

# SPECIFIC OF DEMOCRATIC REFORMS IN KYRGYZSTAN

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**Abstract:** *the article analyzes the state of democracy in the Kyrgyz Republic, with an emphasis on understanding democracy through the lens of the political consciousness, social memory and spiritual and cultural values of the Central Asian republic. The article analyses the concept of "transition", which in the context of Kyrgyzstan's revolutions is still ongoing. At the end of the article the paper will explore the early warning signs that existed prior to Kyrgyzstan's transition to a parliamentary form of government.*

**Keywords:** *democracy, authoritarian regime, secular and democratic state, policy, democratization, liberal democracy, independence, Central Asia, transition, revolution, crisis, culture, values, reform, tradition.*

## ОСОБЕННОСТИ ДЕМОКРАТИЧЕСКИХ РЕФОРМ В КЫРГЫЗСТАНЕ

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**Аннотация:** *в статье анализируется состояние демократии в Кыргызской Республике, при этом акцент ставится на своеобразии понимания демократии, которое зависит от специфики политического сознания, социальной памяти и системы духовно-культурных ценностей. Рассматривается понятие «транзита», приобретающего в контексте Кыргызстана состояние бесконечного транзита. При этом выясняются причины такого рода транзита, а также определяется существование кыргызских «революций». В содержании статьи обозначается важность культурного контекста для понимания ситуации в Кыргызстане до и в период перехода к парламентской форме правления. Статья была написана в период прохождения исследовательской стажировки в Международном центре ученых им. В. Вилсона (Вашингтон ДС, США).*

**Ключевые слова:** *демократия, авторитарный режим, демократическое государство, политика, либеральная демократия, суверенитет, Центральная Азия, транзит, революция, кризис, культура, ценности, реформы, традиция.*

**Introduction:** The democracy in the world today reveals a kind of potential political developments in each of the regions. The Kyrgyz Republic is considered to be the most democratic state in Central Asia and the country that is least susceptible to authoritarian tendencies. Kyrgyzstan's resistance to authoritarianism was dramatically demonstrated by the two color revolutions that took place in 2005 and 2010. Since gaining independence in 1991, Kyrgyzstan has been known as an "island of democracy in Central Asia." However, in light of the past two decades and the overthrow of presidents Askar Akayev (2005) and Kurmanbek Bakiyev (2010) it is reasonable to question the quality of Kyrgyz democracy and whether it exists at all.

This article reveals the peculiarities of the development of democracy in Kyrgyzstan, as one of the Central Asian republics. Accents in the reflection characteristics of democracy in Kyrgyzstan are dictated by the specifics of culture. The author's thesis is confirmed Seymour Lipset and Jason Lakin that cultural differences are a serious obstacle for smooth implementation of democratic values. The originality of traditional values, political consciousness and social memory affects the democratic reforms in Kyrgyzstan. It is the specificity of culture became a stumbling block democratic reforms in the Republic. This article focuses on the confirmation of the fact that the uniqueness of cultures undoubtedly affect the quality and the level of ongoing democratic reforms in Central Asia. An example appears most democratic republic in the region - Kyrgyzstan.

**Purpose** of the article - to reveal the essence of mental and cultural characteristics of Kyrgyz influence the democratization process in Kyrgyzstan. The source of mental and cultural identity of Kyrgyz is nomadic way of thinking, fundamentally different from the mentality of the sedentary peoples. If the foundations of liberal democracy were laid in ancient Greece, the foundations of the traditional society of Kyrgyzstan as part of the Central Asian nomads were formed in Center of Asia, in the life of which it is possible to see signs of a meritocracy. The difference between the way of thinking and, as a consequence, the culture is the cause of the deep features of the process of democratization in modern Central Asia (particularly in Kyrgyzstan).

**Hypothesis** - position Seymour Lipset and Jason Lakin, that cultural differences are a serious obstacle in the implementation of democratic values.

