POLITICAL ELITES OF KYRGYZSTAN: HOW THEY APPEARED AND HOW THEY INTERACT

Elmira NOGOYBAEVA

Expert at the International Institute of Strategic Studies under the President of Kyrgyzstan (Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan)

Some History

Since 1991, that is, from the very first days of Kyrgyzstan's independence, its elites have been following their own paths and developing in ways that do not fit into other models or nation--building projects. This was, in fact, a new stage in the elite-forming process.

Before this time, the local elites developed within larger states and followed the prevailing patterns: partially within the Kokand Khanate, then later within the Russian Empire and the Soviet state. The Kyrgyz elites as a system-forming factor of the Kyrgyz nation mainly adapted themselves to the conditions offered.

There are two sides to the fairly frequent phenomenon whereby one nation develops within another. On the one hand, a nation threatened with assimilation, dispersal, or extermination can save itself by moving into the gravitational field of a stronger entity. This brings security and the chance of self-preservation and, sometimes, modernization. It acquires an elite of its own formed within the new state and may either change itself within the same state to become a system-forming nation, or descend to the lower levels of social development. On the other hand, the nation loses the opportunity to develop its own symbols, traditions, and institutions; it is forced to adapt itself to the dominant subject or, to be more exact, to imitate it.

For nearly a century the political culture of Kyrgyzstan developed as a Soviet political culture characterized by the monopoly of one party and the rigid hierarchy of elites replenished through a closed recruitment system.

Today, in the context of state-building, prime importance is attached to the formation of independent and transitional elites across the post-Soviet expanse that are searching for a political system best suited to Kyrgyz national specifics with all the appropriate forms of political organization and institutions.

Since the country did not have any local recruiting traditions or principles of functioning as it moved away from the communist toward democratic development paradigms, new forms of recruitment and organization of the new/old elites in Kyrgyzstan appeared.

Since 1991, the political elites of Kyrgyzstan (which did not differ much from hardly any of the other post-Soviet countries) have been developing and functioning as the elites of an independent state engaged in nation-building and institutionalization within their geographic and political areas.

The Elites in the Independent State

August 1991 and the election (some time later) of the country's first president, Askar Akaev, ushered in the first stage of the republic's independent existence. This was a time of political euphoria in which the country acquired its statehood.

The country opted for democracy and a market economy with the corresponding procedures. The choice was mainly an alternative to the old, communist paradigm rather than a conscious choice regarding the country's future. Much was done to establish Western democratic values; political Western-style modernization was an officially proclaimed policy supported from abroad. Indiscriminative copying of foreign patterns in a country with its own development trends created a quasi-democracy in Kyrgyzstan: the democratic institutions that emerged barely functioned.

The Soviet nomenklatura, or at least part of it, remained in power even though the country acquired a new president, doctor of physics educated in the Soviet Center. Little by little, a country born as democratic degenerated into an authoritarian state, until it collapsed in March 2005.

The first period of Akaev's presidency (1991-1996) was dominated by the following trends in the formation and rotation of the elites:

— The perfunctorily announced course of "gradual transfer to democratic order" was actually only carried out during the first five years of Akaev's rule: new people from different social groups joined the elites and filled the key posts. It was a new phenomenon in a country where the communist party nomenklatura had never changed and was replenished from very limited and closed circles. It was then that the nation became acquainted with the names of O. Tekebaev, A. Madumarov, and T. Bakir uulu. It was then that the "legendary parliament" was shaken by a fierce political struggle; real reforms were carried out and the president made his first attempts to extend his powers. The political elites of the early 1990s were resolved to carry out the reforms.

— The first protest movement, the Democratic Movement of Kyrgyzstan (DMK), which later developed into a party, was fed by the sentiments of the destitute intelligentsia and land seizures supported by people from the capital's adjacent districts. It was the first real political structure with an ideology of its own and a distinctive and vast social base. Later, nearly all

its leaders—Zh. Zheksheev, D. Nur uulu, T. Mulkubatov, T. Turgunaliev, and others—joined the republic's political elite. In 1991-1992 several groups (Erkin Kyrgyzstan, Ata-Meken, and Asaba) detached themselves from the DMK to form independent structures. They have retained their political ardor and are still the most active segment of the country's political expanse.

Meanwhile, the distribution of resources and recruitment of new members to the political elites moved behind the closed doors.

