

THE COVID-19 AND POLITICAL TRANSITION IN KYRGYZSTAN

Podcast transcript

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This is the second episode of the podcast on politics and international relations in Central Asia. The podcast is part of a project by Dr Eric McGlinchey and Dr Shairbek Dzhuraev on debating international relations of Central Asia. The project is supported by the Hollings Center for International Dialogue. The guest of the episode is Dr Andrew Kuchins, President of American University of Central Asia, Bishkek.

Eric McGlinchey: Thank you, everyone, for joining us. We're very pleased today to have with us Dr. Andrew Kuchins. As many of you know, in fact, probably all of you know, Andrew Kuchins is the president of American University of Central Asia. And today we are going to be focusing on, among other things, the impact of COVID-19 on politics in Eurasia and Kyrgyzstan, also potentially a little bit in the United States. We'll be talking about political transition or change in regimes, which is interesting is we have a change going on both in Kyrgyzstan and the United States. So one of the questions we'll be looking at is a potential impact on bilateral relations between these two countries. And lastly, I think, we will be potentially looking at what's next for Kyrgyzstan as the presidential elections are approaching. So with that, I wanted just to say welcome, Andy, we're very grateful that you're joining us today. Let's get to that first question about COVID-19 and perhaps starting with what's been the impact of COVID-19 in your day to day experience at American University of Central Asia?

Andrew Kuchins: Thanks, Eric, Shairbek. It's great to be with you. Well, the first impact, of course, goes back to the middle of March when, like most universities and colleges around the world, we went fully online, and that went reasonably well. Trying to do budget planning was a real challenge in May and June. But actually, we did really well with our recruiting for the fall and also with our retention of students. So that was a big, big plus. And from the COVID standpoint, things have gone... you

know, we're doing online better this fall than we did in the spring. So that's all good. But from the university standpoint, where we are going to get is increasing debt, tuition payments by students and families. And that's been growing ever since March. And the economic fallout from COVID has been very significant. And, of course, the political instability that has taken place this fall doesn't help things. The COVID numbers here have risen to the level of about 500 to 600 a day where they were in early August. They had a horrible peak and in the second half of July, where it got to be around a thousand a day. But, you know, if you're not tested, you're not infected. So the numbers were much greater. And there was a sense that someone in everybody's family was getting sick. We had at the university at one time in July, 20 percent of our faculty and staff were sick from COVID. Fortunately, nobody died. But it was a very, very difficult time.

My view, if we could switch this to politics, is that 2020 was a bad year for incumbent politicians, probably anywhere around the world. That may have been the decisive factor in Mr. Trump not getting reelected, although I didn't expect it would be quite as close as it was. But I think especially for Kyrgyzstan, what happened in July really was kind of catastrophic, and it was an exposure of institutional breakdown of the government and inability to provide any the kind of help that people needed. The medical system was overwhelmed, and it was civil society, actually, people going out and finding ways to get medicines back to Kyrgyzstan and certain pieces of equipment. It was an impressive show of civil society action here. But that and the economy together left people in a much sour mood coming into the parliamentary elections on October 4th. You know, I think having the seven percent barrier to entry for parties was a problem because what you ended up with was only four parties making it to parliament. And three of them were basically pro-government parties, more or less. And with 57-58 percent of the vote, they got close to 90 percent of the seats. If more opposition parties had gotten into the parliament, maybe we wouldn't have seen what we had seen. And again, I think maybe if there hadn't been COVID and the exposure of the ineptness of the government and the medical system, we may not have seen what we saw.

Eric McGlinchey: Andy, I wanted to ask you a little bit more about the role of civil society in dealing with COVID-19. For me, watching from afar, this has actually been something that's been a real bright light with Kyrgyzstan amidst, as you just described, many challenges. So I wonder if you could tell us a little bit more about the volunteer brigades that seem to have kept the country afloat during this period, and then, with the understanding that some of our listeners may not be following Kyrgyzstan as closely as you and Shair do, what happened in the summertime? I mean, again, watching from afar, it's just dumbfounding for me to see the Kyrgyz government go on vacation in the middle of a pandemic. How is that even possible? So is this a complete abrogation of authority at the height of a pandemic and then civil society stepping in? If you could give us a little bit more background about how these kinds of tendencies work in Kyrgyzstan, I think that would be really helpful for our listeners.

