

While Kyrgyzstan is recovering from the coronavirus pandemic, the country's electoral processes are in full swing. Worse still, total reframing of the Kyrgyz political landscape over the last two years has been stirring things up for both politicians switching their allegiance and an electorate.

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Political parties in Kyrgyzstan have started their campaigns for the Kyrgyz Parliament, Jogorku Kenesh. The campaign period commenced on September 4, while the elections are scheduled for October 4, 2020. The Central Election Commission of the Kyrgyz Republic (CEC) has registered 16 parties to stand in the country's parliamentary elections. The current, now retiring parliament's composition was installed under, now jailed, former President Almazbek Atambayev. Roughly the entire landscape of Kyrgyz politics, including the once-dominant ruling party, which Atambayev founded and headed, is in throes of transformation today. Having promptly changed their allegiance from a disgraced former president to the incumbent one, most politicians and political parties are starting a new game. Atambayev-built hierarchy fell and the upcoming elections should predetermine the political outcome.

Challenges

Apart from the internal political situation, there are other elements to Kyrgyz politics. At different levels, they influence and shape evolving political factors in the country in various ways. Let us consider three major challenges that provide a framework for developments in Kyrgyzstan in 2020:

International challenge

Kyrgyzstan was not immune to the coronavirus pandemic that sweeps the entire world and the damages it brought. Lives lost, turmoil in health management, and unpreparedness for crises this vast, lockdown and economic recession. All this has exposed the fragility of the state, administration, and the government. The country's vulnerable budget is replenished with external grants and foreign aid.

Challenge of domestic politics

As discussed above, the parliamentary elections are scheduled for October 2020. The country's electoral processes are in full swing, while Kyrgyzstan is recovering from the coronavirus pandemic. The process requires not only the accumulation of all resources, finances, social mobilization, but also PR campaigns, party sales, and CEC arrangements. Pandemic and the fight against it, as an emotional resource, would certainly be used in the race, but we can only guess the impact it would have on the election results.



The culture house in the village of Mayevka, near Bishkek, previously used as a day hospital for coronavirus patients, is now a polling station. Photo: 24.kg

The strategy challenge

The Kyrgyz Republic is now celebrating its 29th anniversary of independence. A rather routine and recurring event at first, escorted by protocol arrangements and statements of top officials, in fact, calls for a greater focus. The reason is simple – the value of Kyrgyzstan's declared and enforced sovereignty. Russia's most loyal ally across the CIS and the EAEU, Kyrgyzstan is subtly returning to its position of a satellite. This is evidenced in a recent strengthening of the Russian airbase in Kant and its preferences supported by Parliament, and the emerged tradition to seek Moscow's endorsement – starting from the

president and ending with the heads of political parties.

The new social phenomenon of “volunteers”

Kyrgyzstan has been at its peak of coronavirus infections only a month ago. We have observed a high level of solidarity and cooperation at all levels in the country. Instead of pathos and rhetoric, there has been real mutual assistance. It's not only the funds of international organizations and business received by the state we're talking, it's those workers and ordinary Kyrgyzstanis that heavily engaged in voluntary work and healthcare activities to help fellow citizens.

Pandemic has exposed the worst in the state; it is reluctant and unable to coop with serious trials. But it also generated the most beautiful thing in society - human and civil solidarity; mutual assistance; a surge of civic activism. The lockdown in spring left some deprived of essential medicines and food, which led to the advent of the first civilian self-help groups. Young and empowered have grouped to deliver food and help health workers, with later lacking protective equipment and other facilities.

The public has recognized new faces, new heroes. The recently formed influencers' scarcity has been stuffed with new names.

It is later that another resource group will appear. Having accumulated or invested their funds, emerging philanthropists have become known to the public, largely owing to social media. Most of them were later invited to the President's reception. While some accepted the invitation, others declined, opted to make the right priorities. Whether by accident or by design, the more prominent names have been invited to join the forces of actively forming and claiming a seat in parliament parties. Time has shown - it was no accident.



Sooronbai Jeenbekov at the end of July met with volunteers and civil activists who assisted the fight against the coronavirus spread. Photo: president.kg

Some further expressed their resistance to the idea of holding the elections this year. They argued that people, the state, and most importantly the political parties, which had little time to form and prepare for the race, are prostrated and not ready for the elections yet. Vigorous debates among experts, in mass and social media, have not changed the pursuit of policies. Without a change in plans, the Kyrgyz public found itself in electoral preparations.

