

## KYRGYZSTAN: POLITICAL HISTORY OF TWO DECADES OF INDEPENDENCE

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### *Introduction*

For over twenty years now the Soviet-successor states have been building newstatehoods in the territory that used to be the Soviet Union; not all of them have been equally successful, but each has hastened to declare its devotion to democratic ideals and principles. During the first ten years of its independence Kyrgyzstan looked

like a Central Asian “island of democracy”; since that time, however, the country has lived through two regime changes accompanied by the use of force, bloodshed, and mass disturbances.

Below is a summary of the country’s political experience during the two decades of its independence.

### **The First Decade and a Half: An Oasis of Democracy or the Khanate of an “Emperor in New Clothes”?**

On 31 August, 2011, Kyrgyzstan, the role and place of which in the new global geostrategic paradigm has changed much more radically than those of any other country, marked twenty years of its independence.

In the past, few professional political scientists knew anything at all about Soviet Kirghizia. A prominent Sovietologist Prof. Audrey Altstadt of the University of Massachusetts wrote at one time that the U.S. intelligence community, which knew everything about life in the Kremlin, was not prepared for gathering information in the republics of the former Soviet Union.<sup>1</sup> Knowledge was limited to the republic’s strategic uranium resources; it was also known as a place of “soft” exile for Soviet dissident intellectuals and erring Party functionaries such as Foreign Minister of the U.S.S.R. Dmitry

<sup>1</sup> See: *Ethnic Nationalism and Regional Conflict. The Former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia*, ed. by W.R. Duncan, G.P. Holman, Jr., Westview Press, Boulder, 1994, p. 125.

Shepilov who spent several years working at the Academy of Sciences of the Kirghiz S.S.R. after the June 1957 C.C. C.P.S.U. plenary meeting.

Disintegration of the Soviet Union pushed the republic into the limelight of world politics, mainly because of its proximity to the “arc of instability” (Afghanistan, Iran, and Iraq) and its transit potential to be used to deliver military cargoes to the counterterrorist coalition in Afghanistan. Its common border with China’s western regions was another political and strategic argument.<sup>2</sup>

Kyrgyzstan’s higher “strategic value” opened wide vistas for the country’s political elite and bred hopes that it could exploit the contradictions between the power centers in its political and money-grabbing interests.

The phenomenon of independent Kyrgyzstan (which under President Akaev looked like an “island of democracy” in the Central Asian ocean of authoritarianism) was born in this fairly complex and very contradictory context. In actual fact, however, the first fifteen years of flourishing democracy were nothing more than a product of inertial political thinking. The situation looked very much like the Khrushchev thaw initiated by the 20th C.P.S.U. Congress. Khrushchev could sling around democratic slogans as long as he relied on the repressive machine inherited from Stalin and corresponding ideology deeply rooted in the minds of the ordinary people. But as soon as Khrushchev moved beyond “flirting with democracy,” the same machine and the same ideology ousted him from the political scene.

In Kyrgyzstan, political thinking remained loyal to the Soviet system and the Soviet Union; on 17 March, 1991, the absolute majority voted for a united country (the U.S.S.R.); nationalism was limited to part of the political elite and was practically unknown among the ordinary people.

So far, not one serious author has denied that the Soviet Union exerted immense efforts to develop the republic up to and including consolidation of its national statehood. In this context, it comes as no surprise that former sector head of the C.C. Communist Party of the Kirghiz S.S.R. was elected as the first president of the independent country: people wanted continuity and traditional ties with the other former Soviet republics, Russia in particular.

The radical nature of the post-1991 changes required time to be recognized as such. The inertia of political thinking of the majority of the republic’s population (including its fairly large Russian community) preserved the illusion that the government was untouchable and any encroachments on it would be cut short by force and repressions. For a long time people remained convinced that the republican elite was still taking orders from Moscow and that the Kremlin controlled the most important appointments.

