

National Identity in Kyrgyzstan: the Case of Clan Politics¹

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Introduction

The definition of Kyrgyzstan's national identity remains a complex matter. The Kyrgyz national identity is represented by its history, culture, regionalism, tribalism, ideology, language and ethnicity.² A closer look at each of these factors reveals arrays of more complex, and sometimes, questionable and contradictory sub-factors that make it all the more difficult to draw a definitive conclusion to the question of Kyrgyz national identity. While the exact definition of Kyrgyzstan's national identity remains debatable, some of the country's unique characteristics help understand the country's current political and socio-economic problems. One of its unique features is the continued strength of clans and their roles in various aspects of the political and socio-economic dynamics of the country. Although other features of the Kyrgyz national identity are important to understanding the country, notions of regionalism, tribalism and clanism are bases of some of the serious political and socio-economic problems. In the post-revolution environment, these divisions bode disaster for the country lurching between crisis and turmoil as criminal elements and special interests take advantage of divisions.

In this paper, I will seek to answer the following questions: What is Kyrgyz national identity? Why does it matter? What is the connection between Kyrgyzstan's weak national ideology and divisions along clans and regions? Why do clans matter in Kyrgyzstan? What kind of influence do they have on the political process and economic development? And finally, what means could be employed to weaken the clans and diminish their influence on political and economic dynamics?

First, this paper argues that the continued lack of national unity and national ideology in Kyrgyzstan are contributing factors to the ongoing divisions of the society along long-standing regional, tribal and clan lines. It will look at the unsuccessful attempts of the former President, Askar Akayev, to promote various forms of national ideology. Despite the Kyrgyz state's attempts to redefine the "sovietized" Kyrgyzstan by underlining its national identity through the emphasis on its powerful national symbols such as Manas³ and the Kyrgyz language, most such attempts did not resonate with the Kyrgyz population at large, where identity may often be defined by diverse loyalties and allegiances.

Divisions along regional, tribal and clan-based lines not only negatively impact the stability and cohesiveness of the Kyrgyz nation, but they are also sources of many

¹ This paper was prepared for and presented at the Association for the Study of Nationalities' 11th Annual World Convention entitled "Nationalism in an Age of Globalization," Columbia University, New York, March 23 – 25, 2006.

² Iraj Bashiri, "Kyrgyz National Identity," University of Minnesota, 1999.
<http://www.iles.umn.edu/faculty/bashiri/Kyrgyzd/kyrgid.html>

³ Manas, a Kyrgyz hero who lived around AD 800 and fought for the independence of the Kyrgyz people, united them and led Kyrgyz troops in battles against foreign invaders, is celebrated in a well-known three part tale epic, which was preserved for many centuries by bards called "manaschi."

social, political and economic problems. In particular, clans, which form informal influential entities, wield influence in politics and decision-making, undermining state-building efforts based on the rule of law, democracy and meritocracy. Although clan divisions were present before and during the Soviet Union, they became particularly vivid under former President Askar Akaev's rule from mid-1990s onwards and in the post-revolutionary environment when a struggle for power and economic resources became more intense. Clan and regional divisions in the country foster corruption and nepotism, which will prevent the country from progressing and integrating into the global economy.

Second, this paper will look at specific cases in which clanism and regionalism have had negative influences on democratization, economic development and political reforms during President Askar Akayev's rule and afterwards. The post-revolutionary Kyrgyzstan faces a delicate situation where social and political grievances remain high in the face of politically motivated assassinations, rising crime and fierce political infighting among various actors that seek loyalty from various constituencies. Further divisions along clan and regional lines may destabilize the country. I will conclude with policy recommendations that address a complex set of issues, including clanism and regionalism.

The Kyrgyz National Identity Predicament

The definition of the term national identity can often be ambiguous because it can be looked at from different perspectives. Identities may vary from individualistic to collective, ideological, religious, ethnic, cultural or language-centered. But the general thrust of the term national identity is a sense of belonging to a certain group of people. Understanding and analysis of Kyrgyzstan's national identity is important because, first, some of its negative aspects such as clanism and regionalism hinder the country's democratic development. The enduring strength of clan solidarity and regionalism are increasingly a problem because they are sources of nepotism, corruption and divisions in the country faced with potential crisis and failure. They negatively affect governance, public administration, economic development and overall state-building efforts. They are also effective tools to establish a power base for the elite and ambitious local politicians, who often get ahead not necessarily because of their policy agendas but mostly because of their clan or regional ties or loyalties to the ruling elite. These problems thrive in an environment of political vacuum.

Second, because modern Kyrgyzstan is a relatively new nation, it lacks a strong national ideological direction. This is not to argue that the country needs an ideological blueprint. However, in light of the prevalence of personalistic politics, the lack of guiding ideological principles strengthens factionalism and gives voice to various special interests. The post-Soviet Kyrgyz government had unsuccessfully tried to create a national ideology, based on key facets of its national identity such as history, language and cultural legacy, having also failed to address and, in fact, became a victim of some of the negative aspects of the Kyrgyz national identity such as regionalism and clanism. This section will discuss some of the attempts of the post-Soviet elite to establish a national ideology and explain why the government has failed in these efforts.

A subject of suppression during the Soviet years, the Kyrgyz national identity began to be openly discussed after its independence. To a large degree, the discussion

and definition of the Kyrgyz national identity were necessary as the country faced ideological vacuum and a lack of a clear understanding of itself to determine its vision of the future. During the first painful transition years, the country's search for direction was not easy as it experienced an ethnic conflict with its Uzbek population in the southern town of Osh in 1991, saw a mass exodus of its Russian and German population that made up the most skilled strata of the population, faced border disputes with its neighbors, and failed to revive its economy. In an attempt to consolidate power and control over the country, the Kyrgyz leaders began emphasizing the unity of the nation by tapping into some of the unique characteristics that symbolize the Kyrgyz national identity such as the historical figure Manas, the Kyrgyz language and Kyrgyz history.