The Closed Nature of the Elites Leads to Degradation

At that time, the resources were distributed among the chosen few—this was the hallmark of the elites in power; promising, intelligent and, therefore, highly competitive people were promptly removed from the narrow circle. This happened at different times to I. Abdrazakov, Ch. Jakypov, M. Imanaliev, I. Beshimov, K. Baialinov, D. Usenov, and others, while the circle of "trusted" managers was filled with mediocrities.

Between 1998 and 2005, circulation of the elites as a mechanism of a democratic transition society ground to a halt. Practically no new people joined the cohorts of those at the top: circulation of the elites as a method of bringing "fresh blood" into the ruling class was essentially discontinued. By "fresh blood" I mean people who grew up and were educated under the new conditions, within new organizational and cultural frameworks, ready to accept innovation, etc.

Today, political scientists describe the formation of elites as *reproduction* of them,[1] which means that the old elite, say, in Kyrgyzstan remains at the helm.

The following features were typical of reproduction of the elites under President Akaev:

— A party of power, which is called Alga Kyrgyzstan with the president's daughter as its leader; a rigid administrative vertical; an overused administrative resource, etc;

— Nepotism (the family forms a close-knit circle of persons and vast economic, political, administrative and other resources are concentrated in its hands);

— Revived tribal, regional, and other closed forms of recruitment (regarded as illegitimate inside the elites, as well as in relation to the technically proclaimed democratic principles. They replaced democratic elections as a legitimate way of appointing leaders);

— A trend toward stronger nomenklatura bureaucracy (the key posts under the president and in the upper echelons of power were distributed among the old elite with the new political figures pushed to political periphery);

— Personnel rotation in the upper echelons of power and among the "trusted" top managers (at that time, rotation of governors became absolutely predictable—the same people were shifted among regions, ministries, embassies, etc);

— The Administration of the President of the Kyrgyz Republic was the most active structure engaged in the country's rule (the hierarchically organized elite pyramid was permitted two election terms, that is, a total of ten years, to create traditions, recruitment methods, etc.).

[1] See: A. Ruchka, "Elity transitnogo obshchestva," Kiev, 2003, available at [www.dialogs,org,ua].

At that time, the country's economic resources, which were essentially identical to its political resources (the two components almost blended into one and became the only condition under which the business activity in the republic could be carried out), were the key tools for retaining power or fighting for it.

The limited nature of distribution of the country's resources inside one elite group and a couple of tribal (read, clan-corporate) communities in the absence of public recruitment and circulation, as well as the doubts (that appeared some time later) about the power's legitimate nature, created tension among the elites.

By March 2005, the country was living in a systemic crisis. This, as well as outside interference and, to an even greater extent, the need to change the political elite—an absolutely indispensable process in any state, especially in those that claim to be democratic—inevitably ousted the Akaev regime from the country.

In fact, the "elite rotation" techniques in post-Soviet countries assumed different forms: either violent, called Color Revolutions, or traditional, "operation successor." This actually confirms the theory formulated by Aron Brudny, a prominent philosopher and psychologist, about the global re-feudalization of contemporary society, which explained the trends in the formation of elites: "In the latter half of the 20th and early 21st centuries, kindred relations as the cornerstone of mutual trust, if they do not predominate, at least play a very important role. It is enough to mention Akaev's last parliament: it was not by chance that his daughter and son found themselves among the members. It is not by chance that Nazarbaev's daughter leads one of the active political parties, etc. It is not by chance that the U.S. incumbent president is the son of a former president. It is not by chance that the son of the previous president of the Democratic Republic of Congo was elected president. It is not by chance that in Poland the president and premier are brothers. The list goes on. This all started in Asia: let me remind you of Korason Akino and others."[2]

Political Parties as a Political Element of the Formation of Elites

In democratic societies political parties are the main element in the formation of political elites and their continued existence. No other political institution can cope as successfully with this problem. Being a resource rather than a tool for setting goals, education cannot cope with the task. Political elites cannot be replenished from among career bureaucrats, since they will be unable to develop within the limits of the state as a system; they will only be able to function. An elite cannot be created by status, since it merely fulfills (sometimes with dubious results) the role of legitimizing power. The elite is that part of society able to specify goals, ensure development, and assume responsibility. It can emerge only in regimes engaged in similar activities.[3]

Joseph Schumpeter described democracy as a set of clear democratic procedures and institutions. The formula applied to Kyrgyzstan with its 84 political parties describes it as a democratic and pluralist state. Party membership is steadily, if slowly, increasing, even if the parties are not engaged in activities that reflect the nation's real social involvement.

