

THE MAIN RESULTS OF KYRGYZSTAN'S DOMESTIC POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT IN 2009

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Introduction

The year 2009 was full of political events for Kyrgyzstan, the most noteworthy being reelection of the current president, Kurmanbek Bakiev, to a second term and reformatting, in a certain sense, of relations with the country's main partners on the world arena. The latter had

an influence on the alignment of domestic political forces, whereby it was revealed that Western sponsors and partners had little interest in the Kyrgyz opposition.

This prompted the government's supporters to talk about a period of "stability" and a transition to a new stage of administrative reforms called upon to consolidate the position of the ruling elite even more.

In this context, several experts believe that Bakiev's victory put an end to the post-March pe-

riod, which can be described as a time of struggle of all against all. Energetic activity on the part of the opposition should now slow down, which will allow Kurmanbek Bakiev's team to take up a key position.

In addition, it is very likely that the authoritarian development model will be reproduced, in compliance with which power will go to a successor, while democratic institutions will be strictly formal and serve the interests of a narrow circle of people.

Main Areas of Kyrgyzstan's Domestic Political Development in 2009

As mentioned above, Kyrgyzstan experienced several important interrelated political events in 2009.

On 11 February, after returning from Moscow, Kurmanbek Bakiev made a statement about the possibility of holding a presidential election in 2009 and about his participation in it. In particular, during the briefing, he said that this was his prerogative and did not intend to waive it.

Soon thereafter, image-makers especially appointed to run the president's campaign began fashioning a positive picture of the current head of state.

In particular, emphasis was placed on the already dubious argument that the American military base located at Manas airport would be moved to a different location by the end of the summer.

It was also maintained that the Kyrgyz leadership intended to consolidate its position even more in the future and carve out a prominent niche for the country on the world arena.

But, as things transpired, the military base not only remained where it was, but even grew in size.

At the beginning of March, neutralization began of politicians in one way or another related to the opposition. It is enough to recall the arrest of ex-minister of foreign affairs Alikbek Jekshenkulov, who became one of the leaders of the United People's Movement (UPM), and the mysterious death of ex-head of the presidential administration Medet Sadyrkulov on 13 March, 2009.

During the second half of March, a sitting of the Constitutional Court was held which issued a decision defining the relevance of holding a presidential election in 2009; and later a specific date was set—23 July, 2009.

A number of opposition politicians stated quite rationally that there were several reasons for adopting such a hasty decision about holding an election, including the fact that the government wanted to make it difficult for the opposition to participate in it and also wished to gain some extra leeway for continuing its bargaining over the American airbase.

For all intents and purposes, as early as March, the presidential election campaign had essentially been launched. Nineteen contenders began the race, but this number eventually dwindled to six. The opposition announced that it would nominate one candidate for the entire bloc, who would win the election. As subsequent events showed, he proved to be a weak political figure who could not gain unanimous support.

In particular, it was announced that the UPM would support the candidacy of Almaz Atambaev, but one of the movement's leaders, big businessman Temir Sariiev, objected to this choice and said he would participate in the election independently, which ended in his exclusion from the bloc.

The opposition hoped to boost its popularity by staging a mudslinging match in the press it controlled, but this had the opposite effect of undermining its prestige even more.

The government made deliberate efforts to compile the list of likely participants and rules of the game in advance, which turned the election campaign into a very languid and uninteresting affair. The republic was inundated with enormous billboards calling on the people to vote for the only "proper" candidate, against the background of which all other contenders went unnoticed.

In the end, as was only to be expected, Kurmanbek Bakiev sustained a resounding victory by gathering 76.4% of the votes, according to the data of the Central Election Commission published on 27 July and the results of the referendum held.

Incidentally, even before the official results were announced criticism was voiced about how the election was held.

In particular, the OSCE Election Observation Mission said that it did not meet the country's main obligations to the Organization; the current president had the advantage because of the administrative resource and biased coverage of the election campaign in the media. In addition, instances were noted of pressure being exerted on supporters of the opposition and of the use of scare tactics, which created an atmosphere of fear and distrust, and deprived the population of any hope of holding a democratic election.

Voting day itself was complicated by the inappropriate behavior of opposition candidates Almaz Atambaev and Zhenishbek Nazaraliev: at first they announced they would remove their candidacy, then later they denied these statements.

So Kurmanbek Bakiev took the presidential seat for the second time with ease; according to his statements, the country can expect radical changes for the better in political and economic life, of which, according to him, the people were already reaping the benefits.

At the beginning of the fall 2009, the president came forward with several program theses, the main one being that the country could expect radical changes in state administration. In particular, he said that before 20 October, 2009 a new government structure would be ushered in and the relevant reassignments made.

