

POLITICAL TRANSITION IN KYRGYZSTAN:

PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|-----------|
| EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS | i |
| I. INTRODUCTION | 1 |
| II. KYRGYZ DEMOCRACY: A SHORT HISTORY | 2 |
| III. DYNAMICS OF TRANSITION I: THE AKAEV PRESIDENCY | 4 |
| A. PRESIDENT AKAEV | 4 |
| 1. The political system: rhetoric and reality | 5 |
| 2. Corruption | 6 |
| B. THE FAMILY | 7 |
| C. GROUPS AROUND THE PRESIDENT | 8 |
| D. THE NEW GENERATION | 10 |
| E. BUSINESS ELITE | 11 |
| IV. DYNAMICS OF TRANSITION II: THE OPPOSITION | 13 |
| A. FOR PEOPLE'S POWER | 13 |
| B. SOUTHERN DEPUTIES | 14 |
| C. KURMANBEK BAKIEV | 14 |
| D. KULOV AND THE NORTH | 14 |
| E. THE CIVIC UNION FOR FAIR ELECTIONS | 15 |
| V. DYNAMICS OF TRANSITION III: SOCIETY AND THE ELECTORATE | 16 |
| A. WHAT VOTERS WANT | 16 |
| B. POTENTIAL UNREST | 17 |
| C. REGIONAL ASPECTS - NORTH VS. SOUTH? | 17 |
| D. ETHNIC MINORITIES | 18 |
| VI. LOCAL AND PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS | 19 |
| A. ALGA KYRGYZSTAN! | 20 |
| B. OTHER POLITICAL PARTIES | 20 |
| C. CONFLICT SITUATIONS | 21 |
| D. REGIONAL ASPECTS | 22 |
| VII. PRESIDENTIAL SCENARIOS | 23 |
| A. SUCCESSION | 25 |
| B. A FAIR CONTEST | 27 |
| C. FINANCE | 27 |
| VIII. STATE CONTROL AND THE ELECTORAL PROCESS | 28 |
| A. THE AUTHORITARIAN FEUDAL STATE | 28 |
| B. THE SECURITY FORCES | 29 |
| C. FALSIFYING ELECTIONS | 29 |
| 1. Political pressure | 30 |
| 2. Tricks of the trade | 31 |
| D. CORRUPTION | 32 |
| IX. MINIMISING FRAUD | 33 |
| A. IMPROVING ELECTORAL AUTHORITIES | 33 |
| B. VOTING | 34 |

| | | |
|-------------------|--|-----------|
| C. | MONITORING | 35 |
| 1. | Domestic observers..... | 35 |
| 2. | International observers..... | 35 |
| D. | THE ROLE OF NGOs | 35 |
| E. | MEDIA | 36 |
| F. | DISPUTE RESOLUTION..... | 37 |
| X. | THE INTERNATIONAL ROLE | 38 |
| A. | RUSSIA AND THE U.S. | 38 |
| B. | EUROPEAN UNION..... | 38 |
| C. | UNITED NATIONS | 39 |
| D. | OSCE..... | 39 |
| E. | DONORS/IFIS | 39 |
| XI. | CONCLUSION | 40 |
| APPENDICES | | |
| A. | MAP OF KYRGYZSTAN | 41 |
| B. | ABOUT THE INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP | 42 |
| C. | ICG REPORTS AND BRIEFING PAPERS ON ASIA SINCE 2001 | 43 |
| D. | ICG BOARD MEMBERS | 45 |



POLITICAL TRANSITION IN KYRGYZSTAN: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Kyrgyzstan's society has become more mature since independence but its government more authoritarian. Parliamentary and presidential elections in 2005 offer the chance of a democratic transfer of power that would be an example for all Central Asia. If President Askar Akaev leaves office and allows candidates to compete fairly, it will be an historic moment for Kyrgyzstan and its less democratic neighbours. If he tries to retain power, directly or indirectly, in fraudulent elections, serious unrest is possible, and 2005 could mark the end of the region's democratic experiment. Prospects are finely balanced, and the international community can help tip the balance.

Kyrgyzstan has had a troubled transition from Soviet rule, although it has retained a relatively liberal political environment, with some independent media and opposition representation in parliament. But previous elections have seen extensive malpractice, and the Akaev family has come to dominate both politics and the economy, making any transition difficult. The constitution does not allow Akaev to run again, and he has said publicly he will not. However, scenarios are under consideration for him to continue to dominate politics and ensure that members of his family and entourage retain economic privileges.

The regime's support is relatively weak. Beyond the family and a few powerful advisers, the loyalty of its power base is wavering. The business elite, which should be a natural ally for Akaev's economic policies, is irritated by the family's forays into business. Officials are increasingly critical of the way the political system works and rising corruption. A younger generation of officials supports the liberal policies Akaev rhetorically advocates but is increasingly dissatisfied with the reality of ineffective governance.

The opposition is divided and in many cases dependent on the regime, its members making implicit deals over parliamentary representation or other advantages. Society has changed significantly since the last elections in 2000 and in many places is highly politicised, but it is still not well-educated in the democratic process and often favours clan leaders over issue-based politicians. Local elections in October 2004, a first guide to the new electorate, could throw up some surprises for the regime.

President Akaev will attempt to ensure that loyal candidates win a majority of seats at parliamentary elections in February 2005. A reliable parliament would give him a base for further moves to assert control over the political process. These elections will be highly contested, with considerable pressure on opposition candidates. There is potential for conflict around controversial races if the government seeks to rig results.

The parliamentary elections will set the stage for a presidential election in October 2005. Their results will determine the balance of political forces and may suggest mechanisms for Akaev to retain or pass on political power. The regime has a number of options to avoid a presidential ballot it would likely lose -- for example, a referendum to prolong the president's term or change the political system to diminish the power of the presidency and promote the parliament as the key institution. But such moves could well provoke an angry reaction, not only from society at large, but also from many influential elite figures.

If presidential elections go ahead, there will be several opposition candidates, the most formidable of whom at present is a former premier, Kurmanbek Bakiev. Akaev may seek to promote his own reliable successor but while several names are mooted, the

process would not be simple. Few possess the required combination of loyalty to the present regime and popularity, and there is a real possibility that a weak choice would split the elites.

Kyrgyzstan has a relatively lively civil society, and the participation of NGOs and independent media in the process is important. Although a new electoral code will make traditional mechanisms for fraud more difficult, many possibilities remain, and well-trained election observers are needed. Many officials have little training, particularly in the new electoral rules, and they face constant interference by state officials. Corruption has also heavily tainted past elections.

The international community has a key role to play, but so far its response has been slow and poorly coordinated. A UN election assistance plan has focused on narrow technical assistance to the Central Electoral Commission, but more support is needed for media, civil society and other non-government groups. It is vital to stress the deterioration in relations with governments and international financial institutions that would result if there is not a peaceful, democratic transfer of power. On the other hand, a successful transition should reasonably bring significantly more assistance, especially if a new leadership begins to tackle corruption, economic stagnation and poverty.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To the Kyrgyzstan Leadership:

1. Make a public commitment to free and fair elections, in a joint statement with opposition forces pledging all political players to abide by the electoral process.
2. Reiterate publicly that there will be a real transition of power and refrain from improper interference in the electoral process, such as ordering electoral authorities to ensure the victory or defeat of certain candidates, as has occurred in previous elections.
3. Refrain from manoeuvres to restrict the ability of voters to decide themselves on the political transition process, such as special referendums or constitutional changes designed to preserve the status quo.

To Media Outlets, Both State and Private:

4. Provide candidates equal access to airtime and balanced news coverage.

5. Establish a joint commission, including representatives of leading political parties, candidates and NGOs, to monitor and report regularly on media coverage of the electoral campaign.

To the Electoral Authorities:

6. Make the Central Electoral Commission (CEC) more transparent by:
 - (a) moving it to separate premises outside the Government House, with public access;
 - (b) provide regular press conferences and briefings on election preparations; and
 - (c) open CEC decision-making procedures to public and media scrutiny.
7. Ensure that the electoral commissions at all levels include not only pro-government, but also genuine independent and opposition representatives.
8. Compensate members of precinct electoral commissions for their work.
9. Prosecute corrupt electoral officials.

To Political Parties and Candidates:

10. Form joint platforms supporting a fair electoral process, including commitment to united action against fraud.
11. Widen political debate and direct it more to key issues than personalities by developing issue-based platforms and participating in political debates.
12. Develop programs to train candidate representatives to monitor the elections.

To the ODIHR and Other OSCE bodies:

13. Seek support for full-scale observation missions to monitor both parliamentary and presidential elections and work with the OSCE centre in Bishkek to develop a wide range of election-related activities.

To the UN:

14. Link technical assistance to the Central Electoral Commission to the actions of the authorities in ensuring free and fair elections, using local elections in October 2004 as a measure of government compliance.

15. Revise the UNDP program for electoral assistance to include:
 - (a) more direct involvement of NGOs, representatives of political parties, and media outlets; and
 - (b) training for judges and lawyers in the new electoral code.

To Other International Organisations:

16. Develop a coordinated program of electoral assistance, focusing on providing:
 - (a) voter education, for example through media programs, publications and seminars;
 - (b) training of observers representing candidates and political parties;
 - (c) training of electoral commission members at all levels;
 - (d) support for media electoral coverage;
 - (e) monitoring of election-related human rights issues, and legal advice and support for candidates and other political actors;
 - (f) temporary resource centres in regional towns for the use of NGOs and political parties; and
 - (g) support for NGOs to establish a central information node in Bishkek to coordinate data from the regions and release periodic running vote counts on election days.

To the U.S., Russia, the EU and other members of the international community:

17. Emphasise to the Kyrgyz leadership that concrete political and economic support, as well as the country's prestige, is directly dependent upon success or failure in managing a genuinely democratic and peaceful transfer of power in the upcoming election cycle.

Osh/Brussels, 11 August 2004

POLITICAL TRANSITION IN KYRGYZSTAN: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

I. INTRODUCTION

Democratic development in the five states of Central Asia since their independence from the Soviet Union in 1991 has been largely a failure. Turkmenistan has become one of the world's most repressive dictatorships, with Uzbekistan not far behind. Tajikistan has only limited pluralism behind a façade of tolerance toward an emasculated opposition. Kazakhstan has a more open political system, but there is little expectation that President Nazarbayev will give up power to a democratic challenge in the near future. Indeed all Central Asian leaders have managed to retain power since independence, but are now facing the challenge of how to pass it on to a new generation.

Kyrgyzstan has managed to retain at least some of the liberalism that marked it in the early 1990s. But increasingly the political system has come to be dominated by a small group around President Akaev, the opposition has been sidelined, and independent media has come under pressure. Akaev has achieved much, particularly in laying the foundation for economic reform and ensuring political stability, but his unpopularity is now such that he would probably not win a free election. According to the constitution, he is anyway unable to run again at the next election in October 2005. As Akaev's legal term comes to an end, Kyrgyzstan faces the difficult question of how to achieve political transition peacefully and without losing the gains of the past decade.

Kyrgyzstan is not the first country in the post-Soviet Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) to face this dilemma. Three examples of transition already exist, and all have influenced thinking in the Kyrgyz elite. The most influential has been the so-called Putin scenario. President Boris Yeltsin stepped down before the end of his legal term and supported a young, largely unknown official, Vladimir Putin, for the presidency. After the chaos of the Yeltsin years, Russian voters

liked Putin's firm promises of economic revival and a stronger state. His deal with Yeltsin ensured that the ex-president and his family did not face any prosecution, although many oligarchs linked to Yeltsin were put under pressure. Some, such as Boris Berezovsky, left the country; Mikhail Khodorkovsky is in prison.

The second example was in Azerbaijan, where long-time strongman Heidar Aliyev successfully passed on power to his son before his death. Many considered that Ilham Aliyev, with his minimal interest in politics and reputation as something of a playboy, would be a weak president, but so far, the opposition has been largely crushed, and Aliyev has retained control without serious difficulty.¹

The third and most worrying example for post-Soviet leaders was in Georgia, where a falsified presidential election brought crowds into the streets and eventually led to the downfall of President Shevardnadze. Television pictures of a haunted Shevardnadze clearing out his desk in the presidential palace sent shivers up the spines of many Central Asian leaders.² He reportedly blamed the U.S. and international organisations such as the Open Society Institute, which has led to a perception in other CIS countries that Western organisations are potential supporters of opposition-led challenges to their regimes.

Because most of the CIS lacks recent experience as an independent state, there is a strong tendency to look to each other for political inspiration. Oppositions naturally see Georgia as a model; governments prefer either Azerbaijan or Russia. In truth Kyrgyzstan has its own unique characteristics that make a simple copy of any of these scenarios impossible. But their influence on thinking should not be underestimated.

¹ See ICG Europe Report, N°156, *Azerbaijan: Turning Over a New Leaf?*, 13 May 2004.

² See ICG Europe Report N°151, *Georgia: What Now?*, 3 December 2003.

II. KYRGYZ DEMOCRACY: A SHORT HISTORY

Given the experience of other CIS states, it is perhaps surprising that there is still some point to a discussion of elections in Kyrgyzstan.³ That a semblance of democratic politics remains is due partly to particular aspects of Kyrgyz political culture -- nomadic tradition and lack of authoritarian political customs -- and partly to decisions taken in the early 1990s to forge a political system based largely on pluralism and tolerance.⁴

The first Kyrgyz parliament -- the so-called "legendary parliament" -- was indeed representative. It was also chaotic, and battles between it and the president occupied many of the early years of independence. The desire to push through reforms was one reason why President Akaev used a series of referendums to strengthen the powers of the executive considerably in the mid-1990s.

But such was Kyrgyzstan's post-Soviet economic collapse -- some 80 per cent of the budget had been subsidised by Moscow -- that these reforms did little in the short term to produce marked improvements in living standards. Presidential elections in 1995 were marked by considerable malpractice, but Akaev won without provoking widespread dissent. As dissatisfaction with his leadership mounted in the late 1990s, increased authoritarianism was aimed at blocking criticism and retaining power.

³ The Kyrgyz Central Electoral Commission announced on 10 August 2004 the following preliminary schedule for elections to be held in 2004-2005: primary local councils -- village, settlement and town councils -- on 10 October 2004; parliament, regional and district councils on 27 February 2005; heads of towns with region status (indirect elections) -- on 3 July 2005; presidential on 30 October 2005; and heads of villages, settlements and towns with district status (direct elections) -- on 18 December 2005. AKI-press (in Russian), 10 August 2004.

⁴ Background information on Kyrgyzstan's political system and recent events can be found in previous ICG reports. See ICG Asia Report N°22, *Kyrgyzstan at Ten: Trouble in the "Island of Democracy"*, 28 August 2001; for an assessment of the unrest in Akty district in 2002 and its aftermath, see ICG Asia Report N°37, *Kyrgyzstan's Political Crisis: An Exit Strategy*, 20 August 2002; ICG Central Asia Briefing, *Central Asia, A Last Chance for Change*, 29 April 2003. For ongoing coverage in English, see the reports of the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), at www.iwpr.net, and coverage at www.eurasianet.org, and the Bishkek-based news agency, AKI-press, at www.akipress.org

One democratic-minded official says:

I respected this government until about 1996-1997: there was real democracy. But after the referendum of 1996 we strengthened his authoritarianism. In the second half of 1997 active interference on the part of the family began, and he became more authoritarian...."⁵

By 2000, when both parliamentary and presidential elections were due, Akaev faced increasing political challenges. For the first time a credible alternative candidate had emerged from within his own ranks. Felix Kulov, a former security chief who split with Akaev, was running on a democratic platform. Kulov was not universally popular -- many in the elite feared that he was less of a democrat than he seemed; others believed that corruption had increased while he was in government. Nevertheless, he was gaining increasing support, not just from his northern homeland but nation-wide. Southern opposition political leader Omurbek Tekebaev was also expected to pick up votes from Akaev.

Akaev moved against Kulov decisively, first in parliamentary elections in February 2000. The OSCE concluded diplomatically that these "were not in full compliance with OSCE commitments".⁶

Much of the abuse went on before election day, with two opposition parties -- the Democratic Movement of Kyrgyzstan and the People's Party -- excluded from the vote. Candidates were also deregistered under dubious circumstances, and on election day itself there were reports of malpractice. Some opposition candidates were elected⁷ but not Kulov. Huge malpractice in his constituency prevented him from becoming a deputy, although he clearly won the first round of voting. He subsequently failed to register for the presidential election, after refusing to take a controversial Kyrgyz language test, which seems to have been created largely with him in mind.⁸ He was arrested in March 2000 on vague

⁵ ICG interview, Osh, October 2003.

⁶ Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Election Observation Mission, Kyrgyz Republic, Parliamentary Election, Preliminary Statement, 21 February 2000. At www.osce.org.

⁷ For more details see, OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission, Kyrgyz Republic, Presidential Election, 29 October 2000.

⁸ Seven other candidates were disqualified by the language test, including Yuruslan Toichubekov, who regularly wrote poetry in Kyrgyz. Many Kyrgyz in the north who studied or

charges of abuse of power, acquitted by a military court in July, but rearrested in September and found guilty on the same charges in January 2001. A further prosecution for embezzlement left him with a ten-year sentence. Despite international pressure for his release, he remains in prison.

With Kulov out of the running, the October 2000 presidential election proceeded according to plan. The Constitutional Court ruled that Akaev was eligible, despite the fact that he had already served the two terms provided for in the constitution. He kept his opponents uncertain by waiting until late August to announce that he would run. In Soviet style, he called his decision a response to overwhelming appeals from workers' collectives and other public organisations.

Apart from Kulov, other potential challengers such as opposition leader Usen Sydykov were "persuaded" not to run. Businessman and potential candidate Daniyar Usenov was arrested and his business bankrupted. Considerable pressure was applied to independent groups committed to observing the election, and widespread falsification was reported on election day. Interviews with officials suggest that Akaev may not have won the election fairly, and almost certainly had a minority of votes in the south, against popular opposition candidate Tekebaev.

Falsification of results was often crude and provoked considerable tension around the country, particularly in the south. A Tekebaev supporter describes the ballot counting in his home town:

When they counted the ballots, the [electoral] commission put in false ballots themselves. They took them out of their boots, or out of their sleeves. Then they start the count There is a small pile for Tekebaev, a large one for Akaev. They check again. People have surrounded the precinct on horses, making sure they don't take away their votes. They do a recount. Tekebaev's pile grows bigger than Akaev's. I tell them to write it down formally. They say, let's just split the votes in half. But I insisted ... "let's put everything in the protocol, then I'll let my people go". I dictated the protocol, and they wrote it all down as I said.