Such attempts included a full-scale campaign to make the Kyrgyz historical figure Manas an indelible part of the Kyrgyz consciousness. Manas became a ubiquitous national icon. He is pictured on national banknotes, statues and posters of him are displayed across the country, the international airport and a new university in Bishkek are named after him, and schools have integrated studies of the Manas epic. Secondary schools began inculcating Manas's seven principles to students since 1997. The emphasis on the revival of the legacy of Manas in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan as a symbol of unity, national identity and a testament to the long history (an issue of debate) of the Kyrgyz nationhood was to redefine the "sovietized" identity of Kyrgyzstan and consolidate the nation. There is a Kyrgyz saying "chaynap berilgen ash bolboit," which means "spoon feeding does not digest well." This metaphor well reflects the Kyrgyz government's attempts to impose national ideas such as Manas's principles, which have no practical basis to address the country's problems and to unify the multinational country. Government-backed ideas have been largely detached from the daily lives of the people. More importantly, the government itself had failed to internalize the ideas, let alone to put forth a practical plan to implement these ideas. The same proved true about the Kyrgyz leadership's attempts to endorse its other national ideas.

During the early years of independence, President Akayev began advocating a slogan "Kyrgyzstan is Our Common Home," which called for inter-ethnic accord and unity, in part because of the 1991 ethnic violence between the Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in the Osh province as well as due to the increased emigration of the Slavic population. However, this idea also remained largely a hollow slogan as economic conditions worsened while Kyrgyz nationalism and regional and clan-based tugs of war over property and power distribution grew. Emigration increased not only among the Slavic and other nationalities in the country, but the Kyrgyz also left in large numbers to work or live abroad.

Other than socio-economic factors, emigration is also tied to some degree to the country's language policy that negatively affects political participation of non-Kyrgyz ethnic groups. Following Mikhail Gorbachev's "glasnost" policies, the titular language earned the status of a state language of Kyrgyzstan and the leaders tried to revive it as part of the greater nation-building effort. After independence, the state encouraged a more effective teaching of the Kyrgyz language by adopting better teaching methodologies. However, books and teaching methods of the Kyrgyz language remain rather ineffective. Non-Kyrgyz groups, and even some ethnic Kyrgyz, are hardly motivated to learn the state language, partly because they are comfortable with the Russian language and partly because they do not see career advancements by knowing Kyrgyz, when Russian, and increasingly, English, are more widely used and promise

more opportunities. Such attitudes to the titular language stem from the Soviet era when it was given a secondary role to Russian.

The leadership made Russian an official language to encourage the Russian population to stay and work in the country, which met resentment among Kyrgyz nationalists. Despite the moves to encourage or discourage the role of the Russian language in the country, the reality is that those not speaking the Kyrgyz language are not able to fully participate in the political and decision-making process. With this understanding, there is little incentive for the Slavic population to stay in the country where they do not see guarantees of their rights and freedoms. Thus, the language aspect of the Kyrgyz national identity seems to be hardly a strong unifying factor.

Another part of the Kyrgyz national identity – Islam – also seems to be a nebulous and questionable aspect with a limited potential to serve as a unifying or an ideological force. Islam was rather superficially introduced to Kyrgyzstan between the ninth and twelfth centuries but the Kyrgyz have continued to preserve some of the shamanist practices by worshipping the nature. Seven decades of Soviet suppression of religion is a big part of the weakened role of Islam in Kyrgyzstan. At this juncture, Islam is reviving more actively in Kyrgyzstan with the help of foreign-sponsored donors. Other religions, such as various denominations of Christianity, are also winning converts in the country in large numbers. Although Islam is more widely practiced in the southern part of the country, it remains a more ambiguous realm of the Kyrgyz national identity because the Kyrgyz mostly do not practice Islam, however, continue to affiliate themselves with it.

Some of the government-endorsed attempts to develop and endorse the arguably key aspects of the Kyrgyz national identity in an effort to unify the country appeared as too political and nationalist to certain segments of the population and met resentment from various ethnicities. For instance, the tone of the celebration of the southern city Osh's 3,000th anniversary held in October 2002 caused bitterness among the Uzbek population of the city, who deemed the events as “an inappropriate emphasis on Kyrgyz historical themes.”⁴ This is because Osh also has deep Uzbek cultural basis.⁵ The designation of the year 2003 as the 2,200th anniversary of the Kyrgyz statehood, throughout which the government held numerous events celebrating the country's cultural legacy, was also seen by opposition politicians and journalists as a source of inter-ethnic tension.⁶ The designations of these anniversaries are questionable to begin with as no accurate information is available on the exact number of years of the Kyrgyz statehood and of Osh's birthday.

More importantly, President Akayev's approach to underline the Kyrgyz national identity by putting an emphasis on national celebrations and national ideas, supposedly aimed at uniting and harmonizing the multi-ethnic country, lacked substance. The ideas were too intangible and generalized,⁷ which did not resonate with common people, the majority of who were politically apathetic, suspicious of the government, and were mostly concerned with daily socio-economic problems.

⁴ Ahmedjan Saipjanov, “Kyrgyzstan “statehood” festivities a potential source of interethnic tension,” EurasiaNet.org, August 26, 2003.

http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav082603a_pr.shtml

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Talaibek Koichumanov, Joomart Otorbayev, S. Frederick Starr, “Kyrgyzstan: the path forward,” *Silk Road Paper*, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, November 2005, p. 16.

The most striking feature of the post-Soviet Kyrgyz leadership is that it in fact acted against the ideas of unity and consolidation either by tapping into those very divisions for its own empowerment or simply giving into the inertia and ignoring the country's regional and clan divisions. A weak state without a direction and a purpose strengthened divisions within the society. The situation did not change much after the March 2005 revolution.

The current government faces the same challenges as the former Akayev regime in finding the ideological direction of the country. In attempts to define the country's ideology, the Bakiyev government created a commission on ideology, which includes a selected number of scholars and politicians. However, these efforts will prove futile without the involvement of a larger population. More importantly, efforts to cultivate any ideology will depend on a political consensus and compromise within the government as well as on tangible improvement of the overall economic situation of the country

Due to the peculiarities of its political culture, a weak state like Kyrgyzstan without a clear direction inevitably feeds not just the influence of clan and regional divisions but also the organized criminal groups, which are increasingly driving a wedge to the country's flailing unity. These forces slow down, if not undermine, the state-building efforts and fuel instability as various competing entities scramble for power, prestige and limited economic resources. The increasing roles of clanism and regionalism affect the country in almost every level - the political process, economic policies, personnel decisions and institutional reforms. The nexus between these issues deserve closer examination, which will further help understand the weak ideological basis of the state and the prevalence of negative aspects of the Kyrgyz national identity.

