

TRANSITION AND CONSOLIDATION OF DEMOCRACY IN KAZAKHSTAN AND KYRGYZSTAN AFTER 1990: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

Abstract

In the early 1990s, with the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Central Asian countries became independent states and entered new political and social structuring processes. This process brought about political transformations that each country experienced in different ways. The transition to democracy and, in this context, the consolidation of democracy have become fundamental discussion topics in the Central Asian region, especially after the 1990s (Huntington 1991: 3-250). Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan stand out as countries that, despite various political and institutional differences in the region, claim to have taken steps towards democratization in the post-independence period.

In this study, the processes of transition to democracy and consolidation of democracy in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan after 1990 will be addressed within a comparative framework. First, the theoretical background of the concepts of transition to democracy and consolidation will be discussed, followed by explanations of the case selection, scope of the research, limitations, methodological approach, and level of analysis. Subsequently, a discussion of the findings will be presented, and finally, the conclusion will include the study's new and original contributions.

Transition of Democracy

The transition to democracy is often defined as a transformation from an authoritarian regime to one with democratic elements. This process aims to establish fundamental principles such as organizing fair and competitive elections, recognizing basic rights and freedoms, allowing political parties to organize freely, revitalizing civil society, strengthening the rule of law, and promoting media freedom (Huntington 1991: 25-35). However, Central Asia, has faced several challenges, such as the continuation of centralized bureaucracy in the post-Soviet period, a weak civil society tradition, and geopolitical competition in the region (Roy 2000: 45-60).

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan inherited a similar historical legacy. Yet, due to differences in leadership styles, economic resources, and ethnic-social dynamics, each country has taken distinct paths toward democratization. For example, while Diamond speaks of the possibility of a "reverse wave," Huntington predicted that the "Third Wave" of democratization could spread from Eastern Europe to Central Asia. Indeed, although countries like Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan initially took steps toward reform, they quickly evolved into regime types classified as "competitive authoritarian" (O'Donnell, Schmitter, Whitehead 1986: 16).

Kyrgyzstan, despite presenting a more "open" picture within Central Asia with the "Tulip Revolution" and waves of protests in 2005 and 2010, struggles to build a lasting democracy. At this point, O'Donnell and Schmitter's (1986) "elite bargaining" approach and Dahl's (1971) "polyarchy" (multiple centers of power) model offer important

theoretical frameworks. On the other hand, researchers like Linz and Stepan (1996) and Thomas Carothers (2002) take a more critical approach to the Central Asian case by highlighting the difficulties of institutionalizing democracy in the post-Soviet world and revealing the shortcomings of the “transitology” paradigm.

The fundamental conclusion from these approaches is that the democratic transition process in Central Asia often does not align with the “linear” or “orderly” progression anticipated in classical literature. In countries like Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, where “patronalism” and “personal network-based politics” dominate, the role of external actors (Russia, China, and Western organizations) frequently complicates rather than accelerates the path to democracy (Hale 2014).

Democratic Consolidation

Democratic consolidation refers to the process in which democratic institutions, norms, and values become irreversibly established, political actors recognize the regime as the “only legitimate game in town,” and military or authoritarian interventions lose their legitimacy (Linz & Stepan 1996: 5-15). Although democratization discourse in Central Asia is often presented with the goal of consolidation, resistance from both the economic structure and political elites poses significant obstacles to this process. In the case of Kazakhstan, a presidential system strengthened by oil and natural gas revenues has reinforced the legitimacy of the ruling power through promises of social welfare. However, with opposition parties and the media suppressed and elections held only formally, this system closely resembles a “competitive authoritarian” structure (Joldoshev 2010: 173-204). On the other hand, Kyrgyzstan portrays a different profile—a country unable to maintain economic stability due to frequent government changes and dependence on foreign aid, but with a relatively more active civil society. In an environment where regimes often change through “waves of protests,” the institutional and behavioral dimensions of consolidation remain incomplete.

In the context of Linz and Stepan’s definitions of behavioral, attitudinal, and institutional dimensions, opposition in Kazakhstan remains weak in behavioral terms, whereas in Kyrgyzstan, despite a strong opposition, institutional stability cannot be achieved. Attitudinally, periodic revolutions repeatedly disrupt the status quo. In conclusion, it can be said that both countries are still far from achieving “full and lasting” democracy.

