

---

<https://doi.org/10.47669/CCAS-1-2023>

## **Dissecting Political Landscape of Post-Revolution Kyrgyzstan**

Aram TERZYAN\*

*This paper explores the dynamic of post-revolution state building in Kyrgyzstan, with a focus on its political landscape following the 2020 revolution. While pledging to regain the status of the Central Asian “island of democracy”, Japarov’s government’s efforts have run into significant resistance. In effect, Kyrgyzstan remains plagued with a series of authoritarian malpractices, including but not limited to corruption and human rights violations.*

**Keywords:** Kyrgyzstan, revolution, state-building, authoritarian legacy.

### **Post-Soviet Volatility: The Challenges of Post-Revolution State – Building**

The political development of Kyrgyzstan has been marred by a series of authoritarian malpractices since its independence in 1991, ranging from centralization of power and erosion of political and civil liberties to lack of judicial independence and rampant corruption.

Throughout the 1990s, democratic reforms in Kyrgyzstan would provide grounds for optimism. Notably, the country would be largely referred to as “an island of democracy” in Central Asia (Akiner, 2016, p.

---

\* Aram Terzyan, PhD is research director of the Los Angeles-based Center for East European and Russian Studies of Eurasia Institutes. Email: [a.terzyan@eurasiainstitutes.org](mailto:a.terzyan@eurasiainstitutes.org).

13). The major achievements, with some reservations, included freedom of speech, freedom of press, supported by active civil society, political opposition, along with the strides towards economic liberalization (Juraev, 2008, pp. 254-255).

The constitutional amendments adopted by the national referenda in 1996, 1998 and 2000 significantly increased the presidential power while limiting that of the parliament. Through constitutional changes, Akayev ran for third term as president in 2000, amid mounting public discontent (Temirkulov, 2010). In effect, the 2005 parliamentary elections were marred by serious irregularities, including vote buying (Heathershaw, 2009, p. 304). The mass mobilization that picked up speed in the aftermath of the elections, served as a “catalyst” for overthrowing Akayev’s regime.

As a matter of fact, one of the main driving forces behind the Kyrgyz revolutions was the clan politics that divided north and south in the struggle for power. Overall, the clan hierarchy has been an unmistakable characteristic of Central Asian political systems for centuries. Kyrgyzstan is no exception. The country’s elite groups have long cleaved along North-South clan, with greater Russian influence in the North and stronger Uzbek presence in the South. Akayev belonged to the northern power base, meaning that the South had a particular interest in having him overthrown. Besides, the President had “northern” rivals (Hale, 2006, p. 315).

The personalization of power in Central Asia has led to a situation, where state-building depends on personal decisions and performances of handful of individuals, rather than on well-established and functioning institutions. Given the authoritarian context within which Central Asian nation building has been unfolding, the distinction between institutional and political dynamics is often blurred, i.e., institutions are frequently

politicized, and political objectives are institutionalized (Kamrava, 2019). Thus, one of the most formidable challenges facing Kyrgyzstan is “transforming the accidental arrangements, prudential norms, and contingent solutions . . . into relationships that are reliably known, regularly practiced and normatively accepted” (Uzul, 2010).

While, on paper, Kyrgyzstan’s leaders have created institutions that are mostly in line with international standards, the reality is quite different. The weakness of state institutions and continuous drawbacks in state-building are well evidenced by the three revolutions faced by Kyrgyzstan.

Essentially, there are three major actors, that have been involved in state-building in Kyrgyzstan: the government, the international community, and local civil society organizations. Following inter-communal clashes in 2010, the country has received significant support in the form of international peacebuilding and conflict prevention programs (Lottholz, 2018). Relations between Kyrgyzstan and the EU intensified after the overthrow of the Bakiyev regime. The EU opened a full-fledged Delegation in Bishkek the same year and has proclaimed that it is committed to supporting reforms and post-conflict reconciliation (European External Action Service, 2012).

