

**REPORT ON
THE PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS
IN KYRGYZSTAN
FEBRUARY–MARCH 2000**



**A Report Prepared by the Staff of the
Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe**

WASHINGTON:2000

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The OSCE is engaged in standard setting in fields including military security, economic and environmental cooperation, and human rights and humanitarian concerns. In addition, it undertakes a variety of preventive diplomacy initiatives designed to prevent, manage and resolve conflict within and among the participating States.

The OSCE has its main office in Vienna, Austria, where weekly meetings of permanent representatives are held. In addition, specialized seminars and meetings are convened in various locations and periodic consultations among Senior Officials, Ministers and Heads of State or Government are held.

ABOUT THE COMMISSION (CSCE)

The Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), also known as the Helsinki Commission, is a U.S. Government agency created in 1976 to monitor and encourage compliance with the agreements of the OSCE.

The Commission consists of nine members from the U.S. House of Representatives, nine members from the U.S. Senate, and one member each from the Departments of State, Defense and Commerce. The positions of Chair and Co-Chair are shared by the House and Senate and rotate every two years, when a new Congress convenes. A professional staff assists the Commissioners in their work.

To fulfill its mandate, the Commission gathers and disseminates information on Helsinki-related topics both to the U.S. Congress and the public by convening hearings, issuing reports reflecting the views of the Commission and/or its staff, and providing information about the activities of the Helsinki process and events in OSCE participating States.

At the same time, the Commission contributes its views to the general formulation of U.S. policy on the OSCE and takes part in its execution, including through Member and staff participation on U.S. Delegations to OSCE meetings as well as on certain OSCE bodies. Members of the Commission have regular contact with parliamentarians, government officials, representatives of non-governmental organizations, and private individuals from OSCE participating States.

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REPORT ON THE PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS IN KYRGYZSTAN

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- On February 20, 2000, Kyrgyzstan held the first round of its second parliamentary election since gaining independence in 1991. For the first time, parties competed for 15 of the lower chamber's 60 seats. According to the Central Election Commission (CEC), about 65 percent of voters turned out. In party-list voting, the Communist Party came in first, winning 28 percent. The pro-presidential Union of Democratic Forces was second, with 19 percent. Four other parties passed the 5-percent threshold, in the following order: the Democratic Party of Women (13 percent); Party of Afghan Veterans (8 percent); *Ata-Meken* (6 percent); and My Country (5 percent).
- Much of the real drama took place before the first round, when opposition parties headed by potential challengers to President Askar Akaev were excluded. The controversial election law carefully required parties to have been registered for a year before the election in order to field a party list. This provision barred the *Ar-Namys* [Honor] Party, headed by former Vice President Felix Kulov. Also disqualified was *El (Bei Bechara)* [Party of Poor People], led by businessman and parliament member Dan-yar Usenov, because its charter did not state specifically it intended to participate in elections. On February 4, the opposition Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan (DDK), which had been already registered to participate, was also excluded for allegedly holding a congress without the necessary quorum.
- Even before the election, the observation mission of the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) took the unusual step of issuing a statement on February 8 criticizing the exclusion of these parties. After the first round, the mission, along with an observer delegation of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, judged the election not to have *fully* corresponded to OSCE standards. Though the voting and vote count had proceeded well in most districts, parties and candidates had not been able to participate on an equal basis and state media favored pro-government candidates and parties while attacking opposition figures, especially Kulov.
- In single-mandate districts, only three seats were decided in the first round. A runoff took place on March 12 in the remaining districts. Both Kulov and Usenov made it into runoff races, though both claimed they had been robbed of first round victories. But the CEC disqualified Usenov before the second round, charging that he had not disclosed all his property holdings. Kulov was able to run, but despite having won a plurality in the first round, official results gave the victory to his government-backed opponent. Kulov and his supporters accused local officials of intimidating voters and falsifying the balloting. The ODIHR observation mission strongly criticized the second round and openly questioned the results in Kulov's Kara-Buura constituency. Considering the authorities' flagrant efforts to rig the election and especially to make sure that Felix Kulov did not win a seat in parliament, ODIHR's final verdict (April 10) was that the election "did not comply with OSCE commitments."
- After Kulov's defeat, his supporters began holding protest demonstrations in Bishkek and Kara-Buura. On March 22, officers of the Ministry of National Security arrested Kulov and charged him with having sanctioned, while Minister of National Security, the illegal purchase of bugging equipment. An official announced that once the investigation of his crimes was over, he would be tried in a closed military court.
- The conduct of the election has set back Kyrgyzstan's already faltering democratization and tarnished the country's reputation. Though certainly more open than neighboring countries, Kyrgyzstan under President Askar Akaev now has a clear record of holding flawed elections. The

election and especially the subsequent arrest of Felix Kulov have entirely discredited President Akaev, once the fondest hope of reform in Central Asia. He has now openly gone the route of his dictatorial counterparts in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, who are determined to remain in power for life. With presidential elections expected later this year, it appears Akaev's key goal was to ensure that neither Kulov nor Usenov would win a parliamentary seat to use as a springboard for a presidential bid. Kulov's arrest demonstrated that Akaev is prepared to manipulate the country's law enforcement apparatus and justice system to remove his political rivals from contention.