Dimension and Impact of Clans on Contemporary Kyrgyzstan

Brief Historical Overview of Clans in Kyrgyzstan

The notion of a clan in terms of Kyrgyzstan is rightly defined by Kathleen Collins who notes that it is "an informal social institution in which actual or notional kinship based on blood or marriage forms the central bond among members."⁸ Although the Kyrgyz people remain largely a monolithic group with shared history, language, ethnicity and culture, divisions among the Kyrgyz across clan lines have survived and constitute an important part of the identity of many Kyrgyz people. Clan structures go back to the Kyrgyz history. According to history books, as well as the Manas epic, the Kyrgyz society was built from forty kin-based but disparate tribes, each of which had different subdivisions. Some scholars claim that these tribes "were united by imaginary, rather than real, kinship links."⁹

⁸ Kathleen Collins, "Clans, pacts, and politics in Central Asia," *Journal of Democracy*, Volume 13, Number 3, July 2002, pp. 137-152.

⁹ Azamat Temirkoulov, "Tribalism, social conflict and the state-building process in Kyrgyz Republic," *Forum*, Institute for East-European Studies, p. 94. <http://www.oei.fu-berlin.de/Outnow/boi21/pdf/forum%20temirkoulov.pdf>

Prior to joining the Soviet Union, clan formations were the customary forms of “social and political organization in Central Asia.”¹⁰ The pre-Soviet Kyrgyz society, comprised of dispersed nomadic groups, was not a nation-state in the modern understanding of the term with clearly a defined territory, a central government and formal institutions. Hardly a unified nation, the Kyrgyz state took its modern form only after joining the Soviet Union in 1936. The Kyrgyz society was made up of three major clan confederations known as “wings” (“Ong kanat,” the right wing; “Sol kanat,” the left wing; and the Ichkilik, which is neither),¹¹ which are still relevant to many Kyrgyz people. The left wing consists of seven clans from the north and west, while the right wing has only one clan, the Adygine, based in southern Kyrgyzstan.¹² The Ichkilik group, with a stronghold in the southern part of the country, includes many clans, “some of which are not of Kyrgyz origin, but all of which claim Kyrgyz identity in the present.”¹³ There are many clans within these major groupings with dominant clans and clan leaders.

Some sources claim that the pact of the northern clans with the Tsarist Empire in 1920, after several years of struggling with the Kokand Khanate, resulted in the increased influence and control of Russia. This factor has widened rifts between the northern and southern clans as the latter continued to be tied to the Kokand Khanate and “fought against the Tsarist army” at the beginning of the 20th century, with the backing of some segments of northern clans. Whether or not this historical episode is a factor in the existing division between the north and the south, the rivalry between clans from both regions has been reinforced by various levels of development and representation in the government during and after the Soviet Union. The technological, educational and administrative center of the country has been concentrated in the north, while the south remains mainly agricultural and traditional in many ways. Attempts of the northern political elite to eliminate competition and maintain control over resources and the distribution of power in the country met resentment from southern clans, which to this day seek better representation in the government.

Barring the clear clan or regional ties, some of the pre-Soviet Kyrgyz traditional principles such as *adat* and *tuuganchylyk* (kinship) also provided basis for clan solidarity. *Adat* promoted a strict discipline and social control, requiring respect of the elders. *Adat* is part of *tuuganchylyk* that required each Kyrgyz to be a loyal member of a group, ready to defend and fight for it as the Kyrgyz came under threats and attacks.¹⁴ These principles are similar to the arabo-muslim term *achabyya*, which also promoted a group solidarity “based on family and personal relations” after Islam was introduced to the

¹⁰ Kathleen Collins, “The Logic of Clan Politics: Evidence from the Central Asian Trajectories,” *World Politics*, January 2004, 56, 2, p. 138.

¹¹ Note: clan-based divisions of the Kyrgyz to the left and right wings have nothing in common with the Western concept of identifying with various sections of the political spectrum based on a set of political principles and values.

¹² Alisher Khamidov, “Kyrgyzstan’s unrest linked to clan rivalries,” EurasiaNet.org, June 5, 2002. http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav060502_pr.shtml

¹³ Kyrgyzstan – A Country Study, Based on the Country Studies Series by Federal Research Division of the Library of Congress. <http://www.country-data.com/cgi-bin/query/r-7659.html>

¹⁴ Azamat Temirkoulov, “Tribalism, social conflict and the state-building process in Kyrgyz Republic,” *Forum*, Institute for East-European Studies, p. 96. <http://www.oei.fu-berlin.de/Outnow/boi21/pdf/forum%20temirkoulov.pdf>

Kyrgyz between the ninth and twelfth centuries.¹⁵ One of the more obvious traditional structures, which the current Kyrgyz power continues to maintain, is the so-called *aksakal* court, or the court of the elderly. The government has often used this structure as an instrument to settle disputes as well as to boost its legitimacy. Thus, the principles of group solidarity and cohesiveness of clans have remained valid through much of the Kyrgyz history.

Clans and Politics

Although the Soviet nationality policy attempted to weaken the traditional structures in Central Asian societies, some of the important aspects such as clan-based informal patronage governance were overlooked as long as the Kyrgyz ruling elite remained loyal to Moscow. The Soviet-led modernization and development of the Kyrgyz society did not reduce the influence of clans, which defined the identity of many people and included “an extensive web of horizontal and vertical kin-based relations.”¹⁶ Clans from the left wing dominated Kyrgyzstan and vied for power during the Soviet and post-Soviet years. The northern Buguu clan controlled the country during the early years of Soviet Union, but the Sarybagysh clan wielded more power as the Buguu’s rein weakened after the 1930 Stalinist purges.¹⁷ Former President Askar Akayev is from the Sarybagysh clan, and he relied on the support of northern clans, including that of his wife, Mairam, to maintain power, although he also had supporters from the south in the government.

The widespread clan and patronage-based rule became entrenched during the Soviet era and afterwards, although the Soviet leaders tried to weaken the clan system after the incorporation of the Kyrgyz to the Soviet Union. Moscow’s “indirect rule” of its satellite states through representatives of titular nationalities provided an opportunity to the ruling elite and powerful clans in Kyrgyzstan to promote their kin in the system.¹⁸ A largely neglected problem of clanism during the Soviet years, it became a root of many problems facing the country today. It must be noted that the part of the reason of the continued importance of clans and regional divisions in Kyrgyzstan is also due to the fact that the nation did not modernize through the evolutionary process of gradual transformation. In fact, it rapidly jumped from a feudal structure to Communism within a relatively short period of time. Although the Soviet Union dramatically shaped and changed the Kyrgyz society, the change was not thorough, whereas the mentality of the people retained the characteristics of the pre-Soviet era.

