



around the  
**CASPIAN**

# Political Party System Formation in Kyrgyzstan

**Maia Machavariani**

Dublin City University

**POLICY PAPER – 2017, 8**

CASPIAN is funded by the European Commission's Horizon 2020 programme

Downloadable at <http://caspianet.eu/>



## Executive Summary

In the region famous for its authoritarian regimes and corrupt dictators, Kyrgyzstan once regarded as an “island of democracy” of Central Asia, has emerged as the sole parliamentary system, creating the precedent for a peaceful transfer of power by means of competitive elections.<sup>[1]</sup>

Since gaining its independence in 1991 Kyrgyzstan has experienced political turbulence of violent regime change and overthrow of two presidents, first in March 2005 (Askar Akayev) and then in April 2010 (Kurmanbek Bakiev), aggravated by growing authoritarian and corrupt regimes and elites fighting over political power.

Under the newly elected government of Almazbek Atambayev in 2010, Kyrgyzstan has taken a step towards political stabilization and democratization of the state, by adopting the new constitution designed to prevent a single political network from capturing too much power, which transformed Kyrgyzstan from a presidential system to a semi-parliamentary system.

Regardless of significant improvements in political processes, political environment in Kyrgyzstan is characterized by an unbalanced party system, with weak and fragmented political parties, relatively low levels of political competition, high and increasing levels of political polarization and distrust and the over-personalization of politics largely dominated by neopatrimonial links.

### Political System and Transition to Parliamentary Democracy

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Kyrgyzstan has struggled to construct a functioning parliamentary system. The first president of independent Kyrgyzstan Askar Akayev initially appeared committed to economic and political reforms. However, Akayev soon abandoned his desire for democratic governance in Kyrgyzstan and the country developed into an authoritarian presidential rule, eventually resulting in political unrest known as the Tulip Revolution in 2005.

He was replaced by opposition leader Kurmanbek Bakiyev, who also promised significant political reforms, however with his increasingly authoritarian rule hopes for a democratic transformation faded as well. His presidency was also followed by the “Second Tulip Revolution” in 2010 which led to ethnic violence, particularly between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in the south of the country.

The Parliamentary and presidential elections in 2010 and 2011 have become the final step in the transition process towards parliamentary democracy. Despite the dominated neopatrimonial interests, elections have been assessed as genuinely competitive and fair. By winning 62% of votes, Almazbek Atambayev was elected president for a six-year period, limited by the constitution to a single-term mandate.

The revolution of 2010 resulted in the adoption of a new constitution that reduced presidential power and transformed Kyrgyzstan from a presidential system to a semi-parliamentary system with a 120-seat in the parliament.<sup>[2]</sup> The new constitution prevents any one political party to maintain a political monopoly in the country,<sup>[3]</sup> empowering the

legislature and limiting the president's power. The Electoral Code also includes 30% quotas for women, ethnic minorities and young people in the parliament.

On December 11, 2016, Kyrgyzstan held another national referendum to approve 26 revisions to Kyrgyzstan's constitution. The proposed constitutional amendments further decreased the authority of the president, granting more powers to the cabinet and to leaders of parliamentary factions, as well as enhancing the Prime Minister's authority, giving significant influence over the legislature. Nevertheless, constitutional validity of the proposed amendments has been subject to harsh criticism from the opposition groups, generating speculation that the pro-Kremlin leader is planning to retain his power by becoming the prime minister instead.

### ***Parliamentary Elections 2015***

The country's parliamentary election held on October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2015, according to international elections monitors was described as free, fair and competitive, with minimal irregularities.

Parties were required to ensure that at least 30 percent of their listed candidates are women and every fourth candidate on the list is from a different gender. There was also 15 percent quota on each list for ethnic minority candidates. Following the allegations on vote rigging during the previous election, biometrics was also introduced.

The Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan (SDPK), identified with President Almazbek Atambayev, won a clear majority with 27 percent of the vote. Five other political parties passed the 7 percent threshold: Respublika-Ata Jurt; Kyrgyzstan Party; Onuguu-Progress; Bir Bol and Ata Meken party. Parties like Bir-bol, Kyrgyzstan and Onuguu Progress were formed less than one year before the 2015 elections.

