

KYRGYZSTAN: TODAY AND TOMORROW

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Introduction

An analysis of the sociopolitical situation in the Kyrgyz Republic speaks of a crisis of the democratic idea in Central Asia. The nearly twenty years of the republic's sovereignty and democratic development have supplied us with an idea of democracy local style: two revolutions

of sorts in the last five years and a constitution subjected to frequent changes. Anyone wishing to summarize this experience inevitably arrives at the following legitimate questions: Should we continue along the same risky road, and will this not lead to complete loss of our statehood?

The Theory of Democracy and Kyrgyz Reality

As befits neophytes, the newly independent states willingly embraced the theory of democracy as a remedy for totalitarianism and became resolved to build a law-governed state. This made the 1990s

a symbol of another democratization wave which swept the world (according to Samuel Huntington's conception).¹

In Kyrgyzstan, the democratization process was theoretically divided into stages, each being a breakthrough expected to promote democracy and deepen the democratic changes.

At the early stages of sovereignty, transitology was all the rage in the Central Asian states. The brainchild of Western political scientists and sociologists, it described the process of transition to a sustainable democratic state built with the instruments devised and used in the West.

Zbigniew Brzezinski demonstrated how each of the Central Asian states (the democratic prospects of which were described as fifty-fifty) should move toward democratic standards and employ development mechanisms. As could be expected, however, Western academics (who relied on Western criteria) were baffled by reality in the regional context.

For a long time, the Kyrgyz academic community remained riveted to the Western democratic criteria and measured the local processes with Western yardsticks.

On the other hand, a careful analysis of the reforms underway in the republic convinced many of the Kyrgyz academics that the democratic standards should be adjusted to the local conditions lest society reject them as totally alien.

This means that transitology is not universal and that its standards should, therefore, be made to fit the regional context and the states' cultural and historical specifics.

In the first years of its independence, Kyrgyzstan was the region's pacesetter: it introduced national currency and was one of the first among the Soviet successor-states to join the WTO, a sure sign of its prompt response to the need to develop a market economy, the economic linchpin of a democratic society. Among the neighbors, which tended toward strong authoritarian power, Kyrgyzstan with its relatively independent opposition looked like a politically democratic society.

It was its quasi-democratic nature, however, which caused two coups in Kyrgyzstan that drove the republic economically and socially back into past; the coups frightened off investors and lovers of Oriental exotics, while the shattered state essentially lost its statehood.

Moreover, security, one of the main criteria of an effective state, was infringed upon, and national independence and sovereignty were placed under threat.

What caused the rapid decline of the democratic-minded republic?

Specific Ideas about Democracy in Kyrgyzstan

The slide toward the precipice of contradictions and conflicts started when the republic indiscriminately borrowed elements of Western democracy and planted them in soil that could hardly produce adequate fruit.

The mentality, political ideas, and ideas about democracy in Kyrgyzstan were highly specific—they had nothing to do with the Western type of thinking, which perceives democratic values as one of the main conditions of human existence.

For many centuries, the Central Asian nations (the Kyrgyz among them) regarded power and those who embodied it (the elders) as sacred; at the subconscious level, political ideas remained dominated by clan loyalty: tribalism and another twist in the “democratic sanctification of power” could only be expected.

¹ See: S. Huntington, “After Twenty Years: The Future of the Third Wave,” *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 8, No. 4, 1997, pp. 3-12; Z. Brzezinski, *The Choice: Global Domination or Global Leadership*, Basic Books, New York, 2004, 256 pp.

These traditions survived socialism when much was done to wipe them out to revive and strengthen an independent Kyrgyzstan, however not one of the new-fledged political elites became a national elite.

The elites are responsible for the very much needed social changes of historic importance. In their widely read *Creating a New Civilization: The Politics of the Third Wave*, Alvin and Heidi Toffler, American futurologists and sociologists, wrote that the burden of responsibility is the key to all interpretations of democracy and that the stability and integrity of any society should be treated as an absolute priority in the context of the new level of relations established by the elite.²

The people and the political establishment alike remained devoted to their own ideas of democracy far removed from the generally accepted interpretations. The former perceived democracy as permissiveness: at the everyday level it is seen as the power of the majority understood as the power of the crowd. This led to popular riots which, albeit poorly organized, proved to be unexpectedly vigorous and damaging. The political establishment created democratic governance Central Asian or even Kyrgyz style.

