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## EVOLUTION OF OCHLOCRACY IN KYRGYZSTAN

Gökhan Tekir<sup>1</sup>

### ABSTRACT

Kyrgyzstan has been considered as an exception in Central Asia since its independence because its relatively democratic rule has been considered as an exception in the Central Asian countries where the strongman rule has become prevalent. The popular term the Switzerland of Central Asia has been used to refer Kyrgyzstan. Yet, the democratic system has evolved into ochlocracy (mob rule) especially for the last two decades. Different from democracy, which was based on the rule of law, ochlocracy refers to rule of the caprices of the mob. Kyrgyzstan has witnessed several upheavals and revolutions since 2005. Democratically elected three presidents have been ousted because of the mass protests, damaging the political stability. This study aims at examining the political process in Kyrgyzstan, which experienced the ouster of three heads of the state as a result of popular demonstrations. Furthermore, this study will cover the factors that paved the way of ochlocratic rule in Kyrgyzstan and uprisings.

**Keywords:** Ochlocracy, Democracy, Kyrgyzstan, Tulip Revolution, Akayev, Bakiyev, Jeenbakov, Japarov

## KIRGIZİSTAN'DA OKLOKRASI'NİN EVRİMLEŞMESİ

### ÖZET

Kırgızistan bağımsızlığından itibaren güçlü lider yönetimleri altında olan Orta Asya ülkeleri içinde görece demokratik yönetiminden dolayı bir istisna olarak görülmektedir. Kırgızistan'ı anlatırken popüler bir terim olarak Orta Asya'nın İsviçre'si kullanılmaktadır. Fakat, son yirmi yılda demokratik sistem oklokraşiye doğru evrilmiştir. Hukuk düzenine bağlı olan demokrasiden farklı olarak oklokraşi kalabalığın kaprislerinin yönetimini çağırıştırır. Kırgızistan 2005'ten beri birçok ayaklanmalara ve devrimlere tanıklık etmiştir. Demokratik seçimler sonucu başa geçen üç başkan büyük protestolar sonucu görevinden ayrılmak zo-

<sup>1</sup> Doç.Dr., Ankara Hacı Bayram Veli Üniversitesi, Uluslararası İlişkiler Bölümü, gokhan.tekir@hbv.edu.tr

runda bırakılmış, siyasi istikrar zarar görmüştür. Bu çalışma Kırgızistan’da üç liderin protestolar sonucu görevinden ayrılmasına neden olan politik süreçleri inceleme amacı taşımaktadır. Ayrıca, bu çalışma kurulmasına yol açan faktörleri kapsayacaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Oklokrasi, Demokrasi, Kırgızistan, Lale Devrimi, Akayev, Bakiyev, Ceenbakov, Caparov

## INTRODUCTION

The collapse of the Soviet Union led to the establishment five independent states in Central Asia. Kyrgyzstan has been among the poorest and the least stable Central Asian countries besides Tajikistan. Although it had relatively open political system under the President Askar Akayev, corruption, economic underdevelopment, high-level of organized crime activity afflicted the country (Marat, 2008, p. 7). The Tulip Revolution promised change and reforms but the rule of Kurmanbek Bakiyev was also characterized by organized crime’s infiltration into political system, corruption, and nepotism (Furstenberg et al., 2020). Bakiyev was also removed by popular uprising. That time the uprising led to a bloody period for Kyrgyzstan.

The change from presidential system to parliamentary system in Kyrgyzstan proved to be unable to prevent political instability. The latest insurrection unseated the President Sooronbay Jeenbekov in October 2020. The popular demonstrations in Kyrgyzstan are not indicative of vibrant civil society in a functioning democracy but they are the symptoms of a degenerative form of democracy, ochlocracy. The diversified ethnic structure, strong clan affiliations, and weak central authority prevented the development of nationhood in Kyrgyzstan. The competitive clan, business, and criminal group leaders have been using the masses to gain political and economic edge in the country, blocking the way to democracy and statehood.

This paper starts with the conceptualization of ochlocracy. Then, it examines the political developments in Kyrgyzstan since its independence, analyzing how the term ochlocracy can be applied to describe Kyrgyzstan’s chaotic political situation. The factors that led to mob-rule and political uprisings are to be included.

