



Notes on recent elections

The 2010 referendum and parliamentary elections in Kyrgyzstan

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1. Background

Unlike its authoritarian neighbors in post-communist Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan has had periods of competitive politics, most notably in the early 1990s and in the immediate wake of the Tulip Revolution of March 2005, which deposed the long-time president, Askar Akaev. Following a lengthy period of rule by northern elites, the Tulip Revolution introduced a brief period of consociational democracy, which divided power between a president from the south, Kurmanbek Bakiev, and a prime minister from the north, Felix Kulov. However, this tandem fell apart at the end of 2006 as a result of personal and regional rivalries and disagreements over constitutional reform. The beneficiary was President Bakiev, who engineered with remarkable speed the establishment of a hegemonic-party regime inspired by similar systems in Russia and the neighboring country of Kazakhstan. After forming a new “party of power,” Ak Jol, Bakiev called snap parliamentary elections for December 2007. Widely recognized as fraudulent, these

elections produced an assembly in which more than 80% of the deputies supported President Bakiev. With the traditional constraints on executive authority removed, Bakiev introduced for the first time in Kyrgyzstan a highly repressive regime that concentrated power in the hands of the president's family and forced some opposition figures into exile.

In early 2010, the Bakiev family appeared to have a firm grip on power in Kyrgyzstan. Kurmanbek Bakiev had won re-election to the presidency in July 2009 with over 76% of the vote and his sons and brothers occupied controlling positions in the economy and law-enforcement institutions. However, the rapid and brazen accumulation of political and financial assets in the hands of the Bakiev family created enemies at home and abroad. One of these was Russia, which had been stung by the scale on which its foreign aid funds had been diverted into the family business and by the refusal of President Bakiev to expel the United States from the Manas airbase in Kyrgyzstan – a promise Bakiev had made after receiving a \$2bn loan from Moscow. Dissatisfied with its former client, the Russian government in late March 2010 directed state-controlled media, which are closely followed in Kyrgyzstan, to air news stories critical of the cronyism and

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corruption of the Bakiev regime. These reports fanned the growing discontent in Kyrgyzstan over political repression and the perilous state of the economy. Already reeling from the consequences of the world economic crisis, and in particular the return to Kyrgyzstan of hundreds of thousands of labor migrants that had worked in Russian and Kazakhstan, the population of Kyrgyzstan was subjected in early 2010 to dramatic increases in utility prices, at the very moment that the Bakiev family was expanding its ownership of the utility companies.

A further ingredient in this volatile mix was the rising resentment of northerners against their increasing marginalization in the Bakiev regime. When a rally against the government in the northern city of Talas on April 6 descended into violence, the authorities ordered the arrest of leading members of the opposition. These arrests prompted large-scale demonstrations outside the White House in the capital city of Bishkek. Unlike during the Tulip Revolution, when President Akaev refused to fire on the crowds, President Bakiev's troops used force to quell the rally, and the death of 86 demonstrators at the hands of government marksmen enraged the crowd and led to the storming of the White House and the deposing of the second president of Kyrgyzstan in five years.

2. The referendum of June 2010

An Interim Government composed of former opposition leaders assumed executive power on 7 April 2010. It immediately dismissed the Parliament and Constitutional Court. Ruling through a combination of revolutionary decrees and existing laws, the Interim Government launched a constitutional reform process that by late May had produced a draft constitution which promised to usher in the first “parliamentary republic” in post-communist Central Asia. Despite this label, the draft constitution in fact envisioned a form of semi-presidentialism. The president would continue to be directly elected and would retain oversight of security and law-enforcement organs, but responsibility for forming a government would now rest with party leaders in parliament rather than the president. In order to prevent the concentration of power in the hands of a single party, the draft constitution advanced two novel provisions: no single party could gain more than 65 seats in the new 120-member unicameral parliament, and the opposition bloc in parliament would chair the two most important committees, on the budget and law and order.

Two dramatic and related events interrupted the drafting and popular debate of the new constitution. The first, in mid-May, was an abortive coup led by allies of the deposed president who seized local government offices in Bakiev's home district of Jalal-Abad. In the absence of loyal law-enforcement personnel in this region, members of the Interim Government appealed in desperation for assistance from leaders of the minority Uzbek population in Jalal-Abad. Thus, a struggle that had begun as a standoff between representatives of the current and former regimes—and, to some extent, between northern and southern ethnic Kyrgyz – had now assumed an inter-ethnic dimension, with Kyrgyz set against Uzbeks. The involvement of the Uzbeks in the quelling of the restorationist coup alarmed many ethnic

Kyrgyz from the south, even if they had little sympathy for the Bakiev government.

The heightened tension between the two ethnic communities – long divided by urban-rural distinctions, sedentary-nomadic traditions, and class backgrounds – exploded into violence in the southern city of Osh on 10 June. The triggering mechanism for the inter-ethnic bloodshed remains in dispute, as does the number of the dead (with estimates ranging from 400 to 500), but the violence clearly affected Uzbek neighborhoods more deeply than Kyrgyz areas ([Kyrgyzstan Inquiry Commission, 2011, 44](#)). Fearing that a state apparatus dominated by ethnic Kyrgyz would not protect them, more than 100,000 Uzbeks fled across the border in Uzbekistan.

Only two months into its tenure, the Interim Government was facing the greatest political and humanitarian challenge of the post-communist era in Kyrgyzstan. In light of this crisis, many domestic and foreign observers advised the Interim Government to postpone the referendum on the new constitution, which was scheduled for 27 June. However, believing that a successful referendum was essential to legitimate its rule, the Interim Government refused to postpone balloting on a referendum that asked the citizens of Kyrgyzstan to express their preferences on three distinct questions by casting a single ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ vote for all three. The questions related to the approval of the constitution, the dismissal of the Constitutional Court, and the confirmation of Roza Otunbaeva as president of the country until 31 December 2011 – whereafter presidents would be elected for six-year terms. Against all odds, observers from the OSCE concluded that the Interim Government “had succeeded in creating the necessary conditions for the conduct of a peaceful constitutional referendum...” ([OSCE, 2010b](#)). The Central Election Committee reported that 90.6% of voters cast a ‘Yes’ vote in the referendum. The turnout nationwide was 69.5%, but ranged from 85.1% in the northern region of Issyk-Kul’ to 51.0% in the southern region of Osh, the site of the most intense inter-ethnic violence in mid-June ([OSCE, 2010b](#)). To maximize turnout, the Interim Government had worked with Uzbekistan to facilitate the return of refugees by election day, and it also waived portions of the electoral code in order to allow citizens to vote outside the precincts in which they were registered.

3. Parties and the parliamentary campaign

The first parliamentary elections under the new constitution took place on 10 October 2010. The electoral rules, based on the election code of 2007, provided for a closed list PR system based on a single national district, electing 120 deputies to serve a five-year term. As in the previous parliamentary election, held in December 2007, there was a national threshold of 5% of those registered to vote, an imposing threshold that the former regime had introduced to minimize the number of opposition parties in parliament. Another legacy from the Bakiev regime was a threshold of 0.5% of registered voters in each of nine electoral regions. This unusual regional threshold, designed ostensibly to prevent the entrance into parliament of parties with purely regional

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