Kyrgyzstan: political situation

The Kyrgyz Republic is the only Central Asian state in which power has transferred peacefully, following the April 2010 political uprising against the regime of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev. Since the adoption of a constitution paving the way for a democratic and pluralist system, Kyrgyzstan has been governed by coalitions of the political parties represented in the parliament. The prime minister’s office is gaining in influence, whereas the president’s authority has been circumscribed.

Rise and fall of authoritarianism

Kyrgyzstan was described as an ‘island of democracy’ in Central Asia during the first decade of its independence. Elected its first President in 1990, Askar Akayev was considered a promising leader, able to develop a democratic form of government, particularly in the early years of his term. However, as the years passed, Akayev’s rule became more authoritarian, especially after his re-election in 2000. The detention of Feliks Kulov, a leading opposition figure and a former Vice-President, after his announcement that he would run for the presidency against President Akayev, was a concrete indication of the changing nature of Akayev’s stance towards democratisation.

The Tulip Revolution and the end of the Akayev period

Widespread corruption, weak socio-economic conditions, nepotism, human-rights violations and the President’s attempts to accrue more power were all seen to be on the rise in Kyrgyzstan. Allegations of fraud in the parliamentary elections of February-March 2005, coupled with the example of the revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine in November 2003 and 2004 respectively, led to mass protest, later known as the ‘Tulip Revolution’. In the wake of these events, President Akayev fled Bishkek for Moscow on 24 March 2005. The parliament appointed Kurmanbek Bakiyev as Prime Minister of an interim government, and thus Acting President in Akayev’s absence.

Akayev resigned on 4 April 2005, having been assured that he would not be prosecuted for any misconduct during his term in office. Akayev’s resignation removed the legal obstacle to holding a snap presidential election; which would have taken place in October 2005, at the end of Akayev’s five-year term in office. Soon after assuming the leadership of the interim government, Kurmanbek Bakiyev announced his presidential candidacy. Bakiyev won the presidential elections of 10 July 2005, capturing 88.7% of the votes.

The same old politics and the second (tulip) revolution

Expectations for Kyrgyzstan’s transition to a democratic path soon faded, as President Bakiyev strove to accumulate power. Bakiyev also tried to silence political opponents and the press, and violated fundamental freedoms. His unpopularity grew, as his involvement in allegations of widespread corruption became public, at a time when a two-fold increase in utility prices caused growing resentment of the government. Furthermore, foundation of a pro-Bakiyev party, Ak-Jol, prior to the parliamentary elections was considered a step towards a ‘one-party state’. As noted in OSCE reports, Bakiyev’s government fell short of meeting democratic standards in parliamentary and presidential elections held in December 2007 and July 2009 respectively. Regarded as a test of the consolidation of democratic development, the outcome of these elections was a disappointment.

This trend is regarded as a post-revolution ‘authoritarian turn’. It is evident that Bakiyev failed to learn lessons from the ousting of Askar Akayev, and faced his predecessor’s destiny after only five years in office. On 6 April 2010, an originally small-scale protest erupted in popular riots all over the country, and mainly in the capital Bishkek. The anti-Bakiyev government protests left at least 80 dead and more than 1 000 injured as a result of police violence. Protestors demanded President Bakiyev’s resignation, and seized government headquarters. On 7 April 2010, opposition leaders declared the formation of a provisional government led by Roza Otunbayeva, which then dissolved the parliament by decree.
New constitution and hopes for democratisation

The provisional government affirmed that it would draft a new constitution and vowed to create a system that would prevent one-person or family rule. Indeed, the new government unveiled a draft constitution which provided for a multi-party parliament, divided the executive between a weakened president and empowered prime minister, and included mechanisms for checks and balances. As stated in the Venice Commission's opinion, this constitution was a step towards improving the separation of power in Kyrgyzstan.

