Chapter-V

Challenges and Limitation to Democracy and Civil Society in Kyrgyzstan
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CHALLENGES AND LIMITATION TO DEMOCRACY AND CIVIL SOCIETY IN KYRGYZSTAN

Inter-Regional Differentiation

Regionalism means love of a particular region or province in preference to the country as whole. According to B.L.Fadia, regionalism means the love of a particular region in preference to the country and in certain cases, in preference to the state of which the region is a part. Regionalism is not totally undesirable because a certain amount of ethnic pride or regional identity is inevitable and necessary for self-development but the attitude becomes dangerous when that pride for one's region leads to hatred for and violence towards those from other regions or communities. There are many factors which give rise to the feeling of regional identities. Regionalism may be rooted in political, cultural and economic deprivation for a long period of time. Today almost every nation is facing the same problem.

The feeling of regionalism may arise either due to the continuous neglect of a particular area or region by the ruling authorities, or it may spring as a result of increasing political awareness of the henceforth backward people that they have been continuously discriminated. The negative implication of regionalism affects the entire country. It is a very acute problem that weakens the fabric of national unity. It breaks the notion of tolerance, co-operation and accommodation, and can create conflicts and cleavages. Kyrgyzstan has also been affected by the problem of regionalism.

Under the Soviet system regionalism was suppressed to a large extent. As it was seen as a treat to communism. If regionalism had been tolerated during that period, the entire Soviet Union would have been de-stabilised. Because Soviet Union was composed of many regional identities. Though, Lenin was some how liberal to accommodate various regional identities. But under Stalin's iron curtain policy, regional aspirations of various ethnic groups were suppressed. After the death of Stalin, the regional identities raised their heads gradually. Finally, they got conducive atmosphere to grow during the regime of Gorbachev.

But with the introduction of “Perestroika” and “Glasnost” it raised it’s head. Finally, with independence of Kyrgyzstan it emerged as a potential challenge to the country. The regional leaders started bargaining for power in the political process of Kyrgyzstan. There were three main actors involved in this bargaining game. Firstly, president Akaev and his core advisers known as central leaders. Secondly, leaders representing the northern oblasts known as northern leaders. Thirdly, leaders representing the southern oblasts known as southern leaders.

An attempt was made at liberalizing the political and economic system during Kyrgyzstan’s first few years of independence which created small openings for the inclusion of regional actors in the decision-making process. As the bargaining game proceeded, the northern regional leaders began to demand an enhanced role in establishing a new electoral system commensurate with their increasingly important role in the country’s political and economic life. The newly formed political parties were also able to participate in a much greater capacity than it would have been possible under the previous system. They exerted influence through building coalitions with the main actors, first central leaders and then with regional leaders in the north and south due to their reliance on regionally based support.

Though the Central leaders know that for a politically stable and economically viable Kyrgyzstan the Centre needs more power to supervise the regions and to control the inter-regional rivalry and external security threat.

But in reality, they cannot override regionalism, tribalism and clan identities at the local level. Pauline Jones Luong has explored salience of some regional identities in Kyrgyzstan by putting interview questions to the Central Leaders, Regional Leaders and Political Activists. Table no. 8 explains the salience of regional identities in Kyrgyzstan.
Table 8: Salience of Regional identities in Kyrgyzstan (1995).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Central Leaders</th>
<th>Regional Leaders</th>
<th>Political Activists</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What is the main source of your political and/or electoral support (i.e., your most important constituency)?</td>
<td>Region in which last held office: 97% Region of origin: 97%</td>
<td>Region in which currently holding office: 82% Region of origin: 93%</td>
<td>Region in which party was founded: 97% Region of origin: 93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>According to what principle should deputies pass laws?</td>
<td>Advance the president's reforms: 75%</td>
<td>Promote regional interest: 97%</td>
<td>Advance the president’s reforms: 55% Promote regional interest: 78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you view as the primary task of the new parliament?</td>
<td>Mediate between regional rivalries: 85% Advance national interest: 97%</td>
<td>Advance regional interests: 97%</td>
<td>Promote national unity: 70% Protect regional interest: 79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On what basis will coalitions in the new parliament form?</td>
<td>Regional: 79%</td>
<td>Regional: 100%</td>
<td>Regional: 87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the proper role of political parties in independent Kyrgyzstan?</td>
<td>Represent national interests: 85% Represent regional interests: 70%</td>
<td>Represent regional interest: 100%</td>
<td>Represent national interests: 55% Represent regional affiliations: 75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the greatest obstacle to further democratization?</td>
<td>Concern with regional rather than national interests: 92%</td>
<td>New leaders are inexperienced 67% Popular support for parties is weak: 97%</td>
<td>Concern with regional rather than national interests: 70% Popular support for parties is weak: 85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the greatest threat to Kyrgyzstan’s stability?</td>
<td>Disrupting, or fundamentally altering, the regional balance of power: 99% Spread of Islam: 99%</td>
<td>Disrupting, or fundamentally altering, the regional balance of power: 97% Spread of Islam: 97%</td>
<td>Disrupting, or fundamentally altering, the regional balance of power: 95% Spread of Islam: 95%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N.B.-Actors are not limited in their responses. The table includes all the responses that were given by more than 50% of those interviewed. Sample size included eleven central leaders and activists and thirty-five regional leaders and activists from five out of Kyrgyzstan’s six oblasts.

(Source: Pauline, Jones Luong, op. cit., p. 160).

Kyrgyzstan has many political parties. The main source of political or electoral support of the leaders is regional. Whether they are central leaders, regional leaders or political activists. On
favour), the regional leaders support for promotion of regional interests (97%), the political activists' support for president's reforms (55%), while their support for the promotion of regional interest was much greater (78%). Regarding the question of primary task of the parliament, the regional leaders, and political activists were strongly in favour of regional interest (97% and 79% respectively), while the central leaders were strongly in favour of national interests. In relation to the question of basis of coalitions in the new parliament, the central leaders, the regional leaders and the political activists mostly underlined regionalism as the main factor (79%, 100% and 87% respectively). Regarding the proper role of political parties in Kyrgyzstan, the central leaders were more in favour of national interests, i.e. 85%, than regional interests, i.e. 70%, while, the regional leaders and political activists were strongly in favour of regional interests, i.e. 100% and 75% respectively. On the question of greatest obstacle to further democratization, the central leaders pointed at regional interests (92%), while the regional and political activists say that popular support for parties is weak by giving opinion in favour of it by 97% and 85% respectively. Regarding the last question i.e. the greatest threat to Kyrgyzstan's stability, the central leaders, the regional leaders and the political activists all gave equal importance to regional imbalance and spread of Islam (99%, 97% and 95% respectively).

An analysis of the previous table regarding the response of the actors i.e. central leaders, regional leaders and political activists to the interview questions, thus, indicate that regionalism has got precedence over Central power in Kyrgyzstan. Though the central leaders are mostly in favour of national interest, they are not completely devoid of influence from regional interests, as they have also to depend upon the regional leaders and political activists for their political gain and support. The central leaders attempt to appease regional leaders by offering a compromise that incorporate some elements of national interests as well as regional interests. Pauline Jones Luong concludes that "thus, the main actors in Kyrgyzstan's bargaining game share an interest in the fate of regionalism and enhance their own position in the future balance of power."2 Many political leaders in Kyrgyzstan are interested to promote their own ideological visions or to pursue private or regional goals. According to John Anderson political parties are "often based upon personalities and regions, and have paid insufficient attention to

2 Pauline, Jones, Luong, op. cit., p. 164.
the creation of nationwide organizations with broad agendas, despite the adoption of single
member constituencies and a majority electoral system which might be thought to encourage the
creation of such parties. Perhaps more importantly, the evolution of national political parties has
probable been undermined by the continued importance of regional patronage networks and
tribalism.\textsuperscript{3}

Historically one of the key divisions has been between the northern and southern Kyrgyz, which
has threatened the unity and integrity of Kyrgyzstan. With the northerner Askar Akaev
replacing the southerner Absamat Masaliev at the time of independence, there were claims that
appointments were increasingly dominated by the north, with special prominence given to those
form the Talas and Chu regions. This in turn was reinforced by the economics of independence.
The north proved quicker to adapt to market oriented reform than the south where anti-market
attitudes “reinforced political suspicions about northern dominance.”\textsuperscript{4} Such attitudes are again
strengthened by a cultural superiority complex on the part of some northerners. It is evident in
the reluctance of Bishkek officials or northern army officers to serve in Osh or Jalalabad regions
and it is very often alleged that the primitive nature of southern culture allows fundamentalism
to spread. The significance of the North-South divide was evident in the December 1995
presidential elections when Communist leader Absamat Masaliev officially polled nearly 50%
in the southern Osh region, despite the best efforts of the local administration to obstruct his
campaign.\textsuperscript{5} It was also evident in the 1995 parliamentary election, when there was a clear cut
voting on tribal and clan lines. People cast their votes for the candidates belonging to their own
tribes and clans. According to Ajay Patnaik “the 1995 parliamentary elections confirmed the
continuing strength of tribal and clan ties in Kyrgyz politics.”\textsuperscript{6} Some observers are of the opinion
that the political parties and various organization presently active in Kyrgyzstan are mainly
regional based without having clear cut ideology. According to Tolkun Namatbaeva, as of July

\textsuperscript{1} John Anderson, \textit{Kyrgyzstan: Central Asia’s Island of Democracy?}, (Netherland: Harwood Academic Publishers,

\textsuperscript{4} Ibid., p.40.