The commonly accepted idea of the Kyrgyz as a freedom-loving and heroic people when pushed to the brink has been disproved by the barbarian riots and rulers who fled for their lives rather than standing their ground.

Anyone wishing to sort out the objective factors behind the processes underway in Kyrgyzstan will inevitably arrive at an important philosophical conclusion: each of the historical periods in social life has laws of its own. Indeed, in the relative stability of the mid-20th century, it was believed that figures of historic importance come from among the people and that no one was irreplaceable; at the turn of the 21st century, philosophers who concluded that chance and coincidence ruled the world invested the idea of historic personality with new special meaning.

It was by chance that Kyrgyzstan acquired its first president responsible for the continued historical traditions and the republic's politics; he created the foundations of leadership in the republic. The second president did not owe his post to chance: the fates of both leaders proved similar in many respects, apart from the Tulip Revolution.

Another so-called coincidence triggered another coup and the talk about the traditionally violent advent to power.

Past experience and common sense say that traditions can and, in many cases, should be changed in order to avoid Hegel's "bad infinity" (*schlechte Unendlichkeit*).

The Social and Political Situation: The Focus Points of Change

Today, the republic has reached the threshold of its third "renovation," which makes concerns about its future highly justified. The interim government resolved to change the course has shouldered an immense historic responsibility.

Exhausted long ago, the people's confidence has been replaced with justified doubts, suspicion, and even nihilism. Is there a charismatic leader able to inspire the people to take the leap into a better future? Will the conflict of interests (very much in evidence in the interim government) flare up once the parliamentary republic is established to plunge the people into an abyss of despair?

² See: A. Toffler, H. Toffler, *Creating a New Civilization: The Politics of the Third Wave*, Turner Publishing, Atlanta, GA, 1995.

We all know that another conflict of interests will push the country into a wilderness: two coups in five years are too much for any country. This is all the more true of a small republic entangled in numerous contradictions, permanent economic crises, and political conflicts. What should be done to preserve its statehood and ensure stability?

First, we should pay more attention to the Constitution (amended five times in the twenty years of independence). The never-ending assaults at the Fundamental Law cast doubts on its function as a guarantor of security, national independence, and development; this means that the state refuses to follow its own laws and that it is always ready to pattern them on private interests.

Today the Constitution is being amended for the sixth time. Will this radical amendment, which will make Kyrgyzstan a parliamentary republic, save it?

The idea *per se* is not a bad one, yet it hardly suits a country inflicted by economic problems, political conflicts, social upheavals, and spiritual impoverishment. For its success parliamentarism largely depends on mature political parties with clear and detailed conceptions of what should be done and charismatic leaders.

The country is entering an election race; new political parties are being hastily knocked together, which adds to the chaos on the domestic scene. The political parties that have been functioning for a fairly long time have failed to use it to resolve the crisis.

Not infrequently, members of the interim government speak of certain similarities between Kyrgyzstan and the U.K., which is hardly correct. The past, to say nothing of the present, of both countries are worlds apart when it comes to the level of political awareness, social memory, and economic, social, and cultural (particularly political) development. This looks very much like Akaev's utopia of turning Kyrgyzstan into a Central Asian Switzerland; every development strategy leads us to another pitfall.

Deep in crisis, Kyrgyzstan, armed with the idea of a parliamentary republic, invited a fundamental change in its political system. What has already happened may give a new boost to development: tragedies are known to produce vast cultural and creative potential.

There is another argument in favor of the parliamentary system: in the past the Kyrgyz have acted together more than once to decide their future. Whatever the case, when realized, the parliamentary system will reveal the true feelings of yet another elite and the extent to which it is determined to act in the interests of the country and its people.

So far, Kyrgyzstan is balancing at a brink of a precipice: the parliamentary form of government will either push it down or stir up the nation's good reason, willpower, and determination to preserve the republic's statehood; its instinct of self-preservation should send people down the road of development.

Theoretically speaking, the nomadic archetype of thinking typical of the Kyrgyz is genetically receptive to change: in other words, the Kyrgyz can adapt more or less easily to anything new.

A sober and objective approach to the very possibility of building a democratic state is the second, and no less important, condition of the republic's continued existence and development. We should establish beyond doubt whether the people treat this as an all-important idea.

