

Kyrgyzstan: Secularism vs Islam

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Kyrgyzstan is one of the smaller and lesser known republics of the former Soviet Union. It is largely mountainous and is bordered by China to the south, Kazakhstan to the north and Uzbekistan and Tajikistan to the west. Its population of about 4.5m consists of Kirgiz (52 per cent), Russians (21 per cent), Uzbeks (13 per cent) and about 80 other nationalities, including Germans (75,000), Kazakhs, Jews and Dungans (Chinese Moslems). Kirgiz also live in neighbouring republics of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and in Afghanistan and Turkey, and there are a further 140,000 across the border in Xinjiang.

There is, then, a complex ethnic situation in the republic, and a major turning point in Kyrgyzstan's recent history was the violence in summer 1990 between Kirgiz and Uzbeks in Osh. These clashes discredited the Communist regime and ultimately led to the election of Askar Akaev as President in October 1990. Acutely aware that another flare-up would end any hope of improving Kyrgyzstan's dire economy, Akaev has, since becoming President, striven to ensure stability in the republic. His policy of national harmony (*nationalnoe soglasie*) to reduce ethnic tension involves fully supporting the national aspirations of the Kirgiz while at the same time encouraging other nationalities to pursue their own cultural needs. Akaev has a difficult task trying to hold the balance between different ethnic groups, ensuring that no single nationality gains advantages over the others. Should the scales tip too far one way the result is likely to be instant bloodshed. This political balancing act demands frequent compromises and tactical changes from the President which in turn leads to criticism of inconsistency.

In spite of the policy's relative success, ethnic unrest has not disappeared, particularly in south Kyrgyzstan. A curfew has been in force for several months in Uzgen, a largely Uzbek town near Osh. A change in the town's administrative status seems to have served as a pretext to push claims for greater autonomy. Much of the south is allegedly in the hands of extremists and black marketeers, who control land, trade, drugs and arms; and religious activists such as the followers of the Wahabites. Guns and copies of the Koran are brought in from Afghanistan via Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.¹ The region is therefore likely to remain a trouble-spot. Many Kirgiz intellectuals fear that instability there could easily spread to the rest of Kyrgyzstan and sweep away everything that has been achieved under Akaev.

Concern is also often expressed that an increase in tension between Kyrgyzstan and its neighbours could result in the sort of economic warfare as seen in the Caucasus. Parts of Kyrgyzstan depend on Tajikistan and Uzbekistan for electricity and gas, whereas the republic controls much of the water supply to the Ferghana valley in Uzbekistan. In addition, all these republics have, or could make, territorial claims on each other. Whilst Kyrgyzstan itself is unlikely to open this Pandora's box, there is a fear that Uzbekistan or Tajikistan could take such steps in the future. Conflict with Kyrgyzstan's northern neighbour, Kazakhstan, on the other hand, can be safely ruled out. The Kirgiz and Kazakh consider themselves 'blood brothers': they share a common mentality and a broadly similar attitude to

religion born of the nomadic life-style they both used to lead, and their languages are virtually identical.²

A further source of present ethnic unrest is the privatisation scheme now under way. Traditionally nomads, the Kirgiz lost much of the best land in the north to Russian and Ukrainian settlers in the nineteenth century, and in the south the Uzbeks have been working the land for generations and are also heavily involved in trade. Farmers already settled on the land have a better chance of acquiring it permanently and usually have more capital than the Kirgiz, who are mostly stock breeders and still practice transhumance (seasonal moving of livestock to another area).

A similar situation prevails in industry, where Russians and Ukrainians are dominant. Many Kirgiz, therefore, are demanding a stop to the privatisation programme, but although the privatisation of land has been temporarily postponed, both President Akaev and the Minister of Agriculture, Karipbek Asanov, are determined to push ahead with privatisation in the autumn. Akaev sees privatisation as a market process, the only way to solve the republic's economic problems and avoid food shortages in the future,³ but selling this idea to those Kirgiz who say they are losing out under the scheme is not easy.