\textsuperscript{5} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{6} Ajay Patnaik, \textit{Nations, Minorities and States in Central Asia}, (New Delhi: Anamika Publishers and Distributors
1995, as many as 12 political parties, 6 public organizations, 28 national cultural centers and 15 women’s organizations were registered by the Kyrgyz Ministry of Justice. Despite the numbers, most were nothing but diminutive interest groups, often regionally based. All these parties and groups were formed by those politicians who aspired to be country’s leader; were mono-national. supported mainly by city intellectuals; and do not have any clear-cut ideological platforms. The general and presidential election of 2000 in Kyrgyzstan also indicated the existence of the strong regional rivalries within the country.

Regionalism, tribalism, family and clan identities are important challenges to the stability of the political system of Kyrgyzstan. Namatbaeva maintains that “all these greatly affected the Kyrgyz political landscape”. Regional affiliations and loyalties, she maintains, are malaise common to all the Central Asian States. In short, regional fragmentation and internal rivalries have posed serious threat to national integration, ethnic harmony and co-operation in Kyrgyzstan, which has not yet been able to overcome all these problems.

**Inter-Ethnic Conflict**

Kyrgyzstan is a land of many ethnic groups having their own distinct identities. During Soviet rule the ethnic based identities were promoted but not at the cost of inter-ethnic harmony. Central Asia became the home to many ethnic groups during Soviet period. According to Lori M. Handrahan, “During Soviet rule, there were two major immigrant streams into Kyrgyzstan. First, there was a massive influx of Russians, Ukrainians, Jews, Tatars and Armenians and other Europeans during the period between 1926 and 1959. Second, Stalin’s deportation policies brought Koreans, Crimeans, Germans and Turks to Central Asia as a punishment for collective disloyalty during world War II.” Some Western writers are of the view that, the ‘ethnicity

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8 Ibid.

factor’ in current Central Asian politics originated in Soviet period due to it’s forced population movement and arbitrary redistricting. During the early 1920s the new Soviet-created republics shattered an existing zone that was territorially structured into city-state Khanates and tribal confederations. They also further add that by craving out five republics on the basis of distinct national entities and by maintaining sufficient ethnic diversity within each boundary, the Soviet Union could prevent the emergence of a powerful unified force with anti-Soviet tendencies. But Devendra Kaushik says that the Central Asian Republics were created for a better administration and regional development. Each republic was supposed to represent an ethnic community. But the settlement pattern of ethnic groups did not follow, territorial boundaries. Large ethnic minority groups were left out of their Soviet-created homelands.¹⁰

The discrepancy between national frontiers and regional spread and ethnic communities did not pose major challenges for inter-ethnic relations under Soviet rule. The Centralised nature of Soviet Union and Moscow’s commitment to protecting and promoting ethnic cultures made these nominal frontiers of little consequence for ordinary citizens. By the end of Soviet rule, according to 1989 census, the ethnic Kyrgyz population was a majority in its own country, accounting for 52 percent of the total population in Kyrgyzstan. Talking of Soviet role, Handrahan remarks “In sum, the Kyrgyz have traditionally been politically weak as well as ethnically solvent, generally passive, people. Only a modern twist of Soviet-influenced fate provided a political homeland that Kyrgyz neither fought for nor particularly desired.”¹¹

The weakening of Soviet rule in the late 1980’s, followed by it’s disintegration, bestowed a new meaning to the concepts of ‘home land’ and ‘national frontiers’. Ethnicity in Kyrgyzstan is now at the centre of a complex web of economic, social and political relations. Ethnic-conflict and related tensions have posed a big problem to the nascent democratic political system. Though former President Akaev publicly called for the preservation of civic and ethnic harmony but in practice the problems for the country are compounded by delicate nature of inter-ethnic relations and the varied demands made by different ethnic groups on the polity.


¹¹ Ibid., p. 472.
The small numbers of Dungans, Uighurs, and Tajiks meant that they were of little consequences for the authorities in pursuing the goal of ethnic harmony. More problematic was the Uzbek population in the south, traumatized by the events of 1990 (inter-ethnic riots) and suspicious of the authorities in Bishkek. During the post-war era the share of the Uzbek population in Kyrgyzstan gradually increased, from around 10% in 1939 to over 14% in 1995, and in the two southern oblasts of the country they comprised substantial minorities—just over a quarter in the Osh region and nearly 40% in Jalalabad. Yet, Anderson pointed out, despite making up a significant proportion of the population there was a growing perception amongst the Uzbeks that their place in the new Kyrgyzstan remained insecure.¹²

A number of developments reinforced these fears, including the de facto continuation of Turdakun Usbuliyev's (Communist Party chief for more than two decades) tendency to reduce the number of Uzbeks in administrative positions. Hence by the mid-1990s Uzbeks held only 4.7% of key posts in the Osh regional administration, only two positions on the Jalalabad town government, and had only six deputies in the country's parliament. There was also a perception that little was being done to meet the cultural and linguistic needs of the minority, with complaints that though Bishkek remained overly sensitive to the Russian language issue; it had refused to grant any official status to Uzbek. Tensions between Kyrgyzs and Uzbeks were further exacerbated by differing patterns of socio-economic development, which many of the titular nationality (Kyrgyz) saw as leaving the Uzbeks better placed to take advantage of the new situation. The Uzbek minority tended to dominate in the fields of trade, transport and handicrafts, and resided in urban areas where the possibilities of economic activity were greater than in the Kyrgyz dominated and often impoverished rural areas. In consequence, from the 1980s onwards large numbers of Kyrgyz youth had flooded to the towns in search of work. It was such people who had played a key role in the conflicts of 1990 and there is a fear that they might facilitate a repeat of those tragic events in future.

During the early 1990s, some Uzbeks in the south responded to these problems by supporting moves towards greater autonomy from the capital while others pushed for unification with

¹² John, Anderson, op.cit., p.43.
neighboring Uzbekistan. Bishkek’s response was largely rhetorical, attacking ‘extremists’ and stressing its commitment to equality between ethnic groups. “In practice the government elite did little beyond encouraging the creation of a Kyrgyz-Uzbek friendship society, and setting up a committee to prepare the celebrations of the forthcoming 3,000th anniversary of the town of Osh. In the south, however, tensions lingered beneath the surface, with surveys carried out in 1995 revealing that over half of Uzbeks in the two regions had experienced ethnic hatred and that many believed inter-ethnic clashes were likely in the near future.”13 And at the end of 1997 government fears of Uzbek political organization were revealed, when the authorities sponsored the creation of a new national cultural centre in the Osh region, a move which some Uzbeks saw as an attempt to develop more effective control over their cultural life.

Though Uzbek-Kyrgyz relations perhaps have greater potential for arousing bloody conflict, the immediate concern to the authorities has been the retention of the European and Slavic peoples who have played such a key role in administration and economic management. In 1989 there were around 100,000 Germans resident in Kyrgyzstan, most of them the descendants of families deported from the western regions of the USSR after the Nazi invasion in June 1941. By mid-1991 around 15,000 had left for Germany, which offered an open door for all those of proven German descent, and there was increasing concern that many more would leave.”14 Addressing a conference of Kyrgyz Germans held in early 1992 Akaev went out of his way to praise the contribution this community had made to the development of the republic, and defined his chief objective in the sphere of ethnic relations as realising the interests of all ethnic groups within Kyrgyzstan regardless of nationality. He expressed the hope that there would develop a special relationship which brought in the local community and the Federal Republic in support of a continued German presence within the republic. At the end of January 1992 he issued a decree setting up two German National Cultural Districts to be run by elected representatives who would have autonomy to decide economic and social issues. Many Kyrgyz were unhappy regarding the decree as they thought it as a renunciation of sovereignty. But Akaev argued that

14 John, Anderson, op.cit., p.44.
this was a special case and that it was necessary to take special measures to retain the services of this useful minority. At the same time it was hoped that preserving a German community within the republic would serve as magnet for German investors and financial support from the government in Bonn, which had its own interest in persuading its co-ethnics not to migrate. Nonetheless, by 1997 only around 20,000 remained, and many in the north faced increasing hardship as the industries in which they worked faced restructuring and downsizing. And as numbers fell it became harder to maintain a distinctive cultural identity, especially since many of those remaining were more comfortable in Russian than German. Even the Lutheran churches in some parts of the country started holding services in Russian.\textsuperscript{15}

Similarly the case of Russian population in Kyrgyzstan is disturbing. Russians were occupied mostly in industry, transport, construction and communications where they had much larger share than the titular population. Among the intelligentsia they comprised the majority of the specialists in technical field and natural sciences. As white collar workers, Russians worked mostly in trade and services.

