

## ON THE RESULTS OF THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN KYRGYZSTAN

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**B**y 18 May, 2009, 18 people had decided to run for president of the Kyrgyz Republic. Within five days, they were to submit all the necessary documents to the Central Elec-

tions Committee, gather at least 50,000 signatures in support of their candidacy, and pass a state language competency exam. At the beginning of the election campaign, there were six candidates left

in the running: current present Kurmanbek Bakiev, the only candidate from the opposition, leader of the Social-Democratic Party A. Atambaev, leader of the Ak-Shumkar party T. Sariev, head of the NGO and NCO Association T. Umetalieva,

leader of the Zhoomart movement N. Motuev, and well-known physician Zh. Nazaraliev.

On voting day (23 July), the majority of the republic's citizens voted for Kurmanbek Bakiev and he was re-elected president.

## Situation Preview

It is commonly believed that there is a political standoff in Kyrgyzstan between the northern and southern clans or, to be more precise, families. This popular opinion, although it is not entirely true, does indeed reflect the actual state of affairs to some extent. First president Akaev is considered a "northerner," while Bakiev is a "southerner." Most of the posts in the current government and state institutions are occupied by southerners.

It was presumed that Bakiev would gather most of the votes in the country's south. And this is indeed what happened. In his birthplace (the Jalal-Abad Region), he received 78.2% of the votes, while in the Naryn Region (in the north) he only obtained 29.3%, that is, 2.5-fold less.

The concepts of "northerner" and "southerner" apply exclusively to the indigenous Kyrgyz population among whom kinship ties are still preserved and for whom place of birth and affiliation with a particular family are of immense importance. It is very difficult for the non-Kyrgyz to find a niche for themselves in the power structures. For example, the first government formed by Bakiev was entirely made up of representatives of the titular nation.

Amendments on not permitting other nationalities to occupy positions in the power structures were made to the constitutions adopted under Akaev and Bakiev. The provision on mandatory knowledge of the Kyrgyz language makes it impossible for the representatives of other nationalities to climb to the top. Whereas a person wishing to become a deputy used to be able to simply nominate himself, now he must play by the game rules and become a member of a particular party. And since all the members of political parties are Kyrgyz, it stands to reason that titanic efforts must be exerted for a person to distinguish himself among them and be nominated.

Presidential and parliamentary elections have always been accompanied by attempts to play up to the non-Kyrgyz electorate. The government and opposition suddenly remember that other nationalities exist. Numerous promises and assurances of upholding the spirit of internationalism are heard, since almost 40% of the voters are non-Kyrgyz. But this time it was perfectly clear that Bakiev already had his victory in hand.

The non-titular electorate mostly ignored the election. For example, the turnout was extremely low at polling stations with a predominantly Uzbek population.

During the years of independence, most of the country's non-Kyrgyz population, particularly Uzbeks (20%), have become convinced that elections are a purely Kyrgyz event and their results are the extension of a latent nationalistic policy. The Kyrgyz, who make up a little more than 60% of the population, traditionally uphold the principle of "collectivism," particularly in rural areas. Kindred relations are strong there and the people usually participate in such events en masse. So the ethnic factor was ignored this time: Bakiev was sure that he would obtain the necessary number of votes, and the other candidates understood from the beginning that the chances of taking the election to a second round were highly unlikely. So there were no traditionally aggressive agitation campaigns or a parade of live meetings with the voters.

Bakiev's victory came as no surprise. It could have been predicted long before the beginning of the election campaign as he had no worthy opponent and had the administrative resource, which

no one else controlled, at his disposal. Moreover, the opposition began the campaign in a state of disarray and with no firm legs to stand on, although the election was held ahead of time on its initiative.

One of the main reasons for Bakiev's victory was that long before the election he had debilitated the opposition by initiating court persecutions of the most prominent of its members. For example, a criminal case was instigated against I. Isakov, former defense minister and active participant in the Tulip Revolution. And the opposition was dealt a crushing blow when ex-minister of foreign affairs Jekshenkulov left the political arena. A criminal case was also instigated against him. He was considered the coordinator and "brain" of the opposition forces and he was able to cut short the internal discord by restraining the conflicting sides. When he left, the united opposition movement began to fall apart. Experts believe that only Jekshenkulov had the ability to direct the "untamed" political trends into a civilized channel. He would have under no circumstances permitted hostility between the candidates from the opposition, Atambaev and Sariev, something which was in Bakiev's interest.