For fifteen years, President Akaev remained an “emperor in new clothes” in real politics and played this role with gusto thanks to his skilful use of political techniques. Belarusian President Lu-

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<sup>2</sup> Political scientists prefer to avoid the subject of American-Chinese contradictions and rivalry in Central Asia, however we must accept the fact that contradictions between the two largest powers of our time—the capitalist United States and the socialist People’s Republic of China—came to the fore once Russia retreated to the periphery of world politics. This is fully confirmed by what R. Bernstein and R. Munro have written about “the statements made by Chinese officials (prominent military and foreign policy analysts as well as members of the C.C. C.P.C. and civilian analytical centers) in closed-door sessions” held in Beijing in November-December, 1993 and which “were echoed in the press.” For eleven days the brain tank discussed Chinese strategy in relation to the U.S. and the rest of the world. The final report said in particular: “From the present stage to the beginning of the next century, the major target of American hegemonism and power politics is China. Its strategy toward China is, through economic activities and trade, to control and sanction China and force China to change the course of its ideology and make it incline toward the West; to take advantage of exchanges and propaganda to infiltrate ideology into China’s upper strata; to give financial assistance to hostile forces both inside and outside Chinese territory and wait for the opportune moment to stir up turbulence ... to fabricate the theory of a China threat toward neighboring Asian countries so as to sow dissension between China and countries like India, Indonesia, and Malaysia; and to manipulate Japan and South Korea to follow American strategy toward China” (R. Bernstein, R. Munro, *The Coming Conflict with China*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1997, pp. 46-47).

kashenko summed up his visit to Bishkek and his meetings with Akaev by saying: "He is well-educated and smart and also astute when it comes to defending his country's interests. He is the most intelligent of the presidents; you can learn a lot from him; it is a pleasure to work with him."<sup>3</sup>

As president, Akaev did his best to preserve positive relations with Russia and even develop them further. The law that made Russian the state language was a clever and far-sighted step, a decision fraught with nationalist and opposition protests that was beyond the powers of many his CIS colleagues. As a scientist, Akaev argued that the higher status of the Russian language changed nothing in the country's political orientation yet would consolidate his position when dealing with Moscow and the republic's Russian-speaking community.

He went out of his way to promote in the West his image of a confirmed democrat and consistent fighter for human rights and fundamental freedoms. Indeed, until the 2005 Tulip Revolution, many Western politicians remained convinced that the Kyrgyz president was "building a Western-type democracy, a phenomenon hitherto unknown in Central Asia" with a multiparty system, opposition press, and numerous international human rights organizations.

He could not, however, remain in power indefinitely: after a while, the political elite realized that the "emperor in new clothes" and his clan had moved beyond his limits. More than that, no defense and security structures either inside or outside the country guaranteed his continued presidency. It should be said that the republic inherited considerable material, technical, and financial resources from Soviet Kirghizia and the Soviet Union in the form of non-liquid assets of the military-industrial complex (the Fizpribor, Lenin, and Kristall plants and the 110th military camp) which the president used to decorate the "shop window" of his democracy during the first fifteen years of independence. When they ended, the republic was left with the task of consolidating and developing its economy.

## **The Spring of Tulips: A Revolution or Newer Clothes for the "Emperor"?**

The 2005 Tulip Revolution, which brought Kurmanbek Bakiev to power, was a fast and relatively bloodless affair. The new president learned the lessons of his predecessor: he put his stakes on a stronger repressive machine to disperse opposition rallies and set up the Ak Zhol (The Bright Road) Party to win the people over to his side. These were the "new clothes for the emperor" which the previous president had never bothered to acquire.

President Bakiev went out of his way to borrow money right and left to keep the rapidly sinking economy afloat and to lubricate the cumbersome and overly large state machinery. He flirted with Moscow, which promised a loan of \$2 billion. Later, when Bakiev's true aims became known, the loan went down in the history of international relations as "the Kirghiz swindle."

He also used, without much success, what he called "the far from simple relations with Moscow" to fill the treasury at the expense of Washington which needed the Manas Transit Center while trying to disprove through diplomatic channels what the opposition said about the embezzlements of his closet retinue.