- After the government's handling of the parliamentary election, government-opposition relations are in crisis. The opposition's worst suspicions have been confirmed, having seen what Akaev is willing to do to retain power. Nor is there any reason to expect any near-term improvement, given the upcoming presidential election. Though the government has voiced support for a roundtable with the opposition, Bishkek may opt for more broad-ranging repression, given the course Akaev has chosen and the desire to crush any resistance before it gets out of hand. With the pressure on journalists intensifying, the crackdown seems already to be underway.
- Having thrown away his reputation as a democratic reformer, Akaev may now emphasize ever more greatly the Islamic threat in Central Asia and argue that the West must continue to back his secular regime—despite its slippage towards authoritarianism—against religious fundamentalism. At the same time, Akaev may move away from the West, while developing closer relations with Russia and China, both of which have stressed the need to combat “terrorism and religious extremism.”
- Before the election, Vice President Al Gore wrote to Akaev, urging him to hold fair elections. Akaev ignored his plea, complicating Bishkek's relations with Washington. The State Department echoed the OSCE's assessment of Kyrgyzstan's election, regretting the setback to Kyrgyzstan's democratization. Secretary of State Albright traveled to Central Asia in mid-April, visiting Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. In Bishkek, she called for Kulov's release pending his trial and won Akaev's pledge to implement the ODIHR's recommendations for improving the electoral process before the presidential election.
- Though Secretary Albright openly criticized human rights violations and electoral machinations in Central Asia, she also stressed the danger to the region posed by terrorists and drug trafficking, and offered assistance to help safeguard borders. With Washington increasingly worried about security matters and prepared to expand bilateral cooperation to address perceived threats, Central Asian leaders seem unconcerned about U.S. strictures on democracy.
- The region's strongmen have never suffered any serious consequences in relations with Washington for rigging elections. If Askar Akaev, perhaps the weakest of them, gets away with falsifying the parliamentary election and arresting his leading rival, the last remaining hopes of holding a fair presidential election will vanish—along with prospects for Kyrgyzstan's democratization.

POLITICAL BACKGROUND

For years, Kyrgyzstan has enjoyed a reputation as the most democratic, most liberal of the Central Asian Newly Independent States. Of all the region's presidents, only Askar Akaev had not been the leader of the republic's Communist Party during the Soviet era. A physicist by training, he was head of Kyrgyzstan's Academy of Sciences and by temperament and outlook was more Western-oriented and inclined to permit dissidence than his regional counterparts. Lawmakers were willing, even eager, to criticize him—unthinkable in Uzbekistan or Turkmenistan, and virtually impossible in Kazakhstan, after Nursultan Nazarbaev manipulated several elections to get the legislature he wanted. Parliament did not give Akaev everything he

wanted, refusing for example, to sanction dual Kyrgyz-Russian citizenship or to give Russian the status of second state language, so while Kyrgyzstan's president retained dominance in relations with the legislative branch, he was not the all-powerful "super-executive" typical of Central Asia.

Media in Kyrgyzstan were also the freest in the region. True, independent and opposition newspapers were always under pressure from the authorities and some were forced to close because they pursued stories about high-level corruption too avidly. But criticism of the government and even of Akaev was possible. In this relatively liberal atmosphere, a large network of non-governmental organizations emerged, including independent human rights monitoring groups. Some, like the Kyrgyz Committee for Human Rights, were deregistered under flimsy pretexts and Committee leader Ramazan Dyrlydaev has for years faced the threat of criminal prosecution. But with all its flaws and distortions, democratization in Kyrgyzstan developed faster and deeper than anywhere else in Central Asia, making beleaguered dissidents and political opposition movements in neighboring countries envious.

Nevertheless, Kyrgyzstan's record of holding elections was unimpressive. The 1995 parliamentary election featured widespread vote buying and many deputies were under investigation for corruption. In the snap presidential election Akaev called in October 1995 for December of that year, two serious contenders were disqualified shortly before the vote.

This mixed picture on political reform has developed against a background of serious economic decline. Resource-poor Kyrgyzstan, unlike its energy-rich neighbors, has not attracted major foreign investment and the price of its main asset—gold—has long been in the doldrums. Bishkek, which has launched market reforms and has been accepted into the World Trade Organization, has received significant loans from the international financial institutions, which have kept the economy afloat. But some \$80 million is coming due this year. The government is negotiating a debt restructuring program over 12-15 years and hopes "friendly" countries, particularly Russia and Turkey, will forgive its debt.

