

Opinion – 'No Change' After Kyrgyzstan's 2021 Parliamentary Elections

Written by Martin Duffy

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MARTIN DUFFY, DEC 1 2021

There are several Russian words for “no change” but the expression does not translate well in the dynamic Turkic Kyrgyz script abolished under Stalin's orders and now revived as the country's co-official language. Nevertheless, this is the word which comes to mind when one looks at the recent Kyrgyzstan election, largely down to President Japarov's capacity to carry off an illusion. It has been a busy year for politicians in the Kyrgyzstan Republic. They have got used to that old USA military snipe, “hurry up and wait...” In this former communist state, the massive statue of Marx chatting with Engels at Bishkek's Dubovy Park is a reminder of old days, but also of the shady credentials of Kyrgyzstan democracy. After months of unprecedented political turmoil, snap parliamentary polls were conducted on 28th November 2021. These followed in the wake of the notorious October 2020 elections which were abruptly repealed amidst rare public protests in the major cities. This time everything ran rather more smoothly, with few surprises either on polling day or in the election's outcomes.

The OSCE preliminary report is the proverbial curate's egg, “Competitive but constitutional changes weakening parliament... a stifled campaign and voter disillusionment hindered meaningful engagement.” President Japarov neither looms Lukashenko-like as one of the “last dictators”, nor is he a Zelenskyy, the democracy-loving, Ukrainian comedian turned president of Ukraine. The Bertelsmann Transformation Index previously classified Belarus as a “moderate autocracy” and lists Kyrgyzstan (and Russia too for that matter) under the ‘moderate autocracy’ label. Lukashenko's shares have since plummeted with his penchant for aviation kidnapping, state repression and exploitation of the European migration crisis, but Japarov's have not risen with this carefully choreographed state election.

There have also been a few false starts on the way. In 2020 street protests forced the annulment of the earlier parliamentary polls and the hasty resignation of President Jeenbekov, the steady foot soldier of his politically colossal predecessor, Almazbek Atambayev. However their rift, Atambayev's arrest and the closure of that era in Kyrgyz politics had seen the emergence of a new (in some ways tougher) regime. His reputation tarnished with corruption and government paralysis, Jeenbekov unsuccessfully belittled electoral fraud in 2020. The public would only stand so many empty platitudes. His resignation became inevitable amidst political unrest over the disputed elections. Japarov then stepped in as acting president and prime minister before finally securing the 2021 presidential elections.

In January 2021, the presidential and government referendum elections went ahead which ushered in Japarov as president who almost immediately delayed the parliamentary elections to the autumn. As Freedom House analysis puts it, these changes dropped Kyrgyzstan into the “not free” category, reflected in a marked increase of intimidation and incarceration of activists. Subtly, Japarov increased his grip on power. The Supreme Council fell from 120 to 90 seats, MP's powers were reduced and a presidential advisory body or People's Kurultai was formed. Japarov took executive authority and effective control of the judicial system. Human Rights Watch, issued an alert that these measures in Kyrgyzstan, “endanger freedom of association and speech”. There is limited space to explain the subtleties here, but in a nutshell Japarov tweaked things to increase his grip. He also barred Kyrgyz voters casting their ballots outside of their home districts, which effectively disenfranchised large swathes of his target opposition among migrant workers.

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Now Kyrgyz voters are far from docile. Suspicions of election irregularities that sullied two previous parliamentary elections in Kyrgyzstan triggered revolutions that ousted two presidents. Only a firm grip of all his departments allowed Japarov to take to the polls again on November 28, amidst accusations of misuse of funds and gerrymandering, the practice of redrawing electoral districts in a way that gives one political party or candidate an advantage. New electoral laws, coming into effect on August 27, also changed the national party-list system leading to derision that Japarov had basically bought off voters, an old stunt. These electoral changes could have harmed Japarov, "since his meteoric rise from prisoner to prime minister and then president in October 2020". As for the state of Kyrgyzstan's democracy more generally, the Freedomhouse.org records some core changes. The country's National Democratic Governance (NDG) rating plummeted from 1.50 to 1.25 due to the collapse of the government and illegal grab of executive power by Japarov. His Electoral Process rating declined from 2.25 to 2.00 due to the postponement of local elections in March (admittedly under pretence of the COVID-19 pandemic). The country's Civil Society rating fell from 3.25 to 3.00 due to the right-wing extremism. These rightist clusters showed great capacity to marginalize pro-democracy voices during the post-parliamentary electoral crisis.