Economic decline and recession in Kyrgyzstan, growth of nationalism, adoption of new language laws in September 1989, a spurt in cultural and religious revivalism and the break out of ethnic riots in Ferghana (1989), in Dushanbe (1990), and in Osh (1990), have created a psychological atmosphere of uncertainty resulting in mass exodus of Russians and Russian speaking population from Kyrgyzstan. It has also happened in all other Central Asian Republics.\textsuperscript{16}

The Kyrgyz leadership has been particularly concerned to meet the needs of the Russian and Russian-speaking population who totaled around a quarter of the population in 1989. From the late 1980s this group experienced, or felt itself to be subject to, increasing pressures within Kyrgyzstan stemming in particular from the growth of nationalism. Central adoptions of the state language law in September 1989 which proposed a fairly rapid changeover to the use of Kyrgyz in administration and education. For Russian speakers this law appeared discriminatory.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{16} Yaccov, Roi, op.cit., p.67.
For the elderly there was little prospect of learning a new language, and the time frame within which change was envisaged was unrealistic, even for many Russified Kyrgyz who had little facility in their own language. According to Eugene Huskey “The 1989 language law, which called for Kyrgyz to replace Russian as the language of state, subjected the political leadership to intense pressure from three sides. The least Russified segments of the ethnic Kyrgyz population sought the earliest and fullest implementation of the language law. For this group, a Kyrgyz language revival promised to bring greater educational and career opportunities as well as the dignity attached to those fluent in the state language. If the leaders of Kyrgyz nationalist movements viewed the indigenization of language policy as means of redistributing political, economic and cultural power in the country so did the Russians.”\(^\text{17}\) Slavic hostility to the language law was rooted both in great nation chauvinism and in a fear of being marginalized in Kyrgyzstan’s political and economic life. In terms of life chances, language had served to mitigate for the Slavs the advantages of family and clan ties among the Kyrgyz. For the Uzbeks, who spoke a Turkic language with broad similarities to Kyrgyz, the prospect of having to master the titular language was less daunting than for the Russians, but they presented, nonetheless, the prospect of new linguistic hegemony depending Kyrgyz political dominance.\(^\text{18}\)

Other factors contributed towards the ‘social discomfort’ of Russians, including the growing nationalist tone of many political activists, the anti-Russian tone given to the 75\(^{\text{th}}\) anniversary celebrations of the 1916 steppe revolt which was seen as glorifying Kyrgyz resistance and demonising the role of the Russians, the tendency to make political administrative appointments on the basis of ethnicity and, in the southern regions, a suspicion of the perceived or possible growth of Islamic influences. As the republic moved into its first five years of independence, these fears were exacerbated by the increasing dominance of Kyrgyz in business, administration and political life, with 85% of local deputies elected in 1984 coming from the titular nationality and 84% in the 1995 parliamentary elections.


\(^{18}\) Ibid.
Taken together with a collapse of the economy, especially its Slavic dominated industrial sector, the implementation of the language law led to a massive exodus of Russians from Kyrgyzstan. From 1989 to 1993, the Slavic share of the population of Kyrgyzstan declined from 24 percent to 18 percent, representing a loss of over 200,000 persons. Of the approximately 100,000 Russians who remained in the southern regions of Osh and Jalalabad, 60,000 ethnic Germans departed perhaps less as a result of language reform than out of a desire to return to a newly united Germany. In many ways the most dramatic social movement of transition period in Kyrgyzstan has been the emigration of peoples who were not indigenous to Central Asia.19

The most immediate response to these developments was emigration, with many Russian speakers leaving the republic during the early 1990s. More importantly many of these were highly skilled professionals whom the republic needed. Asked in a 1992 survey why they would consider leaving, most Russians pointed to the worsening of inter-ethnic relations (59.7%) and the adoption of laws that discriminated against Russian (29.4%), though some cited other factors including the poor economic situation (13.5%), fear of unemployment (7.6%), price rises (6.6%), fear of physical violence (13.2%) and concern that their children would not get a proper education in the new republic (16.5%).20 Above all there seemed to be a fear that whatever the good intentions of the leadership and other members of the republican elite, future generations would be less accommodating and that therefore the prospects for Russians in the next century would be increasingly poor.

For then president Akaev, this exodus had potentially perilous political and economic consequences. Those leaving the country depleted the ranks of educated and highly skilled workers essential for a modern economy. But they also eroded the political base of leaders like Akaev who were committed to governing through a multiethnic alliance. Put starkly, the smaller the share of Europeans in Kyrgyzstan, the more susceptible Akaev was to challenges from ethnic Kyrgyz opponents willing to pursue an aggressive nationalist agenda. The Russian exodus also complicated Kyrgyzstan’s relations with the Russian federation, which has offered moral and financial support to Russian-language universities and social organizations in Kyrgyzstan. The former foreign minister of Russia, Andrei Kozyrev, publicly called for


20 John, Anderson, op.cit., p. 45.
Akaev to adopt Russian as a second state language alongside Kyrgyz. Recognizing the political and economic costs of an exodus of Europeans, Akaev decided in the spring of 1993 to suspend by decree the implementation of language law, a decision that appeared to stem the tide of emigration.

According to the new constitution of Kyrgyzstan, all languages including Russian are guaranteed free development and use. Discrimination on the basis of lack of knowledge of the state language is not permitted. According to Ajay Patnaik “a source of pride for Akaev is the Slavic university, unique of it’s kind in all the C.I.S. countries. Classes at the university are held in three languages-Russians Kyrgyz and English” 21

The constitutional approval of Russian language as an ‘official language’ in Kyrgyzstan has made it’s place better than any where else in central Asia. It became an official language in regions predominately populated by Russians speakers as well as in areas of economic importance. The new constitution also includes provisions aimed at mitigating the concerns of Kyrgyzstan’s Slavic community and other ethnic groups; most notably Russian was accorded the constitutional status of a language of inter-ethnic communication. Akaev further requested that “the government delay the final date for the full establishment of Kyrgyz as the official state language form 1995 to 2000 (subsequently extended until 2005).” 22

Another important area of ethnic problem was the enactment of land law. In May 1991, shortly before the collapse of the U.S.S.R., the nationalist-minded deputies in the republican parliament enacted a land law that designated the country’s territory and national resources as the wealth of ethnic Kyrgyz. Fearing a backlash among other nationalities; especially, Russians and Uzbeks, Akaev quickly vetoed the offending provision. Thereby he could save the country from an approaching ethnic disaster. 23

Still another important problem was the issue of dual citizenship. In 1994 many Slavic organisations like Slavic Fund and Soglasie (Agreement) operated on the principle that

21 Ajay Patnaik, op. cit., p.15.


23 Eugene Huskey, op.cit., p. 254.
Russian had future in Kyrgyzstan and concentrated their effort on improving the rights of this particular group. During 1994 these groups argued for various policy shifts that might encourage Russian speakers to stay, including the introduction of dual citizenship, a change in the status of the Russian language, the stabilisation of socio-economic situation and stronger guarantees for the rights of ethnic minorities.

In June 1994, in an attempt “to curb the rate of emigration from Kyrgyzstan (more than 1,00,000 people, mainly Russians were reported to have left the country in that year ).” Akaev announced that Russian was henceforth to have the status of official language in regions predominantly populated by Russian Speakers, as well as in areas of economic importance. The procedure of application “for dual citizenship was to be simplified and the equitable representation of ethnic Russians in the state administration was to be guaranteed.” This policy of appeasement towards Russians speakers created a suspicious attitude in the mind of ethnic Kyrgyz about then president Akaev. A major set back to Russians and Russian speaking people came when recently on February 12, 2004, the Kyrgyz parliament “adopted a law making Kyrgyz the only state language and giving Russian the status of an official language only. Under the new law, all government officials are required to have a good command of the state language.”

Interestingly enough, the president Askar Akaev himself introduced the draft law on the state language in the parliament to abolish official bilingualism in Kyrgyzstan. Until recently Russian was a second state language in Kyrgyzstan. The bill’s 38 articles would require civil servants to speak and write in Kyrgyz. In addition, at least one-third of all advertising and news media outlets would have to change over to the national language. It is recommended that wider use be made of Kyrgyz in education. The bill calls for a gradual transition from the Cyrillic alphabet to Latin script and for the creation of a national language commission to that end. Oddly enough, one of the bill’s articles states that every parent must teach his or her child in the state language.