In Kyrgyzstan, as in other former Soviet republics, living standards have plummeted throughout this period. Akaev himself has cited the figure that over 55 percent of the population lives at the poverty level.¹ By many accounts, discontent has grown correspondingly, as have doubts about the ability of Akaev—who has been in power for a decade—to improve matters. In this environment, Akaev's would-be rivals began to announce openly their intention to run against him.

The best known among them was Felix Kulov, former Vice President, former Minister of National Security, former Governor of Chu oblast, and former Mayor of Bishkek. He left the government in April 1999 and formed the *Ar-Namys* [Honor] Party. As the seriousness of his ambitions became clearer, relations between Kulov and Akaev deteriorated. Officials impeded efforts by *Ar-Namys* members to seek support among voters, and Kulov warned that he would demand parliamentary investigations of the transit of Iranian weapons through Kyrgyzstan, in which he claimed Akaev was involved.² Another challenge to Akaev was posed by entrepreneur and independent parliamentarian Danyar Usenov.

¹ Interfax, February 15, 2000.

² In October 1999, Kyrgyz officials seized a train loaded with arms and ammunition, which were transiting Kyrgyzstan to Afghanistan.

The election law passed by parliament in April 1999 contained provisions designed to eliminate inconvenient politicians from the race. Article 92 stipulated that parties that had not been registered for a year before the election could not field a party list. The article also specified that only parties whose charter specifically stated that the party would participate in elections could do so.

In September 1999, a band of about 1000 armed fighters, mostly of Uzbek origin, invaded Baatken province in southern Kyrgyzstan. Their stated goal was to transit Kyrgyzstan to get to Uzbekistan, where they hoped to topple the regime of President Islam Karimov and free thousands of people jailed for their Islamic piety. With Kyrgyzstan's small armed forces incapable of handling the situation, the standoff lasted a few months, until the bandits were bought off and left for Tajikistan.

The Baatken crisis undoubtedly raised questions about the country's basic security and Akaev's ability to defend its interests. Islam Karimov, the president of neighboring Uzbekistan, has long and openly disparaged Akaev as a weak leader who insufficiently understands or appreciates the Islamic threat. Felix Kulov's credentials as a former Minister of National Security and KGB General lent him the aura of a strong leader and enhanced his electoral prospects.

In January 2000, as the campaign heated up, the government acted to remove candidates considered troublesome. The OSCE Center in Bishkek reported that the authorities were offering bribes to opposition activists not to run. For example, leading members of Danyar Usenov's *El (Bei Bechara)* party were intimidated or induced to withdraw. One of them was offered an ambassadorship and promised that a threatened criminal case against him would be dropped, while another took a deputy minister's post in the Ministry of National Security not to run. Usenov himself was temporarily sidelined, when a criminal case against him that was concluded long ago was reopened and then postponed because of his health problems.

Ultimately, Usenov's party was disqualified on the ground that its charter did not specifically state the party's intention to participate in elections. The argument that Kyrgyzstan's constitution states that political parties may take part in elections changed no minds in the government. Usenov told international observers that he tried to convene a party congress in November to change the charter but the authorities told him it was too late.

Article 92 also disposed of Kulov's *Ar-Namys* party, which had only been established in April 1999. Having been excluded from the proportional voting, Kulov's *Ar-Namys* party merged with the Democratic Movement of Kyrgyzstan (DDK), and put together a joint list. But though the CEC had registered the DDK on January 25, a local court overturned that decision on February 4, claiming the party had held a congress without a quorum, as 33 of the 80 people present were allegedly ineligible to participate. The CEC Chairman professed his helplessness in the matter, blaming an "intra-party scandal" for his reluctant decision to disqualify the DDK. According to a DDK spokesman who briefed international observers, however, the CEC demanded the names and addresses of delegates to the party congress. After the DDK complied, the delegates received visits from officials of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and National Security who warned them not to attend the congress. After being disqualified, the DDK then held an extraordinary congress which had a quorum, but the Supreme Court refused to reconsider the matter.

All these flagrant and obvious machinations caused consternation in the international community. On February 4, the Washington-based National Democratic Institute (NDI), which has been working with political parties in Kyrgyzstan for years, issued a statement voicing serious concerns about the pre-election

environment. The OSCE/ODIHR election observation mission issued a statement on February 8, echoing NDI's sentiments and noting that the exclusion of parties and candidates had narrowed the choice available to voters. Finally, U.S. Vice President Al Gore sent a letter to President Akaev, expressing his dismay that the election might not live up to Kyrgyzstan's good reputation.

As February 20 approached, however, it was clear that Akaev had decided to run the election his way. The only questions were how his leading challengers would fare in their districts and what would happen if they won.

ELECTION LAW

The legislation called for setting aside one quarter of the lower chamber's 60 seats, i.e., 15, for proportional party list voting. Individual candidates contested the remaining 45 seats in single-mandate constituencies, as well as all 45 seats in the upper chamber.