People were supporting us so much; it makes you want to cry.⁹

But few places could summon this kind of popular pressure on the electoral commissions. Local administration heads knew their jobs depended on delivering the vote for Akaev. In one southern district, his vote of 9.9 per cent became 99 per cent in the election protocol.¹⁰ Some opponents claim he lost heavily throughout the country; certainly in the south, and his legitimacy was widely questioned.

It was in the south that political tensions remained highest, peaking in 2002, when an ill-judged arrest of an opposition deputy, Azimbek Beknazarov, sparked a series of protests in which five demonstrators were shot dead in the Aksy district. This provoked several months of protests and marches across the south, and for a while a real political crisis seemed to be brewing.¹¹

In an attempt to calm growing discontent, President Akaev called a Constitutional Council, consisting of members of the opposition, government and neutral figures, to consider changes to the political system in light of the Aksy events. Initially this seemed a positive process, which produced a compromise report that proposed significant limitations to the power of the presidency and an enhanced role for parliament. However, an Akaev-appointed expert commission produced an alternative report that differed significantly from the Council's findings and proposed much weaker constitutional amendments. This irritated the participants: "Akaev agreed with everything. And then suddenly this commission appeared...and rewrote everything.... You can't work like that. If you've made an agreement, you have to keep your word".¹² Another participant bitterly complains: "They used us like a condom".¹³

Akaev then called a quick referendum for 2 February 2003, leaving little time for opposition to coalesce, and local authorities were instructed to push through the amendments as convincingly as possible. The results announced by the government claimed

⁹ ICG interview, Kuratbek Artykov, assistant to parliamentary deputy Omurbek Tekebaev, Bazar-Korgon, Jalal-Abad province, 17 May 2004.

¹⁰ ICG interview, election official, southern Kyrgyzstan, April 2004.

¹¹ See ICG Report, *Kyrgyzstan's Political Crisis*, op. cit.

¹² ICG interview, Absamat Masaliev, Party of Communists of Kyrgyzstan, Bishkek, 9 December 2003.

¹³ ICG interview, opposition leader, Bishkek, January 2004.

overwhelming support for them as well as for a proposition confirming Akaev in office until 2005.¹⁴

The referendum was reportedly accompanied by significant malpractice: the announced turnout did not reflect the observations of unofficial observers on the ground, some of whom reported minimal turnout. As in other elections, local officials expected to be rewarded for achieving high turnout but punished if they did not. The result was that they felt obliged to ensure that the figures matched central expectations; so much so that they were apparently embarrassingly high. Some turnout figures were reportedly later reduced by the Central Electoral Commission.¹⁵

The opposition was clearly weakened by the referendum -- it was not prepared for Akaev's move, and seemed unable to form a united front. A liberal-minded official says: "After the last referendum, there was this silence. Everybody started thinking that it was all useless. Conversations reverted to the kitchen. And everyone became sure, that while he remains in power, it's impossible to do anything".¹⁶

Akaev's tactical ability remains unchallenged but how he deployed it in the Constitutional Council further undermined the trust in him of many participants, who had believed that it was a genuine attempt to seek a bipartisan compromise.

The trend of Kyrgyzstan democracy since independence does not augur well for the next series of elections. Nevertheless, there is a widespread feeling, among both officials and the population, that this time it will be more difficult to falsify the results. The experience of Georgia, where vote falsification led to revolution, has not gone unnoticed. Memory of the revolt in Akxy and the fear of a repeat are still very much alive. However, the narrow elite around Akaev strongly believes that somehow it will find a way to retain its power and privileges without provoking serious opposition.

III. DYNAMICS OF TRANSITION I: THE AKAEV PRESIDENCY

In comparison with the first families of some neighbouring countries, Akaev's seems fairly attractive to outsiders. But by holding power so long, it has consolidated its hold not just on the political system, but also on the economy. In addition to the psychological problems of leaving power, the economic incentive to keep control is extremely compelling. And around the family are groups of people who are dependent on it for their livelihoods and will do almost anything to retain their privileged lifestyles.

All these groupings, and in particular family members, will play a key role in decisions about the political transition. But it is Akaev, by all accounts a complex and often contradictory political figure, who will make the final determination.

A. PRESIDENT AKAEV

Akaev is one of the more respected Central Asian leaders, as even many of his opponents would grudgingly admit. A former physics professor, he is highly educated and generally liberal in his inclinations. His desire to maintain a positive international image has benefited Kyrgyzstan's political development. Unlike leaders of neighbouring states, he has generally supported open policies in both politics and economics. A parliamentary deputy says, "His success has been that he did not turn away from reform even under political pressure, and opposition was indeed very strong".¹⁷ If he leaves office in 2005, there is little doubt that his legacy would still be judged fairly positively by history.

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to assume that his international image reflects widespread support at home. In the north, he does have some measure of backing from what might be called Kyrgyzstan's proto-middle class, who fear a worse alternative. But this kind of devil-you-know support rather than more active popularity is weak. As a middle-ranking foreign ministry official puts it: "The mechanism for transfer of power is entirely unclear. Nobody knows who the successor will be, and what will happen

¹⁴ The government claimed that 86.68 per cent of registered voters participated; 76.61 per cent supported the first question on constitutional amendments, while 78.84 per cent supported the second question concerning Akaev's continued occupancy of the presidency until 2005. OSCE/ODIHR, "Kyrgyz Republic, Constitutional Referendum, 2 February 2003, Political Assessment Report", 20 March 2003, p. 7

¹⁵ See *ibid.*, p. 8, citing NGO Coalition reports; and ICG interviews.

¹⁶ ICG interview, foreign ministry official, Bishkek, December 2003.

¹⁷ ICG interview, Kubatbek Baibolov, parliamentary deputy, 17 November 2003.

afterwards, and that irritates people. And so you start to think, maybe it's better if he just stays on".¹⁸

In the south, Akaev is genuinely unpopular. The reasons are varied. Sometimes the dissatisfaction seems simply to be that typical with any long-time incumbent. "Simply everyone is fed up with him", explains a government official.¹⁹ But the discontent goes further. There are two recurring themes, particularly in interviews with officials. The first is the political system Akaev has created; the second is corruption.

1. The political system: rhetoric and reality

Even supporters of Akaev say that the political system has to change. The ineffectiveness of state institutions, its inability to respond to the problems of ordinary people or deal with periodic crises, all undermine the good intentions of many in the leadership. The problems of state administration are felt directly by officials, and this contributes to a wide-ranging feeling that something has to change, before change is forced by the people themselves. An official commented:

We have all become an internal opposition...in relation to this political system, which we need to change. We don't need [sharp changes], we have to change gradually, but we need to start by at least dismissing a couple of corrupt *akims* [heads of local government].

The political system has largely failed to produce effective governance, partly because it has consistently been altered not to get better results, but to ensure Akaev's continuing ascendancy. The government does not really function as a government; instead the presidential administration dominates policy-making. A former minister comments: "...sometimes a minister never even gets to see Akaev, and never makes a statement to a meeting of the government".²⁰ The late Communist Party leader Absamat Masaliev told ICG: "Akaev has only received me once ... but they show [President] Putin, all the time meeting with ministers, and party representatives".²¹

Much of the frustration of officials is with this ineffective style of government, and the poor appointments that often go with it. There is little stability in a government career, and the country is awash with ex-ministers and ex-officials, many offended at the nature of their political demise.

An opposition leader who knows Akaev well says "Somebody comes to Akaev, talks with him; while he's there, Akaev announces a decision, gives instructions, but when the presidential decree comes out, it's an entirely different decision".²² A former minister gives an example:

One official got an appointment. The president congratulates him, and he goes off to Kara-Balta, two hours drive away. He arrives, and he has already been dismissed. There's already a decree. But then in the morning he is appointed again. And all these decrees are numbered in order!²³

This chaos frustrates everybody, but it reflects a wider inability to implement political decisions.

The grand rhetoric and lack of follow-up irritates many. A leader in Naryn gives a small example:

Naryn is the centre of a province, but it does not have the status of provincial centre [which brings with it financial and other benefits]. When Akaev came here, he promised [that this would change] but nothing happened. And he said this in front of everybody...and nothing happened. I've stopped trusting Akaev...I used to trust him [but now] people listen to him and say "you listen to him, and everything is fine. But you go out on the street, and everything is not like that".²⁴

This gap between words and deeds is the leitmotif of the regime. One leading businessman sums up the attitude of much of the elite: "We are not against the reforms of Akaev: we just want to implement them".²⁵

Ideas such as the World Bank-backed Comprehensive Development Framework (CDF) have been turned into rhetorical devices distant from the everyday

¹⁸ ICG interview, Bishkek, December 2003.

¹⁹ ICG interview, Osh, October 2003.

²⁰ ICG interview, November 2003.

²¹ ICG interview, Bishkek, 9 December 2003.

²² ICG interview, Bishkek, December 2003.

²³ ICG interview, Bishkek, July 2004.

²⁴ ICG interview, Bakyt Djaparaliev, head of Teplokomunergo [municipal heating company], former candidate for mayor of Naryn, 13 November 2003.

²⁵ ICG interview, Bishkek, July 2004.

reality of ordinary people. The president himself creates institutions that reflect the rhetoric of his speeches but hardly function in reality.

These initiatives come and go with blistering rapidity. In 2002, not long after the five peaceful demonstrators were shot dead in Aksy, Kyrgyzstan was declared a "Country of Human Rights". In 2003 Akaev unveiled a Democratic Code, a rather surreal document that mixed banalities and moral guidance in equal measure. An accompanying Council of Democratic Security has no obvious role except to offer more sinecures for retired officials. 2004 was declared the "year of social mobilization and good governance", both phrases plastered on the entrances to government buildings and schools across the country, but largely incomprehensible to the mass of the population. A Council on Good Governance has been created, but has no apparent impact on the burgeoning corruption. "This stupid democratic code, this stupid Alga party, this good governance nonsense -- it's all some kind of profanity", exclaims one exasperated official.²⁶

A newspaper editor comments:

Yesterday he [Akaev] spoke on television. [He said] "if only Georgia had a Democratic Code there wouldn't have been the revolution. And now all countries are asking us for this Code". You watch and you think...this is some kind of surrealism. I suppose he lives in this world, and those around him say, yes the Democratic Code is functioning, and he believes them.²⁷

Inevitably long power brings with it a sense of unreality, perhaps compounded by an over-loyal set of advisers. A leading official, who is in position to know, comments: "His advisers do not give him information....They soften everything, and don't like to speak out".²⁸

2. Corruption

The corruption that has developed in the political system and around the presidential family has probably done more than anything to undermine his popularity. Long-time opponent Usen Sydykov claims it is problem number one: "Akaev cannot root out corruption -- he allowed it to flourish. And if the

next president does not root it out, he will lose any trust also".²⁹

The practice of post-buying has become systemic. A regional political figure only half-joked to ICG: "Do you want to become a minister? Give us money. I know a channel....It doesn't matter where you're from, just pay the money".³⁰ But this feudal system seems to have been getting out of control in recent years, leading to serious discontent among officials. One describes his friend, a leading regional official.

He is deeply offended at the Family. He wanted the post of...gave everything as ordered, but then did not receive the position, because increasingly extravagant demands came his way. And he is not alone; if somebody respectable turns up, everybody will go out and support him.³¹

This kind of personal offence suggests that the system is breaking down. The mixture of loyalty and reciprocal benefits is becoming too one-sided, and many in the elite are ready for change.

It is not just the major corruption involved in appointments that worries officials. Those with limited budgetary financing are forced into corrupt deals with business just to carry out their duties. One official describes how he provides hospitality for a visiting delegation. "I have a list of rich guys. I telephone....I say, 'hello, I hope the tax police aren't bothering you'". They quickly help out with the expenses but, as he points out, this mutual petty corruption turns into a vicious circle. "Then three days later, they phone and say, 'can you telephone the police and sort out this problem we have'".³²

This vicious circle of corruption hurts all spheres of governance. Manipulation of the budget to support pet projects, often with obvious financial gain, does the same to economic management. Editor Alexander Kim notes that "Everybody can see this outflow of huge financial resources from the budget; while social issues are not being solved....Akaev understands, of course, that this could lead to social instability".³³

²⁶ ICG interview, Bishkek, December 2003.

²⁷ ICG interview, Aleksandr Kim, editor-in chief, MSN, Bishkek, November 2003.

²⁸ ICG interview, Bishkek, March 2004.

²⁹ ICG interview, Bishkek, 6 February 2004.

³⁰ ICG interview, Naryn, April 2004.

³¹ ICG interview, government official, Bishkek, April 2004.

³² ICG interview, April 2004.

³³ ICG interview, Aleksandr Kim, Bishkek, November 2003.

This systemic corruption is undermining some of the good economic policies that have been advanced over the past decade. And it is seriously undermining support for the regime both within the elite (many of whom have benefited from it, but some of whom are increasingly disenchanted) and among ordinary people, who see the huge houses of officials, all the while receiving miserly salaries and wonder why there is never enough money in the budget to cover social needs.

B. THE FAMILY

These two major failings of the regime -- the ineffective political system and the systemic corruption -- are frequently blamed not only on President Akaev himself, but also on the roles his wife and children play in politics and business. The expansion of family rule to include wider family members and interference in business is characteristic of Central Asian politics, and in this sense Kyrgyzstan is no exception. However, this widespread reach of family members into all aspects of society and the economy makes transition much more difficult and is an important contributor to the president's unpopularity.

Most political figures with experience of the Akaev family suggest that major decisions are taken much more within its bounds than in, say, the presidential administration. So how the members of the family view the transition process is important in understanding the possible outcomes.

President Akaev's wife, Mairam Akaeva, is also a former scientist, but is now occupied mainly as head of the Meerim foundation, which helps underprivileged children, and is also involved in other charitable work, writing and support for culture. But her influence is much wider. "She's the real decision-maker", says a long-time family friend.³⁴ Many officials claim she has considerable influence over appointments and personnel policy, and that a good relationship with her is needed for promotion and other benefits.

Her books, translated into many languages, demonstrate her close interest in politics, and her feelings of betrayal by what were once close supporters of her husband.³⁵ Her close involvement in political life has led to suggestions that she might aim to succeed

him, but a family friend says "Mairam is the leader in the family [but]... she has no political ambitions".³⁶ Others disagree but say she understands her unpopularity will not allow her to make a political career. However, it seems that she will play a leading role in determining an overall strategy for the family.

The Akaevs have four children. One son studies abroad and seems to have little interest in politics; a younger daughter also works abroad and is apparently uninterested in domestic politics. Two children live in Kyrgyzstan and are involved in both politics and business.

The elder daughter, Bermet Akaeva, is an intelligent multilingual professional who worked for several years in Geneva for the UN and now is a representative of the Agha-Khan Foundation in Kyrgyzstan. Often seen as something of a political strategist for the family, she perhaps has a clearer view of options than other family members.

Bermet Akaeva seems to be quite popular among a certain sliver of Bishkek society. Mostly these are young, progressive business people, who are in the same age bracket and have similar relatively liberal economic views. Even people who do not know her personally have a good deal of respect for her views, although she has little public persona and few people in the country know her beyond very official interviews and staged public performances. She may seek a seat in the new parliament, which would force her to take a more public role. Some suggest she might compete in the relatively controllable university constituency in Bishkek.

Her Kazakh husband, however, is less popular. Adil Toigonbaev reportedly controls important industries, with apparently powerful positions in tobacco, alcohol, building materials and oil products, and a holding that includes the daily newspaper, *Vechernii Bishkek*, the television channel KORT, and other media and publishing outlets. He uses his media outlets to promote his own position and attack both the opposition and rival businessmen.

Both Bermet and Adil seem to be increasingly involved in politics, supporting the new *Alga Kyrgyzstan!* [Forward, Kyrgyzstan!] party, in which Bermet acts as a consultant. Although Bermet Akaeva is probably capable of gathering some supporters around her in a political career, the role of her

³⁴ ICG interview, Bishkek, December 2003.

³⁵ See her discussion of former Prime Minister Bakiev, Mairam Akaeva, *U nadezhdy ne byvaiut nochi* [Hope has no nights] (Moscow, 2003), p. 138.

³⁶ ICG interview, Bishkek, November 2003.

husband will always be controversial, especially with other businesspeople.

A weak point for Akaev is his elder son, Aidar Akaev, who is particularly unpopular among some businesspeople. He is also regularly accused of leading a disreputable personal life, so much so that in June 2004 he gave an interview to the opposition newspaper *Agym*, denying some of the most outlandish rumours.³⁷ Aidar is formally an adviser to the Ministry of Finance, but unofficially he is said to be a powerful figure in the business world.

Aidar Akaev has gathered round him representatives of a younger generation, many of whom work in the Ministry of Finance or the National Security Service (SNB) and are often well educated. This is a potentially powerful group of supporters who are gradually moving up the career ladder. Among his friends are reputed to be the head of the SNB, Kalyk Imankulov, Minister of Finance Bolot Abildaev, the head of the State Property Committee, Ravshan Jeenbekov, and others from similar backgrounds. A businessperson notes: "These are worthy, educated guys. The son himself is well educated. Ministry of Finance [people], Kalyk Imankulov, Nurbek Turdukulov [head of Aereopag, a telecommunications company, and First Deputy Minister of Transport] -- they're all well educated."³⁸

Another local businessman says:

My impressions are not so bad, they are certainly not the worst; they are just in focus all the time. By comparison with Karimov's or Nazarbayev's children, they don't have anything. Bermet doesn't give any reason for criticism, and Aidar is also fairly well-behaved with people.³⁹

Aidar Akaev's supporters claim he has no political ambitions and is only interested in finance and business. In Kyrgyzstan, where business and politics are inevitably intertwined, such assertions seem a little disingenuous. He may seek a place in parliament at the next elections and use this as a platform for further political steps.⁴⁰ An interesting dynamic is provided by the apparently difficult relationship between

Aidar and the son-in-law, Adil Toigonbaev, which occasionally is evident in the output of rival media outlets.

The significant economic positions built up by the family make the transition much more difficult. Family members will inevitably seek to protect their investments, and given the profile of their businesses, all highly influenced by political decisions, they will seek to ensure that they retain their influence over the system one way or another.