### **Ochlocracy**

The term ochlocracy was coined by Polybius in his work *Histories* while discussing the various forms of political rule. According to Polybius, monarchy descends into tyranny, and abolishment of tyranny leads to the establishment of aristocratic

rule. Aristocracy degenerates into oligarchy. When the excess of oligarchy led to its overthrow, democracy is set up. The chaos and lawlessness transform democracy into ochlocracy (Polybius.VI.4.2.). Ochlocracy is, therefore, the degenerative version of democracy. Ochlocracy is defined as the direct rule of illiterate masses to influence the government crucially. Since there is a thin line between the will of people and ignorant and inflammable masses, ochlos (scums) imitate themselves as demos (political people). Thus, the masses act as angry crowds to subvert democracy in taking advantage of its rules. The demagogues and dictators mobilize masses to manipulate them for political and economic gain (Hasanovic, 2015, p. 61).

Respect to the law and procedure differentiate democracy from ochlocracy. Cicero wrote: “Commonwealth is property of people. But a people is not any collection of human beings brought together in any sort of way, but assemblage of people in large numbers associated in agreement with respect to justice and a partnership for the common good” (De Re Publica.I.XXV.). In a speech at the Canadian Parliament in 1943, Madame Chiang Kai Shek, the wife of the Generalissimo of China Chiang Kai Shek, said that democracy is a disciplined rule that should not be conflated with ochlocracy, characterized by unrestraint chaotic mob-rule, fed by febrile emotions (1943, p. 548).

The absence of law and common interest among people give rise to factions among citizenries. Factions are united by common impulse of passion and interests, harming the interests of other citizens and state. Encouraged by ambitious leaders, striving for fame and power, factions divide citizens into parties and contribute to the polarization in the republic. The masses due to their ignorant and passionate nature are prone to falling into manipulation of the leaders, which represent different business and political leaders (Madison, 1787). The activities of unrestrained factions have detrimental consequences on the political institutions. Abraham Lincoln, the 16<sup>th</sup> president of the United States of America (USA), offered the picture of dangers posed by crowds, which took justice into their own hands. He wrote pamphlet titled *Opposition to Mob-Rule*, addressing the mob’s hanging gamblers at Vicksburg and burning an accused African American at St. Louis. According to Lincoln, these incidents could not be overlooked by evaluating these as carrying out justice in the hands of people. Whether the mob was right in assessing these men executed were guilty or not, someday the mob would likely to execute innocent men by mistake arising from its passion. This would lead to eradication of the walls, which protect the lives and property of citizens. The mob

would see the government as its most deadly enemy since the government apparatus wants to limit the mob's excesses. Thus, the mob would direct its anger to the government. On the other hand, the rest of the citizens, who suffer the ills of the mob, would be disillusioned with the government as the government has failed to protect them (1837). Therefore, the constant mob activity harms the political institutions by eroding their legitimacy. When the political institutions do not develop, the statehood project of the nation fails short.

Social theoreticians such as Erich Fromm and Hannah Arendt were suspicious of social movements, expressing that they are reflections of attempts of escaping from freedom and the ways of achieving political and economic gains of alienated individuals through the fanatical commitment to a leader (Hasanovic, 2015, p. 65). The isolated and ignorant men in the society are the prerequisites of ochlocratic rule. Lacking civic motivation, equality means to them as advancing their own interests vis-à-vis their peers. The isolated and ignorant men only receive and disseminate limited messages, which are suitable for their interests, so they inhabit an exclusive position. Therefore, they form a closed society made up by discreet and limited set of information (Kamitake, 2007, p. 88). This description is reminiscent of Madison's warning of the activities of factions in the state. Factions are formed around particular interests, so their dissemination prevents the formation of common interests in the nation. As they imitate democracy, the views and opinions of the masses would be imposed as common views or interests.

Last two decades the world has witnessed the rise of ochlocracy through revolutions made in the streets by the crowd. The first wave of crowd revolutions was the color revolutions, which swept across the post-Soviet countries such as Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan. The election results of these countries were challenged by the crowds, leading to unseating of decade long strong men in these countries. These countries, however, did not manage to establish a stable democracy. Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan experienced the second and third wave of revolutions. The second big wave of street revolutions occurred in Middle East and North African countries, which led the ouster of thirty yearlong dictatorship in countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen. Only Tunisia managed to maintain a stable political system, others plunged into civil wars. The common *modus operandi* of those revolutions was the occupation of the main street or avenue in the state capital by the protesters. The state leaders, when they understand that they would not be able to cope with the protesters due to weak security appa-

ratus, bowed down the demands of the protesters and resigned. Yet, due to underdeveloped political heritage and lack of belonging to civic identity, the protesters, which united to overthrow the leader, are divided by warlords, organized crime group leaders, or business and clan elites to gain advantage among each other instead of forming a stable political system. This crumbles the political institutions and leads to civil war or permanent revolutions.