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<sup>3</sup> Akaev Askar Akaevich, *byvsh. Prezident Kyrgyzstana*, Federal Investigation Agency, available at [<http://www.flb.ru/persprint/518.html>], p. 4.

On 21 September, 2009, during lunch with U.S. Ambassador Tatiana C. Gfoeller, Maxim Bakiev, son of the Kyrgyz President, insisted that his country should acquire a place of its own on the world scene to be able to move forward. “We do not want this money for ourselves,” he said, “but we want to ensure that it is not used in traditional, unhelpful, assistance projects, but instead in something that is really well-thought through.” When asked about the Russian money, Maxim Bakiev responded that the Russians had not yet come through with the promised loan of \$2 billion.<sup>4</sup>

Even before the lunch it was common knowledge that the president’s clan was a bunch of corrupt officials. Sources in Bishkek quoted Maxim Bakiev as saying to his father that “this money (part of the Russian loan.—*V.P.*) should remain in the family.” This cannot be confirmed or disproved, however at the first press conference the former Kyrgyz president gave upon his arrival in Belarus he was asked whether President Lukashenko had paid the country’s Russian gas debts with the Russian money Kurmanbek Bakiev had allegedly paid for political asylum.<sup>5</sup>

## **Kyrgyz and Uzbeks. Soviet Legacy or the Cost of Independence?**

The Bakievs obviously overestimated the range of their power: they failed to set up a reliable repressive machine to suppress dissent, and they never won the people over to their side. Everything turned against them: the political elite feared dictatorship of one family that might push the other clans away from power.

The Kyrgyz nation consists of over 40 large tribes shown on the country’s national flag, each of them being entitled to a share of political power and a place on the national political stage. This explains the speed with which the anti-Bakiev opposition closed ranks and deposed the “emperor” or the “khan” (to borrow the local term). This revolution claimed the lives of 80 young men who took to the streets in response to the call of tribal patrons and died in the battles for the White House in Bishkek.

Street fighting encouraged plundering on a big scale: in April 2010, criminals and déclassé elements reigned in the streets of the Kyrgyz capital. The building of the office of prosecutor general burned twice and ruined beyond restoration stands as a sad memorial of the tragic events.

Those who organized the April coup had to carry the heavy (or even back-breaking) burden of restoring order in the capital and the country and setting up new power structures. Were they ready to assume complete responsibility for the future? There was any number of those wishing to fill the highest posts, yet competent and trustworthy people were few and far between. The country’s obviously inadequate political potential suggested a wise step: the country was entrusted to an interim government headed by Prof. Rosa Otunbaeva, a conciliatory figure.

The interim authorities found themselves in a very difficult situation: the Bakievs were still living comfortably on clan property in the republic’s south; the rivalry between the regional political elites (the so-called North-South syndrome) was mounting; the demoralized law enforcers were unable to control the situation; and the money shortage was acute.

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<sup>4</sup> See: U.S. Embassy about Maxim Bakiev: “Smart, Corrupt and a Good Ally to Have,” available at [<http://proclus.gnu-darwin.org/wikileaks/www.win.tue.nl/~aeb/soc/wl/rusrep/09BISHKEK1065.html>].

<sup>5</sup> See: *Komsomolskaya pravda*, available at [<http://www.kp.ru/daily/24511/662254/>], p. 2.

The new people in power turned out to be true revolutionaries: they emptied the personal bank safes of the Bakiev family to use \$21 million to cover the most urgent needs. Later, some of the deputies of the newly elected Jogorku Kenesh (parliament) doubted the legitimacy of what they called expropriation, but the Bakiev money had helped to stabilize the financial situation.

Ethnic and political stabilization required more time and greater efforts. The republic still remembered the clashes between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz that shook the country in 1990 (the Uzgen conflict), yet certain people, in pursuance of political aims of their own, never hesitated to fan another fratricidal clash.