For the business elite in particular, the economic role of the presidential family is particularly irritating. Given the nature of Kyrgyz politics and business, it is not surprising that the president should seek to control some of the most lucrative strategic areas of the economy. Control of business inevitably leads to political influence, and any new president is also likely to assert influence over areas such as energy or aviation.

A well-informed insider claims: "Where there are significant incomes, Akaev has put his own people in place. Really only the airport, telecommunications and Kyrgyzaltyn [gold company] make a profit. He put his own people in there".⁴¹ But Akaev is accused of allowing his family to gain control not just of the strategic heights of the economy, but many other areas as well.

In Kyrgyzstan losing political power is not simply about looking for another job: potentially it is about losing everything. In theory, Akaev is protected from any prosecution after he leaves office by a law adopted in 2003. In practice, few people believe this offers much real defence should a new political leadership attempt to bring charges against the family after Akaev leaves office. It certainly offers little protection for the family's economic interests, and even an initially loyal successor might be tempted to engage in a new round of property division.

C. GROUPS AROUND THE PRESIDENT

While the family dominates politics, influential groups around the presidency have changing levels of influence on decision-making. These include leading officials in the presidential administration, regional groupings, and powerful business elites. Family friends also play an important political role, but they

³⁷ *Agym*, No. 50 (253), 25 June 2004.

³⁸ ICG interview, Bishkek, February 2004.

³⁹ ICG interview, Bishkek, February 2004.

⁴⁰ He is too young to become president (28), but he may run for parliament either in his father's home area of Kemin, or in the south, in Uzgen, where his wife is from.

⁴¹ ICG interview, February 2004.

seem to change with some regularity. One who has remained at the side of the family for many years is businessman Tashkul Kereksizov. According to someone close to the family:

He's a real grey cardinal; it's he who solves critical situations, he's very smart, very strong, a remarkable character....He's a self-made man, through his own efforts, his own money.⁴²

Opposition leader Emil Aliev calls him the richest man in Kyrgyzstan.⁴³ Kereksizov has a relatively low profile but probably does have political influence, although some suggest he does not interfere overtly in political machinations.

Family friends often merge seamlessly with official posts, most noticeably in the case of Misir Ashirkulov, formerly a head of the SNB and of the Security Council, who was dismissed from his government post in May 2004 and allegedly has now broken with Akaev, with whom he had been friendly since student days. Ashirkulov was always seen as the ultimate loyal supporter. But possibly his search for compromise during the Aksy events and his dissatisfaction with other aspects of his relationship with the family have driven a wedge between them.

Some suggest that the break is part of a wider political game, intended to divide the opposition and infiltrate the president's man into its ranks. There seems little doubt about Ashirkulov's frustration with the Akaevs⁴⁴ and real commitment to some issues such as justice for those who suffered in Aksy. In Kyrgyz politics, however, there is always room for intricate intrigue, and the reality may only emerge much later.

At least on the surface, Akaev has lost a long-time supporter, who often was a useful channel for leaders of the opposition and apparently an advocate of compromise in difficult times. According to opposition editor Melis Eshimkanov, Ashirkulov often helped the opposition reach Akaev.⁴⁵ Without him, more hard-line views seem likely to grow in influence around the president.

Other advisers and officials are less independent. Even those who are sympathetic toward Akaev tend to dislike the kind of people he has gathered around

him. A business leader says: "He needs dog-like loyalty from his people. His advisers are talented technicians...but there are no personalities among them".⁴⁶

Among officials in the presidential administration, Bolot Djanuzakov, former head of the SNB and now in charge of security services, appears slightly apart, but he does seem to have significant influence. Although sometimes thought to be a hardliner on relations with the opposition, he is more open to meeting with it, and more of a public figure, than some others in the administration.

Other officials thought to be close to the family are Vice-Premier Kubanychbek Jumaliev, one of Akaev's students from his academic days, and State Secretary Osmonakun Ibraimov, one of the few southerners in the presidential administration and responsible for much of its public relations. Both are seen as highly dependent on the president.

Another influential group close to the president, or perhaps more accurately to Mairam Akaeva, includes officials such as Temirbek Akmataliyev, the Minister of Ecology and Emergency Situations, and Topchubek Kasymov, who heads the Presidential Administration and is sometimes touted as a potential successor. But none has real political weight, and all are dependent on the survival of the regime.

Other key political players, although far from automatic supporters, are powerful regional clan leaders, such as a group around former Communist Party leader Turdakun Usabaliev, reputed to have been a key adviser to Akaev, although his influence may be on the wane. He is from the remote Naryn region, as are a number of other influential officials including Naken Kasiev, governor of Osh, once a presidential favourite, but now apparently out of favour with the family. Also influential is Naryn Governor Askar Salymbekov.

Although once thought of as a possible successor, Vice-Premier Djoomart Otorbaev seems to be gradually moving away from the centre of power. He is the technocrat's technocrat, never happier than when reviewing World Bank documents or devising new investment strategies. Intelligent and well-educated, he has a strategic thinker's mind. He has disappointed some supporters by not pushing his liberal views more openly, but he retains much support among centrist

⁴² ICG interview, Bishkek, November 2003.

⁴³ ICG interview, Bishkek, 22 April 2004.

⁴⁴ ICG interview, Misir Ashirkulov, Bishkek, July 2004.

⁴⁵ ICG interview, Melis Eshimkanov, Bishkek, 13 July 2004.

⁴⁶ ICG interview, Bishkek, February 2004.

politicians and Bishkek's business elite and is named by some opposition leaders as a possible compromise candidate.

The differences between these various groups and individuals can be as great as between them and the rest of the political elite. This regime -- with its sometimes competing, sometimes cooperating groupings, partly based on clan affiliation, partly on common economic or political interests -- has little real core to it, except for the president himself. As a governor points out, "There is no united team, and nobody does anything. They cannot unite, because each of them wants to be president".⁴⁷ Instead, each fights for selfish interests and feels little compunction in competing against rivals. Akaev cleverly uses this rivalry against them all. An official close to the regime insists: "Nobody around the president really has influence, not Djanuzakov, or Otorbaev, nobody. It's a wolf pack -- they eat each other".⁴⁸

D. THE NEW GENERATION

For such a young country, Kyrgyzstan's top officials are surprisingly elderly. Naryn Parliamentary Deputy Tursunbek Usubaliev is a sprightly 85, Central Electoral Commission head Sulaiman Imanbaev is 72, and there are plenty of other officials still in the government and presidential administration who in most states would have been collecting pensions long ago.

But this older generation is moving on, and sooner or later a younger generation will take power. The generational gap is one of the less noticeable but most interesting dynamics of the transition process. Ambitious younger players are bored of playing second fiddle and anxious to get things done. They have little time for the old ways of slow compromise, and instead offer energetic leadership and a promise of real results. Several have emerged from among the financiers and businesspeople who have been associated with Aidar Akaev.

Others are also linked to Bermet Akaeva, and some are members of her party, Alga Kyrgyzstan!, which was designed specifically to promote a new generation of officials. They all share with the younger members of the family an impatience with

the "dinosaurs" of the White House,⁴⁹ the older generation who still occupy many leading posts.

One of the most interesting of these political figures is the governor of Batken, Askar Shadieiev, who has had a steep ascent of the political career ladder, going through parliament, the Ministry of Finance and the Incomes Committee, before becoming governor at 34. Governor of Chui Azamat Kangeldiev is a few years older, but also seems to be friendly with this younger group and is an Alga supporter.

Others in this group include many younger business figures, some grouped in the Bishkek Business Club. These people are impatient with the old ways. A younger official sighs, "When I was governor... they demanded that I represent every single group in the administration. It's that kind of mentality....There needs to be a new figure, and there are such people".⁵⁰ They are fed up with the constant compromises forced upon them. "You have to choose a course, and just go forward regardless of the obstacles, not looking around and not listening to anyone", says one sharply.⁵¹

Some voters are also impatient for a change of generation. A young ethnic Uzbek man in Osh is looking for new political faces: "We would vote for a young person, so that something gets done. The factories don't work, there is no salary, children can't study, and there are no textbooks".⁵² A woman in the conservative *mahalla* [neighbourhood] of Amir-Temur echoes this sentiment: "Mamunov [local city council deputy] is young, he's interested in everything. He has energy. The young are always interested, and will work. And the older generation, well, they've got experience, but no desire".⁵³

But this future elite is still far from being ready to take power. They do not have a ready presidential candidate who could appeal to existing elites, and the connection of some of them to Aidar Akaev, however short-lived it may turn out to be, could compromise them. An astute observer says: "Somebody [as president] from Aidar's circle? No,

⁴⁷ ICG interview, May 2004.

⁴⁸ ICG interview, December 2003.

⁴⁹ "White House" is the common short-hand for the presidential administration, after the large white government building in central Bishkek in which the presidential administration and government officials are housed.

⁵⁰ ICG interview, November 2003.

⁵¹ ICG interview, March 2004.

⁵² ICG interview, Osh, July 2004.

⁵³ ICG interview, Amir-Temur district, Osh, July 2004.

nobody would accept one of them....There might even be a scandal".⁵⁴

Attempts to channel them into the Alga party may also trap them too closely to the existing regime, damaging their chances under a new leadership. But given their skills in areas such as finance, and the impatience of much of the population for new political faces, their time may come sooner than expected. In the meantime, they provide a professional veneer to a government that is short of good appointments, but their dissatisfaction with some elements of the present political set-up means they are not a guaranteed support group for the president. As with almost all the political figures around the president, everybody has his own interests, regardless of apparent allegiances, and many will be looking beyond the next eighteen months of political confrontation.

E. BUSINESS ELITE

In theory, Akaev's liberal economic policies should appeal to businesspeople and the *nouveau riche*.⁵⁵ They should be a key pillar of his regime. Some do indeed support him, again for fear of instability, or because of the cost of building up relationships with a new team. But there is growing dissatisfaction among business leaders also.

There are essentially two types of business in Kyrgyzstan: that done with the presidential family and that conducted without its direct involvement. Inevitably, those who do the first tend to be supportive of the leadership, although even here there is criticism. More independent businesspeople feel they can do deals with almost any future politician, and probably in most cases they are correct. There is also a large group that has lost business to the family, or else finds the limitations it effectively imposes on their growth increasingly frustrating. This group is irritated with the regime

and would probably welcome a reasonable successor candidate.

An analyst notes: "Serious business is selected by and works for the family, and all the rest is smaller business, and they are afraid to lose it".⁵⁶ In many (but not all) cases small and medium business can work reasonably well. But, as one business leader says, "If your business is more than \$1 million, you immediately get attention".⁵⁷

Some have tried to combine business with politics. Among them have been opposition-oriented business leaders such as Daniyar Usenov, who lost most of his business before the 2000 presidential election, when he seemed a potential candidate. Almaz Atambaev, another former presidential candidate and head of the opposition Social Democratic Party, has managed to retain a good deal of his business interests, despite considerable pressure, partly, he claims, because of his political profile and apparent ability to mobilise popular support in his home villages near Bishkek.⁵⁸

Those who work with the family have mixed views. Most view them as useful investors and a form of protection. But some are critical of their apparent appetites for a wide range of different businesses, lack of strategy, and inability to refrain from buying up businesses in which they are not prepared to invest their energies. Their interest in establishing monopolies by buying up competitors irritates more progressive businesspeople, even those who keep good relations with the family.

So far much of the business elite is not very politicised, except in the sense of maintaining good ties with the leadership. A member of the Bishkek Business Club notes: "In the Business Club everyone tries to maintain their distance from politics, because they are afraid for their own business. And businessmen will never finance political parties".⁵⁹

A more professional class of business manager is emerging, mostly in its 30s and 40s. Many are more interested in the minutiae of an arbitrage court or a new tax code than the more informal style of wheeling and dealing common to the rest of the business elite. They gather in places like the Bishkek Business Club

⁵⁴ ICG interview, February 2004.

⁵⁵ Leading businessmen include Kereksizov, the close family adviser, Kubatbek Baibolov, a smart and relatively independent figure who is also a parliamentary deputy; Alisher Sabirov, a southern Uzbek deputy who with his wife controls much of the cross-border trade in the south with China; and a number of trading magnates, who run Kyrgyzstan's successful bazaars. They have gained enormously from the trade in Chinese consumer goods in the huge markets of Dordoy near Bishkek and Kara-Suu near Osh. A thriving market is rumoured to bring in at least \$1 million in profit a year to an owner.

⁵⁶ ICG interview, banker, Bishkek, October 2003.

⁵⁷ ICG interview, business leader, October 2003. Figures denominated in dollars (\$) in this report refer to U.S. dollars.

⁵⁸ ICG interview, Almaz Atambayev, Bishkek, June 2003.

⁵⁹ ICG interview, banker, October 2003.

but have no real platform that could produce a political impact.

True, many businesspeople are fed up with corruption and state interference, which has limited foreign investment to a trickle. They want clear rules of the game and improved security for their money. They find many politicians difficult. One says: "I went to see the prime minister: he doesn't understand what I'm talking about, he's never earned a single dollar himself...."⁶⁰ But many stress the positive changes that have occurred, and some fear a new president could make things worse.

Some claim that things are getting better anyway, particularly for small and medium-sized enterprises. One businesswoman tries to look on the bright side:

Over the last three years there have been a lot of changes, legislation has changed....Business has been legalised; it's become easier to work. There are still those who put pressure on you, but if you're smart, you can resist. In small and medium business it has become easier to work: pay your taxes and that's it. The kind of chaos that existed before -- when they wouldn't give out licenses -- that's gone. And even the corrupt influence of customs has become less.⁶¹

Others are less confident. One says: "I was inspected ten times this year...and now I'm wondering whether to expand my business or go off to Kazakhstan or Russia, where there are more possibilities and you are less noticeable at this level"...He adds: "I always give money, its impossible not to give....Most of all the police come round. I give away almost all [my profit]. But if you don't give, there will be problems".⁶²

Businesspeople will form a high percentage of candidates in the next parliamentary elections. Their interest is less in influencing legislation than finding a stable niche, with immunity, for what could be a period of political uncertainty. Their participation seems to be part of a scenario planned by the authorities to promote the election of relatively rich deputies, who will be largely manageable politically, partly through their dependence on the authorities to protect their business interests, and also through their

relative political and parliamentary inexperience. This may be a miscalculation. First, money alone is probably not enough to get elected, although it certainly helps. Secondly, they may be more difficult to control than the authorities imagine.

The business elite still seems a long way from the situation in Kazakhstan, where real business financing has funded the opposition Democratic Choice party and promoted alternative political leaders. There is more money around in Kazakhstan, but there also seems to be a mature business elite that has a wider strategy for the country than simply its own business interests. The beginnings of such a business-political elite are also present in Kyrgyzstan, but so far it is too dependent, disunited and apolitical to have a major impact. Its automatic support for the regime cannot be guaranteed, however, and most will quietly shift allegiance if the wind seems to be changing.

⁶⁰ ICG interview, businessman, November 2003.

⁶¹ ICG interview, Chinara Seigakhmetova, director of Ak-Bulak restaurant, Bishkek, March 2004.

⁶² ICG interview, businessman, October 2003.

IV. DYNAMICS OF TRANSITION II: THE OPPOSITION

Because of the nature of the regime, it is not surprising that the opposition is fluid and not as clear-cut in its allegiances as might otherwise be expected. Opposition leaders are also part of the wider political system and often are perfectly willing to do deals with the White House. Many are in frequent contact with government officials and are engaged in multiple political games at different levels. A pro-government media official says, "We should not divide people according to government and opposition, but into categories of honest and not honest. If you go to Dasmiya [popular Bishkek restaurant] you'll see the opposition sitting there with the White House".⁶³

Akaev has often manipulated the opposition, by co-opting it into government or offering other establishment posts. Government figures often tend to underestimate them. "We don't have an opposition. When you know how much each of them costs -- \$100 and up -- it's hard to respect them", says a cynical, high-ranking security official.⁶⁴ The tendency to believe everyone can be bought may lead to complacency with an opposition that may yet pose a real challenge to the regime.

The opposition is divided around individuals, rather than a platform. Differences with the authorities come less over major policy issues than from personal relations.

A. FOR PEOPLE'S POWER

For People's Power is an opposition bloc consisting of parties and individuals. Its opponents consider it the radical opposition. Its members tend to be more uncompromising toward the authorities and to have been involved in moments of civil unrest such as the Aksy events.

At its head stand more radical deputies such as Azimbek Beknazarov, Bektur Asanov and other southerners. They emerged during the Aksy events and formed a movement, "For the Resignation of Akaev", which forms the core of the new bloc. Other members include Djapar Djeksheev, a long-time opposition leader, and Giaz Tokombaev of the

Republican Party. They work closely with human rights activists, such as Topchubek Turganaliyev, director of the Institute for Human Rights and Prisoners of Conscience.

Not surprisingly, they are not popular with the administration. Presidential official Bolot Djanuzakov says: "There is this radical opposition -- you explain to them, explain to them, but for them everything is bad! But what should be done, they don't say..."⁶⁵ But sometimes they have surprisingly good relations with more compromising political figures.

For People's Power understands that it has no serious presidential candidate. Turganaliyev says: "We don't have to have a candidate from among our ranks; it's possible to have someone in the centre, who is loyal to everybody".⁶⁶ In 2004 it announced qualified support for former Prime Minister Kurmanbek Bakiev. For a figure such as Bakiev, this is probably more of a liability than a help, since it will scare away more moderate supporters.

These opposition groups have one major advantage for any candidate: they have the ability to organise at the grassroots in several areas in the south and promote demonstrations and other actions. A Beknazarov supporter says: "If we do not elect Beknazarov again as our deputy, it will be shameful for all of us.... The people will rise up ... if one person is arrested, 40 brothers will go out in his place".⁶⁷

This ability to mobilise popular support in the most active ways is a clear danger for the authorities. But for the most part the For People's Power bloc will concentrate on getting its candidates into parliament. Their lack of an obvious presidential candidate tends to cause them to support changes that would lead to a parliamentary republic: "The political system needs to change, otherwise we will anyway have this khan style of government. The daughter and son do whatever they like, and the state serves the family. We need a parliamentary system and not a presidential republic".⁶⁸

⁶³ ICG interview, December 2003.

⁶⁴ ICG interview, Bishkek, March 2004.

⁶⁵ ICG interview, Bolot Djanuzakov, first deputy head, Presidential Administration, 30 October 2003.

⁶⁶ ICG interview, Topchubek Turganaliyev, director of the Institute of Human Rights and Prisoners of Conscience, Bishkek, 1 December 2003.