The Islamic factor

The 'Islamic factor' in Central Asia has been the subject of much comment in both the Western and the Russian press. However, although the Kirgiz are Sunni Moslems and speak a Turkic language, they are not deeply Islamicised. Few religious practices are observed and fundamentalism is unlikely to take hold in the republic. The comparatively late arrival of Islam to the area, the nomadic lifestyle of the Kirgiz and an easy-going attitude to life have prevented Islam from putting down the deep roots it has in other parts of Central Asia, although religious feeling is stronger in the south due to Uzbek influence. The Kirgiz are well aware that Islam has been unable to come to terms with the modern rational and scientific world and as such is incapable of solving the problems both of the republic and of Central Asia as a whole.⁴

Occasional manifestations of fundamentalism nevertheless do occur. A translator of the Koran into Kirgiz had to go into hiding recently for 'defaming the words of the Prophet'. In April a petition addressed to Akaev and allegedly signed by 150,000 people called for the closure of the commercial television channels for showing uncensored scenes of sex and violence in Western films. In keeping with the generally tolerant nature of the Kirgiz, such outbursts are regarded with wry amusement by most people. The petition also demanded an end to the visits by foreign evangelists to the republic. Uniquely in Central Asia, there have been conversions of Kirgiz to Christianity, but it is unclear whether this is due to genuine religious belief, to disorientation after the breakup of the Soviet Union or to people being seduced by the wealth of foreign churches. Whilst some Kirgiz are confident that the trend is just a passing phase, others fear that it could lead to a permanent split among the Kirgiz along religious lines, although it is still too early to assess the real significance of such conversions.

Most Kirgiz, therefore, see no danger of indigenous fundamentalism. Although they admit that a handful of determined extremists could certainly wreak havoc with the republic's fragile stability, intellectuals are far more concerned that Islamic fundamentalism could be brought in from the outside. Such worries were increased when religious elements in neighbouring Tajikistan managed to gain a share of political power⁵ and the mujahedin began introducing Islamic law in Afghanistan after the fall of the Najibullah regime. In so far as fundamentalism is a reaction to a late and rapid modernisation process and its attendant uprooting, disorientation and rural and urban poverty, there is ample scope for such developments all over Central Asia. Should fundamentalism take hold in neighbouring Tajikistan or Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan would hardly remain unaffected.⁶

Bankruptcy looms

After Akaev's election in October 1991 it was felt that he would finally get to grips with the struggling economy. Although he was unopposed in the election, a 90 per cent turnout resulted in a massive 95-per-cent vote in favour of the President. Even Akaev's repeated statements that living standards would fall in 1992 before a slight improvement could be expected in 1993 failed to dampen the widespread euphoria in the republic that things would now start to change.

However, the collapse of the Soviet Union - described by Akaev as 'a major social and economic cataclysm of the twentieth century' - greatly exacerbated Kyrgyzstan's economic problems. The republic is now on the verge of bankruptcy. Recent pay increases to help maintain social stability and a series of natural disasters in April and May have put further strains on the budget. Akaev says that the economic upturn he originally predicted for 1993 will now be in 1995,⁷ but the interim period could well be characterised by social unrest as the economy deteriorates further.

Given the high prices and shortages, it is hardly surprising that Akaev's popularity has sunk to an all-time low. The euphoria of last October was of course bound to fade and people now realise that many factors are beyond the President's control and that they had expected too much from him.

However, considerable criticism has been levelled at Akaev and the government for their inadequate handling of the economy and their inability to implement presidential decrees and laws. The government's failure to clamp down on the rapid growth of corruption among bureaucrats in recent months has come under particular attack. Functionaries have been hit heavily by the high inflation. Their low fixed incomes are forcing them to resort to bribery to survive economically and to build up a nest-egg for a future in which they expect to be unemployed. People wishing to acquire property under the privatisation schemes therefore have to pay often prohibitive sums for the requisite documents.

Furthermore, although Kyrgyzstan is the most democratic of the Central Asian republics, the 'former' Communists are still very much present at all levels of government and administration, so their commitment to market reforms is questionable. Even if it were possible to remove them en masse there is no adequately trained staff to replace them. Akaev is therefore faced with the usual type of resistance confronting reformers from above in the former Soviet Union. Government ministers also admit to considerable confusion at lower levels concerning the implementation of laws and decrees involving new and alien concepts, such as privatisation and private property, and what these mean in

practice. An impression has consequently arisen among the population that the whole governmental machine is doing all it can to thwart democratic and economic change. Akaev is aware of these problems but seems to have no answers beyond exhortation.⁸

Another frequent criticism of Akaev is that he lacks an overall concept for the republic's future development. Akaev's tendency to enthuse about whichever country he has just returned from as being the 'ideal model' for Kyrgyzstan means that most people no longer take such pronouncements seriously.⁹ He has made broadly similar comments about several countries, including Canada, Switzerland, Germany and China. However, this is at least partly due to Akaev's attempt to acquaint and familiarise people with the outside world. The President sees re-educating the population as one of his major tasks.¹⁰ Part of his problem is thus one of public relations. An effective and articulate 'salesman' in private, he is a less adroit performer on television and has failed to get his message across to a wider audience. It would indeed be surprising if it were otherwise, given the hardship many are facing at the moment. People are tired of rhetoric and promises and want action.