Andrew Kuchins: Well, I'll just say a couple of things, but Shair could say more, because what, unfortunately, I ended up locked out of the country from the middle

of March until August 21st. The plan for a one week trip to Australia to visit my sister through Moscow and ended up three and a half months in Moscow and almost two months in the United States. That was kind of my micro-story. So I wasn't here on the ground. So that's a big caveat. But I know that just several of our board members who are active figures in Kyrgyz society took it upon themselves with their own financial means and then connections to order the medicine, equipment to get into the country. Hospitals were basically turning people away. Medicine was not available. So it was people that were relying more on their own personal networks, I think, and much less so on the existing health system. I would be interested to hear Shair's perspective from being here actually on the ground.

Shairbek Dzhuraev: Well, it so happened that in July I left for the village, so I missed this peak in Bishkek. But the first thing is that in July, the horrible month, COVID-wise, touched Bishkek, the city. In the rural areas, the figures were much less so, and people were not suffering as now. The second wave is hitting very hard the rural areas. We hear from Osh, from Jalalabad, from Batken, about the hospitals filled up with no places, a shortage of medicines, shortage of doctors. So I think it was partly because it was Bishkek in July that we realized how powerful the civil society is in Kyrgyzstan. With social media, people were able to organize to help people who were just sitting, staying in their apartments, unable to dial and invite their doctors. Probably this is a typical thing that you would expect in a country where the public institutions are very weak, and people do not really expect much from public hospitals. They turn to relatives; they turn to family members, they turn to people who they know when the government was simply not able to do anything because of the ineptness, because of corruption and because of complete lack of competence and lack of resources. Now we're having the second wave, but as in all other countries, this wave is proving to be less lethal, apparently for some reason, at least so far. So the government is somewhat surviving with the new president, a new leader, not even mentioning coronavirus in his speeches.

Eric McGlinchey: You know, one of the frequent claims that President Trump has made here in the United States is you can't let the response to coronavirus be more harmful than the virus itself. And as much as I personally may disagree with a lot of President Trump's policies, there is I think the question that we have to ask ourselves, and I think it's even more important in an economy like Kyrgyzstan. Is there some justification to that argument that Kyrgyzstan just can't survive a lockdown, particularly as we're looking to the winter when cases are going to be going up? Would a lockdown and the economic devastation that would impose on the economy be, in fact, more painful than dealing with coronavirus and the impact coronavirus has on the health care system and people's health?

Andrew Kuchins: We have to all remember that Kyrgyzstan is a poor country, per capita income of less than two thousand dollars per annum. So the margins, the economic margins are very thin for poor families, the great majority of families surviving, let alone thriving. You know, I felt from the beginning that worldwide, that some countries were facing the choice of, well, are you going to kill the economy or are you going to kill more people? And that's a that's that's really between a rock and a hard place. It's not a kind of place where you want to have to make that

decision. It was really interesting and that in the first two, maybe even three months of the pandemic, Kyrgyzstan was doing really well, relatively with numbers. And then suddenly they weren't, and it had to do with the not only, you know, calling off the lockdown. Again, I was not here personally, but I think that people were just not wearing masks as much as they should. They weren't were washing their hands as much as they should. They weren't social distancing as they should. And they got hammered. And certainly, the current leadership, acting president, prime minister, they would be very, very loathe to call for a lockdown at this point, one, because there's going to be a presidential election on January 10th and the campaign starts on December 10th, pretty soon. And the economy is already in a very bad place. You know, I think best case scenario, you're looking at a minus five percent drop in 2020. Worst case, somewhere eight to ten. So I think he's going to be reluctant to call for the lockdown unless the numbers suddenly pop up into the thousand or above level.

Shairbek Dzhuraev: I think there's quite a consensus in Kyrgyzstan about the lockdown. Despite the figures in July, it was the period when there was no effective lockdown measure. All of that was in April and March. And now, indeed, many people rely on informal, day to day jobs. And the government doesn't have any fiscal buffer to help out the families in need compared to neighboring countries, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan. I don't think that another lockdown is likely unless a real disaster comes indeed.

Andrew Kuchins: To add to that, there's the problem of, you know, most countries and multilateral institutions don't really recognize this existing government, which gets very problematic for the provision of humanitarian and/or economic assistance in the near term. So I think that Kyrgyzstan is going to be relatively more alone in that regard than they were in the summertime. Some of that legitimacy may start to come back after a presidential election on January 10th.

Eric McGlinchey: You kind of raised the counterfactual when we first start talking about COVID-19, this just not being a good year for leaders, and that were it not for coronavirus, that perhaps we might not have seen the political events that we saw in the fall in Kyrgyzstan. And I want to press you on that just a little bit. It's a fairly frequent occurrence in Kyrgyzstan that when we see massive vote-rigging like we appear to have seen in the last parliamentary election in Kyrgyzstan, that we see responses similar to what we saw in the fall in Kyrgyzstan. So it is impossible for us as analysts to actually determine what the causal mechanism here is. But I'm just wondering what you guys think would have been the response in the absence of COVID-19 to the kind of election manipulations that we did see with the parliamentary ballot?