¹⁵ Azamat Temirkoulov, “Tribalism, social conflict and the state-building process in Kyrgyz Republic,” *Forum*, Institute for East-European Studies, p. 96. <http://www.oei.fu-berlin.de/Outnow/boj21/pdf/forum%20temirkoulov.pdf>

¹⁶ Kathleen Collins, “Clans, pacts, and politics in Central Asia,” *Journal of Democracy*, Volume 13, Number 3, July 2002, pp. 137-152.

¹⁷ Alisher Khamidov, “Kyrgyzstan’s unrest linked to clan rivalries,” EurasiaNet.org, June 5, 2002. http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav060502_pr.shtml

¹⁸ Kathleen Collins, “Clans, pacts, and politics in Central Asia,” *Journal of Democracy*, Volume 13, Number 3, July 2002, pp. 137-152.

Clanism and the Political Process

Clanism tainted and weakened public administration and governance in Kyrgyzstan during and after the Soviet era. It became a root of corruption, nepotism and a weak rule of law prevalent throughout the state system. Kathleen Collins argues that Leonid Brezhnev's idea of "stability of cadre" during his near quarter century rule ignored the informal patronage relations in Central Asia and other countries as long as they remained politically subservient to Moscow.¹⁹ Eventually, this made the political succession issue increasingly more difficult as the Kyrgyz power structure, as well as those of other Central Asian countries, had no checks and balances and proper political mechanisms to ensure a peaceful and transparent power transition.²⁰ The weakening of the Soviet Union during perestroika in late 1980s further emboldened clan networks as they sought power from Moscow's decentralization policy. Clan elites, representing various clan networks, took the freedom to informally choose leaders and manage interests and power distribution among clans.²¹

A power struggle between competing clans often meant zero-sum game for some leaders. For instance, dismissal from power in 1985 of the first secretary of Kyrgyzstan, Turdakun Usabaliev, who is from the northern political clan and served for a quarter of a century, reportedly led to the "personal humiliation" of Usabaliev as well as a purge of "his entire network of associates, cronies and relatives" with the succession of Absamat Masaliev, who came from the southern clan.²² Interestingly, Usabaliev continued to remain in the power echelons after the Soviet Union by winning parliamentary elections "largely because nobody had the nerve to stand against him in his home district [in the Naryn province]."²³ The victor of the first post-independence presidential elections in 1991, Askar Akayev repeated the pattern of the "winner take all" tactic by humiliating Masaliev and granting political and economic power to his close circle of cronies and supporters, "at the expense of the southern clan."²⁴ Akayev's induction to power was reported to have been at least partially due to the heavy backing of northern clans under the leadership of Chingiz Aitmatov, a well-known and respected writer from the north.²⁵

Moreover, informal patronage-based relations and clan rivalries have permeated and weakened formal institutions. They are particularly pronounced in the legislative branch. Parliamentary elections have not been transparent because of the tendency of the electorate to vote for individuals affiliated with a corresponding region or clans. A lack of a clear ideology and a platform by most political parties may be a valid reason for the

¹⁹ Kathleen Collins, "The Logic of Clan Politics: Evidence from the Central Asian Trajectories," *World Politics*, January 2004, 56, 2, p. 239.

²⁰ Rafis Abazov, "Kyrgyzstan and Issues of Political Succession," *Russia and Eurasia Review*, The Jamestown Foundation, Volume 2, Issue 11 (May 27, 2003).

²¹ Kathleen Collins, "The Logic of Clan Politics: Evidence from the Central Asian Trajectories," *World Politics*, January 2004, 56, 2, p. 241.

²² Rafis Abazov, "Kyrgyzstan and Issues of Political Succession," *Russia and Eurasia Review*, The Jamestown Foundation, Volume 2, Issue 11 (May 27, 2003).

²³ Kubat Otorbaev, "Mould Breaking Kyrgyz Politicians," *Institute for War & Peace Reporting*, July 7, 2000. http://iwpr.net/index.php?apc_state=hen&s=o&o=archive/rca/rca_200007_10_03_eng.txt

²⁴ Rafis Abazov, "Kyrgyzstan and Issues of Political Succession," *Russia and Eurasia Review*, The Jamestown Foundation, Volume 2, Issue 11 (May 27, 2003).

²⁵ Kathleen Collins, "The Logic of Clan Politics: Evidence from the Central Asian Trajectories," *World Politics*, January 2004, 56, 2, p. 241.

continued importance of clan or region-based voting. However, corruption and politicization of the country due to regional and clan divisions and competition facilitate the process of selecting public figures based on their clan or regional affiliations more than their political agenda and reform proposals. Similarly, elections for the parliament provide an opportunity for opposition groups to fight for power. They do so by tapping into their ties with supporting clans. For instance, some of the well-known politicians and parliamentarians from the south such as Adahan Madumarov, Azimbek Beknazarov, Omurbek Tekebaev, Absamat Masaliev, Bektur Asanov, Dooronbek Sadyrbaev and Ismail Isakov, have strong southern constituencies.

Differences in political loyalties and allegiances are not limited just to regional clan divisions. They are often present among various local clans within the regions. This is often seen in voting patterns. A vivid example was Kyrgyzstan's, as well as Central Asia's, first elections for local self-administration in December 2002. A presidential decree allowed the election of local leaders instead of appointing them through regional governors. However, such elections demonstrated the prevalence of voting along blood ties instead of policies, proving "once more the enduring strength of clan solidarity in Kyrgyz society."²⁶ In some districts, the winners were representatives of important Kyrgyz clans.²⁷ The election race was often tense, causing concern of a possible violent conflict between candidates.²⁸ Because the electoral constituencies were small, the candidates had close ties with them through family and friends, which facilitated their victory.²⁹

Similar outcomes and conclusions were observed after the December 2005 local government elections. In these elections, local political analysts stressed the influence of kin and blood ties as opposed to party memberships, party platforms and ideas. Only five percent of over 1,500 candidates were nominated by political parties to 369 seats in village and municipal bodies.³⁰ The influence of Kyrgyz clans was less significant in ethnically mixed constituencies. However, they were not altogether absent as the winners often relied on "distinctly "clannish" methods to secure support."³¹ Bribery and vote buying were also important factors in "winning" the votes of certain constituencies, especially the poor masses. This has been true not only during the local government elections but also during national parliamentary and presidential elections.³²

Clanism and corruption have similarly tarnished the independence of the courts. The President has been empowered to appoint judges to high courts (who are subject to parliamentary endorsement), military tribunals and local courts. In the past, the judiciary has been implicated in barring candidates and parties from running in parliamentary elections by using false evidence or minor violations of the electoral law, allegedly due to