The most controversial aspect of the law was Article 92, which stipulated that only parties whose charters specifically stated that participation in elections was a goal could do so. Moreover, parties had to be registered a year in advance of the election to field a party list. President Akaev urged lawmakers to reduce the period to six months but parliament refused.

The 1995 parliamentary election had taken place in February, so it was likely that the 2000 contest would, as well. The passage of a law in April 1999 requiring a full year's registration therefore meant that any party not already registered would not be able to participate. The Constitutional Court refused to hear an appeal on this provision.

POLITICAL PARTIES AND THEIR PLATFORMS

The platforms of the 11 participating parties and blocs were similar to each other, except for the Communist Party. Below are brief descriptions of the parties which passed the 5-percent threshold to win representation in parliament, in the order of their eventual tallies.³

Communist Party: The Party rejects Kyrgyzstan's pro-market economic reforms and favors state control of the economy, especially the high revenue industries, such as tobacco, as well as foreign trade and price regulation. Party representatives told OSCE Parliamentary Assembly observers that their program calls for various forms of ownership—state, private and cooperative—in industry and agriculture but categorically opposes the privatization policies which have enriched the few and well-connected while in no way benefitting the bulk of the population. The party seeks to revise all acts of privatization and return all illegally privatized enterprises.

The Communist Party rejects broad-ranging presidential prerogatives and advocates a parliamentary form of government. Linked to Communist Parties in all the former Soviet republics, Kyrgyzstan's communists call for integration with other CIS countries, especially Russia, and urge the creation of a unified economic, political and military zone across the CIS.

³ Except for the Communist Party, this information comes from the OSCE/ODIHR Guide for International Observers.

Union of Democratic Forces: The Union is a bloc composed of the Unity Party of Kyrgyzstan, the Social Democratic Party and the Party of Economic Regeneration. These pro-presidential parties called for continuing democratic and economic reforms while strengthening the economy and improving living conditions. The UDF's leading figures are renowned writer Chingiz Aitmatov and former Deputy Prime Minister and former Mayor of Bishkek Boris Silaev.

Democratic Womens' Party of Kyrgyzstan: The pro-presidential Womens' Party defends womens' interests, specifically through electing women lawmakers.

Party of Afghan War Veterans: As the name implies, the party emphasizes raising benefits for war veterans and bringing military representatives into parliament. This pro-presidential party was especially strong in the south.

Ata-Meken Socialist Party: *Ata-Meken* advocates a multi-party system, support for democratic development, promotion of private ownership, access to health care, education, employment and housing, and combating corruption. The party's main areas of support are in the south, in Osh and Jalal-Abad oblasts.

My Country: The party, with its main area of support in the capital, calls for unifying the country, institutionalizing democracy and defending private property.

CAMPAIGN

Communist Party spokesmen, noting that they had enjoyed equal access to all media, told international observers that the campaign had been much better than in 1995. Still, they complained that local officials had impeded their campaigning, especially in the south, and were exerting undue pressure on voters to cast ballots for the Union of Democratic Forces.

Matters were much worse for the non-communist opposition. State media sought to discredit Felix Kulov and other *Ar-Namys* candidates. A few days before the election, an anti-Kulov program was broadcast on television. According to *Ar-Namys* spokesmen, over 2000 civil servants originally from Talas, the region where Kulov was running, were sent home from Bishkek to tell their relatives not to vote for him. In Chu, most of Kulov's proxies yielded to official intimidation and gave up their position, forcing the party to send replacements from Bishkek. There were attempts to disrupt Kulov's meetings with voters. Media refused to air rebuttals by Kulov, who also encountered difficulties organizing press conferences. Kulov told Helsinki Commission staff that he had received almost no access to television: he was allowed to address the voters for 30 seconds on Pyramida, a station that only reaches Bishkek, and was not even permitted to buy any more air time.

Danyar Usenov, who ran in a district in central Bishkek, told international observers that a few days before the election the capital's mayor said that he would resign if Usenov won, along with four *hakims* (local officials). The message to local officials could not have been clearer.

Internews and the International Foundation for Election Systems monitored media coverage of the parties. They reported that the pro-presidential Union of Democratic Forces got more coverage in political news than all the other parties together.

VOTING AND VOTE COUNT

Helsinki Commission staff observed voting in precincts in Bishkek. Representatives of various parties, especially the Communist Party, were present among election commission members. Most striking was the large number of local observers and proxies, usually representing individual candidates. No monitors reported any serious violations and Helsinki Commission staff saw none.

Helsinki Commission staff observed the vote count in a district of Bishkek where Danyar Usenov was running. The process went smoothly and well, perhaps because the 35 local observers present insisted that the election commission members count the ballots in the open and give the observers copies of the protocol. Usenov won in this polling station by a wide margin.

RESULTS

The Central Election Commission released the results of the party list voting quickly. First came the Communist Party, with 28 percent; next was the pro-presidential Union of Democratic Forces, with 19 percent. Four other parties passed the 5-percent threshold, in the following order: the Democratic Party of Women (13 percent); Party of Afghan Veterans (8 percent); *Ata-Meken* (6 percent); and My Country (5 percent).

