REGIONALISM AND STATE-BUILDING IN KYRGYZSTAN

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Introduction

During the Soviet years, while on the one hand the titular nationality was being consolidated culturally, politically and demographically, the republics were also acquiring multi-ethnic character like never before. In some cases this was leading to group conflicts as the economy later years showed signs of stagnation and competition for resources became acute. With central control loosening, chauvinistic tendencies in the form of not only nationalism but also of tribalism and regionalism in the republics increased.

In situation of insecurity such as those created by the collapse of Soviet Union, people fell back on whatever form of solidarity that are available culturally or politically. Since regional and clan networks have been a tacit constant of politics in various forms in all the Central Asian states even during Soviet times, not surprisingly there is a speedier revitalisation of these traditional institutions.

The local elite of Central Asia was closely connected to the tribal, clan or regional patronage networks that existed and solidarity was built around these loyalties. It is clear from Central Asia's experience that sub-national loyalties continue to exist and function mainly as patron-client networks.[1]

Regional identity during the Soviet period

Pauline Jones Luong has pointed out that the integration of traditional networks with the Soviet apparatus functioned in a manner that it benefited both the federal and republican leadership. In an interesting analysis the author draws attention to the Soviet form of "regionalism", which functions successfully in Central Asian states even in the post-Soviet period, barring in Tajikistan. These states inherited a system of administration and governance in which regional

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[1] Demian Vaisman, "Regionalism in Uzbekistan", in Yaacov Ro'I (ed.) *Muslim Eurasia: Conflicting Legacies*, London, 1995, pp. 106-07.

administrative heads, 'in exchange for privileged access to political and economic resources, for most part accepted and implemented central directives as their own'[2].

This was made possible due to the Soviet creation and reinforcement of regional political identities, interests, and power asymmetries in Central Asia – or what Luong calls "regionalism". Soviet administrative division within each republic along with cadre recruitment and placement policy institutionalised and politicised these regional cleavages by fostering political and economic competition between regions (oblasts) while consolidating political mobilisation on a regional basis. Economic division of labour between titular and not-titular groups aided this system. The latter mostly were not affected by this "regionalism", thus leaving a large sphere in which traditional loyalties could be used for material benefits.

The republican leadership, argues Luong, had a strong incentive to follow the administrative directives of central authorities in order to continue their privileged access to political and economic resources and also did have the ability to implement central policies through their control over the local distribution of these resources. After independence, most Central Asian states maintained this system of rule by essentially renaming *obkom* first secretaries as *hokims* (in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan) or *akims* (in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan).

The institutionalisation of this regional patronage-based political and economic system (or "regionalism") is also why one can witness relatively little internal conflict in Central Asia despite numerous predictions to the contrary. This form of "regionalism" provided a peaceful mechanism for meditating political conflict following independence, first, because it represented some degree of continuity for policy-making elite in what was a very uncertain time; and second, because it served as a mutually recognised and widely-accepted mechanism for distributing political and economic resources. According to Luong, in Tajikistan, as an exception to this rule, regionalism was not institutionalised to the same degree as others.[3]

In addition to the legacy of "regionalism", argues Luong, the Soviet system directly shaped societal expectations of the proper state role through what can be understood as a form of "social contract" between state and society, which was an implicit agreement that the state would provide for society's basic economic needs in exchange for its political acquiescence. In short, the main internal challenges that the Central Asian states face are essentially two-fold: to maintain regional leaders as "agents" of the republican government; and to meet the basic welfare expectations of society.

From most of the writings on the existence of clan and regional loyalties, it appears that the division helped maintain a patronage network that sustained the

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[2] Pauline Jones Luong, "The future of Central Asian statehood", *Central Asia Monitor*, No.1, 1999.
[3] Ibid.

previous system and the same can continue without destabilising the existing states if the balance in distributing patronage can be maintained.[4]

Rubin distinguishes between "clans" attached to a unit of administration as a phenomenon within the party or state apparatus, which appeared throughout the USSR, and those used for purposes of patronage and mass mobilisation. In Central Asia, too, the territorial identities functioned as patronage networks. Each territorial unit had leaders who controlled benefits paid for by Soviet subsidies and allocated by republican administration to the units. These identities, according to Rubin, were based themselves on larger regions rather than on the micro-identities of traditional clan (*avlod*, etc.) that had prevailed traditionally.[5]