²⁶ Cholpon Orozobekova, "Kyrgyzstan: Clan Loyalties Mar Local Elections," *Institute for War and Peace Reporting*, January 18, 2002.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Cholpon Orozobekova, "Kyrgyzstan's Clannish Voters," *Institute for War and Peace Reporting*, December 23, 2005.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Gulnara Saidazimova, "Kyrgyzstan: Pro-Presidential Forces Emerge Strong From Elections," *RFERL*, March 14, 2005; "Kyrgyzstan's Chronic Complications," *Power and News Internet Report*, March 18, 2005, http://www.pinr.com/report.php?ac=view_printable&report_id=280&language_id=1

pressure from the government.³³ The decision to grant Akayev the ability to run for reelection in 1998 and the subsequent continued support of the head of the Constitutional Court, Cholpon Baekova, who is allegedly a member of Akayev's clan,³⁴ indicate the level of the judiciary's partiality. The government has also reportedly used courts to quash the opposition and the independent media.³⁵

Finally, clan and regional influences tainted the executive branch. Despite the repeated rhetoric of professionalism, merit and competency of government employees, former President Akayev himself became strongly dependent on the close circle of cronies and northern clans to maintain his power base. Having the overwhelming power of the executive branch, granted by the Kyrgyz Constitution, President Akayev had the right to nominate the prime minister and other ministers, who were subject to legislative approval, appoint regional and local leaders, and shape the overall organization of the government. His appointments were often based on loyalty and support of those leaders. Although regional governors have been granted enough leeway to run their constituencies with significant autonomy,³⁶ Akayev retained enough power to control them.

The executive branch's rules of the game implied elimination of a clan rivalry in a particular region through the appointment of a leader from a different region to a key position. The clashes between unarmed civilians and the authorities in the southern province Aksy in the spring of 2002, which resulted in the deaths of six civilians, revealed that the bitterness in the south was caused not just by the government's neglect of the region's problems, but also by "Akayev's policy of appointing political protégés and then rapidly rotating them in the key post of governor of Osh oblast [province]."³⁷ The fact that the Osh oblast's five governors since independence were from the north was the biggest source of discontent for southerners.³⁸ The current President Bakiyev recently faced a similar problem after switching the seats between the governor of the northern Talas province and the governor of Jalalabad province, which resulted in protests in both provinces,³⁹ although Bakiyev ultimately prevailed in his decision. Sudden changes of the government's composition and the turnover of officials became a habit of the Kyrgyz leadership. This seriously undermines public administration as civil servants have no guarantee of their jobs, have no commitment to work effectively, and become prone to corruption, thereby heightening the public distrust in the government.⁴⁰

Non-transparent staffing practices have been prevalent in other parts of the state system. Institutions such as fiscal agencies, customs and various government

³³ "The Kyrgyz Judiciary: The Winding Road to True Independence," *Focus Newsletter*, Center for International Legal Cooperation, #8, May 2000.

³⁴ Kathleen Collins, "The Logic of Clan Politics: Evidence from the Central Asian Trajectories," *World Politics*, January 2004, 56, 2, p. 249.

³⁵ Askat Dukenbaev and William W. Hansen, "Understanding Politics in Kyrgyzstan," DEMSTAR Research Report No. 16, September 2003, p. 35.

³⁶ Askat Dukenbaev and Valimjan Tanyrykov, "Politico-Administrative Relations in Kyrgyzstan," United Nations Online Network in Public Administration and Finance, p. 19.

<http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/nispacee/unpan005576.pdf>

³⁷ Alisher Khamidov, "Kyrgyzstan's Unrest Linked to Clan Rivalries," EurasiaNet.org, June 5, 2002.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ "Kyrgyzstan Crisis Watch," International Crisis Group, February 2006. URL:

http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?action=cw_search&l=1&t=1&cw_country=60&cw_date=

⁴⁰ Talaibek Koichumanov, Joomart Otorbayev, S. Frederick Starr, "Kyrgyzstan: the path forward," *Silk Road Paper*, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, November 2005 p. 16.

bureaucracies are riddled with nepotism and corruption.⁴¹ The ethnic Kyrgyz constitute the majority in the personnel selection to these lucrative agencies thanks to kin affiliations and solidarity among the Kyrgyz, which exclude other ethnic groups. These problems, compounded by the bureaucratic red tape and deficiency of professional, competent and honest corps of civil servants, have poisoned the public administration that need thorough reform if all other reforms are to succeed.

Economic Implications of Clanism

The informal patronage system and clanism helped maintain the stability of the Akayev regime. Akayev had discretionary power to allocate public goods, the main beneficiaries of which were reportedly the northern Kemin, Aitmatov and Sarygulov clans as well as that of his wife.⁴² Top down corruption and kleptocracy became one of the main causes of political and economic crises. Recent investigations and disclosure of the Akayev family's financial and property possessions revealed numerous illegal activities with astounding revenues. The Akayev family controlled major businesses in the country and was suspected of involvement in money laundering.⁴³ After the revolution, the Bakiyev government announced that "two-thirds of all tax collections had not reached the state budget, but went to Akayev's so-called "family purse."⁴⁴

An example of the country's Akayev-era biggest charity organization "Meerim", established and run by Akayev's wife Mairam, shows the scope of corruption in the high echelons of power. "Meerim" appropriated land property and millions of dollars from various districts of the country worth 30% state share in the charity.⁴⁵ Among other properties, the Akayev family controlled 28 resort complexes around the Issyk-Kol lake area, which have been divided and given to various family relatives and cronies.⁴⁶ The current government also accused Akayev's son-in-law, Adil Toygonbayev, for pocketing \$16.5 million from fuel supplying deals to the U.S. airbase in Manas airport through the Aalam Service company. Top down corruption became endemic, permeating the very fabric of the society, ranging from schools to all state institutions. Kyrgyzstan now ranks in the category of top 20% of most corrupt countries.⁴⁷

The problem is getting worse as bureaucrats on different levels continue to "effectively extort money from entrepreneurs and entities, [according to] local businessmen. Bribe rates have risen between 200-500 percent."⁴⁸ Because of the dubious legal environment, corruption, red tape and slow economic reforms, capital flight is

⁴¹ Azamat Temirkoulov, "Tribalism, social conflict and the state-building process in Kyrgyz Republic," *Forum*, Institute for East-European Studies, p. 96. <http://www.oei.fu-berlin.de/Outnow/boi21/pdf/forum%20temirkoulov.pdf>

⁴² Kathleen Collins, "The Logic of Clan Politics: Evidence from the Central Asian Trajectories," *World Politics*, January 2004, 56, 2, p. 250.