Only three individuals won a parliamentary seat in the first round, including Asankul Akaev, the president's brother, who ran unopposed. Results for other districts were released very slowly, with the CEC claiming there had been many complaints about the first round which officials had to investigate.

BETWEEN THE ROUNDS

Opposition groups hoped the second round would take place on March 5, which would leave the authorities less time to rig the runoff. But the CEC scheduled the vote for March 12.

After the first round, a group of candidates who had qualified for the second round were disqualified based on complaints about their initial registration and/or their conduct in the campaign. Among them was Danyar Usenov, whom the Territorial Election Commission (TEC) deregistered for allegedly not having disclosed fully his property assets. According to the OSCE/ODIHR Final Report on the election, the TEC chairman "was seemingly under great pressure. He did not allow serious consideration of the allegation against Usenov, and did not give the candidate a real opportunity to rebut the allegations of improper financial declarations. The case was finally concluded at the Supreme Court, at which two members walked out before the final vote, refusing to be part of the proceedings." The OSCE/ODIHR concluded that "The overwhelming conclusion is that there was a high level of political interference affecting actions and decisions of candidates, election commissions and courts, up to and including the CEC and Supreme Court. These actions aimed at excluding particular political forces from competing in the election."

In the election's other most controversial case, the CEC did not reveal until almost the day of the second round whether Felix Kulov had made it into a runoff—which he did. But the CEC refused to allow candidates to campaign until all the first round results were in. Naturally, the official silence bolstered the widespread conviction that Kulov had actually won, and the authorities were trying to figure out how to ensure his defeat. The chairwoman of the Kara-Buura territorial election commission announced in Bishkek that local and central government officials were pressuring her to resign, because she had not permitted falsification of the vote in the first round.

SECOND ROUND RESULTS

Most of the candidates in individual constituencies were nominally “independent,” i.e., not affiliated with any political party, so it is difficult to assess the political orientation of the new legislature. Nevertheless, some clearly opposition candidates managed to win their races, including Adakhan Madumarov, Dooronbek Sadybaev and Alevtina Pronenko.⁴ None of them, however, is a potential presidential aspirant.

According to the CEC, Felix Kulov—the opposition’s leading potential challenger to Akaev—lost his race to the government-backed candidate. But international observers saw that protocols from precincts had been changed by the time they left the Territorial Election Commission. Other problems, according to the ODIHR election observation mission, were: a massive increase in the number of advance voters; precinct commission members acknowledged irregularities during advance voting and on voting day, including vote buying; pre-marked ballots observed in a safe in a precinct; ballots shown to officials for approval before being deposited in the ballot box; and an atmosphere of intimidation in the district throughout the electoral period. The OSCE/ODIHR Final Report on the election concluded that “During the second round of the election in District 44 [where Kulov ran], [there was] clear evidence of systematic fraud, committed by state and election authorities, aimed at securing the defeat of Feliks Kulov.” In an unusually blunt statement, the ODIHR election observation mission “question[ed] the legitimacy of the election in District 44.”

POST-ELECTION DEVELOPMENTS

Felix Kulov’s defeat sparked a series of protests in Bishkek and Kara-Buura. Ten days after the second round, officials from the Ministry of National Security arrested Kulov, taking him from a hospital bed in Bishkek, where he had been recovering from cardiac problems and exhaustion, to a cell in the Ministry. He has been charged with embezzlement and authorizing the unsanctioned purchase of bugging equipment while he was Minister of National Security. Officials did not allow his own doctor to treat him, while his meetings with his lawyer have been curtailed and videotaped by police. Kulov, in turn, declared a hunger strike, which lasted until April 10.

After Kulov’s arrest, over 100 demonstrators in Kyzyl-Adyr, in Kara-Buura electoral district were arrested. Police reportedly used disproportionate force, and destroyed the yurts where they had been living. Ten people were sentenced to various terms for resisting arrest. Meanwhile, pro-Kulov protesters continue to demonstrate in Bishkek. The authorities have created a commission to address the issue but the commission does not include any protesters.

On March 24, a judge in Kara-Buura district dismissed a complaint brought by Kulov’s lawyer against Kulov’s victorious opponent for bribing voters. The trial took place in a closed court, and the judge did not allow Kulov’s lawyer to present witnesses.

