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CHALLENGES FOR DEMOCRACY IN POST-BAKIYEV KYRGYZSTAN

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In April 2010, the second president of Kyrgyzstan, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, was ousted from power after bloody clashes between authorities and protesters. He finally settled in Belarus, following the trajectory of his predecessor Askar Akayev, who ended up in Moscow after the Tulip Revolution of 2005. Opposition leaders, most of whom served under both Akayev and Bakiyev, established an “interim government” and promised to develop a system that would prevent rule by one person or family. The successful ouster of a corrupt authoritarian leader – the second time in five years – once again revitalized hopes that Kyrgyzstan has indeed put an end to authoritarianism and corruption. Doubts persist, however, about whether the Kyrgyz elite, and society in general, will be able to develop a viable alternative political system governed by law and democratic values.

April 2010: Mixed Reactions

In April 2010, new leaders came to power in Kyrgyzstan promising, for the third time in twenty years, to “root out” the faults of the preceding system and build a genuinely democratic one. The opposition leaders, who formed a self-proclaimed interim government, announced they would create a system that would prevent the usurpation of power by a single person and, thus, return the country on the path toward democracy.

Presidential Leadership and Constitutional Reform

There is some ground for optimism. First of all, the personality of the interim government leader and now president, Roza Otunbayeva, appears to be a much better

fit for democracy development than that of Bakiyev in 2005. As opposed to many political leaders of Kyrgyzstan, Otunbayeva conveys a deep belief in democracy. She understands the concept and its value for Kyrgyzstan. She spent years in Western countries, is fluent in English, and, importantly, remains one of very few political leaders not known for corruption.

Secondly, the interim government demonstrated a strong determination to root out the detrimental elements of Bakiyev's presidential rule and lay down the basis for a fundamental revision of the political system. The new leaders dissolved parliament, arguing that it was an illegitimate body due to the massive fraud that accompanied the 2007 parliamentary elections. Constitutional revisions were launched immediately with strong rhetoric about the need to develop a parliamentary system in Kyrgyzstan. This turn of events was in stark contrast to the aftermath of the Tulip Revolution, when both the constitution and the parliament were left intact, much to the disappointment of the opposition.

Violence and "Business as Usual"

Nonetheless, the April 2010 events received a much cooler welcome from academic and political circles around the world compared to the Tulip Revolution. Many of those who lauded the "will of the people" in 2005 now appear concerned about the violent pattern of power changes taking shape in Kyrgyzstan. Observers suggest that the protesting crowds were less representative and more aggressive than before.

Moreover, the majority of the new government leaders have never really been known for their democratic beliefs, but rather for their dubious endeavors. Immediately after seizing power, some political leaders lost no time entering the race for key positions and appointments, apparently to strengthen their internal support base within the state apparatus. One key seat is an appointment as head of the state customs service, which is generally believed to be a prime cradle of large-scale corruption. Within a week, three persons were nominated, each propelled by three different interim deputy prime ministers.

Finally, the tragic events in May and June that left thousands dead highlight, among other things, the weakness of the central government vis-à-vis emerging local, belligerent, and sometimes well-armed groups.

In the context of democratization in Kyrgyzstan, the views outlined above suggest opposite interpretations of current developments. For some, the April events reflect a return to the path toward democracy and, thus, an important episode in the country's democratic transition. Others view the violent regime overthrow of April as reflective of the destination of post-Soviet development in Kyrgyzstan – a place featuring a weak central government and a constant struggle among fragmented, ideology-free political groups and a weak relevance of formal law. Paradoxically, both arguments appear compelling.

Contestation Through Polarization

The fragmented nature of political elites, and society as a whole, has provided a favorable environment for the development of political contestation in Kyrgyzstan, including in the days when the regimes of Akayev and Bakiyev looked their most oppressive.

Political Elites

Most top political leaders in Kyrgyzstan are actors on their own and not linked to each other or to an electorate. As many accounts suggest, political parties and ideologies in Kyrgyzstan are more imitation than reality, and the key difference between those in power and those in opposition has been the very fact that some possess power and others do not. A good example is a remark by Kubanychbek Isabekov, who until recently was a vice-speaker of parliament from the *Ak Jol* party. He said he would join the opposition unless the new authorities stopped firing his relatives from their jobs and auditing his pre-April 2010 performance in parliament. In another illustrative case, Azimbek Beknazarov, one of the leaders of the interim government, directly threatened to organize a “third revolution” if he was dismissed from power by his peers in the interim government. Such modes of opposing the government are not necessarily related to the demands of specific constituencies, and they do not arise from values and ideologies; rather, they are driven by a far more simple dichotomy of “in-power vs. not-in-power.” Within this is a powerful source of political contestation.

Society

Political contestation has also been fed by fragmentation within Kyrgyz society. The division into multi-layered kinship-based groups, often competing for control over land and pasture areas, is a key element of most descriptions of pre-Soviet Kyrgyz people. Similar divisions, now enriched by geographic elements based on Soviet-created *oblasts* and *raions* (regions and districts), appear very relevant in post-Soviet Kyrgyz politics. In analyzing the Kyrgyz opposition, Eugene Huskey and Gulnara Iskakova ([*Post-Soviet Affairs*](#), July-September 2010) have noted that politics in Kyrgyzstan remains “very local,” with one’s attachment to a “village or district” prevailing over loyalty to the nation, an *oblast*, or other such units.