The latest known event that reminded ochlocracy was storming of U.S. Congress in January 2021 by an angry mob mobilized by the former U.S. President Donald Trump, who did not accept the legitimacy of the November elections. This attack to the Congress claimed the lives of five people and also diminished U.S. prestige in the world. The insurrection attempt in 2021 was likened as an example of ochlocracy. Trump's demagoguery rhetoric encouraged the mobocratic spirit to stay in the power (Lang, 2021). The conspiratorial messages have been used to motivate the crowd. QAnon, the infamous conspiracy group, presented Trump as a messiah who wages war against Deep State led by Satanists. Therefore, it was the faithful's duty to rise up to support the leader (Harwell et al., 2021) Thus, this case demonstrates that ochlocratic spirit could be used to maintain and legitimize existing political situation.

In Kyrgyzstan example, ochlocratic regime reflected itself as permanent revolutions. Three heads of states have been ousted since 2005 by popular demonstrations instead of regular political process. Kyrgyzstan came to the brink of civil war in 2010 during Kurmanbek Bakiyev's ouster but luckily civil war was averted. The latest ouster of the President Jeenbekov demonstrates that ochlocratic regime still permeates the political life of Kyrgyzstan. In order to fully analyze these constant revolutions, this paper offers the development of political structure of Kyrgyzstan since its independence.

### **Kyrgyzstan Under Askar Akayev**

Under the President Askar Akayev, Kyrgyzstan had been characterized as having relatively open political system, afflicted by corruption, and striving to build nationhood sense among citizenries. The President Askar Akayev became the first president of Kyrgyzstan after its independence. He launched ambitious political and economic reform programs and differentiated Kyrgyzstan from other authoritarian Central Asian states. Kyrgyzstan introduced a pluralistic and competitive political life, liberal economic agenda, multi-vector foreign policy (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2020, p. 4). Akayev's liberal agenda allowed actors outside to government apparatus to amass wealth and emerge as elites since they exploited their

position to secure control over privatized assets (Radnitz, 2010, p. 63). The elites in Kyrgyzstan solidified bases to gain political power and formed coalitions with other elites to pursue common interests (Radnitz, 2010, p. 53). By the mid-1990s, however, Akayev's rule evolved into authoritarian style of government, plagued by nepotism, corruption, and poverty (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2020, p. 5). Akayev's son-in-law Adily Toygonbaev had been controlling key state and private enterprises. Akayev's son Aidar Akayev had taken over private enterprises forcefully. Those enterprises had been backed by Akayev administration, which exempted them from the taxes. Corruption, on the other hand, had been part of daily life of citizens (Soltobaev, 2005).

One of the most important challenge for Akayev has been to achieve nationhood in a country divided by ethnic and clan lines. Kyrgyzstan hosts almost 70 different ethnic groups (Country Watch, 2020, p. 3). Ethnic Kyrgyz is further divided into 40 clan lineages (Ismailbekova, 2018, p. 195). Clan dependency and regionalism foster nepotism and corruption, furthering division in the country and preventing the national unity (Berdikeeva, 2006). In order to give these groups a common national identity Askar Akayev developed several projects. The first project was Kyrgyzstan is Our Common Home project, which aims at developing a civic identity, while recognizing each ethnic groups' identity in Kyrgyzstan (Marat, 2008, p. 31). However, this project was not widely accepted. In line with Akayev's rising authoritarian tendencies in the mid-1990s, he turned into nationalistic view in defining citizenship in Kyrgyzstan. In the mid-1990s, Akayev initiated Manas-1000 project, emphasizing the role of Manas epic in determining Kyrgyz identity. Citizenship project tried to be built upon traditional Kyrgyz values (Marat, 2008, p. 35). This meant that the initial civic project had been replaced by a nationalistic one. Akayev's controversial third term introduced another big project called as 2,200 years of Kyrgyz civilization. This project coincided with widespread poverty, corruption, political instability, and violent terrorist attacks, causing public ridicule (Marat, 2008, p. 40). These attempts demonstrate that even the President Akayev had not had coherent plan to develop a common identity which could unite the country divided along ethnic or clan lines. This eventually led to factionalism, which promoted partial interests instead of common Kyrgyz interests. Since the mid-1990s Akayev abandoned his ideal of turning Kyrgyzstan into Switzerland in Central Asia by deviating from liberal democratic project. The presidential power was expanded in the expense of the parliament. His rule started to resemble other Central Asian autocratic states. The opposition was harassed, its

leaders were arrested. Besides his family, his entourage and network expanded corrupt activities (Bunce et al., 2011, p. 170).