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24 “Kyrgyzstan”, Europa World Year Book, op.cit., p. 2544; see also Ajay, Patnaik, op. cit., p. 16.
25 Ibid.
Under the new law, “administering entrance and final examinations in the state language is mandatory for all educational institutions that receive funding from the state budget.” And one of the law’s articles establishes that Kyrgyz, as the state language, is also considered the language of inter-ethnic communication. In the past, this function was also performed by Russian. Under this article, all text on the labels and markings of retail goods and in instructions for their use must be written in both Russian and Kyrgyz. Earlier, providing instructions in Kyrgyz was optional.27

In presenting the law in parliament, State Secretary Osmonakun Ibraimov said that Russian was considered an official language in the republic under the constitution, so nothing in the proposed document would contradict the country’s basic law. Opponents of the bill started saying that it violated the rights of the Russian speaking population and of Russian speaking members of the Cabinet of Ministers. But supporters of the law feel that the document merely emphasizes the development of the state language and enhance its prestige.28 It is noteworthy that only about seventy percent of Kyrgyzstan’s population speak Kyrgyz.

Toktayim Umetaliyeva, chairperson of the Association of Non-governmental Organisations, believes that support for the Kyrgyz language at the state level is now a life-or-death issue for the language. She said that “adoption of the law is essential so as not to forfeit the spiritual and cultural heritage of the Kyrgyz people, though not to the detriment of other ethnic groups. But the law should not be enforced in a harsh or coercive way.”29

The main reasons for out-migration of Russians and other ethnic minorities are given below.

i) Growth of ethno-centric nationalism often leading to de facto limits on the rights of the Russians and other minorities.

ii) Adoption of state language law, i.e. Kyrgyz as state as well as official language.

27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
iii) The ethnic principles as the basis for nation building in Kyrgyzstan, for example policies on privatization of properties and land laws.

iv) A spurt in cultural and religious revivalism, especially the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Kyrgyzstan.

v) Economic decline and recession in Kyrgyzstan and a relatively higher standard of living in the Russian Federation.

vi) Discrimination in work, housing and education.

vii) Worsening personal relations with neighbours and members of the local community in everyday life.

viii) Psychological atmosphere of uncertainty in the wake of inter-ethnic riots i.e. in Ferghana (1989), in Dushanbe (1990), and in Osh (1990) and many other minor ethnic violence in recent years.

ix) Growing tendency of authoritarianism in recent years after a brief period of democratic governance following independence.

x) Family Circumstances.

The change in the situation of the Russians in Kyrgyzstan from being a dominant group to that of a discriminated minority is indeed psychologically unsettling. Many Russians speakers have complained that they have been treated as second class citizens. All these factors have prompted more and more Russians to emigrate from the republic. According to a report of the Current Digest of the Soviet Press, more than 4,00,000 Russians have left during the decade between 1994-2004.30

Lori M. Handraban has taken an extreme view of ethnicity in Kyrgyzstan, by stating that ethnicity is omnipresent in Kyrgyzstan. He states that “an overview of Kyrgyz history, since independence (1991-2000) demonstrates the constant presence of ethnicity within the political process as well as ethnic conflict. Indeed, the entire political culture exists under a shadow of ethnic tensions. Important governmental institutions, such as the akims, internal police, the

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white house, law enforcement organs such as the courts, and the police, blatantly function as
ethic Kyrgyz preserves."\textsuperscript{31}

The extreme stands taken by Lori. M. Handrahan may be an exaggeration. It is pertinent to
mention here that inspite of Kyrgyzstan’s democratic political culture, ethnic conflict and out-migration of Russians and other Europeans have posed serious challenges and limitations upon
the Kyrgyz leadership to accommodate and maintain a harmonious inter-ethnic relations among
the diversified ethnic groups. The more important immediate challenge is to contain the out
migration of Russians as much as possible by evolving appropriate policy initiatives aimed at
them.

\textbf{Criminalization, Corruption And Nepotism}

Criminalization, corruption and nepotism are the important dysfunctional aspect of many
political systems of the present world. There has been excessive misuse of power, money and
favouritism in politics. The political leaders are supporting criminals for their selfish interest to
capture power. The politicians at the higher echelon of politics are also showing favoritism to
their relatives, kith and kins in the occupation of important and strategic positions in politics,
economy and in religious spheres also. Hence the broader idea of democracy is being perverted
for the narrow immediate gains of politicians.

Though Kyrgyzstan committed to become a corruption free, vibrant democratic country with an
efficient bureaucracy and transparent economy in the early years of independence, later on, it
failed to achieve these ends. Because the top level politicians and bureaucrats misused their
power and authority. Hence, corruption, criminalization and nepotism grew at an increasing
rate.

The new experiment with democracy, and simultaneously the rapid economic reform process
also contributed a lot to large scale corruption. Akaev’s presidency was destabilized during
1993 by a series of corruption scandals, which his supporters claimed “were orchestrated by

\textsuperscript{31} Lori. M. Handrahan, op. cit., p. 472.
communist and nationalist forces in an attempt to discredit the reformists.” In March a commission of inquiry was appointed to investigate the business dealings of the then Vice-President, Feliks Kulov. A second commission was established by the legislature later in the year to examine allegations that senior politicians, including the then Prime Minister Tursunbek Chyngyshev, had been involved in unauthorised gold exports. In December 1993 Kulov resigned as Vice-President for ‘ethical reasons’ urging the government to do likewise. Moving beyond its original mandate, the Parliamentary “gold commission” also uncovered the corrupt practices in privatization and foreign trade. Among the subjects of these inquiries were leading executive officials in central as well as regional governments. Even the president’s wife aroused suspicion because of her brother’s involvement in a large hard currency loan from the National Bank. The spate of accusations and insinuations thrown up by the inquiries into official corruption quickly eroded the civility that had characterized Kyrgyz politics in the initial years of transition. In September 1996, following an investigation into claims of government corruption, several leading officials were dismissed for serious financial impropriety and senior members of the government were severely reprimanded. The first Deputy Prime Minister was removed in a government reorganization effected in December, amid speculation that he has been implicated in the scandal. In the month of December 1998, President Akaev took drastic action against crime and corruption. Higher functionaries and officials, including three deputy ministers, were arrested on charges of corruption and abuse of office. This action constituted an intensification of Akaev’s campaign in the late 1990s against financial crime and corruption as a result of which 383 government officials had been dismissed since 1993. In late December 1998 the president dissolved the government, on the grounds that “it had failed to address the country’s economic problems.”

Corruption is also seen in the general and presidential elections in Kyrgyzstan allege many opposition political parties, media etc. E. Huskey maintains that “If the 1995 parliamentary elections present a defining moment, it is not in the consolidation of democracy but in the

33 Eugene Huskey, op.cit., p. 257.
35 Ibid., p.2545.
criminalisation and regionalization of politics in Kyrgyzstan. The entry of large numbers of corrupt businessmen into the legislature was certain to complicate attempts by Akaev to clean out his administration and to make less likely elite adherence to democratic rules and procedures."³⁶ To insure its sway over the distribution of such products as tobacco, alcohol, petroleum, and opium, the mafia participated in the political processes inside the country.³⁷ A disillusioned former leader of Erkin Kyrgyzstan party estimated that approximately, "two-thirds of the new assembly consisted of corrupt officials and businessmen."³⁸ In a meeting with the government called in Mid-1995 to discuss the fight against corruption, the President completed his remarks with strong words directed at corrupt officials and the country at large. "It’s enough. Stop it! stop it! there will be a Judgement Day. Fear God! you see how they drink the blood of the nation and steal, and many of you participate in this. The spirit of Manas will curse you, he said."³⁹

There is also ample proof of corruption and criminalization during the 2000 general and presidential elections, when there were instances of abuse of authority. The Times of Central Asia wrote on 21 March, 2002 that the then Deputy and chairman of a parliamentary committee, Azimbek Beknazorov, was arrested in Toktogul on criminal charges. The voters and the opposition in Bishkek, however, believed that Beknazarov was persecuted for his criticism of then president Askar Akaev and the government for ceding Kyrgyz territories to China.⁴⁰

According to Murat Cokgezen, factors like low income level, massive state intervention, weak democratic institutions, poorly operating legal system and cultural background of Kyrgyz people are responsible for increasing corruption in Kyrgyzstan."⁴¹

The Civil servants who maintain their lives with very low wages, and have no security for the uncertainties of the future are easily attracted towards bribe. Massive state intervention, despite

³⁶ Eugene Husky, op.cit, p. 265.
³⁷ Ibid.
³⁸ Ibid.
³⁹ Ibid.
⁴⁰ The Times of Central Asia, 21 March, 2002
liberalization, i.e. governmental regulations via licenses and permissions also helped corruption to grow. Weak democratic institutions like lack of vigilant roles of opposition political parties, N.G.O’s, media etc. are also responsible for corruption and nepotism. Political influence over the judicial system and corruption in the legal system are the two major handicaps for a well-functioning legal system in Kyrgyzstan. The president can directly influence justices and procurators general, oblast procurators, the procurator of the city of Bishkek and military procurators of Kyrgyzstan. During the 2000 election campaign, both national and international observers agreed that the judiciary was biased against opposition candidates and used it’s power selectively to harass potentially strong candidates. Cultural structures also promote corruption in Kyrgyzstan. Murat Cokgezen maintains that “strong informal and traditional links among friends, family and clan members and in society, both encourage and justify corruption activities.”