⁴³ Daniel Kimmage, "Kyrgyzstan: Follow the money – the Akayev investigation," *RFERL*, May 4, 2005.

⁴⁴ Aziz Soltobaev, "New authorities blame Akayev's rule for economic downfall and corruption," *Central Asia – Caucasus Analyst*, Johns Hopkins University, May 4, 2005.

⁴⁵ Almaz Tashiev, "Kyzargandan kya otpogon Mairam Akaeva," *Apta*, June 17, 2005, #7, p. 3; Aziz Soltobaev, "New authorities blame Akayev's rule for economic downfall and corruption," *Central Asia – Caucasus Analyst*, Johns Hopkins University, May 4, 2005.

⁴⁶ Almaz Tashiev, "Kyzargandan kya otpogon Mairam Akaeva," *Apta*, June 17, 2005, #7, p. 3

⁴⁷ "Rampant corruption makes Kyrgyzstan a "faltering state," EurasiaNet.org, December 21, 2005.

<http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/business/articles/eav122105.shtml>

⁴⁸ Ibid

considered one of the major problems of Kyrgyzstan as many firms and businesses rely on their offshore accounts and “conduct their commercial operations in hard currency.”⁴⁹ Meanwhile, the country does not generate enough jobs and capital as the Soviet era industries have largely stalled because of the failed privatization and widespread plundering. Despite the modest growth since the revolution, increasingly, economic disparities are affecting the country’s stability and inter-ethnic peace.⁵⁰ Although there are a number of various factors behind these problems, non-transparent elections and economic policies and political exclusiveness in favor of special interests were key variables of the Akayev regime’s downfall. It appears that the current government is virtually repeating the Akayev-style governance.⁵¹

The Post-Revolution Situation

In the post-revolution environment, the problems associated with clanism and regional divisions are compounded by the collusion between organized crime and government officials. The current government, facing a fierce power struggle and internal squabbling, has proven weak not only in uniting the heavily politicized and divided country, but it is also failing to address the problem of rising criminality in the country. Amid the political vacuum and governmental feuding, criminal forces present a real danger to the country as they penetrate the government and establish control over the parts of the country where central authority has little reach. Reportedly, semi-criminal forces, funded by the drug money, wield influence in some parts of the country, especially in the south.⁵² According to some sources, certain individuals with ties to the drug trade in the south were able to get “immunity and influence by being elected to parliament.”⁵³

The ability of criminal elements to gain access to power is at least partly facilitated by the support they get from the local populations as they distribute goods, “build roads and mosques and provide electricity” to poor and neglected areas.⁵⁴ Criminal bosses now act openly to gain local support by organizing “public events [and] festivals, giving out money to the people, taking over companies supposedly for the sake of the people.”⁵⁵

Some criminal figures also enjoy local support because of their ties to their regions. A salient example of this is a dubious figure from the Jumgal district in northern Naryn province, Nurlan Motuev, who disrupted the functioning of Kyrgyzstan’s largest

⁴⁹ UNDP Human Development Report on Kyrgyzstan, 1995.

<http://www.undp.org/rbec/nhdr/kyrgyzstan/chapter3.htm>

⁵⁰ “Kyrgyzstan: Economic disparities driving inter-ethnic conflict,” *IRIN*, February 15, 2006.

<http://www.irinnews.org/print.asp?ReportID=51731>

⁵¹ For more information on President Bakiyev’s governance, see “Kyrgyzstan: Is the president losing interest in constitutional reform?” EurasiaNet.org, August 25, 2005.

<http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav082505.shtml>; Bruce Pannier, “Kyrgyzstan: president warns parliament over ‘course of confrontation,’” EurasiaNet.org, February 24, 2006.

<http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/pp020406.shtml>

⁵² Borut Grgic, “Revolution, Kyrgyz Style,” *IP-Transatlantic Edition*, Fall 2005.

⁵³ Svante Cornell and Niklas Swanstrom, “Kyrgyzstan’s “Revolution”: Poppies or Tulips?” *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, May 18, 2005.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ “Kyrgyzstan: A Faltering State,” International Crisis Group, Asia Report #109, December 2005, p. 17.

coalmines in Naryn province by illegally taking them over and overcoming the state's efforts to evict him, has thousands of supporters and admirers in Jumgal.⁵⁶ An official in the Naryn province administration describes him as "a combination of Hitler, Zhirinovski, and Mussolini."⁵⁷ The state's lack of response to his illegal takeover of the coalmines only emboldened him, as he threatened President Bakiyev and staged protests against any government effort to investigate the issues surrounding the mines, heightening his popularity in Jumgal. Symbolizing the increasing lawlessness in the country, Motuev openly demonstrated his support to the country's well-known gang leader Ryspek Akmatbayev as the latter organized protests in Bishkek calling for the resignation of Prime Minister Kulov, whom he accused of killing his brother, a member of parliament with suspected links to organized crime.⁵⁸

Against the backdrop of growing criminality, the incumbent government's legitimacy and transparency is increasingly under question. Some of the factors in that seem to be the rivalry within the government as well as the executive branch's rule based on loyalties and kinship support similar to that of the former regime. For instance, the duumvirate between Prime Minister Kulov and President Bakiyev is fragile due to the rivalry and differences in leadership style and policies. The fact that both leaders come from different regions – Kulov from the north and Bakiyev from the south – is also a factor in their rivalry. The Bakiyev-Kulov union, based on a single election ticket in the July 2005 presidential elections, was intended to prevent possible violence in the country as it verged on the edge of instability in the wake of the March 2005 revolution.⁵⁹ However, the government is faced with an impending crisis as both leaders seem to be on different tracks in terms of viewing the country's pressing problems such as organized crime, constitutional reform, and reform of the security forces. But despite Kulov's bigger popularity in the north, he is rather weak and Bakiyev can easily replace him. However, Bakiyev, who largely owes his presidential victory to Kulov, retains weak legitimacy in the country. To increase and prove his legitimacy, Bakiyev not only took control key state agencies and economic industries but he is also promoting the strong presidency and is building his power center by adopting Akayev's tactics.