The reports, there were five of them, submitted by several commissions, the Kyrgyzstan Inquiry Commission headed by well-known and highly respected Finnish political figure and diplomat Kimmo Kiljunen among them, offered contradictory or even mutually exclusive assessments of the tragedy that took place on 11-15 June, 2010 in Osh and Jalalabad (in the republic's south). International experts remained undecided: either it was genocide of the Uzbek community of Kyrgyzstan or a patriotic war the Kyrgyz waged against the Uzbek separatists to preserve the country's territorial integrity.

Meanwhile, the Uzgen events should be interpreted as a repetition of what happened in nearly all the former Soviet republics: national relations proved to be the weakest link of the country's social organism undermined by weaker state power, political rivalry among the clans, criminal wars over drug trafficking, and mounting tension. There was any number of people wishing to explain the ethnic clashes by what they described as "natural enmity between the nomad warriors (Kyrgyz) and the trader-artisans (Sarts) that had been ripening for many centuries."<sup>6</sup>

There is no "natural enmity:" in Osh, for example, the areas where Kyrgyz and Uzbeks lived side by side, remained practically intact because neighbors closed ranks to defend their homes. There are, however, seats of potential tension caused by the still unregulated land and water issues, use of the native language, the inadequate system of law and order enforcement, the low level of culture, education, and the media, etc.

In a multinational country, the state should identify contradictions and prevent negative developments; this was done by the Soviet state, the weakening and disintegration of which was accompanied by hundreds of big and small sporadic outbursts of ethnic enmity, the Uzgen conflict being one of the many.

For a while, President Akaev, who relied on the fairly effective concept of "Kyrgyzstan is our common home," kept the situation under control. To remain effective for any stretch of time, this required adequate funding and adequate law-enforcement capabilities. The tragic events of June 2011 in Osh and Jalalabad were an outcrop of the collapse of the Kyrgyz statehood in the spring of 2011.

The new people in Bishkek have to offer the nation their own conception of national policy and ethnic harmony; despite the mounting pressure of the nationalist elements, the new leaders remain confirmed that in a multiethnic state the titular nation should not be invested with privileges and special rights. Rosa Otunbaeva said at the Kurultai of the Assembly of the People of Kyrgyzstan: "There are people of about 90 nationalities living in our country; they live according to our law and have the same rights as the Kyrgyz."<sup>7</sup>

"Good" documents are not enough though; they must be put into effect; the nations must be equally represented in the central and local administrations, business, the media, culture, education, and, pri-

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<sup>6</sup> Document "Allah, sokhrani moy Kyrgyzstan ot vsekh bed!!" organizatsii "Oppozitsiadagy Tushtuk Kyrgyzstan Eldik Frontu," p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> "Assambleya naroda Kyrgyzstana prinyala Kontseptsiiu etnicheskoy politiki i konsolidatsii," Document of the Fergana International Information Agency, available at [<http://www.fergananews.com/news.php?id=16899>], p. 2.

marily, in the law-enforcement bodies. The international Kiljunen Commission pointed out the following with good reason: "The Government should ensure that the composition of the security forces reflects the ethnic diversity of society [and] employ a regional rotation policy in the personnel of the security forces."<sup>8</sup>

Much should be done in this respect.

## Form of Government: A Parliament or a President?

Kyrgyzstan's post-April 2010 experience of setting up legitimate power structures is especially significant in the context of post-Soviet development of statehood. The new people wanted the new Constitution to prevent usurpation of power by one person or one clan.

All previous constitutions of independent Kyrgyzstan endowed the head of state with extraordinary powers, a practice which proved to be wrong. It was decided to increase the role of the parliament and the speaker (*toraga*), as well as the Cabinet and the prime minister, and limit the president's power to decision-making on issues which require national consensus (mainly under extraordinary circumstances). Today, one person may take presidential office for one six-year term. This can be described as a parliamentary-presidential form of governance complete with a well-organized checks-and-balances system. The constitutional commission headed by Omurbek Tekebaev consulted experts of the Venice Commission and other international organizations.

