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# Journal of Eurasian Studies

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/euras](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/euras)

## General perceptions of a good political leader in Kyrgyzstan

Dinara Murzaeva\*, Pınar Akçalı

Middle East Technical University, Ankara, Turkey

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 2 September 2011

Accepted 24 July 2012

### ABSTRACT

This article analyzes general perceptions of a good political leader of post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan by looking at how political leadership is perceived by the ordinary people in the country. This issue seems to be particularly important with country taking a new route – parliamentary republic and facing crisis of political leadership as a result of two revolutions of 2005 and 2010. Furthermore the article sheds some light at people's expectations which are important due to the presidential elections in fall 2011. The article looks at what type of a leader the people of Kyrgyzstan wish to see, and what are the qualities (personal or professional) a political leader must possess. In an attempt to answer these questions, the article identifies ten main qualities of a “good” political leader for Kyrgyzstan as a result of a field study and tries to evaluate the Kyrgyz case within a broader body of literature about political leadership.

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James MacGregor Burns said, “Leadership is one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth.”<sup>1</sup> In analyzing the issue of leadership in Central Asia in general and in Kyrgyzstan in particular, it can be said that there is overwhelming “reliance on leadership” which does not always bring about positive results for these country's

societies.<sup>2</sup> This article aims to analyze the general perceptions of a good political leader for the ordinary citizens of post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan. Role of elites in the process of transition to democracy emphasized by the elite-led democratization approaches seems to be especially useful in understanding Kyrgyz leadership patterns in this era.<sup>3</sup> In this context, it is possible to suggest that Kyrgyz leaders portrayed themselves as the main actors of post-Soviet democratization process. The role that the two leaders, Askar Akaev and Kurmanbek Bakiev, played in the political life of the country was very important, as they were the

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [mdinara@hotmail.com](mailto:mdinara@hotmail.com) (D. Murzaeva), [akcali@metu.edu.tr](mailto:akcali@metu.edu.tr) (P. Akçalı).

<sup>1</sup> Burns, J. M. (1978). *Leadership*. New York: Harper and Row, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> For further information please see Cummings, S. N. (Ed.) (2002). *Power and change in Central Asia*. London: Routledge; Robert, C. T., & Colton, T. J. (Eds.). (1994). *Patterns in Post-Soviet leadership*. Boulder: Westview Press; Ray Taras, (ed.), *Postcommunist Presidents*. Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1997.

Peer-review under responsibility of Asia-Pacific Research Center, Hanyang University



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main figures who shaped the process of transition to democracy by using political legitimacy as a major reference point in order to make their everyday practices acceptable for the people. In rhetoric, they claimed that they supported democratization and used certain methods (such as regular parliamentary and presidential elections as well as referendums) to legitimize their rule. Within this general framework, it will not be wrong to argue that the whole transition process in Kyrgyzstan was to a large extent shaped by the choices and preferences made by Akaev and Bakiev.

It is further possible to suggest that both Akaev and Bakiev, as the top two leaders of the country, exercised considerable amount of influence as long as they stayed in power. Once these two leaders were ousted however, in 2005 and 2010 respectively, their influence over the affairs of the country came to a sudden halt. Therefore, in order to better understand the political developments in Kyrgyzstan, it is in a way inevitable to analyze how political leadership is perceived by the people in the country. As such, what type of a leader do the people of Kyrgyzstan want, and what are the qualities that they wish to see in this person must be seen as important questions. In an attempt to answer these questions, this article focuses on the main qualities of a “good” political leader for Kyrgyzstan as seen by the ordinary citizens of the country and tries to evaluate the Kyrgyz case within a broader body of literature about political leadership.

One major reason why such a topic is worth studying is related to the fact that there is a relative void in the literature about leadership studies in the Eurasian region. As Ismail and Ford suggested, “Despite the critical importance of leadership effectiveness in the region, there is a striking scarcity of leadership studies that focus on [Eurasia].”<sup>4</sup> As such, more leadership research focusing on Eurasia can “explore the appropriate leadership style and behaviors that could result in leadership effectiveness”<sup>5</sup> in the region, an obvious necessity in the specific case of Kyrgyzstan, a country which suffered from political instability that resulted in two of its post-Soviet leaders ousted from power. Therefore, studying political leadership in Kyrgyzstan may help us understand more the reasons why the country faced two leadership changes by popular revolt, so far the only case in Central Asia.

