Democracy in Central Asia: Supporting Kyrgyzstan’s “Island of Democracy”

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With its two revolutions in 2005 and 2010, Kyrgyzstan is often dubbed Central Asia’s “island of democracy.” Surrounded by autocratic dictatorships and heavily dependent on Russian political and economic support, Kyrgyzstan appears to some pundits to be no more than a pawn in Russia’s “Great Game” ambitions in the region, leading many to conclude that democracy in Central Asia is not sustainable. But Kyrgyzstan has so far proved resistant to one-man rule, and few people in Kyrgyzstan see autocracy as inevitable. Since one of the highest priorities for US foreign policy is supporting the growth of accountable government and democracy in the world, it is worth reflecting on Kyrgyzstan’s experience and its future prospects as a lesson in what is possible for the spread of democracy in the most difficult regions of the world.

Early Success in Transitioning to Democracy

When I arrived in Bishkek in May 2011, Kyrgyzstan was still very much in the midst of its latest democratic transition following the April 2010 revolution. A constitutional referendum and parliamentary elections in 2010 gave interim President Roza Otunbayeva’s government necessary legitimacy. The 2011 presidential elections solidified the democratic transition to a new regime under President Almazbek Atambayev. The success of these three largely free and fair early elections was an early win for democracy, but the new government faced enormous challenges in low governance capacity, absence of rule of law, rampant corruption, human rights challenges, and external pressures. The tragic interethnic violence that killed nearly 500 people in Kyrgyzstan’s south in June 2010 exposed the government’s tenuous control of its regions, nearly started a war with Uzbekistan, and left the government with the long-term challenge of overcoming the now greatly widened gulf between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in the south.

During this time, the United States and the international community provided millions of dollars in critical assistance in drafting a new constitution, supporting badly needed reforms to electoral legislation, providing immediate, foundational support to the new Parliament, and promoting security initiatives throughout the country. Our assistance had been in decline in the period before 2010, but was rapidly bolstered in a “democracy dividend” of fast-deploying, flexible programming, which focused on the immediate needs of electoral support and security in the south. This support was critical to helping the government with these early transitions.

Entrenched Structural, Geopolitical and Legacy Challenges Remain

We have slowly shifted our focus over time to long-term assistance to support Kyrgyzstan’s underlying governance challenges. Critical reforms are needed in sectors
such as energy, law enforcement, and governance. Moreover, Kyrgyzstan remains a deeply impoverished country, making economic growth a central concern. But these long-term, structural issues are not easy and pose an equal challenge to the growth of democracy as did the short-term transitional problems following the revolution. Soviet-era thinking, corruption, and a lack of transparency are pervasive and entrenched in both society and the political elite, which has remained largely in place since Soviet times despite political upheavals. While we see signs of hope in the younger generation, change is incremental. And so while Kyrgyzstan’s people largely supported the 2010 revolution, they remain disappointed with the lack of improvement in their daily lives. Nostalgia for the Soviet Union remains high in the older generation, while many in the younger generation gravitate to cynicism or, in a small minority of cases, religious extremism.

Another challenge to our efforts to support Kyrgyzstan’s democracy is its growing partnership with Russia. Confronted with a sea of internal and external challenges, President Atambayev has forged a strong partnership with Russian President Putin, seeing Russia as one of his few options for much needed assistance. This partnership has had its impact on our efforts, leading to the closure of the United States military presence at the Transit Center at Manas International Airport, while Russia retains its Kant Air Base outside of Bishkek. On a range of other issues, Kyrgyzstan’s new leadership would welcome a partnership with the United States, but places a priority on its relationship with Russia, which often comes at our expense. It remains an unanswered question how Kyrgyzstan can maintain its democratic trajectory while pursuing this partnership. President Atambayev’s decision to enter the protectionist Customs Union by the beginning of 2015 exemplifies this challenge. Both officials and business leaders appear unenthused, but resigned to this choice, seeing a lack of better options. Strong US and European support for democratic transitions in Georgia and Ukraine fuels the impression locally that Kyrgyzstan must “go it alone” in Central Asia, even though our assistance levels for Kyrgyzstan are the highest in Central Asia.

Along with political influence, Russia enjoys heavy cultural influence in Kyrgyzstan, both through legacy Soviet institutions and through Russian media. Most of Kyrgyzstan’s people get their news from Russian-language sources. In particular, following the crisis in Ukraine, the strident anti-American tone taken by Russian propaganda has crystallized local public opinion around Moscow’s narrative of events there. Although the domestic media remain free and diverse, they are far from professional and can be easily influenced by powerful political leaders. Kyrgyzstan’s open society remains one of its great achievements, but its media need to make significant strides to make to become a true pillar of its democracy.