**Research methods:** this article uses the methods of synthesis of cultural and social anthropology (symbol culture of everyday life, traditions, rituals, behaviors, values), political science (value-normative, institutional),

philosophy (ascent from the abstract to the concrete, the hermeneutic method). Using these methods to reflect the direction of a complete picture of the development of Kyrgyzstan in the modern period.

### **Country in Permanent Transition**

After gaining independence, Kyrgyzstan officially declared itself, in its 1993 Constitution, to be a secular and democratic state. Consequently, the Kyrgyz Republic, like all post-Soviet countries, was labeled as a state in "transition." However, this definition is the result of trying to understand developments in Kyrgyzstan using Western expectations about building a liberal democracy. Based on this knowledge, it would be appropriate to ask the question - is it possible to build a liberal democracy in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan? [14, 39]. It should be noted that this question can apply to all post-Soviet states. While many of the states in Central Asia reflect liberal democratic values, in reality they are gravitating towards authoritarianism displaying a stark contradiction.

The theory of transitology was taken up by Central Asian scholars (including Kyrgyz) in the early years of independence (including Kyrgyz) with great fervor. Transitional state theory came at a convenient time for developing states because the term "transition" became a scapegoat for economic, political and social failures. No one, including the government, has been willing to take any responsibility for what happened.

In this article, I intend to temper the "transition" concept in explaining the political processes taking place in Kyrgyzstan in order to try and determine the quality of democratic reforms. In this regard, given the current developments in the country, it is safe to say that the end of the transition period is not in sight. The reason being because, in reality, Kyrgyzstan has yet to establish the conditions necessary for a stable democratic government. Transition theory was primarily imported from the West [44, 337-363], which after centuries of development is a stronghold of democracy. A few years ago Zbigniew Brzezinski believed that transition period for the countries of Central Asia would last 15-20 years. He gave Kyrgyzstan an above average chance of success [ 2, 288]. Yet his forecast projects a Western vision of democracy and therefore relies on a Western way of perceiving modernization reforms. In reality, Western interpretation of democratic reforms in Central Asia fail to account for the region's mentality. Ultimately, regional identity and perceptions lead to profound changes in the substance of democracy in Kyrgyzstan. In this regard, the following thesis by G.Pogosyan sounds befitting: "many researchers believe that Soviet society embraced ideas of democracy, but that it could not realize the process because of its closed, undemocratic nature, that is, government suppression of civil society and hence the absence of a place for civil initiative and self-organization" [17, 126-136]. Indeed the era is characterized by uncertainty [38, 69-284; 46, 337-63] and in the case of Kyrgyzstan, has modified society's behavior and defined the country in the eyes of the international community.

Several questions arise with respect to our country - why have early democratic reforms failed to consolidate and bring positive results? What is Kyrgyzstan's status in this situation, who will help and what should be done?

### **How People in Kyrgyzstan Understand Democracy**

After gaining independence Kyrgyzstan set off on a democratic course without any prior experience. When looking at the term "democracy" [21, 864] we can agree with A.Giddens who stated that, "declared democratic ideals are not always consistent with reality. The fact is that the elites zealously demonstrate their commitment to democracy in Kyrgyzstan, says little about the system of governance" [6, 632] . Indeed, for more than two decades, Kyrgyzstan's former and current presidents enthusiastically not only about the commitment of the republic to democracy, but also of its achievements. Askar Akayev has repeatedly declared that "Kyrgyzstan has always been the leader of democracy and reform in the Commonwealth of Independent States" [49]. Internal levers of democracy promotion occasionally failed. Bakiyev on the other hand pioneered the so-called "counsel democracy," where the emphasis was to be placed "on the inclusion of different social groups in the process of public policy making and implementation" under the auspices of the People's Kurultay [51]. Despite these outward displays of commitment, Presidents Akayev and Bakiyev, became more and more inclined to use authoritarian mechanisms, which ultimately ended in both of them fleeing the country.