Other experts also suggest that because of the territorial patronage through which Soviet power was exercised, the forms of solidarity were primarily those of the regional "clans". Jack Snyder is of the view that because the patronage was distributed unevenly over various territories and the patronage groups linked to them, states like Tajikistan broke down. Stephane Dudoignon also underlines that differential relationships to the assets of the dissolving Soviet state was the fundamental social cleavage. So does Solnick who notes that post-Soviet conflicts were those related to control over assets in a context of uncertain property rights. These cleavages were articulated with other cleavages like ideological ones. Each of the social categories has a particular regional pattern of recruitment and thus regional ties of patronage became the mechanism of mobilisation. Various forms of parallel power networks that emerged got solidified through the local practice of using kinship as the idiom of solidarity, which gave rise to clans. The conclusion, therefore, is that rather than a survival of the traditional past, the clans in Central Asia were typical products of the 'interaction of Soviet institutions with a local society that simultaneously joined and resisted them'.[6]

Patronage theorists like Rubin neither accepts the view that tribal/clan structures are traditional units that continue to exist as social-cultural categories nor that at times of shortage and crises these ties are used to gain maximum advantages or as survival strategies. These were simply patronage networks that were continually performing a redistributive function.[7]

Even if one accepts the view that contemporary clans are largely formed as strategies to capture assets, their formation was not arbitrary but based on long-

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[4] The rehabilitation of Rashidov, the former Party Chief in Uzbekistan, and others involved in the cotton scandal and denounced during Gorbachev years is seen in this light. In November 1992, the birth centenary of Rashidov was celebrated with great pomp all over Uzbekistan. John Anderson, *The International Politics of Central Asia*, Manchester, 1997, p. 89.

[5] Barnett R. Rubin, "Russian hegemony and the state breakdown in the periphery", in Barnett R. Rubin and Jack Snyder (eds.), *Post-Soviet Political Order*, London, 1998, pp. 131-47.

[6] Rubin links Tajik conflict to the peripherality of the republic in the Soviet system and the pattern of elite recruitment which resulted in territorial identities becoming key to patterns of redistribution. ibid., pp. 131-47.

[7] Ibid., pp. 145-46.

standing cultural differences between regions. These differences have been highlighted, especially in Tajik case, by scholars such as Ludmila Chvyr who point out to the existence of sub-national levels of self-identification. The identities are not in a continuous state of political mobilisation, nor for that matter even the national identity. These identities would continue to exist even if the Soviet patronage networks collapse.

In fact, there is likelihood that the regional-clan divisions would be more visible in the socio-cultural sphere. Cultural revivalism and difficult economic conditions would create conditions for strengthening of sub-national solidarity, which is likely to be reflected in the sphere of politics as well. Anna Matveeva even suggested that since opposition to the ruling elite was either marginalised (Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan) or eliminated (Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan), ambitious regional elite were likely to be the main potential challengers. The patron-client framework in which centre-periphery power relations are exercised are dependent to a large extent on the republican centre's ability to distribute wealth, favours and appointments. Failure to do so could create alternative power centres and lead to political instability.[8]

Luong's model of "regionalism" or Gleason's view that identity in Central Asia should be best understood as 'coalition behaviour' held together by common purpose and not by essential fraternity, suggests that the states are not necessarily destabilised by the mere existence of regional/clan divisions. Their stability would depend on evolving a system that does not allow challenge from regional leaders to the republican leadership and at the same time allows the former to be in control of their territories. However, in the post-Soviet period such a system of balance and stability is increasingly under strain. Earlier Moscow could mediate or tilt the balance in favour of this or that group; in the present context the competition is likely to be more intense.

Regionalism in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan

The scale of complex regional clan/tribe competitions and rivalries has complicated the nation and state building process in the post-Soviet period. The Kyrgyz are divided along rich north and poorer south. Clan and tribal loyalties continue to temper Kyrgyz nationalism. Party and government elites have long been divided into northern and southern "families". Politically the most influential clans came from the Chu Valley and the Naryn region. In the later Soviet years, Usubaliev, a *Sarybagyshese* (*Sary-Bagy* kin grouping inhabiting the Chu valley), headed Kyrgyz republic for about two decades. During *perestroika* Masaliev from Osh replaced him ignoring the opposition of the *Sarybagyshese*. Even Masaliev

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[8] Anna Matveeva, "Democratization, legitimacy and political change in Central Asia", *International Affairs*, Vol. 75, No. 1, 1999.

was removed subsequently and Askar Akaev headed the republic.[9] Independent Kyrgyzstan's first president Akaev, though not from Talas clan, however, enjoyed the support of *Sarybagyshese* group. In the state machinery, the Tugu (Issyk-Kul) and Salto (Chu valley) also enjoyed considerable presence.