It is clear from the above discussion that corruption, criminalisation, and nepotism are spreading their hold in the social, economic and political spheres. Politicians are often too preoccupied with internal squabbles thereby taking the help the criminals, mafia etc. They see everything to the extent their personal interests are concerned than with the well being of the people.

**Growing Authoritarianism**

After independence, Kyrgyzstan adopted a new liberal constitution which is generally considered as a cardinal feature of a modern democratic country. The first Article itself, i.e. Article 1 of the constitution describes Kyrgyzstan as “Sovereign, democratic united republic built upon a legal and secular state and the carriers of sovereignty are the people of Kyrgyzstan.” The first president, Askar Akaev, also displayed a firm commitment for strengthening of democracy in his country. Although the constitution envisages a democratic structure, the tension between legislature and executive over many critical issues cannot be set a side. A close examination of the executive structure of Kyrgyzstan shows that it closely

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42 Ibid., p. 91.
43 Ibid., p. 92.
resembles French Executive presidency. The President has got wide powers to exercise, though the prime minister enjoys certain power to run the day to day affairs of the government.

The political development in Kyrgyzstan after mid-1994, shows a trend towards authoritarianism. According to Gregory Gleason, “Akaev’s lurch toward authoritarianism can be traced to meeting between the heads of state of Kazakstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan that took place in Almaty on 1 July 1994. Pressure from Uzbekistan to agree upon an “Asian development path” apparently persuaded Akaev to abandon his efforts to reach national consensus democratically. Under threat that Akaev and those closely associated with him (mainly family members) would be accused in the autumn parliamentary session of corruption and malfeasance, Akaev decided to strike preemptively at his political opponents.”

He took many drastic actions which were seen as antidemocratic and authoritarian by many observers. He disbanded the parliament, forced the resignation of the government, cowed the judiciary, shut down the opposition press, set up a new electoral commission, and announced the new parliamentary elections in 1995. Lori. M. Handrahan says it is a symptom of totalitarianism. The original western euphoria over President Akaev’s commitment to authentic democracy and economic reform significantly diminished due to increasing repression and corruption.

In the face of deteriorating political and economic climate he grew disillusioned with the democratic constraints on executive power. Akaev sanctioned the formation of a Committee to Defend the Honour and Dignity of the President, which was designed to intimidate those who criticized the president. The Parliamentary elections held in February 1995 reflected the diminishing nature of democratization. It exposed the fragile party system in Kyrgyzstan and growing influence of informal politics based on regional and clan networks. The election provided an opportunity to the emerging plutocracies comprising akims, clan leaders and business groups, to have their say in the governmental decision-making process. Numerous violations of voting malpractices like bribe, fraud and irregularities were seen.

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46 Lori, M. Handrahan, op.cit., p. 468.
The December 1995 Presidential election also symbolized the authoritarian trends in Kyrgyzstan politics. It has been reported that, during the elections, Akaev resorted to a number of unfair practices to win the election. After victory he initiated a number of proposals for constitutional changes like giving the president the power to appoint and dismiss ministers, appointing judges from apex to lower levels. He defended the measures initiated by him as urgent for improving country’s efficiency to speed up economic reforms and check the obstructionist method practiced by the legislature. He put all those reform proposals to a referendum in the month of February 1996. The referendum was approved with an overwhelming majority, with 94.5 percent supporting it. According to Mahavir Singh “after getting the constitutional referendum approved Akaev used this as a means for consolidating his hold over Kyrgyz politics. This can be evident from the harassments which he carried out against press persons and passing of law related to private ownership of land through constitutional means despite opposition from elected legislatures etc. Similarly, in late 1998 Akaev dissolved the government and appointed a new Prime Minister Jumabek Braineov.”

The second election to Kyrgyz parliament held on 20 February 2000 was also not free from allegations. Although the Central Election Commission declared the elections to have been ‘free and fair’, a number of electoral violations were reported by the Organisation for Security and Co-Operation in Europe (O.S.C.E), which expressed particular concern regarding infringements of the freedom of the media and the election administration, as well as the alleged intimidation of opposition leaders. The observers form the O.S.C.E. released a report the day after the elections. Mark Steven’s of Britain, the group’s head, said that “the observers had recorded an unprecedented number of violations. The authorities are accused of interfering in the election process, barring political opponents from participating in the elections, intimidating voters and skewing the results.”

The Presidential elections held on 29th October, 2000 also showed the growing trend of authoritarianism in Kyrgyzstan. The O.S.C.E. observers said that several hundred ballot papers were marked in favour of Akaev, before polling had officially begun. In addition, opposition parties claimed “that they had been prevented from taking part in media broadcasts during their election campaigns.”49 The U.S. Congress’s House of Representatives also criticized the election irregularities in Kyrgyzstan. During a debate on the resolution on “authoritarian regimes in Central Asian States”, Congressman Christopher Smith expressed the opinion that “Kyrgyzstan, which used to be the most democratic Central Asian nation, has lately been moving toward authoritarianism.”50 Neither the O.S.C.E., nor the U.S’s non-governmental National Democratic Institute (for International Affairs), nor the Kyrgyz human rights committee (located in Vienna), nor the international Helsinki Federation, nor the European Institute for the Media had recognized the election won by Askar Akaev as free and fair.51

The West believes that the authorities failed to remedy the shortcoming that came to light during the last parliamentary elections held in 1995. The barring of the opposition leaders Feliks Kulov and Daniyar Usenov form participation in the election, prevention of voter’s participation in the election by the local government officials and police were some instances of electoral malpractices in Kyrgyzstan’s presidential election in 2000. Government officials campaigned on behalf of the incumbent president or used their positions to influence employees subordinate to them. During the election campaign, the news media openly showed a preference for incumbent president.52

Despite all this, the Central Electoral commission (CEC) ruled that the election was legitimate and was conducted in full accordance with the constitution and laws of Kyrgyzstan and in keeping with it’s commitments to the O.S.C.E. with respect to democratic elections. On 10th November the Constitutional Court formally endorsed the results of the election. By contrast to the Westerns views, observers from the C.I.S. Inter Parliamentary Assembly gave the election high marks,

51 Ibid.
52 Ibid., p.18.
declaring that it had “not only been held democratically and fairly, but could also serve as an example for other C.I.S. countries.”53 After the election, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs released a statement saying that the presidential election in Kyrgyzstan “was a step forward in development of a democratic society.”54

The analysis of both those parliamentary and presidential elections showed that the democratic development in Kyrgyzstan was yet to make much headway except for some promises committed in the initial stages of independence. Some political observers see problems like growing regionalism in politics, resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism, growing unemployment and economic recession as factors influencing the democratic development of Kyrgyzstan. The political elite uses these factors for justifying increasing authoritarianism in Kyrgyz politics.

**Falling Economy**

During the Soviet rule Kyrgyzstan was basically an agricultural economy. Cattle herding and animal husbandry remained key components of the agricultural sector. Since it’s independence, then president Askar Akaev stressed on market led reforms. Kyrgyzstan was infact the first Central Asian state to introduce it’s own currency, Som, in May 1993 and government introduced privatization programme in 1994. However, after some initial booms, the economy subsequently declined. The process of privatization was not transparent. According to John Anderson “the legal and cultural basis for private enterprise remains ambiguous for both domestic and foreign entrepreneurs and corruption remains endemic.”55 There was also a rampant tax-evasion. Martha Brill Olcott observed that “Government official speak of 1995 as a “make-or-break” year for Kyrgyzstan’s economy. Government capital investment has fallen precipitously since independence, by 55 percent in 1994 alone. Tax collection is falling with uncollected taxes accounting for almost one-fourth of state revenue in 1994.”56

53 Ibid., p. 17.
54 Ibid.
With the falling economy, unemployment and underemployment increased considerably in Kyrgyzstan. According to Olcott, “in early 1995, the official number of unemployment in Kyrgyzstan was put at 42,000 people, with another 107,300 on forced vacations. Other sources claim that the work force had declined by about 25 percent in 1994. The biggest dislocations came in the industrial areas, with jumps in their 1994 unemployment rates ranging from 370 percent in Osh to 1,020 percent in Talas and even 1,580 percent in Jalalabad.”\(^\text{57}\) There was also a sharp decline in the standard of living of the people of Kyrgyzstan. According to John Anderson, the 1995 figures suggested that 60% of the population lived below the official poverty line and that 18% of the population was in ‘extreme poverty’.\(^\text{58}\) The government failed to provide basic services like healthcare, education, water and sanitation to the people. Gap between rich and poor rural and urban population increased. Many people involved themselves in criminal activities like drug-trafficking, smuggling and religious extremism. Mahavir Singh maintains that “Although government introduced a number of measures through economic reforms rather than improving the socio-economic conditions of the people, it resulted in widening the gap between the high and low-income groups. Reform programme initiated by the government was affected by widespread corruption at government level, which was evident from the report of Transparency Internationals of 1999.”\(^\text{59}\)

The slowdown of Kyrgyzstan economy was followed by decrease in production, high inflation, mass unemployment, corruption and criminalization acute poverty, which provided impetus to the growth of regional, ethnic and religious cleavages. All these issues presented serious difficulties for then president Akaev and his government who were struggling to build a new economic system based upon market principles and create public faith in the new Kyrgyzstan as a social and political system concerned with the welfare of all of it’s citizens.

