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The impact of state weakness on citizenship a case study of Kyrgyzstan

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Abstract

This article, using contemporary Kyrgyzstan as a case study, examines how state weakness is both reflected and reinforced at the citizens' level. Based upon field research conducted in April and May 2007, we discuss three hypotheses. First, the inability of the state to provide essential goods and services and has deterred citizens' willingness to fulfill their responsibilities such as paying taxes, respecting the laws, and serving in the army. Second, citizens have lost trust in their regime; some directly confront the state by joining demonstrations, strikes, and other protest activities. Finally, state weakness has negatively influenced the feeling of collective membership and reinforced sub-national identities. Declining loyalty is particularly evident among the citizens who have left the country in the prospect of better employment abroad.

Keywords: Kyrgyzstan; Citizenship; State capacity; Citizens' duties; National identity

Kyrgyzstan is a compelling case for the study of political change. In the early 1990s, the country was a model of democratic transition in Central Asia. Under then-President Askar Akayev, this post-Soviet republic held largely free and fair elections, liberalized the press and tolerated some degree of political opposition

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(Anderson, 1999; Huskey, 1997). However, clanism and corruption crept in and, rapidly, Kyrgyzstan started to resemble an "illiberal democracy" (Dukenbaev and Hansen, 2003). Then, in March 2005, the "Tulip Revolution," a popular uprising inspired by the Ukrainian and Georgian revolutions, deposed Akayev and opened a new moment of democratic hope (Beissinger, 2005; Bunce and Wolchik, 2006; D'Anieri, 2006; Radnitz, 2006b; Heathershaw, 2007). Disputing the partiality of the parliamentary elections and following several weeks of unrest in the south of the country, protesters in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan's capital city, forced the president to leave. A few months later, a former political opponent from the South, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, was elected as president. Since then, however, political instability and criminality have plagued the country and led to several institutional crises (International Crisis Group, 2006; Bekbolotov, 2006).

Most scholars concur to classify Kyrgyzstan as a hybrid regime, although they disagree on its exact denomination. Terms recently used have included "managed democracy" (Kimmage, 2005), "soft authoritarianism" (Bingol, 2006), "competitive authoritarianism" (Diamond, 2002), "weak autocracy to near democracy" (Wood, 2006), "partly free country" (Freedom House, 2006), or even plain "autocracy" (Collins, 2006). Such uncertainties about the short-term future of the regime explain why analysts have started to shift their attention towards the larger issue of "state capacity" (Blank, 2006; Engvall, 2006; Wood, 2006; Imanaliev, 2006; Foreign Policy and Fund for Peace, 2006). Implied by this terminology is the hypothesis that democracy will not be sustainable as long as Kyrgyzstan remains a weak state.

Weak states and, to a larger degree, failing and failed states are unable to maintain political order and security, to enforce laws, implement policies, and deliver services (Smith, 2005). Their monopoly over the legitimate use of force is sometimes contested by other groupings (warlords, criminal networks). According to Migdal (1988: 4–5), weak states are on the "low end of a spectrum of compatibilities" when it comes to "penetrate society, regulate social relationships, extract resources and appropriate or use resources in determined ways." Weak and failing states are also generally predatory, neo-patrimonial regimes where the separation between the private and the public is blurred and where nepotism and corruption are prevalent. Consequently, their legitimacy is minimal. In contrast, a strong state is able "to formulate and carry out policies and enact laws, to administer efficiently and with a minimum of bureaucracy, to control graft, corruption and bribery, to maintain a high level of transparency and accountability in government institutions and, most importantly, to enforce laws" (Fukuyama, 2004: 12).

An approach focusing on "state capacity" is not necessarily more precise than one looking at forms of regime. For one thing, the concrete distinction between weak, failing, failed, and collapsed states is often left vague in the literature devoted to the topic (Rotberg, 2002) and, as a result, may seem somewhat arbitrary. For example, states can be strong in some areas and weak in others. In the case of Central Asia, Luong (2004: 280) argues that there is a paradox of "strong–weak" states, where states are strong in terms of population control and regulation but weak when it comes to implement policies.

Our purpose in this article, however, is neither to clarify these conceptual categories, nor to precisely assess the degree of state weakness in Kyrgyzstan. Instead, we start