In the 27 June 2010 referendum, almost 92% of the voters supported the new constitution, ushering in a new era for Kyrgyzstan, which henceforth became the first parliamentary republic in Central Asia. As acknowledged by the OSCE, progress towards consolidation continued with the legislative elections of 10 October 2010, which formed a multi-party parliament. The presidential elections of 30 October 2011 constituted the final step in the transition process in the post-Bakiyev period. Obtaining 62% of votes, Almazbek Atambayev was elected president for a six-year period. He is not allowed to stand for a second term.

Jogorku Kenesh: a pluralist and thriving authority

As Kyrgyzstan has a turbulent political history, the Kyrgyz parliament, Jogorku Kenesh (Supreme Council) has also undergone major changes in terms of its structure, size and competence. Under the new political system, the unicameral parliament, defined as the highest representative body exercising legislative power, is composed of 120 seats, subject to renewal every five years. Aiming to preventing any possible power grab by a political group, parties are capped at 65 seats, regardless of their share of the vote.

The new constitution has some provisions that are exceptional for the region, where authoritarian presidents prevail. For instance, the Kyrgyz President does not have the right to initiate legislation, whereas 10 000 voters have that right, according to Article 79 of the Constitution. One of the notable provisions (Article 76) is on parliamentary oversight of the government, as the chairs of the Budget Committee and the Committee on Law and Order are reserved for MPs from opposition parties. The formation of a government, which is responsible and accountable to the Parliament, entails parliamentary approval.

As of today, five political parties, Ata-Jurt (28 seats), the Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan (SDPK, 26), Ar-Namys (25), Respublika (23) and Ata-Meken (18) are represented in parliament. Since the inauguration of the new parliament, four coalitions have been formed with at least three of the above-mentioned parties participating. The present coalition, favouring closer ties with Russia, composed of SDPK, Ar-Namys and the Ata-Meken, led by Djoomart Otorbayev, was formed in April 2014. The new election law adopted in June 2011 changed the rules on the threshold that parties must reach; parties must now secure 7% of votes nationwide and 0.7% of votes in each of the seven regions and in two cities, Bishkek and Osh. Debates in parliament are under way on a bill to increase the threshold to 10%, although it is less than a year to the next elections.

Challenges for political stability

The gradual development of a relatively democratic system in Kyrgyzstan remains fragile. Fragmentation in the parliament and frequent coalition breakdowns are a challenge for political stability. Pro-Bakiev Ata-Jurt’s backing for the Kumtor gold mine protests in May 2013 demonstrates the likelihood of political unrest. Other threats to political stability include poor economic performance, possible repercussions of NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan and, perhaps most critically, revival of the inter-ethnic violence which resulted in bloodshed and thousands of displaced people in southern Kyrgyzstan in June 2010. Eradicating the geographic (north vs. south) and ethnic divisions (Kyrgyz vs. Uzbek) is indispensable for maintaining political stability, preventing any recurrence of human-rights violations against the Uzbek minority (which makes up about 15% of the population), and for better relations with neighbouring countries, in particular, Uzbekistan.

Bilateral relations between the EU and Kyrgyzstan are governed by the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) that entered into force in 1999. Following Akayev’s removal, the EP adopted a resolution on 12 May 2005 praising the efforts of Kyrgyz society and calling for a real process of democratisation. The EP resolution of 6 May 2006 recognised that Bakiyev’s rule had become authoritarian. Another EP resolution called on the provisional government to begin investigation into the June 2010 ethnic clashes. An independent international commission of inquiry was established in September 2010 and the EU welcomed its report, released in May 2011. The EU called on the Kyrgyz government to pursue reforms leading to transparency, independence of the judiciary, interethnic reconciliation and respect for human rights. The EP resolution of 15 January 2015 on Kyrgyzstan’s homosexual propaganda bill urged the Kyrgyz authorities to put an end to the criminalisation of homosexuality. In addition, Kyrgyzstan constitutes a key part of the EU ‘Strategy for a New Partnership’ with Central Asia.