First, Bakiyev has been accused of promoting nepotism and clanism. Leading northern politicians, who have left the Bakiyev government, say that Bakiyev's government is laden with "nothing more than stacking the government with his own people to the exclusion of others."⁶⁰ Resembling the former President Akayev, Bakiyev is giving important posts to his relatives and supporters in a likely attempt to take control of the north and create his own power base.⁶¹ He appointed one of his brothers as ambassador to Germany and a younger brother as first deputy chairman of the national security service.⁶² In September 2005, the Kyrgyz living in Europe sent a protest message to the government, expressing their opposition to the "spread of tribalism to the state's personnel," in particular, protesting the appointment of Bakiyev's brother to the

⁵⁶ "Kyrgyzstan: A Faltering State," International Crisis Group, Asia Report #109, December 2005, p. 17.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Daniel Kimmage, "Kyrgyzstan: Restive Days In Bishkek," *RFERL*, October 30, 2005.

⁵⁹ "Kyrgyzstan: A Faltering State," International Crisis Group, Asia Report #109, December 2005, p. 2.

⁶⁰ "Kyrgyzstan: Instability in the Wake of "Revolution," *Stratfor*, April 11, 2005.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² "K. Bakiyeva kritikuyut za to, chto ego bratya zanimayut vysokie posty," *Obshchestvenny reiting*, December 12, 2005; "Kyrgyz President's Brother Appointed To High Security Post," *RFERL*, March 2, 2006.

post of an ambassador to Germany.⁶³ Nepotism and promotion of special interests in top echelons of power completely undermine the idea of democratic rule based on meritocracy, intensifying the vicious cycle of nepotism, favoritism and corruption so much opposed initially by the revolutionary forces.

Second, pointing at Bakiyev's ineffectiveness, Zainidin Kurmanov from "Moya strana" (My country) Party alluded to Bakiyev's ties to organized criminal groups by using the latter "as a police baton, as a tool against Kulov and others who disagree with him," while the reform of security agencies and fighting organized crime are neglected.⁶⁴ The country's security services are currently at a crossroads as they come under pressure from the Prime Minister and legislature for incompetence and impotence in fighting organized crime. The security services are increasingly suspected of turning a blind eye to the ties of certain employees to organized crime.⁶⁵ While growing criminality and corruption in law enforcement agencies received harsh criticism from Kulov, who said that the Prosecutor's office, the National Security Service and the courts are not obeying him as "criminals are taking over the state," president Bakiyev brushed it aside as a "myth [that is] nothing more than an attempt to create a sense of instability in the country, discredit the new authorities, and discredit – once and for all – the law-enforcement organs."⁶⁶

Third, as noted above, in an effort to prove his legitimacy, Bakiyev took under control not only security agencies but also the remaining profitable industries in the country.⁶⁷ As a result of the post-Akayev changes in the patronage system and power vacuum,⁶⁸ property redistribution became focused in the hands of politicians, local leaders and criminal bosses. Some property disputes resulted in violence and deaths evidenced by disputes over one of the biggest wholesale bazaars in the Ferghana Valley in the southern town of Karasuu, Osh province; by the above-mentioned Karakeche coal mines in Naryn province; and by land seizures in Bishkek.⁶⁹

According to Prime Minister Kulov's January 2006 statement, international financial institutions (IFI) are increasingly concerned about the worsening criminal situation in the country, especially a group that reportedly has criminal ties with Ryspek Akmatbayev, which extorts money from IFI clients and small businesses.⁷⁰ Vandalisms and looting in the wake of the revolution and a looming instability in the country make it difficult to attract foreign investment. A lot of investors are concerned with the "increased political influence" of organized crime and internal governmental squabbles over the course of the country's direction.⁷¹ The lack of the strong rule of law was cited as one of the main issues of concern for businessmen.⁷² In sum, the post-revolution

⁶³ "Ethnic Kyrgyz set to picket embassy in Germany against "tribalism," *Belyy parokhod*, September 7, 2005.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Syrgak Abdylidaev, "SNB – vremya sobirat kamni," *Obshestvenny reiting*, February 2, 2006.

⁶⁶ Daniel Kimmage, "Kyrgyzstan: Hardball Politics With No Winners," *RFERL*, February 20, 2006.

⁶⁷ "Teatr tenei kyrgyzskoi politiki: problema K. Bakiyeva – nedostatok legitimnosti," *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, January 16, 2006.

⁶⁸ "Kyrgyzstan: A Faltering State," International Crisis Group, Asia Report #109, December 2005, pp. 4-10.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ "Feliks Kulov sdelał zayavlenie o razgule prestupnosti v strane," *AKIpress*, January 25, 2006.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

Kyrgyz state has proven to be increasingly divided, corrupt, and weak in responding to the country most pressing problems so much like the previous government.

Policy Recommendations

Political divisions and the tug of war for power in the government, underlined by influences of regional, clan and other special interests, herald bigger problems for Kyrgyzstan. Bakiyev is currently at loggerheads with parliament, criticizing it of ineffectiveness, obstructionism, political squabbling and the pursuit of private agendas by certain deputies.⁷³ The more important bone of contention between the legislature and the executive is Bakiyev's December 2005 proposal to postpone the constitutional amendment on the presidential system until 2009, despite the legislative efforts to change to the parliamentary system of governance. The issue right now is whether the legislature and the executive will agree on a nationwide referendum on the system of government. Some politicians fear that such a referendum will end in an Akayev-style authoritarianism.

Moreover, in light of the chaotic post-revolution environment, divisions and political squabbling within the government bolster criminal forces and clan leaders, who will further take advantage of the situation as they seek loyalties from their immediate kin and by offering public goods to the impoverished denied by the government. Clan and region-based divisions are bound to get worse if the government fails to provide welfare, infrastructure and public goods to the remote poor areas in the country. Government will further weaken as criminal forces erode the shaky legitimacy of the system that heavily relies on patronage networks. The lack of government transparency will intensify the criminalization and corruption from top down.

Therefore, viable reforms and changes must begin from the top. Only the effective, accountable and responsive government is able to unify the country and diminish the influence of destructive forces such as regionalism, clanism, and criminality. The government's ability to unify the country will largely depend on the restoration of the public confidence in formal institutions and major reforms of the state agencies. The efforts to address the problems raised in this paper cannot be solved without integrating them as part of a more comprehensive package of reforms because of their inter-related nature. For instance, Kyrgyzstan will not be a *bona fide* democratic state without the proper checks and balances in the government, skewing of which facilitates the consolidation of power in the hands of a small elite in favor of exclusive special interests to maintain power. This in turn solidifies nepotism, corruption and collusion with criminal elements throughout the system. Likewise, without the strong rule of law and transparency, there will be no tangible reforms in any part of the public realm, be it the state agencies or the economy.