The draft was approved, albeit not unanimously, in Kyrgyzstan and raised doubts outside it in the Central Asian neighbors. Many experts in statehood and political science pointed out that the country, which badly needed strong vertically organized power and elementary order, also needed a strictly centralized presidential form of government. They pointed out, with good reason, that under a weak government the political sphere is divided between those who strive to preserve independence and the crowd (*ochlocracy*), rather than between democrats and the supporters of authoritarianism.

At some point the debates ran into a dead end: some political forces suggested external governance as an extreme measure; others (the *Ar Namys* and *Butun Kyrgyzstan* parties) made it clear that if they had a majority in parliament they would restore the presidential form of power.

What happened later, however, proved that in many respects the supporters of strong presidential power had their point.

On the other hand, the *Jogorku Kenesh* (parliament) elected on 16 October, 2010 demonstrated the obvious advantages (its shortcomings aside) of the parliamentary form of government: the competitive political process and greater transparency, which brought to power politicians and managers of the top and medium level not involved (or, rather, involved to a lesser extent than others) in corruption.

Anti-corruption watchdog Transparency International ranked Kyrgyzstan 164th of 178 countries in its Corruption Perceptions Index for 2010.<sup>9</sup> Bribery keeps foreign investors away from the country, which badly needs investments to develop and restructure its economy, a *sine qua non* of integration into the world economy.

Throughout the winter and spring of 2010-2011, the *Jogorku Kenesh* was engrossed in heated discussions of corruption among top-level bureaucrats, fuel deliveries to the U.S. Transit Center, the

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<sup>8</sup> [[http://www.k-ic.org/images/stories/kic\\_report\\_english\\_final.pdf](http://www.k-ic.org/images/stories/kic_report_english_final.pdf)].

<sup>9</sup> [<http://uk.reuters.com/article/2011/06/28/us-kyrgyzstan-mining-idUKTRE75R1BK20110628>].

scandal around mobile communication provider MegaCom, the way fuel production licenses were issued, etc. In this way, the electorate acquired a much clearer picture of the domestic situation on the eve of the presidential election scheduled for 30 October, 2011, the last stage of statehood development in Kyrgyzstan.

## **Russia's Policy: Imperial Ambitions or a Wise Response to the New Challenges and Threats?**

On 10 June, 2011, Ombudsman of Kyrgyzstan Tursunbek Akun sharply protested against what CSTO Secretary General Nikolay Bordiuzha said about the Organization's willingness to help members confronted with a situation similar to the one that occurred in 2010 in the south of Kyrgyzstan.

He said that this "did not quite fit the international legal regulations" and specified his point by saying: "I should remind you that Art 5 of the CSTO Charter dated 7 October, 2002 says, 'The Organization shall operate on the basis of strict respect for the independence, voluntary participation and equality of rights and obligations of the member States and noninterference in matters falling within the national jurisdiction of the member States'."<sup>10</sup>

This statement was suggested not so much by the position of the CSTO Secretary General as by the general sentiments in the republic in the summer of 2010. With the number of casualties in Osh and Jalalabad reaching 400, people saw no other alternative than bringing Russian military contingents into the country. The hottest heads even wanted Kyrgyzstan to become Russia's ninth federal district.<sup>11</sup>

We should thank the ombudsman who, unwittingly, rescued Russia from a possible dangerous entanglement. Indeed, Moscow has no reason to interfere in the domestic affairs of the small friendly independent state, even though the Kyrgyz, as one of the Soviet peoples, are close to the Russians. In 1991, they chose independence, which means that Moscow is no longer responsible for political stability and ethnic harmony in their country.

In fact, careless manipulation of military-political instruments in Central Asia is fraught with serious consequences. In 1979, few doubted that the Afghan government asked Moscow for a limited Soviet military contingent and that the local people were overjoyed. The result is only too well known.

Today, there is no shortage of crafty politicians ready to play on "imperial ambitions" in order to draw Moscow into the hazards of Central Asian policy.

We should be guided by regional realities rather than emotions:

- first, today Russia is much weaker than the Soviet Union: its GDP is 70 percent of India's, 50 percent of Japan's, slightly over 25 percent of China's and 15 percent of the American and EU GDPs. This means that Russia is not ready to compete for domination in Central Asia.