Andrew Kuchins: I would leave that to Shair. This is the only election that I've been a witness of here in Kyrgyzstan. So I have no way to speak whether there was a greater vote-buying, greater falsification and violations of the process than in other cases. It certainly seems to be the conventional wisdom that people said. But let's hear what Shair has to say.

Shairbek Dzhuraev: My impression is that the vote-buying has always used to take place. This year, it was much more mass-scale. And that's one thing. And second, even without COVID, I think the political events were developing in this direction, and the key enabling factor was the deliberate effort of President Jeenbekov and his team to centralize the control over the key political groups. Even with the 2015 elections, when Atambayev effectively controlled the parliament, effectively controlled four or five parties within the parliament, the parties made into parliament in more or less free elections, even though everyone was buying their votes, though so could. There was no general understanding that all of these parties would become dummy parties for the president. Here, everything was just blatantly explicit. There is Jeenbekov's party, and there is Matraimov's party, and two of them are allies and are massively buying out. Those 2005 and 2010 regime changes happened in the context where the incumbent was overstepping everything in an effort to create a very centralized, very controlled political elite.

So I wouldn't say that the COVID played a crucial role. President Jeenbekov's legitimacy was very weak, to begin with. It was just amazing to see how protesters went to attack the government, and a simple fact that the building was taken meant that the government collapsed. But it was basically political capitulation of the regime. I don't think that so easily the power could be grabbed in other countries.

Andrew Kuchins: It reminded me of what Vladimir Lenin said in 1917. Power was lying in the street, and we took it. And in this case, it was Japarov and his people that took it. But to add to the argument that would support, I think, the premise of your question, Eric, the corruption question was really front and center going back to early December of 2019, when there were two anti-corruption meetings and really focused on Raim Matraimov, the former number two guy in the Customs Bureau, the Kloop and other publications' revelations that he and his cronies had amassed several hundred million dollars plus while he was in power, basically managing trade from China through Kyrgyzstan to Uzbekistan. So you got so when you got to have his party and Birimdik, the sort of party of power so that I think the anti-corruption and the weakness of the president were both already well evident. The president and the government basically disappeared early on in the COVID, and the president disappeared for the first four days of the revolution before he suddenly came out on Friday afternoon, October 9th, at about four o'clock and announced martial law.

The other thing that I would say about the election that was what it was seemed strange to me, is that there were so many parties, you know, there were 16 parties total. I am sure that even with the 65 percent of the vote that was taken by the four parties that made it into the parliament, there's still thirty-five percent of the votes out there. And so if there are less parties competing for it, then likely one, maybe two more opposition parties get into the parliament. And then it looks a lot differently. But that then gets to the problem of, you know, parties are very weak and the negotiation that goes on between those with money and those that are making the party and who gets on the list and where they are on the list. There's no reliable polling that I don't think that anybody really has on what these parties can do and what they can bring to the table. They need a better-developed party system. And so that there's a little more certainty about what you're signing on to,

because it seems like these are very difficult calls to make. And for those that want to be high on the party list, you know, you're talking about the investment of several hundred thousand dollars. And that is not only it's not only about you, it's not only about your family, but it's about your sort of your larger extended family that you that you represent. So there maybe the stakes are almost too high for getting into or not getting into the parliament. That makes it a more I think, a more risky, unstable situation.

Eric McGlinchey: So it's what you're saying, if I understand correctly, Andy, is that you think the actual kind of backroom politics of what's involved with the party lists in Kyrgyzstan are having a potentially negative and very consequential effect on not only just transparency, but the health of the Kyrgyz democracy, which kind of raises a question. The current curious political system, not to diminish in any respect, the agency of Kyrgyz politicians and bureaucrats themselves, but also has been very heavily influenced by international donors and international advisers. You know, this was a seven percent barrier to getting into parliament, the party list system, the whole parliamentary system, which kind of raises this issue about whether or not there's any degree of international culpability with the degree of instability that we see in Kyrgyzstan. Shair, since you've got the long view of this, I mean, to what extent are countries like the United States or the European Union, these international advisers, at least part responsible for the pathologies of instability that we see in Kyrgyzstan today?

Shairbek Dzhuraev: I don't think there is a direct answer possible here. As a citizen of Kyrgyzstan, I would say that the responsibility is on those implement, on those who invite the international advisers and their grants and moneys. So I wouldn't move the responsibility to those who come and advise. I don't think there's anything problematic with the parliamentary system or the political party based elections. Many governments, many countries are moving actually in this direction, while we think that this is a problematic one for us.