**Reasons for Hope**

Despite the enormous challenges, Kyrgyzstan’s democracy has weathered many storms. Although most experts focus on the 2005 and 2010 revolutions, Kyrgyzstan parted ways with its Central Asian neighbors upon independence in 1991. In contrast to the other Central Asian states, Kyrgyzstan replaced its Soviet-era leader with a political outsider, Askar Akayev. Akayev, a physicist by career, had almost no political experience and had
spent many years of his career teaching and conducting research in Leningrad. In the early years of independence, Kyrgyzstan developed a relatively open society with a vibrant civil society, even if it failed to develop its economy or initiate significant structural reforms. Over time, Akayev became more autocratic, leading to his ouster in 2005. The cycle repeated with his successor, Kurmanbek Bakiyev. Thus, Kyrgyzstan has developed on a different trajectory from its neighbors since 1991, giving us reason to believe that it will continue to do so. Most notably, this includes the historic peaceful transition of power from President Otunbayeva to President Atambayev in 2011, a first in Central Asia.

One of the most significant products of these 20 plus years of a relatively open society is Kyrgyzstan’s vibrant, professional, respected, and fearless civil society, which has successfully weathered the anti-democratic storms. Our core investment in civil society over the past 20 years successfully “seeded” civil society organizations (CSOs) that not only survived the lean years of the late Akayev and Bakiyev presidencies, but unified the sector’s voice. They now act as a key government partner, when given the space. Consistent, multi-year engagement with these organizations—including the Coalition for Democracy and Civil Society, Interbilim, Foundation for Tolerance International, and Association of Civil Society Support Centers—also helped ensure that key pro-civil society voices ascended to influential positions in Parliament, the President’s Office, and relevant ministries. Civil society is also widely represented in Public Advisory Boards, a type of oversight and advisory committee attached to over 40 government ministries and agencies. In recent years, home-grown CSOs have made significant contributions on supporting democracy and human rights, de-escalating interethnic conflict, fighting corruption, eliminating torture and supporting a free media. In short, Kyrgyzstan’s civil society has deep roots and is well organized to protect democratic gains.

Engagement with the country’s growing cadre of increasingly tech-savvy youth—more than half of the population is under the age of 30—presents opportunities to more effectively promote democratic gains. Bishkek is the home to the American University of Central Asia (AUCA), our long-term hope for building pro-Western critical thinking in Central Asia. AUCA was funded originally by the United States government in consultation with the Open Society Institute. Over the last 23 years, AUCA has become the most prestigious university in the country. Its language of instruction is English and it graduates 200-300 liberal arts students who carry a Bard College degree and the ability to think critically along Western-oriented lines. English language learning is also a national priority and English language programs present an opportunity to build the capacity of Kyrgyzstani citizens to compete in the global economy, as well as to address drivers of instability in the country. With a rapidly growing Internet penetration rate, nearly universal access to mobile phones, and the ubiquitous use of mobile-based applications, youth are increasingly influenced by the rising tide of non-traditional news and information sources. Kyrgyzstan’s youth will chart its own course, but hungers for access to information and the world.

Most of our Kyrgyz partners, including President Atambayev, assure me that the people of Kyrgyzstan will not tolerate one-man rule, reflecting their over 20 years of shared experience with a more open model of government. Few if any Kyrgyz express envy of their neighbors in Kazakhstan, who enjoy a higher standard of living, but want for
democratic freedoms. Even President Atambayev appears to realize that his predecessors made a mistake in closing the democratic space, which led to their eventual downfalls. He constantly reaffirms his desire to step down in 2017 as mandated by the constitution, but worries about what will come after him.

**Kyrgyzstan Matters**

With the closure of the Transit Center at Manas after 13 years of supporting our mission in Afghanistan, policymakers and taxpayers may wonder why a poor, land-locked country of five million matters to the United States. But as Secretary Kerry has said: “It’s no coincidence that the places where we face some of the greatest national security challenges are also places where governments deny basic human rights and opportunities for their people.” Central Asia’s only democracy remains a fragile success facing serious risks of economic under-development, low governance capacity, absence of rule of law, rampant corruption, human rights challenges, and external pressures. But since gaining independence Kyrgyzstan has charted a course different from that of its Central Asian neighbors, one that the United States should continue to support as a beacon of hope in the region.