The beginning of 2000s signaled the end of Akayev regime. The large-scale mass protests occurred in Aksy in November 2002. The combination of vertical and horizontal networks played role in mobilizing people against the government (Radnitz, 2005, p. 406). The person, who formed the networks that carried out the protests, was Azimbek Beknazarov. After the independence of Kyrgyzstan, he rose through the ranks of the law system, being the chief investigator in Jalalabad. He, then, became a member of parliament. He was a popular politician feared by Akayev. In January 2002, he was arrested because of his actions as a legal prosecutor in 1995. After his arrest, he and his associates tried to mobilize people in Aksy, which is his support base, to pressure the government. A rumor that he was beaten in prison incited thousands of peoples to gather in the central square on 19 February. The government gave in. Beknazarov was released but the charges were not dropped. In May, the second wave of protests began. Even the resignation of Akayev was demanded. The charges were dropped and Beknazarov was reinstated in the parliament (Radnitz, 2010, pp. 111–118). This case demonstrates the weaponization of the crowds for the interest of the local elite Beknazarov and the fragility of the Akayev regime. Aksy event was the prelude of the Tulip Revolution that occurred in 2005.

### **The Tulip Revolution**

The fraudulent election in February 2005 was the catalyst of the demonstration that led to the ouster of Akayev. First demonstrations began in the South before the elections because of the removal of favored candidates from the ballots. The defeat of the patrons of the patronages caused the intensifications of the protests. The organized crime members helped protesters to take over some government buildings from March 4 to March 8 (Bunce et al., 2011, p. 174). The Kyrgyz troops were deployed to suppress the revolt in the southern Jalalabad and Osh. The clashes between the government troops and protesters left dozens wounded. Hundreds of protesters were arrested including the leaders of the opposition (Marat, 2006, p. 11). The opposition groups bounced back. From March 20, the protesters repelled the security groups in the south. The half of the country came under the control of the opposition. While the south was resisting successfully the government, the protests spread to Bishkek. On March 24, over ten thousand protesters gathered in Bishkek and broke into the White House, where the President

of Kyrgyzstan resides. Akayev had to flee to firstly Uzbekistan and then to Russia (Bunce et al., 2011, p. 175).

The root of the Tulip Revolution emanated from the south of Kyrgyzstan. The existing north-south polarity manifested itself in the overthrow of Akayev. Akayev had already low popularity in the south. He and his wife were from northern part of the country. His administration mostly excluded southerners (Radnitz, 2010, p. 63). In 1995, presidential election, his competitor Absamat Masaliyev had captured 80 percent of votes in the south (Marat, 2008, p. 38). Ryan Kennedy observes that the revolution was “motivated less by national than by regional concerns, centered in the economically depressed and politically marginalized south” (2014, p. 275). The protests started because a popular elite Jusupbek Jeenbekov lost the seat to Rashid Tagayev, supported by the president Akayev. The crowd claimed that the result was rigged. The protesters were soon joined by other protesters organized by Jusupbek Bakiyev, the younger brother of Kurmanbek Bakiyev, the head of main opposition party, the PMK. The administrative buildings in Jalalabad were invaded by the crowd. Soon, the protests spread to Osh, another southern city. Then, through the links that exist within the PMK Bakiyev and Rosa Otumbeyeva translated these protests into national level by organizing protests in Bishkek (Radnitz, 2010, pp. 144–148). The protesters carried out the elites’ political demands instead of their democratization desires. The profiles of the demonstrators confirm this assumption. Instead of young politically motivated protesters, the old people, retirees, and unemployed youth comprised the protesters (Tudoroiu, 2007, p. 333).

Interregional alliance built by autonomous elites transformed regional grievances of petty people into nation-wide protests (Radnitz, 2010, p. 265). Independent business interests, informal networks, clans, and patronage hierarchies that developed under Akayev brought the end of Akayev regime in 2005 (Radnitz, 2006, p. 132). Thus, the Tulip Revolution could be considered as top-down revolution instead of bottom-up revolution.