⁶⁷ ICG interview, Tadjimat Turaliev, assistant to Deputy Beknazarov, head of the Committee for the Defence of Those Who Suffered in the Aksy Events, Kerben, 19 May 2004.

⁶⁸ ICG interview, Azimbek Beknazarov, parliamentary deputy, 17 November 2003.

B. SOUTHERN DEPUTIES

A more centrist opposition is grouped again around southern parliamentary deputies. Roughly speaking, one element centres on Usen Sydykov and Kurmanbek Bakiev, together with allies such as Dosbol Nur uulu, head of the Jana Kyrgyzstan party. Another clusters around potential presidential candidates Adahan Madumarov and Omurbek Tekebaev.

Tekebaev is a constant of presidential races. A powerful politician, he has probably been the also-ran too often to make a really serious challenge but he retains the respect of many politicians. An official who is far from being a supporter says: "Tekebaev has become a very experienced politician....He's very careful ... a good presidential candidate. He is able to speak, but knows when to stop".⁶⁹

Journalist turned parliamentary deputy Adahan Madumarov has no government experience and seems in some ways an unlikely presidential candidate. But he does have that something most Kyrgyz politicians lack -- charisma and the ability to stir feelings in a crowd. He sometimes strikes a slightly lonely figure, and he may find it hard to unite with other politicians in a real political bloc, although he says of himself: "People are wrong when they say that Madumarov cannot unite with others".⁷⁰ And some colleagues say: "He's matured a lot, and understands he needs a coalition".⁷¹

He also has a certain following among the Bishkek intelligentsia, whether for his good looks or his political persuasions is never entirely clear. He has a reputation of being honest. The downside is that he is not rich and would require the kind of sponsorship that few Kyrgyz businesspeople are willing to offer. His one-time nationalist views will tend to count against him with the all-important ethnic Uzbek electorate.

Getting a single candidate from the south could be difficult though some think it will happen. Opposition Deputy Asanov claims that anybody who opposed a single candidate would be a "political corpse".⁷² But the chances of either Tekebaev or Madumarov joining with the other major southern candidate, Kurmanbek

Bakiev, seem slim indeed, although as Madumarov says, once the political situation develops, "the most unlikely people will make peace with each other".⁷³

C. KURMANBEK BAKIEV

Bakiev has served as governor of two provinces and prime minister and is now a parliamentary deputy. He has the air of a politician who believes his time has come, palpably self-confident and anxious to get on and start the job. He is a cautious player though, trying to maintain good relations with most other groupings and even speaking to President Akaev from time to time.⁷⁴ However, he was taken aback when Beknazarov and other more radical opposition figures declared their support in a move that risks losing him more centrist elites.

Although he is a southerner and therefore suspect for many northerners, he has worked for so long in the north that he can probably appeal to at least some establishment figures. His Russian wife will be proof to ethnic minorities that he has few nationalist tendencies. Nevertheless, he is probably unacceptable to the northerners who dominate the political administration, and it seems very unlikely Akaev would choose him as a compromise successor. The clear irritation with which Mairam Akaeva writes of Bakiev is probably evidence enough that he will never be the family choice.⁷⁵

His drawback is lack of public speaking skills, although he does have a certain private charisma. "If only we could combine Bakiev and Madumarov", laughs an opposition deputy.⁷⁶ Some businessmen also express doubts about him as an economic manager, although he reputedly is very rich.

D. KULOV AND THE NORTH

Feliks Kulov remains a potent political figure, but any bid for the presidency is hampered by the fact that he remains in prison. His lawyers argue that he should be released on parole sometime in 2004, but most people do not expect this before the

⁶⁹ ICG interview, Bishkek, October 2003.

⁷⁰ ICG interview, Adahan Madumarov, Bishkek, 12 May 2004.

⁷¹ ICG interview, Bishkek, July 2004.

⁷² ICG interview, Bishkek, 19 November 2003.

⁷³ ICG interview, Adahan Madumarov, Bishkek, 12 May 2004.

⁷⁴ ICG interview, Kurmanbek Bakiev, Bishkek, July 2004.

⁷⁵ Mairam Akaeva, op. cit.

⁷⁶ ICG interview, June 2004.

presidential election. In July 2004 a Justice Ministry spokesman announced that Kulov could only be released on parole in November 2005, just after the scheduled presidential election day.⁷⁷

Even if released earlier, Kulov would not be permitted to run because of his criminal record but he could emerge as a potent figure, in alliance with another candidate. Given their weaknesses, most opposition figures in the south will need some kind of alliance with a northern opposition leader to get through. Kulov is the most potent such leader, but also influential in the Chui region is Almaz Atambaev, a self-made millionaire and head of the Social Democratic Party, who won 6 per cent at the last presidential election.

Kulov's imprisonment has given him a certain mystique among some voters, but, as noted above, his past record has not gained him significant support among key elites. Businesspeople in particular would be concerned by a resuscitated Kulov, and his support might be a liability for a candidate among some influential groups.

E. THE CIVIC UNION FOR FAIR ELECTIONS

Some of the main opposition figures and potential presidential candidates -- with Bakiev the notable exception -- have formed a new coalition, "Civic Union -- For Fair Elections", led by former Akaev ally Misir Ashirkulov.⁷⁸ It has provoked widespread discussion because of Akaev's lifelong friend Ashirkulov, whose conversion to opposition, as already discussed, is not accepted as genuine by all. Thus, potential opposition candidate Bakyt Beshimov says:

Ashirkulov was the head of the administration, and was directly involved in the elections. Then he was head of the SNB and he was responsible for security during elections, and when he was head of the Security Council, this

was also his function. And now he is going to talk about honest elections?⁷⁹

Another opposition leader says: "The Civic Union is not a trick -- I think there was a conflict with the wife [Mairam Akaeva], although Akaev retains good relations with Misir. He might still want to bring him back [into government]".⁸⁰ Others think it is simply a game to undermine support for Bakiev (both Madumarov and Tekebaev are thought to have reservations about supporting Bakiev). In reality, everybody in the new grouping may have different agendas, but this does not mean that it cannot be effective.

Melis Eshimkanov, a key player in setting up Civic Union and persuading Ashirkulov to join, claims it is a simple attempt to gather disparate political forces around a single aim: honest elections that will keep "unworthy" people out of the parliament.⁸¹ Although in this sense it is less a political union than a single-issue umbrella group, it seems more like an attempt to join some of the opposition with a relatively centrist elite behind a platform for a managed succession process.

The opposition remains weak and divided. It is rightly accused of not having an alternative program to Akaev's. In some ways this is understandable: it relies heavily on the discontent with the present regime. But for the long term, and indeed for key elites such as business executives, it needs to come up with more concrete suggestions as to how it would act in power. Reluctance to do so sometimes seems to stem from a collective psychological disbelief that the system will ever really change. This also leads to frequent deals with the governing elite, though in most cases, this simply reflects the reality of a political system that depends on such cooption for survival and treats any who reject the unwritten rules of the game harshly.

⁷⁷ AKI-press web site, Bishkek, 23 July 2004, www.akipress.org.

⁷⁸ Among others, Omurbek Tekebaev, Almaz Atambaeyev, Emil Aliev, Feliks Kulov, Marat Sultanov (parliamentary deputy), Adahan Madumarov (parliamentary deputy) and Melis Eshimkanov (influential editor of the opposition newspaper *Aghym*).

⁷⁹ ICG interview, Kyrgyz Ambassador to India, Bakyt Beshimov, Bishkek, 22 July 2004.

⁸⁰ ICG interview, July 2004.

⁸¹ ICG interview, July 2004.

V. DYNAMICS OF TRANSITION III: SOCIETY AND THE ELECTORATE

Although Bishkek's chattering classes love to discuss the latest elite gossip, few pay much attention to the voters who will, in theory, decide the election. Kyrgyz society is very varied and changes rapidly, so predicting voter response to politicians is extremely difficult. In some areas, clan connections will be overriding; in others, only an opposition candidate can hope to win or rich businessmen are likely to buy their way to power; and in yet others, the perceived political influence of a candidate will be the key element.

A. WHAT VOTERS WANT

In the remote district of Leilek, the head of the local administration sits in an empty office. Nobody telephones; there are no papers on the table. Time stands still. Nobody comes for assistance, because nobody trusts him, and anyway, he has no money. He sits and waits for something to happen, but it never does.

In the office of opposition leader Omurbek Tekebaev in equally remote Bazar-Korgon, there are plenty of visitors. Some want help with a court appeal, some to write to the procuracy. One who wants to build a mosque paid the factory but got no bricks. Can the party help? The local party leader says: "Our voters don't trust official structures, but they do trust us".⁸²

In these distant areas, where the state hardly functions, any authoritative figure who can help in the daily struggle for survival is likely to receive voter support. Parliamentary deputies do not need to offer a party program; they provide intervention services with state structures that under a different political system would be largely unnecessary. As a result, many trust them more than officials.

They are not necessarily opposition figures either. Colourful Kara-Suu deputy Murat Malabaev (nickname: "the Wallet") has a similar reputation for helping. He may not be the ideal legislator from the point of view of Bishkek's intellectuals, but he is the kind of politician people vote for.

Opposition leader Usen Sydykov, who ran for parliament in 2003 in a constituency where he has no clan ties, says, "I haven't even worked in Kara-Kulja, and I am not from that clan; that's why [the authorities] were convinced that nobody would vote for me. So why did they vote for me? They thought that if I was their deputy, I would help them".⁸³ Sydykov led the first round but was disqualified on a technicality.

It is such figures, both opposition and close to power, who will receive votes because people are fed up with the paralysed state and its leaders' empty promises and want someone they can call on to get things done.

In everyday terms this means that sometimes people vote for candidates who offer material benefits -- so much so that some observers have become cynical. An observer at recent local elections asserts:

The electorate votes for money, for vodka, and relatives. In their own village every candidate received almost all votes. There were lots of drunk people....People don't know who are communists, who are right-wingers, they don't care.⁸⁴

Kinship networks still play an important role in elections, and voters tend to seek candidates who are local and they know well. Sometimes this so-called tribalism is exaggerated by the authorities. "There's no real tribalism", says a former minister, "there are some elements, that's all. But Akaev complains to the West, saying, look what conditions we have to work in, we are tribalists and traditionalists, it's all very difficult. And the West says, 'oh, we understand, we'll help you out'".⁸⁵

Attitudes may be slowly evolving. A deputy governor explains how the electorate has been changing in Naryn:

Take the elections to the *ailokmetu*⁸⁶ -- at first all the posts were given out by clan allegiances. Everybody wanted their own people there, but then they began to demand re-elections

⁸² ICG interview, Kuratbek Artykov, assistant to parliamentary deputy Omurbek Tekebaev, Bazar-Korgon, Jalal-Abad province, 17 May 2004.

⁸³ ICG interview, Usen Sydykov, 6 February 2004.

⁸⁴ ICG interview, Naryn, May 2004.

⁸⁵ ICG interview, Bishkek, November 2003.

⁸⁶ The lowest level of administration.

themselves. And now they elect people who are able to work.⁸⁷

A member of the Central Electoral Committee agrees: "After these ... elections to the *ailokmetu*, people have begun to understand that they should not elect relatives, but somebody who will really work".⁸⁸

This change will take time. Meanwhile clan ties remain potent in many cases. However, the situation is complex, and the traditional approach of simply relying on clan support may no longer be tenable everywhere.

An opposition politician argues that

You have to take into account that the population is politicised, and monitors each politician, and gives them careful assessments. KTR [Kyrgyz state television and radio] thinks that they feed people their own ideas, but people watch and understand how things are in reality. People take presents [from candidates] and then do everything against them.⁸⁹

In many areas, political discussion among ordinary people is common. In Kara-Kuldja in Osh province, a former *akim* describes the local population:

They love to watch parliamentary sessions on television, they read *Agym* [popular opposition newspaper]. They listen to *Azattyk* [Radio Liberty]. They hold political classes. The whole village gets together and one of them reads aloud. Then they discuss it. They have their own leaders, and their own analysts.⁹⁰

In some cases this politicised electorate is over-idealised by the opposition. Some seem to believe that all they have to do is turn up and ensure that the elections are not openly falsified, and they will be elected simply because they are opposed to the government. Others are less confident:

Everybody needs some kind of resources -- its nonsense what they say that they'll be elected

just like that, just because people know that they are opposition leaders, that's wishful thinking.⁹¹

B. POTENTIAL UNREST

In many areas, this politicisation has led to an increased willingness to protest. A regional official in Jalal-Abad complains: "In Jalal-Abad this stupid habit has appeared -- the slightest problem, and everybody goes out on the street".⁹²

It is this "stupid habit" that the authorities are most afraid of. There were small protests during the last election period, but they were fairly easily contained. The eruption of unrest in Aksy, however, unnerved the authorities in 2002, although the numbers involved were relatively small. The fear for the parliamentary elections is that protests will emerge in more than one district, making it difficult for the authorities to mediate.

Since the Aksy unrest in 2002, there have been few true political protests. Where they do occur, they tend to be the preserve of a few dozen activists in Bishkek and hardly trouble the authorities. However, in regions such as Aksy, which are quiet on the surface, deep anger remains. A local human rights activist says, "At the moment it seems quiet, but underneath there is something simmering ... at any moment a conflict could break out".⁹³ The danger is that the elections could provide just that spark.

However, the authorities are confident that they can deal with isolated protests in the south. Their biggest fear is that protests might occur in Bishkek itself. At present, this looks fairly unlikely: much of the population is apolitical, and most understand the risks. Nevertheless, leaders such as Almaz Atambaev claim to be able to mobilise supporters in the capital, and this remains a potent threat for the government in the event of serious tensions.

C. REGIONAL ASPECTS - NORTH VS. SOUTH?

A key dynamic in the whole political process is the cultural and political divide between north and south. The north is more Russified and European, while the south is traditionally more religious, with society

⁸⁷ ICG interview, Chingiz Ismailov, Deputy Governor, Naryn province, Naryn, November 2003.

⁸⁸ ICG interview, Leila Sydykova, Dean of the Legal Faculty of Kyrgyz National University, Bishkek, 27 October 2003.

⁸⁹ ICG interview, Bishkek, December 2003.

⁹⁰ ICG interview, Rustam Anarbotov, former *akim* of Kara-Kulja district, June 2004, Osh.

⁹¹ ICG interview, parliamentary official, Bishkek, May 2004.

⁹² ICG interview, Jalal-Abad, May 2004.

⁹³ ICG interview, Kerben, May 2004.

based much more on family values and kinship connections. These differences are gradually breaking down, but there is still a widespread perception that the two regions are political rivals rather than partners.

The north-south divide is sometimes exaggerated and sometimes manipulated by politicians but it certainly exists in the perceptions of people. A northern politician says: "The north has no conception of the south. Akaev has simply given up working on the issue. The important things are his informers. The southerners who work here, they tell him what is going on in the south, but they themselves don't live there anymore".⁹⁴

This ignorance and fear of the south is widespread among Bishkek's elite. One says:

The south is not exactly what I think of as Kyrgyzstan: different type of people, strong Uzbek influence, a family way of life. I don't understand why I have to talk in a flowery kind of way for ten minutes before I can get down to business⁹⁵

In the south on the other hand, many see the north as too Russified and Europeanised. Many in Bishkek do not speak Kyrgyz as their native language and feel more comfortable in Russian. In the south, Russian is heard much less often.

The political consequences of these divisions are felt. The south tends to be more supportive of the opposition, while the north fears election of a southern president. Attempts to transfer some of the power and money that concentrates in Bishkek to the south tend to fail. A much vaunted plan to move some government ministries to Osh has largely been forgotten. Southerners complain they have little representation in government structures,⁹⁶ which gives an added importance to parliamentary elections. The parliament is probably the only institution in which southerners play a role commensurate with their numbers, and so the elections are seen as an important way for the south to test its political power. Southern parliamentary representatives often have greater status at home than their northern counterparts.

⁹⁴ ICG interview, former minister, Bishkek, November 2003.

⁹⁵ ICG interview, Bishkek, December 2003.

⁹⁶ One southern newspaper editor points out that, "for 13 years of Akaev's rule there has not been a single head of the MVD, the SNB or the Ministry of Defense from the south". ICG interview, Beken Nazaraliev, editor, *Zhana Ordo*, Bishkek, February 2004.

D. ETHNIC MINORITIES

Ethnic minorities are a significant part of the electorate. Russians, Dungans, Koreans and Uighurs are scattered throughout the north but seem unlikely to get many seats in the new parliament. In the south, ethnic Uzbeks are more than 30 per cent of the electorate and a key national constituency. An Uzbek leader has said that his people seek ten seats in the new parliament, probably an overestimate of potential, but a sign they are serious about raising their political profile.⁹⁷

Some fear that in highly contested contests, there could be conflict on an ethnic basis. The south has had inter-ethnic tensions before at election time, although relatively minor. It seems unlikely that there will be serious problems, as most southern leaders -- Kyrgyz and Uzbek -- want to avoid confrontation, unless there is a deliberate attempt to exclude certain ethnic Uzbek deputies. In fact, the division of constituencies probably guarantees ethnic Uzbek representation in the new parliament.

At past elections, the Uzbek vote has been a key southern constituency for President Akaev. Uzbeks, concerned by the potentially more nationalist southern Kyrgyz and keen to maintain good relations with the authorities, have tended to support the status quo. But the idea that ethnic Uzbeks will only support President Akaev or pro-government candidates is something of a myth. Even at the last presidential election, when Akaev won the vast majority of ethnic Uzbek votes, Tekebaev had some support. In one precinct in the conservative Uzbek district in Osh, Amir-Timur, for example, he received over 200 votes, though Akaev had about 1,000.⁹⁸

Ethnic Uzbeks are now more disenchanted with Akaev and seem much more split about how they will vote. An Uzbek leader in Jalal-Abad says: "Bakiev is the lesser of two evils; he has a Russian upbringing and is tolerant on interethnic questions ... but there are people around him, his relatives [who may be more nationalist]".⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Bakhtiarjan Fattohov, "Kogo Uzbeki khotyat videt na vershine vlasti?" [Who do Uzbeks want to see at the summit of power?] *Slovo Kyrgyzstana* [Word of Kyrgyzstan], Bishkek, 2 July 2004.

⁹⁸ ICG interviews, former electoral official, Osh, July 2004.

⁹⁹ ICG interview, Jalal-Abad, May 2004.