[2] A. Brudny, "Krugly stol '7 noiabrskikh dney v politicheskoy zhizni Kyrgyzstana,'" Social Research Center. American University-Central Asia (AUCA), 17 November, 2006, available at [www.src.auca.kg].

[3] See: V. Bogatyrev, "Mesto i rol politicheskikh partiy v Kyrgyzstane," *Politicheskie partii v Kyrgyzstane,* Institut publichnoy politiki IPP, Bishkek, 2006, p. 23.

Here are the factors and reasons behind party genesis in the country, which faithfully reflect the nature of the parties' emergence and activities.[4] It depends on the milieu, time, and quality of the political social environment (the formation stage). The parties are divided into *program and project* types depending on their axiological and functional principles. The former enjoy active social support enlisted by their programs, which means that their followers are guided by values and ideologies. The party itself develops and organizes itself in full conformity with them. The latter are set up either by the government or opposition as artificial structures designed to serve specific projects. Most parties, be they Democrats or Republicans, Communists or nearly forgotten Constitutional Democrats, were set up in periods of social, class, paradigm, and other rifts. For a certain amount of time they were history-changing factors; they guided the masses wishing to change the world for the better. Their programs and values were accepted as the Fundamental Law. After a while the ideological component, as the party's goal, lost its all-embracing importance to very specific tactical aims: votes, parliamentary seats, factions, lobbyism, and the top office. This is typical of the United States, the U.K., and other countries.

The first parties also appeared in Kyrgyzstan during the social crisis when the country was moving from one paradigm to another; the country, together with the other post-Soviet states, was experiencing ideological, economic, political, humanitarian, and other changes. The first upsurge of national self-awareness, which took the form of land seizures, gradually developed first into institutions (unions of the homeless and landless) and then into political parties. In the spring-summer 1989, in Frunze (as the capital was called under Soviet power), young people at their barely controlled rallies demanded land for housing. The movement then developed into Ashar, an association of those who built their own housing. Informal groups of workers, scientific workers, teachers, creative workers, and young people appeared in many towns (Karakol, Osh, etc.). Later they merged to form a mass opposition structure called the Democratic Movement of Kyrgyzstan (DMK), which intended to transform the republic into a prospering democratic state. In 1991-1992, several groups detached themselves from the DMK to become independent parties (Erkin Kyrgyzstan, otherwise known as ErK; Ata-Meken, and Asaba). On 29 May, 1993, a regular DMK congress transformed the public movement into a political party. The DMK and the *Maydan* newspaper it published were the most popular political force; it is still widely accepted and the most popular party with a broad social basis and supporters across the country. This was the only period when the republic acquired program parties. The time of parties with strong ideological bases is drawing to an end—such parties are no longer needed. Strange as it may seem, there is no need to destroy the old order of things, even though the system crisis is going on—there is no new order of things to replace the old one.

Since 1993, tactical aims and specific political leaders have become and remain the main reason for the emergence of new parties and the transformation of old ones (this happened to the DMK). The huge number of parties that register when elections are drawing close (their number increases when elections are about six months away) is ample proof of this. The new constitution will introduce the proportional-majority system of parliamentary representation rejected by the 2000 referendum, which means that there will be even more political parties. In 2005-2006, the number of parties doubled from 40 in May 2005 to 84 in October 2006.

The project parties of our day and age are formed and function like a vast election campaign, which starts well in advance with a good share of political resource and develops consistently. Party development, however, takes more time than an election campaign. There are parties in Kyrgyzstan

[4] See: E. Nogoybaeva, "Pluralizm politicheskikh partii Kyrgyzstana 2006 ili konkurs partiinykh proektov," available at [www.tazar.kg], [www.open.kg], 27 November, 2006.

and elsewhere that formed when the election campaign was already underway. Normally, however, party-building covers one or several election cycles, party ideas being promoted by party members rather than salaried agitators.