Case Selection: Kazakhstan & Kyrgyzstan

In Central Asia, democratic transition attempts after the 1990s have produced significantly different political outcomes despite a shared historical and cultural legacy. In this study, the cases of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan were selected for the following reasons:

1. **Similar Historical Legacy:** Both countries have been shaped under the institutional and political influences of the Soviet era.
2. **Different Political Practices:** While Kazakhstan maintains a strong presidential system and one-party dominance, Kyrgyzstan occasionally shifts toward a parliamentary system and has a political structure open to protests.
3. **Economic Differences:** Kazakhstan, with its abundant oil and natural gas resources, is well-positioned to attract foreign investment. In contrast, Kyrgyzstan relies on foreign aid due to its limited natural resources.

Within the framework of the “Most Different Systems Design,” it becomes clearer why these two countries, despite sharing the same historical foundations, have produced vastly different political outcomes (Przeworski 1970).

Scope of The Research

This research aims to examine the processes of democratic transition and consolidation in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan from a multidimensional perspective. Specifically, it focuses on:

- The organization of electoral systems and political parties,
- The impact of international factors (Russia, China, Western countries, and international organizations),
- The extent to which democratic consolidation (both institutional and societal) has been achieved.

In this context, the research also evaluates the causes and consequences of the “color revolutions” in Kyrgyzstan in 2005 and 2010, as well as the large-scale protests in Kazakhstan in 2022.

Analyses

Within the framework of historical comparative analysis, the constitutions and electoral laws of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan were examined. The Kazakhstan Constitution (1995) grants the president extensive powers, including dissolving parliament and making high-level bureaucratic appointments (Articles 42–48), thereby significantly strengthening the president’s political authority. Reforms during Nursultan Nazarbayev’s rule, particularly the 2007 constitutional amendments, eliminated the classic two-term presidential limit, enabling the president’s indefinite re-election. Nazarbayev’s political status was further reinforced in 2010 with the adoption of the “Elbasy (National Leader)” law, which granted him the title of “state founder,” a broad sphere of influence, and immunity from prosecution.

Following the January 2022 Protests (also known as the Qantar Events), Kazakhstan introduced constitutional changes that limited the president’s term to a single seven-year term and abolished the previously unlimited re-election rule. Additionally, the “Elbasy” title was removed from the constitution—a symbolic yet significant change. These revisions aimed to curtail the dominant power structures of the Nazarbayev era and bolstered President Tokayev’s image as a reformist. However, some analysts remain skeptical about the actual impact of these changes, arguing that the tradition of centralized power is still deeply rooted.

In contrast, the Kyrgyzstan Constitution (1993 and 2003 amendments) aimed to balance power between the presidency and parliament. Nonetheless, amendments in 1996 and 2003 granted additional powers to the president. The 2010 constitutional reform reflected a shift towards a more parliamentary model. Despite these changes, Kyrgyzstan’s political instability and frequent government changes have hindered effective institutionalization. The 2005 and 2010 uprisings, which can be described as revolutionary, were seen as attempts to counterbalance the tendencies toward a strong presidential system.

Despite these differences, both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have retained much of the centralized state apparatus inherited from the Soviet era. In Kazakhstan, the strong presidential system established under Nazarbayev, though partially reined in by the 2022 constitutional amendments, continues to exhibit a tendency toward centralized control. Kyrgyzstan, on the other hand, has experienced a more fragmented political structure in the post-Soviet period. However, central authority has frequently reasserted itself, with periodic strong leaders (e.g., Akayev, Bakiyev) emerging. This dynamic demonstrates that, although both countries officially bear the title of republic, the practical distribution of constitutional power often consolidates around a narrow ruling elite or an individual leader. In Kazakhstan, Nazarbayev’s transition from indefinite presidency to Elbasy, and in Kyrgyzstan, the short but impactful presidencies of various leaders, illustrate the interweaving of Soviet legacy and contemporary power dynamics.

The influence of Russia and China on energy and security in Central Asia has played a significant role in shaping reform efforts in the region (Diamond 1999). Kazakhstan’s oil agreements starting in 1997 and Kyrgyzstan’s

foreign aid received after 2000 have limited the scope of Western-led democratization projects. According to Freedom House (2023) and EIU (Economist Intelligence Unit) reports, both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are classified as “partly free” or “hybrid regimes” on the international stage due to these geopolitical dynamics.