## The Social-Democrats and the Communists

As early as the end of last year, there was talk about the possibility of an early election. The Social-Democratic and Communist parties, whose factions sit in the parliament along with Ak Zhol, acted as though they had no major differences with the government. Debates in parliament focused on insignificant issues. But, as the question of an early presidential election was raised and opened to the floor, differences albeit emerged and burgeoned.

It was the Social-Democrat faction that initiated re-examining the question of an early election. The idea was to deprive Bakiev of any room for maneuver and force him to enter the battle unprepared.

The time for holding the next regular presidential election aroused dispute among all the opposition parties. According to the constitution, which was adopted after the so-called Tulip Revolution (March 2005), the next election was scheduled for 2010. But Bakiev became president while the old constitution was still in effect, according to which the election should be held in October 2009. The Social-Democrats, zooming in on this non-compliance, came forward with the initiative to hold an early election. The parliament decided to give the Constitutional Court the right to issue a verdict, which, basing its arguments on both the new and the old constitutions, determined that the election should be held before 25 October, 2009. The Zhogorku Kenesh (parliament) was to decide the actual date.

The deputies, most of whom were members of Bakiev's party, Ak Zhol, scheduled the presidential election for 23 July. They explained this decision by the possible need for a second round, which would require at least two months. In addition, time might be needed for court proceedings in the event the results were contested and for a decision to be issued. 23 July happened to fall on a work day, which did not suit the Social-Democrats. Moreover, they wanted to hold the election in the fall, when, in their opinion, more voters dissatisfied with the government would come to the polls.

Indeed, approximately 10% of Kyrgyzstan's able-bodied citizens (approximately 0.5 million people) live, although not permanently, outside the country, mainly in Russia. These are labor migrants. Approximately half of them leave the country to work in the spring and return in the fall. The opposition reckoned that the world crisis would also have an effect on the Kyrgyz migrant workers. Indeed, most of them were unable to find suitable jobs. So in this event it was logical that they would vote against Bakiev.

But the president foresaw this development of events. This was precisely why his pocket parliament scheduled the election for mid-summer.

Scheduling of the election on a work day (Thursday) gave rise to vehement disputes. This was also to Bakiev's advantage. He had the administrative resource at his disposal; he had the opportunity to manipulate those voters who were on the government budget and dependent on it (doctors, teachers, bureaucrats, and students). Only their bosses would permit them to take time off to go and vote, which they did. And it stands to reason that these "government" voters would vote for Bakiev, while those working in the private sector were not all given time off work to vote.

The calculations of the Social-Democrats and the opposition were not justified, and Bakiev and his team stepped confidently toward success. This was promoted by several important factors—the administrative resource, the availability of finances, the domestic political situation, and the economic circumstances. The other candidates were unable or did not want to make use of the opportunities they had.

The Communist party has the third largest faction in the parliament. The Communists did not have any major differences with the party in power, while there was some friction within the Ak Zhol party itself. When the date of the election became known, the Communists did not even announce whether or not their candidate would participate in the election.

As early as May it became known for sure that the Communists would not put forward a candidate. They said they would support Bakiev's candidacy and were entirely in agreement with his platform, although it had still not been publicized.

The reason for such a strange position was the Communists' desire to retain their seats in the parliament. They could lose them if they did not support the Ak Zhol party, so they preferred not to enter the fray, particularly since at the last parliamentary election the Communists acquired only 8 out of 90 seats. They were very well aware that their candidate could not contend for even second place.

The number of Communist deputies in the parliament graphically shows the breakdown in forces in the fight for presidency. During the election campaign, they occupied a neutral position, agitating neither for nor against Bakiev, and after the election they did not make a single statement about the voting results. The impression was created that for some time the Communist party had simply ceased to exist.

