

Kyrgyzstan's slow progress to reform

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Kyrgyzstan's parliamentary elections in February this year, the first since March 1990, were expected to mark the next stage in the country's progress towards full democracy after gaining independence from the former Soviet Union. The new Parliament would, it was thought, be more professional and competent than its obstreperous and Communist-dominated predecessor and show a far greater commitment to President Askar Akayev and his democratic and economic reform course.

Difficulties had been mounting between President Akayev and Parliament over the past few years, particularly during the debates on the new Constitution passed on 5 May 1993. Then, in the course of 1994, relations between the executive and the legislature deteriorated still further and became increasingly acrimonious, paralysing the political life of the republic. This development was paralleled by the emergence of two opposing factions within Parliament itself. However, they were divided less by political orientation than by their attitude to the endemic corruption among official and public figures who had taken advantage of their position and privileges to line their own pockets. Whilst one camp wanted to continue investigating the various scandals and see Parliament serve out its full period of five years to new elections in March 1995, a second faction was more determined to prevent the various parliamentary commissions from publishing the names of those people allegedly involved in corruption. The body's very name - Commission of the Supreme Soviet for Examining the Participation of People's Deputies, Members of the Government and Heads of the Local State Administration in the Privatisation of Objects of State Property, the Receiving of Credits, Land and Flats - gives an indication of the scale of corruption and those involved.

The commission was due to report and publish names in the autumn 1994 legislative period. However, fearing public exposure, over half the deputies announced that they would boycott the forthcoming session. This left Parliament unable to constitute a quorum, whereupon the government under the Prime Minister, Apas Jumagulov, resigned *en bloc* on 6 September, arguing that it could not work without a Parliament, to which President Akayev responded by dissolving it.

In a subsequent referendum, on 22 October 1994, Akayev obtained a popular mandate to replace the old single chamber of 350 members with a smaller, bi-cameral legislature of 105. The new *Jogurku Kenesh*, as the old Supreme Soviet is now called in Kyrgyz, would, it was hoped, discharge its duties competently and honestly and make a break with the corruption of the old Parlia-

ment. The President and many others believed that the political stalemate which had afflicted the country for months would be resolved.

The elections were indeed a watershed, but hardly in the way people in the republic had anticipated. The results of the two rounds of voting on 5 and 19 February sent shock waves through the country, brought about major changes in the political balance of Kyrgyzstan and gave Akayev's critics additional ammunition in their battle against the President. It is still too early to say how the new Parliament will behave, but many local observers feel that

the country's long-standing political crisis can now only become even worse.



Local and international reactions

The biggest shock was that, at the time of their election, nearly 30 per cent of the new deputies were being investigated by the State Prosecutor's Office for illegal financial dealings. Parliamentary privileges, notably immunity from further investigation and criminal prosecution, gave corrupt businessmen and mafiosi a strong incentive to seek election to Parliament. Candidates with the threat of jail sentences hanging over their heads spent appropriately large sums of black

[Map from *The Economist*] money in often bitter campaigns, and numerous cases of vote-rigging and outright physical intimidation were reported. Large sections of the hard-pressed population, particularly pensioners and poorer people, were bought off with trinkets, food packets and a few dollars offered by many of the richer candidates.

This author also witnessed several cases where officials openly ignored and violated the provisions of the electoral law, which was in any event badly drafted and weakly enforced. In the absence of effective legal sanctions, unscrupulous electoral officers had *carte blanche* to rig the results, although voting at many polling stations was nevertheless reasonably fair. So, contrary to expectations that a more mature electorate would make democratic decisions based on enlightened self-interest, immediate economic benefits set the tone of the campaign and voting.

The elections also brought about a crucial change in the balance of power in Kyrgyzstan. The Islamic south of the republic managed to get many of its own local candidates elected at the expense of placemen from the secular north, showing that it was no longer prepared to accept traditional northern dominance in the economic and political life of the country. This is a development with potentially far-reaching implications. The south is already the least stable part of Kyrgyzstan, and there are demands

for greater autonomy vis-à-vis the north and for secession from the large Uzbek minority there. Both neighbouring Tajikistan and nearby Afghanistan are torn by armed conflict, and the whole region is awash with arms and drugs. Many of the new deputies from the south are assumed to be involved in the narcotics trade and to have considerable amounts of weapons at their disposal.