In contrast to its regional neighbors, Kyrgyzstan stands out due to its relatively vocal civil society that played a critical role in deposing President Akayev during the Tulip revolution. Meanwhile, much of that activism was concentrated in urban areas and civil society organizations were largely dependent on donor funding. The initial liberal orientation of President Akayev made Kyrgyzstan the main Central Asian target of the Western support aimed at promoting a Western-style civil society advancement

across the country (Pierobon, 2018, p. 114). Recent years have seen a variety of civil society engagements, beyond donor-funded NGOs. Voluntary civic groups have formed around the issues of environmental protection, while civic activism has been on the rise. Nevertheless, “such activities have often been sporadic, short-term and incapable of sustained engagement on salient public issues where longer-term activities would be necessary” (BTI, 2020).

The government has not been actively involved in the implementation of development programs due to the reluctance of the ruling elites to implement policies that could adversely affect their personal and political interests (Wilkinson, 2014, p. 144).

Admittedly, the challenges of post-Soviet state-building in Kyrgyzstan have been compounded by inter-ethnic tensions, with the Uzbek community not identifying itself with the state of Kyrgyzstan. It has different and sometimes contrasting perceptions on political and social reconstruction. These historically rooted cleavages cause serious problems in state-building. The outbreak of interethnic violence between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in Jalalabad in late May 2010 and ensuing the eruption of violence in Osh region on June 9 seemed to reinforce worst fears about Kyrgyzstan’s plight (Wilkinson, 2014, p. 139).

The government’s attempts at dealing with the challenges of post-conflict peacebuilding have been reflected in the ‘Conception for Strengthening National Unity and Inter-Ethnic Relations’- national policy strategy adopted by the presidential administration in 2013. The commitment to restoring interethnic trust and harmony has been reflected in the Conception’s core values of: 1) acknowledgement of unity in diversity, including ethnic, cultural, linguistic, age and other differences in

different spheres of social life; 2) appreciation of the historical-cultural heritage of the people of Kyrgyzstan, of the history of the state, the conservation of national values developed over centuries and ideals of unity, the uniqueness of ethnicities...(Lottholz, 2018, p. 9). Nevertheless, despite these efforts, in December 2019, UN Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues Fernand de Varennes visited Kyrgyzstan and found that ethnic relations “remain fragile” and that factors including “underrepresentation of minorities” and “unfair treatment by law enforcement” could “bring the level of inter-ethnic tension to a breaking point” (HRW, 2021).

Not only do the divisions along regional, tribal and clan lines negatively impact the cohesiveness of the Kyrgyz nation, but they also give rise to a series of socio-economic and political problems. Clan politics strongly undermines state-building efforts. Long-standing clan divisions became particularly salient under former President Askar Akayev’s presidency from mid-1990s onwards, as well as after the 2005 revolution when the struggle for power and economic resources became more intense (Berdikeeva, 2006).

Moreover, the lack of national unity and national ideology in Kyrgyzstan considerably contributed to the ongoing divisions of the society. National ideologies have been a crucial element of state-building in Central Asia, that helped the ruling elites to mobilize society and alleviate intra-elite frictions. However, as Marat (2008) aptly notes “in their efforts gain dominance, the ruling elites ran into a dilemma typical of many developing states: while increasing their authority against competing forces, they failed to enact effective state policies” (Marat, 2008, p. 13).

The interplay between formal and informal institutions is another typical characteristic of state-building in Central Asia. Notably, traditional informal institutions, such as Aksakals and religious leaders (imams), have played a significant role in local communities across Kyrgyzstan. This is particularly true for the rural areas, where informal leaders have a strong reputation and a powerful influence. Aksakals are involved in conflict mediation between cross-border villages. Local governments tend to use Aksakals to mobilize voters during elections or support a particular candidate. Aksakals are also the ones who mediate between disputing parties within Aksakals courts. Aksakals courts were formalized in 1993, and previously, they existed as a pre-Soviet mechanism of a customary law, i.e. adat (Sheranova, 2020).

Beyond this, there is a series of other factors that pose formidable challenges to state-building in Kyrgyzstan, including organized crime, contestation of power and resources among various groups, and the weakness of the state in the areas where border delimitation is yet to be reached with neighboring countries (BTI, 2020).