CONCLUSIONS AND PROJECTIONS

Democratization: The election was a disaster for Kyrgyzstan’s reputation as an oasis of democracy in the authoritarian Central Asian desert. Though Kyrgyz officials claim that only two or three of the 14 participating parties were pro-government—the rest being centrists or opposition-oriented—in fact, the opposition parties that represented a serious threat to President Akaev were disqualified. True, no oppo-

⁴ Others include Ishenbai Kadyrbekov and Omurbek Tekebaev.

sition leader was excluded from running in single-mandate districts, and Kulov and Usenov did so. But local officials exerted pressure on the election administration and voters to ensure that neither Kulov nor Usenov would win deputy's seats. The formulation "free but not fair," used by the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly to characterize the July 1995 parliamentary election in Armenia, well describes the first round of voting in Kyrgyzstan in February 2000. That is, voters were free to choose on voting day and the vote count, too, generally went well, but the government's conduct of the campaign had excluded parties and candidates and ultimately limited the choice open to the electorate. The second round was worse, featuring flagrant official interference and vote rigging.

On February 22, President Akaev's press secretary said the elections have shown that "in Kyrgyzstan, democracy is not an empty slogan but a reality." Just the opposite is true: the election destroyed the myth of Kyrgyz democracy. As OSCE Secretary General Jan Kubis said while visiting Bishkek after the second round, the election had been a "blemish" on the reputation of the government and the president.

Askar Akaev: If Kyrgyzstan's image has been badly damaged, Akaev's has been shattered. The man Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott once called the region's "Thomas Jefferson" has now become democracy's Benedict Arnold. Akaev has shown himself willing to exploit a carefully written election law to disqualify threatening candidacies and to manipulate his country's election administration, judicial system, law enforcement apparatus and National Security Ministry to secure his own power and position.

True, Akaev suggested to parliament that the minimum period of registration for parties to participate in proportional voting be reduced to six months from one year. It is impossible, however, to credit the sincerity of his intervention, which would have allowed Kulov's *Ar-Namys* to field a party list. Akaev's actions recall the tactics of Kazakhstan's President Nazarbaev, who affected concern in late 1998, when the Supreme Court upheld the earlier exclusion of opposition leader Akezhan Kazhegeldin from upcoming presidential elections. Nazarbaev loudly promised to ask the Supreme Court to rethink its decision so Kazhegeldin could run. Though Nazarbaev completely controls the Supreme Court, its decision stood and Kazhegeldin was barred from participating.⁵ Equally hollow was Akaev's February 8 address to heads of law enforcement agencies and local administrations, whom he warned against pressuring voters or otherwise influencing the election's outcome. He had little choice but to make such a gesture: the day before, as Akaev related, he had received a letter from Vice President Al Gore voicing the hope that Kyrgyzstan's election would sustain its reputation. Nevertheless, it is obvious that Akaev never had any intention of taking seriously Gore's importunities.

One difference between Nazarbaev and Akaev is that the former would never have allowed the Communist Party to come first in proportional voting, reserving that privilege for the party he heads. But Kyrgyzstan's communists have a cozier relationship with the government than in Kazakhstan. Indeed, on election day, Akaev praised them for not complaining to international observers.

⁵ In plotting his election strategy, Akaev apparently took a cue from neighboring Kazakhstan. There, in recent elections, President Nazarbaev has carefully targeted serious non-communist political forces, eliminating them through legal technicalities and vote fraud, while allowing communists to run, and then defeating them handily in rigged elections. He then presents the election to the international community as a contest between his own, allegedly pro-reform party and the regressive communists eager to reinstate state control of the economy and cleave to Moscow.

There may be another possible motive for Akaev to ensure a pliable parliament, without any would-be presidential challengers who could call for parliamentary investigation of embarrassing issues. Opposition politicians fear that Akaev may induce the new parliament to pass a law authorizing the legislature to elect the country's president, instead of allowing a nationwide popular vote. This would obviate the need to falsify yet another election, but it would heighten the accumulated tension in society.

If Akaev does not take this route, the presidential election later this year promises to resemble the parliamentary contest. Most likely, he will arrange the disqualification of any serious non-communist challenger and then defeat a communist candidate. Tellingly, Kyrgyzstan's ambassador to the OSCE told the Permanent Council on February 17 that communist leader Absamat Masaliev is planning to run against Akaev, adding ominously that the moratorium on criminal cases against candidates—specifically mentioning Danyar Usenov—would only last as long as the election campaign. Indeed, on April 5, Usenov was arrested on charges stemming from a case dismissed long ago, but was released the same day.

Government-Opposition Relations: After the government's handling of the parliamentary election, relations between government and opposition are in crisis. The opposition's worst suspicions have been confirmed, having seen what Akaev is willing to do to retain power. Nor is there any reason to expect any near-term improvement, given the upcoming presidential election. The government, for its part, may decide more broad-ranging repression makes sense, given the course Akaev has chosen and the desire to crush any resistance before it gets out of hand.