**Islamic Fundamentalism**

Religious fundamentalism is not a religious concept, though it is directly derived from religious core. By identifying a temporal social struggle with the cosmic struggle of order and disorder,
truth and evil, political actors are able to avail themselves of a way of thinking that justifies the use of violent means. Those who want their use of violence to be morally sanctioned, but do not have the approval of an officially recognized government, find it helpful to have access to a higher source; the metamorality which religion provides. By elevating a temporal struggle to the level of the cosmic, they can bypass the usual moral restrictions on killing.

Religious fundamentalism is not a religious concept because no particular religion can be disdained for its genesis. It is a by-product of other social variables that have tampered and manipulated the religious callings. One can see great variation amongst the Islamic countries in the interpretation of their own religion. What causes this difference? It is the re-interpretation and calculated religious inferences that some desperate section of a desperate society draws that leads to this dysfunctional aspect of religion—the religious fundamentalism.

Anna Matveeva maintains “that Islamic radicalism appears to be increasingly prominent in Central Asia, although fears of Islamic extremism, or so-called ‘Wahhabism’, by the republic’s leadership might be exaggerated. Nevertheless, the social grounds for the emergence of a radical movement of some kind, with an appealing quest for social justice are being fermented.”

In Kyrgyzstan, where the activity of radical Islamic groups is increasingly in evidence, the governmental approach has been different, reflecting a combination of conciliation with a degree of coercion. But the result, according to Matveeva, does not appear to be much different from those in Uzbekistan. The emergence of radical Islamic groups may have “deeper roots in social injustice, poverty, loss of coherent belief systems, and reaction against disorder and criminality. Without addressing these social causes it will be difficult to counter the appeal of anti-system Islamic groups with any positive image, she underlines.”

According to K Warikoo, “with the collapse of the Soviet system and the wave of ethno-religious and nationalist resurgence sweeping this region, the situation in Central Asia has

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60 Anna, Matveeva, “Democratization, legitimacy and political change in Central Asia”, International Affairs, (Vol.75, No. 4, 1999), p. 41.
61 Ibid.
62 Ibid., p. 42.
become politically volatile and socially fragile.\textsuperscript{63} Radical Islam presents a vision of the future and a set of guidelines to reach that goal and is therefore a political challenge. Shahram Akbarzadeh says, "The implementation of Sharia is held to lead Muslims to a Divine Society (Medina Fazila), to an idealized state where the Divine Rule reigns supreme. There is no room for secularism here as Allah's judgment, recorded in the Quran and prophetic traditions (hadith), defines and regulates every facet of social life. Economics, politics and cultural activities are subordinated to the will of Allah. The distinction between religious and temporal is irrelevant to radical Islam."\textsuperscript{64}

The suppression of Islam under communism and the introduction of 'Perestroika' and 'Glasnost' and collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 have ultimately paved the way for the revival of Islamic nationalism in Central Asia with the achievement of independent statehood. Ghoneheh Tazmini says, "The process of enlightenment was organically intertwined with nationalist sentiments and the notion of national revival was intertwined with Islam."\textsuperscript{65} Islam as form of cultural social, political and national identity acquired new scope. A phenomenal increase in the observance of Islamic rites, religious marriages, performance of daily prayers and attendance at mosques in society was noticed. More and more mosques and Madrassas began to open, and the number of persons who entered theological training institutes also increased.\textsuperscript{66}

At the time of independent statehood, popular knowledge of Islam was minimal and so was information or political activism, ideas and debates about religion in the Islamic world. But the arrival of funds and mullahs from neighbouring countries like Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, Pakistan etc. and other Islamic literature by theologians from these countries changed the nature of Islam in Central Asia.\textsuperscript{67} The vacuum created by the lack of leadership from the official Islam allowed fundamentalist groups to proliferate. The growing involvement of outside powers

\textsuperscript{63} K. Warikoo, \textit{Strategic Analysis}, (September, 1992), p. 539.


\textsuperscript{65} Ghoneheh, Tazmini, "The Islamic Revival is Central Asia: A Potent Force or a Misconception", \textit{Central Asian Survey}, (Vol-20, No.1, 2001), pp.63-64


\textsuperscript{67} Ibid.
increased as Wahabi groups from Saudi-Arabia, Iranian Revolutionary Guards and some Sunni fundamentalist parties in Pakistan took advantage of the unprecedented political opportunities.  

The influence of Islamic fundamentalism was not so strong in Kyrgyzstan's early years of independence because of the governmental restrictions on the politicization of Islam. It passed law prohibiting political parties that are based upon religion and has maintained some degree of state control over religion. However, in recent years Islam as a religious tradition and as a form of cultural and political identity has acquired new meaning in Kyrgyzstan. It has taken the shape of religious extremism in the name of Islam. Some extremist organizations in Central Asia, i.e. Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Hizbul-Tahrir are spreading religious extremism in Kyrgyzstan.

Kyrgyzstan's campaign against Islamist extremism intensified in mid-1999, when Islamist groups believed to be based in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan held a number of people hostage in separate events in the southern region of Osh. In mid-August Kyrgyz and Uzbek forces launched air-strikes against Tajik militants in Osh region, in an attempt to prevent further acts of insurgency. In the same month a senior Kyrgyz military commander was kidnapped along with 25 other people by the extremists of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (I.M.U.), which demanded the release of Islamists imprisoned in that country. A large-scale military operation was done by the Kyrgyz government. A series of incursions of Islamist militants were made till the end of 1999, Kyrgyz Security Council Chairman, Bolot Dzanuzakov reported in April 2000 that Islamic militants from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Central Asian Republics collaborated in terrorist training and narco-trafficking. Kyrgyz officials were also concerned that between 2,000 to 5,000 militants had received training in camps at Tavildara in Tajikistan.  

In the year 2001, also, the extremists started a new campaign of violence by making two attacks in one week in the Batken region of Kyrgyzstan. The first attack was made on a border post on 24 July 2001 and second on a radio transmitter station near Chauvai, in the Kadamjai district on 30 July 2001. A small group of them tried to cut through a perimeter fence, but fled after

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68 Ibid.
security guards opened fire. “I.M.U’s spokesman, Zubairibn Abdurahim, confirmed that the insurgents were members of the guerrilla group. “These are our mujahideen”, he said in a telephone interview with the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR). Abdurahim also said, “we are determined to continue our Jihad (holy war) against the regimes in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan”.

Besides IMU, Hizbut-Tahrir is spreading religious extremism in Kyrgyzstan. It is a religious, political, and underground organization. The main political objective of this organization is to change the existing regimes and to create a new Islamic state by means of a violent revolution. According to Poonam Mann, “This Hizbut-Tahrir is very active in Kyrgyzstan. Sources in the Kyrgyz security services believe that the organization has 3,500 members on the territory of Kyrgyzstan, mainly former students of theological colleges, state employees and businessmen. It is making the biggest impact in the south of the country- Osh and Jalalabad regions.”

