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Post-Soviet State - Building in Kyrgyzstan: Behind and Beyond the Revolutions

Abstract

This paper explores post-Soviet state-building in Kyrgyzstan, with a focus on the root causes of the three revolutions faced by the country. It suggests that the revolutions have not produced significant results in terms of fundamental economic and political reforms. Rather, Kyrgyzstan has turned into the Central Asian “island of instability”. The situation is compounded by deep-rooted inter-ethnic tensions, the prevalence of traditional informal institutions and weakness of democratic institutions, as well as country’s heavy reliance on international donors. The presidential elections and constitutional referendum of 2021 have provided grounds for cautious optimism. A question remains of whether and to what extent Sadyr Japarov’s ambitious agenda will translate into reality, thus leading the country to prosperity and stability.

Keywords: Kyrgyzstan, Central Asia, revolution, state-building, neo-patrimonialism.

Introduction

Central Asia has been long treated as one of the most repressive regions in the world, characterized by inherently authoritarian regimes and extensive crackdowns on political freedoms and civil liberties (Lewis, 2012, p. 115). According to widely held beliefs, the Soviet authoritarian legacy combined with local conservative political culture has obstructed the emergence of democratic values and a vibrant civil society in Central Asian countries (Matveeva, 1999).

Against this backdrop, Kyrgyzstan seemed to constitute a remarkable exception. The country was among the “fast reformers” of the region - largely referred to as an “island of democracy” (Pelkmans, 2005, p. 147). Nevertheless, the country has experienced a series of ups and downs, compounded by ethnic clashes and revolutions.

There is a lot of scholarship on the political and socioeconomic rationale behind post-Soviet revolutions. Given their ‘anti-post-Soviet’ nature, there has been a tendency to regard ‘color revolutions’ as major international setbacks to Putin's Russia (Finkel and Brudny, 2012). According to widely held beliefs, the ‘color revolutions’ in Ukraine, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan sought to purge the Newly Independent States’ ruling elites and political-economic systems of residual ‘Sovietism’ (Nikitin, 2007). In response to “democratic diffusion,” Russia resorted to “authoritarian resistance,” including a political, administrative, and intellectual assault on the opposition and Western ideas of democracy promotion, integral

part of which was the attempt to delegitimize the idea of liberal democracy itself (Ambrosio, 2007; Finkel and Brudny, 2012). In search for a parsimonious contribution to the political science literature on social protest, some works delve into the relationship between election and protests and thus apply the collective action framework to “color revolutions”. This approach posits that “electoral fraud can be a remarkably useful tool for solving the collective action problems faced by citizens in countries where governments are not appropriately restrained by the populace” (Tucker, 2007).

Admittedly, the above-mentioned revolutions were significantly fueled by the attempts of authoritarian leaders to sustain the long-term stability of their authoritarian regimes through electoral fraud and consolidation of autocratic control over society.

Helf (2020) aptly notes that in Kyrgyzstan it is easier to start a revolution, than to finish it (Helf, 2020). In October 2020, Kyrgyzstan faced its third revolution after the 2005 Tulip revolution and the 2010 one. Essentially, the parliamentary elections - marred by serious irregularities, were instrumental in triggering mass protests and leading to revolutions. The revolutions were driven by a series of political and socio-economic factors along with multi-ethnic tensions. Nevertheless, the outcomes were not “revolutionary” in terms of producing significant changes. In effect, the long list of malpractices in Kyrgyzstan includes rampant corruption, inter-ethnic tensions, along with weakness of democratic institutions. This paper specifically addresses the following research questions: 1. What are the main rationales behind the three revolutions in Kyrgyzstan? 2. What are the main hindrances to post-revolution state-building?

This article is an in-depth case analysis that uses policy analysis and process tracing to examine main dynamics of post-Soviet state-building in Kyrgyzstan behind and beyond the revolutions.

Behind the revolutions in Kyrgyzstan

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. 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 first pro-democratic president Askar Akayev introduced new democratic institutions and replaced the Soviet *nomenklatura* (a political and administrative upper class) with a new generation of young politicians. Along with political reforms, Akayev's government introduced comprehensive market reforms despite their insufficiency in terms of producing significant economic outputs (Haerpfer and Kizilova, 2020). Nevertheless, democratization in Kyrgyzstan was not a linear process, with the country constantly finding itself in disarray compounded by the surges of ethnic clashes.