In just a month, the Kyrgyz society has had witnessed tremendous social metamorphoses. ***The actual national solidarity in one month has been replaced by an election race; it crumbled the social coherence and yet again or even more fragmented the society.*** The wrought campaign for the Kyrgyz parliament divided the society into party candidates and their followers.

2010 - 2020 Analogy

Exactly 10 years ago, at about the same time in 2010, our analytical group returned to Bishkek from Osh, Jalalabad, and Batken, that is, from the epicenter of the smoldering interethnic bloody conflict. And in Bishkek, everyone seemed to be devoured in soccer (2010 FIFA) and elections. Promising candidates to the country's parliament looked at us from billboards and a massive pile of handouts all over the city; they've promised a good, peaceful life in abundance. Just like today behind the formal curtain of the not very stern CEC.

Crowdfunding as a new form of fundraising for parties

The first obstacle to the competitive political race is the sum of five million soms (*slightly more than 63 thousand US dollars - editor's note*), determined by the CEC as collateral.

Many observers and activists argue that the mandatory registration fee is extremely high for a small state like Kyrgyzstan. Perhaps this is bearable for the oligarchs but not for civic activists that chosen to enter the political arena. The CEC was relentless here either.

Before the election kicked off in the country, there has been another unprecedented case in the country's political party history - crowdfunding. One of the political parties has raised money for the electoral deposit through crowdfunding. The fundraising campaign has been open to public contribution and view for the list of investors and the amounts replenished. And they succeeded. A party of Kyrgyzstan's young activists, in many ways new faces, the majority of whom have proven themselves during the epidemic at its worst, has managed to raise five million and entered the election race with a new line-up and a leader.

Updates and "new faces" demands

Kyrgyz society has long demanded "new faces". The retiring parliament of the 6th convocation has a reputation of the notorious parliament endowed with impartial metaphors in society, wherein the later chiefly quotes the very same deputies. We do not find it necessary to cite those in this article, given their vulgar, although very reinvigorated, slang among the people.

There is a high level of intolerance towards reigning MPs. The general picture of the VI convocation's parliament might be divided into the following categories of politicians, according to the societal perceptions. "Old", those who were in politics, in power/opposition throughout almost the entire independence period. Even once popular and oppositional

figures like Omurbek Tekebayev are nevertheless unpromising today. This was evidenced on June 29, at the last mass rally in Bishkek for speech freedom, where young participants expressed their frustration with him. Tekebayev, having been a speaker of the parliament and a convicted in the prison, having gone from a young oppositionist and an experienced party builder hardly exceeds the tolerance threshold in a society demanding changes. His rejection of the party leadership was deemed a wise choice in society.

At the last mass rally in Bishkek for freedom of speech, young participants expressed their frustration with the "heavyweight" of Kyrgyz politics, Omurbek Tekebaev.

The current parliament is rather remembered for illiterate speeches, bogus pressing of the voting button, and lobbying of discriminatory bills that were in use in authoritarian states.

The voter attitudes mightily shift because of the current political situation. According to a June 2020 study "Parliamentary elections in Kyrgyzstan from the polls", 96% of the survey participants rank education first among the qualities they want to see in future MPs^[1]. They also want to see new, young and people's candidates. The study remarked a growing demand for a greater representation of women in parliament. More than half of the respondents believe that a candidate's religiosity significantly influences the voter's attitudes.

The parliamentary system as the most progressive regime is ever more discredited in Kyrgyzstan. The performance of the VI convocation only reinforces the trend. The young generation, feeling hopeless, has zero-tolerance in criticizing the situation in the country in social media. The COVID-19 pandemic has compounded the problem. For instance, the video of the president's speech had more dislikes than likes and has later been deleted by the presidential administration. The demand to replace the stagnating ruling class is terrific. But also terrific are the inertia force and a social mistrust in changes in the country after two "revolutions".

Elections without certainty

In a situation like this, fair parliamentary elections could become a decisive factor of changes in Kyrgyzstan. Worse still, total reframing of the Kyrgyz political landscape over the last two years has been stirring things up for both politicians switching their allegiance and an electorate.

The political field in Kyrgyzstan is, therefore, far from being entrenched; it's just being shaped by unions and parties, by allegiance and opposition. But the electorate is perplexed - who and where is their first choice in the upcoming elections?