Everything comes down to implementation. We haven't mastered conducting free and fair elections, and that's not a problem of international donors, foreign partners who advise the Kyrgyz government, Kyrgyz political elites. This is about political struggle and the level of corruption allowed and thriving in the country. The closed party-list system is problematic, but this is done not on the advice from outside, but by those who were drafting the Constitution. They had huge freedom in terms of designing more appropriate way of how the parties would make it to parliament. They chose opaque, potentially corrupt system where the citizens would have no idea who are they voting for because the people would just withdraw from the party list on their own without any accountability, and some random people from the down of the list would end up in the parliament. This created a system where the people started questioning party system as just another opportunity for corrupt people who don't represent the population to end up in the parliament. They're businessmen. The party is nothing more than a business tool. So it is about the Kyrgyz political system and Kyrgyz political leadership who discredited it really seriously.

Eric McGlinchey: One of the reasons why we know about some of these challenges in the country's political system is because in Kyrgyzstan, in contrast to, say, a place like Uzbekistan or even in Kazakhstan, there has been a relatively vibrant and free news system, right, the press is much more developed here than it is elsewhere. One of the things watching from afar that has has me quite concerned has been the recent attacks of Japarov on the free media in his recent statements. To draw a parallel with the U.S. system: one of the struggles that we're facing here in the United States right now is even with comparatively well-structured and institutionalized electoral system, we still see people beginning to question the results, not even beginning, really questioning the results because of the manipulation in the news media that we see of the current Trump administration. So looking forward to January with Japarov's ongoing attack on Azattyk, for example. What is the likelihood of having any kind of free and fair election at the presidential level if the Kyrgyz media continues to endure the kind of attacks that we're seeing with the current interim administration?

Andrew Kuchins: One question to me, Eric, is who is actually going to step up and run against Mr. Japarov. It was quite striking how quickly people were stepping aside. The speaker of the parliament, who should have assumed the position of acting president, he stepped aside. Mr. Jeenbekov himself basically decided to step down. So not even taking into account what the current government will do vis-a-vis the press, there's still a strong feeling of, I think, a fear among people about this guy and about what happened. And it really was a pretty bizarre story, you know, of the four people that were let out of jail on October 6th, former president and two former prime ministers. I don't think that anyone was thinking that he was going to be the guy that had nine days and nine days was going to be a not only a premier but acting president.

Also, I think, and this is I think to the credit of Kyrgyz people, what was nice or good of, I can't call this a revolution, to me, it's a coup d'etat, but, you know, compared to 2005, 2010, there was almost no bloodshed. And also there was almost no looting, much less commercial, immediate commercial damage. So that was a plus. And just another really positive thing that was happening during the week from October 5th was, and this is a civil society in action again, was the formation of the civil militia patrols, the druzhinniki. Well, especially in Bishkek, which was really impressive. And also I felt that one of the reasons why whoever it was that made the decision on October 9th to shut things down felt to me like the tide was turning in favor of civil society and of those that were more reform-oriented. But then that just "poof" went away.

Eric McGlinchey: So, despite the positive aspects of civil society that you were suggesting, the other part to me I find terrifying, which is somehow Japarov, who was just in jail, is now running the country. Although he had been increasing very prominently in social media presence, so in that sense, I guess he was out there. But absolutely he was in jail. Is this just the consolidation of thug politics, mafia politics in Kyrgyzstan? What you just described is frankly terrifying because in every single previous transfer of power (and I called 2010 a putsch, I didn't go so far as to call it a coup d'etat, but I was very hesitant to use the term revolution in that case).

But in every single previous transfer of power, we have had opposition, and what you're describing is basically an uncontested presidential election in January and the wholesale disappearance of any viable political opposition. Babanov just threw his hat in the ring. Is this the consolidation of mafia rule in Kyrgyzstan and the days of democracy are over?

Andrew Kuchins: Well, I would say today, things are not looking good. You can review what happened, and yeah, this is a step backwards, I think, for democracy or at least pluralism in Kyrgyzstan. But I think it's it's a big question mark. It's a big question mark remains to be seen to what extent there will actually be a consolidation. What do you think, Shair?