It is difficult to operationalize democracy [11, 27] , especially in a country that only superficially observes democratic principles. In the case of Kyrgyzstan, the key is to use the term democracy within two frameworks "state" and "society." Kyrgyzstan, as a state has all the basic features of a democracy (elections, multi-party systems, etc.), but it cannot claim that society is democratic. While Kyrgyzstan may have implemented some of the "universal" principles of democracy, based on society's behavior, worldview and culture, Kyrgyzstan is far from the ideals espoused in political theory. As a result, democratic ideals have retained only their superficial character and have not become internalized by society at large. Kyrgyzstan does not have a unique national democratic identity [17, 135]. What this means is that Kyrgyzstan has not been able to earn a place among the world's recognized democracies because it has not shown itself to be a stable and democratically oriented state. So much so that more often Kyrgyzstan was associated with a country rapidly losing its statehood.

Kyrgyzstan is not sufficiently self-reliant, which is why some powers and politicians can afford to carve out spheres of influence. For example, the leader of Russia's Liberal Democratic Party, Duma deputy Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, declared that "to solve its problems, Kyrgyzstan would need to join Russia, as it would not be able to solve these problems by itself. In order to be an independent state, it is required to have a viable economy and the ability to provide security, of which and there is neither" [54]. Such statements reflect much of the world's

perception of Kyrgyzstan. In fact, not so long ago, in 2010, Kyrgyzstan truly risked becoming a failed state because of the inability of the authorities to govern the country.

At first Kyrgyz people held a peculiar understanding of democracy. They saw it as absolute freedom in everything, which led to chaos in official and public life. Seymore Lipset and Jason Lakin are right in saying that "democracy and equality are not the same" [11, 23]. The main mistake was that democracy was chosen emotionally and not rationally [11, 35]. After gaining independence emotions ran high and overwhelmed us from the beginning. The initial fervor gave us extraordinary impetus for self-realization. This included choosing our own developmental path and our own presidents - who themselves were democratically inexperienced and simply repeated liberal democratic slogans without understanding them. These same emotions accompanied us during the first Tulip Revolution of 2005, the second Rose Revolution in 2010 and continue to be seen at protests and rallies. We have lived in an "emotional democracy" for over twenty years without having a thorough and thoughtful strategy or developmental program, but instead Kyrgyzstan is surviving on loans, donor assistance and the various aid projects. This is how many Kyrgyz understand democracy and due to this mentality we are known as a country in permanent "revolution".

### **Revolutionary Democracy or a Democratic Revolution?**

The "Kyrgyz revolutions," in relation to the country's democratic development, can be viewed in two ways. One, as a proof that society is dedicated to the chosen democratic path and thus in clear opposition to authoritarianism. Two, as a reflection of society's inability to reconcile conflicting ideas about the country's developmental path and weakness of the central government.

The first aspect reflects the level of democratic development [13, 11- 14] the open expression of the will of the people, eager to implement and demand the realization of their democratic values and freedoms. From this perspective, some unrest that took place can be taken as revolutionary according to certain parameters. If we take Marx and Lenin's handling of revolutions, the classic elements of a revolutionary situation are as follows: the inability of the authorities to maintain the status-quo, the reluctance of the poor to live according to old rules and the motivation of the masses [10, 245-265]. The people must be convinced of the necessity to overthrow the existing government due to its failure to implement the principles of democratic development, where the emphasis is put on the people as the main force of democracy. One can only wonder and marvel at the inspiration and courage displayed against the authoritarianism of the first and second president. It is indicative of the people's strong potential. According to one historian, the suppression of civil and political rights was one of the main causes of the crisis in 2010, the a result of which president Bakiyev was overthrown [5, 171]. However, at the same time it was essential to have grassroots protests in order to make them truly popular revolutions. However, in the end it was the opposition that played that organized the masses and coordinated protest movements in the capital and in the regions. The opposition managed to motivate the masses and encouraged them to seize power. This is the basic outline of the colored revolutions in Kyrgyzstan.