Despite the constant pronouncements by senior political leaders in Kyrgyzstan that the country now has a pluralistic and multi-party system, none of the 12 largest parties was able to win more than a few seats. So while the opposition may indeed be vociferous on occasion, it is still poorly organised and very weak in terms of real political power. As a result, no party was able to stake a claim to ministerial posts in the Cabinet subsequently nominated by Akayev.

Equally worrying is the fact that the new Parliament consists almost entirely of Kyrgyz, leaving Russians, Uzbeks and other nationalities with virtually no representation. Memories of the ethnic clashes between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in the southern town of Osh in summer 1990, which left at least 200 dead, are still very vivid in the republic. In an effort to maintain national harmony, Akayev had proposed a system of proportional representation for the revamped Parliament to reflect the make-up of the country's multi-ethnic population. This was meant to prevent the Kyrgyz from dominating the new legislature and to reduce the risk of alienating the other nationalities. Akayev had also proposed a quota system to give women a say in the country's affairs. However, the previous Parliament rejected these suggestions, and there is now a real danger that the non-Kyrgyz, who make up about 44 per cent of the population, may feel even more resentful of Kyrgyz dominance and nationalism.

Complaints about intimidation and other electoral violations began weeks before actual polling as it became clear how the campaign was being conducted, and criticism mounted sharply almost immediately on the commencement of voting on 5 February. Many calls came from the various opposition groups, the mass media and the general public for the elections to be annulled and conducted again. There was also a widespread expectation that the many observers from the international community would also call for new elections in view of the numerous violations.

There was therefore great disappointment, indeed anger, when the report by observers from the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), published on 6 February, concluded that despite the massive number of irregularities and violations the voting had on the whole been fair and free. Unfortunately, the report displayed all the typical defects of a committee effort which had to incorporate the varying views of each member. The result was a bland, compromise document which glossed over major irregularities in the voting procedures. More important, it only concentrated on the formal aspects of the elections and their conduct and ignored the larger picture of politics in Kyrgyzstan. Consequently, it gravely underestimated both the extent of the violations and the devastating effect they could yet have on the political life of the republic and the confidence of the people in the political system.

It is symptomatic of attitudes in Kyrgyzstan generally that local observers saw the conclusions of the OSCE report as a mere reflection of the vested interests of the United States and Western Europe, which had decided to back President Akayev and his (alleged) reform course with large amounts of money either directly or indirectly through the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. As the only democratic state in Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan is seen abroad as a model for the other countries in the

region and therefore deserving of international support. Many local analysts argue that the donor countries were thus forced willy-nilly to continue maintaining that Kyrgyzstan was still on the right road to democracy. The OSCE report consequently turned a blind eye to the many irregularities which occurred.

There was, then, a widespread feeling locally that the elections should be held again, but with much more stringent and competent international monitoring than in February to guarantee genuinely fair and free voting and a Parliament which would actually reflect the wishes of the people. This view was also largely supported by the non-governmental observers from the Washington-based International Republican Institute, who were equally angered by the OSCE report and argued that there were more than sufficient grounds for the elections to be annulled.¹

Additional support for this view comes from sources close to the President which reported that Akayev too was alarmed by the outcome of the elections and seriously considered rescinding the results. However, with powerful economic and political interests at stake and an ample supply of weapons, many people argued that the southern deputies, in particular, would not stop at fomenting open conflict if their new privileges and parliamentary immunity were to be threatened should the results be annulled. Akayev therefore apparently decided against this step for fear of destabilising the republic and risking unrest or even civil war.

Against this background, Akayev subsequently stated publicly that it was necessary to abide by the results despite their negative outcome since for the most part they had been conducted in accordance with the current electoral law and because they were a necessary first step on the way to full democracy. But he did respond to the massive public criticism by setting up a commission to investigate the numerous violations, although sceptics point out that most commissions in the republic are ineffective and that the end results are unlikely to be affected.