The Alga Kyrgyzstan Party is the best example of a successful project cut short in March 2005. The mega project was never completed. Three women (the leader, a journalist, and a financier)—Bermet Akaeva, Olga Bezborodova, and Sharipa Sadybakasova—were the project's greatest gain. Skilful project management as well as a powerful administrative resource and lavish funding brought them parliamentary seats that were later, in the wake of the March events, contested. Potentially, the party was a classic example of the reproduction of the elites through power transfer within a limited circle.

That was happened in practically all the post-Soviet states (the Baltic countries being the only exception). Approaches, procedures, and formats may differ, but the result is more or less the same in Moscow and Ashghabad, Baku and Minsk, Astana and Tashkent. Kiev, Tbilisi and Bishkek do not fit this pattern.

Any attempt to change the usual scenario for a transfer of power that lost its token legitimacy in the eyes of the elites and the nations causes a veritable storm among neighboring countries that were recently part of the same country and belonged to the same ideological camp. This accounts for the powerful PR-campaigns and obstruction that swept the post-Soviet expanse; the Color Revolutions and election campaigns were described as hazardous and highly unwelcome developments.

Restored proportionality inherent in the new wording of the Constitution is one of the main mechanisms that ensures the representation of many parties and gives them a chance to remain afloat. The parties may compete during elections, which in turn ensures the continued existence of elite groups and their formation. Today, project parties are appearing in Kyrgyzstan for the following reasons:

Continuity. The administrative and bureaucratic top circles want to reproduce themselves to retain their position. Former bureaucrats, and even those still employed, head most of the parties; aware of the value of the institutionalized representation in power structures they tap their administrative skills to set up new parties.

Lobbying and support of individual public structures and groups of all levels. Each financial group, for example, that reaches a certain development level believes that a political party that will lobby its interests in the corridors of power is an absolute must. Lobbying as a tool of communication within the political field is an institutionalized representation of financial, corporate, clan, etc. interests. There is nothing new in this: recently in Germany one of the main parties and the country's leaders spoke of the automobile lobby.

Protection of one's interests against rivals is a version of lobbying.

Popularization (PR-campaigns on the eve of elections) is described as the most frequent motivation, which does not, however, guarantee victory. It depends not so much on the amount of money spent as on a conscientious approach to strategy and goal-setting. The Mekenim Kyrgyzstan party and its leader Urmat Barktabasov are the best examples of this: the process should be correctly organized, carried out, and completed (an election campaign, etc.).

Association with the communist stereotypes of the past. The communists of Kyrgyzstan and the conservatively minded part of the nation rely on such associations. An archaic structure to the casual observer, a communist party may move to the fore under certain conditions: there is any number of those who pin their hopes on a "strong hand" and the authoritarian trends in some of the CIS countries (Belarus and Turkmenistan, for example) also demonstrated to some extent by the party of United Russia.

Finally, the most formal and officially recognized reason—equal representation of all social groups and strata through parties as independent and equal entities of the political processes. There are much more latent and obvious reasons for party-building, but the political power remains the central one.

The move away from program to project parties has completed a certain development stage of Kyrgyzstan's body politic. Competition through elections is nothing more than the rivalry among projects designed and modeled by people.

Elite Cooperation after March 2005

The March 2005 events that replaced the old system of power transfer did not change much either in politics or in the economy. To a great extent, this process can be explained by the prevailing types of elite leaders.

As a rule these people organize their activities in a more or less similar way and share a more or less similar administrative and management experience; they received a similar education and cherish similar values and ideologies. All of them were economic managers at the top and middle levels of the nomenklatura; all of them prefer to be regarded as "hard-line statesmen" rather than reformers. It should be said in all justice that during the transformation of a society with a traditionalist rather than secular past, it is hard to say which of the elite types is more efficient and will remain such in the future.

It is absolutely clear that this administration type creates contradictions during power transfer and social dynamics. After all, accelerated social development is possible only when new types of managers and administrators familiar with the latest managerial and administrative techniques reach the top levels of power. For example, the public policy technique not required under Soviet power plays an important role in a genuinely socialist and democratic society (which differs from the Soviet type) as a method for correlating key decision-making by the state and civil society. In Kyrgyzstan, the attempts of the nationally oriented elite (which remains outside the power structures) to promote this technology run up against a blank wall of incomprehension.

Today, the region-oriented differentiation of political elites of the South and the North is all-important. Under Soviet power regional and tribal differentiation played an important role as well: indeed, the cultures of the nomads and settled people are very different, while the distances are great (there is only one road that connects the country's two parts and it can be easily blocked at the Too-Ashuu pass). Under these conditions, rotation breeds suspicion and rivalry among the regional and clan groups.