The impression that Kyrgyzstan's revolutions made on the international community was influenced by preexisting historical, social and geopolitical ideas. The West mostly interpreted it as progress towards global democracy [13, 11, 168]. However, in response to the revolutions Russia and the Central Asian region became more guarded, fearing the export color revolutions, and rightfully criticized Kyrgyz authorities for their failure to maintain peace. For example, the President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev expressed, "this is not a revolution, it is banditry" [57]. Non-violent methods do not instigate the population to action [11, 35]. In any case, the Tulip Revolution in 2005, and the Rose revolution in 2010 showed the democratic potential of the country and the necessity for change in the direction towards quality governance. Therefore, the positive side to these coups, despite their destructive character, is the demonstrated desire to adopt democratic values to Central Asian and particularly Kyrgyz value systems. However, currently, Kyrgyzstan's democratic development is cyclical: a declaration of democratic principles that fade with the passing time; followed by stagnation in reforms and a turn towards authoritarianism and finally culminating in the revolutionary overthrow of the regime.

The second characteristic of the Kyrgyz revolutions is that, ultimately, they could not achieve fundamental regime change due to the weakness of the state, the presidents, and the government. It is evident that this is true in relation to the situation after the 2005 coup. After coming to power, Kurmanbek Bakiyev quickly outdid his predecessor Askar Akayev. Bakiyev quickly inserted family members into critical sectors of the economy and political system and established a much harsher authoritarian system. Similarly, it is relevant to recall the idea of Karl Marx that "...at a time when society seems to be on the verge of great beginnings, when it might start a new era, it gives in to the illusions of the past and willingly gives its hard-won power to the real or imagined community leaders of the past" [12, 196-200]. The revolutionaries were the most susceptible to these illusions. They dreamt of a better life, but in reality, they handed over power to the same generation of political elites who had promised to finish what was started, but usurped power instead. Thus, the results of the revolution were disappointing. There was little progress and in some respects the country regressed. As a result, democracy in the post-Akayev era took a step back. This caused frustration and widespread disappointment within the country, in the region, and in the global community [13, 11].

Consequently, the Kyrgyzstan that existed between the revolutions can only be labeled a pseudodemocracy. Questions about progress remain rhetorical. Towards what goal is Kyrgyzstan transitioning towards? Is there a transition at all? After two decades of independence, the country is not closer to answering these questions. Each president promised democratic reform, but what resulted was a very peculiar mix of some democratic values and traditional behavioral norms, both on the personal and governmental levels. There is no point in saying that we are building a liberal democracy, when reality shows something completely different.

#### **Parliamentary Democracy or Crisis of Democracy?**

After the revolution of 2010, Kyrgyzstan became the first and only parliamentary democracy in Central Asia. Why was a parliamentary democracy possible in Kyrgyzstan? The answer to this question lies in the preceding paragraph - the revolutions were responses to the establishment of authoritarian rule in the country, therefore, parliamentary democracy was the result of a search for ways that could prevent another round of authoritarianism. Many sources that discuss the essence of democracy point out that parliamentary democracies have a higher chance of survival than presidential ones [11, 26]. Perhaps this is the case and contemporary democracies support these facts, but it should be noted that this corresponds mainly to developed forms of democracy that have had centuries of stable development. Kyrgyzstan, on the other hand, adopted parliamentarism at a time of great instability. Debate continues among supporters and opponents of the idea of parliamentarism. According to supporters, "the overthrow of the authoritarian regimes and the change from presidential to parliamentary systems can be considered an achievement in the process of democratization. The system in Kyrgyzstan will avoid the vicious circle that previously existed because parliamentarism is built on the principles of equal opportunity, openness and transparency of the political process. The Constitution of the Republic, adopted in 2010, does not allow for the concentration of power. The president's powers are greatly reduced in favor of the parliament. The parliament, in turn, forms the government" [53]. The opposing view reflects the sentiments of the population who believe that "Kyrgyzstan hastily chose its new parliamentary model. It is possible that the parliamentary system is appropriate for Kyrgyzstan, but, at least, after 20 - 30 years, when the party system will stabilize and political institutions represent the interests of the citizens not with slogans, but with actions" [52]. The main arguments put forth against a parliamentary system in Kyrgyzstan is that it lacks established parties, it has a weak civil society, there is lack of compromise among political elites, there is an absence of communication between society and the country's difficult geopolitical environment [58].