The authorities remain confident that the Uzbek vote, while not as automatic as previously, can be manipulated. Social structures in some areas ensure the control in local neighbourhoods (*mahalla*) of informal social leaders, to whom payment or other compensation usually can ensure a majority.

Other ethnic minorities will also seek election. A Uighur businessman points out: "There are 60,000 Uighurs in Kyrgyzstan, but not a single Uighur in parliament".¹⁰⁰ There is a chance this will change. Increasing Uighur immigration from China has created some fairly strong pockets of settlement, in addition to those who always lived in Kyrgyzstan.

For the most part ethnic Russians are concentrated in the north, especially in Bishkek. Russians do not usually form a coherent political force, and as a whole they are one of the most apolitical constituencies. However, they may support Russian independent and opposition candidates, and many ethnic Russians are also involved in human rights work and NGOs.

VI. LOCAL AND PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

Local elections due in October 2004 offer an important dress-rehearsal for the more significant parliamentary and presidential elections in 2005. They will provide a good chance to see the new electoral rules in practice and to train observers and other participants in the electoral process.

- On 10 October 2004 elections will be held to local councils (*kenesh*) of villages, settlements, district towns and Bishkek City.
- On 27 February 2005 there will be elections to district (*rayon*) and province (*oblast*) councils, as well as the national parliament (*jogorku kenesh*).

Although local elections have less national significance, they will be an important testing ground for candidates and parties. They also offer a good possibility for NGOs and other independent actors to conduct election-related projects.

The parliamentary elections themselves will be of much greater significance for the whole transition process. They will be to a new unicameral legislature of 75 deputies, elected in single-seat constituencies. In previous elections, 25 per cent of seats were determined according to party lists that provided some stimulus for the development of political parties and also enabled more technocrats and women to get into parliament. The absence of party lists is a step back in some ways but it does ensure a closer connection between candidates and their constituencies.

Competition at the parliamentary elections is likely to be intense, since the number of seats will be less than in the old two-chamber body, many new candidates are appearing, and the new parliament will have greater powers.

There will be essentially two dynamics at work. In some cases the authorities will be supporting a particular candidate against opposition candidates; in others there will be several candidates, more or less amenable to the authorities, who will be fighting among themselves. In many cases, there will be pre-election bargaining, with well-known figures seeking safer constituencies, but there are few guarantees in this race, and some famous names may lose.

The elections are important not just in terms of the new parliament, but also because of their influence

¹⁰⁰ ICG interview, Tursuntai Salimov, director of the Madina bazaar, 28 October 2003.

on the overall presidential succession. A key aim of the authorities is to produce a body in which the president will control two-thirds of the seats. This would give him several options, including changing the constitution to downgrade the presidency and subsequently finding himself a place in parliament from which to continue to exercise much power.

A. ALGA KYRGYZSTAN!

The regime's main tool in its attempt to win the parliament is the new party, Alga Kyrgyzstan! created by young businessmen and officials and apparently the inspiration of Bermet Akaeva. It seems to have been inspired by similar "parties of power" in Russia -- Yedinstvo [Unity] -- and even more so in Kazakhstan, where presidential daughter Dariga Nazarbaeva has created her own party, albeit in a much more public way than Bermet Akaeva.

Bermet Akaeva has no formal role but acts as a consultant, who takes part in meetings.¹⁰¹ The party includes younger political figures such as Governor of Batken Askar Shadiev and seems initially to have been designed as a vehicle for them as well as younger businesspeople.

But Alga seems to be degenerating into a typical pro-regime party and so has lost such focus on the young and the progressive that it may have had. It still has no serious program and has instead concentrated on expensive advertising campaigns and slick presentations. Whether this works in Kyrgyz society is open to dispute:

Alga conducts these PR-actions, developed by non-Kyrgyz PR professionals -- they're aimed at young people, but young people don't vote, and old people don't like these [PR] events.¹⁰²

A leading government official also has doubts: "The problem is that the label Alga will work against many candidates. As soon as people see the label, they will vote against them, because they know it's the presidential party".¹⁰³ Opposition deputy Ishembai Kadyrbekov agrees: "People will see the Alga label

next to a candidate's name, and immediately vote for someone else".¹⁰⁴

Alga will struggle in some rural areas. Despite its apparently wealthy backers, its chairperson in the opposition stronghold of Kara-Kulja in Osh province lacks money even for pencils.¹⁰⁵ Alga has little chance of winning such areas and will focus on cities and areas where it is associated with a popular governor, such as Batken province.

Some Alga candidates will be genuinely popular, and the original idea -- to promote young, business-minded candidates -- could have considerable success. The problem seems to be that inevitably Alga is seen simply as the party of power, and it has attracted many people who are far from the original model. It has many members who may have little real loyalty to it. As an opposition leader notes: "People understand that Akaev's sun is sinking, and will think about whether to vote for him or not. People might come to parliament through Alga, and then later on throw Akaev out".¹⁰⁶

B. OTHER POLITICAL PARTIES

Parties play a minor role in political life, and with the removal of the list vote for parliament, they will become even less significant. There are at least 44 parties¹⁰⁷ but most revolve around a single figure. They often have very small memberships, usually restricted to a geographical area. The key dynamic is not platform but personalities.

"The party Erkendik is just seven people", claims presidential official Djanuzakov, "and society does not take any notice of them. The Republican Party - that's twenty people. And people don't know who these parties are...."¹⁰⁸

Adilet

A second pro-government party is Adilet, run by the deputy prime minister in charge of transport and

¹⁰¹ ICG interviews, Valery Dil, parliamentary deputy, member of political council of Alga Kyrgyzstan!, 18 November 2003; ICG interview, Bolot Begaliev, chairman of Alga Kyrgyzstan!, October 2003

¹⁰² ICG interview, parliamentary deputy, Bishkek, June 2004.

¹⁰³ ICG interview, Bishkek, July 2004.

¹⁰⁴ ICG interview, May 2004.

¹⁰⁵ ICG interview, Tamchybek Kairov, Kara-Kulja, 1 July 2004.

¹⁰⁶ ICG interview, Bektur Asanov, parliamentary deputy, Bishkek, 19 November 2003.

¹⁰⁷ ICG interview, Deputy Minister of Justice Nurlan Alybaev, 21 October 2003.

¹⁰⁸ ICG interview, Bolot Djanuzakov, first deputy head of the Presidential Administration, 20 October 2003.

telecommunications, Kubanychbek Jumaliev, a close friend of Akaev. Another leading official involved is the head of the presidential administration Topchubek Kasymov. It has been less visible than Alga but has been running campaigns throughout the country. It is not clear exactly to whom it will appeal but it seems to see itself as more conservative than Alga, attractive perhaps to an older electorate who might otherwise vote for the Communist Party.

Moya strana

Moya strana started as pro-government but is increasingly more independent, deliberately trying to represent modernist, progressive politics with a heavy accent on economic reform. Vice Premier Djoomart Otorbaev is the ideological leader of this relatively small group of politicians, although he downplays his party links. It apparently has 5,000 members¹⁰⁹ and has begun to work at the local level, supporting candidates in the Osh city elections, for example. Its relatively neutral image might help it gain some seats in parliament if it can field good candidates in urban areas.

Communist Party

Thirteen years after the collapse of the Soviet Communist Party, its Kyrgyz successors still retain a network of offices and supporters and can expect some level of electoral support. There are two parties, the Party of Communists of Kyrgyzstan, headed until his death in August 2004 by Absamat Masaliev, and the Communist Party of Kyrgyzstan, headed by Klara Ajibekova. The two parties have joined in a renewed alliance but have few viable candidates and will be hurt by the new single-mandate system. Only Masaliev was really recognisable to the wider electorate, and the party will find it difficult to find a new leader of similar stature.

One Communist claims that only his party campaigns for real change: "We are for a change in the constitutional order".¹¹⁰ But few believe the Communists have much more of a program than anybody else. Masaliev did support a slightly confused form of re-nationalisation, but in reality it seems unlikely that this would be more than a renewed division of property.

Ar-Namys and the opposition

Opinion polls suggest that many voters recognise the Ar-Namys opposition party, presumably because of Kulov, its imprisoned leader. Unlike some other small opposition parties, it has a large activist base and has started working at the local level. But without Kulov it lacks a visible leader -- only Deputy Chairman Emil Aliev is well known.

Other parties, such as Tekebaev's Ata-Meken or Atambaev's Social Democratic Party tend to be even more closely associated with a particular political leader and are usually geographically restricted to the support base of that individual. In the case of Atambaev, this is parts of Bishkek and Chui; for Tekebaev it is in his home territory of Jalal-Abad province. Jana Kyrgyzstan (formerly the Agrarian-Labour Party), headed by Dosbol Nur uulu, also has some support in Jalal-Abad and Osh.

Parties will be marginal in the campaign. It is the personalities and actions of candidates that will decide the outcome. Even when parliament is formed and deputies group in party factions, alternative networks and groupings are likely to appear quickly. Party discipline is a rarity.

C. CONFLICT SITUATIONS

From the point of view of potential conflict around the elections, a number of scenarios need to be avoided. The Georgian experience demonstrated the problems that can arise from overt vote falsification. Similar protests are likely in Kyrgyzstan if this occurs or popular opposition politicians are deregistered or otherwise forced from races.

A classic example of what might go wrong was a by-election in Kara-Kulja (Osh province) contested by opposition politician Usen Sydykov. As an electoral official puts it, "If we get a recurrence of the situation like with Usen Sydykov, we'll have a Georgian situation..."¹¹¹

Sydykov is a long-time opponent of Akaev and a former deputy. He was apparently threatened in 2000 and left the country to work as a Kyrgyz representative in a CIS structure. In 2003 he ran in a by-election for a vacant parliamentary seat in Kara-Kulja. He recalls: "Everybody was working against

¹⁰⁹ Galina Kulikova, coordinator, Moya strana, Bishkek, 30 October 2003.

¹¹⁰ ICG interview, Nikolai Bailo, parliamentary deputy, Party of Communists of Kyrgyzstan, Bishkek, 17 November 2004.

¹¹¹ ICG interview, January 2004.

me. In one village 27 officials were working against me".¹¹² The local *akim* claims he was told by the authorities, "If Sydykov wins, you lose your job".¹¹³

Despite the official interference, it was clear Sydykov had wide support. He claims he received 56 per cent of the votes in the first round, figures subsequently supported by ICG interviews in the Central Electoral Commission. But according to official figures, he received only 48 per cent, thus necessitating a second round. He was then deregistered on flimsy grounds that he did not have written permission to take leave from his work to run. The courts were used to confirm the decision.

The popular reaction was swift. A crowd of supporters stormed the local administration building and took the *akim* hostage. The *akim* managed to prevent any intervention by the security forces, which might have led to bloodshed, but could not find anyone in Bishkek willing to negotiate with the protestors,¹¹⁴ who then began a march to Uzgen. The protests eventually dissipated, but a dangerous precedent was set.

Sydykov himself appealed to people not to protest when the second round was held, and the anger faded, but similar scenes are probable if the authorities act this way again. With 75 seats at stake, the chances of multiple protests is worrying. Neither local authorities nor the police are necessarily well trained to deal with such civil unrest, although officials at the lowest level have often been successful at regulating conflict, frequently without support from superiors.

D. REGIONAL ASPECTS

Most controversial races are likely to be in the south, where the opposition is strongest, and the number of candidates is predicted to be high.

In the north, regions such as Issyk-Kul are traditionally not noted for political activism, and this may be a favoured area for pro-government candidates. The present governor has a reputation as illiberal, with little sympathy for NGOs involved in

political affairs and likely to try to control elections for the ruling elite. Talas is similarly politically quiet, although at the last elections there was a scandal about Kulov's non-election to parliament.

Chui and Bishkek are likely to see some opposition candidates, with figures such as Atambaev, who has a strong position there, and pro-Kulov Ar-Namys groups active. The deputy chairman of Ar-Namys, Emil Aliev, is considering running in the city.¹¹⁵ The capital's Russian-speaking population will generally support centrist technocrats.

It is in Naryn province and the three southern regions where most previous election tension has been reported. In southern districts, there are not only many candidates, but also many opposition deputies, and in general this is seen as difficult territory for government friends. The south is also considered -- fairly or not -- as more likely to have widespread electoral malpractice, and its politics is complicated by interethnic rivalries.

The remote and poor province of Naryn has thrown up some unusual politicians. Former Communist Party Secretary Usabaliev, an exception to all rules, will no doubt win his constituency even at the age of 85. Opposition deputy Ishembai Kadyrbekov is also formidable, but other well-known names, such as Naken Kasiev, could also be seeking a Naryn seat.

Potentially the most difficult region will be Jalal-Abad province, where candidates contesting its seventeen constituencies will include some of the best known opposition leaders. Local analysts point to Arslan-Bob, Jalal-Abad city, Akhman and Suuzak as potential hotspots. Bakiev may contest a constituency either in Jalal-Abad city or Suuzak.¹¹⁶

Osh province is also a potential hotbed, and if the December 2003 Osh city elections are a guide it is likely to experience malpractice and controversial results. Many of its eighteen constituencies will be contested by Alga, which has been active, but it is not clear how well official candidates will do outside Osh city.

No international observers were in Batken at the last elections, which had a number of disputed

¹¹² ICG interview, Usen Sydykov, 6 February 2004.

¹¹³ ICG interview, Rustam Anarbotov, former *akim* of Kara-Kulja district, Osh, June 2004.

¹¹⁴ Ibid. This rather brave *akim* was later dismissed because of the compromising stance he took. He claims that for three days he could not get through on the telephone to the governor, the presidential administration or any other superiors.

¹¹⁵ ICG interview, Emil Aliev, Bishkek, 22 April 2004.

¹¹⁶ ICG interview, Kurmanbek Bakiev, Bishkek, 10 June 2004.

constituencies.¹¹⁷ The present governor, Shadiey, will have considerable influence over the campaign in an area where opposition parties are traditionally rather weak.

VII. PRESIDENTIAL SCENARIOS

The potential scenarios for the presidential elections are enormously varied. Much depends on Akaev's ability to select a successor, or indeed on whether he may run again himself or simply prolong his term. On the face of it, it would seem obvious that he would prefer to stay in power, but he faces a number of problems:

- he has already served the constitutional limit of two terms;
- he has already publicly promised not to run, most notably to international visitors;
- he is extremely unpopular with parts of the electorate and could lose a fair election, while a highly falsified one could lead to popular unrest; and
- he is also unpopular with many officials and elites and could face an elite rebellion if he tries to remain in power.

One option is simply to battle it out – either just call a referendum to prolong his term or run and ignore the inevitable international criticism. But this would be dangerous and could cost Kyrgyzstan much of the goodwill it has built up, not to mention the risks of social unrest and elite dissatisfaction.

In the end, everything depends on Akaev's decision whether and how to arrange a transition or to try to stay in power. It seems that there is no strict plan, and much will depend on how events unfold. An influential official says: "As somebody close to the president, I can tell you that he does not yet know what to do; he's looking for ways out, and all possibilities are being assessed".¹¹⁸

Akaev has repeatedly told foreign delegations that he will not run again, most recently U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage in early July 2004. Nevertheless, many are sceptical. The difficulties of finding a suitable successor, the economic interests of the family, and the psychological difficulties of giving up power may all be too much. But the balance of probabilities suggests that choosing now to run would be a high-risk strategy that he would rather avoid. Opposition leaders are convinced that it would lead to conflict.

¹¹⁷ Although the U.S. and UK retain security-justified restrictions on travel by their official personnel to Batken province, the on-the-ground situation would not seem to justify such self-limitations. International observers should be deployed to the region.

¹¹⁸ ICG interview, Bishkek, February 2004.

"If he runs again, there will be war", says another former presidential candidate.¹¹⁹ This may be an exaggeration, but the situation will be at the very least highly volatile.

There have been several stage-managed calls for him to stay on, for example from a congress of entrepreneurs in Bishkek. But a businessman says:

I was at the Congress of Businessmen when they called for Akaev to run. But who on earth gave that guy the right to call for Akaev to run again? I'd never even seen him before. What right has he got to speak in my name, without even asking my opinion?...That's... not the wish of businessmen.¹²⁰

Government officials have also occasionally hinted publicly at the desirability of a further term. A member of his entourage tells ICG: "Another five years would be ideal".¹²¹

There are a number of reasons why these stage-managed calls are likely to continue. One is that Akaev wants to keep his options open. Perhaps more importantly, he wants to keep an element of doubt in people's minds as long as possible. If he declares unalterably that he will not run, it will be difficult for him to avoid turning into a lame-duck, with only limited control over the succession process. During the last elections, he only declared his candidacy two months before the election, which helped to make it difficult for his foes to manage their campaign.

If Akaev does decide to run again, he needs a legal decision from the Constitutional Court that the changes to the constitution in early 2003 in effect produced an entirely new constitution with a new term of office limitation. This is what he achieved in 2000, and there is no real reason to believe that he cannot get similar help a second time. The Court began examining the case in June 2004 and promised a decision within six months. Its chairperson, Cholpon Baekova, is a powerful political figure, who is not an automatic loyalist, but it seems unlikely that she would be able to resist intense presidency pressure, unless she had serious popular and elite support.

If the Constitutional Court rules in favour of Akaev, he would still face an electoral test that most consider he would fail in an honest contest against any significant candidate. So the ideal scenario for many in the administration is a simple referendum prolonging his term in office by two to five years. Such a referendum, however, also could provoke serious opposition.

The regime will need to assess a number of issues before it plunges into such potentially dangerous scenarios. First is the popular reaction. An opposition parliamentary deputy claims:

If Akaev runs again, 10,000 people will protest in every village. Or Osmonakun [Ibraimov], Djanuzakov, Akmataliyev...if there is a White House candidate, people will come out [on the streets]...Even northerners will protest, Atambaev's people, Bishkek will protest if Kulov says two words from prison.¹²²

It is actually very difficult, however, to assess the potential level of public protest if Akaev attempts to either run or prolong his term. There will indeed be popular anger, and it could flow into the streets, but whether it would reach levels that would threaten the regime is impossible to predict. The danger is that unlike during earlier civil unrest, there might be only limited support for the regime from other elites. Indeed, it is not inconceivable that some groups might manipulate popular discontent in an attempt to force Akaev to step down.

This second factor -- elite reaction -- is extremely important. Clearly senior officials dependent on Akaev for their posts and businesses support him staying. But they are relatively few. More typical is the attitude of this official:

I want him to go, but I don't want there to be conflicts, to see crowds going against each other....And I also don't want the same kind of people to come [to power] and get fat. So I don't know what possible scenario there is here.¹²³

Many officials and elites are ready for a change. There is a fairly powerful group that has been in some way offended by his rule -- for example

¹¹⁹ ICG interview, January 2004.

