

THE CURRENT STATE OF KYRGYZSTAN: ELITE PROBLEM Urmanbetova Zh.

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Abstract: *the article analyzes the current state of the Kyrgyz Republic, with emphasis on the problem of the national elite, which should provoke and promote democratic reforms. A separate aspect of the elite problem appears situation with political parties. In this regard, there is a problem of political culture, reflecting the coexistence of different segments. The article was written during the period of research internship at the Kennan Institute of Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars (Washington DC, USA).*

Keywords: *democracy, political culture, democratization, liberal democracy, independence, transition, crisis, elite, culture, values, reform, tradition.*

СОВРЕМЕННОЕ СОСТОЯНИЕ КЫРГЫЗСТАНА: ПРОБЛЕМА ЭЛИТЫ Урманбетова Ж. К.

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Аннотация: *в статье анализируется современное состояние Кыргызской Республики, при этом акцент ставится на проблеме национальной элиты, долженствующей провоцировать и способствовать развитию демократических преобразований. Отдельным аспектом проблемы элиты выступает ситуация с политическими партиями. В этой связи встает проблема политической культуры, отражающей сосуществование различных сегментов. Статья была написана в период прохождения исследовательской стажировки в Международном центре ученых им. В. Вилсона (Вашингтон ДС, США).*

Ключевые слова: *демократия, демократическое государство, политическая культура, либеральная демократия, суверенитет, транзит, кризис, элита, культура, ценности, реформы, традиция.*

Introduction: This article reveals the peculiarities of the development of political parties in Kyrgyzstan. Unlike of political parties must take place on the ideological aspect. However, this is not observed in Kyrgyzstan. Question of elite reflects the existing regionalism and specificity of mental culture. The specificity of culture is one of the reasons for the endless transit.

Is there an Elite in Kyrgyzstan?

In connection with the question of political parties is the question of the elite. The elite of the country will be judged by their desire to address the country's problems and society's interests and not their personal ambitions, as cliché as that sounds. Kyrgyzstan's elite bear a special and historic responsibility to future generations for the changes that are taking place in society [11, 784]. It is the elite that should be leading the evolution of the country's social, political and cultural processes. However, they have failed to do so because of the constant change with every coming election, self-interest and the intractability of political conflicts. The level of political culture of many representatives of the "elite" is disastrously low and characterized by nothing but empty slogans. The slogans encouraged the masses to seize power. However, in the post-revolutionary phase it is impossible and senseless to depend on impractical slogans that are not supported by theory in addition to the fact that trust in politicians is at an all-time low.

The political culture in Kyrgyzstan is too idiomatic, which hinders political settlement and thus makes development highly complex, controversial and unstable. Kyrgyzstan's political instability is due to the fact that, according to Seymore Lipset and Jason Lakin, only ideology or values should divide groups, not interests [6, 53]. In Kyrgyzstan, everything is absolutely to the contrary, it is interests that motivate the actions of the elite. These factors put into question the stability and viability of Kyrgyzstan's democracy. However, some experts do believe that "Political elite competition can be seen between leaders of parties and between the various factions in parliament. Also, for the first time, the country is displaying an ideological discourse" [45]. Nevertheless, the overall culture of political consensus is still underdeveloped.

It might be too early to say that Kyrgyzstan has formed a national elite, capable of responsibly representing the interests of the people. The elite need to develop a new dialogue that prioritizes social cohesion and a desire to wrench Kyrgyzstan out of a state of deep crisis.

The current state of democratic reforms

Currently, Kyrgyzstan is a state that has not overcome its challenges; for five years, it has experienced two "revolutions" resulting in the decline of the economic development; it is in the state of permanent political crisis, which has not been resolved through parliamentary governance.

Kyrgyzstan's mistakes and errors began with the 1993 Constitution. The first Constitution declared the Republic to be a democratic secular state. It was an imperfect document, at the same time, many experts are increasingly calling for a return to this seminal document that marked the turning-point in Kyrgyzstan's historical development. According to one expert, "in the Constitution, adopted May 5, 1993, there were many provisions congruent with the Kyrgyz mindset" [48]. This Constitution subsequently underwent six amendments, which indicated the country's evolving approach to the concept of democracy. In 1996, the country's electoral system was changed by the division of parliament into two chambers - the Legislature and the House of People's Representatives. 1998 saw the introduction of articles on private ownership and freedom of the media.