The following are the factors that led to this “choice without certainty”:

1. The current parliament was formed under the former, now imprisoned, president Almazbek Atambayev. Members of the party with most seats in the parliament - SDPK (Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan), which Atambayev had once established and headed - have been loyal to him. From when he fell into disgrace under the new President Sooronbay Jeenbekov, who, by the way, was plotted to be Atambayev’s successor, things have changed. The political elite once loyal to Atambayev sided with the incumbent leadership. Meanwhile, a ruling party polarizing, and many left it. The political field itself divided, exposing new patterns and sides of former loyalists and forming new political alliances.
2. The COVID-19 situation has opened the way for young people who have opted to go into politics. They disseminated across all parties, prompted the creation of a relatively new party and changed the party lists of other conservative parties, such as Ata-Meken, Bir Bol, and in a sense, Republic. New parties, although still little known in the country, have emerged.
3. The political landscape has yet to consolidate. Party design is mixed, many parties endure rebranding, whilst some candidates manage to change their membership in three different parties in electoral processes. Kyrgyzstan’s political history suggests that with each new government there is a hierarchy of political parties with one dominant party on top, evidenced by the rule of every president in the country. We already observe preferential treatment to certain parties.

Hence, it is very challenging for a voter. The same study shows that 82% of Kyrgyzstanis as of June 2020 did not realize who they would vote for. Most ticked “neither”, and the second majority chose “I don’t know”[\[2\]](#).

Party agenda

It’ll be hard to differentiate between parties according to programs they communicate, almost all exploit the same issues related to the fight against corruption and poverty, etc. We, nonetheless, can distinguish three ways of how political parties position themselves in the 2020 parliamentary elections:

1. Traditional, ethnic, and patriotic content with a common coalescing agenda. They often use sacred symbols, even in party’s names: Motherland, Unity, the word ‘future’ in Kyrgyz, and with the general eclecticism of appeals: “Ata-Meken”, “Mekenim Kyrgyzstan”, “Mekenchil”, “Yiman Nuru” and others. The pathos of the names used does not reflect the broad party ideology and draw differences from one another, but it

does devalue the eternal meanings people give to sacred things.

2. Borrowing from an even larger eclectic and recent past. Judging by the first days of their campaigns, the Party of Democratic Socialism and Eurasianism “Birimdik”, with texts and aesthetics refers to Soviet nostalgia on the one hand; and to traditional beliefs and rituals - on the other.
3. Reformist ideas and new calls from the two parties “Reforma” and “Respublika”, in a way “Bir Bol”, which calls for major changes in society, renewal, liberalization, and democratic procedures both at the local and central levels.

The composition of parties in social terms is also excellent: both by age, and by the persons participating or not participating in parliament until recently, and by the rank of officials. Perhaps this divide is the most obvious - the former (former for a long time) and new (completely new in politics) candidates this time greatly diversified the dull list of the country’s political elite candidates over the years of independence.

Conclusion and (not totally new) recommendation

The elections to the Kyrgyz parliament are not the first electoral cycle that manifests itself not only as another electoral process but also as a kind of forerunner of later developments both on the legal field and outside it, for instance, on streets.

It is obvious that the current government is in a hurry to form its own field and maybe even have a new hierarchy of its own with loyal politicians and institutions. The very start of the electoral process right after the pandemic, the persistence of the CEC, and the nomination at once of several parties with former officials, deputies, and businesspersons illustrate the fast-tracked course of shaping new loyal card for the incumbent president.

Contrary to the old saying, Kyrgyzstan counts its chickens before they hatch. It’s in the country’s political history. In addition, this time, a 2020 pandemic, and possibly generational and worldview changes in society, are spilling out a new cohort of young or new leaders ready to change both society and the state. Right now this is only an ambition to change and reform, energy amassed in creation. It’s inevitable that it, one day, will become an oppositional force. We need to realize that this is normal. In no case should it be pushed into an unlawful field, wherefrom a mere opposition it would turn into a protest force. The opposing views must be represented in the parliament!

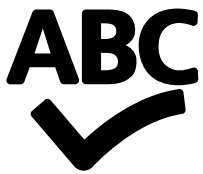
A powerful protest force in the spring in Kyrgyzstan is unpredictable, given the post-pandemic impoverishment, the vulnerable government budget, and other trends. How would the current government act in the upcoming elections? How fair would they be: suppressing

bribery and administrative resources? How equal would the correlation with Kyrgyzstan's spring prospects be?

This material has been prepared as part of the Giving Voice, Driving Change – from the Borderland to the Steppes Project. The opinions expressed in the article do not reflect the position of the editorial board or donor.

[1] *Настроение кыргызстанцев перед выборами в ЖК. Основные выводы исследования. Kaktus.media.*
https://kaktus.media/doc/418810_nastroenie_kyrgyzstancsev_pered_vyborami_v_jk._osnovnye_vyvody_issledovaniia_video.html

[2] Ibid.



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