However, Akayev has kept his options open with regard to a future dissolution of Parliament. Early on the first polling day, he remarked rather cryptically that the new legislature would probably be only a temporary and provisional body, apparently implying that with presidential elections due in 1996, the legislature would have to be re-elected in any case. He went on to state that he foresaw no problems with the new Parliament, expressing the view that he would be able to work with it just as a Democratic President worked with a Republican Congress.

Akayev thus seems to have started preparing the psychological ground to legitimise any future dissolution should the need arise later - and this before the voting had finished. His comments were also interpreted as a ploy to extend the period of presidential rule by decree which began when he dissolved the previous Parliament in the autumn of 1994. Although the first parliamentary session had been set for 28 March, the summer holidays are due relatively soon and it is suspected that Akayev may be able to govern with little interference from Parliament for several months.²

Whether the President will in fact dissolve the Parliament once again at a later date is of course uncertain, and much will depend on how it will function in practice. But it is clear that Akayev's hopes for a more professional and reform-oriented Parliament have not been fulfilled. Very few of the candidates he favoured managed to get elected, and many local commentators are predicting that the new legislature will be far more obstreperous than its Communist predecessor. On the other hand, a sizable body of opinion feels that, with richer deputies in the form of both corrupt and legitimate businessmen, the new Parliament will in fact be less inclined to line its own pockets than the previous one.

Views of Kyrgyzstan

For the past few years Kyrgyzstan has enjoyed the reputation of being the most - indeed the only - democratic country in Central Asia. Askar Akayev is usually portrayed as a go-ahead President keen on promoting democracy and market reforms. The republic has one of the lowest rates of inflation of any post-Soviet republic and according to some experts may be among the first post-Soviet countries to achieve economic growth. Western journalists and other official visitors still tend to paint a picture of Kyrgyzstan as an Arcadian idyll with just a few minor problems which could be easily rectified.³

Outside observers first became aware that things in Kyrgyzstan were not quite as they seemed when Akayev had two newspapers closed down and had court proceedings instituted against several others in summer and autumn 1994. But after the United States made it clear that further aid to Kyrgyzstan depended on a continuing adherence to reform, Akayev subsequently softened his position and the President's reputation as a liberal committed to democracy and the free market remains largely intact.

However, whereas the curtailment of the press was something of a surprise to outsiders, Akayev's local critics say this was just one more instance of autocratic behaviour among many which go right back to the beginning of his presidency. His detractors have been arguing for several years that Kyrgyzstan is not the 'island of democracy' it is purported to be by government officials and in the Western press, and there is constant talk of increasing authoritarianism and arbitrariness and the breakdown of whatever limited democracy may have existed.⁴ A huge rift has opened up between Akayev and the opposition, and he is accused of precipitating a long-term political and constitutional crisis and of bringing about the complete collapse of the economy. In contrast to official views and those of the outside world, it is argued that the attempted economic reforms and the privatisation programme have been total failures.

Intense local criticism has been further fuelled by the seemingly endless series of high-level cases of corruption which are constantly coming to light. In addition to those investigated by the parliamentary commission on privatisation, these include the awarding of a gold concession to a Canadian mining company without any official tenders being announced; gold reserves which have allegedly gone missing; the misappropriation and commercial sale of humanitarian aid from the European Union; and last but by no means least favouritism and nepotism in the allocation of official posts and loans.

Critics argue that the parliamentary commissions investigating these matters are ineffective and either fail to report altogether or simply exonerate everyone allegedly involved, concluding that nothing illegal occurred. Formal proceedings are rarely brought against those suspected of corruption and people point to one cover-up after another. Politicians and bureaucrats are indeed occasionally sacked, such as the former Prime Minister, Tursenbek Chyngyshev, who had to resign because of his alleged role in a gold scandal, although many think he was made a scapegoat for others.