### **Bakiyev’s Rise and Fall**

Kurmanbek Bakiyev was born in the southern part of Kyrgyzstan, Jalalabad in 1941. He briefly served as a Prime Minister under Akayev regime in 2001. He was one of the leaders of the Tulip Revolution as the head of the PMK. After the Tulip Revolution, he became the president (Country Watch, 2020, p. 18). Bakiyev placed emphasis on satisfying other elites that participated in the overthrow of Akayev. Felix Kulov, who was imprisoned during Akayev’s term, became the



Prime Minister. His premiership was important because he was from the northern part of Kyrgyzstan, so a tandem was set up in the administration. Roza Otumbayeva, another important figure of the Tulip Revolution, became Foreign Minister, Azimbek Beknazarov became the Minister of Justice. But few months later, Otumbayeva and Beknazarov lost their seats. Kulov resigned in 2007 (Sarı, 2010, p. 37).

The political instability, corruption, and nepotism that ended Akayev's rule soon returned to Kyrgyzstan. In the political life, no group was able to dominate and centralize over taxation and legislation within a territorially defined area, the government could not guarantee the rule of the game or the protection of private property (Engvall, 2007, p. 37). The protests held by thousands of people had become common elements of the political scene (Country Watch, 2020, p. 21). While depriving his allies of the offices, Bakiyev increasingly relied on his relatives. He appointed his brother, who did not have any diplomatic background, as the Ambassador to Germany. He appointed another brother to the head of the secret service. He appointed another brother as the governor of Jalalabad. He made Maksim Bakiyev the head of Central Agency for Development. These appointments attracted criticism from the elites in Kyrgyzstan (Sarı, 2010, p. 38). The administration structure was characterized as hyper-fragmentation. The elements of Bakiyev administration distrusted each other and jealously guarded their positions without forming a common mechanism (Engvall, 2007, p. 42).

The elites gradually abandoned Bakiyev. In 2009, the former Defense Minister Ismail Isakov was charged with corruption and sentenced to eight years in prison after publicly declaring that he defected to the opposition. Medet Sadirkulov, who served as the Secretary of Presidential Office lost his life in a traffic accident immediately after he joined to the opposition. Bakiyev was blamed for his death (Sarı, 2010, p. 38). Gennady Pavlyuk, who was an opposing journalist, was found dead bound by duct tape. Bakiyev was also held responsible for Pavlyuk's death (Country Watch, 2020, p. 25).

The government's ability to rule was not only challenged by political area but also its authority was confronted by criminal organizations. Influential criminal groups sought alliances with political figures to pressure the government and gained concession (Sinnott, 2007, p. 428). The criminal figures use the money derived from illegal activities to create support base in public to manipulate Kyrgyz politics. A Kyrgyz official under Bakiyev administration remarked that: "Our mafia is stronger than our intelligentsia. In other countries the mafia is always separated

from the government. Here the situation is another. We have to fight it in another way, since it has political power” (Engvall, 2007, p. 37).

The practices of the administration and political landscape under Bakiyev’s rule demonstrated that the Tulip Revolution did not bring democracy. Instead, the practices of nepotism, corruption, and the intimidation of opposition under Akayev regime were replicated under Bakiyev rule. The rules of the administration did not change because of the Tulip Revolution but the actors changed. Thus, the Tulip Revolution only transferred the power to the new elite rather than making Kyrgyzstan a democratic state. Bakiyev’s rule proved to be more unstable than Akayev as he could not maintain elite support more than five years.

### **2010 Revolution**

The triggering cause of the April 2010 coup was the increase in the prices of utility goods. The demonstrations started on March 10 in the town of Naryn demanded the government to reduce price increases and privatization of energy companies. On April 7, the unrest spread to other cities in such as Chui, Talas, Issyk-Kul, Jalalabad, and Bishkek. The regional administrative buildings were stormed. In Bishkek, five thousand protesters occupied the presidential office. In the same day, Roza Otumbeyeva declared that the interim government was established. The government included Almazbek Atambayev as First Deputy Prime Minister, Temir Sariyev as Deputy Minister, Olmuzbek Tekebayev as Deputy Minister, Azimbek Beknazarov as Deputy Minister, Ismail Isakov as Defense Minister, Boloz Sherniyazov as Interior Minister. Bakiyev fled to Kazakhstan and to Belarus (Nichol, 2010). When the figures of the interim government are examined, it is seen that these figures were also the agents of the Tulip Revolution that brought the end of Akayev. The alienation of these figures by Bakiyev caused his downfall.