Notably, in 2021, Kyrgyzstan's status declined from "partly free" to "not free" given that the aftermath of the flawed parliamentary elections entailed significant political violence and intimidation (Freedom in the World, 2021). According to Freedom House report (2021), after two revolutions that ousted authoritarian presidents' governing coalitions have proven unstable, while corruption remained rampant. The Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan consolidated power over several years, using the justice system to suppress political opponents and civil society critics. Moreover, the unrest surrounding the annulled 2020 parliamentary

elections led to significant political upheaval (Freedom in the World, 2021).

Overall, the episodes of relative stability and provisional reforms are not testaments to fundamental changes. The progress in state-building remains limited, with the country's heavy reliance on international donors, and weakness of democratic institutions.

Despite the initial objectives of becoming a sound democracy where human rights are respected and protected, actual reforms to obtain said objective never took place. Cameron (2021) describes the country's elements as being endemically corrupt, lacking political will, the culture of impunity, or 'legal mentality' - a mindset where people believe that there will be no consequences for ignoring or subverting the legal process (Cameron, 2021). Beyond this, every elected President in Kyrgyzstan has either been removed from office by protests or been subsequently imprisoned after their term of service had expired (Hug 2021, 6). The parliamentary elections organized in Kyrgyzstan on October 4, 2020, led to the third revolution in the history of independent Kyrgyzstan.

Whereas the primary demand of the October protests was to denounce election results, Japarov's rise to power gave rise to rushed efforts amid the pandemic to introduce far-reaching constitutional reforms in Kyrgyzstan. A key component of the constitutional changes was the transfer of powers back to the president, including the right to appoint and dismiss the cabinet, initiate draft laws, and other functions that were stripped from the executive in the aftermath of 2010 constitutional reform. These efforts to return Kyrgyzstan to a presidential-oriented system

were largely viewed as an attempt to monopolize formal power in the hands of a future president (Freedom House 2021).

### **Beyond the Revolutions: The Challenges and Constraints**

Studies show, the main hindrances to post-revolution state-building in Kyrgyzstan include but are not limited to:

- ***Super presidential power***: the post-Soviet transition led to the accumulation of presidential power at the expense of the parliament and the judiciary, neither of which had sufficient power to balance the presidential one or even properly perform their constitutional functions. A new constitution ratified in May 2021 further reinforced a hyper-presidential system while diminishing the role of the parliament (Freedom House, 2023). The situation is compounded by Kyrgyzstan's considerable dependence on Russia. Notably, the promotion of authoritarianism in Central Asian countries, with the goal of producing autocracies and absorbing them into its ranks, has been placed at the heart of Russia's renewed post-Soviet policy. It is not surprising, that the rise of authoritarianism in Armenia and Kyrgyzstan has been correlated with the Russian mechanisms of its diffusion (Terzyan, 2020).
- ***Corruption*** is pervasive in politics and government. Kyrgyzstan is ranked 140th of 180 countries in Transparency International's 2022 Corruption Perceptions Index (Transparency International, 2022). Political elites have tended to use government resources "to reward clients—including organized crime figures—and punish opponents" (Freedom House, 2023). Japarov's government seemed to intensify anti-corruption efforts, provided that a wide range of former officials were detained on corruption charges in 2022. Yet,



critics have described this “catch-and-release” pattern of arrests as both a political tool and a way of doing business (generate revenue) (Freedom House, 2023). In effect, while the government took steps to investigate and prosecute or punish officials known to have committed human rights abuses and those involved in corrupt activities, official impunity remains of serious concern (U.S. Department of State, 2022). Judicial corruption is one of the most harrowing challenges facing Japarov’s government. The judiciary has been long dominated by the executive branch, while corruption among judges has been widespread (Freedom House, 2023). Multiple sources, including NGOs, attorneys, government officials, and private citizens, assert that some judges have tended to pay bribes to attain their positions. Meanwhile, many attorneys contend that judges ubiquitously accept bribes (U.S. Department of State, 2022).

