion of the one-year anniversary of Kyrgyzstan's new constitution, then-President Roza Otunbaeva declared that the key task for the Kyrgyz citizenry was "to make a return to authoritarianism impossible." Her comment conveyed both a celebratory note about the eradication of the previous authoritarian regime and pointed to the key threat going forward.

A multiparty parliament, a three-party coalition government, and a divided executive with a significantly weakened presidency are the main features of Kyrgyzstan's new political system, now two years old. It is a set-up that the authorities boldly call parliamentary rule. The June 2010 referendum on the constitution and parliamentary and presidential elections in October 2010 and October 2011 passed peacefully (contrary to many predictions) and generated some cautiously positive assessments.

In light of the forceful overthrows of recent Kyrgyz rulers, however, and in the context of post-color revolution developments in Ukraine and Georgia, one may wonder whether Bishkek has achieved an equilibrium that will last or whether it has merely reached a temporary stage in a revolutionary/authoritarian cycle. Looking at certain key political features such as political fragmentation and elite dynamics, this memo argues that the current regime can best be characterized as one of "feckless pluralism" (to borrow a term from expert Thomas Carothers) and that this system can endure.

### **The Arrival of "Parliamentary Rule" to Kyrgyzstan**

In contrast to post-March 2005 developments, when the Tulip Revolution replaced President Askar Akaev with Kurmanbek Bakiev, the interim government that came to power in April 2010 claimed it would eradicate the institution of a strong president and develop a "parliamentary" system of government. Amid explicit skepticism about the idea, expressed by many including Russian president Dmitry Medvedev, the leader of

the interim government, Roza Otunbaeva, claimed that parliamentary rule was the right way to prevent the usurpation of power by future presidents.

The new constitution, adopted via national referendum in June 2010, does not set up a parliamentary system of government *per se*, however. The president is popularly elected and still enjoys certain important executive functions. Nonetheless, the new law has introduced some important changes aimed at preventing the emergence of a dominant single political group.

First, the president has lost certain politically important executive functions, including the power to nominate, appoint, and dismiss the heads of local governments or to have any decisive role in ministerial appointments. These powers now belong to the parliament. Moreover, the president only serves a single six-year term and must be prepared to cooperate with a multiparty government. The president is still responsible for national security, but he or she is expected to have a minimal role in economic issues and a fairly limited role in foreign policymaking.

Second, the new constitution introduces a controversial clause forbidding any political party from controlling more than 65 seats in the 120-seat parliament. While potentially discriminatory, this emerged as a precautionary measure to prevent a so-called “party of power,” like Bakiev’s *Ak Zhol* (White Path) party, from monopolizing control in the parliament in a manner similar to Russia’s United Russia or Kazakhstan’s *Nur Otan* (Light of the Fatherland).

The October 2010 parliamentary elections provided a stark illustration of the significance of the changed rules of the game. In contrast to the 2007 elections, when *Ak Zhol* gained over 78 percent of the seats, this time five parties passed the electoral threshold with a relatively even distribution of seats. The new system required a coalition of no less than three of the five parties to create a majority (see **Table 1**). This proved to be a challenging task. The initial coalition, consisting of the Social Democratic party, the *Ata-Meken* (Fatherland) socialist party (both were active in the April 2010 mobilization), and the *Respublika* party, failed the system’s first test when some coalition members defected during the voting process for the position of parliamentary speaker. While this was a bad omen for the new system, the next coalition, with the *Ata Jurt* (Fatherland) party replacing *Ata Meken*, created a strange, but apparently more accommodating, mixture of parties that survived until late 2011.

The October 2011 presidential elections were the last step in legitimizing the new political structure. With over 80 candidates initially registered, the main political competition was between then-Prime Minister Almazbek Atambaev and two rivals, Adakhan Madumarov (*Butun/United*) and Kamchybek Tashiev (*Ata Jurt*). The campaign offered up a contest along various dimensions: 1) preference for parliamentary rule vs. a strong presidency, 2) the April 2010 winners vs. members of the previous regime, and no less important, 3) northern vs. southern elite groups. In the context of the April and June 2010 violence, many warned about a possible escalation of the situation, especially in case of a second round of elections.

Despite these concerns, Atambaev won in the first round with 62 percent of the vote, and virtually no public protests followed. Atambaev’s Social Democratic party

immediately departed the parliamentary coalition, forcing its collapse. In its wake, a new coalition was created that included four parties and excluded the main “troublemaker,” *Ata Jurt*. The leader of the *Respublika* party, Omurbek Babanov, was elected prime minister, in exchange for supporting Atambaev during the election campaign.

### **The Pillars of Pluralism**

The eradication of a strong presidency and the monopoly of a single group over political power thus appears to have been well achieved. However, given the twists in the political system of Kyrgyzstan over the past 20 years (and seeing processes currently at work in Ukraine), one wonders how sustainable the current political system really is. While forecasting is risky, one can reach some tentative conclusions by analyzing the factors that support the current arrangement. Two in particular seem to feed the division of power: social and political fragmentation and the interests of predatory political and business elites.

