

Kyrgyzstan: Another Chance at Democracy

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Getting it right this time will depend on new government's efforts to overcome legacy of previous authoritarian rulers. By Pavel Dyatlenko in Bishek

The popular unrest in Kyrgyzstan has presented the country with the third chance to transform its clan-based, autocratic political system into a real democracy.

Previous attempts since Kyrgyzstan gained independence after collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 have completely failed. The country's first president Askar Akaev and his family had concentrated power in their hands and used their political influence to control the economy and accumulate personal wealth.

It was the popular uprising of March 2005, dubbed Tulip revolution, that put an end to Akaev' rule and brought Kurmanbek Bakiev, who was then in opposition, to power. In July 2005, Bakiev was elected president on the promise of implementing democratic reforms, improving the economy and taking the country away from an emerging tendency of dynastic rule.

During his presidency, Bakiev did not put Kyrgyzstan on a democratic path, strengthening instead his increasingly authoritarian rule. History has repeated itself.

The popular uprising of this week ousted Bakiev and the interim government set-up by the opposition took control over the country. Now, the new authorities have the opportunity to avoid the mistakes of the unfulfilled revolution of 2005 and to establish democracy in Kyrgyzstan.

The success of their task will very much depend on overcoming the overarching obstacle to democracy - the clan-based political system. In Kyrgyz politics, kinship ties and regional allegiances remain an important factor. As a result, access to power and, in particular, allocation of top government posts is determined by one's association with the ruling clan rather than by the professional merits of an individual.

This requires the creation of an effective and transparent system that will curb the dominance of clan politics and will stimulate political, economic and social competition.

As for the immediate efforts of the interim government, they should be directed at changing the current political set-up - the re-distribution of power which has been skewed in favour of presidential authority as well as changing economic policy to stimulate economic development.

The new authorities should also create conditions for media freedom and for more active involvement of the third sector in achieving greater transparency and accountability of government institutions.

It is of great importance for Kyrgyzstan to build a stable democracy. This could be achieved through moving to parliamentary rule by strengthening the role of the legislature; by giving more powers to the government and by reducing the president's authority.

Political parties should play a bigger role in parliament and the leader of the party that wins the election should head the government.

Transparent conduct of the referendum on the new constitution and election in six months' time as announced by the interim government, followed by presidential and parliamentary contests held without violations, are the best safeguards against Bakiev's comeback.

The economic policy needs changing and incentives offered for businesses to grow. The measures could include reducing the tax burden, offering affordable loans and combating corruption.

As for civil society, non-governmental organisations can be called upon to participate in the reform of government bodies such as law enforcement, so that their main task is to protect not the political system but the rule of law and rights of citizens.

In the media sector, the process of allocating radio and TV frequencies should be based on fair competition; the stalled efforts of turning state media into public entities need to be revived.

Kyrgyzstan's new rulers will be relying on backing and financial help from the international community to successfully accomplish tasks they are facing. As the only country in Central Asia where the public and opposition are able to stand up against authoritarian leadership, Kyrgyzstan deserves support for another

chance at democracy.

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