All of this shows that the Communists and the Ak Zhol party had most likely entered an unofficial "non-interference pact."

## The Candidate's Chances

The election campaign launched by A. Atambaev, the main contender for the post of president after Bakiev, was boring and uninteresting, as, incidentally, were those of the other candidates. The press did nothing to inflate the mini sensations about the candidate being poisoned or a hex being put on him and so failed to pique the public's interest in Atambaev. Journalists and experts were expecting the election campaign to send sparks flying, but no sensational events occurred.

Even candidate N. Motuev, who had always been a central figure in scandals and the author of many a caustic statement, kept a low profile this time. His entire election campaign was built on making statements on TV in keeping with the election code, and he did not pay for extra airtime. Even before the election date was announced, he said that he would not be running for president, but would support Bakiev.

His comrade-in-arms and former ombudsman T. Bakir-uulu announced his desire to run for president, but soon gave up this idea when he was offered the position of ambassador to one of the

foreign countries. At the same time Motuev had a sudden change of mind and announced his decision to run for president. Evidently he had decided that he too might be offered a cushy post in the government or be sent to a prestigious country as ambassador.

Candidate T. Sariiev conducted a very dull election campaign. He very rarely made statements; sometimes journalists had to go looking for him since he almost never invited them to his meetings with the voters. His election campaign was extremely uninspiring and insipid. Admittedly, a spark of interest was aroused by the fact that his representative, B. Zheenbekov, accused candidate Atambaev of making an assassination attempt on Sariiev. Atambaev submitted a complaint to the Central Elections Committee, in which he wrote that Zheenbekov had accused him in the press of organizing an assassination. The scandal went no further than this.

Zh. Nazaraliev's election campaign was the strangest and most outrageous: he refused to meet with voters, preferring to communicate with them on the Internet, and announced that he wanted to turn the country into the largest legal producer of opium. He was called Mussolini for the image he projected in his agitation leaflets and posters.

As for candidate T. Umetalievaa, her election campaign was the most passive. She did not meet with voters, did not make any sweeping statements, did not hold any debates with her rivals, did not criticize the president, and no one saw her agitation leaflets or posters almost right up until the election. She did occasionally appear on TV, but that was about all.

As for all the candidates and their election campaigns as a whole, journalists, analysts, and voters alike called them the most innocuous in the entire history of independent Kyrgyzstan. The impression was created that they had no intention of running for president and so there was no way they could even hope to win.

Atambaev went to the election knowing he would not win or even make it to the second round. He evidently hoped to be able to conspire with Bakiev to obtain certain economic or political advantages for himself, his closest supporters, and his relatives. Sariiev's goal was to try his luck as candidate this time with his sights set on the next parliamentary, and then presidential, elections. It is possible that he also hoped to gain some favors from Bakiev. Nazaraliev's motives defy understanding. The successful physician and businessman, who is not associated either with the southern or the northern clans and who shocked the voters with his absurd statements, obtained no more than 3% of the votes. He claimed that it was his concern for the country and his native people that prompted him to run for president, but this did not really ring true. T. Umetalievaa was easier to understand: she was simply confirming and enforcing her image as the only woman candidate for president and one of the leaders of the civil sector.

## Untapped Potential

There was little to distinguish the presidential candidates' election campaigns. Nazaraliev's shocking proposal to make Kyrgyzstan a legal opium producer hardly counts. For the most part, the candidates did not put forward any precise programs either. They limited themselves to criticism of the powers that be and vague promises of a bright future—carrying out economic reforms, creating additional jobs, raising wages, lowering prices, observing human rights, providing free medicine and secondary education, and so on.

Initially, A. Atambaev, the candidate from the united opposition, had more chance than his rivals (not counting Bakiev). But his limp election campaign brought him only 8% of the votes, although he could have achieved a better result. This may have been because of the scandals associated with his

name, particularly when he appeared at meetings with voters either ill or with a hangover and gave his speech from behind the backs of two stalwart bodyguards.