¹²⁰ ICG interview, Naryn, November 2003.

¹²¹ ICG interview, Bishkek, July 2004.

¹²² ICG interview, Bektur Asanov, parliamentary deputy, Bishkek, 19 November 2003.

¹²³ ICG interview, October 2003.

through lost jobs or preferment. The reaction of the business elite is also mixed, but it is far from a steady source of support for Akaev, and many of its members also fall into the camp of the insulted and the injured.

With both popular and elite support far from guaranteed, much attention will be paid to the attitude of external powers. Outside influence tends to be exaggerated inside the country. Russia's influence is perceived as critical, and there is much discussion of the U.S. attitude towards Akaev. In reality, neither country is perhaps as concerned about the outcome as some in Kyrgyzstan believe. Neither has vital interests there, and both will probably be able to deal with either the new leadership or an extension of Akaev's rule.

Russian support for a continuation of Akaev's rule is reportedly no longer guaranteed. The president's role in permitting the U.S. to maintain a military base upset many in the Russian elite, and it seems that some have not trusted him since. But it seems unlikely that the Russians would be able to do very much if Akaev decided to stay on. Alternatives to him are not necessarily more pro-Russian, and in many ways Kyrgyzstan's foreign policy stance is decided by objective criteria that any president would have to take into account. According to Moscow observer Arkady Dubnov, the Russians mostly want "someone with whom everything is predictable, and on whom there are some levers of influence. But somebody unknown.... We're afraid".¹²⁴

The U.S. attitude is more straightforward. As usual there are allegations of tension between the Department of Defence and the State Department, although this is denied by U.S. officials. The importance of the military base at Manas may not be so great that it will be an overriding factor. More likely, the fairly strong stance of the State Department will take precedence, which is that according to the constitution, there should be a change of leadership in 2005, and the U.S. expects this will indeed occur.

An attempt by Akaev to remain in office, particularly through illegitimate means such as a falsified referendum, would be greeted by a fairly strong U.S. reaction. There would be no question of sanctions but there would be much less goodwill, and bilateral aid and support for international lending would probably

be reduced. Foreign debt restructuring would become harder.

None of this would bankrupt Kyrgyzstan immediately but analysts suggest that without international support, and without a renegotiation of debt, the country would face a serious economic crisis within two years.¹²⁵ Such a crisis would probably mean the end of Akaev's rule in much more ignominious circumstances.

Perhaps just as important psychologically, the relationships the Akaevs have built up over the years would be seriously damaged. The invitations from UNESCO, the cosy meetings with the World Bank president, the elaborate state visits would not disappear entirely, but there would be much greater reluctance by many international dignitaries to be associated with a leader seen to have stayed in office illegitimately.

For all these reasons, a prolongation of Akaev's rule would likely lead to grave trouble, if not immediately, then within a year or two. The only possible reason that might persuade the three key players -- Kyrgyz society, its elites, and the international community -- to acquiesce would be a crisis of sufficient proportions to allow him to argue plausibly that he had to stay on for the sake of stability. It has to be hoped that nobody in the regime would consider creating such a crisis artificially with this in mind.

An alternative mooted by some is to promote a family member to the presidency, similar to what occurred in Azerbaijan. However, this involves the same risks as Akaev staying, with the added complication of more elite opposition. Almost nobody in the elites would relish Mairam Akaeva as president, the son and daughter are too young, and the chances of an elite revolt would be high.

A. SUCCESSION

Given the problems of prolonging President Akaev's stay in office, the idea of a controlled succession is understandably popular, particularly in the centrist elite. Even among the opposition there is considerable acceptance of some kind of successor scenario. One opposition member commented: "Anybody, as long as we have the precedent of a change of power. And

¹²⁴ ICG interview, Arkady Dubnov, Moscow, 14 July 2004.

¹²⁵ ICG interview, Bishkek, July 2004.

Akaev is not touched. And so that the next president also knows that nobody will touch him either".¹²⁶

There are countless potential candidates, and chances are that as the election approaches more will emerge. As a former minister puts it: "Every slightly significant person sees himself as the presidential successor".¹²⁷

The problem of succession is a difficult one. On the one hand, a successor should ideally be seen as 100 per cent loyal to the family to gain its blessing. The family is concerned about its political and, above all, economic position after any transfer of power and needs to be absolutely sure about new leadership. "He does not trust anybody", says one official, "everyone who began with him in 1990, they're no longer around. Now around him are people who came to power in 1997-2000".¹²⁸

However, several figures offer this kind of loyalty. The problem is that those like State Secretary Osmonakun Ibraimov or friends such as Kubanichek Jumaliev, vice premier in charge of transport and telecommunications, are almost certainly unelectable in a free vote and would encounter considerable opposition from powerful elite figures. Others sometimes touted as successors, such as Topchubek Kasymov, head of the presidential administration, are both little-known and too closely associated with the regime to win a fair election. In a similar position is Kemelbek Nanaev, Kyrgyz ambassador to Moscow.

The unpopularity of the leadership is such that any candidate who wants to be elected needs to distance himself from the regime (assuming elections are free and fair). But this kind of distance is frightening for the family and would probably end the successor's chance of support. There is a dangerous scenario under which the family promotes a weak and unpopular candidate merely on the basis of loyalty, the rest of the elite refuses its support and chooses its own candidate. This kind of split could provoke real political tension.

A more risky form of succession from the family's point of view but favoured by many in the elite would be to choose a compromise figure respected by all sides. Some who might fit this description are likely to

be acceptable to the opposition, but few would be acceptable to all members of the present presidential team. Nevertheless, several names come up. The first is General Prosecutor Myktybek Abdyldaev. It is hard to find anyone who has a bad word for him. He has a reputation for honesty and has apparently been popular enough with Akaev to be on his list of pretenders to the throne. Abdyldaev has little public image and no obvious power base, however, and he would have to overcome the generally negative image that the procuracy has in the country, probably by being promoted first to a government post.

A long-time pretender to the succession, Djoomart Otorbaev is popular among the intelligentsia but may not have the right characteristics for a national political figure. His supporters say:

Otorbaev is three heads higher than any of them, and smarter than anyone in the Aidar group...but he has no clan...[and] he's also Russian-speaking. And the elite won't accept him...He is reforming the state apparatus, and...taking the juice out of the corruption mechanisms.¹²⁹

A variant would be to choose a little known, perhaps younger generation figure, such as Azamat Kangaldiev, Governor of Chui Province. From Talas, he is thought to be close to both Mairam and Aidar Akaev. Fairly young, with an air of authority, he is the kind of new leader whom some in the elite might consider a reasonable compromise, although he may be viewed as too close to the family by some in the opposition and too little known nationally to gain wide support.

Another candidate might be Naken Kasiev, the popular governor of Osh province. His background as a candidate from Naryn would count against him in both the north and south, but he is a consummate politician, good at developing links with all groups. Though his apparent troubles with the family would probably make him an unlikely choice as a direct successor, he is the kind of candidate the elite might turn to if they could not agree on anybody else. Even more independent-minded is the respected parliamentary speaker, Abdygany Erkebaev, but he probably does not have the political and clan network to develop a serious campaign.

¹²⁶ ICG interview, 22 April 2004.

¹²⁷ ICG interview, Murat Imanaliev, former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Bishkek, December 2003.

¹²⁸ ICG interview, Osh, 19 October 2003.

¹²⁹ ICG interview, businessperson, Bishkek, November 2003.

The compromise candidate option could possibly avoid serious tensions, but it would likely be pursued only in circumstances where the president felt he could not safely remain in office, and none of his immediate advisers believed they could easily win the election or gain elite support. Such a candidate would still, of course, face opponents, but major figures like Bakiev might be persuaded to join his team.

B. A FAIR CONTEST

The least likely scenario is a reasonably free and fair election, about which there has been no previous agreement among elites. In a free election, centrist candidates such as Bakiev would have good chances, but an open contest would also expand the prospects of a number of other pretenders, as well as the better known opposition leaders such as Madumarov.

Hitherto lesser known candidates might also emerge. One such is Bakyt Beshimov, ambassador to India and a former popular rector of Osh University, who is considering re-launching his political career. Beshimov is not a typical opposition figure but he has experienced the sharp end of the regime. His dismissal as rector, apparently because he insisted on his independence from the White House, provoked rare student protests. When he ran in the 2000 parliamentary elections, the state worked against him. Beshimov is one of the few potential candidates who enjoys discussing political and economic programs, and he has used his time abroad to develop new ideas, many based on his study of South and South East Asian countries. Whether he has the necessary support to become a serious candidate remains to be seen.

There are other potential candidates of this type: former officials who are now independent, as distant from the formal opposition structures as from the authorities. They could shake-up the rather introverted politics within both Akaev's circle and the opposition. People such as Beshimov are less interested in the intrigues of the White House and the opposition and are more involved with long-term strategies. As Beshimov puts it: "Akaev will leave sooner or later, and we shouldn't concentrate entirely on him. The key issue is how do we develop the state?...For them [other politicians] the first issue is Akaev. But serious people should think about serious things".¹³⁰

A scenario that worries some observers would be a near dead heat in a relatively fair election contested by a designated successor and an opposition representative. Such an outcome, although entirely democratic, would risk provoking serious tension, especially if the split was also along regional lines. "If the split is north-south", says a government minister, "it really could provoke a war. A presidential candidate needs to win two-thirds of the vote to be accepted".¹³¹

Given the many possible problems with an unprogrammed election, elite preference for a compromise candidate and a managed transition is understandable. But for this to serve its purpose, it would have to be done in way that really was about compromise and not about manipulation, observing the democratic process and providing an opportunity for alternative candidates to run.

C. FINANCE

A candidate needs to be rich or have rich friends to campaign for president. Few Kyrgyz businesspeople have the means to finance a candidate -- figures bandied around suggest \$2 million to \$5 million is a plausible campaign fund; and few want to risk their money on a potential failure. Some candidates, such as Bakiev, are rich in their own right. Others count upon receiving the support of the family as its chosen successor.

Some candidates disagree, arguing that politics is more important than money. Former presidential candidate Omurbek Tekebaev claims he did not spend these kinds of sums during the 2000 elections, relying only on his political weight.¹³² But the search for financing will be a problem for most candidates and could compromise some before they have even reached the election.

An alternative suggested by some is foreign financing. A few observers suggest that Russian or Kazakh businesspeople might finance their own candidate in exchange for business privileges. At least one Kazakh oligarch is reported to be investigating opportunities in Kyrgyzstan, and there may also be interested Russians.

¹³⁰ ICG interview, Bakyt Beshimov, Ambassador to India, Bishkek, 22 July 2004.

¹³¹ ICG interview, Bishkek, July 2004.

¹³² ICG interview, Bishkek, 20 November 2003.

VIII. STATE CONTROL AND THE ELECTORAL PROCESS

Some reporting on Kyrgyzstan by human rights organisations gives the impression of an oppressive dictatorship, all too ready to arrest and imprison opponents and use torture whenever necessary. Reality is a little different. True, there are occasional arrests, police brutality, and significant pressure on the independent media. But the overall atmosphere is relatively liberal: outspoken political figures are largely unafraid of government reaction to their statements.

A. THE AUTHORITARIAN FEUDAL STATE

This does not mean that there is not very considerable political control. The authorities try to avoid human rights scandals and thus work in a somewhat more subtle way. They put pressure on relatives, use the vulnerability of businesspeople to their advantage, and only in the final instance resort to arrests. Most people observe the rules of the game, so the level of outright repression, and the number of political prisoners, is relatively low.

The usual way to achieve a result is to combine an offer of benefits -- a post or business opportunities -- with the implicit threat of something much worse in case of non-compliance. A potential candidate in the 2000 election explains: "The procuracy came to see me and said, either you go to Moscow or to Iran as ambassador, or we will arrest you. And Kulov was already in prison at the time...and we decided that I should leave".¹³³

The threatened sanctions are very real. When Daniyar Usenov announced that he might contest the 2000 presidential elections, the state machine destroyed his business, Eridan, through a series of dubious legal cases. Allegedly Usenov lost at least \$10 million. He was arrested and detained, although released under international pressure. He took up Kazakh citizenship in 2004 and is apparently a relatively successful businessman in that country. Another businessman who has faced problems comments: "They frightened him, and he lost his health, and his close relatives. They did that to all of us".¹³⁴

This highly effective repression explains why many officials are simply afraid to come out in opposition to the system. One says:

they'll begin to persecute my and my wife's relatives...I have eight relatives and all of them are in state service, all of them have businesses, they all have something to lose. If their shops get closed, they lose their income. And that's why many in the elite hold back because of their responsibilities [to their relatives].¹³⁵

This approach works at all levels. The same mixture of threats and favours is employed against people who come out in the streets to protest. When demonstrators marched in support of Usen Sydykov in 2003, officials avoided using the police against them:

[Instead] we immediately start to play games, to buy them off. You find the leaders: what problems have you got? What have you got to live on? Here's a loan. He takes it...But it's not a way out of the situation -- otherwise others come and they want help too.¹³⁶

The results are varied. The country stays quiet, but most of its ambassadors seem to be among the more radical supporters of the opposition. A real lack of certainty about the future is noticeable in individual investment strategies and career choices. Above all, there is a significant outflow of people, mostly the young and educated, and a lack of willingness to get involved in changing society at home.

The extreme dependence of all officials on the system is one of Akaev's main strengths. Almost all appointments, from regional governor to university rector, depend on the president. Even leaving the government involves risk for any official. Entering business tends to require political connections, and voluntarily relinquishing a post in the system is guaranteed to produce an adverse impact on the businesses of family and relatives.

Kurmanbek Bakiev, a former prime minister, is one of the few to take the much greater risk of open opposition to the presidential regime. Former Security Council head Misir Ashirkulov has apparently followed. As the succession struggle heats up, more and more officials may feel the need to demonstrate their independent credentials, but only if the regime is perceived to be weakening.

¹³³ ICG interview, Usen Sydykov, 6 February 2004.

¹³⁴ ICG interview, Bishkek, July 2004.

¹³⁵ ICG interview, Osh, October 2003.

¹³⁶ ICG interview, official, Osh, June 2004.

B. THE SECURITY FORCES

The system of control cannot be conducted without the security forces, although they are not necessary in all instances. Both the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) and the National Security Service (SNB) fulfil important political roles on behalf of the regime.

The SNB gathers information on opposition parliamentary deputies, examines their sources of support, and seeks weak points in their campaigns. In some instances, it has apparently broken up opposition meetings or spread false information about opposition candidates.¹³⁷

The MVD has frequently been used for political purposes: the police, whom it controls, are in effect the regime's foot soldiers, a function that sometimes leaves them dissatisfied and also vulnerable. The police are a potentially major player politically, particularly in the event of any unrest, when their reaction could be crucial. Attempts to reform them have met stubborn resistance inside the ministry.¹³⁸ An analyst says:

The militia [police] are the strongest player -- more than 20,000 of them....They don't sit in garrisons, they interfere in everyday public life....they have taken the place of the mafia, drugs, human trafficking -- all this is the militia. But its drawback is that it is not consolidated, and it has no ideologies. If any ideologue appeared, and said "how much are we going to put up with!" maybe they would want to put their own person [in power], but while they all live normally, they don't want anything -- they live too well.¹³⁹

Some police would disagree. True, senior officers have large incomes, either from corruption or by running businesses on the side through relatives. But many ordinary officers receive minimal salaries and are dissatisfied with their situation. Some also are fed up with being used as the regime's tool. These feelings came to a head in Jalal-Abad in 2002, when the police went on strike after they were accused of wrong-doing in the Aksy events.

Aksy showed that the police are not well-trained to deal with civil unrest, although there have been subsequent efforts, with some international help, to improve their crowd control techniques. The ability of the police to serve as neutral arbiters of law and order at a time of political tension remains in doubt.

Perhaps even more worrying is the relationship between the police and society and the impact that has on criminality. An officer says:

The criminal world has become a real force, which threatens security...and the police are not seen as representatives of the state, but as personal enemies. If we arrest a criminal...he calls us enemy no. 1 and uses his financial links to shut us up. If he can't, he'll use force.¹⁴⁰

In early 2004, a string of contract killings were reported in Bishkek. There is increasing fear of criminal money flowing into politics, and with it a concern that criminal conflicts will emerge also in the political sphere. Political violence or murder is relatively rare, but a number of worrying events in 2002-03, including an assassination attempt on Misir Ashirkulov, suggest that the system is far from immune.

C. FALSIFYING ELECTIONS

The regime has considerable ability to control the electoral process, the credibility of which has been seriously damaged by past abuses. Many people will not vote because they believe that the authorities will decide the result. Restoring faith in the system is a difficult struggle in which the authorities have been slow to engage.

There have been some changes in the electoral system, mostly for the better. A new electoral code

¹³⁷ See the report issued in May 2004 by a parliamentary commission on the political role of the SNB. The report was prepared after listening devices were apparently found in the offices of opposition parliamentary deputies in late 2003. It includes alleged excerpts from SNB documents that detail the political and business connections of deputies and list their relatives and informal leaders in their constituencies who might support them. According to the report, the SNB keeps files on international organisations, such as the OSCE and the National Democratic Institute (NDI), as well as on leading parliamentary deputies and human rights activists. It also asserts that SNB officials worked to disrupt opposition meetings.

¹³⁸ The OSCE is running a controversial police reform program, which seems to have met with little success in challenging the essential culture of the force.

¹³⁹ ICG interview, Bishkek, 20 November 2003.

¹⁴⁰ ICG interview, senior police officer, Jalal-Abad, July 2004.

makes it harder to engage in some prior practices though its detail is less important than how it is implemented. And here there is less evidence of change. The same people who presided over previous falsified elections are likely to be present this time also.

In addition to technical changes suggested below, some of which have already been adopted, there is a need for a much greater campaign to raise public consciousness. This can only be led by the president. It requires some public admission that while previous elections have had serious problems, this time there will be much stricter control, electoral officials who break the law will be punished, and the law will be applied equally to all candidates. If the authorities are serious about free and fair elections, they could seek to formulate a common position for all candidates and parties on the need to change the existing culture of corruption of electoral officials, official interference, vote-buying by candidates, and illegal activities by the security services.

In the absence of such efforts, there needs to be widespread public pressure on electoral officials to improve the technical conduct of elections and more active political party and NGO involvement in the process to avoid widespread manipulation. The media is also in a position to play an important role.