Obviously, the depiction of Kyrgyz political elite as clear representatives of different clans, ethnic groups, or other large sociopolitical structures is not accurate; the notion of “representation” has been largely irrelevant in Kyrgyz politics. However, deep-rooted kinship-based (and, often overlapping, locality-based) solidarities provide the most available and potent political support for leaders at critical moments of political struggle, such as elections or street demonstrations (often following elections). Dethroned Bakiyev found firm support in his home village in Jalalabad. Similarly, residents of the Kemin district were nearly the only ones who expressed support for Akayev after March 2005.

Thus, despite the efforts of Akayev and Bakiyev to suppress and marginalize opposition, political competition has been sustained, to an important degree due to

power-seeking political elites and the persistence of kinship- and locality-based solidarities.

Current Advantages

After April 2010, the new leaders made it clear that the primary political goal of the interim government was to create a system that would prevent the emergence of another “super presidency.” They pursued this aim by adopting at least two key institutional innovations: a redistribution of power to strengthen parliament (and government) vis-à-vis the president and the establishment of a limit in number of seats (65 out of 120) that any party may hold.

The decisiveness of the new leadership to enforce new rules that could help democratization conveys some optimism. Many suggest that the way the constitutional amendments were developed and voted on was not terribly democratic and that the interim government forced them through. Still, one may hope that these institutional changes will lead to a more effective balancing of various political groups, without any particular one rising above the rest. This would help democratize the system even without committed democrats.

Current Hazards

Current political dynamics, however, also pose some serious risks. The first challenge, increasingly articulated within Kyrgyzstan, is the risk of further localization/regionalization of national politics. Free and fair elections will most likely reveal the parties’ weak linkages to social groups and, contrarily, strong linkages to specific parts of the country, something that the authoritarian state machine used to cover up.

For example, in July 2010, Adakhan Madumarov, leader of the *Butun Kyrgyzstan* party, received a very aggressive reception in Talas, and he was forced to cancel a planned party meeting. He was accused of working with Bakiyev in the past, likely a legitimate point. However, the incident in Talas was preceded by a series of well-attended meetings in the southern Batken and Osh *oblasts*. Subsequent media and informal web-forum discussions of the incident tended to underline the regional rather than political aspect of the story.

The division of Kyrgyzstan into areas that support various political groups is not a unique phenomenon. The regional threshold requirement will lead many parties to work hard to ensure receipt of a minimum number of votes in all parts of the country. Nevertheless, in the context of Kyrgyzstan’s political culture, even minor signs of “regionally”-colored representation will most likely reinforce the conventional discourse of regionalism, something that appears more and more to be an existential issue for the country. Some local analysts have already been predicting that “southern-based” parties will be the government’s core opposition. Illustrative has been the active opposition of the Osh mayor, Melis Myrzakmatov, to the deployment of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe’s Police Advisory Group in southern Kyrgyzstan, despite Otunbayeva’s support for the OSCE proposal. The Osh City Council, ostensibly under the mayor’s guidance, adopted a resolution to “reject”

deployment of the OSCE police group, a decision with dubious legal but clear political implications.

The institutionalization of the rule of law is another key challenge. To this day, Kyrgyzstan's political elites have demonstrated an utter disregard for legal procedure. Both Akayev and Bakiyev felt comfortable revising the constitution to fit their current political interests. President Otunbayeva remains powerless against her peers from the "interim government" who keep issuing highly dubious decrees that challenge existing laws and the constitution. After the April events, the interim government heavily referred to the "will of the people" as the source of their legitimacy; in July 2010 the mayor of Osh also referred to the "will of the people" when explaining his protest against Otunbayeva's plans to dismiss him. A consensus on the primacy of formal law over alternative sets of norms is very weak, not only among Kyrgyzstan's elite but among the general population.

The weak relevance of formal law combined with strong political fragmentation poses an important challenge for the development of democracy in Kyrgyzstan. The new changes in the constitution that empower parties in parliament to set up a government will require a high level of civility and cooperation from political leaders, something rarely observed in Kyrgyz politics.

Conclusion

Opposition leaders have had trying times since coming to power in April 2010. The legitimacy of Kyrgyzstan's governing institutions remains under question while the interim government's decrees have been further contributing to a legal mess. The finance minister has said that the state budget is in a critical state. The search for external assistance has become a daily business for President Otunbayeva. All problems have been blamed on either the former regime and family of Bakiyev or to the inevitable side effects of the interim period. In this light, the October 2010 parliamentary elections will be a serious test of the new political system.

The constitutional revisions adopted in the June 2010 referendum have created a path for the development of a competitive political system that will provide more power to parties in parliament and less to the president. A consensus regarding the negative impact of the rules of Akayev and Bakiyev is strong, as is also the need to strengthen the role of political parties.

However, transforming this opportunity into real positive change will require addressing some serious challenges. Ideally, political parties should start becoming more national and less regional, with values and visions competing rather than individuals. Can the fragmentation in Kyrgyz politics fit with a political system featuring a strong parliament? The persisting importance of localism and blood-based solidarity coupled with largely opportunistic motives of political leaders and the weakness of the state apparatus will pose an important trial for democratic development.

This highlights another, though related, issue in Kyrgyz politics: a widespread disregard for formal law. Both Akayev and Bakiyev fell from grace because they were

accused of manipulating the law for personal gain. Now the Kyrgyz nation faces the well-deserved but extremely challenging task of accepting and defending the law as the primary set of sociopolitical norms.

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