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 social discontent also stemmed from presidential family's full-scale involvement in critical political and economic decision making across the country. According to widely held beliefs, Akayev's wife was strongly involved in personnel policies with her powerful influence over the distribution of resources. Moreover, the president's eldest daughter supervised the presidential party "Alga Kyrgyzstan" (Temirkulov, 2010, p. 591). Not surprisingly, the political regime of Kyrgyzstan is often regarded as neo-patrimonial (Laurelle, 2012). That said, it is not uncommon for political relations to be based on private interests, personal connections, favors, promises, and privileges. This leads to blurred lines between personal and universal gains. This phenomenon is prevalent in authoritarian regimes, where the incumbents rely on a formal bureaucracy and patronage networks to sustain their power (Marat, 2012).

The crackdown on opposition leaders, protestors and independent mass media was among the crucial factors that triggered massive protests. Much of the direct political background leading to the 2005 events (known as Tulip revolution) stemmed from the Aksy crisis in 2002. Even though the events received little media coverage, the opposition capitalized on them in terms of undermining the legitimacy of the ruling regime (Lewis, 2008, pp 267). Overall, the events of Aksy served as a prelude to the Tulip revolution. In 2002, people from Aksy region in Kyrgyzstan vigorously protested politically motivated arrest of their Parliament member. In terms of their organization and scale, the protests were unprecedented in Central Asia (Radnitz, 2005).

Unlike Georgia and Ukraine, there was not a single individual, who would be perceived as a primary leader of the opposition forces before the revolution. In effect, the Tulip Revolution was rural and driven by an ad hoc opposition led by regional elites rather than a unified opposition organized via NGO networks (Hess, 2010, p. 32). Prior to the revolution, various opposition groups emerged and tried to take advantage of the popular discontent over authoritarian malpractices, including rising social inequality and declining living standards. Nevertheless, opposition parties have always been markedly weak, mostly due to regional rivalry and clan politics (Tudoroiu, 2007).

Interestingly, the domestic change of 2005 has been largely viewed as more of a coup d'état than a revolution. Even the President Bakiyev, the primary victor of the event, avoided framing it as the "Tulip Revolution," while calling it "March 2005 events" (Bond and Koch, 2010). Some commentators contend that the Tulip Revolution produced non-democratic results and that it was "elite, not mass instigated" (Juraev, 2008). The lack of a strong opposition, the government's inability to carry out fundamental reforms in terms of addressing clan politics, along with persisting north-south divisions, were among the critical factors that led to a new revolution in 2010.

The rationale behind the 2010 revolution was like that of the 2005 one. The new rulers headed by Kurmanbek Bakiyev came up with a promising development program. They promised to defeat corruption and nepotism inherited from Akayev's regime. Nevertheless, the democratic promises never translated into reality and five years later Bakiyev faced Akayev's destiny (Collins, 2011).

Bakiyev's regime tended to heavily rely on particularistic ties based on family and kinship. Local and regional divisions became even more salient. The president sought to

radically redress the dominance of northern elites over the country's politics by promoting southerners, mainly from his native Jalal-Abad region (Engvall, 2011, p. 58). Restrictions on freedom of speech, freedom of assembly and independent media deteriorated and reached an unprecedented high level. A draft constitution was prepared in November 2006, and subsequently passed by Parliament. This was regarded as a victory for opposition groups as the new constitution included measures that would limit the presidential power. Nevertheless, a month later, pro-presidential supporters pushed for amendments, that essentially reasserted president's power (Gullette, 2010, p. 93).

In essence the situation preceding the second revolution was not much different from the one that led to Akayev's decline, characterized by rampant corruption, declining living standards, rising poverty, elite divisions, along with an extensive crackdown on free media (Kubatbek, 2012, p. 61). Since 2008, electricity shortages and forced restrictions became a daily reminder of the government's ineptitude, corruption, and regional vulnerability (Wooden, 2014).

Bakiyev's victory in 2009 elections, prompted his newly strengthened regime into taking further repressive measures. The democratic opposition began to rely more on informal institution of the 'kurultai' or popular assembly—a method of bringing people together with deeper cultural roots and more influence (especially among the rural and small-town ethnic-Kyrgyz majority) (Collins, 2011).

Like the events following the Tulip Revolution, the ouster of the central authority led to violence against minority communities, including ethnic Uzbeks. Meanwhile, the interethnic violence of 2010 took an unprecedented form. It resembled the tragedy that had occurred 20 years before- in the summer of 1990, following the collapse of the Soviet Union (BTI, 2020). The hostilities were concentrated primarily in Uzbek-populated Osh Province, and to a less extent in Jalalabad and Batken provinces bordering Uzbekistan in southern Kyrgyzstan's portion of the Fergana Valley (Ibid).