To keep a closer eye on the activities of the religious organizations in Kyrgyzstan a special council was created on 6th July 2004, at then Kyrgyz Prime Minister Nikolai Tanayev’s behest, to identify any extremist organizations within the country’s religious communities that could potentially divide communities that could potentially divide society. State Commission on Religious Affairs, was of the opinion that increased activity of foreign Islamic and Christian Missionaries in Kyrgyzstan had driven it to the brink of a religious conflict. While the Muslims extremists are active in south, the Christian missionaries have intensified their activities in the north, though the latter is not violent. According to the Kyrgyz Ministry of National Security, “Wahhabi preachers from Saudi Arabia, Iran and other Muslim States have been very active in the southern part of the republic recently. Their aim is to create an Islamic state in Ferghana Valley. And it must be said that they are enjoying considerable success.” Muslim fundamentalists are receiving military and financial aid from abroad. It is steadily increasing. Their chief patron is Saudi Arabia. By 2004, some 2,000 mosques had sprung up in

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70 Ibid., p. 1034.
71 Ibid., p. 1036.
73 Ibid.
the country, most of them in its southern provinces. A large proportion of these mosques were built with funds from foreign sponsors.74

Then President Askar Akaev stressed that despite Islam being the dominate religion, Kyrgyzstan will remain a secular state, and the country opposes Islamist extremism. The increasing extremist activities inside the country especially in the southern part of the country is creating social division and political instability as well as security threat. In April 2001, at a meeting of leaders of the Turkic-speaking countries, the President of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkey and Turkmenistan and Chairman of Uzbek legislature signed an agreement on regional co-operation to combat terrorism and drugs-trafficking.75

One month later the signatories of the CIS collective Security Treaty-Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan-agreed to form a collective Rapid Reaction Force (RRF) in Bishkek to combat Islamist militancy in Central Asia. In January 2002 it was announced that RRF was ready to undertake combat missions. In late April 2003 a successor organization to the Collective Security Treaty was formed, when it’s six signatories inaugurated the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (C.S.T.O.).76 Kyrgyzstan also signed many agreements with China and Russia to fight against international terrorists. In mid-2001, the alliance of six, i.e. China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan named as the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation (SCO), signed the Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism. In August an associated anti-terrorism centre became operational in Bishkek. In August 2003 Kyrgyz forces participated in major anti-terrorist manoeuvre, hosted by China and Kazakhstan.77

Following the large-scale suicide attacks on the U.S. cities of New York and Washington, DC, on 11 September 2001, President Akaev announced that he was prepared to allow U.S. military aircraft to have access to Kyrgyz air space for the aerial bombardment of militants of the Al-Qa'ida organization and it’s Taliban hosts in Afghanistan. In late November the Government

74 Ibid.
75 "Kyrgyzstan", The Europa World Year Book, op.cit., p. 2547.
76 Ibid.
77 Ibid.
agreed to give the U.S.-led anti-terrorism coalition access to it’s military bases, and later, it’s main airport at Manas. Kyrgyzstan undertook joint exercises with U.S. troops in February 2002, which aimed to facilitate attempts to counter insurgency in the country’s mountainous regions.\(^{78}\)

Refugees

Refugee problem is another serious problem which is being confronted by Kyrgyzstan today. It is related to the “breaches of the law” said Akaev, the then president of Kyrgyzstan. In the mid-1996, the growth of Islamic extremists and infiltration of refugees posed serious problem for Kyrgyzstan. Tension on Kyrgyz-Tajik border increased. Requests were made by the Kyrgyz government for assistance from Tajikistan in the rehabilitation of Tajik refugees, who had fled to Kyrgyzstan (estimated to number 15,000 in August). The escalation of the conflict in Afghanistan in September 1996 was condemned by the Kyrgyz government, which feared that the unrest would spread into neighboring Tajikistan. A possible influx of Afghan refugees into Kyrgyzstan was further cause for concern. The peace agreement concluded by the Tajik government and the rebel Tajik forces in June 1997 was welcomed by the Kyrgyz authorities.\(^{79}\)

But as time rolled on the refugee problems grew in proportion, thereby further exacerbating social, economic, religious and political problems.

According to the Interior Ministry's statistics, 11,000 refugees from Tajikistan, 800 from Afghanistan and 223 from Chechnya were registered in 2001. The previous year over 300 foreigners were deported from Kyrgyzstan for violation of the passport and visa regime.\(^{80}\) The refugees were accused of spreading Islamic extremism, creating law and order problems, increasing further socio-economic and political problems like shelter, sanitation, poverty, drugs addiction, drugs trafficking, prostitution, inter-ethnic tensions etc.

Inter-ethnic conflict is much more problematic in the ethnically divided southern region of Kyrgyzstan. Southern Kyrgyzstan, because of its relatively open borders and its geographic

\(^{78}\) Ibid.


position at the end of the road connecting Afghanistan and Tajikistan's impoverished Pamir region to the Ferghana Valley, Osh oblast received a large number of refugees from southern Tajikistan and Afghanistan. Many there feared that further violence in northern Afghanistan could lead to a far more massive influx in the future. A May 1997 visit by the UN high commissioner for refugees, Sadako Ogata, to various countries of Central Asia highlighted the urgency of the refugee issue in southern Kyrgyzstan. As of 1997, 16,000 people had been granted official refugee status. But, according to interviews with UNHCR in Osh, the true number was believed to be between 40,000 and 45,000. More than half of the refugees were ethnic Kyrgyz, creating fears of a change in the ethnic balance where Uzbeks dominate the urban areas of Osh.\(^{81}\) About 20 percent, largely Tajik, had fled from Afghanistan. In the winter of 1996, the Russian news agency Interfax reported that many of the recent arrivals were in dire need of humanitarian aid and that most of the families arriving in Kyrgyzstan have neither clothes, nor food, nor fuel for the upcoming winter. The children could not go to school because they had no shoes, clothes or textbooks.

The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees is the key international agency tackling refugee problems in this region. Although its program in Kyrgyzstan was small (on the order of $300,000 in 1996 and $500,000 in 1997), UNHCR was the only UN agency with an office in Osh; this provided a way to understand more effectively what was going on in the Valley and provided direct support to refugees arriving from Tajikistan.\(^{82}\) Beyond offering humanitarian and medical assistance, according to Helmut Buss, UNHCR's representative in Bishkek, the organization's more important focus was on the bigger picture: capacity-building to cope with the large numbers, linking the refugee issue to the overall economic and narcotics trafficking situation, and creating an environment that minimizes the prospects for conflict. UNHCR worked in conjunction with local and international NGOs that are also active in this area.

While assistance from UNHCR had been important in meeting the needs of the refugees already in Kyrgyzstan, two problems remained. Firstly, as in so many other refugee situations, some local

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\(^{82}\) Ibid., p. 127.
people were unhappy that aid organizations were often providing the refugees with more than they had themselves. Secondly, although humanitarian organization and the Kyrgyzstan government had been stepping up efforts to prepare for a possible influx of refugees from Afghanistan, it was unclear whether the measures would be sufficient. A related problem was that, while many of the past arrivals from Tajikistan had been ethnic Kyrgyz, the vast majority of those fleeing northern Afghanistan were ethnic Tajiks. This put strains on interethnic relations, especially in the western part of Osh oblast near Tajikistan, where there had already been conflicts between Tajiks and Kyrgyz over land and water.83

The increasing influx of refugee into Kyrgyzstan primarily consisting of people from Afghanistan and Tajikistan led to the establishment of advisory centre for refugees. It provided legal and social counseling. It also provided humanitarian aid like food, clothing, shelter, education and financial assistance to the families and children of the refugees. While many people of Kyrgyzstan were poor and unemployed, the economic cost borne by the government for the settlement of refugees created dissatisfaction among them. Thus, the challenge before Kyrgyzstan government was to maintain a balance between the refugees, keeping the international standard of human rights by providing them the basic needs and to contain the dissatisfaction of the citizens of Kyrgyzstan simultaneously.

Security Issues

Kyrgyzstan like other Central Asian republics emerged as an independent country in 1991. Independence was so sudden that it did not know what kind of relations it would evolve with their regional neighbours and others.

The existence of territorial disputes, inter-ethnic conflicts in 1989-90 and the possibility of civil war between neighbours united the Central Asian leaders for the formation of the Commonwealth of Independent States. According to Ajay Patnaik, "Not only were their Soviet-created borders recognized by their CIS neighbours, but were protected from outside threats by

83 Ibid.
The CIS security structure. All of them barring Turkmenistan entered into a CIS Collective Security Treaty signed in May 1992 that also included Russia and Armenia.⁸⁴

Though the CIS framework helped Kyrgyzstan to feel less vulnerable on the security front, but some border issues created difficulties in relationship with its neighbours. Like other Central Asian republics, Kyrgyzstan has a heterogeneous population. Their conflict with each other threatens the independence and sovereignty of Kyrgyzstan. For example, the ethnic clash between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in Osh region of Kyrgyzstan in 1990 created an inimical attitude between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, and Uzbek-Kyrgyz border was closed. The state of emergency remained until September 1995.

