

## FINAL PAPER

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“Kyrgyzstan: a new step toward democracy”

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Kyrgyzstan is a five million-nation located between China, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. Sunni Muslims of Hanafi school consist of 85 percent of total population. Islam adopted in the 8th century since the 15th century was the only religion of the Kyrgyz. After perestroika and gaining independence in 1991, the role of everyday Islam has greatly increased: about two thousands mosques instead of few ones emerged across the country and a number of the Kyrgyzstani pilgrims perform the Hajj annually. Seventy years of the enormous pressure against religion and Soviet propaganda could not change the importance of traditional Islam in the country. Most Muslims observe traditional values and rituals, and expressed very little interest in political Islam.

In post-Soviet Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan is viewed as a state advanced in political and economic reforms and surrounded by neighbors with less liberal regimes. However, the increasing authoritarian trends in the last decade in Kyrgyzstan caused a popular uprising, the Tulip revolution on March 24 2005 triggered by the rigged parliamentary elections. A corrupt and autocratic regime of president Askar Akaev has collapsed as a house of cards because of mass protests mobilized thousands of people across the country. Poor governance, sluggish economic development and poverty led to social discontent among almost all groups of population. People’s frustrations have been built up on rampant corruption, increasing economic hardship and alienation of the Akayev government from political elite and populations. Anti-corruption campaigns initiated by the previous administration have been used as a pretext to attack disloyal politicians and businessmen. Many former allies of the president disapproved steady concentration of political and economic power by his family and joined to the opposition forces. Nascent middle class and business community opposed growing authoritarianism and activities of the president’s son and son-in-law that heavily controlled the country’s economic life.

After the one-day revolution, the liberal-minded politicians led by Kurmanbek Bakiev formed an interim government to pursue democratic reforms. The new leadership deals with many unresolved problems that have been inherited from the previous regime – a huge external debt, rampant corruption, widespread poverty and unfair land distribution, etc.

New presidential elections in July 2005 will be a litmus test for democratic development in Kyrgyzstan. Most candidates for presidency promise a voting public further political liberalization and economic reform. The corruption of Akayev’s administration caused the discontent among all segments of society and united many people to rebuild new state system. A chorus of protests against return of the ousted president and his regime in the print media and Internet website informs about the demand for democratic changes and

building modern state. For this reasons the constitutional council, including state officials, politicians, and the civil society leaders was established to discuss how to balance executive and legislative powers and to prevent the autocracy in the future. Currently, representatives of almost all social groups express own opinions on the future constitution and development in Kyrgyzstan. However, the voices of Muslim leaders still are absent in these discussions.

Today, Kyrgyzstan is challenged by many problems that should be resolved to move forward:

- By resuming political and economic reforms, enforcing a rule of law, strengthening state institutions and civil society, the current leadership should mobilize people regardless their ethnicity, faith and localities for participation. Otherwise, the risk of involvement of criminal groups with narco-money in political struggle might be real.
- Customary law is very influential at family and community level. A new dilemma is how to harmonize democratic changes with local traditions. Market relations might conflict with the culture of male inheritance and gender and age discrimination. Oral law discourages women and youth participation. Gender discriminative interpretation of Koran might slow down programs on empowerment of women.
- Kyrgyzstan is viewed as a peaceful multiethnic and multicultural country; however, modern programs on ethnic and religious tolerance need to be initiated. The country has become a place of competition between various missions from the world for believers. Since independence more than 800 foreign missions from the Christian mostly Protestant churches and Islamic organizations visited the small country. In the north, thousands of Kyrgyz from Muslim families have chosen Protestantism. In the south some locals joined illegal political party Hizb ut Tahrir headquartered in London and called for establishing a caliphate. To prevent possible exaggeration and manipulation of sub-ethnic/ethnic and religious identities in political struggle for power, the civic education programs and activities of civil society groups should be strengthened and extended in the country, especially in the Ferghana Valley.
- Access to modern religious education for young generations is one of the most important issues. A shortage of educated mullahs leads to low resistance on the part of the youth to religious extremism. Some young people inevitably join religious extremist movements as a sign of protest against the old values of the Soviet generation, against the current economic hardship and the damage to trade done by regional disintegration. Mostly the youngsters see restoration of Muslim identity as a part of anti-colonial movement. A number of students have been invited to Jihadi madrassahs in neighboring Pakistan. The prospects for religious extremism will much depend on continuing reforms, political participation and employment for youth.
- In Central Asia, rhetoric on religious extremism and terrorism tends to camouflage internal problems to divert mass discontent by economic and social policy. Part of politicians tends to follow the Soviet attitude to religion, failing to differentiate fundamentalism and extremism. Interstate tension over water, energy distribution, border and land, narco-trafficking, struggle of local elites within one country over power and resources, division and disputes between Muslim leaders over power and income – all might exploit a threat of political Islam.
- At the same time, radicalization of Islam might be seen as a response to the worsening socio-political conditions in the country and a consequence of a weakness

of religious institutions severely damaged by the Soviet atheism. In the Central Asian context, the current debate tends to be narrow and focused on fundamentalism and terrorism, which begets a phobia of Islam. Political Islam needs to be considered within a framework of numerous problems at international, regional and national levels.

Since independence in 1991, Kyrgyzstan started building a sovereign state and integrating into the international community, however, the transition for millions of people is painful and not easy. The spring revolution of 2005 demonstrated their aspirations for democratic changes and hopes for the brighter future.