Another major reason why such a topic is critical is related to the fact that leadership studies have a tendency to focus on the leaders themselves and not their followers. In other words, what we see in these studies is an attempt to understand the general attitudes, beliefs, backgrounds, characteristics, leadership styles, decision-making patterns of the political leaders, and/or their relations with the

subordinates.<sup>6</sup> We also see other studies which focus on the domestic or global context in which these leaders find themselves.<sup>7</sup> The limited number of leadership studies in Eurasian region is no different in this sense. In other words, these studies also put the main emphasis on the leaders themselves, how ‘effective’, ‘charismatic’, ‘authoritarian’ etc. they have been.<sup>8</sup>

As such what seems to be missing in the literature on political leadership in general and political leadership in Central Asia in particular is research on how the ordinary people perceive their leaders, in other words, a shift from the leaders to the led. What the public thinks about political leadership in general and/or their particular leaders in particular may shed more light on our understanding of a better, more smoothly and more democratically functioning political order.<sup>9</sup> Some studies suggest that how the electorate perceives leadership quality may be critical in determining the outcome of the elections.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Bass, B. (1997). “Does the transactional–transformational leadership paradigm transcend organizational and national boundaries?” *American Psychologist*, 52(2): 130–139; Bass, B. (1999). “Two decades of research and development in transformational leadership”, *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 8(1): 9–32; House, R. J., & Mitchell, T. R. (1974). “Path–goal theory of leadership”, *Journal of Contemporary Business*, 4: 81–97; Ford, D. L., & Ismail, K. (2006). “The cultural convergence and divergence debate: an examination of perceptions of effective leadership for US and Post-Soviet central Eurasian managers”, *Journal of International Management*, 12(2): 158–180; Pawar, B. S., & Eastman, K. K. (1997). “The nature and implications of contextual influences on transformational leadership: a conceptual examination”, *Academy of Management Review*, 22(1): 80–109; Bradford, D., & Cohen, A. (1998). *Power up! Transforming organizations through shared leadership*. San Francisco, CA, Jossey-Bass; Manz, C. C., & Sims, H. P. (1991). “Super leadership: beyond the myth of heroic leadership”. *Organizational Dynamics*, 19(4): 18–35; Pearce, C. (2004). “The future of leadership: combining vertical and shared leadership to transform knowledge work”. *Academy of Management Executive*, 18(1): 47–57; Yukl, G. (1999). “An evaluation of conceptual weaknesses in transformational and charismatic leadership theories.” *Leadership Quarterly*, 10: 285–305; Pearce, C., & Sims, H. P. (2000). “Shared leadership: toward a multi-level theory of leadership” In Beyerlein, M., Johnson, D., & Beyerlein, S. (Eds.). *Advances in interdisciplinary studies of work teams: Team leadership*: 7: 115–139, Greenwich, CT: JAI; Pearce, C., & Conger, J. A. (2003). *Shared leadership: Reframing the hows and whys of leadership*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage; Seers, A. (1996). “Better leadership through chemistry: toward a model of emergent shared leadership.” In Beyerlein, M., Johnson, D., & Beyerlein, S. (Eds.). *Advances in interdisciplinary studies of work teams*: 145–172. Greenwich, CT: JAI.

<sup>8</sup> House, R. J., Hanges, P. J., Javidan, M., Dorfman, P. W., & Gupta, V. (2004). *Culture, leadership, and organizations: The GLOBE study of 62 societies*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage; Dorfman, P.W., Hanges, P. J., & Brodbeck, F. J. (2004). “Leadership and cultural variation.” In House, R. J., Hanges, P. J., Javidan, M., Dorfman, P. W., & Gupta, V. (Eds.). *Culture, leadership and organizations: The GLOBE study of 62 Societies*: 669–719. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage; Den Hartog, D. N., House, R. J., Hanges, P. J., Ruiz-Quintanilla, A. S., & Dorfman, P. W. (1999). “Culture specific and cross-culturally generalizable implicit leadership theories: are attributes of charismatic/transformational leadership universally endorsed?” *Leadership Quarterly*, 10(2): 219–256; Ford, D. L., & Ismail, K. M. (2006). “The cultural convergence and divergence debate: an examination of perceptions of effective leadership for US and post-Soviet Central Eurasian managers,” *Journal of International Management*, 12(2): 158–180; Ismail, K. M., & Ford, D. L. (2008). “Discerning leadership perceptions of central Eurasian leaders: an exploratory analysis.” *Organization Management Journal*, 5: 99–113.

<sup>9</sup> Cartwright, D., “Public opinion polls and democratic leadership.” *Journal of Social Issues*, 2(2), May 1946, p. 32.

<sup>10</sup> See for example, Jones, P., & Hudson, J. (Apr., 1996). “The quality of political leadership: a case study of John Major.” *British Journal of Political Science*, 26(2): 229–244.

<sup>4</sup> Ismail, K. M., & Ford, Jr. D. L. (2010). “Organizational leadership in Central Asia and the Caucasus: research considerations and directions”, *Asia Pacific Journal of Management*, 27(2), p. 322.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 323.

<sup>6</sup> See for example, Blondel, J. (1987). *Political leadership: Toward a general analysis*. London: SAGE Publication Ltd.; Tucker, R. C. (1995) *Politics as leadership*. Revised Edition, London: University of Missouri Press; Kellerman, B. (1986) *Political leadership: A source book*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press; Paige, G. D. (1977) *The Scientific Study of Political Leadership*, New York: The Free Press; Burns, J. M. (1978). *Leadership*. New York: Harper and Row; Jones, B. D. (1989). *Leadership and politics: New perspectives in political science*. USA: University Press of Kansas.

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