A further difficulty faced by Akaev is that in contrast to the other leaders of Central Asia and Kazakhstan, he is not a product of the Communist Party machine and cannot use it in the way that, say, President Nazarbaev in Kazakhstan is able to.¹¹ Indeed, Akaev does not belong to any party, arguing that he has to be above particular interests. While this is a valid point in the complex web of Kirgiz politics, it means that the President is somewhat isolated and lacks real institutional support and mechanisms for implementing policies and decrees.

It is against the perceived failure to take action that conspiracy theories of a Communist return to power have become rife, a view seemingly confirmed in May when several prominent 'former' Communists were elected to the Supreme Soviet. However, such results owe as much to the nature of clan relationships and loyalty in Kyrgyzstan as to nostalgia for the good old days when food and vodka were cheaper.

This fear of a Communist comeback has led to a tense atmosphere in Kyrgyzstan which stands in marked contrast to the buoyant mood of October 1991. With the single exception of *Res Publica*, the Russian-language press is still rather bland and Soviet in style, lacking the critical stance and bite of many newspapers in Russia. People have become careful about what they say and journalists admit privately that they are keeping quiet for fear of losing their jobs or, more ominously, because they fear for their children. There is no censorship as such but the mass media do come under government pressure. People are, therefore, playing safe just in case President Akaev loses power - or is removed from office.

However, even if the Communists managed to return to power, they would hardly be able to cope with the huge problems now facing the republic. Both the economy and society have changed too much to make Communist methods viable, and many members of the semi-opposition parties now dismiss notions of a Communist comeback.

A further indication of dissatisfaction in Kyrgyzstan is that comparisons are now frequently being made between Akaev's current position and that of Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985-88. Pessimism, resignation and cynicism at home stand in marked contrast to a high reputation abroad. The fact that such comparisons are being drawn is more symptomatic of the intractable

nature of the problems facing the republic than of genuine parallels between the two men and their respective positions, and it would be unwise to push this analogy too far. Gorbachev's lack of strategic vision is most definitely not shared by Akaev although, as we have seen, many are now questioning the latter's tactics. Nor is Akaev actively and vehemently disliked, as Gorbachev was by many in Russia. As a non-Communist with an excellent education achieved on his own merits and not because of his Communist father, Akaev is highly respected. It is, however, often argued now that he is a far better physicist than politician, and whereas earlier in his presidency Akaev was favourably compared to Nazarbaev, the reverse is now true.

Against this, Akaev's ability to make a good impression abroad is a great asset to the republic. Kyrgyzstan's foreign policy is based on a desire for stability to enable it to attract the outside investment and know-how it needs to help solve its economic problems and develop its considerable natural resources.

Kyrgyzstan's external links

In the course of 1991, it was expected in the West and in Russia that Turkey and Iran would move into the power vacuum left as Soviet influence waned in Central Asia. The newly independent republic, it was asserted, would choose either the secular Turkish model of development or succumb to Iranian fundamentalism.¹²

Turkey and Iran have indeed increased their activity in the region. Language, religion and money are playing an important role in this process. But the situation is more complex than this would suggest. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the initiative of the three Slav states in forming a new union without consulting the other republics made both the leaders and the populations of Central Asia realise they could no longer count on support from Moscow. Judging by Kyrgyzstan, they have still not recovered fully from this shock and have been forced to look to each other and to outside powers for support.