There are signs a crackdown is already underway. Freimut Duve, the OSCE's Representative on Freedom of the Media, reported to the Permanent Council on March 30 that a reporter for the *Res Publika* newspaper was arrested after covering a peaceful demonstration in Bishkek.⁶ Moreover, *Vash Advocat* [Your Advocate] has ceased publication because the tax inspectorate has frozen its accounts, and the state-owned distribution network has refused to distribute three newspapers. All the papers in question were involved in election coverage. Kyrgyz authorities have also charged Topchubek Turgunaliyev, former Rector of Bishkek State University, who has already served jail sentences for opposition activity, in connection with a failed plot to kill Akaev.⁷ On March 23, one day after Kulov's arrest, the OSCE Center in Bishkek issued a statement contending that the chance to hold honest elections had been missed. Perhaps more important was the Center's judgement that "Today, as never before, the issues of Kyrgyz citizens' rights and freedoms are of importance." On March 30, DDK Chairman Jypar Djeksheev announced that the Bishkek city prosecutor had warned him that he had violated the law by protesting in the weekly *Res Publika* against the arrest of Feliks Kulov.

In his address the same day to the OSCE Permanent Council, Kyrgyzstan's Ambassador reported that a roundtable, with the participation of the three branches of government, opposition figures and the OSCE, is planned to discuss electoral reform and other matters relating to democratization. It is difficult to

⁶ Opposition newspaper *Res Publika* has been under constant pressure from the authorities. On January 16, the Supreme Court upheld a lower court ruling that the newspaper had to pay a \$4200 fine for insulting the "honor and dignity" of the head of State Radio and Television Corporation. *Res Publika* had printed an open letter from the corporation's employees, demanding his dismissal.

⁷ *RFE/RL Newswire*, February 25, 2000.

imagine how such a meeting could be arranged or what could be discussed if Kulov remains in jail and other opposition activists face the threat of politically-motivated criminal charges. On the other hand, having ordered Kulov's arrest, it would be difficult for Akaev to permit his release—if Kulov insists on remaining in Kyrgyzstan. Considering that opposition leaders were offered jobs to withdraw their candidacy, Akaev may try to make a deal with them which would leave Kulov in prison. But this scenario would not only split and discredit the entire opposition, it would leave anyone who accepted the offer vulnerable to future pressure and intimidation.

With such a narrow range of options as the presidential election nears, the opposition may also weigh a boycott, if only to tarnish Akaev's victory. But a boycott's significance would wane if, as is likely, a communist candidate runs against the incumbent and provides the pretense of a real contest.

Parliament: Considering that the Communist Party had one deputy in the previous parliament, winning one-third of the 15 seats contested in the proportional voting was impressive. While the Communist Party is relatively well organized and probably has a core group of supporters who may be motivated by nostalgia, it is much more likely that theirs was a protest vote. Had non-communist opposition parties been allowed to participate, the communists would surely have fared much worse.

Despite their strong showing, the Communists are unlikely to exert a significant influence on policy. Whatever Akaev's views on OSCE strictures about fair elections, he knows his country needs Western aid, and a return to state control of the economy is not in the cards. If Akaev decides to join the Russia-Belarus Union, it will not be because of pressure from communist lawmakers. Certainly, they will press for a legislative agenda that emphasizes socio-economic issues, but there are enough pro-government deputies to keep the communists from scrapping basic market reforms, including privatization.

More interesting is how effective opposition candidates who made it into parliament will be. Kulov and Usenov, had they been allowed to win their races, would have been their natural leaders. It remains to be seen if the others can withstand official pressure and blandishments to form a united group, though they apparently do not have enough members (15) to form a faction. Their performance in the debates over the law governing the upcoming presidential election—as well as their possible participation in a government-opposition roundtable—will indicate whether they can use their seats to help stem the country's drift towards authoritarianism.

Regional Trends: There are indications that Vladimir Putin, having won Russia's March 26 presidential election, may try to develop closer ties with the CIS states and some of them—including Kyrgyzstan—might welcome the prospect. Akaev's brazen conduct of the election, his flagrant dismissal of calls from the U.S. Vice President, as well as the OSCE and human rights organizations, may indicate movement away from the West. Moscow does not criticize Central Asian leaders for their democratic shortcomings.⁸ Moreover, with respect to democratization, Akaev has surely been under pressure from the leaders of larger neighboring states: both Uzbekistan's Islam Karimov and Kazakhstan's Nursultan Nazarbaev abhor the idea of fair elections and particularly fear the possible precedent of a Central Asian leader being voted

⁸ Gennady Seleznyov, Speaker of Russia's Duma, accused U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright of trying to divide Russia from Central Asia, adding "I don't like it when we have American democracy shoved down our throats." *Reuters*, April 21, 2000.

out of office by a disgruntled electorate. They also disapprove of Akaev's tinkering with democratic reforms because it makes their authoritarian regimes look bad by comparison and creates an example for political opposition movements in their countries. Both Karimov and Nazarbaev have apparently concluded that rigging elections entails no serious consequences, other than a poor assessment from the OSCE/ODIHR and stern lectures from the United States. Washington, however, continues to develop relations with them and provide assistance. Akaev may well have drawn the same lesson—perhaps under the direct tutelage of his neighbors—and decided the risks of eliminating his rivals was worth the relatively low potential cost.