On the other hand, pro-Bakiyev forces fought back especially in the southern part of the country. They seized the regional government administration in Osh and raided buildings in Jalalabad in mid-May. Even the establishment of Southern Kyrgyz Republic was called among the counterrevolutionaries (Country Watch, 2020, p. 28). The security vacuum in Osh led to the ethnic clash between Kyrgyz and Uzbek communities from June 11 to June 15. Killings, rape, and destruction occurred, leaving at least 470 deaths, 2444 severely injured. 400.000 people fled the region, of whom 75,000 escaped to Uzbekistan (Kaye, 2018). The interim government accused Bakiyev of this civil strife. He might have calculated that a possible intervention of Uzbekistan, due to ethnic violence against Uzbeks, could

jeopardize Kyrgyzstan's sovereignty and the legitimacy of the interim government. Bakiyev's son Maxim allegedly financially supported the violence (Rezvani, 2013, p. 70). These events demonstrated that elite manipulation of the crowds could drive Kyrgyzstan into a civil war due to the weak state structure and tension that exist among ethnic groups.

Dr. Marta Brill Olcott argues that Bakiyev was ousted because he lost the support of the population, alienated political elite and businessmen, and presided over a weak security force. The concentration of power in political and economic life in the hands of Bakiyev family united elites against Bakiyev. However, after the ouster of Bakiyev, they did not have much a game plan. The elites, who replaced Bakiyev competed with each other for the power. This prevented the consolidation of power by the interim government. Therefore, the government lost control in the south (2010). After being overthrown by the mob, Bakiyev tried to set up a countercoup by mobilizing his supporters in the south against the interim government. On May 13, pro-Bakiyev supporters gathered in Jalalabad. They occupied the city center and demanded the resignation of the governor who did not support Bakiyev. He was dragged and beaten. The pro-Bakiyev figure Masirov was installed as the governor. The interim government's mobilization of Uzbeks against pro-Bakiyev supporters was one of the reasons of ethnic strife between Kyrgyz and Uzbek nations in the south (Kyrgyzstan Inquiry Commission, 2010). Triggering events of ethnic strives between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks indicate crowds have become weapons in the conflict between the elites and the ruler in Kyrgyzstan. This play proved to be a very dangerous in that it almost caused a civil war in the country.

### **Kyrgyzstan Under Atambayev and Jeenbekov**

After two revolutions, the elites in Kyrgyzstan sought to create a more stable and workable political system in Kyrgyzstan. Yet, this process was not seamless. The leaders, who overthrew Bakiyev had different interests and opinions concerning the way that the country should take. The general prosecutor Beknazarov and Finance Minister Atambayev exchanged threats in a leaked phone conversation. Beknazarov blackmailed that he could organize another revolution if his demands were not met. The parties agreed on \$400,000 bribe. Omurbek Tekebayev, the head of the Ata-Meken party, wanted to create a playground where the interests of the elites are satisfied. Among these elites, Otumbayev could be seen as a mediator for those elites. Instead of a setting up a long-term system, the elites agreed on a regulatory system where they could avoid "the winner take all" situation that

they experienced after 2005. Thus, the May 2010 constitution, which established parliamentary system in Kyrgyzstan, was designed. According to this constitution, the parliament was strengthened vis-à-vis presidency. The president is elected for one six-year term. The constitutional articles ensured that no single leader would dominate the political scene in a long time (Marat, 2012, pp. 333–334).

Still, this new constitution was not a panacea for the chronic problems in Kyrgyzstan. Corruption, nepotism, elite rivalry, and regional divisions has continued throughout the rule of Atambayev and his successor Jeenbekov. Almazbek Atambayev is a prominent businessman, who served as Minister and Prime Minister under the governments of Akayev and Bakiyev. He derives support from the north of the country (BBC, 2014). After became the President of Kyrgyzstan in 2011, Atamabayev placed fighting corruption to a number one priority. Fighting corruption led to the arrest of several mid- and high-level officials. This record, however, raised suspicions that Atambayev was targeting his rivals and sparing his allies ( Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2016, p. 4). In fact, Atambayev's circle took the biggest part in the corruption activities. Although the position of the parliament has been strengthened, it has failed to check the corruption emanated from the presidential office. Instead, parliamentary members enter in corrupt activities by deriving power from their offices (Chayes, 2016).

