Development of Parliamentary Democracy in Kyrgyzstan: Lessons and Prospects

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One step for a small nation, one big leap for democracy

A new convocation of the Parliament started its work in the Kyrgyz Republic. The parliamentary elections in this small country went largely unnoticed by the world media. However, these were some of the most important elections for the development of democracy in Central Asia in particular and the world in large.

By conducting fair and transparent elections, the Kyrgyz Republic proved that democracy is possible in developing countries, despite the theory that democracy can only exist in developed Western nations, while authoritarianism is the best system for developing countries.

As opposed to many post-Soviet countries, where elections are attended by 99% of population, and the ruling candidates get 99% of votes, in Kyrgyzstan the results were not known in advance.

Another feature of these elections is the absence of rigging and mass manipulations of the results, which were the common feature of previous elections. New technologies allowed for implementation of the principle: “One citizen – one vote”.
Kyrgyzstan’s Parliamentary Democracy

Five years ago, after much debate, the Kyrgyz Republic adopted parliamentary system of government. Opponents of this new system, both domestic and foreign, saw the change as an inappropriate imitation of western lifestyle. They predicted the new system would not last long, five years at most. The new system should have sunk into oblivion along with the parliament.

Yet, the Kyrgyz Parliamentarianism displays its survivability and is in demand. Since the last convocation of the Kyrgyz Parliament started work in 2010, street protests moved inside its walls and transformed into political debates. Apparently the new parliament has satisfied a primary goal: to clear the streets and squares of countless protesters and negativity.

Elections-2015

The results of the Kyrgyz Republic’s recent parliamentary election refute pessimistic conclusions and furthermore confirm the universality of parliamentary democracy – perhaps it is not just the privilege of western civilization.

Election Process

According to expert opinion, the use of new technologies such as biometric data and automatic voting machines helped hold fair elections. The new measures have reduced risks of falsifications of results to a minimum.

“The election campaign in the Kyrgyz Republic was very public and free political competition” – agreed many observers. In previous elections, voters often already knew the results of the election in advance to the point that they did not believe in the influence of their vote. Voters were, unsurprisingly, not eager to make it out to the ballot boxes. This time, even a few days prior to the election, nobody, including anyone in the expert community, could have guessed the outcome.

Election Results

For the first time in the Kyrgyz Republic’s recent history, almost everyone – voters, observers, even political parties (both winners and losers) – accepted the election results.

Six of the fourteen parties won seats in the Kyrgyz Parliament (previously, Jogorku Kenesh consisted of five parties). The six parties reflect the whole gamut of opinions in
Kyrgyz society: from Left- to Right-leaning; from moderates to radicals; from liberals to conservatives; from supporters of integration with Eurasian Economic Union to adherents of a new, independent Kyrgyz course of development.

Regional Context

Still, the first successes of the parliamentary democracy in the Kyrgyz Republic are a matter of concern and increased anxiety to the surrounding areas. Neighboring countries, where power is concentrated in the hands of former Soviet elite, want to isolate this “parliamentary model” within the Kyrgyz Republic and prevent spilling into their own territory—to protect themselves from this “infection”. This “infection” is dangerous, more dangerous than the Ebola virus: first, it attacks consciousness and it is very hard to find an antidote…

In recent years, barbed wire and watchtowers have sprung up on the perimeter of the Kyrgyz Republic, and contact was reduced to minimum. Citizens of the Kyrgyz Republic crossing the borders between of neighboring countries are considered carriers of a dangerous infection at the border check-points.

In the neighboring areas, TV and other media are used as propaganda to create a negative image of the Kyrgyz Republic, painting the picture of a country eroded by this virus. Angry crowds in city square, ruins, and political tension in Kyrgyzstan are common motifs on TV programs, even five years after the April 2010 revolution in the country.

These images are addressed to fellow citizens for edification: “Look what happens when you carelessly begin to adopt foreign practices”. Their diagnosis is: “Kyrgyz authorities are carried away by politics, and as a result they are damaging the economy”. “Democracy” has turned into a curse word.

After watching and hearing all this ravings, somebody really might ask a question: did Kyrgyzstan step forward or step back into a deadlock? Similar questions might come to mind to those who are not familiar with the history of the Kyrgyz nation. Since ancient times, the social life of the Kyrgyz people was based on collective responsibility. Leadership was elected on the basis of consensus. The power of the Kyrgyz nation was not handed by a dynasty, it had to be asserted by a general “kurultay (assembly)” – through the force of compromise between tribes and families.

In other words, the elements of a parliamentary democracy in an embryonic form have existed since those times. Today, they are adapted to state-of-the-art requirements. This is the definitive key to success in building a parliamentary democracy in the Kyrgyz
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Republic.

**Challenges and Opportunities**

So, motley Kyrgyz crowds on streets with countless demands now have enough room in one assembly hall of the National Parliament. There is no doubt that for the next five years this place will be an arena for heated debates and an incubator for the country’s most important decisions—a place directly relevant to the future of the Kyrgyz Republic.

With these stakes, the quality of sixth convocation of Jogorku Kenesh has been a heated discussion in Kyrgyz society and on everybody’s lips since the announcement of the election results.

The new parliament has to solve problems left to it by predecessors: first of all, to form an effective and stable government, which will in turn help with creating jobs, reducing the unemployment and poverty rates, diversifying of national economy.

At the moment, the Kyrgyz Republic endures flux of an economic crisis. Its external debt is well over half of its GDP. The number of citizens who have left country to send home remittances is close to one million, a substantial fraction for a six million-person country. How the voters’ choices were appropriate for challenges of the current situation is hard to say.

**Conclusion**

What does this all mean? Above all, it means that elections in the Kyrgyz Republic have stopped being a ruse of the ruling class. In this country, the institution of democracy has begun to work.

Just prior to the election, The National Institute for Strategic Studies of the Kyrgyz Republic (NISS KR) conducted a survey of voters on their sympathies for the parties. If their results are to be trusted, in most cases voter displayed skepticism to the creation of pre-election blocks between parties that did not have mutual aims. Voters considered this move a method of gaining votes through false pretenses. An important conclusion can be seen in this survey: The voter no longer allows himself to be subject of manipulation. Quite the contrary, he understands the behavior he expects of the parties. This symptom is critical in diagnosing of political health of the country.

The Kyrgyz Republic’s success in building a parliamentary democracy in a country, not
to mention in a hostile environment, might encourage supporters of this development model beyond its borders too, contrary to skeptics. The appearance of a parliamentary democracy at such close proximity to our neighbors is regarded as dangerous by some and as a chance for changes by others.