This calculation, however, may be unfounded. Nazarbaev can count on Kazakhstan's oil to interest Western investors and capitals, and Karimov has cotton and other assets, such as Central Asia's largest population. But Kyrgyzstan has few resources, attracts few investors and relies heavily on aid from the international financial institutions.

For this reason, Akaev may now emphasize ever more greatly the Islamic threat in Central Asia and argue that the West must continue to back his secular regime—despite its slippage towards authoritarianism—against religious fundamentalism.⁹ Uzbekistan's Karimov has played this card successfully to date and indeed, combating radical Islam, especially after the events in Baatken in 1999 and widespread fears of a recurrence this year, is a priority shared by the region's leaders. Another interested party is Russia, which is waging a war against what it calls Islamic terrorism in Chechnya. Karimov has stated that should Islamic radicals launch new attacks in Central Asia, he would call on Russia for assistance—quite a departure for the man who led Uzbekistan out of the CIS Collective Security Treaty just over a year ago. For his part, Russian Defense Minister Sergeev predicted on March 29 that Central Asia was beset by “international terrorism and religious extremism” which require “joint efforts to deal with this geo-political challenge.”¹⁰

China is another potential ally for a Kyrgyzstan possibly moving away from the West. Indeed, on March 30, defense ministers from the Shanghai Five, which includes China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, agreed to intensify military cooperation to fight Islamic extremism, terrorism and separatism in Central Asia.¹¹

Relations with the United States: The State Department echoed the OSCE/ODIHR's assessment of Kyrgyzstan's election, regretting the setback to Kyrgyzstan's democratic process. The U.S. Delegation to the OSCE offered rather mild criticism on March 23, considering Kulov had been arrested the day before. “We would appreciate receiving a report from Foreign Minister Imanaliev and CEC Chairman Imanbayev regarding the [arrest of Kulov and reports of beatings of demonstrators in Kara-Buura]... We would sincerely hope that these actions were not politically motivated. If...force was used to break up the

⁹ On March 26, the secretary of Kyrgyzstan's security council said 5000 terrorists could invade the country this spring. *RFE/RL Newline*, March 27, 2000. Previously, Akaev had predicted that 2000 militants could attack (Interfax, March 2). As one commentator put it, “When democratic resolve diminishes, join the global march against drugs and terrorism.” Paula Newberg, “Kyrgyzstan's Leader Backslides on His Western Civics Lessons,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 27, 2000.

¹⁰ Interfax, March 29, 2000.

¹¹ *Agence France Presse*, March 30, 2000. One day earlier, a leader of the Uighur movement, which seeks to create a homeland in China's Xinjiang province, was assassinated in Bishkek.

demonstration... we ask the Government of Kyrgyzstan to look into the matter carefully, ensure this does not happen again, and take appropriate action against those responsible. We would also urge that all those arrested are afforded full judicial due process in accordance with international standards.”¹²

April offered an opportunity for a stronger message from Washington, when Secretary of State Madeleine Albright traveled to Central Asia, where she visited Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. She did indeed openly criticize human rights violations and electoral shenanigans in all three countries. In Bishkek, she called for Felix Kulov’s release pending his trial and won Akaev’s pledge to implement the ODIHR’s recommendations for improving the electoral process before next October’s presidential election.

Still, while Secretary Albright criticized human rights violations and electoral machinations in Central Asia, she also stressed the danger to the region posed by terrorists and drug trafficking, and announced a program of financial assistance to help safeguard borders. Her gesture clearly demonstrated that Washington is increasingly worried about security matters in the region; in late March, in an unusually public trip, CIA Director George Tenet visited Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, where coordinating efforts to fight terrorism was presumably a key item on his agenda. With the United States obviously prepared to expand bilateral cooperation to address perceived threats, Central Asian leaders seem unconcerned about U.S. strictures on democracy. Uzbekistan’s President Karimov and Kazakhstan’s President Nazarbaev rebuffed Albright’s advice on the need for greater democratization; Akaev was somewhat more obliging but after she left, officials denied that Kulov would be released.

Central Asian strongmen have never suffered any serious consequences in relations with Washington for rigging elections. If Askar Akaev, perhaps the weakest of them, gets away with falsifying the parliamentary election and arresting his leading rival, the last remaining hopes of holding a fair presidential election will vanish—along with prospects for Kyrgyzstan’s democratization. And if Washington lets Central Asian leaders shift the focus of relations towards security issues, they will deflect attention from their determination to remain in power indefinitely—the greatest threat to democratization and stability in the region.

¹² The European Union took a harsher tone: “We have witnessed massive and carefully orchestrated manipulation of the part of Kyrgyz authorities, not only on a local level, to deprive opposition candidates, most prominent among them Felix Kulov and Danyar Usenov, of their victory.”

This is a U.S. Government publication produced by the
Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE).

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This publication is intended to inform interested individuals and organizations about developments within and among the participating States of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

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