Overall responsibility for the conduct of elections rests with the Central Electoral Commission (CEC). Its chairman, Sulaiman Imanbaev, insists that the CEC and the government will ensure free and fair elections,¹⁴¹ but his occupancy of the same post during previous elections casts doubt on his independence. Ideally, he should be replaced by a more neutral figure with the support of a wider constituency, but in reality it seems unlikely that President Akaev will give this key position to an untested figure.

In theory, the CEC is a collegial body with twelve members plus the chairman. People involved in the electoral system, however, suggest that the chairman and the permanent staff take most decisions. Other members have separate duties and only attend formal meetings.¹⁴²

The CEC's major problem is lack of independence. Its office is in government headquarters, indicative of what everybody knows -- that it depends on orders from the presidential administration. Making it more independent is difficult in practice, although moving it out of the White House would have some symbolic effect. Opening it to greater outside scrutiny would also help. An official admits: "The CEC is a closed structure, closed from society; there is little information, and they don't even appear on television much".¹⁴³

Because it is not independent, the CEC cannot withstand the constant interference in the electoral process of officials, above all from the presidential administration. Orders from above about who can be allowed to win and who not are the fundamental electoral dynamic, and only the bravest official would resist such directions from Bishkek. The second major dynamic is corruption, which is widespread in local and parliamentary races and likely to be particularly prevalent at the upcoming parliamentary poll when there will be many candidates with plenty of money to spend.

1. Political pressure

The most serious abuses generally do not take place in the CEC itself. By the time vote counts reach the CEC, they have been carefully massaged to ensure the right result. Local authorities are under huge pressure to ensure this. Failure means loss of livelihood, perhaps worse. An electoral commission head in the south sighs: "if the White House says to me, get this one through, what can I do? Where's the guarantee that they don't give me a list of 30 members of Alga and say 'just do it'..."¹⁴⁴

The orders flow down to the polling stations. An unsuccessful candidate complains:

Chairmen of Electoral Commissions have the vote here, not ordinary people. At 2 a.m. I had won according to the votes, but then at 5 a.m. the chairwoman telephoned, and I was no longer the winner. She told me she put 200 voting slips in herself; she was crying, they forced her to do it.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴¹ ICG interview, Sulaiman Imanbaev, Chairman of the Central Electoral Commission, 29 June 2004.

¹⁴² During the election campaign, one or two CEC members are put on a full-time basis.

¹⁴³ ICG interview, Bishkek, February 2004.

¹⁴⁴ ICG interview, local electoral commission head, April 2004.

¹⁴⁵ ICG interview, Bishkek, May 2004.

This pressure on electoral commissions could be lessened by making them more representative. Precinct electoral commissions (PECs) often consist of teachers, since the polling stations are usually situated in schools. They are a particularly vulnerable group, with low salaries and employed (so dismissible) by the local state administration. In theory, electoral commissions are to include one third party representatives and a second third social organisation representatives. But only pro-government figures are wanted, as Absamat Masaliev of the Communist Party explained: "They simply do not allow us into the electoral commissions -- they take pro-government parties, and don't take us. When we try and find out what's going on, they say: we've already got party representatives".¹⁴⁶

Similarly, the NGO share is generally filled by representatives of social organisations of veterans, pensioners and other non-controversial groups. The pro-government Association of NGOs, led by Toktaiym Umetalieva, was created to counter the NGO Coalition and continues to fulfil the role of government spoiler in relation to civil society.

Parties, which mostly have very weak financing, also find it difficult to afford representation in all electoral commissions, which involves perhaps a month's work and expenses for food and transport.¹⁴⁷

2. Tricks of the trade

Apart from packing the electoral commissions, administrations have other options for dealing with unwanted candidates. The best is simply to persuade them not to run, either through threats, directly or to family and relatives, or by buying them off. If that does not work, the authorities can try to deregister a candidate to avoid the need for significant malpractice on polling day. This approach has been widely used in the past, and given the fear of the authorities that falsification of the vote count could lead to unrest, seems likely to be used again at the next parliamentary elections.

The easiest way to deregister candidates has been by making the registration process itself very complicated, including a declaration of income wide open to abuse. The new code makes registration more

transparent and straightforward but there will still be loopholes to exploit.

If nothing is found to permit deregistration, there are other means to get rid of a candidate during the campaign. Thus, candidates are not permitted to give presents to voters. An opposition activist explains: "Its very simple: in a village a couple of people come round, and say, 'here's a couple of bottles of vodka from [candidate] Suvanaliev' -- and go away immediately. Then the electoral commission comes round and says, 'look there's a transgression, attempted vote-buying', and they've got rid of Suvanaliev".¹⁴⁸

Ideally, from the regime's point of view, on election day everything should already be settled, with difficult candidates excluded and the winners a foregone conclusion. Leaving the result to voters is simply too risky. Nevertheless, if there are still opposition candidates running, plenty of measures are available to make sure they do not get through.

The first is to have many ballots that will not be used, which can be done by keeping voter lists old and unchecked. Lists have frequently been out of date, and since many people do not live in the same place as their legal registration (*propiska*), the scope for abuse is wide. At the October 2003 Osh local elections, a whole student hostel was missing from the list.

Those who live in an area but are not legally registered there can vote by being included in what is known as an additional list. This additional list can cause problems because there is little cross-checking, potentially allowing double-voting, or voting by non-existent residents. At local elections in Osh, additional lists contained up to 700 people in constituencies with only 2,000 to 3,000 votes.¹⁴⁹

A further problem on election day is that residents turn up to vote and are allowed to do so in some places, even if they are not on the list, by producing a note from the head of their house committee (*domkom*). This is strictly illegal, but is widely accepted in areas where the head of the electoral

¹⁴⁶ ICG interview, Bishkek, 9 December 2003.

¹⁴⁷ ICG interview, Emil Aliev, Deputy Chairman, Ar-Namys, Bishkek, November 2003.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ The potential abuse of migrant workers' votes is also cause for concern. An estimated 100,000 Kyrgyz nationals work in Kazakhstan, and perhaps as many as 500,000 in Russia. An opposition activist claims that this group was used to bolster the vote at the referendum in 2003: "Kyrgyz electoral commission members went round the bazaars with Kazakh policemen and said, 'We won't give you an extension of your right to work here, if you don't vote'. And they voted".

commission is trying to get as high a turnout as possible. In some areas such notes are sold by the *domkom* to whoever turns out, for just one som (\$0.02). This enables multiple voting, with voters going from one polling station to another -- or even multiple voting at the same polling station.

"Carousel" voting is also a good way to boost the vote. Students are typically used. They are given an already filled-in ballot paper outside the polling station and emerge with an empty ballot paper, which is handed over in exchange for a small payment. This is filled in and given to the next student and so on.

Finally, if none of these measures work, it is always possible to falsify the count. Indeed, by all indications, this is when the greatest rigging takes place. The simplest method is to put ballots in favour of one candidate in the pile for another. At past elections, observers have been unable to check carefully, since they have not been allowed to approach the counting table. At the next elections, procedures may be different, and observers will need to know their rights if they are to perform their duties actively.

The second method is to put falsified figures in the protocol. In some past cases, the protocol has been filled in at the polling station in pencil and "corrected" at the constituency electoral headquarters. Observers will have to insist on finalised protocols at the end of counting and before transmittal to the constituency electoral commission.

At the last parliamentary elections, Emil Aliev says:

In many places they simply took away protocols, the police drove away observers -- in Kara-Buura they was even shooting [the police shot over the crowd]. One chairman of an electoral commission hanged himself. People said to him, "we voted for Kulov, and what did you do?" They gave him a difficult time, and he hanged himself.¹⁵⁰

D. CORRUPTION

The other way to influence the course of the election is through corruption, though this is by no means the sole prerogative of the regime and its supporters. According to one observer, parliamentary candidates

already have their finances ready. He suggests that some will pay up to \$300,000 to get elected, although "in some constituencies, \$50,000 will be enough".¹⁵¹ Some campaign money, of course, goes to legitimate expenses such as printing leaflets and newspapers, and providing observers, campaigners and transport.

However, many candidates who run state enterprises use the resources of those enterprises. This is particularly popular with the heads of energy enterprises, who effectively promise electricity in exchange for votes. Heads of municipal heating enterprises are also in an advantageous position. Others use money in a more straightforward way.

Some candidates will organise celebrations in order to get noticed and give out presents on Womens' Day or Veterans' Day. Others build mosques, roads or provide water-pipes to villages. In several cases candidates have apparently paid the community share of international projects, such as the Asian Development Bank's Clean Water projects.¹⁵²

Others will directly provide money to informal leaders. An official describes how it is done: "You go up to a local leader and say, 'here's 50,000 soms (\$1,150). If you get the whole village out in support of me, there will be another 50,000'".¹⁵³ The candidate does not care whether the vote is won by persuasion, pressure or some mild rigging, and keeps a careful distance from the process.

Lower level electoral authorities expect to make money on the elections. Most work as volunteers, so there is an obvious temptation to get something from what is fairly tedious and burdensome work. An electoral official admits:

Everybody does business -- on all levels and in every possible way: [at the very lowest level] the chairman of the territorial commission gets money for ten printer cartridges, uses old ones, and puts \$600 in his pocket. That's the price of a house in some of these places.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁰ ICG interview, Emil Aliev, Ar-Namys, Bishkek, November 2003.

¹⁵¹ ICG interview, Bishkek, June 2004.

¹⁵² The community that benefits from a water infrastructure project is supposed to fund 5 per cent of the cost to promote community ownership. In several areas, candidates are alleged to have paid this money on behalf of the community.

¹⁵³ ICG interview, former regional official, Osh, June 2004.

¹⁵⁴ ICG interview, electoral official, June 2004.

At the Osh local elections in October 2003, candidates claimed that a chairman of a precinct electoral commission was taking \$500 to ensure candidates won.¹⁵⁵ Such accusations were widespread at those elections. An official complains: "The Osh elections are the beginning of the future disaster of the parliamentary elections".¹⁵⁶

Candidates use funds to bribe electoral commission officials, independent observers and other interested parties, including judges and others after the vote if necessary. Most popular is giving money to electoral authority members, who have influence over the counting process. One says: "People say to me, 'you can earn good money during the elections'. But I think if we don't work properly, we'll have a Georgian situation. We don't have an Ajara, but we do have Osh".¹⁵⁷

IX. MINIMISING FRAUD

Some aspects of election malpractice are very difficult to prevent with technical changes, either in legislation or in implementation. Those who really wish to do so, will probably find a way around innovations designed to restrict such practices. Nevertheless, there are many ways to make falsification harder. Some are already being implemented. International organisations have an important role to play in assisting local NGOs and political parties to challenge the malpractice of state bodies. Government representatives are likely to increase pressure on international NGOs involved in such activities and accuse them of interference in sovereign affairs. However, Kyrgyzstan has signed a wide range of documents committing it to free and fair elections. It should be difficult for it to object too strenuously to external help in satisfying that commitment.¹⁵⁸

A. IMPROVING ELECTORAL AUTHORITIES

Some malpractice is not the result of direct government interference but of local corruption or poor preparation. An electoral official complains: "It is so difficult working with these electoral commissions -- we teach them everything, pay them, explain everything -- and in the end they don't do any of it. They sit at a seminar and it goes in one ear, and out the other".¹⁵⁹

The CEC is responsible for training the thousands of electoral commission members and has limited resources. It would make sense to collaborate with an international NGO such as the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), which has enormous experience.¹⁶⁰ The UN program puts considerable emphasis on such training, and it should be able to attract funding for a wide range of programs.

One problem is that members of electoral commissions are only appointed a few weeks in advance, ensuring that there is little time for full-scale training. Permanent

¹⁵⁸ The documents include both those under the OSCE, such as the 1990 Copenhagen Document (International Standards of Elections), and the UN's International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 16 December 1966. For more details see the list at www.osce.org/odihr?page=elections&div=standards.

¹⁵⁹ ICG interview, CEC member, Bishkek, November 2003.

¹⁶⁰ Despite its obvious experience in the field, IFES does not have a real election program in Kyrgyzstan, largely because donors have been slow to provide support. Its main activities are in civic education.

¹⁵⁵ ICG interviews, Osh, October 2003.

¹⁵⁶ ICG interview, member of the CEC, December 2003.

¹⁵⁷ ICG interview, regional electoral official, May 2004.

electoral officials also lack preparation. The chairman of a regional electoral commission complains that he has little training. "I've never been out of the country for training -- I would love to go to Georgia. We don't know the legislation of other countries and what practices they have there. The only people who go are formal leaders in the CEC".¹⁶¹

Regardless of the level of training, the temptation to follow corrupt practices, or the orders of the local administration, will always be there. There are only a limited number of ways around this problem. One suggestion is to compensate electoral commission members. Of course, candidates would offer far larger sums, but it might help in some cases.

Ensuring that all political parties and independent NGOs have a chance to be on them is perhaps the best way to limit malpractice by the commissions. The Civic Union group of opposition representatives, which aims to control abuse at the elections, has made this a priority.¹⁶²

A third possibility is to assign commissions to polling stations only on the day of the elections. This would make it more difficult for candidates to target particular commission members at particular polling stations, but it could lead to chaos in election preparation.

In many cases, electoral commissions, particularly at the constituency level, require greater technical support from the CEC. Often these bodies do not have the necessary computers or telephones to ensure continual communication with the CEC. Although there is some donor reluctance to assist with such technical backup, it would make it more difficult for the electoral authorities to blame malpractice on technical problems and in the regions would provide some distance for commissions from local authorities. One electoral official says:

Electoral commissions should be independent. But in my office the only thing that belongs to me is my briefcase. Everything else belongs to the governor. And then they say that I should be independent. I don't even have my own transport or my own computer. And I work entirely on my own, without even an assistant.¹⁶³

The authorities are not really interested in independent electoral commissions. It will be up to donors to ensure that any technical assistance is properly used and reaches those who might make use of it to increase their material independence from the local authorities.

B. VOTING

Some technical fixes have already been adopted or are expected to be part of the UN election assistance program, such as transparent urns for polling stations. New voting booths are also to be provided to all polling stations, to facilitate secret voting, but also allow observers to ensure that nothing untoward is done inside the booth. These measures should make carousel voting in particular somewhat harder. Another initiative that seems to have won CEC support is indelible ink to mark voters' hands and prevent multiple voting.

Much more attention to voter lists is needed. One initiative being considered is to involve NGOs in checking them, which could help ensure they are not wilfully inaccurate. But the lists will inevitably be much bigger in many places than the number of potential voters, simply because many wish to remain on them while they work in Russia or elsewhere. Observers need to be trained properly to spot whether excess ballot papers are being used improperly by electoral officials.

A key issue on polling day will be the vote count. Emil Aliev and his Ar-Namys party colleagues attempted to publish the running score of the 2003 referendum as results came in from their observers at polling stations every half-hour. But at 7 p.m., he says, their server was blocked. He proposes publishing the results on a protected on-line site as they come in from observers at polling stations.

Such monitoring would be most usefully conducted by an independent group rather than an opposition party. Much will depend on observers being able to get a protocol of the vote at the end of the count. If they can, they would then be able to report the results directly to a central coordinator, who could publish them on a website.

Exit polling of voters as they leave the polling station is also a good way of checking official results. It is not clear how well it would work in some areas in Kyrgyzstan, where people may be afraid to say who they voted for, and the practice is likely to attract the suspicions of the authorities.

¹⁶¹ ICG interview, regional electoral official, 20 May 2004.

¹⁶² ICG interview, Melis Eshimkanov, Bishkek, July 2004.

¹⁶³ ICG interview, regional electoral official, May 2004.

C. MONITORING

1. Domestic observers

There are two types of local observers: independents, mostly from NGOs, and representatives of candidates. At past presidential elections, independent observers, mostly from the NGO Coalition, an alliance of NGOs, were put under considerable pressure and in many cases were not permitted to work at polling stations.

The NGO Coalition will field observers again as might other NGOs, including Alliance, led by Tolekan Ismailova, the former head of the Coalition NGO. These observers need considerable training, and there has to be more effort to ensure that they are truly independent. At local elections in Osh, there was concern that some independent observers were actually working for candidates.¹⁶⁴

Although independent observers are useful, often those from candidates are more effective, since they have more self-interest in getting the result right. But few are trained. Since most candidates are readying their campaigns, there seems to be no obstacle to starting training early. International NGOs might consider getting behind the idea. Both the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the International Republican Institute (IRI) have programs in Bishkek to assist political parties. Joint training of independent and candidate observers and electoral officials would be particularly beneficial to ensure that officials understand the observer role.

Local observers are often vulnerable. Usen Sydykov notes: "My observers in Kara-Kulja asked me to send observers from another region. [They said] we're local, and they can put pressure on us. Whereas they can't put pressure on outsiders".¹⁶⁵ Bringing in outsiders makes sense, but raises costs for candidates and independent NGOs.

2. International observers

Kyrgyzstan deserves a monitoring mission with nationwide coverage by international observers under

the auspices of the OSCE's Office of Democratic Initiatives and Human Rights (ODIHR). The advantages of international observers are obvious: they can report what they see free of pressure and are unlikely to be touched by corruption. There are a few disadvantages: even with good training, there are some things newcomers and short-term missions are likely to miss.

ODIHR, based in Warsaw, is responsible for such monitoring, assuming it is invited by the host government. ODIHR claims to be stretched in terms of resources but seems likely to provide international monitoring teams for both parliamentary and presidential elections. Usually a long-term mission is put in place two months before the elections, and a larger number of short-term observers are deployed for election day itself. Kyrgyzstan needs a nation-wide mission and a strong long-term observer team but the number of observers available depends on the willingness of participating states to contribute personnel. The poor reaction to ODIHR requests for observers for the Kazakhstan elections in September 2004 set a bad precedent. It is important that OSCE members be more responsive to requests this time.

D. THE ROLE OF NGOS

The Coalition and other NGOs are likely to take an active part in the election campaign, although there are some legal limitations on this.

At past elections young people have been largely ignored by the parties or been used as votes to be manipulated. This time there may be somewhat more youth activity, although for the most part young people are not involved deeply in politics. Students, in particular, are reluctant to join opposition movements or NGOs lest they get into trouble with the university authorities. At previous elections, students have complained that they were forced to vote for candidates favoured by the university leadership on threat of expulsion or loss of housing or allowances.