- ***Lack of media freedom*** remains a significant issue in Kyrgyzstan. The restrictions imposed on the country’s media, have engendered a lot of controversy. Journalists and bloggers covering major events that involve but are not limited to corruption cases have routinely faced intimidation, detention, physical attack while conducting their work (Freedom House, 2023). The parliament passed new legislation on “false information” in 2021, which grants an unspecified government agency the power to order service providers to block information that for some reason is considered “false” by authorities (Freedom House, 2021). As a matter of fact, this restrictive legislation tightens government’s grip on media and

allows it to control the media narrative on politically sensitive issues. Moreover, in 2022, the parliament went so far as to consider new legislation that would require all media organizations to reapply for registration and impose specific limitations on outlets that receive funding from abroad (Freedom House, 2023).

- ***Minority rights and interethnic tensions:*** the challenges of post-Soviet state-building in Kyrgyzstan have been compounded by inter-ethnic tensions, with the Uzbek community not identifying itself with the state of Kyrgyzstan. It has different and sometimes contrasting perceptions on political and social reconstruction. These historically rooted cleavages cause serious problems in state-building. The outbreak of interethnic violence between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in Jalalabad in late May 2010 and ensuing the eruption of violence in Osh region on June 9 seemed to reinforce worst fears about Kyrgyzstan's plight. In December 2019, UN Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues Fernand de Varennes visited Kyrgyzstan and found that ethnic relations "remain fragile" and that factors including "underrepresentation of minorities" and "unfair treatment by law enforcement" could "bring the level of inter-ethnic tension to a breaking point" (HRW, 2021). Not only do the divisions along regional, tribal and clan lines negatively impact the cohesiveness of the Kyrgyz nation, but they also give rise to a series of socio-economic and political problems.

Other significant human rights issues include the use of use of torture by law enforcement, restrictive laws on the funding and operation of civil society organizations, etc. (U.S. Department of State, 2022).

Furthermore, the growing Russian influence over Kyrgyzstan is bound to adversely affect the state of human rights and democracy across the country as it previously did (Roberts and Ziemer, 2018).

Kyrgyzstan traditionally has been the most Russia-friendly Central Asian country, with Russia consistently striving to tighten its grip on the country. Essentially, the Russian pressure was critical to shutting down the United States' transit center at Manas in 2014 at the request of the Kyrgyz government. In effect, Kyrgyzstan has been left with only two major power partners—China and Russia, with limited Western influence.

Some commentators contend that the chances of democratization across a vast swath of Eurasia seem slimmer now, than ever before in the face of Russian President Vladimir Putin's crackdown on liberal-democratic forces at home and abroad (Diuk, 2014). Indeed, the fiasco of post-Velvet Revolution Armenian government both in terms of domestic and foreign policies, along with the failed Kyrgyz revolutions further reveal the difficulties of a democratic state-building in the orbit of the Russian influence.

## References

Akiner, Sh. (2016). *Kyrgyzstan 2010: Conflict and Context*. Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, Silk Road Paper.

BTI (2020). Kyrgyzstan Country Report 2020, Retrieved April 9, 2023 from <https://www.bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report-KGZ-2020.html#pos16>.

BTI (2020). Kyrgyzstan Country Report 2020. Retrieved April 9, 2023, from <https://www.bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report-KGZ-2020.html>.

Cameroon, J. (2021). Kyrgyzstan: Why human rights have been declining over the last 20 years and what happened to the ‘Switzerland’ of Central Asia? Retrieved October 10, 2023 from <https://fpc.org.uk/kyrgyzstan-why-human-rights-have-been-declining-over-the-last-20-years-and-what-happened-to-the-switzerland-of-central-asia/>.

Diuk, N. (2014). The Maidan and Beyond: Finding Ukraine, *Journal of Democracy*, 25(3), pp. 83-89.

European External Action Service (2012). Progress report on the implementation of the EU Strategy for Central Asia: implementation review and outline for future orientations, June 2012.