The first step to restoring the public trust in the government and resolving the systemic political crisis should be the Constitutional reform, which must happen sooner rather than later. A prolonged lack of consensus and power struggle in the government will only sharpen the divisions within it and beyond. The strong presidential system should be changed to a presidential-parliamentary system, that is, to a balanced power

⁷³ Bruce Pannier, "Kyrgyzstan: President Warns Parliament Over "Course of Confrontation," EurasiaNet.org, February 3, 2006.

arrangement between the executive and legislative branches. A purely parliamentary system of governance might be rather premature for the country where personalities and their networks carry bigger weight, while political parties - a backbone of a functioning parliamentary system - are still weak and fragmented without viable agendas. As the Kyrgyz Sociologist Kusain Isaev notes, parties in Kyrgyzstan revolve around individuals and not a coherent system of ideas.⁷⁴ At this juncture, special interests – whether regional or clan based – may take an upper hand in the weak parliamentary system.

The strength of the parliament will largely depend on the revision of the law on political parties. The current law is rather weak because it lacks strict standards that would ensure the viability and coherence of political parties. As Rosa Otunbayeva notes, it is relatively easy to create a political party in Kyrgyzstan with a group of a dozen people, while, for example, in Kazakhstan, a party must enlist 50 thousand members to be able to register with the state.⁷⁵ The improvement of the law on political parties will allow to build a more united and mature opposition in the long run. The Constitutional reform must also address the issue of the permanent immunity of the President, upholding of which may undermine the accountability sought by the Constitution. These and other reforms in the political system must underline the rule of law and accountability, primacy of which may help weaken regionalism and clanism in the power echelons.

The second step in winning the public confidence should be the reform of the public administration, which has not received much attention since the country's independence. This resulted not only in ineffectiveness, corruption, and double standards in the government but it also stalled key economic reforms. Because of the wide discrepancy between the government's decisions and their implementation, the state must include new approaches in the decision-making procedure and integrate a monitoring and evaluation system.⁷⁶ The government must unify and determine its direction on par with a clear plan on how to enact its decisions based on the assessment of the country's peculiarities. This cannot be achieved without communicating with the people on what changes the government seeks to make and how it will do it.⁷⁷

Moreover, a consensus within the government will not be reached without a more inclusive political system, including regional representation. Representation in key positions in the government, namely, the executive, has noticeably shifted from the northern majority to southern majority in the wake of the March 2005 revolution. In the future, this might become a basis for more public resentment along regional lines if the current government's legitimacy is further weakened. In fact, one of the public's main issues of concern with the Bakiyev administration is its personnel policy, which favors the old elite from the Akayev era and Bakiyev's relatives and supporters.⁷⁸ Reflecting the example of the central government, some local state bodies in the country are also run by entrenched kin-based groups and their cronies.

⁷⁴ "Zhelezobeton natsii," Interview with Kusain Musaev, Professor of Sociology in the Bishkek Humanities University, *Vechernii Bishkek*, January 6, 2006.

⁷⁵ Vitalii Pozharskii, "Rosa Otunbayeva: "Ne do revolutsii! Nam by splochennuyu oppozitsiyu sozdat," Interview with Rosa Otunbayeva, *Delo nomer*, March 1, 2006.

⁷⁶ Talaibek Koichumanov, Joomart Otorbayev, S. Frederick Starr, "Kyrgyzstan: the path forward," *Silk Road Paper*, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, November 2005 p. 27.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Vitalii Pozharskii, "Rosa Otunbayeva: "Ne do revolutsii! Nam by splochennuyu oppozitsiyu sozdat," Interview with Rosa Otunbayeva, *Delo nomer*, March 1, 2006.

Reforms and changes on the top should be also reflected in areas such as secondary and higher education, which should integrate civics and democracy programs, including participatory democracy, public service, elections, and conflict prevention and conflict resolution. In addition, the education system will further improve with the growth and sophistication of the national standardized tests to enter the higher institutes of education, which were introduced a few years ago. These measures, combined with reforms in the personnel selection, should help raise the quality of education and the performance of public servants, thereby dampening the influence of special interests and corruption in the education and the state systems.

Third, the government should look into the proper ways of understanding the concept of ideology and on how to integrate it to the divided and skeptical society. The incumbent government is currently developing a national ideology with a team of two dozen scholars and politicians. The leader of the working group, Dastan Sarygulov, advocates that the country should go back to Kyrgyz roots and the Kyrgyz language must become “the fundament of ideology.”⁷⁹ Sarygulov adds: “We do not need to try to be similar to the Japanese, the Swiss. We need to be genuine, proud, honest, humble, freedom-loving and hard working Kyrgyz.”⁸⁰ The very concept of developing a written ideology, laden with semi-nationalistic sentiments, for the potentially unstable country is a wrong start.

First, such an ideology may distort the very goal of uniting the country and even stoke inter-ethnic tensions, while it should foster patriotism and the rule of law in the multi-ethnic country like Kyrgyzstan. Second, an ideology imposed from the top may fail as it happened with Akayev’s efforts because of the lack of tangible translation of such ideas to the reality on the ground. A case in point is the forceful imposition of the Kyrgyz language, which may mount more resentment from the non-Kyrgyz population, especially given the short amount of time requiring proficiency in Kyrgyz to be able to fully participate in the political process. Meantime, the teaching of the Kyrgyz language as a foreign language remains extremely weak due to the lack of proper methodology, books and competent teachers. Likewise, no ideology will work in a country with over 50% of the population living below poverty line and with high emigration while the economy is showing no signs of improvement. Thus, the priorities here must be revisited.

Third, and more importantly, learning from the lesson of Akayev’s botched ideological strides, ideology cannot be an abstract concept detached from the Constitution or the state laws. Indeed, the revised Constitution, encapsulating the fundamental principles and laws of the state, is and should be the very basis of the state ideology. Kyrgyzstan could learn from the U.S., where no official ideology was written, by respecting and strictly adhering to the Constitution.

Lastly, although the comprehensive reforms in the political system, governance and the economy may decrease the spectrum of clan and regional influences, it appears that these phenomena will continue to exist in one form or another in Kyrgyzstan for a long time because of their entrenchment in much of the Kyrgyz society. Only increased urbanization and development of the country may help gradually weaken these divisions

⁷⁹ Almaz Gashiev, “Zhelezobetn natsii,” *Vechernii Bishkek*, January 6, 2006.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

in the long-term as representatives of various clans and regions will mix and modernize in urban settings.

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