The tense relations with Uzbekistan increased with the hostage crisis and a series of incursions of Islamist militants into Kyrgyzstan in 1999. According to Rafis Abazov “the tense relations with Uzbekistan in 1999 spilled over into 2000, with continued disputes over borders, water usage, and frequent interruptions in Uzbekistan’s supply of gas to Kyrgyzstan. In addition, Tashkent was extremely angered over the Kyrgyz army’s inability to stop the guerrillas of Islamic movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) infiltrating Uzbekistan from Tajikistan via Kyrgyzstan.”⁸⁵

There has also been conflict situations over river water, place between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan with regard to the use of the Syr-Darya river. Through numerous hydro-electric stations and dams such as the Toktogul Dam in the Naryn region, Kyrgyzstan can exercise control over the amount of Syr-Darya water flowing into Uzbekistan. A dispute developed shortly after both states become independent, initially over the price of Uzbekistan’s natural gas supplies to Kyrgyzstan, when Kyrgyzstan was unable to pay. In 2001 then President Akaev took initiative to promote “diplomacy of the Silk Road” by improving relations with neighbouring Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan and other Central Asian Countries.

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In April 2001, Uzbekistan laid landmines along the Kyrgyz border and increased the deployment of its army there to combat the incursion of Islamist militants and drugs traffickers from Kyrgyz territories. This action of Uzbek authorities was seen by the Kyrgyz leadership as a threat to the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Kyrgyzstan. In September 2001, the Kyrgyz Legislative Assembly refused to ratify an agreement with Uzbekistan on arm’s supplies. In July 2003, Kyrgyzstan unilaterally removed the land-mines along the border with Uzbekistan. Negotiation on the final delimitation of the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border is still going on. The rise of Islamist extremism in the neighbouring Tajikistan has been great concern for Kyrgyzstan. In 1992 the Kyrgyz government participated in negotiations aimed at ending the civil conflict in Tajikistan between forces of the Tajik government and rebel Islamist groups. In 1993, groups of armed Tajiks had crossed into Kyrgyzstan, to incite an Islamist insurrection among the local population. The Kyrgyz government subsequently intensified controls along the border with Tajikistan and contributed troops to CIS peace-keeping mission on the Tajik-Afghan border.

The influx of refugees and drug-traffickers into Kyrgyzstan has been also a great concern for the Kyrgyz leadership. A customs accord was signed by Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in September 1998, with the aim of combating arms and drugs trafficking. Despite many steps taken by the Kyrgyz and Tajik authorities, it has been reported, in 2003 drugs-trafficking from Afghanistan has increased enormously. The border negotiation with Tajikistan, which had commenced in 1997, is continuing till today without having a concrete deadline.86

Relations with Kyrgyzstan’s other neighbouring Central Asian republics, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, deteriorated sharply in May 1993, following Kyrgyzstan’s sudden introduction of its own currency, the Som. The Uzbek government fearing a massive influx of rubles into Uzbekistan, closed its border with Kyrgyzstan, suspending all trade and telecommunications links for several days. However, the situation improved in the latter years when Kyrgyzstan signed many agreements with its neighbours, like the Interstate Council in 1998, which was constituted as the Central Asian Economic Union, and from March 2002 known as the Central Asian Co-Operation Organization.

Kyrgyzstan has also some border problems with the People’s Republic of China. From early 1997 Kyrgyzstan was concerned by unrest on the country’s border with China, caused by members of an organization called For a Free Eastern Turkistan, whose aim was to create an Islamic state on the territory of China’s Xinjiang Uygur (Uigur) autonomous region. Kyrgyzstan adopted certain policies to prevent such kind of proliferation of Islamic extremism. Later on many Uigur separatists were arrested on charges of spreading terrorism and dissemination. Kyrgyzstan reached a series of bilateral co-operation agreements with China, during 1996, the terms of which provided for the partial demarcation of their shared border, which was undertaken from mid-2001. Another border treaty was signed in August 1999, which ceded almost 95,000 hectares of disputed territory to China.\(^{87}\)

An Agreement signed in April 1997, called Shanghai Five, (members consisting of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan) later known as the Shanghai Forum aimed to improve joint border security. It was again renamed as the Shanghai Co-Operation Organisation and signed the Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism in mid-2001. Now Kyrgyzstan is getting financial and technical assistance from China to fight against cross-border terrorism.

China has also been concerned about the long-term presence of U.S. forces in Central Asia after the Post-September 11 era. Some argue that Sino-Russian interests and their vision of the region’s political future have been severely shaken by the new U.S. military and diplomatic initiatives in Central Asia. Successive C.S.T.O. and Shanghai Co-Operation Organisation (SCO) meetings called for the establishment of an anti-terrorist network, but it was only in June 2002 that the organizations finally approved the opening of the anti-terrorist office in Bishkek. In August 2003, the SCO held it’s first anti-terrorist military exercises. These had important symbolism. China played a leading role in organizing them, and it was seen by international observers as muscle flexing in the face of the U.S. presence.

\(^{87}\) Ibid.
According to Shahram Akbarzadeh “it is clear that the arrival of the U.S.A. in Central Asia has convinced Beijing of the importance of the S.C.O. As a multinational regional body, in Beijing’s view, the SCO has the potential to represent an indigenous solution to indigenous problems. So while the U.S. operation against the Taliban was welcomed, the continued presence of the U.S.A in the region is censured as unnecessary, even smacking of hegemonism.”\(^88\) It has been reported that Beijing is attracting new members to the SCO to energise it. It has extended support for the admission of India and Iran to the SCO (inspite of their uncertainty to be the members) to act as a break on Washington’s advances in the region.

Russia’s role in Central Asia is like a big brother’s role. In June 1992 Akaev and the then Russian President, Boris Yeltsin, signed a Treaty of Friendship, Co-operation and Mutual assistance. An agreement concerning the expansion of Russian-Kyrgyz military Co-operation was concluded in October 1997. They also signed a further declaration on friendship, alliance and partnership in July 2000. For a decade, Kyrgyzstan like the other Central Asian States has faced the threat of Islamic radicalism, terrorism and drug trafficking. These are the main security threats and Afghanistan as the locus of that threat. Though Russia could help on all these issues in the Central Asian republics by stationing it’s troops, it found success against Islamic terrorism arising from Afghanistan a difficult proposition. It was United State’s active military intervention, which ousted the Taliban in Afghanistan.

The presence of the USA in the Central Asia regions is seen differently by different political analysts. Devendra Kaushik says that “The United States is vitally interested in retaining and further consolidating it’s hold over the world energy resources. It is deeply involved in this “Great Game” on account of the region’s potential oil and gas reserves and other strategic nuclear materials.”\(^89\) Shahram Akbarzadeh goes further and adds that besides the desire to capture the energy resources in Central Asia, the U.S.A. has sought for strategical influence to oust Russia and China.

The terrorist attacks in the United States on 11 September 2001 and the subsequent U.S. campaign against the Taliban (in Afghanistan) in October of the same year changed the entire scenario in the Central Asian region. After the decision of Uzbekistan to allow U.S. troops in its southern air base in Khanabad, about 1,200 anti-terrorism coalition forces were stationed in Bishkek’s Manas international air-port. Even after the ouster of the Talibans in Afghanistan, US is not willing to leave Manas air port. It has taken the plea that US presence there would help to prevent a possible return of Taliban and Al-Qaeda and other Islamists extremists in the region. But the longer aim is a permanent presence in Central Asia.

The strategic motivations of Washington’s Central Asia policy has been nicely summed up by Ajay Patnaik “(a) ensuring it’s access to energy resources (b) containing and eliminating international terrorism emanating from the region (c) strengthening its foothold in the backyard of Russia and China. The Central Asian republics, he underlines, have welcomed US military and political support primarily to pull out from their continuing economic crises and also to ensure their regional stability and national security from perceived internal and external threats both inside and form outside.”

In December 2002, Moscow established an anti-terrorism rapid reaction force in Kant, Kyrgyzstan, less than 50 kilometres from American forces stationed in that republic. Some observers say that the cause behind the establishment of the Russian anti-terrorist force nearly a year after the Americans had toppled the Taliban is to counter the pervasive ‘American hegemony’ in Central Asia. According to Alec Rasizade “with Russia’s grip on the region loosening, the United States is aiming to check the expansion of Chinese influence in the region.”

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Boris Rumer quotes a Kyrgyz parliamentary deputy expressing the complexity of Central Asian geopolitics, who lamented that “as if it was not enough that Central Asia is squeezed by China, Russia and the Muslim World, now we also have an American eagle flying over it.”

Thus it can be said that the involvement of the U.S.A. in Central Asia in the Post-September 11 era has changed the geopolitical dynamics of the region. In the short term, it appears to have contributed to regional stability and dealt a blow to local forces of Islamic insurgency and deprived them of a safe haven in Afghanistan. But in the long run the consequences of the new geopolitical realities are less certain.

To sum up, the challenges and limitations to democracy and civil society in Kyrgyzstan are many. Regionalism, inter-ethnic conflict, Islamic fundamentalism, refugee problems, economic decline, corruption and criminalization and security issues are the major challenges to the democratic process of the country. The growing trend of authoritarianism has also posed serious threat to the newly emerged civil institutions in the country. However, these are inevitable to a pluralistic democratic country, like Kyrgyzstan which has always strives to face these challenges since its independence.

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