This trend has received added impetus due to the perceived weakness of the CIS and Russia's virtually non-existent policy towards the region. The visits by the Turkish Prime Minister, Suleyman Demirel, to the largely Turkic-speaking Moslem republics, and summit meetings in Bishkek and Ashgabat, took place against this background of increasing cooperation. During Demirel's visit to Kyrgyzstan, the republic received a \$75m credit, humanitarian aid and an offer of help in changing from Cyrillic to a Latin-based alphabet for Kirgiz. Akaev's comment that 'the Turkish model is appropriate for Kyrgyzstan' would seem to confirm Western assumptions about the path being taken by the Central Asian states.¹³

At the meeting in Bishkek from 22 to 24 April, the leaders of Central Asia and Kazakhstan discussed measures to solve the region's economic problems and how to develop closer economic cooperation and effect the switch to a market economy. It was also agreed to establish a legal framework and infrastructure for a common market. The Ashgabat summit of the Islamic Organisation for Economic Cooperation from 9 to 10 May brought together the three original founder members, Turkey, Iran and Pakistan, as well as the Central Asian republics and Kazakhstan. The topics discussed were broadly those handled at Bishkek, and as President Nazarbaev of Kazakhstan pointed out, it was entirely natural to coordinate action on economic problems at such a difficult time.¹⁴

The realisation of these projects will, of course, not be easy. Lack of capital, know-how, experience and internal differences

of opinion are likely to cause delays and setbacks. Nevertheless, President Akaev sees a bright long-term future for the region if the political situation remains relatively stable.¹⁵

However, while Kyrgyzstan is playing its part in the developments in Central Asia, its external relations are by no means limited to Islamic countries. Akaev and the Kirgiz are very aware of their Asian heritage and of the huge economic potential of the continent. Constant attention is focused on the Asian 'dragons' such as Malaysia, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and of course Japan as models for development. Kyrgyzstan is, in fact, far more interested in achieving the phenomenally high growth rates and living standards of these Asian countries than in emulating Turkey and Iran.

A major role in the potentially huge common market will be played by China. Relations with the People's Republic may indeed be of greater significance for Kyrgyzstan in the long term than links with the Islamic world. China quickly recognised the Central Asian republics and Kazakhstan after the breakup of the Soviet Union. The official and unofficial high-level contacts of 1991 between Kyrgyzstan and China, particularly Xinjiang, have continued into 1992 and the road between Kyrgyzstan and China, virtually closed since the Cultural Revolution, was reopened earlier this year for increased traffic. According to Akaev, the Chinese leaders, Le Peng and Jiang Zemin, expressed their support for the idea of a common market from Turkey to South-East Asia which the President had put forward on his official visit to China from 12 to 16 May 1992.

The Kirgiz delegation was interested in China's experience in switching from a planned to a market economy - seen as particularly appropriate for Kyrgyzstan - and visited the Guangdong free economic zone in South China. As Akaev said in Beijing, the Kirgiz also wanted to improve trade and cultural contacts and 'be a link between East and West to resurrect the traditions of the ancient Great Silk Route using new possibilities and modern communications'. Agreements were signed on increased cooperation in science and technology, health, education, tourism and information. Regular flights are now planned from Bishkek to Beijing and from Bishkek to Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang. It was also agreed to exchange television and radio programmes. In addition, China awarded Kyrgyzstan a soft credit equivalent to \$6m.¹⁶

However, Kyrgyzstan's desire to develop contacts with the West should not be overlooked. Akaev established special districts for the German community in Kyrgyzstan to woo the Germans before visiting their country in April 1992, a move which met with some criticism at home. Nevertheless, Akaev made a good impression in Germany and Chancellor Kohl is expected to visit Kyrgyzstan later this year.

Kyrgyzstan's ultimate aim politically is arguably a state more European than Asian. After returning from Switzerland - a small and mountainous republic like Kyrgyzstan - Akaev told the Supreme Soviet:

'Fate has determined us to be a new Switzerland in Central Asia - there is every chance for this in the third millennium. Negotiations to attract investment and technology will soon bring results...But the most important thing is that Switzerland has a tradition of permanent neutrality. Our initial experience shows that the political position of our republic is creating all the conditions necessary to acquire the status of permanent neutrality.'¹⁷ Kyrgyzstan is also visited by a constant stream of delegations

from more Western-oriented institutions such as the European Community, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, the European Bank of Reconstruction and Development and others, contacts which are welcomed by the republic.

Kyrgyzstan's desire for neutrality explains why it is the only CIS republic to have decided not to form its own army,¹⁸ although it signed CIS agreements on collective security agreed at the Tashkent summit in May. The Kirgiz are keen to participate in developments in Central Asia but want to do so as equal partners and without outside interference in their internal affairs. Seventy years of Soviet rule have made them wary of alliances. Neutrality, if achieved, would enable Kyrgyzstan to retain greater control over its own destiny and to avoid domination by its two 'great neighbours', Russia and China, and by the 16m Uzbeks who outnumber all the other Turkic-speaking peoples put together.