This division of political influence, according to Kovalskii, requires a permanent search for compromises on the part of all the clan groups, and this is one of the main features of the power structure in the present-day Kyrgyzstan. He also notes that since independence, not only the *manap* (feudal-aristocratic) clans are being rehabilitated, but also the redistribution of power according to the place of tribes, clans and kin groups in the hierarchical rules are now accepted practices in the Kyrgyz society. The highest positions of power were occupied after independence by representatives from *Talas* who historically have represented the Kyrgyz elite and continued to do so under the Soviets.[10]

It has been reported that with the coming of Akaev (a northerner) in place of Masaliev (a southerner) important appointments were not only from the north but that too from the Talas and Chu provinces in the north. This widened the gulf between the two regions of the country. In fact, opposition to Akaev's leadership came from the south, led first by Jalalabad head of regional administration, Bekmamat Osmanov, and networks associated with him. Osmanov was removed in 1992. In the 1995 Presidential elections, the north-south divide was evident when communist leader Absamat Masaliev polled made a strong showing in the Osh region in the south. Akaev received 97 percent of the votes in the Naryn region, while his opponent Masaliev secured 46.5 percent votes in the Osh region. Akaev, who was outside the communist party political hierarchy and lacked a patronage network of his own, is supposed to have benefited from co-opting the former Brezhnevite party boss Usubaliev. This was reflected in record support he received in the Naryn region in the 1995 Presidential elections. There are other differences, says Anderson, that have coincided with the regional division – more market orientation in the north compared to negative attitude towards market in the south, relatively more religious revivalism and growth of fundamentalism in the south than in the north.[11]

The 1995 parliamentary elections confirmed the continuing strength of regional and clan ties in Kyrgyz politics. Huskey cites the example of Tolubek Omuraliev, a department head in the then Presidential administration, who contested the elections from Naryn with the blessings of the Akaev and the local head of Naryn regional administration. Being a member of the largest tribe, the

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[9] Alexander O. Filonyk, "Kyrgyzstan", in Mohiaddin Mesbahi (ed.), *Central Asia and the Caucasus after the Soviet Union*, Florida, 1994, pp. 157-58.

[10] V.F. Kovalskii, "Democratic declarations and political realities", in Alexei Vassiliev (ed.), *Central Asia. Political and Economic Challenges in the post-Soviet Era*, London, 2001, pp. 236-37.

[11] In the 1995 Presidential elections Akaev secured 97 percent of the votes in the Naryn region, while his opponent Masaliev received 46.5 percent of the votes in the Osh region. John Anderson, *Kyrgyzstan*, Amsterdam, 1999, pp. 39-40,54.

Tynymseitov, in Naryn, he used the network of tribal elders to defeat his opponent from another tribe, the *Sarbagysh* tribe. He won the election in the second round only after a meeting of the leading members of the tribe that decided to ensure his victory following his failure to win in the first round. Huskey also draws attention to increasing desertion in the Kyrgyz army due to narrow regional feelings because of which contingent from the numerically dominant region in each "unit commands" make life difficult and intolerable for Kyrgyz from other regions.[12]

Akaev, though not a part of old Soviet era *nomenclatura*, followed the pattern of past practice of appointing northerners to key positions including in south. He was accused of seeking to create a power base of his own in his home province of Naryn by aligning with old Soviet era party leader Usubaliev and his network.[13] The weakening of the latter's traditional dominance over key republican positions brought the division of northern and southern elite to the surface. Since the ouster of Masaliev who was a southerner in 1990, there were demands heard from southern sections for greater regional autonomy, equal representation of both north and south in republican bodies, formation of a federation etc. One writer even suggested a confederation of five autonomous regions with a rotating collective presidency.[14]

In all such demands the fear of loss of power by the regional elite and their marginalisation was evident. Unlike the Soviet years, there is no Centre to mediate and balance the interests of various regional groups. In those times Moscow saw to it that power alternated between various regional leaders so that no group felt permanently deprived. In the post-Soviet period, however, some regional groups feel more vulnerable since they have less influence over the republican power structures. This has resulted in increasing regional/clan rivalries.

The rising rivalries among political clans, the vast patronage networks determined by ethnicity and geography, has complicated the nation-building process in Kyrgyzstan. Ties with one of three clan "wings" traditionally determine Kyrgyz identity in public and private life. The *Ong* wing includes seven clans from the North and West (including the former president Akaev's clan, the Sarybagysh); the *Sol* represents a single large clan that has its roots in southern Kyrgyzstan; and, the *Ichkilik* has many smaller clans that also have strong links to the South. Informal power-sharing arrangements among clans helped maintain stability in Kyrgyzstan during the early years of independence. However, the balance could not be sustained due 'to the northern clans' reluctance or inability to address the complaints of southern groups', which led to the rising political unrest in 2002,

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[12] Eugene Huskey, "Kyrgyzstan: The fate of Political Liberalisation", in Karen Dwaisha and Bruce Parrott, (eds.), *Conflict, Cleavage and Change in Central Asia and the Caucasus*, Cambridge, 1997, pp. 261, 269.