Based on EIU (2022) data, Kazakhstan’s GDP per capita, which was around \$700–800 USD in the 1990s, increased significantly to \$9,000–10,000 USD by 2022. In Kyrgyzstan, GDP per capita rose more modestly from \$400–450 USD in the 1990s to \$1,200–1,400 USD in 2022 (radingeconomics). Both countries maintain literacy rates exceeding 98%, a legacy of the Soviet education system. However, university graduation rates differ: 28% in Kazakhstan compared to 18% in Kyrgyzstan. These differences in economic and human development indicators highlight the contrast between Kazakhstan’s resource-driven prosperity, fueled by its energy sector, and Kyrgyzstan’s aid-dependent development path.

Party Systems and Parliamentary Operations

The records of the Kazakhstani Parliament (1996–2020) and party laws show that the Nur Otan (now called Amanat) Party has been in power for a long period, either alone or with an overwhelming majority. In Kyrgyzstan, despite the establishment of many parties (such as Ata-Meken, SDPK, etc.), unstable coalitions and frequent government changes have disrupted the legislative processes (Joldoshov, 2010). This fragmentation of parties has prevented Kyrgyzstan from forming a stable majority, despite its parliamentary tendencies.

Media Organizations and Freedom Indexes

In both countries, the media is evaluated in international reports as being “partly free” or “not free” (rsf.org). In Kazakhstan, state-controlled or state-affiliated media organizations are predominant, while in Kyrgyzstan, although relatively independent outlets exist, frequent government pressures and financial difficulties limit press freedom. Polity IV data suggests that media control is stricter in Kazakhstan, while in Kyrgyzstan, although it softens periodically, a fully independent press environment has not been established (systemicpeace.org 2024).

Bureaucratic Structure and Perception of Corruption

Both countries show high levels of corruption according to reports (Transparency International, 2023). Kazakhstan, leveraging its economic advantages, presents a more “well-functioning” bureaucracy, but there are ongoing criticisms that many state officials rise based on “centralized appointments” and personal references. In Kyrgyzstan, a more fragmented administration structure and bribery allegations due to low-paid civil servants weaken the efficiency of the bureaucracy.

Leader Discourses and Reform Promises Kazakhstan

Examinations of press archives and official documents reveal that former President Nursultan Nazarbayev, especially after 1997, promoted economic growth and international prestige as his foremost goals through campaigns like the “Success of the Kazakh Way” (Kazakhstannin Yoli) and “Strategy-2030.”

Kazakhstan

Strategy-2030: This vision document, announced in 1997, emphasized economic development, social welfare, and “national unity,” while democracy was seen as part of the “stability and security” discourse.

Emphasis on “Stability”: Nazarbayev often presented “economic growth and the maintenance of social order” as a priority over democratic reforms in his media discourse. In this context, the “unlimited re-election” right he introduced with the 2007 constitutional amendments was legitimized in the public eye under the discourse of “continuation of stability.”

Elbasy (National Leader) Role: In 2010, a special law granted Nazarbayev the title of “Elbasy,” ensuring his continued influence over both public institutions and political parties. This status allowed him to largely control the reform promises in the country’s politics. After Nazarbayev, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, who assumed the presidency in 2019, promised reforms in line with the “people’s expectations of the state” and emphasized terms such as “New Kazakhstan,” “Fair State,” and “Social Dialogue” in his public statements.

After the 2022 protests, although Tokayev’s administration declared various reform packages and constitutional amendments (such as a one-time 7-year presidential term), international reports (Freedom House, EIU, 2022) indicate that these steps have not yet created a deep political transformation, especially since control over the media and opposition parties remains.

“New Kazakhstan” Discourse: After the 2022 protests, Tokayev promised reforms such as fighting corruption, limiting economic privileges of elites, and simplifying bureaucracy, but analysts emphasize that the “centrally concentrated authority” is still preserved.

Kyrgyzstan

In Kyrgyzstan, the discourses, official speeches, and campaign promises of various leaders post-independence (Askar Akayev, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, Roza Otunbayeva, Almazbek Atambayev) frequently addressed topics such as “the people’s will,” “free elections,” and “constitutional reforms.”

Askar Akayev (1990–2005): As the first leader after the Soviet era, he portrayed himself as a “liberal and reformist” figure and emphasized strengthening parliament with the 1993 Constitution. However, from 1996 onwards, he supported legal amendments that increased presidential powers and was overthrown in the 2005 “Tulip Revolution” due to corruption and nepotism allegations.

Kurmanbek Bakiyev (2005–2010): Upon taking office, he emphasized a “democratic system based on the people’s will,” but quickly faced accusations of “power concentration” with his family and close circle. By the time he was overthrown in the 2010 popular uprising, he had failed to fulfill most of his reform promises (Joldoshev, 2010).