Consequently, Kyrgyzstan's Democracy Score declined from 1.96 to 1.93. 2020 was tumultuous with the confluence of the COVID-19 pandemic, fraud hanging over parliamentary elections and musical chairs at the cabinet table thanks to an increasingly dictatorial president. Civil society offered little in the way of a counter-blast to this demagoguery and indeed seems itself percolated with pseudo-civil-society groups. Election observers confirmed that as in many former Soviet countries, the entire environment of election monitoring was being contaminated by "observer stooges". Whereas the presence of domestic observation is normally recorded in merit points, recent years have seen a dramatic rise in charlatan observers representing the state and intimidating voters. In Kyrgyzstan, there was some revival of civil society in response to Covid19 while Japarov's poor decision-making elicited an increasing vocality of opposition parties, but the effect was little.

Japarov's ousting of Jeenbekov and propelled his metamorphosis from prisoner to president and thus to a real power grab. Naturally, measures to return Kyrgyzstan to a super-presidential system were viewed by observers as an attempt to monopolize formal power. Predictably, International human rights organizations voiced their concerns. Seen in the cold light of statistical day, in 2020, the democratic quality of Kyrgyzstan's national governance deteriorated severely as both the executive and legislative branches of power were seized without an electoral mandate by Japarov, a lot of this cunningly concealed by pandemic upheaval (Ibid.)

Now the downfall of two elected institutions of government was widely thought to be the result of blackmail, coercion from Japarov's supporters protesting in the streets, and, perhaps, the participation of organized crime. Meanwhile the Supreme Council quietly but effectively perverted the country's governing institutions. Japarov quickly exploited his newly acquired office to conduct meetings in flagrant disregard for his presidential neutrality, even ordering teachers and public employees to recruit for him. Meanwhile under Japarov, the state began effectively controlling the web and intimidating international NGOs and domestic civic society organizations. Harassment of journalists became a frequent practice in Kyrgyzstan.

Finally, a brief look at the election and what it says about the state of Kyrgyz democracy. OSCE and its partners saw a governance and election framework fatally "undermined by limitations on civil and political rights and diminished separation of powers and independence of the judiciary". The centralized hand which came in after October 2020 resulted in a vaguely camouflaged state repression. Changes to election legislation were the opposite of democratic law-making. As for gender representativeness, if anything women's participation declined, with more than 93 per cent of candidates being men. As for opposition representation, there was really none of it. On the state TV channels critical reporting was largely absent during the official campaign thus limiting the voters' ability to make an informed choice. Now while observers reported that election chiefs (the CEC) handled complaints in a collegial and transparent manner, the fine print of the OSCE statement suggests a further democratic set-back.

Fresh parliamentary elections have contributed little to a very nascent Kyrgyzstan democracy. Kyrgyzstan civil society appears eviscerated as suggested by the limited vocality of women's, environmental, LGBT, civil justice and other protesting groups. An increasingly intimidatory and intrusive justice system has cut the rug from whatever was left of the opposition. Journalists are genuinely frightened. The media faces tighter and tighter restrictions, the web is

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covertly controlled and all opposition subject to security exposure. However, Japarov is not a Lukashenko or even a Nazarbayev or Niyazov. He is less thuggish but perhaps more politically skilful.

Japarov has proven surprisingly resilient for a leader who attained his power almost by accident, and who does not have the natural political instincts of arch manipulators in “trophy cities” of former Soviet wildernesses. He is unlikely to emulate his neighbour President Berdymukhammedov's grand architectural gestures in Ashgabat, or to rival him with a re-designed white alabaster Bishkek. However, elections are the acid-test of Japarov's resilience when political cards are down, and of his genuine control of the Kyrgyzstan security apparatus. The election will determine the future civil progression of this central Asian republic, and whether it may yet take a step back from the rigid authoritarianism which has characterized its recent political nomenclature. For the moment Japarov promised and delivered “Bez Izmeneniy” and his next five years will be about clawing unto it.

About the author:

Martin Duffy has participated in more than two hundred international election and human rights assignments since beginning his career in Africa and Asia in the 1980s. He has served with a wide range of international organizations and has frequently been decorated for field service, among them UN (United Nations) Peacekeeping Citations and the Badge of Honour of the International Red Cross Movement. He has also held several academic positions in Ireland, UK, USA and elsewhere. He is a proponent of experiential learning. He holds awards from Dublin, Oxford, Harvard, and several other institutions including the Diploma in International Relations at the University of Cambridge.