Incidentally, some experts noted that the anticipated changes would not lead to an increase in the efficiency with which the country was run, but rather to another extension of the president's powers and removal of undesirable politicians from his team, which was legislatively enforced after the president's December initiatives to make amendments to the Constitution. In this way, the president acquired an impressive *carte blanche* permitting him to rebuff his opponents.

Kyrgyzstan's Government and Opposition in 2009

The defeat of Almaz Atambaev (Kurmanbek Bakiev's main opponent) at the election graphically demonstrated how insignificant the opposition's role is in Kyrgyzstan's political life.

However, in spite of the political experience accumulated by Kurmanbek Bakiev and his team, they had never before found themselves in a situation like the one that developed during the 2009 election.

In 2005, the people voted against Askar Akaev, while the former prime minister and leader of the opposition acquired a significant share of the population's trust.

During Bakiev's first term, there were no significant events to speak of, apart from the division of property that took place under the standard slogan about "the need to get rid of the Akaev past."

So it is not surprising that on the eve of the 2009 election the government took extremely tough and at times even brutal steps to squash the opposition. This is all explained by the fact that there was a lot at stake.

Bakiev's team with its impressive accomplishments should be given its due. One of the leaders of the UPM, Azimbek Beknazarov, who can in no way be suspected of liking Bakiev, made the following comment, which everyone took as a compliment: "Here we are stuck in the mud, while Bakiev's people are all as busy as bees."

As further events showed, the steps Bakiev's opponents took proved to be principally incorrect, and the tactics they employed largely failed. Bakiev, on the other hand, despite several blunders, was able to impose his game rules on his opponents, which automatically deprived Atambaev and his team of any chance of winning.

Despite its significant intellectual potential, the UPM was unable to make full use of it and lost.

The opposition made a mistake from the very beginning in its choice of candidate; Almaz Atambaev is a well-known personality in the country, but the people remember how twice in four years he went over to the opposition and then returned to the government.

Whereas this may be permissible from the political perspective, in the people's opinion it is unforgivable. In addition, in 2007, the government headed by Atambaev "overlooked" the food crisis, which it publically admitted.

Another significant point is that the opposition has not offered any conceptual national idea (or program) addressed to all of the Kyrgyz people, and it has been unable to compete with presidential power from the very beginning.

It stands to reason that the opposition wants Bakiev to retire, but this is only because it wants a change in power; throughout the election campaign talks were held (and they are continuing to this day) about how Bakiev should retire of his own volition.

But the opposition took pains to avoid many of the issues that very much concern society, preferring to discuss global problems; Bakiev, on the other hand, told the people precisely what they wanted to hear in his campaign speeches.

Another reason for the people's lack of trust in the opposition is its promises to organize a "second round" of the revolution.

For example, in February 2009, in an interview with the Deutsche Welle radio station, a UPM official, Topchubek Turgunaliyev, said: "Now the revolutionary movement is suggesting employing different tactics. We must prepare our population step by step, although it is already quite well prepared. But we must make at least 15, maybe 20, locations ready in Kyrgyzstan where 50-100,000 people can come out into the streets on the same day, at the same time, with the same demands. This is an entirely different tactic. We must not give the government a chance to suppress the demonstration in any location, relocate its forces, and so on. Arithmetically it can be done as follows. For instance, we have ten people, each of whom trains another ten people within ten days. In ten days, we will already have 100 people. This hundred will recruit another ten people each that will make 1,000. In other words, we must work methodically."

Time has shown what came of these words: no revolution took place last year.

The same Deutsche Welle radio station asked: "Let's say that your movement succeeds in getting Bakiev to resign. What next? Won't it again just be a change of name, while the system remains the same?" Turgunaliyev gave the following response: "A provisional government will be formed, for instance, that will abolish Bakiev's Constitution and many other laws that do not work or contradict the elementary rules of democracy, while the declarations, decrees, and resolutions of the provisional government will have legal force. In addition, we have drawn up two documents about the provisional government and provisional power. They are interrelated, but not the same thing. We propose that the

top leaders of the provisional government not have the opportunity to participate in the next presidential election. Why? Because they will be in power for at least six months, say, and each will arrange the presidential election in the way that suits him best. We have seen this again and again! So the most difficult things will come after the president retires, things that are a thousand times more difficult than overthrowing this regime. Removing Akaev was difficult, but possible.”

It is worth noting that Turgunaliyev did not say a single thing about what would happen after Bakiev’s likely retirement.

Now let us take a look at the existing power regime. After Kurmanbek Bakiev became the president of Kyrgyzstan for the second time last year, Bishkek’s power structures were confident that the transition period in the country was over. They even believed that they could build something fundamental in the near future.