Roza Otunbayeva (2010–2011) & Almazbek Atambayev (2011–2017): Otunbayeva, as an interim president, accelerated the transition to a parliamentary system, but economic problems and regional inequalities remained unresolved. Atambayev used the rhetoric of a “new constitutional order” and “transparent governance” during his campaigns, but tensions with the opposition during his term led to limited structural reforms. In Kyrgyzstan, leaders’ reform promises often focused on corruption, bureaucratic inefficiency, and economic vulnerability, but despite parliamentary inclinations, “political stability” was not achieved, and most of the promises were unfulfilled. The gap between the leaders’ rhetoric and implementation is summarized in Freedom House (2023) reports as “Kyrgyzstan has a relatively freer press and more diverse politics, but institutions remain unstable.”

Comparative Analysis of Leader Discourses

Both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan's leaders emphasize themes of economic development and social order. In Kazakhstan, the emphasis on "stability" and "national leadership" (Elbasy) reinforces authoritarian elements, while in Kyrgyzstan, the rhetoric of "the people's will" and "constitutional reform" frequently results in protests and frequent changes of government. The 2022 Kazakhstan protests accelerated Tokayev's reform promises, but it remains unclear how much democratic standards will rise in the country. In Kyrgyzstan, although leaders' "reform" rhetoric often points toward a relatively "more open" system, long-term democratic consolidation has not been achieved due to institutional instability and economic constraints.

Thus, although leadership discourses in both countries officially emphasize "reform" or "democracy," in practice, policies that protect economic or elite interests prevail. This reveals that political discourses in Central Asia contain "democratic" elements at the rhetorical level but, in practice, serve to consolidate power.

Role of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs)

In Kyrgyzstan, especially Western-funded CSOs participate in public debates through election monitoring, constitutional amendment proposals, and human rights reports. In Kazakhstan, CSOs also exist, but their activities are more limited due to state permission procedures and financial dependency. Examining civil society demands, press releases, and CSO reports, "transparency" and "rule of law" are among the most frequently mentioned concepts in both countries.

Conclusion

In this article, we examined the phenomenon of transition to democracy and democratic consolidation through a comparative perspective, using Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan as case studies in the post-1990 period. Throughout the study, the functioning of political institutions built in the post-Soviet era, the extent of democratization and institutional transformation, and particularly the role of political elites' strategies and societal dynamics were discussed. The theoretical framework incorporated key approaches from the "transition to democracy" and "democratic consolidation" literature (Huntington, O'Donnell and Schmitter, Dahl, Linz and Stepan, etc.), which were compared with the unique conditions of Central Asia.

The research shows that in Kazakhstan, a regime structure legitimized by economic development and a discourse of stable governance but characterized by mechanisms that restrict opposition and fundamental freedoms, emerged. The economic welfare provided by high oil and natural gas revenues has kept the regime's social legitimacy alive for a long time; however, the political space has largely been consolidated around the presidency, limiting the freedom of opposition organizations. Regular elections and a multi-party system, in practice, reflect the prominent features of a "competitive authoritarian" structure. The protests of 2022, although they revealed elite divisions within the government and societal demands for reform, did not lead to a fundamental change in the core characteristics of the regime.

On the other hand, although Kyrgyzstan is often described as having the most "open" political system in Central Asia, it presents a portrait of an unstable and externally dependent political model following the 2005 "Tulip Revolution" and the 2010 uprisings. Steps toward a parliamentary system and relatively freer media and civil society differentiate Kyrgyzstan from other Central Asian countries, but frequent government changes,

economic vulnerabilities, and a competitive elite structure have made it difficult to establish lasting consolidation. The presence of social movements provides a potential advantage for democratization, but the weakness of institutional infrastructure and dependence on external aid threatens the sustainability of reforms.

A comparative analysis of both cases points to Central Asia as a rich laboratory for understanding the democratic practices shaped by post-Soviet legacies, geopolitical competition, the distribution of economic resources, and local political culture. In Kazakhstan, authoritarian tendencies based on the discourse of “economic development with stability,” and in Kyrgyzstan, an unstable pluralistic structure marked by “periodic revolutions,” present two different paths of democratization. However, the results show that neither path has achieved full and lasting democratic consolidation. In Kazakhstan, the deeply rooted authoritarian tendencies, and in Kyrgyzstan, the frequency of political crises exacerbated by institutional fragility, prevent both countries from attaining long-term democratic stability.

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