There is, then, ample material for the rumours and conspiracy theories on which much of post-Soviet society, including Kyrgyzstan, thrives. The prevailing impression that politicians and bureaucrats are lining their own pockets while most of the population is suffering from a shattered economy has led to a dangerous polarisation of society and politics, seriously undermining confidence in the political system and almost wholly alienating both the critical intelligentsia and the population in general. Political debate has been conducted in a vehement and

often personalised tone for the past few years. Critics say that while lip service is paid to democracy and market reform, the country is just as corrupt and undemocratic as its neighbours - a truly oriental country based more on feudal principles, corruption, nepotism, favouritism and clans than anything resembling democracy. Akayev's detractors also argue that not only does the President do little to alter this situation, but that he is implicated in many of the corruption cases himself.

Conspiracy theories and constitutional crisis

Apart from the recurrent accusations of corruption in high places, many in Kyrgyzstan are even more worried by what they regard as President Akayev's political ineptitude in precipitating an almost chronic political and constitutional crisis in the country. Other conspiracy theorists, however, argue that far from being incompetent, Akayev has on the contrary developed into a skilful politician and manipulator who has managed to sideline all of his potential challengers for the presidency and to consolidate his position as head of state, not least with a view to winning a second term of office as President in 1996. Unfortunately, these new-found political skills are being used to promote his authoritarian rule rather than democracy - or so it is argued.

According to this view, Akayev and his advisors foresaw in 1993 that relations with Parliament were likely to deteriorate in the course of 1994, and they therefore decided to bolster the President's position by holding a referendum on 30 January 1994. However, a Soviet-style result for a continuation of his presidency and his reform course did little to enhance Akayev's credibility abroad or among his domestic critics. Both local observers and foreign diplomats in the republic told this author that whole streets and blocks did not even bother to vote and that the official figures were wholly unrealistic. But the referendum did serve to increase his legitimacy at home among the less critical sectors of society who assume that the leader himself is above corruption because he had been elected by the people. Paradoxically, Akayev was therefore able further to legitimise his position as a popular leader, an important element in the coming struggle with the legislature.

The next stage in Akayev's extension of his power was to dissolve the increasingly unruly Parliament. The boycott of the autumn 1994 session by so many deputies served as the pretext to get rid of the old legislature and continue on his reform course with a more pliable body. However, as we have seen, this calculation misfired, and once again the President's detractors point to this result as proof that he lacks political acumen. In retrospect, it is clear that despite the many disputes with the previous legislature, Akayev had nevertheless established a *modus vivendi* with the Parliament and its Speaker, Medetkan Sherimkulov, and had managed to get large parts of his reform legislation passed.

Moreover, in his desire to break the political impasse in the republic by dissolving Parliament, the President did in fact act unconstitutionally. The opposition had indeed been calling for Akayev to dissolve the legislature for at least the previous two years, but according to the new Constitution adopted on 5 May 1993, this can only be done by a two-thirds vote in Parliament or by a popular referendum, neither of which has taken place. The referendum on 22 October 1994 was held after he had dissolved Parliament. So although the referendum gave Akayev overwhelming popular support for the revamped Parliament and also

for subjecting proposed changes to the Constitution and other major issues to referendums, the legal basis is at the very least shaky.

Conclusion

Amid a welter of conspiracy theories and lack of hard information, it is extremely difficult for outsiders to penetrate the Byzantine politics of Kyrgyzstan and understand what is really happening in the country. But the shattered economy, falling living standards and the numerous scandals have without question led to a sharp deterioration in the political atmosphere. The President has lost much of the goodwill he previously enjoyed and now finds it almost impossible to please his critics and the population at large, no matter what he does. It is also clear that whatever may or may not lie behind the conspiracy theories, Kyrgyzstan is having more problems than the outside world generally appreciates and that the local opposition, weak as it is, has been pointing this out virtually from the beginning of Akayev's presidency.