None of the candidates took advantage of the errors of judgment and blunders the authorities made last year. For example, in the spring of 2008, the country was threatened with an energy crisis—there was not enough water in the reservoirs feeding the powerful hydropower stations not only to generate electricity for export, but even for domestic needs. The government introduced an electricity-saving regime. Even the country's capital (Bishkek) was left in the dark, not to mention the small towns and villages. The authorities said that climatic conditions were to blame for the water shortage. But most meteorologists, water engineers, and scientists believe that unskillful management of the country's hydropower resources was the core of the problem.

By the beginning of the election campaign the population had still not forgotten about the electricity problem that made life difficult for almost 10 months. But the opposition did not try to use the people's discontent as a trump card in the political game.

Nor were the candidates able to conduct a normal election campaign, since they were loath to spend money on it, believing it to be pointless. Bakiev's opponents could have also taken advantage of his unfulfilled promise to Russia in February to remove the American airbase, Manas, from the republic's territory. For changing his mind he received a two-billion-dollar loan for building hydropower stations and 150 million dollars in aid that went directly into the budget.

The impression is created that Kyrgyzstan is willing to become the ally of any state for money. And this does nothing for its international prestige.

## *Results*

At the very beginning of the election campaign, Norma, an independent sociological service in Bishkek, carried out a voters' poll. Fifteen hundred respondents took part in the survey and it covered all the regions of the country. A total of 7.88% of the respondents voted for A. Atambaev as future president. His comrade-in-arms and at the same time rival within the opposition T. Sariiev gathered 6.08% of the votes. Physician Zh. Nazaraliev suited 1.5% of the respondents as head of state, while N. Motuev was in favor with only 0.5%. T. Umetalieva did not feature in the survey at all. And, finally, 61.5% of the voters were ready to vote for the current president, Kurmanbek Bakiev. Two point eight percent of the respondents voted against all.

On 27 July, the Central Elections Committee sent documents to the Constitutional Court of Kyrgyzstan on the election results. They were deemed legitimate. Seventy-nine point one percent of the voters (2,329,115 people) participated in the voting. The current head of state, Kurmanbek Bakiev, obtained 76.12% of the votes at the election. This result surprised even his supporters, they were counting on approximately 65%.

Second place went to the only candidate from the opposition, leader of the Social-Democratic Party, A. Atambaev, who gathered 8.41% of the votes. His "sworn friend," leader of the Ak-Shumkar party, T. Sariiev, obtained 6.74%. The only woman candidate, head of the NGO and NCO Association, T. Umetalieva, unexpectedly took an honorable fourth place with 1.14% of the votes. Leader of the Zhoomart movement, former coal king, N. Motuev, did not even gather 1% (0.93%). Physician Zh. Nazaraliev took up the rear with only 0.83% of the votes.

Quite a high percentage of the electorate, 4.66%, voted "against all."

It was clear even before the election that the opposition would try to declare the voting illegitimate, organize pickets and meetings, and lodge a complaint in court about Bakiev's use of the administrative resource. Western observers could have revealed serious violations during the election campaign.

*What Will Happen Now*

According to the constitution, Bakiev does not have the right to run for another term. It is still too early to tell how he intends to hold onto power: will he repeat the political move made by former Russian president Putin or will he think up something else? One thing is clear, the president is already beginning to prepare the ground for retaining control over the country after his presidential term ends. The question only remains—how?

Perhaps President Bakiev and his entourage will try to reinforce their achievements. Most likely there will be a gradual advance on the civil sector, human rights and nongovernmental organizations, and private mass media structures. Intensification of the authoritarian trends will be presented to the population as a necessary condition of survival in the conditions of the world crisis and political instability. At the same time, there will be an advance on the opposition. Those sanctions that were already applied to its leaders (arrests, exile from the country) may be supplemented by routing of the Social-Democratic Party or its gradual transformation into a pocket party. In the future, it may even occupy a liberal position with respect to the government.

Other opposition forces that united less than a year ago into the Oppositional People's Movement (OPM) to run for the election are unlikely to be able to remain united and will go their separate ways. The most radical of them (if they survive) might try and create a new, more consolidated bloc that will fight for seats in the parliament at the next election. This will require united opposition to the repressions that will most likely begin after a relatively quiet post-election period.