Along with a series of internal factors, the geopolitical setting surrounding the country became more complex before the 2010 conflict. Kyrgyzstan needed to manage intra-regional relations while balancing the rivalries and ambitions of extra-regional players. Kyrgyzstan consistently strived to achieve a reasonable balance, while being a member of various regional organizations, such as the Tehran-led Economic Cooperation Organization, the Moscow-led Commonwealth of Independent States and affiliated groups, the Beijing-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization, various Turkish initiatives, as well as the Western-led

NATO Partnership for Peace program and the Organization for Cooperation and Security in Europe. At this point Kyrgyzstan's main partners were Russia and the United States with their specific and quite often mutually incompatible agendas. Meanwhile, China was smoothly emerging as a significant regional power. This complex situation fed the narratives of conspiracy theories, that were often used to explain the upheavals of 2010 (Akiner, 2016).

Nevertheless, it is hard to overestimate the significance of geopolitical factors. Essentially, Kyrgyzstan's neo-patrimonial rule, characterized by personalization of power and monopolization of the country's scarce resources was the main driving force behind the revolutions. The situation was compounded by north-south clan-based politics, deep animosities between ethnic communities and a complexity of geopolitical setting.

Violent protests flared up in October 2020, after the contested parliamentary elections. As in 2005 and 2010, the unrest in the capital was accompanied by a turmoil in key provincial cities (Helf, 2020).

Pro-government parties representing the interests of the 'southern' group won the elections. Supporters of the defeated parties rallied to protest the irregularities documented during the campaign and demanded that the result be annulled (Schmitz, 2021). Even though the allegations of vote-buying are not new in Kyrgyzstan, this time they prompted the Kyrgyz society into action. The day after the election, demonstrators ransacked Bishkek's White House (European Parliament, 2020).

The turmoil resembled the 2005 events given that protests emerged as a reaction to flawed parliamentary elections. In terms of its pace and violent forms, these events have much more in common with the turmoil of 2010. However, this time the opposition leaders did not even ride the wave of demonstrations. They were slow to take strides towards taking the matter into their hands (Engvall, 2020). The revolution was finally hijacked by the politicians from the old elite. Namely, over the course of ten days Sadyr Japarov managed to escape from prison and rose to power (Umarov, 2020).

Kyrgyzstan's presidential election and constitutional referendum held on 10 January 2021 reportedly represent a provisional endpoint of a volatile phase that has gripped the country since October 2020. Sadyr Japarov's victory and his agenda that is focused on establishing stability and prosperity, not least through switching to a presidential system of government provides grounds for cautious optimism (Schmitz, 2021).

Beyond the revolutions: The challenges of post-revolution state- building

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 engagement, beyond donor-funded NGOs. Voluntary civic groups have formed around the issues of environmental protection, while the 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).

Despite the government's efforts at demonstrating significant accomplishments to donors and international community in post-conflict reconstruction and peacebuilding, the underlying issues have not been resolved (Lottholz, 2018). In the aftermath of the March 2005 overthrow of Askar Akaev, International Crisis Group (ICG) report framed Kyrgyzstan as 'a faltering state' and warned that without significant international support 'there is a real risk that... the country will drift into irreversible criminality and permanent low-level violence' (ICG, 2005).

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 the 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 (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 the 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 (ibid).

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.

Conclusion

Post-Soviet state-building in Kyrgyzstan has been marred by a series of shortcomings. The weakness of state institutions and continuous drawbacks in state-building are the root causes of the revolutions faced by the country. All three revolutions were triggered by a series of factors, including persisting neo-patrimonial rule, divisions along regional, tribal and clan lines, continuous interethnic tensions, and rampant corruption. Nevertheless, the revolutions have not produced significant results in terms of fundamental economic and political reforms. Rather, Kyrgyzstan has turned into the Central Asian “island of instability”. The situation is compounded by deep rooted inter-ethnic tensions, the prevalence of traditional informal institutions, and weakness of democratic institutions, as well as country's heavy reliance on international donors.

The presidential elections and constitutional referendum of 2021 have provided grounds for cautious optimism. Further research is essential for answering the question of whether and to what extent Sadyr Japarov's ambitious agenda will translate into reality, thus leading the country to prosperity and stability.

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