Paradoxically, Akayev's chances of winning next year's presidential election are still good. Traditional patterns of Central Asian authority and deference are always likely to favour the incumbent, whatever scandals there may have been in the past. But Akayev will face a strong challenge if the well-known Kyrgyz author and ambassador, Chingiz Aitmatov, decides to run for the presidency, as many now expect. Although he has made contradictory statements about whether he will stand, Aitmatov was elected to Parliament in February, despite living abroad for several years and therefore failing to fulfil the five-year residence requirement for candidates. Aitmatov would be a universally popular President who could bridge the gap between north and south and continue to attract foreign goodwill and credits.

Of Akayev's other possible challengers, all reached maturity during the Soviet period and none is likely to attract outside financial help to the same extent as Akayev and Aitmatov. Furthermore, Akayev has managed to remove or weaken all of his potential challengers in the past few years. For example, the Speaker of the previous Parliament, Sherimkulov, who was seen as a possible future President, failed to get re-elected in February against a candidate favoured by Akayev, although voting irregularities are being investigated.

Interestingly, there is as yet no equivalent of the younger generation of Russian politicians such as Gaidar, Fyodorov or Yavlinsky in Kyrgyzstan. Up-and-coming politicians are biding their time until the presidential elections in 2001, when it is assumed the economy will have bottomed out and will be ready for an upturn. These younger politicians also argue that it would in any case be political suicide to take on the presidency in 1996 and preside over further economic deterioration.

Outside views of Kyrgyzstan's (questionable) progress to democracy and the free market, and favourable comparisons with the surrounding and more autocratic states such as Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan and to some extent Kazakhstan, do not wash with people in Kyrgyzstan. They have seen their living standards plummet and know that their neighbours have an appreciably higher standard of living and far lower crime rates. And whilst Kyrgyzstan is indeed 'more democratic' than the other states of Central Asia, locals retort that you either have complete democracy or none at all. They have little patience for dispassionate Western-style arguments that the transition from the previous command system to a market economy and democracy can hardly be achieved overnight and is bound to be fraught with difficulties.

Akayev's critics respond to this by arguing that having set up Kyrgyzstan as a model of economic reform in Central Asia and given large amounts of money in aid on the basis of Akayev's democratic credentials, the international financial community can now hardly admit that it has made a serious - and expensive - error of judgment in backing a President who is behaving in an increasingly authoritarian fashion.

It therefore remains to be seen whether outside support can indeed lead to a more stable economic environment and a turnaround in the economy - and a consequent easing of the political atmosphere in Kyrgyzstan. But the road is likely to prove a difficult one, whatever the eventual outcome, and no real upturn can be expected before 1997-98. Local critics often argue that foreign aid is given on the false premise of democracy and market reform and that it is in any case ineffective. This underestimates the difficulties involved in the transition from a centrally planned economy to the free market. And whatever problems there are in Kyrgyzstan, they would obviously be considerably worse if outside aid was not forthcoming.

NOTES

1. The main concern here was for a much greater number of observers to allow full monitoring rather than the piecemeal effort of 5 February, and that the observers themselves should be fluent in Russian. There was also criticism that most of the monitors - and foreign journalists - left Kyrgyzstan almost immediately after the first round of voting was over, without awaiting either the actual results or the outcome of the complaints about the numerous violations and irregularities.
2. President Nazarbayev's dissolution of Parliament in neighbouring Kazakhstan in March 1995, following the elections in Kyrgyzstan, was widely seen here as a possible precedent which could further legitimise a future dissolution of the Kyrgyz Parliament. In Kazakhstan, violations during the elections in 1994 suddenly 'came to light', prompting Nazarbayev to dissolve Parliament. Many envisage a similar scenario in Kyrgyzstan.
3. See the articles in *The Economist*, 10 September, 29 October and 10 December 1994. Steve Le Vine, who writes from Almaty for the *Financial Times* and *Newsweek*, published a piece which caused amazement with its up-beat description of Kyrgyzstan among both local observers and the foreign community in the capital, Bishkek. See *Newsweek*, 12 December 1994.
4. See Ian Pryde, 'Kyrgyzstan: secularism vs. Islam' in *The World Today*, November 1992; and 'Kyrgyzstan: The Trials of Independence', in the *Journal of Democracy*, 1 January 1994.