### **Fragmentation of Political Party System in Kyrgyzstan**

As a result of the recent constitutional changes, the suppression of presidential power and the monopoly of a single group appear to have been achieved. However, given the history of the political system in Kyrgyzstan, there is a growing skepticism over the durability of political parties and overall sustainability of the current political environment.

Regardless of major improvements in the political party system, significant challenges exist in almost all important areas that affect the dynamic performance and development of political parties in the country.

The political party system in Kyrgyzstan is highly fragmented, with the Ministry of Justice officially registering more than 200 political parties.<sup>[4]</sup> The majority of political parties remain institutionally weak, with no clear ideological platforms. Parties are highly personalized, centered around the leader, relying heavily on the popularity or wealth of their individual members. Party leaders are often successful businessmen seeking office to obtain government influence and prioritizing their business interests, with a widespread evidence of MPs buying their seats on to the party lists.<sup>[5]</sup>

Among the other major causes that feed the fragmentation of political party are structural factors, such as social and political cleavages and informal politics among major political parties. Although the majoritarian system of electing parliamentary deputies has been abolished, the political environment is heavily shaped by clan and regional interests, business

elites maintaining close clientelistic links with particular regions. As the 2010 and 2015 elections demonstrate, Kyrgyz parties often mobilize votes through the regional influence of particular party members.[\[6\]](#)

As parties are able to gain power with no concrete ideological standpoint and policy platforms, often inactive between the elections, parties lack public support and struggle to unite voters around their ideas.

Political opposition is no exception. Despite the active involvement of opposition political parties during the recent revolutions, it is still considered fragmented and ineffective. Compared to 1990s and 2000s opposition activity has been significantly decreasing since the 2010 parliamentary elections. Mutual distrust and internal competition remain the biggest obstacle to gaining wider support in the country.

The constant process of merging and dissolution of political parties also suggests the problem of clashing personalities and the lack of clear vision for future policy directions. The recent mergers between political parties and defections of prominent political party members, prior to the 2015 Parliamentary elections, also point to an unsettled political landscape.[\[7\]](#)

### **Implications for External Actors**

The political landscape in Kyrgyzstan appears to stay unstable in the foreseeable future. The lack of concrete political policies of the leading political parties during the last Parliamentary Elections also prove that party platforms will continue to be volatile.

The current political developments, such as the recent constitutional amendments fuel the speculations on the tendency of growing authoritarianism in the country. Presidential elections scheduled for 2017 is also considered a test for durability of the parliamentary politics in Kyrgyzstan.

The current economic and foreign policy direction of the Atamaev's regime, supported by all parliamentary political parties point towards a further deepening cooperation with Russia and the other countries in the Eurasian Union in trade, economic and security issues and possible deterioration of economic and political relations with the West.

### **Recommendations**

- Support development of political parties, by funding projects aimed at strengthening institutional capacity, internal democracy and organizational capacity of political parties regionally and nationally.
- Support political dialogue with the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary political parties aimed at addressing the lack of political pluralism in the country and electoral practices.
- Support political dialogue between the ruling and opposition political parties aimed at building confidence and improving trust among political parties to ensure upstream democratic transformation.
- Provide opportunities for discussion and deliberation among political parties, government officials, parliamentarians, scholars, and experts as well as civil society

groups addressing the enabling environment for political party functioning and development in the country.

- Closely monitor political developments in the country and particularly engage in long-term and short-term monitoring efforts across the country for the upcoming Presidential elections 2017.

## References

[1] The Presidential Elections in October 2010, create a precedent for a peaceful transfer of power, since the independence of Kyrgyz Republic

[2] *The constitutional adopted in 2010, increased the number of seats in the Parliament from 90 to 120.*

[3] The 2010 constitution prevents political parties gaining more than 60 percent of the seats in parliament.

[4] Kabar Agency, “About 200 political parties registered in Kyrgyzstan - the Ministry of Justice”, December 15, 2016

[5] Ibrayev Omurbek, “Cost of Politics in Kyrgyzstan”, Westminster Foundation for Democracy; Background Paper; p. 2

[6] Ibid

[7] IWPR Central Asia, Kyrgyz Parties in Flux Ahead of Election, September 16, 2015.