Conclusion

In the short term, the stability of Kyrgyzstan depends to a great extent on the economy. However, expectations in the former Soviet Union are lower than those in the West, and even a slight rise in living standards would bring disproportionate gains in a reduction of tension. Most people would be satisfied with a fairly modest improvement which would give them adequate supplies of food at reasonable prices. Akaev is confident that foreign investment and agricultural reform will begin to bear fruit by the end of 1992, and he foresees a vast common market from Turkey to South-East Asia in the more distant future.

It is only natural that Kyrgyzstan should look to its immediate neighbours, now that it is no longer necessary to go through Moscow. Given their geographical proximity, the common bond of the Turkic languages, Islam and an ancient common history, it would be surprising if these states were not seeking closer ties with each other.

Politicians, however, frequently stress that there is no blueprint for Kyrgyzstan's future economic and political direction. The republic is searching for ways forward and intends to adopt those elements from elsewhere which can be applied at home. Kyrgyzstan is thus open to any country willing to establish normal economic and diplomatic relations, irrespective of ideological or religious orientation. This particularly applies to Russia, which will remain one of Kyrgyzstan's main partners.¹⁹

As we have seen, common Western and Russian assumptions and generalisations about Central Asia and about the role of Islam

there cannot really be applied to Kyrgyzstan. Barring some major and unexpected development there seems little danger of a theocratic state. Even if extremists were to take power somehow, many Kirgiz would probably react as they usually have in the past and simply retreat to the mountains to tend their animals.

NOTES

1. See *Vechernyi Bishkek*, 20 April 1992.
2. Literature on the Kirgiz is sparse. For historical background, see the chapter by Chantal Lemerrier-Quellejey in Gavin Hambly (Ed.), *Central Asia* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1969). Simon Crisp's contribution, 'The Kirgiz', in Graham Smith (Ed.), *The Nationalities Question in the Soviet Union* (London and New York: Longman, 1990) is useful for events under Gorbachev, but is now rather dated in places. On the easy-going nature of the Kirgiz and the relationship between the Kirgiz and the Kazakh, see Guy. G. Imart, 'Kirgizia-Kazakhstan: A Hinge or a Fault-Line?', *Problems of Communism*, September-October 1990.
3. President Akaev and the Minister of Agriculture, Karipbek Asanov, in interviews with the author.
4. Although primarily concerned with the Arab world, an excellent study of the structural impediments which have hitherto prevented Islam from making such an adjustment is Bassam Tibi, *Islamischer Fundamentalismus, moderne Wissenschaft und Technologie* (Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1992). Tibi sees fundamentalism as the defensive reaction of a pre-industrial religion confronted by a secular (and Western) world.
5. For background to events in Tajikistan, see Bess Brown, 'Wither Tajikistan?', *RFE/RL Research Report*, Vol. 1, No 24, 12 June 1992.
6. At the moment most religious leaders in Central Asia deny any wish to establish a theocratic state. See Robin Wright, 'Islam and Democracy', *Foreign Affairs*, Summer 1992.
7. Akaev in an interview with the author.
8. Akaev's speech to the heads of local administration, in *Slovo Kyrgyzstana*, 28 April 1992.
9. See the comments by Zamira Sydykova on Akaev's return from Germany, *Res Publica*, No 17, 14 April 1992.
10. Akaev in an interview with the author.
11. It should, however, be noted that Nazarbaev is also not without his problems concerning his *apparat*.
12. For a typical example of this approach, see 'Choosing partners', *The Economist*, 25 April 1992.
13. On Demirel's visit to Kyrgyzstan, see *Slovo Kyrgyzstana*, 29/30 April 1992.
14. *Slovo Kyrgyzstana*, 12 May 1992.
15. Interview with the author.
16. On Akaev's visit to China, see *Res Publica*, 22 May 1992; *Slovo Kyrgyzstan*, 4, Hand 19 May 1992; *V Kontse Nedeli*, 16 May 1992.
17. *Svobodnie Gory*, 5 March 1992.
18. This decision has created a source of discontent and possible future conflict in so far as the officer corps is overwhelmingly Russian and now faces unemployment. Unlike their counterparts in Eastern Europe, there are no provisions being made for Russian officers and soldiers to move to Russia.
19. See the comments by Rosa Otunbaeva, the then Foreign Minister, in *Slovo Kyrgyzstana*, 5 May 1992.