The Kyrgyz Republic on the verge of change?

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Is the Kyrgyz Republic really an ‘island of democracy’ or was this just a dream of the 1990s? Many hope to distinguish Kyrgyzstan as a model of democratic governance in the Central Asian landscape of authoritarian regimes; however, the latest developments demonstrate contradictory trends and the fragility of new changes in the transition from the Soviet semi-colonial past. Among the most serious challenges to good governance in Kyrgyzstan are institutional weakness, the protracted economic crisis, rampant corruption, and other factors linked to the domestic and geopolitical situation. In my article I will debate some internal problems of governance in this country and also explore some possible prospects for the future development of democratization in the country.

Kyrgyzstan, a country with a population of five million, borders Kazakhstan, China, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. In the wake of the Cold War, the Perestroika process triggered a struggle over the redistribution of political power, ethnic conflict and mass discontent towards the rule of the Communist Party. The republic’s Communist establishment had to stand down in favour of a new government, headed by Askar Akayev, who promised economic and political liberalization and was immediately supported by the local population and the international community. After 1991, the Kyrgyz leadership launched an ambitious programme of political and economic reforms, which generated high expectations among international and local communities. Kyrgyzstan, just like other Central Asian states, is a member of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), which greatly increased its presence there during the last few years and monitors elections as well as continually promoting standards of governance and human rights in the country. International and regional organizations significantly help in building the institutional framework: electoral systems, party systems, parliament, and government, NGOs. In a region of heavy-hardened authoritarianism, Kyrgyzstan has emerged as a relative model of democracy and was often called an ‘island of democracy’ in the Central Asian region.

Today, Kyrgyzstan faces an uncertain future. Considerable progress has been made during the first decade of independence, and the country has one of the strongest set of civil society organizations in Central Asia. At the same time, recent political developments, notably the use of a questionable referendum to legitimize a new constitution devised by the government, have led some to question whether the country is continuing its movement toward democracy. The first president of independent Kyrgyzstan, Askar Akaev, has announced that he will not seek re-

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election in 2005. This holds out the tantalizing prospect that Kyrgyzstan could be the first country in Central Asia to undertake a democratic-style transfer of power at the highest level.

President and Parliament

The Kyrgyz Republic is a unitary state, meaning that it is a presidential republic with considerable power entrusted to the president. The presidency has steadily become more powerful and controls all executive and judicial appointments, usually with little parliamentary involvement. There has been an increasing tendency for the presidential administration to take over decision-making powers from line ministries, further centralizing the decision-making power. In the twelve years since independence, there have been seven prime ministers, who often played the role of a scapegoat for disillusionment in economic and political developments and were removed before they could become popular and challenge the president. This is evidence of the unstable and volatile position of the head of the government and the increasing concentration of power in the hands of the president.

Legislative power was exercised for much of the first decade of independence by a Parliament, the Jogorku Kenesh. Currently, a two-chamber Parliament consists of the Legislative Assembly and the Assembly of People’s Deputies, and in the near future it will have a single chamber following the introduction of a new constitution in 2003. Comparing favourably with the rubber-stamp parliaments in neighbouring post-Soviet Central Asian states, the Kyrgyz parliament has become a home for several opposition leaders and parties which have dared to challenge the president and a place for public discussions. Parliamentarian debates on good governance and liberalization in the country play a crucial role in building a more democratic society.

The President and Parliament of the Kyrgyz Republic are elected by a direct general election for a five-year term. The last Parliamentary elections were held in February 2000 and in October of the same year the Presidential elections were held. Three main opposition parties and several candidates were prevented from participating in the Parliamentary election. The opposition was effectively excluded from the formal political process and, as a result of continuing division, it remains unable to effectively challenge the President. President Askar Akayev won a third term challenged by several candidates, the number thereof being reduced due to various measures undertaken by the ruling elite. In the Parliamentary elections some opposition parties were also barred. The elections were heavily criticized by the OSCE and some local NGOs and newspapers.

Referenda were held on four occasions during the short twelve-year political history of Kyrgyzstan. Citizens voted on such issues as the separation of power in the state, amendments to the Constitution, and the introduction of private land ownership, as well as strengthening the authority of the President. On 2 February 2003, a referendum on constitutional reforms held in the Kyrgyz Republic. The recent popular discontent came after the President held referenda on the new version of the Constitution in February 2003. Several questions arose, including whether or not the law of the Kyrgyz Republic ‘On a new version of the

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