In 2002, a new Constitution was being written, and in 2003, it was adopted; it synthesized all the changes and addressed many issues of an economic and socio-political nature. In 2006, the post-revolutionary version of the Constitution was approved, after undergoing additional changes. In response, to the decision of the Constitutional Court of the Republic, drastic steps, which eventually resulted in the formation of a new parliament, were made. There were some changes in the judicial system of the Republic: instead of the previous three courts, there are now two - the Constitutional Court and the Supreme Court. The Arbitration Court joined the Supreme Court as a court reviewing economic matters. In 2010 after the second revolution that led to a change of power, a Constitution which legislated a parliamentary form of government was adopted. Thus, the systematic change in the basic laws of the country led to a condition of sustained crisis in the country. This indication is significant; it is a reflection of the Kyrgyz understanding of democracy and of the Kyrgyz mindset.

Kyrgyzstan is a country characterized by patrimonial relationships; it is a reality from which there is no escape [30, 327]. Kyrgyzstan is a state with an unresolved identity crisis in civil, as well as cultural, political, religious, ethnic, and linguistic matters. This particular article cannot determine all types of identity; however, it makes sense to focus on the concept of civic identity, as it is through that prism that we can see the issues that arise when trying to unify a society. The multi-ethnic nature of our state, which is home to between eighty and one hundred ethnic groups, makes civic identity a real problem. Inter-ethnic conflicts have arisen in the wake of the revolutionary rallies in 2010. The identity crisis is inevitably connected with the crisis of national development. Problems arise when the state is simultaneously trying to maintain its ethnic diversity while promoting national unity.

In this context, Kyrgyzstan needs a national idea capable of unifying society, which would arise from among the people. Out of habit, some ideology is expected from the state. However, while the government has repeatedly voiced variants of a national idea aimed at unifying society, these have not proven viable. Common slogans include "The Seven Testaments of Manas", "Kyrgyzstan - our common home" and "Kyrgyzstan - the country of human rights." Yet none of these ideas stirred patriotic feelings in the Kyrgyz people and civil society continues to be in a state of sporadic development. As one expert notes, "public opinion polls show that only 55% of the population identifies themselves as citizens of Kyrgyzstan, i.e. almost half the population has a different community and do not tie themselves to the Kyrgyz state. This is an alarming fact and points to the failure of the state's nation building programs. However, catering ideological and political agendas to each individual group is impossible and would contribute little to developing a national identity" [7, 191-201]. This suggests that the state is unprepared – it is shortsighted, but insists that it is dedicated to democratic reforms. This is yet more proof of the country's eternal transition; it's clear from whence the system came, but unclear as to where it is headed.

Exacerbating the situation is Kyrgyzstan's poor economic situation. After independence Kyrgyzstan suffered dramatic industrial decline, which continues today. Many in the country go abroad as economically vulnerable migrant workers. There is also the ongoing problems with privatization. Foreign direct investment raises the perennial question of where and how it is spent, since it is not a transparent process and corruption is a major feature the economy. Finally there is the unresolved energy crisis. Of course, there are some positive aspects, but, overall the trend is negative.

Kyrgyzstan is also in a state of permanent political crisis. The imperfection of parliamentarism created numerous contradictions. At the same time the relationship between domestic and foreign policy is burdened with numerous problems. According to the former Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic, "Kyrgyzstan is the clearest example of how the world's major global players can influence the internal power relationships of a small state" [44]

. In this sense, the political scientist N.Omarov was right in the fact that "the foreign policy of Kyrgyzstan imitates others, it is irrational and illogical. Domestic issues are not resolved ... it resembles chaos" [8].

The current breakdown of the country's economic classes can help us understand the country's developments: as show data of World bank in Kyrgyzstan 1,7 million people live below the poverty line, it is 32 % [50]. After two decades, social grievances are still expressed through protest, which in the case of Kyrgyzstan, often results in coups. Currently, social tension has subsided somewhat, but at times there are outbreaks of social conflict.

Another area of potential conflict is between the traditionalists and westernizers. The first one appeared immediately after independence and focused on reviving Kyrgyz traditional values and cultural symbols; the second focused on Western values, which poured into the country and were amplified by increasing globalization.

After a brief look at the main aspects of life in Kyrgyzstan, it is possible to speak about the contradictions and instability that hinder developments in the country. At this point we return to the question with which we started: is Kyrgyzstan in a state of perpetual transition? What is the cause and is there any explanation for this? For over twenty years, we have been building a democracy impulsively, sometimes making jumps in the form of revolution, and sometimes demonstrating strict authoritarianism. We proclaimed democracy, not knowing what it was and how to build it; it was a normal thing do in the early years of independence. However, twenty years have passed and there have been no substantial changes in the democratic mechanisms at the state and civil levels. For the most part, Kyrgyzstan became caught up in copying the democracies of the West, and, as a result, Westernization became a destabilizing factor. T. Carothers was right when he said that democracy projects in post-Soviet countries are built on three characteristics: "first, using American democracy as a model or template, whether consciously or subconsciously; second, viewing democratization as a process of 'institutional modeling' in which the democratizing countries attempt to reproduce the institutions of established democracies; and third, the assumption that democratization consists of a natural, orderly sequence of stages, from political opening, through transitional elections and finally democratic consolidation" [3, 333].