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<sup>10</sup> "Ombudsman Kirgizii: Ni ODKB, ni drugaya organizatsiya ne vprave vmeshivatsya vo vnutrennie dela Kirgizii," *Regnum*, 10 June, 2011, available at [<http://www.regnum.ru/news/1414579.html>], p. 1.

<sup>11</sup> See: "Nurkamil Saskeev: V Kyrgyzstane neobkhodimo provesti referendum o prisoedinenii k Rossii," *24.kg*, 5 October, 2010, available at [<http://www.24kg.org/community/83950-nurkamil-saskeev-v-kyrgyzstane-neobkhodimo.html>], p. 1.

- Second, the much stronger players drawn into the Big Game are not averse to using Russia's "cannon fodder" to settle scores among themselves. We should be aware of this.

On the other hand, contrary to what those who were actively involved in destroying the Soviet Union are saying today, the post-Soviet cultural-historical community is still alive. There is immense integration potential to be tapped in the political, economic, and ideological spheres; success depends on the situation in the world.

- Third, in the 21st century, the global problems, challenges, and threats of a social and anthropogenic nature calling for consolidated efforts of the world community have somewhat trimmed down political impacts. Our civilization has reached a certain boundary beyond which lies a different world: if left unattended, any of the global problems might prove fatal for mankind.

The risks and threats call for correct and timely assessment. Mankind needs intellectual capabilities to find its way out of the present entanglement. This is where Russia can compete with its partners both in the West and in the East.

The report submitted by the Institute of World Economy and International Relations of the Russian Academy of Sciences said, in particular, that "Russia should address the global problems together with the rest of the world community to become one of its members. It should help formulate common approaches to the mounting global threats. Today, the population is growing faster than the life-supporting resources; production and consumption are growing faster than the alternative resources needed to replace the depleting raw materials and energy resources. Industrial and scientific-technical progress is endangering the quality of the human environment."<sup>12</sup>

At the dawn of the 20th century, the print shop of the Semirechensk Regional Administration (in Central Asia) published an ambitious project entitled "Common Cause" for mankind which called on all the people to transform "the instrument of destruction into an instrument of salvation,"<sup>13</sup> to replace rivalry and wars with joint efforts of all mankind. The project anticipated the development of world science by a hundred years; the time has come to realize it.

When Central Asia becomes a platform of constructive cooperation of all peoples and all social systems, confessions, and nations, Kyrgyzstan will have the chance to become a unique laboratory of democratic development of the international community.

### *C o n c l u s i o n :* *Realistic Democracy as a Road to Democratic Reality*

While analyzing the problems of democratic development, we should bear in mind that authoritarianism, totalitarianism, or any other anti-human political regime is not the only pitfall in the post-Soviet expanse: there is the danger of recurrence of a degenerate form of democracy ruled by the whims of the crowd and influenced by populists and demagogues. Aristotle called this ochlocracy.

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<sup>12</sup> "Rossia v sisteme mezhdunarodnykh otnosheniy blizhayshego desyatiletia," Report on the Results of a Prognostic Study Carried Out Within the Framework of an Innovative Scientific Project Financed by the Russian Foundation for Basic Research., IMEMO RAS, Moscow, 1995, p. 58.

<sup>13</sup> *Filosofia obshchego dela. Statyi, mysli i pisma Nikolaya Fedorovicha Fedorova*, ed. by V.A. Kozhevnikov, N.P. Peterson, Vol. I, Verny. Tipografia Semirechenskogo Oblastnogo Pravlenia, 1906, p. 656.



The recent events in Kyrgyzstan showed that this type of social deviation is as dangerous as the threats created by authoritarianism. Real democracy needs sustainable and legitimate power structures accepted by the people and the international community and efficient instruments of political and economic control.

By the time this article appears in print the presidential election in Kyrgyzstan will be over. To become the final stage of democratic changes in the republic and open the road to true democracy and prosperity, the elections should be democratic, straightforward, and fair. The world community and international organizations are working toward this.

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