European Parliament (2020). Another Revolution in Kyrgyzstan. Retrieved April 5, 2023 from [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2020/659300/EP\\_RS\\_ATA\(2020\)659300\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2020/659300/EP_RS_ATA(2020)659300_EN.pdf).

Freedom House (2021). Freedom in the World 2021: Kyrgyzstan. Retrieved October 4, 2023 from <https://freedomhouse.org/country/kyrgyzstan/freedom-world/2021>.

Freedom House (2023). Freedom in the World 2023: Kyrgyzstan. Retrieved October 18, 2023 from <https://freedomhouse.org/country/kyrgyzstan/freedom-world/2023>.

Hale, H. (2006). Democracy or Autocracy on the March? The Colored Revolutions as Normal Dynamics of Patronal Presidentialism. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 39, pp. 305-329.

Heathershaw, J. (2009). Rethinking the International Diffusion of Coloured Revolutions: The Power of Representation in Kyrgyzstan. *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, 25(2-3), pp. 297–323.

HRW (2021). Kyrgyzstan: Events of 2020. Retrieved April 5, 2021 from <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/kyrgyzstan>.

ICG (2005). *Kyrgyzstan: A Faltering State*, International Crisis Group, Asia Report 109, 16 December 2005.

Juraev, Sh. (2008). Kyrgyz Democracy? The Tulip Revolution and Beyond. *Central Asian Survey*, 27(3-4), pp. 253-264.

Kamrava, M. (2019). Nation-Building in Central Asia: Institutions, Politics, and Culture. *The Muslim World*, 110(1), pp. 6–23.

Lotholz, P. (2018). Old Slogans Ringing Hollow? The Legacy of Social Engineering, Statebuilding and the “Dilemma of Difference” in (Post-) Soviet Kyrgyzstan. *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 1–20.

Marat, E. (2008). Imagined Past, Uncertain Future: The Creation of National Ideologies in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. *Problems of Post-Communism*, 55(1), pp. 12–24.

Marat, E. (2012). Kyrgyzstan: A Parliamentary System Based on Inter-Elite Consensus. *Democratizatsiya*, 20(4), pp. 325-344.

Pierobon, Ch. (2018). The Development of Civil Society in Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan: An Analysis of the National and International Context. *Annali di Ca' Foscari Serie orientale*, 54(1), pp. 107-133.

Roberts, S, and Ziemer, U. (2018). Explaining the pattern of Russian authoritarian diffusion in Armenia. *East European Politics*. 34(2), pp. 152-72.

Sheranova A. (2020) The Interplay Between Formal and Informal in Conflict Prevention, Mediation and Community Security Provision in Kyrgyzstan. In: Mihr A. (eds) Transformation and Development. Springer, Cham.

Terzyan, A. (2020). Political Freedoms and Human Rights in Eurasian Economic Union Countries: The Cases of Russia, Armenia,

Belarus, and Kazakhstan. *Center for East European and Russian Studies. Eurasian Affairs Research Papers*, (2), pp. 2-20

Transparency International (2022). Kyrgyzstan, Retrieved October 18, 2023 from <https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/kyrgyzstan> ,

Tudoroiu, T. (2007). Rose, Orange, and Tulip: The failed post-Soviet revolutions. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 40(3), pp. 315–342.

U.S. Department of State (2022). 2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Kyrgyz Republic. Retrieved October 18, 2023 from <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/kyrgyz-republic/>.

Umarov, T. (2020). Who's in Charge Following Revolution in Kyrgyzstan. Carnegie Moscow Center. Retrieved April 5, 2023 from <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/83046>.

Usul, A.I. (2010). *Democracy in Turkey: the impact of EU political conditionality*. Routledge.

Wilkinson, C. (2014). Development in Kyrgyzstan: Failed State or Failed State-building, in Ware, A. ed., *Development in Difficult Sociopolitical Contexts*, US, Palgrave Macmillan.

Wooden, A. (2014). Kyrgyzstan's Dark Ages: Framing and the 2010 Hydroelectric Revolution. *Central Asian Survey*, 33(4), pp. 463-481.