



OPEMAM Analysis

PRE-ELECTION ANALYSIS:

KYRGYZSTAN / Why these elections are (and are not) significant

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Twenty years on from independence, Kyrgyzstan will on October 30th carry out elections whose relevance can be analyzed historically, institutionally, as a potential cause of further political instability and according to their impact on the country's political and socioeconomic development.

Firstly, from a historical perspective, it is essential to mention the symbolic value of Central Asia's first ever presidential elections with an undecided outcome. Indeed, it is uncertain not only if there will or will not be a second round but also who the candidates will be in case one does take place. Furthermore, these elections represent the first time ever that power will be transferred electorally in Central Asia.

Secondly, from an institutional perspective, these elections are meant to end the cycle of instability that began with the overthrow of former president Kurmanbek Bakiyev in April 2010. The final stage of a three-part electoral process (a constitutional referendum in June 2010 and parliamentary elections in October 2010 were the first two stages), these elections should hail a return to institutional normality with the transfer of power from provisional President Roza Otunbayeva to the new president on 31 December. However, instead of consolidating the current semi-parliamentarian system, several candidates are in favour of returning to a presidentialist system, rescinding the June 2010 reform. However, the balance between maintaining or again reforming the present system seems to be inclined towards the former option, given that only one of the candidates with any possibilities of success, Adahan Madumarov (former Secretary of the Security Council and an ally of Bakiyev), is firmly in favour of restoring presidentialism.

Thirdly, given not only the deterioration of the socioeconomic situation and the lack of progress towards a peaceful and just coexistence among the country's different ethnic groups, it is worth remembering too that elections and political instability are a delicate mix in Kyrgyzstan. Several factors could influence a new outbreak of instability. Firstly, there are no guarantees that the electoral process will be free. Worse, whereas in the 2010 parliamentary elections the benefits of electoral fraud were enjoyed by many, on this occasion there can only be one winner. For now, food, money and other effects have been handed out at rallies, while current prime minister and favourite to win, Almazbek Atambayev, has received accusations of exploiting administrative resources. Whatever the results, it is foreseeable that one or more of the candidates will not accept their legitimacy and will undertake moves to try either to invalidate them, or obtain compensation from the winner. The country's economic and political elite have meanwhile woken up to the fact that these elections represent the biggest redistribution of power since April 2010.

But aside from their whims and machinations, what really puts the country in the eye of the hurricane is the growing tension among ordinary Kyrgyz whose living conditions are getting steadily worse. The result of twenty years of neo-liberal reforms, privatizations, rampant corruption and so much trimming of public spending that the social welfare system has collapsed, is a country with one million internal migrants and around 650,000 emigrants. With little room left to manoeuvre given the context of scant resources - with huge inequalities in the distribution of those that do exist - , structural unemployment and the structural failure of the state to guarantee its citizens access to basic services, this year has seen a mushrooming of social unrest.

Considering the circumstances, what then are the political programs of the candidates? Who are the favourites and what differentiates them? What are their power bases? In Kyrgyzstan, candidates, like political parties, are first and foremost vehicles to promote the private interests of a reduced business elite and its patronage networks, and which during campaign season and inside the country's

political institutions are compelled to ally with other similar informal networks. That said, it is clear that politicians have a greater ability to gather support and assert their patronage in some districts than in others. Order, stability, development, the fight against poverty, and a foreign policy focussed on Russia are common elements in all the candidates programmes. What differentiates them is their relationship with the current executive, their position before ethnic and nationality questions, their regional affiliation (north/south), as well as their emphasis or lack thereof, on the democratization of the country and its system of government. Although some may yet stand down, in total there are 19 candidates - all men - disputing the right to succeed Otunbayeva, although only 4 at the most have any chance of doing so.

According to polling, the leading candidate is Prime Minister Atambayev, leader of Otunbayeva's party, who wields a rhetoric of national unity, intends to consolidate the 2010 institutional reforms and has his main support base in the north. Atambayev has strengthened his candidacy by bringing into his camp other parties and politicians with power bases in the north, like current Deputy Prime Minister Omurbek Babanov or former finance minister Temir Sariyev. The principal alternative to Atambayev is a tandem of candidates with power bases in the south, Kamchybek Tashiev and Adahan Madumarov, both former senior officials during the Bakiyev regime. Both have played the Kyrgyz ethnic-nationalist card strongly, identify themselves as Otunbayeva's opponents, and though Tashiev now seems less convinced, have both declared themselves partial to restoring presidentialism. Until a few months ago, Tashiev was considered Atambayev's major rival, but Madumarov has managed to even out their chances thanks to a bigger investment in the campaign. The biggest unknown is whether the two will at some point unite against Atambayev. Tashiev, who has accused Madumarov of receiving campaign money from Bakiyev, declared last week that the two have been in discussions. Finally, in the last few weeks, the candidacy of Omurbek Suvanaliev has gained force. An important figure in the Kyrgyz security forces and with experience in the executive, his candidacy has gained the support of several well-known political figures.

With just days to go before the elections, the candidates have already established a list of possible scenarios. Consensus is that Atambayev will technically win the first round, although the prime minister's rivals believe that only by abusing administrative resources could Atambayev get enough votes not to have to face a second round. In such an event, post-electoral demonstrations are more than likely. Logic has it that in a possible second round, Atambayev would have to face a southerner. Given this, the prime minister has emphasised the appropriateness of winning outright in the first round so as to avoid a regional confrontation in a second, with the unpredictable consequences this could have. As for the rest, both the southern candidates and Suvanaliev conceive the second round as being so close, that whoever ends up winning (which is to say, they see themselves as losers) must then include the rest of the country's political figures so as to guarantee the country's stability.

In conclusion, these elections have an undeniable symbolic value for the country and wider region. In other respects though, following these elections is important more for the crisis of instability they could set off than for the foreseeable impact of their result on the political and socioeconomic development of the country. There is only possible exception to this claim: the aggravation of the already terrible situation of the Uzbek minority in case Tashiev or Madumarov end up occupying the presidency. While politics remains the preserve of the economic élites, dedicated exclusively to their private battle for the country's resources, the best that can be hoped for from these elections is that they affect as few citizens as possible.