Reasons Why Transition is Still Ongoing

The copying of Western liberal democracy did not give positive results in the context of Central Asia. The development of democracy under local conditions failed because it was unable to overcome the barriers attributed to the uniqueness of our culture and the unique peculiarities of the Kyrgyz mindset. Currently, there is a need to consider opposing views in order to clearly understand the problem and highlight the challenges and incongruities with the current form of democracy. The alternative is to continue Westernization, which has so far lead to nowhere.

One point of view is that, in Central Asia, democracy is misunderstood and not trusted. Jos Bunstra (head of the EU Central Asia Monitoring program), for example, belongs to this camp, noting that: "Authorities (as well as some Western experts opposing democratic progress) often claim that the historical development of Central Asia is different from the rest of the world and cannot be adjusted to Western values. Undoubtedly, the government mechanisms may vary depending on the society, but concepts like free and fair elections, government transparency, government accountability to Parliament and a developed civil society are considered to be an integral part of any democratic state" [19, 1-4]. Based on the thesis above, it appears that we don't understand democracy, perceiving it negatively and opposing its establishment in the region and in the country. But it doesn't make sense that we would declare that we have a democracy without making any attempts to achieve it.

In the context of democracy's applicability to all countries A. Przeworski suggests the idea that culture cannot be regarded as an obstacle to democracy; people can be taught democracy. He comes to the conclusion that there is no culture absolutely antithetical to democracy [36, 127]. We can agree with him in the latter part that hardly any culture, including Kyrgyz culture, is incompatible with democracy. At the same time, Seymour Lipset and Jason Lakin would argue that cultural differences are a serious obstacle for smooth implementation of democratic values. In this regard, Huntington's excerpt can serve as the main thesis saying that "today under the influence of modernization, global politics is being built anew, in accordance with the direction of culture development... state behavior is determined by cultural preferences" [5, 16, 185]. G. Gibson also suggests that successful democratization cannot be guaranteed only by institutional transformations (changing the constitution, laws, institutions of political power, and the like), but assumes, and moreover, makes it necessary to the formation of a specific set of cultural values [21, 13-35]. It is not accidental that the historical development of culture forms a value system that defines the essence of a particular nation. Initially the Kyrgyz were influenced by a nomadic way of life – the nomadic archetype that contributed to the formation of a truly unique mindset. Naturally, during the transition to a sedentary way of life the first serious cultural transformations occurred; it was an internal crisis of culture. However, the basic archetypal elements of the nomadic consciousness remained as a source of cultural identity.

One of the characteristics of the Kyrgyz mindset that is detrimental to democratization is tribalism. In this regard, we should note that, historically, tribalism for the Kyrgyz nomads served as a positive attribute. It united the clans in the face of natural and economic problems by forming a kinship of spirit. However, in the course of time, the

objective necessity of the clan's function has disappeared and the idea of it retreated. During the Soviet period, the tribal way of life and cultural self-determination were destroyed. However, after independence, this trait has re-emerged and gained a negative connotation in the context of the political establishment. K. Collins has done good research on the clan phenomenon based in part on a study of Kyrgyzstan [4, 23-53]; the analysis is rooted in the pre-Soviet past when the clan concept was relevant in the lives of the Kyrgyz and of many other groups in the Central Asian region.

In the terms of the current situation in Kyrgyzstan, tribalism was utilized for gaining votes for the election into the Parliament of the Republic (Jogorku Kenesh); this practice originated after independence and is used to the present day. Kinship promotes unity in pursuit of a common goal - state representation. The use of tribal symbols has become a political fad accompanied by plenty of traditional Kyrgyz events (slaughtering cattle to get a blessing, collective meals and exchanging presents). Even presidents take part in such events; both A. Akayev and K. Bakiyev had kin support and their blessings. By the twentieth anniversary of independence tribal networks are critical in order to ascend to power. It is no coincidence that a sufficient number of studies [23, 28, 32, 34] have been devoted to the subject of tribalism in the country.

The same characteristic, however, is also at the heart of the debilitating levels of corruption, which has impacted the entire political system. Corruption is endemic in part because of the poor economic conditions in Kyrgyzstan. At present it is almost impossible to imagine the effort necessary to contain corruption, much less destroy it.