The West is very comfortable with liberalism and democracy and is willing to share its positive experience with the rest of the world. The question is: Should we copy its experience and will we succeed? There is not much sense in copying; the local historical and cultural traditions should be taken into account, otherwise the effort will fail.

Constructionists and their ideas look much more adequate in our case; they assert that social reality is never immutable, neither is it rationally predetermined. Reality is axiologically and culturally diverse. The constructionists proceed from the following: "Each rationality has historically specific roots; it is created and recreated by the active involvement of politically important participants. Interests (and, hence, rationality) are socially, rather than intellectually, determined and, therefore, should be studied

and comprehended as social phenomena. Interests, understood in historical and political contexts, are the key to this comprehension. Hence the following three basic principles of constructionism: cultural, historical, and political conditioning of social action.”³

When building a state or performing any other social action we should never try to make reality match immutable standards. We should take into account the cultural-historical factors: specific ideas of the world, value system, political awareness, and social memory.

We should never forget that any development strategy should take national interests into account and treat them as a priority; no strategy should be thoughtlessly applied, but it is advisable to go for geopolitical compromises.

Ideology and Identity

We should never forget that ideology is the cornerstone of a sovereign state; in the two decades of its independent existence, Kyrgyzstan has failed to create its own. Meanwhile, social contradictions cannot be resolved in the absence of clear ideas about the country’s future.

In the first years of independence, ideology was generally considered to be useless, if not harmful; numerous conferences and seminars discussed the possibility of non-ideological awareness, while the idea of Western democracy itself is part of the cultural-ideological context.⁴

Later, there were several failed attempts to create a national ideology: the “Seven Covenants of Manas,” which adjusted the nation’s spiritual heritage to short-term political objectives; the slogan “Kyrgyzstan is Our Common Home,” which misinterpreted ethnic harmony; and “Kyrgyzstan is a Country of Human Rights,” a tag deprived of national specifics and easily attached to any democratic state.

This means that today the country needs a truly national idea capable of consolidating the people and making civil identity a reality.

All the CIS countries lived through an identity crisis at one time or another. In Kyrgyzstan, the crisis spread to all spheres: civil, national, and religious. The hierarchy of identity presented by the West is striking in its abundance of trifles, even if they are undetectable at first glance. Fairly recently, this theory (a reinterpreted conception of national awareness) and particularly its ideological aspect became the talk of the day.

We can hardly hope to rally the people around an idea if the phenomenon of civil identity remains vague or even ignored. We should never forget the polyethnic and poly-cultural nature of Kyrgyzstan; there is the problem of preserving the ethnic diversity and sustainable development of all the nationalities as part of one civic whole.

Identity is highly individualized, yet it comes from social interaction, that is, “it is not his biological or cultural-historical origins but his role in society that makes an individual a member of an ethnic group and a vehicle of ethnic identity. Identity is not a quality but an attitude, hence its openness and flexibility.”⁵

³ A. Tsygankov, P. Tsygankov, “Krizis idei ‘demokraticeskogo mira’,” *Mezhdunarodnye protsessy*, No. 1 (19), Vol. 7, 2009; P. Berger, T. Luckmann, *Sotsialnoe konstruirovaniye realnosti: Traktat po sotsiologii znaniya* (The Social Construction of Reality. A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge), Transl. by E. Rutkevich, Mosck. Filos. Fond, Academia-Tsentr, Medium, Moscow, 1995, p. 323.

⁴ See: H.M. Drucker, *The Political Uses of Ideology*, Barnes & Noble, New York, 1974, 170 pp.; J. Larrain, *Ideology and Cultural Identity*, Polity Press, Cambridge, MA, 1994, 190 pp.; L.S. Feuer, *Ideology and the Ideologists*, Harper & Row, New York, 1975, 220 pp.

⁵ V. Malakhov, “Simvolicheskoe proizvodstvo etnichnosti i konflikt,” in: *Identichnost: poisk, proizvodstvo i vosproizvodstvo*, Bishkek, 2005, p. 12.

There is not much sense in knocking together an artificial ideology that no one wants. Ideology should be identified as part of our ideas about the world with continuity recognized as the main element of civil identity. The educational system should be treated as the main instrument: it does not merely cultivate this idea, but also improves the mechanisms related to its comprehensive perception (similar to the Oktiabriata, Young Pioneer, and Komsomol organizations of Soviet times).