[13] John Anderson, *The International Politics of Central Asia*, op.cit., p. 90.

[14] Gene Huskey, "Kyrgyzstan: the political frustration", in Ian Bremmer and Ray Taras (eds.), *Nations and Politics in Soviet Successor States*, Cambridge, 1993, p. 409.

according to Khamidov. Many prominent opposition leaders (such as Beknazarov, Tekebayev, Adahan Madumarov and Bektur Asanov) are aligned with southern clans, especially those of the *Ichkilik* group. There was growing cohesion and co-operation among southerners in their common aim of loosening the Ong wing's grip on power.[15]

The removal of Osmanov as head of Jalalabad administration in 1992 and appointment of a northerner Rustembekov in another southern province, Osh, could be seen as evidences of the failure of earlier consensus. Bekmamat Osmanov and his seven brothers headed a powerful southern clan. They were quite vocal against north's disproportionate share in power and were backed by demonstrations in Jalalabad by supporters in October 1992. Another southern politician from a prominent Osh family who enjoyed a lot of patronage during the Soviet era and subsequently became a rallying point of opposition to Akaev, especially in the south, was Sheraly Sydykov. Yet the regional mobilisation then was not serious enough to threaten the national leadership, though in November 1993 some local legislators in Osh demanded greater politically autonomy and even attempted to introduce a new anthem for their territory.[16]

Akaev won comfortably the Presidential elections of 1995, which was attributed to his alignment with the powerful Naryn base of former leader Usubaliev, who subsequently came back as the head of National Security and his group, including T. Aytbaev and Soldanbekov (former governor of Issyk-Kul region), was back in the leadership positions.[17]

Despite his strong grip on power after the 1995 elections, regional discontent continued to be an important factor in mobilisation against the Akayev. This took a bigger shape after the shooting of 2002. In spring 2002, thousands of people took to the streets in the South to protest the controversial border pact with China and the jailing of opposition parliament member Azimbek Beknazarov. The deaths of six demonstrators and 61 people injured in clashes with police in the Ak-Sui region provoked a public outcry and forced Prime Minister Kurmanbek Bakiev's government to resign in May 2002. It shattered the efforts of the regime to unite the two regions under one authority. The resignation of the symbolic representative of the south, Prime minister Bakiev, in the aftermath of the event intensified the regional division leading up to the parliamentary elections in 2005. The largest protests in the early days of post-election unrest in 2005 took place in the south, led by Bakiev.

However, the success of Bakiev does not point to end of nation-building

[15] Alisher Khamidov, "Kyrgyzstan: organized opposition and civil unrest", *Eurasianet.org*, 16 December 2002,
http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/rights/articles/eav121602.shtml.
[16] Martha Brill Olcott, *Central Asia's New States*, Washington, DC, 1996, pp. 105-06.
[17] John Anderson, *The International Politics of Central Asia*, op.cit., p. 90.
T. Erkinov, "Akaev and his retinue", *Central Asia: Politics and Economics*, No. 2, November, 2000, pp. 59-60.

process in Kyrgyzstan. If anything, the coming of a politician from the South, with the support of anti-Akaev leaders from the North, has helped bridging the regional divide. The induction of Felix Kulov (former vice-president and leader from the north), who was in jail while Akaev's rule was being overthrown, as the prime minister is an indicator that the post-Akaev leadership is keen to build a united Kyrgyzstan.

Conclusion

One cannot ignore the sub-national challenges to nation and state building in Central Asia in the post-Soviet period. While ethnic reassertion goes on one hand, there have also been trends towards fragmentation. At the same time, the manifestations of regional sentiments should not lead one to conclude that the nationality itself is a weak category in post-Soviet Central Asia, including in Kyrgyzstan.

The post-Akayev dispensation thrives on the strength of its national character and there has been a strong attempt to balance the representation of both north and south in the decision-making structures. While Bakiev remains the president, Felix Kulov, an influential politician from the north, is the prime minister. The power-sharing arrangement that kept Kulov away from running for presidency against Bakiev, while dividing major government post between loyalists of both camps, augurs well for Kyrgyzstan. Akaev's loss of power indicates that a conjuncture of clan/region based mobilisation and general anti-regime sentiments can spell the doom for existing authoritarian regimes in post-Soviet Central Asia. At the same time creating a proper balance of regional forces is the key not only to the stability of the ruling group but also to the state-building process. Akaev's failure to do so led to his fall from power. The success of the present regime could depend to a large extent on harmonising the regional interests and power sharing between regional elite, among other things.