Another political consequence of tradition is the fact that "the nomadic mindset, as opposed to the sedentary mindset, recognizes the possibility of the rise to power of any person or clan, not by passing it down from father to son, but by the use of force. Strength and power were the main features of legitimacy. Power in nomadic culture was neither deified, nor sacralized, nor fortified by religious doctrine, as it was in ancient sedentary centers" [41]. This point explains some of the realities of current political life.

Problems of regionalism persist in Kyrgyzstan's political system as evidenced by the study of the representation of the northern and southern clans in the government between 2000 and 2004 [33]. Noteworthy is also the increasingly powerful role of the People's Kurultays (congress) as a kind of civil participation, as a result of which the law "On Public Kurultay" was adopted [12, 307]. Since the term of the first Kyrgyz president, Askar Akayev, Kurultays have asserted their role in the political process and over time their value began to increase. At the same time, Kurultays gained a negative reputation after Bakiyev had co-opted it for his "deliberative democracy" movement. It should be noted that Kurultay's are used by the government as well as by the opposition, on both the regional and national level, as a tool to influence the course of political processes. At this moment there are opposing views on this structure. For example, according to the well-known sociologist K. Isaev, Kurultay must exist on a legal level and the other branches of government should be accountable to it [49]. In contrast to this view, another expert historian calls "the establishment of the Institute of the National Kurultay in Kyrgyzstan...is an attempt to form a parallel government. Kurultays represent the possibility to play political games and manipulate the 'opinion of the people' can be used to implement the narrowly-vested interests of certain opposition groups" [42].

The existence of tribalism and regionalism certainly hinders the process of implementing democratic values and prevents a legal culture from taking root. In this regard, the insistence on our uniqueness is not the parasitic existence mentioned by Jos Bunting, nor is it a simple trick used so as not to introduce democracy. Instead, it is a purposeful rejection and unwillingness to change because the status-quo is advantageous for representatives of the new elite. It is a virus that has not just entered the consciousness, but one that has formed a rich and diversified net, the destruction of which will require a wholly new approach. More than likely, this is impossible to achieve for the political establishment which is currently in power because, for more than twenty years, the same people, who were brought up in the former Soviet system, have been leading the country. Occasionally, there is a change, but this is simply a reshuffling of the same political deck of cards.

Following the discussion concerning Kyrgyzstan's political consciousness and system of cultural values, S. Lipset adds that "cultural opposition" also makes for difficulties when transitioning from one sort of social logic to another [6, 183]. What is "Cultural opposition" and why does it occur? It occurs because the cardinal changes in values leads to a cultural crisis in the entire system. Kyrgyz culture has suffered this crisis twice: first, in the period of transition from a nomadic to a sedentary way of life; second, when it became a part of Russia and later a part of the USSR. Though there were a number of arguments marking this step as positive, there were negative points as well. There are fewer parallels between European Colonialism in Africa and Asia and "Soviet Colonialism" as mentioned in K. Collins' monograph [4, 65] than are readily apparent. There were definite drawback to the socialist way of life, including economic subordination to the center. At the same time, it is impossible not to acknowledge the positive impact of the vast developmental projects in the Central Asian republics. However, one of the more detrimental aspects was the cultural assimilation of small and unique cultures into the larger Soviet identity. Therefore, in a manner of speaking, Kyrgyz cultural norms were internalized on a subconscious level.

Accordingly, the third cultural crisis coincided with the transition to independence. It has been difficult to console the idea of freedom of self-determination, on the one hand, with the set of universal values attributed to democratic culture. Once again, S. Lipset and J. Lakin are on point, saying that "if the culture has to change with the advent of democracy, then it must be true that some cultures are more closely related to democratic values. As a result, culture can be a barrier to the development of democracy» [6, 207]. It is for this reason that there was a crisis of cultural identity. Since independence Kyrgyzstan has experience two major cultural directions: a revival of national identity paired with Westernization. In this situation, if we want to focus our attention on the successful establishment of democracy, we must realize that it is pointless simply to insist on its existence in the country. It would be more productive to understand and realize what led to the unsuccessful implementation of liberal democracy. The uniqueness of Kyrgyz culture must not be interpreted as an absurd justification for the failure to establish democracy, but it is a contributing factor that needs to be considered in order to address the issues at hand. Over the past two decades, the cultural component has become more and more relevant in the research revealing its influence on achieving democratic reforms [15, 127-134]. Knowledge, understanding and the proper perception of culture can help us understand how Kyrgyzstan reached this state of permanent transition.

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