But there is still a transition trend going on in the country and the political elite is unable to control it. The repressions and coercion against politicians (past and present) and journalists and the border problems with Uzbekistan in the spring and summer of last year show that official Bishkek is still incapable of counteracting its opponents.

All the events unfolding on Kyrgyzstan’s political stage have shown once again that they are still only improvisation, although there is an attempt to present them as carefully prepared undertakings.

So it must be admitted that Kyrgyzstan is still far from political stability, although the mass revolutionary moods have significantly subsided. According to both internal and external observers, the Kyrgyz Republic is moving toward authoritarianism. It has equipped itself with Western radical-liberal tools, according to which so-called real politics is complete cynicism, while double standards are an inviolable part of what is called politics.

The president and his entourage have hit an impasse and things are such that the people can no longer have an influence on the government. One of the main goals of Bakiev’s policy is to deprive the elite, business, the media, the intellectuals, and so on of their power. In other words, he is trying to create a political and technological structure called a power vertical that depends on absolutely no one.

But Bakiev is unable to achieve his goals, so a paradoxical situation has arisen. The people can have no perceptible influence on politics; the elite, after Bakiev announced the new course aimed at reviving the country, are afraid of their president, and he, in turn, holds them in contempt. So contrary to his own will, the president has become dependent on the power groups. Today, any attempts to unite the government into a single whole look like political provocation, since they are tantamount to suggesting that the existing clans are at loggerheads.

At present, there are two proposed models of Kyrgyzstan’s further development: liberal and coercive, and for both of them, Bakiev’s regime is a serious obstacle.

As paradoxical as it may seem, today Bakiev needs the support of those whom the government has been maltreating all these years, while saying it is protecting the interests of the state: liberals, statesmen (real ones, and not sycophants), businessmen, public organizations, independent political scientists, journalists, and so on. If he does not gain this support, his retirement will occur in a tense political situation.

Who will be able to support the president? Bakiev’s current entourage proposed a model (under the guise of the reforms) that is capable of destroying its authors.

From the very beginning of independence, Kyrgyzstan’s domestic policy has been built on rules that, while they work today, could change tomorrow; whoever has the opportunity to rewrite them is the one who wins.

Kyrgyzstan’s Constitution, which has been amended seven times during the years of independence, is a good example in point. In particular, one of its editions (in November 2006) was imposed on Bakiev by a group of his opponents from among the deputies of the third convocation of the Zhogorku Kenesh.

Later the Constitutional Court recognized Akaev's Constitution of 2003 as legal, which, in fact, led to the Tulip Revolution.

In October 2007, more amendments were made to the Basic Law.

As the curtain fell on 2009, several significant amendments were made again. They de jure eliminated a number of institutions that were de facto abolished by President Bakiev within the framework of the state administration reform he announced, the ideological basis of which was his same "Course to Revive the Country." In essence, this was another attempt to rewrite the rules of the political game in his favor.

But today Kurmanbek Bakiev is gradually losing his monopoly grip on rewriting the rules (although he himself does not think so), even though it was he who compiled them two and a half years ago. In this way, the president proved not only to be a hostage of the system, but also an impediment to it. It is very likely that he will have to retire early or he will be pushed aside from real power and used as a shield to hide behind.

It is also likely that a situation will develop in which a person becomes president whom Bakiev is able to appoint as successor, but not the person he would like to see in that post.

There is also an alternative circulating in society, in which Bakiev will leave his post early, whereby he might initiate it himself in order to present his successor, for example. The sooner he does this the more chance he will have of keeping his head above water in the future. Procrastination is fraught with his turning into an outcast like his predecessor Akaev.

If Operation Successor fails, almost everyone who supports Bakiev today will talk about the Bakiev regime. It is only a question of when this will start, a month or a year after his retirement.

The myth about ensuring full-fledged stability could create serious problems for the president; the price of heat and electricity has been repeatedly rising in the country. Bakiev's political opponents could make skilful use of this.

It is possible that Kurmanbek Bakiev understands this, since he plans to hold a so-called Kurultai of Consent in March 2010. But it will be very difficult at present to run the scenario of "good king, bad courtiers"; the power groups that have real influence on politics have deceived everyone, the country, and themselves, and Bakiev. The president is accused of all the misfortunes, and he, in turn, understands that yesterday's advisors will betray him at the first opportunity.

So Bakiev can be considered the main victim of his own power. Today he is surrounded by people who are way beyond even the cunning and deceitful tactics of Machiavelli.

