

Sometimes an Election is Just an Election, Not a Step in Any Direction

Lincoln A. Mitchell

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The recent election in Kyrgyzstan presents somewhat of a Rorschach test to observers of political development in Central Asia and democracy generally. The election of Almaz Atanbaev as Kyrgyzstan's president is another chapter in the country's political evolution and, not insignificantly, the first peaceful of transfer of power since Kyrgyzstan was part of the Soviet Union. This election was probably the best in recent Kyrgyz history and perhaps the best ever in post-Soviet Central Asia. For these reasons, it is possible to view democracy as moving forward in Kyrgyzstan, which may perhaps have an effect on the region more broadly.

There are also, not surprisingly, other sides to the story. Somewhat predictably for much of the former Soviet Union, losing candidates Adahan Madumarov and Kamchybek Tashiev alleged widespread fraud, voter intimidation and abuse of state resources by Atanbaev who, until stepping down to run for president, was Kyrgyzstan's prime minister. More seriously, Atanbaev's victory does little to bring together a country that remains highly polarized along geographical lines. Atanbaev is from the north of the country, while his opponents polled strongest among ethnic Kyrgyz in the southern part of the country.

It is far too early to know how this election will resolve or exacerbate these tensions or whether Atanbaev's victory, a little less than two years after the corrupt regime of Kurmanbek Bakiyev was ousted, is another small step towards a more democratic Kyrgyzstan or whether these advances will be short lived.

As usual, some of the language used by western observers to describe this election suggests movement, either forward towards democracy, or backwards away from that target. President Obama described the election as "an important and courageous step on the path of democracy," while the OSCE monitoring mission referred to it the election as having been "conducted in a peaceful manner," but added that "shortcomings underscored that the integrity of the electoral process should be improved to consolidate democratic practice in line with international commitments," implying that there is still work to be done and that Kyrgyzstan is still transitioning.

There is value in both these statements. This election is a cause for optimism in Kyrgyzstan, particularly when compared to the presidential election of 2009 in which Bakiyev was reelected in an election described by the OSCE as "fail(ing) to meet key OSCE commitments for democratic elections, in particular the commitment to guarantee equal suffrage, to ensure that votes are reported honestly and that political campaigning is conducted in a fair and free atmosphere as well as to maintain a clear separation between party and state." However, it is also possible, perhaps even likely, that this election instead of representing a landmark on the road to democracy is simply the new status quo in Kyrgyzstan and that issues of the weakness of

the state, widespread corruption, and ethnic and geographical divisions will limit the extent to which democracy, and elections, can improve there.

A relatively good election in Kyrgyzstan, made possible because of the decision of outgoing president Roza Otunbayeva to step down and encourage fair elections, are significant even in the face of other seemingly intractable problems there. While Kyrgyzstan may not yet qualify as the only democracy in Central Asia, as some have asserted, it is clearly has a very different regime than the other post-Soviet countries in Central Asia.

It is critical to understand that if this election, as President Obama has suggested, is a step on the road towards democracy, Kyrgyzstan is still at the beginning of a long road with many potential wrong turns or even U-turns along the way. It is equally possible, however, that the metaphor of the journey is the wrong one, not just for Kyrgyzstan, but for other countries as well and that Kyrgyzstan is not evolving into a democracy, but is nonetheless genuinely more liberal and open than its neighbors. This view is at least as plausible as the notion that Kyrgyzstan will simply continue to become more democratic and will lead us to seek to understand Kyrgyzstan for what it is, not for what we think it might, or should, become.