Political parties, which form a backbone in the parliamentary system, lack coherent ideological structure in Kyrgyzstan. They are vehicles for elites to reach political and economic resources (European Parliament, 2020). The practice of buying seats is widely recognized and considered normal. Rather than ideologies parties are organized around personalities. The outcome of the elections, on the other hand, depends on networks, engendered and maintained by local elite groups (Ibraev, 2016, p. 7). Thus, the new parliamentary system has not changed elites' position in Kyrgyzstan.

In 2017, Sooronbay Jeenbekov became the President of Kyrgyzstan. He was a protegee of Almazbek Atambayev (Nogoibaeva, 2018). They both were from the Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan (SDPK). However, they soon came into conflict and Atambayev ended up in the prison due to corruption charges in 2019. The SDPK disintegrated after this clash (European Parliament, 2020). This event caused mass demonstration in Bishkek, but the crowd did not march to occupy city hall. Instead, the leaders of the protesters threatened that the demonstration would spread throughout the country if the government does not back down its

decision to prosecute Atambayev (Eshaliyeva, 2019). It was a repetition of a familiar pattern. The protesters were mobilized for the support of an elite to blackmail the government. It is also a sign that the aimed elite consensus after 2010 revolution could not be achieved under the new constitution.

### **The Third Revolution**

The parliamentary elections led to mass demonstrations in Kyrgyzstan in October. Only two pro-government parties passed the threshold: Birimdik and Mekenim. On October 5, 12 opposition parties declared that they would not recognize the results in elections and took the streets. The demonstrations soon turned into a battle. On October 6, the crowd invaded the presidential building. The jailed elites Almazbek Atambayev, former Prime Ministers Sapar Isakov, and Sadyr Japarov were freed by the protesters. The Central Election Committee was forced to cancel the elections and the President Jeenbekov went into hiding (Furstenberg et al., 2020). Although Atambayev returned to prison, Japarov ascended to premiership thanks to the support of the violent mob. Omurbek Babanov, a former Prime Minister and competitor of Japarov, was attacked by the crowd. On October 14, the parliament nominated Japarov as Prime Minister despite the fact that his party Mekenchil (Patriot) only has small representation. The next day Jeenbekov resigned (European Parliament, 2020).

The absence of state authority in Kyrgyzstan again led to abandoning the rule of law and procedures of democracy. Instead, the political competition has been characterized as tug-of-war among elites. Whoever is successful in manipulating the crowd assumed the top official posts. When the President Jeenbekov fled, only 50 members of the parliament gathered in Hotel Dostyk to declare Japarov Prime Minister. Other candidate Babanov was put forward by Atambayev. Atambayev with the help of the organized crime elements held a demonstration on October 9. However, Japarov's supporters suppressed the rally. Atambayev was taken to hospital, after being stoned and injured (Wlodek, 2020, pp. 111–112).

When Japarov captured premiership, he did not immediately allow the new presidential election to be held. Instead, he pressured the parliament to postpone the election so that a referendum, which proposes transition to presidential system could be held. In December, the referendum proposal passed the parliament (Schmitz, 2021). On January 10, 2021, the presidential elections and the referendum were voted. Japarov received almost 80 percent of the votes and the strong presidency was also accepted with 80 percent of votes (Al Jazeera, 2021).

Personal connections with the elite and popular rhetoric were the factors that freed Japarov from the prison and made him the President of Kyrgyzstan rather than the rule of law. He was the head of the Nurneftegaz oil refinery. He was accused of tax evasion while he was performing his duty. After 2005, he moved to politics under Bakiyev's wings. His sister headed the Issyk-Kul investment bank which was used by Bakiyev's son for money laundering. Japarov was accused of fueling the ethnic conflict in 2010 between Kyrgyz and Uzbek ethnic groups when Bakiyev was removed from the power. In 2012, he organized a mass protest to nationalize Kumtor gold mine. In 2017, he was sentenced in prison for his role of organizing this protest. He tried to kill himself in prison after he heard that his parents were dead. This increased his popularity among the population. He formed a tandem with Kamchybek Tashiev, who is the head of the political party Ata Zhurt. This tandem has acquired the support of various criminal organizations and the radical nationalist movement Kyrk Choro (Forty Knights). Japarov adopted a nationalistic and anti-corruption stance in his rhetoric (Umarov, 2020). This simplistic and populist rhetoric is useful for mobilizing disaffected people in Kyrgyzstan. His power grab has, thus, been legitimized (Schmitz, 2021).