It would be appropriate here to recall the establishment of the Central Agency on Development, Innovations and Investments, the essentially new "commander" of the economy. It was headed by the president's younger son, Maxim Bakiev. This shows that the president has no one, apart from relatives, in his entourage whom he can completely trust.

In this situation, the president of Kyrgyzstan has only two possible alternatives, both of which are impossible without serious analytical and ideological preparation.

The first alternative boils down to amending the Constitution yet again, thus ensuring the president the right to run for a third term. Technically this is possible: the situation in society is such that amendments to the country's Basic Law do not meet with mass resistance, particularly since the anti-Bakiev forces have no strong media resource.

But this does not mean that the government can sit back on its laurels and take a rest. Events in Moldova and Iran have shown that any kind of national unrest can be provoked. And this can be done without newspapers or television, social networks such as Twitter are quite sufficient. All of this should ideally make the Kyrgyz authorities draw the relevant conclusions and try to incline public opinion toward making an amendment to the Constitution that envisages re-election of the president to a third term (this alternative was also examined in Russia at one time).

The other alternative consists of urgently making ready a successor, whereby one who can ensure Kurmanbek Bakiev full security. The president's political opponents are already stating that this will be Maxim Bakiev, his son, who will be 35 by the time the president finishes his second term, an

age conducive to running for president in Kyrgyzstan, although ideally it should be a person who does not belong to the ruling family and enjoys respect among the people. And if such a person does not exist, he should be created.

But the specifics of Kyrgyzstan, as of most of the post-Soviet countries, are such that it is developing according to a model that has no rules and where the basic laws of theoretical political science do not work. And this is understood everywhere, in Russia, in China, and in the U.S.

Practice shows that a political system without rules is even worse than an amoral one. In the latter case, some rules do still work, even though they may not coincide with moral principles. Bakiev's presidency has shown that while Kyrgyzstan may have won in part, it has lost overall.

Kyrgyzstan-2009: A Time of Missed Opportunities? (In Lieu of a Conclusion)

Last year was largely a year of missed opportunities for Kyrgyzstan's domestic policy. The situation might change again, and more than once. But for the moment it is difficult to imagine that someone will come to power in Kyrgyzstan after Bakiev who is capable of making independent decisions that will not lead the country into another political crisis and who will enjoy the trust not only of his people, but also of the leaders of foreign countries.

For the time being, Kyrgyzstan, despite the government's statements that the country has its own national interests, remains a zone of opposition among several groups (external and internal) and their struggle continues to gain momentum.

Productive activity of the constructive opposition is impossible by definition in a situation where the country is ruled by clans and groups. And even if such an opposition emerges, it will most likely be suspected of conspiracy.

Ideas of conspiracy have already taken up roost in the minds of the ruling clans and are supported by the media loyal to them. The so-called political elites are themselves creating opportunities for internal contradictions and even for conspiracies hidden from the people. On the other hand, hints at the possibility of conspiracies, betrayal of national interests, and so on, are constantly appearing in the media in order to scare the population and prove to the international community the need, in the future, for well-known countermeasures.

It is enough to recall three instances that show that the theory of conspiracy is already in effect.

- First, the amendments to the law on the right of citizens to gather peacefully and without weapons which prohibit meetings from being held in the center of the capital near any major facilities belonging to the power structures.
- Second, when Beishenbek Abdyrasakov, a deputy of the KR Zhogorku Kenesh from the Ak Zhol party in power, called a member of the opposition faction of the Social-Democrat Party of Kyrgyzstan Irina Karamushkina "an enemy of the Kyrgyz people" for speaking out against the fines instituted against people for not singing the national anthem.
- Third, the new edition of the Law on Noncommercial Organizations, in keeping with which they are essentially excluded from the country's political field. The amendments were initiated by deputies from Ak Zhol Nurgazy Aidarov and Arapbai Tolonov, as well as by leader of the parliamentary faction of communists Iskhak Masaliev.

The entire arsenal of above-mentioned ideas is aimed toward the future and is also being applied as prevention measures. This might mean the revival of traditions characteristic of any authoritative regime, whereby it makes absolutely no difference whether it is Eastern or Western.

Meanwhile, the majority of the population is acting under momentum, which was graphically shown by the latest presidential election: the voters were asked to choose between the bad and very bad, either Bakiev or blatant populists and entirely unpredictable so-called politicians.

On the one hand, there is some advantage to the struggle of all against all, since this struggle will prevent any one group from gaining a monopoly on power. On the other hand, however, there will simply be no time for anyone to think about how the country is developing and what will happen to Kyrgyzstan and its people in 10-20 years.

Privatization of strategic facilities is the next thing on the list, which in fact means divvying up what has not yet been shared; and again, this will leave no time to think about the country and its people.