One kind of fragmentation is evident through the strong ties that exist between particular political leaders and their local constituencies. As political scientist Scott Radnitz argued to explain the 2005 Tulip Revolution, under conditions of weak state capacity, political and business elites maintain close clientelistic relationships with particular localities (often their hometowns as well as electoral districts), eroding the authority of formal state institutions. While some specifics of that 2005 situation no longer apply, such as the majoritarian system of electing parliamentary deputies, political elite connections to particular localities remain salient. As the 2010 elections demonstrate, Kyrgyz parties continue to rely on particular party members’ work at the local level to mobilize votes.<sup>1</sup> In recent local elections, there was high competitiveness in several towns, such as Osh and Balykchy, with no parties winning a majority, and local parties successfully competed against national party organizations.

Another dimension of Kyrgyzstan’s political fragmentation is regional. While generally considered highly sensitive and politicized, regional differences in voting behavior provide interesting data. In parliamentary elections, the *Ata Jurt* party received between 20-30 percent of the votes cast in southern regions (Batken, Osh, and Jalalabad), but just 3-6 percent of votes cast in northern ones. In presidential elections, Almazbek Atambaev received a full 80-94 percent of the votes in northern areas but only 29-44 percent in southern ones. The divide does not only run north-south. The *Ar Namys* (Dignity) party received between 20-28 percent in Bishkek, Chuy region, and the city of Osh, but just 4-6 percent in Naryn, Talas, and Batken. This may indicate an urban-rural divide and/or degree of ethnic homogeneity within populations.

The second factor that feeds the division of power into multiple centers is the nature of the current political elite. The post-Soviet political elite in Kyrgyzstan developed into a large predatory group that views the state primarily as a tool for

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<sup>1</sup> This is best illustrated by the efforts of some party leaders to distribute parliament seats among members based on votes collected in respective localities.

private enrichment. Political scientist Johan Engvall has described the state as an investment market, in which posts can be bought and sold. With severely limited state resources and a large number of diverse elite groups who have tasted power in the past, it is highly challenging for a president to safely manage resource distribution, as political scientist Eric McGlinchey has illustrated in an analysis of the regime overthrow in 2010. The efforts of both Akaev and Bakiev to create single pro-presidential parties left important and powerful actors outside the “state” system, leading to the March 2005 and April 2010 events. The current multiparty parliament and coalition government, in this context, appear to be an optimal solution for providing the largest possible number of elites with some access to the “cake” (state resources). As observers have noted, members of the current coalition government may have few agreements on policy issues but this has not stopped them from agreeing on the distribution of positions, which so far has been sufficient to maintain balance.

### **Conclusion**

A political system that permits pluralism and political competition appears to be a good match for Kyrgyzstan’s highly fragmented society. In turn, empowering fragmented local elites is an important barrier against the monopolization of power within a single center. Such a system may also create a more agreeable balance of power between various political groups struggling for resources and reduce incentives for radical change. It is still too early to make decisive assertions, but the factors discussed above should remain salient barriers against a strongly consolidated system of authoritarian rule. The past two rounds of regime change (2005 and 2010) are strong evidence of this.

However, there could still be setbacks. A deterioration of the socioeconomic situation coupled with poor government performance could potentially erode support for pluralism among the majority of society and/or create conditions conducive for a reshaping of the regime. Also possible is the gradual strengthening of one political party at the expense of others, which may eventually result in constitutional reversions, similar to the situation in today’s Ukraine. In the end, there are also signs that the current system is not really strengthening the rule of law or government accountability. Kyrgyzstan’s pluralist system thus remains a rather “feckless” form of democratization.

**Table 1. Parties in Parliament (including the coalitions they have been a part of since October 2010)**

<i>Party, Leader</i>	<i>Role in April 2010 events</i>	<i>Number of seats</i>
<i>Ata Jurt (Fatherland)</i> Kamchybek Tashiev	Not active in April events; known for ethno-nationalist claims and strong support base in southern Kyrgyzstan; often accused of links to Bakiev clan and labeled as “revanchists”	28 (II)
<i>Social Democratic</i> Almazbek Atambaev	Active in April events; active opposition to Bakiev’s rule in the parliament; interim president Otunbaeva was a member	26 (I, II, III)
<i>Ar Namys (Dignity)</i> Feliks Kulov	Not active in April events; strongly supported by the Russian media on the eve of elections; received most votes in areas with significant ethnic minorities	25 (III)
<i>Respublika</i> Omurbek Babanov	Not active in April events; created after April events; often referred to as a party of oligarchs/businessmen; includes many leaders of <i>Ak Zhol</i> (Bakiev)	23 (I, II, III)
<i>Ata Meken (Fatherland)</i> Omurbek Tekebaev	Active in April events; one of oldest opposition parties; heavily attacked by the Russian media on the eve of elections	18 (I, III)
<b>Total</b>		<b>120</b>