One of the most important factors critical to the success of a parliamentary system is the development of strong political parties that have clearly defined platforms. Kyrgyzstan adopted the parliamentary system while its political arena was in full disarray. Kyrgyz political parties often improvise and the political platforms that they present do little to support the stable development of the country. It is difficult to find the ideological underpinnings of any party [59]. Our political parties have a unique understanding of their role as intermediaries between the government and the public [11, 54], for the most part, political parties pursue self-interested goals or the interests of their leaders. Considering the history of these parties it is difficult to discuss any specific policy proposals for getting the country out of its current political crisis. Some of the problems include difficulties in establishing parties, lack of inter-party dialogue, dependence on compromising materials as a political tool and sometimes just emotional outbursts against each other. It is difficult to imagine a fair playing field under these conditions. Some researchers believe that the parliamentary system in Kyrgyzstan is the result of an informal agreement between influential political figures [41, 325-344], which partially explains the political developments in the country. One can objectively see that party formation is more dependent on financial support and not as a reflection of the electorate. Events following the April 2010 events showed that even historically established and respected parties have a difficult time breaking the election threshold despite being considered favorites. For example, the long established party "Ata Meken" struggled to gain seats in parliament and "Ak Shumkar" failed altogether. Among the favorites, only the Social Democratic Party (Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan) managed to be successful and then only through the use of administrative resources. The fact that "Ata Jurt" and "Respublica," parties that were formed on the eve of the election, were able to enter parliament speaks for itself.

In Kyrgyzstan, it is important to note that, in the phrase "parliamentary democracy" the focus should be put on the word "democracy." In this regard, I would like to highlight that the failure to develop democracy over the last 20 years, during which we experienced two revolutions and an ongoing economic and political crisis had less to do with the presidential form of government than with the fundamental lack of understanding of what to do and how to develop our country. The real question is whether a parliamentary republic can save us from the circulation of rumors in society, civil unrest and traditional conflicts of interest? As we see from our more than two years of experience as a parliamentary democracy, it does not save us from instability and it has not led to the institutionalization of peaceful conflict resolution mechanisms. Currently, the opposition leaders use destabilizing rallies and protests to voice their disagreement with the government [56]. Kyrgyzstan has yet to reach the long-awaited balance of power that would theoretically be characterized by major political blocs. Seymour Lipset and Jason Lakin, argue that "an internal opposition gains legitimacy only when it rests on independent and enduring bases of support and power, which cannot be destroyed or repressed without seriously weakening the union itself" [11, 54].

**Conclusions:** The study specifics of democratic reforms in Kyrgyzstan, the author concludes that in the period of independence of the Kyrgyz cultural component updates the relevance of their research. Knowledge, understanding and the proper perception of culture can help us understand how Kyrgyzstan reached this state of permanent transition.

The author agrees with the thesis of Samuel Huntington that in global politics is determined by the behavior of cultural preferences. Kyrgyzstan has not yet developed a national face of democracy, which does not allow the country to take its rightful place in world politics. The system of traditional cultural values reflect the uniqueness of mentality according to which democratic values are not adapted to society. The author believes that cultural differences are a major obstacle for a smooth implementation of democratic values, adhering to the view, the theorists of the event Seymour Lipset and Jason Lakin. This is confirmed by the situation in Kyrgyzstan, where the mental and cultural characteristics hinder the process of democratic transformation.

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