Small youth groups are campaigning for a more active role for young people. In Osh, the "Southern Centre of Young Voters" intends educational activities to encourage youth voting.¹⁶⁶ Other projects in Bishkek aim to encourage debates or involve young people in NGO work or related activity.

¹⁶⁴ ICG observation, Osh local elections, 12 October 2003. There seems to be only limited training for these observers. An NGO leader says: "Observers often do not know how to correctly draw up an [election] protocol, some can't even write their surnames properly. We need educated observers". ICG interview, Jalal-Abad, May 2004.

¹⁶⁵ ICG interview, Usen Sydykov, Bishkek, 6 February 2004.

¹⁶⁶ Press release, "Southern Centre of Young Voters", Osh, email: scyv_yls@mail.kg.

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) is giving small grants for many local NGOs to run their own programs related to the local elections in October 2004 and is likely to repeat this for the 2005 elections. Recipients include women's, single-issue and environmental groups and local activists of all flavours. The approach is designed to encourage candidates to address local issues in a more serious way. Most candidates, for example, are not well prepared for questions about the environment or similar issues. This may not ultimately be successful in focusing the campaign more on issues than personalities, but it will draw more people into the process.

Other NGO roles include monitoring human rights abuses during the campaign. Although several human rights NGOs are active in Kyrgyzstan, there is only limited coordination among them, and few have earned respect across the political spectrum. It would be useful to establish a human rights reporting mechanism that could investigate or bring to wider attention pressure on candidates, their families or their supporters. Such reporting is piecemeal at present, and incidents often only become widely known some time after the event.

The parliamentary ombudsman, Tursunbai Bakir-uulu, also has a role in human rights monitoring. He intends to get involved in monitoring the electoral process,¹⁶⁷ and the institution, which has regional offices, could usefully support electoral participants who feel they have not received fair treatment by the courts and other official agencies.

E. MEDIA

The media will be important in the electoral process, although observers have differing opinions on its influence. The authorities believe that it will be significant and have sought to assert control over key media outlets.

The state controls significant areas of broadcasting, several national newspapers, and most local press. In particular, the state television and radio station (KTR) is the most widely received in the country and will be a key government propaganda tool. Television is seen as the key medium for campaigning.

During the past elections, KTR coverage was almost entirely devoted to the incumbent. What coverage there was of the opposition was negative.¹⁶⁸ Two private channels, mostly entertainment, KORT and NBT, are thought to be controlled by members of the presidential family.

The only independent television channel with anything like national reach is Pyramida. Its coverage of the last parliamentary elections was reasonably balanced, according to the OSCE, but during the presidential campaign, it was under heavy pressure and gave overwhelmingly positive coverage to Akaev while saying little about his opponents.

Pyramida's significance is recognised by the authorities. In May 2004, it went off the airwaves for over one month, apparently due to a technical fault at the broadcasting station it shares with other channels. Employees at the station are convinced this was not an accident, but a political ploy to put them under pressure ahead of the elections.¹⁶⁹ Pyramida was finally reconnected after international appeals to President Akaev, but there were subsequent rumours that the president's son-in-law had become an owner of the station. These were denied by the known owners, and there has been no obvious change in the station's reporting.¹⁷⁰ If Pyramida does take an independent line on the elections, it will come under increasing pressure and require considerable international support.

Other independent television stations include the Uzbek-language Osh TV, which has also come under repeated pressure from the authorities, often through similar "technical" issues. Local radio tends to be less a target and is a potentially useful medium for public service announcements and innovative election-related programming. The popular Batken-based station Salaam is proposing a series of election-related broadcasts, including on ways to inform citizens of their voting rights, and candidate debates about local issues.¹⁷¹

The most influential radio station, however, is the US-funded Radio Liberty. Its Kyrgyz-language service, Azattyk, is perhaps the most popular media outlet in

¹⁶⁷ ICG interview, Bishkek, July 2004.

¹⁶⁸ OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission, Kyrgyz Republic, Presidential Election, 29 October 2000.

¹⁶⁹ ICG interviews, Bishkek, June 2004

¹⁷⁰ Olivia Allison, "Independent television station in Kyrgyzstan denies share sale", Eurasianet, 22 July 2004.

¹⁷¹ ICG interview, Maksuda Aitieva, Editor-in-chief, Radio Salaam, Batken, May 2004.

the country. "The influence of Azattyk is extremely strong among the population, stronger than all the state media outlets taken together", says opposition deputy Ishembai Kadyrbekov.¹⁷² Presidential candidate Bakiev is also frequently surprised by the station's influence. "When I go out to remote regions, I am always surprised by the knowledge [of current affairs] that people have. There's no television, no newspapers. I ask them how they know all that's going on, and they say, 'We all listen to Azattyk'".¹⁷³

Hence the irritation of the authorities with the station. President Akaev once accused it of conducting "information terror" against Kyrgyzstan, and the head of the journalists union, Kuban Mambetaliev, points to Azattyk's influence as the reason for a new ban introduced in the Electoral Code on foreign-funded media outlets getting involved in election campaigns.¹⁷⁴ While Azattyk remains on the air, it will be difficult for the authorities to institute a complete media clampdown. Indeed, the more one-sided the coverage from state-controlled television and radio, the more attention Azattyk's reporting will get.

Newspapers will be less influential, although they are read more widely than their circulation might suggest. The independent printing press run by Freedom House in Bishkek will be a significant support for the independent media.

Imaginative media coverage will be an important way to improve election conduct. International NGOs such as Internews can have a meaningful part in developing creative approaches to electoral coverage. Television and radio could usefully examine past elections to inform voters of problems they may face; coverage of elections in neighbouring countries (Kazakhstan's parliamentary elections in September 2004, for example) would be an interesting way to open up debate about electoral processes. And there is considerable scope for imaginative public service announcements encouraging turnout and attempting to establish an atmosphere in which the conduct of honest elections gains wide public support.

F. DISPUTE RESOLUTION

At past elections the judicial system has been manipulated both by the authorities to get rid of

unwanted candidates and by candidates to get rid of rivals. Chairman of the Supreme Court Kurmanbek Osmonov promises to "strictly control" judicial interventions and asserts candidates will get fair hearings.¹⁷⁵ He points out that most disputes should be resolved by the election authorities, but acknowledges that there will be a significant burden on the judicial system, not least if those authorities are accused of acting improperly. Osmonov himself entered parliament after five months of court battles so he knows the problems.

The judicial system faces extreme pressure. Judges are appointed by the president, which gives the authorities useful leverage. And judges earn minimal salaries -- around \$70 a month -- leaving them vulnerable to temptations.

Typically, Bakyt Djaparaliev ran for mayor of Naryn in 2003 and won, but was removed after a rival candidate took him to court on dubious charges. Although he won his case in the Supreme Court, he lost a further case and was ousted. He says: "Money decides everything. And the authorities are still the authorities, and they will not give us democracy".¹⁷⁶

There has been little effort to improve this situation through aid programs or other efforts. UNDP electoral assistance lacks a judicial element. International NGO programs such as the American Bar Association's CEELI¹⁷⁷ could consider offering help to the court system in training judges. Other initiatives might offer advice and training to candidates of all parties in the complexities of the electoral law.

¹⁷² ICG interview, Bishkek, 22 October 2003.

¹⁷³ ICG interview, Bishkek, 29 June 2004.

¹⁷⁴ ICG interview, Bishkek, December 2003.

¹⁷⁵ ICG interview, Kurmanbek Osmonov, Chairman of the Supreme Court, Bishkek, 2 July 2004.

¹⁷⁶ ICG interview, Bakyt Djaparaliev, head of Teplokomunenergo, Naryn, 13 November 2003.

¹⁷⁷ Central European and Eurasian Law Initiative.

X. THE INTERNATIONAL ROLE

The elections in Kyrgyzstan take place at a time when Russia, the U.S. and China are vying for influence in Central Asia in various ways. The U.S. has a military base at Manas airport near Bishkek, and Russia has a military base about 60 kilometres away, at Kant. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan will be watching closely, too. All have considerable interest in how the political transition is resolved.

A. RUSSIA AND THE U.S.

Akaev's accommodation of U.S. security needs by allowing the airbase cost him support in Moscow, and there are indications Russia would be happy to see a change of regime, as long as the successor was someone it could do business with. However, the only really strong pro-Russian figure, Misir Ashirkulov, has almost no chance to become president.

The U.S. has openly said it expects a new regime and has been fairly assertive in pointing out the constitutional limits on Akaev's term. Given the failure of its engagement policies to effect positive change in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, the U.S. needs a good news story in Central Asia. It has been slow to provide financing for election-related activities, partly because of bureaucratic battles in Washington, but USAID is beginning to put in place a series of programs.

The U.S. position on regime change may explain a series of recent statements by a government that has traditionally been anxious to court the West. In June 2004 President Akaev published an article in which he compared "the export of democracy" to the Bolsheviks' export of revolution. In a speech at a conference on 10 June, he singled out the OSCE for criticism, saying that "...foreign reactions which have little to do with local realities are often seen as interference in [Kyrgyz] domestic affairs".¹⁷⁸ The state-controlled *Slovo Kyrgyzstana* has published a number of anti-Western articles criticising international organisations, particularly the National Democratic Institute (NDI). Groups such as NDI are viewed by many as directly interfering in the electoral

process. CEC Chairman Sulaiman Imanbaev is one who considers their activities unacceptable.¹⁷⁹

The U.S. is unlikely to pay much attention to such government attitudes and will continue to support a wide range of election-related activities, with a much higher level of funding than either the UN or the OSCE. It will concentrate on independent media and NGO involvement, but it should also consider involving officials, particularly at the regional level. Some in the electoral structures would benefit from training and involvement in wider election-related programs. It would be useful to develop more offerings in which both independent NGOs and official structures took part, as a way of breaking down some of their mutual mistrust.

B. EUROPEAN UNION

The EU has been much slower to take a strong political line with the government. It is hampered by the small number of EU embassies in Bishkek: the U.K., France and the Netherlands are represented by embassies in Almaty; others operate out of Moscow. There is now a permanent EU (Commission) delegation in Bishkek that could be a focal point for election-related activities. Almaty-based EU embassy staff should make more frequent visits to Bishkek and seek to help develop a more coherent EU policy on Kyrgyzstan.

The statement emerging from the EU-Kyrgyzstan Cooperation Council meeting in July 2004 was fairly weak: "The EU welcomed measures to further democratisation, including creation of the Council for Good Governance and the National Program for Human Rights", and expressed its expectation that parliamentary elections would be fairly conducted.¹⁸⁰

The EU should engage more actively. The delegation in Bishkek could be funded to support election-related programs, and the German embassy there should be encouraged by other member states to provide political support. At present, the EU is hardly taken seriously by many in Kyrgyzstan, who focus almost entirely on the U.S. and Russia and the sometimes competitive postures of those two powers. But many would like to see a more active EU, not least so that support for democratisation could not be portrayed as equating to a tilt in the U.S.-Russia contest for influence.

¹⁷⁸ Hamid Toursunof, "Kyrgyzstan: No Exporting Democracy, Please", Transitions Online, 14 June 2004; Leila Saralaeva, "Kyrgyzstan's Fading Romance with the West", Institute for War and Peace Reporting, 25 June 2004.

¹⁷⁹ ICG interview, Bishkek, 29 June 2004.

¹⁸⁰ See Cooperation Council of the EU and the Kyrgyz Republic Joint Communiqué, 13 July 2004.

C. UNITED NATIONS

In talks with Secretary General Kofi Annan, President Akaev invited the UN to provide election assistance, and UNDP in Bishkek, together with the UN Department of Political Affairs (DPA) in New York, has put together a \$1 million program of technical assistance to the government to run the election. In many ways it is unimaginative: all aid goes through the CEC, and it repeats the traditional formula of previous UN election programs in Kyrgyzstan: money for computers, cars and international experts.

There are some useful elements relating to technical issues -- the transparent ballot boxes and new voting booths. It seems possible that the CEC will also agree to use indelible ink to prevent multiple voting. Other potentially useful elements include voter education, printing of guidelines and booklets for election officials, and some of the technical support for regional commissions. However, most of this could be done more effectively by independent bodies. The CEC is likely to be a serious problem for the UN program.

One problem with the UN program is not that it works too closely with the state, but that it does not work with enough state institutions. It has no place for the judicial system, despite the obvious flaws in legal procedures; there is nothing for the police or the procuracy. The problem of dealing exclusively with the controversial CEC chairman, Sulaiman Imanbaev, could have been diluted by expanding the number of state institutions with which the UN is prepared to cooperate.

The UN plan is a vague outline rather than a series of concrete proposals. There is scope, therefore, to fill it out with some worthwhile projects, particularly on voter education, training of election officials, and to help distance the electoral commissions from the state authorities. Donors considering financing the program should insist on more NGO and independent media involvement.

D. OSCE

The OSCE also has a key role to play but it is stretched in terms of resources and personnel. The organisation's participating states should consider seconding additional officers to the OSCE Centre in Bishkek for the election period.

There seems to have been little attempt to coordinate a wider strategy across OSCE institutions, with most of the burden placed on the small team in the Centre in Bishkek. The ODIHR Election Unit concentrates mainly on election observation but its mandate also allows it to conduct pre-election programs aimed at improving the electoral system, either with the government or with NGOs and others. So far it has only given advice on legislation, and there has been little evidence of coordination with other parts of ODIHR or other OSCE bodies on wider programming that would support NGO involvement in the electoral process, or encourage the media to get involved, for example. This type of programming will probably only be conducted by the OSCE Centre in Bishkek, which has limited financial and personnel resources to conduct such projects.

In general, OSCE institutions outside the country seem to have done very little to prepare for the Kyrgyz elections, with the lack of coordination among different institutions leaving large gaps in the approach. The organisation needs to move forward more quickly with a plan for a series of election-related programs, led by the Bishkek Centre, but with more support from ODIHR and other institutions; a proper election observation mission, with officers at centres around the country at least two months in advance of polling day; and a nationwide monitoring program that covers the whole country up to and on election day.

E. DONORS/IFIS

Kyrgyzstan's dependence on international financing ensures that the international community still has a good deal of influence. The country's debt has soared to around 115 per cent of GDP, although pressure on the budget has been diminished by a Paris Club initiative in 2002 that rescheduled it for three years, from 2002. The government seeks new debt restructuring that would provide relief from 2004 onwards. Creditors at the Paris Club have postponed discussions until after the parliamentary elections in February 2005. They should make clear informally that proper conduct of the elections and a peaceful transfer of power are necessary conditions for a speedy restructuring of the debt.¹⁸¹ A final decision on

¹⁸¹ While much of the debt is owed to Russia and Japan, neither of which has been inclined to apply political conditionality, the U.S. and EU member states should use their

the restructuring should be postponed until after the presidential election.

Representatives of the international financial institutions (IFIs) are in little doubt that a fraudulent election would cost Kyrgyzstan much goodwill. This may not have an immediate impact on lending, since there is anyway little scope for new loans given the size of the foreign debt and IMF strictures. But it would ensure that there was very little political will to help the country with its debt problems and would certainly have a negative impact on bilateral aid from Western countries. Given the increasing emphasis on good governance issues in programs of the World Bank and others, it is reasonable to take into account how the political system copes with the transition challenges. IMF budgetary support could also be affected if major shareholders, particularly the U.S., felt the election process was disreputable.

The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) is the one IFI that does have a political mandate, but its ability to influence the government is limited: it is restricted to private sector lending because of IMF limitations, and it is increasingly focusing on smaller credit lines through local banks. Nevertheless, it should include free and fair elections as a key objective in its country strategy, alongside improvements in governance and human rights.

On the other hand, a peaceful transfer of power could spur renewed commitment from the international community to economic growth. Major IMF shareholders could persuade the fund to relax its overly strict criteria for soft lending, and increase public investment programs. Increased grant aid could be offered, particularly if the new leadership took some successful steps against corruption and on improvement in state administration.

XI. CONCLUSION

Kyrgyzstan will go through by far the most critical period of its short independence over the next eighteen months. It faces not only parliamentary and presidential elections, which will determine its leadership, but also important choices for its national strategy.

The choice is fairly straight-forward. The government can continue on a route of anti-Western rhetoric, introverted politics, and an increasingly feudalised economy. If so, the country will be dependent on Russia and China for such political support as it can muster, and donor assistance will gradually diminish. Attempts by President Akaev to retain political and economic power would inevitably require more authoritarianism, which would likely provoke a counter-reaction from a population that in some ways is more liberal than its political leadership.

Alternatively, the leadership can reaffirm the choice made in the early 1990s by much of the elite for economic reform and a liberal political agenda. There is no need to cast such a decision in geopolitical terms, as pro-U.S. or anti-Russian: Kyrgyz democracy is quite capable of developing on its own terms, and society of managing a democratic transition. Many concerns expressed by the leadership about clan politics or social fractures between north and south are genuine, but society has changed considerably over the thirteen years since independence, the government less. People's expectations for change are increasing rapidly. They deserve a mature response from a political leadership that is willing to put national interests above narrow personal interests in retaining power and privilege regardless of democratic support.

Osh/Brussels, 11 August 2004

APPENDIX B

ABOUT THE INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP

The International Crisis Group (ICG) is an independent, non-profit, multinational organisation, with over 100 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

ICG's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, ICG produces regular analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international decision-takers. ICG also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a 12-page monthly bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in all the most significant situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

ICG's reports and briefing papers are distributed widely by email and printed copy to officials in foreign ministries and international organisations and made generally available at the same time via the organisation's Internet site, www.icg.org. ICG works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The ICG Board – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring ICG reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policy-makers around the world. ICG is chaired by former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari; and its President and Chief Executive since January 2000 has been former Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans.

ICG's international headquarters are in Brussels, with advocacy offices in Washington DC, New York, London and Moscow. The organisation currently operates nineteen field offices (in Amman, Belgrade, Bogotá, Cairo, Dakar, Dushanbe, Islamabad, Jakarta, Kabul, Nairobi, Osh, , Port-au-Prince, Pretoria, Pristina, Quito, Sarajevo, Seoul, Skopje and Tbilisi) with analysts working in over 40 crisis-affected countries and territories across four continents. In Africa, those countries include Angola, Burundi, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Guinea, Liberia, Rwanda,

Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Uganda and Zimbabwe; in Asia, Afghanistan, Kashmir, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Indonesia, Myanmar/Burma, Nepal, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan; in Europe, Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro and Serbia; in the Middle East, the whole region from North Africa to Iran; and in Latin America, Colombia and the Andean region.

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