Preparations must be made for the next elections to the Zhogorku Kenesh. The Social-Democrats could become the second largest party in the parliament, but their position was severely undermined after the presidential election.

Until they started making statements in favor of an early presidential election, the leading party tolerated them and there were no particular differences between them, which cannot be said for Ak Zhol itself. Now, however, it is very likely that the members of another party will take the place of the Social-Democrats.

It is possible that some members of Ak Zhol, who are allegedly dissatisfied with the party's policy, will leave it and create a new political union which certain inactive oppositional and liberal organizations may join. This new formation may be able to replace the rebellious Social-Democrats. In actual fact, however, it will be a new, albeit pro-Bakiev "pet" or "pocket" party.

Another alternative is that T. Sariev's Ak-Shumkar party will take the place of the Social-Democrats. He did not criticize President Bakiev or the current authorities at the election. But by refusing to support Atambaev as the only candidate from the opposition and deciding to run independently he can hardly call himself a full-fledged oppositionist. Many believe that his passivity during the election campaign was prompted by his desire to find a niche for his party in the parliament. In five years' time, when Bakiev's term ends, he will most likely try to become president.

Whatever the case, Bakiev will form an obedient parliament and will not want to quit his position of power. In order to retain control over the country, he will need all the levers of power that can help him to solve this task. He is unlikely to try and remain president for a third term—the constitution prohibits this. But it is very likely that Kyrgyzstan will become a parliamentary-presidential republic in which the prime minister has great powers. Bakiev will most likely want to occupy this post and this will require obedient deputies in the Zhogorku Kenesh.

There are also other possible alternatives for the current president to hold onto power.

By all appearances, Bakiev's foreign policy will not change. He has become convinced that he can maneuver between the superpowers, managing to retain smooth relations with everyone. Today he is buoyed by the euphoria of having won the election.

In fact, some time must pass before it can be understood whether Russia has accepted the fact that the American base is still in Kyrgyzstan.

And how will China react, which is continuing to carry out a policy of non-interference and “smiling diplomacy”? So far this shows its tolerance and simple contemplation of what is going on. But we should not think that China liked how Bakiev, ignoring Russia, deceived his SCO colleagues by entering a new agreement with the U.S. on creating a Transit Shipment Center instead of the Manas airbase.

Before the election Bakiev declared a course towards retaining strategic partnership with Russia and supporting good-neighborly relations with neighboring states, particularly Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. Specific statements have still not been forthcoming with respect to China’s relations with the West. There are no comments about relations with the U.S., nor have Moscow’s and Washington’s positions been determined.

Whatever the case, no abrupt changes should be expected in foreign policy. There will no strict orientation toward one country in particular. A multi-vector policy seems to be the optimal alternative for the government.

Normal relations with the U.S. and China are not as important for Kyrgyzstan as its relations with Russia. Bakiev was taking a risk when he decided to go for deceit with respect to the airbase, and it is still not clear whether Moscow has forgotten about it. Bakiev will most likely have to answer for this behavior at some point.

Bakiev should keep in mind that another false step could have serious consequences, because an unpredictable response from Moscow or Beijing could lead to serious problems.

Nor should we forget that 30% to 40% of the republic’s GDP is made up of migrant workers’ money transfers from Russia, while China accounts for 80% of the country’s foreign goods turnover. Sending work migrants home or clamping down on cross-border trade could lead to the economic and political collapse of the current regime. Kyrgyzstan, as the only post-Soviet member of the WTO, makes good earnings on the transit of cheap Chinese goods.

The Kyrgyz authorities have not been placing special importance on relations with the European Union so far, particularly since they are not as well developed as those with neighboring countries and Russia. But now, after the successful “transactions” with Moscow and Washington, Brussels may come up against uncompromising Bishkek, particularly with respect to observing democratic freedoms and human rights. Bakiev has already been humored by Washington choosing to ignore the strengthening of autocracy and flouting of democratic freedoms in the republic in exchange for deployment of the airbase. So it will be very difficult for Europe to hold talks with Kyrgyzstan.