The theory which says that identity should be perceived as a project is just as interesting: "In this sense, it is crucial to understand identity not just as a construction coming from the past, but also, as Habermas proposes, as a project;"⁶ in this way, a sociopolitical element is added to the cultural context.

The "political acculturation" theory of Jürgen Habermas can be used to resolve the contradiction between citizenship and national identity, its realization largely depending on subjective and objective factors.

Subjectively, the individual should be prepared and able to understand his situation and accept it, that is, integrate into his new state. Objectively, the state should feel responsible for setting up a new political system and following democratic values as the only acceptable approach, while treating the rights and interests of its citizens as a priority. In this context, democratic values should be understood in their Western interpretation, of which J. Hoagland has written that a process that does not rest on democratic values will be soon abandoned or degraded beyond recognition.⁷

The above means that what was going on in Kyrgyzstan had nothing to do with democratic values as understood in the West; this was what degraded our artificial democracy.

A crisis of the state always echoes in a crisis of civil identity, which is obvious at the civil and cultural levels; it is caused by the fact that man and his self-identity in society and culture are no longer needed and are not treated as important.

This socio-cultural reality should be tested by time; a new civil identity of the state, akin to social awareness, is the answer to the political and social challenges of our time: the higher the level of this identity, the more the state coincides with the globalized world.

Pluralism and the dialog of cultures have added urgency to the problem of shaping a civil society within an independent nation-state: civil and cultural identity have become the main mechanisms of society's self-identification and self-realization.

Regional identity within Central Asia as a geopolitical region is equally important: today it is actualized and functionalized; it may considerably affect progress in each of the countries.⁸ We need a Central Asian identity for the simple reason that only the region as a whole can stand up to the globalization challenges: none of the regional states can do this on its own.

Kyrgyzstan's closest neighbors are worried, with good reason, about the developments in the republic: if the crisis deepens, the region might lose its integrity and become destabilized—an unwelcome situation from the viewpoint of geopolitical unity.

Democratic changes in Kyrgyzstan are closely connected with modernization in all spheres of life (economic, political, social, spiritual, etc.); at the early stage of its independence, modernization was realized in the form of Westernization (unthinking borrowing of political institutions and axiological systems). The novelties were rejected by society, which demonstrated with unprecedented clarity the traditionalist and conservative features of the Kyrgyz national character.

⁶ J. Larrain, op. cit., p. 7.

⁷ Quoted from: *Demokratia 90-kh*, Moscow, 1997, p. 11.

⁸ See: I. Abdurazakov, "Tsentral'naia Azia: vyzovy i alternativy," *Tsentral'naia Azia i kultura mira*, No. 1-2 (12-13), 2002; M.S. Imanaliev, "Novye parametry miroustrystva: tsentralnoaziatskoe izmerenie," *Tsentral'naia Azia i kultura mira*, No. 1-2 (17-18), 2005; B.B. Ochilov, "Perspektivy razvitiia Tsentral'noy Azii v usloviakh globalizatsii," *Tsentral'naia Azia i kultura mira*, No. 1-2 (19-20), 2006.

The framework of the generally accepted concept of democracy probably does not suit development Kyrgyz style; this means that its modernization should acquire its own strategy geared toward its economic nuances and the specifics of the people's political culture, which is manifested in highly contradictory ways.

In Lieu of a Conclusion

An analysis of the sociopolitical and sociocultural situation in Kyrgyzstan clarifies the present and offers a glimpse into the future. It is highly important, primarily, to realize at the state level that democratic standards should not be blindly copied and that the republic's extremely specific cultural and historical context should be comprehended in its entirety.

It is very important to grasp the specifics of the culture of thinking; certain features of the national mentality should be accented and cultivated to achieve sustainable and long-term results for the simple reason that an individual as the key subject of any state serves as the criterion of social development. This is intimately connected with patriotism, the tuning fork of national unity.

In recent years, patriotism, generally dismissed as a vestige of Soviet times, has been highly unpopular; the recent events in the Kyrgyz Republic have demonstrated that the Kyrgyz are an extremely patriotic people and that patriotism is ingrained in the national character.

Today the country should tap all of its resources to find a positive answer to the question To Be or Not to Be? in the form of a democratic society based on an individual cultural-historical context.