In order to maintain himself as an anti-corruption crusader, Japarov targeted Raimbek Matraimov, who is the former head of Kyrgyz customs. Matraimov was given the nickname Raimbek Million because of his corrupt activities. Japarov stated that Matraimov belongs to the prison. Many Kyrgyz, however, claim that this rhetoric is just for show since Matraimov clan also contributed to Japarov's rise to the presidency (Wlodek, 2020, p. 112). This assessment is most likely true because Matraimov was released hours after his arrest (Umarov, 2020). Kamchybek Kolbayev, a crime boss related to drug trafficking, was also arrested in October 2002. However, he was also released in March 2021 (U.S. Embassy in the Kyrgyz Republic, 2021). These releases demonstrate that Japarov is not ready to tackle the corrupt elite despite his rhetoric to fight corruption. He does not risk alienating the elite in the country. Therefore, the chronic problems in Kyrgyzstan, which are corruption, nepotism, elite manipulation of politics, and the use of the mass for political and economic goals would not change under Japarov's rule.

## ASSESSMENT AND CONCLUSION

Kyrgyzstan has emerged as a relatively free and democratic country when it acquired its independence. The ethnic, regional, and clan-based divisions in Kyrgyzstan, however, prevented the development of statehood and national integration. The relatively free environment, on the other hand, disappeared soon with the increasing authoritarian and corrupt rule under the first President Askar Akayev. The absence of strong security organs in Kyrgyzstan compelled the rulers of Kyrgyzstan to co-opt with the powerful elites in the country. By 2000s Akayev had succeeded in maintaining his rule but his grip on power had been eroding especially in the marginalized south.

In 2002, the arrest of a local elite in the south, Azimbek Beknazarov, led to mass protests in Aksy. The protesters managed to have the government renege on arresting Beknazarov. This event was a first successful case that an elite mobilization of crowds for his political and economic goals. In 2005, co-optation of several elites transformed local protests in the south into national mass demonstrations throughout the country, leading to the ouster of Akayev. Akayev's fall, however, did not bring democracy. Kurmanbek Bakiyev repeated every mistake that Akayev did. Corruption, nepotism, and regionalism continued to shape Kyrgyzstan political scene. The elites, constantly alienated during Bakiyev rule, did not wait too much to topple him because they knew that they could easily mobilize the mass, which was ill-informed, politically disaffected, and receptive to populist rhetoric, through their networks. In 2010, Bakiyev was overthrown.

After Bakiyev's departure, a parliamentary system was introduced in the hope that under parliamentary system the elites could restrain their rivalry without fighting with each other. The system seemed to work for a while. However, both Atambayev and Jeenbekov used the office of presidency for their personal political and economic gains, waging war against their rivals and favoring their networks. In October 2020, the voting irregularities in the parliamentary elections caused mass demonstrations. The protesters ended Jeenbekov's presidency. The crowd lifted Sadyr Japarov from prison to the presidential office.

These events indicate that Kyrgyzstan has been experiencing ochlocratic regime, which is the degenerative form democracy. The whims of crowd manipulated by the populist elites shape the political developments in Kyrgyzstan. The rule of law has been replaced by the rhetoric of the populist leaders, who promise crusade against corruption and nepotism to capture power. When they are in power, however, the state resources have been used to target other elites until these elites set

up coalitions to overthrow the leader, who promise to fight corruption and nepotism. This cycle has been going on in Kyrgyzstan for 15 years. The Kyrgyz citizens play their roles as pawns in this game among the elites. The state institutions have been left weak as strong state institutions do not allow the breach of the rule of law. Thus, the legitimate power structures in Kyrgyzstan could not be established.

Despite his promise to fight corruption, Japarov has so far demonstrated that he shied away alienating powerful corrupt elites in the country. No matter how astute he is in managing elites, the clan and regional divisions in Kyrgyzstan remain. So do the elites of Kyrgyzstan, who have often conflicting political and economic interests. It is not surprising to observe that he would be ousted by the mass demonstrations, organized by the dissatisfied elites.

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