

# From Stagnation to Sovereignty

The Transition of Kyrgyzstan  
into Independence



The air in Frunze was stale, full of the tobacco which Soviet bureaucrats smoked late into the night as they argued about the future of the Soviet Republic. Inside the White House<sup>1</sup>, the Supreme Soviet remained paralyzed in a heated debate. Meanwhile, outside their window, a large crowd had gathered to protest the very government that had strangled them for the past 70 years (Huskey, 1995: 813).

To understand the transition to democracy in Kyrgyzstan, we must understand the very nature to which Kyrgyz democracy was born. It was forged not from memory of the old Kurultais or from outside pressure, but emerged after heated debate in which 350 deputies remained locked in constant fighting over the future of their state and, in turn, their power.

Contrary to the academic narrative, the transition to democracy in Kyrgyzstan was not without violence. In June of 1990, the Ferghana Valley was overtaken by brutal clashes (ibid.: 826). Two peoples who had shared the land for millennia, the Kyrgyz and Uzbek, descended into some of the Union's bloodiest late-era violence during the Osh Riots, fighting over the rights to the homes and lands of their ancestors (ibid.: 827). This bloody conflict reverberated across the Soviet Union and acted as one of the final nails in the coffin of the socialist experiment.

For the deputies in Frunze, this conflict was the backdrop that framed discussions on the topic of independence. It had shown that the period of stagnation had to end, or else they risked the, for now, local conflict to engulf the entire Republic in the future. Absamat Masaliev, the First

Secretary of the Communist Party of Kirghizia<sup>2</sup>, was the man to whom the conflict was attributed (Engvall, 2011: 15). Masaliev had spent his career protecting the myth of Soviet harmony, just for Osh to shatter it. As the conflict erupted under his watch, he became the man who had failed to keep the peace.

Elections for the new president took place on the 23rd of October, with it being widely assumed Masaliev would become the new president. Under the recent alteration to the functioning of the individual Soviet Republics, each of them saw its parliament directly elect a president. Unlike the other Republics, the Kyrgyz elites were deeply divided on what the future of the Republic needed.

Masaliev failed to secure a majority, with the Chairman of the Council of Ministers, Apas Jumagulov, trailing closely behind (Huskey, 1995: 828). After both failed to secure a majority in the second round of voting, they were disqualified under a law which required a candidate to receive more than 50% of the vote (Engvall, 2011: 16). In turn, both of the leading candidates were removed from the race, leaving the question: who would be the next president?

After the traditional elite failed to secure votes, new name began to circulate among the deputies, that of the President of the Kirghiz Academy of Sciences – Askar Akaev. The name started to be whispered in the corridors of power, even as he sat far away from the governmental halls, (ibid.: 18). While many of the Communist Party of Kirghizia career cadres would have been likely choices, it was known that a

<sup>1</sup> The Kyrgyz one!

<sup>2</sup> At the time, the Russified name for Kyrgyzstan – Kirghizia – was used.

candidate from outside the pre-established party architecture had to be chosen.

Akaev's candidacy, and the subsequent victory, was born out of necessity. Kyrgyzstan was a deeply divided state, where a fragile balance was kept between the North and the South (ibid.: 12). The Osh conflict proved fatal to Masaliev's ambitions. With the violence fresh in memory, the Northern politicians seized the moment to push forward a candidate of their own – Jumagulov Akaev, on the other hand, was seen as the perfect candidate compared to a parliament divided between the two sides. To the Northern politicians, he was a fellow Northerner (ibid.: 20). To those from the South, he was someone inherently alien to the regional politics of Soviet Kyrgyzstan, given he studied and worked outside the Republic in Leningrad and Moscow (ibid.: 20).

And most importantly, because he had lived outside the Republic, he was seen as untainted by the failures leading up to the Osh conflict (ibid.: 20). Moreover, he was a Gorbachev loyalist, meaning he would push for greater reform and open elections, offering Soviet cadres a path to retain influence by submitting to the ballot's rather than party appointment (Huskey, 1995: 813).


On October 27th of 1990, Akaev was elected narrowly, making him the first elected President of the Kirghiz SSR. The spirit of the elections could be felt in the wind traversing the streets of Bishkek. The protests, which had been ongoing outside the White House, ended after the legitimation of the elected ruler. Akaev built his power on public support and that of the pro-Gorbachev faction in the parliament, which allowed him to keep

the old cadre from blocking reforms.

The rise of Kyrgyzstan as a democratic state was cemented by the August Coup in Moscow in 1991. Akaev, unlike his regional peers, immediately condemned the coup and threw his support directly behind Boris Yeltsin (Engvall, 2011: 17). In turn, Akaev branded himself a democratic supporter, leading to direct Western support after independence.

As the tanks left the streets of Moscow and the coup was thwarted, the balance of power shifted in Bishkek for the final time. As the 350 deputies gathered once again, the old Soviet bureaucracy fell quietly. On August 31st, 1991, the parliament which had just failed ten times to elect a president decided to declare Kyrgyzstan a sovereign, independent state.


For Akaev, the transition towards democracy was now complete, his path having grown from that of a compromise candidate to the first leader of a sovereign state. To cement his position he made a decision which no other Central Asian state had taken. He decided to ban the Communist Party of Kirghizia, and nationalize their assets (Engvall, 1995: 18). The party, which since 1920 had held a monopoly on power in the SSR, was dethroned with a singular strike of a pen



by a  
man,  
whose  
name was  
unknown to  
the Kyrgyz  
echelon of power  
just months ago.

The years that followed in Kyrgyzstan were full of frantic experimentation both politically and economically. Akaev opened the state to international investment and organizations, welcoming the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and many other NGOs, all of which made Kyrgyzstan into a hub of civil society organizations in a sea of insular autocratic regimes (Engvall, 2011: 28). Akaev brought upon Kyrgyzstan what can only be described as shock therapy: the economy was rapidly opened through a three stage process, which was meant to

facilitate the transition from a centrally planned economy to a privately-owned market one (ibid.: 22-23). In the end, this privatization was a distinct failure, with much of the previously public property having been de facto gifted to old Soviet cadres and other well-connected individuals (ibid.: 24). The period which became known as the Akaev Spring was one of hope, with a deep promise of change, but also of disappointment and pain.

As the promises failed to materialize, we are able to look more critically at this period of ‘wild capitalism.’ The ‘compromise candidate’, despite his early successes in the late Soviet period, was a source of corruption and unwanted centralisation of power around his post. This eventually led to his deposition in 2005. Today, Kyrgyzstan, after nearly three decades of it being known as the “Switzerland of Central Asia”, has fallen into autocracy. Still, Kyrgyzstan stands out as a unique case of the transition from Soviet bureaucracy to an independent state, which to this day remains understudied and, frankly, widely misunderstood. 

*References:*

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Huskey, E. (1995). The rise of contested politics in Central Asia: Elections in Kyrgyzstan, 1989-90. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 47(5), 813–833. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668139508412289>