The present power elite of Kyrgyzstan is disunited and is distinguished by a minimum value consensus both in the government and the opposition camp. While speaking about essentially the same destination, the two camps cannot agree on the road to take them there.

Today, political power is a combination of varied vectors; this is best illustrated by the local cabinets acting independently of each other. The so-called propower parties have strengthened their potential: this was mainly caused by the pre-election fever created by the fact that half of the parliament was replaced with candidates elected by party lists according to a novelty introduced by the 7 November, 2006 Constitution initialed by the parliament and the president.

The opposition part of the political elite groups, which are equally removed from the political power, as well as those still involved in some political decision-making, for example, the Zhogorku

Kenesh deputies, former ministers, high-ranking officials of power-related structures, top bureaucrats who sympathize with the new opposition, and former Akaev supporters, can be described as a "segmented space" in the opposition field. Its core is still formed by those who belonged to the Za reformy movement.

Those who poured into the streets on 24 March, 2005 wanted to bring down the Akaev regime—they had no ideological ambitions and the programmatic vision of the future. Their aim was tactical and practical—"Akaev ketsin." In November 2006 the crowd chanted the unconscious slogans "Bakiev ketsin" and "Kulov ketsin." This means that the crowd, which wanted the ruler removed here and now, had no positive ideas about the country's future.

In 2006, the president's decision to patch up the old and many times patched Akaev Constitution (it was changed four times at referenda) to extend his powers was the formal pretext of more protests. The new/old Constitution and the same old political and economic landscape stirred up another wave of protest. Some of the political elites that took part in the March events later called a revolution found themselves as far from the resources as ever.

The outcome of the prolonged confrontation was easy to predict—seven days of mass protests in the capital's center in November 2006. Just as happened eighteen months prior to this, the protesters congregated in front of the government building.

In the last couple of years, the nation acquired certain political traditions: massive protest actions typical of democratic societies with local specifics. V. Bogatyrev, a prominent political scientist and former assistant to the republic's president, had the following to say: "With the Kyrgyz, democratic action is always real—never symbolic. While in the West people come to a rally for a couple of hours and then go back home, our people, after they start protesting, will never leave until they achieve their aim. Democracy Kyrgyz-style is of a precedent rather than a standard nature."[5]

For seven days the groups and participants involved in the political process looked for compromises. The country's new Constitution enforced the results of haggling over positions and powers in real and symbolic forms.

The nation had the opportunity to watch how the political establishment shifted its preferences in favor of the powers that be or against them by siding with the opposition. The parliament split: some of the deputies clearly identified their rigid preferences from the very beginning holding out to the last, while others, previously neutral deputies (some of them had already served several terms in the country's legislature), all of a sudden plunged into feverish activities.

It should be said that some political actors show their real worth precisely when it comes to the crunch: irrespective of their empirical and political luggage of the past, some of the leaders paled into insignificance and moved to the roadside when confronted with a choice of immense importance for their future demanding prompt action and prompt decision.

Inter-elite cooperation left much to be desired during the turbulent years of 2005 and 2006. New traditions of cooperation among the elites suitable for the early 21st century obviously could not rest either on the crumbled traditions of the closed hierarchical code of relations among the Soviet elites, or on the tribal traditions and communications of the Akaev period, which the elites had already rejected as illegitimate, or on any other practices of the past, such as kurultais, gatherings and intertribal communications of hoary antiquity.

In fact, in a truly democratic society the elites have to compete; rivalry and conflicts are resolved through consensuses, making it possible to keep rivalry within reasonable and legitimate limits confirmed by the law, Constitution, election legislation, tax and civil codes, and other enactments and procedures (elections, checks and balances, limited powers, etc.).

[5] V. Bogatyrev, op. cit., p. 25.

To a great extent, social stability depends on the ability of the elites to reach a consensus on political issues, their own relations, and their support of the existing or newly created political institutions. The national elites of Kyrgyzstan are functioning in the context of social and political instability typical of transitional societies forced to defend their right to equal opportunities in the face of outside challenges created by the globalizing and accelerating world. In Kyrgyzstan, the task of stabilization, integration, and consolidation of the nation fell to the lot of elites not yet fully developed themselves.