Shairbek Dzhuraev: Well, first, I think there will be contestation. Adakhan Madumarov announced, and there are already 19 or 18 candidates. Of course, we know that most of them are usual suspects will end up with 0.5 percent. However, really the difference is that we have not as rich choice as we used to have in the past presidential elections. This tells a story of the country's political elite is learning that politics is a risky business. And as of now, we have almost no politician who hasn't been in jail. The way how Babanov stopped playing politics and joined Sadyr Japarov is a prime example of his strategy to avoid the fate of political losers. Over time, once Sadyr Japarov ended up being the chief leader of politics, whatever hats he has now, the political elite now started understanding that he's the chief patron and you don't want to go against him. We will have Adakhan Madumarov, as of now, as his primary opponent. Sadyr Japarov and Madumarov are equally nationalistic populist leaders, which basically makes a non-choice.

It also brings back to Eric's question on the consolidation of mafia politics. Sadyr Japarov is a very strange phenomenon. The way how he hijacked the streets in October was thanks to his aggressive crowd of supporters; they were much more aggressive and much more loyal and probably much better prepared physically and logistically than the rest. At the same time, it has been not only the aggressiveness of his supporters but also the nationalist-populist rhetoric that made him genuinely popular. We can't discount him as a marginal political figure who suddenly ended up the number one politician. This is basically a crisis of the political system. This is the way how Trump emerged an unlikely president four years ago, and many people saw it as the crisis of the political establishment in general. What we took for granted apparently wasn't as solid as we thought. And in Kyrgyzstan, I think we are moving towards this more populist politics. As votes started counting, elections are becoming more meaningful than 15 or 20 years ago, I think inevitably the Kyrgyz politics will be moving towards more aggressive and less politically correct leaders, and Japarov is a prime example of this.

Andrew Kuchins: And this is this is a global trend. I mean, this is not only Kyrgyzstan where this is happening, but this is happening in many places all over the world. And certainly the I think the increasing nationalist tendencies and less tolerance for certain minority groups, it resonates. It resonates. But I think like Joe Biden when he is inaugurated on January 20th, I think assuming Mr. Japarov is elected on January 10th, they're going to be inheriting a very challenging social,

medical, political environment, and then they're going to be judged more on performance. As I said, I think it remains to be seen to what extent there'll be a real consolidation around this. I think 2021, certainly the first half of it, is not going to be easy. So maybe if we might be in a better position to judge, let's say if they actually do hold the parliamentary elections in June and see and see what happens. But we need to fasten your seat belts for a pretty rocky ride at least for the next couple of months here.

Eric McGlinchey: I think that's a really important observation, Andy, because I remember the early days of the Bakiyev government and just how powerful this government seemed at the time, and ultimately it was the failure to perform really that led to this government's undoing. So although Japarov may seem very powerful at the outset or right now when he doesn't really hold power, he's not responsible, I guess, at this point for delivering the goods, whereas once he's elected, he will be responsible. Kyrgyz society, civil society has not been kind to administrations that have not performed well. So I think that's I think that's a critically important observation and provides an upbeat take on my very downbeat framing of the triumph of Mafia politics in Kyrgyzstan. I think that that that's absolutely right.

Maybe this is moving towards our wrap up question. You were mentioning the role of populism, of growing nationalism in Kyrgyzstan. Of course, this is a dynamic that's all over the world at this point. Kyrgyzstan has had this history, a very trying history of an ethnic conflict, devastating history of ethnic conflict in 1990 and 2010, but also just low-grade conflicts since then. What is the role of an institution like AUCA that comes in admittedly as we were talking about earlier, with this perception of being the "American" university of Central Asia, of an agenda which, of course, is probably a mistaken perception, but one that nevertheless exists? What can AUCA do in this climate of growing nationalism, growing populism to be a constructive force in advancing democracy, advancing pluralism, advancing freedom of the press in Kyrgyzstan?

Andrew Kuchins: A great question. You know, we are the best university in Kyrgyzstan, arguably more widely in Central Asia. So I think we continue to do what we do and to try to do it better and also to be a little bit more proactive in conveying that message to the outside world. Secondly, we are quite active with civic engagement, but I think we need to do more than we did, especially in Bishkek. We just ran a project, for example, a small project for a week of online training for faculty in six regional universities all outside of Bishkek. And I was just heading into the final session of the awarding of the certificates and the discussion. And I thought, you know, this is where we have got to be more active and to be doing what we can to raise the level of higher education in the country and to be viewed as helping to do that. We just celebrated our 25th-anniversary last year, and when you know we're looking at twenty-five, fifty years coming on, this has got to be one of the best assistance projects that the U.S. government has been involved in. It's not only U.S. government project, but thinking from the collapse of the Soviet Union what you build an institution that lasts for this long and has this quality and connections. Sure, I wish we were thinking more about making that kind of investment in the early and mid-1990s than we did.

Eric McGlinchey: Twenty-five years, congratulations. It's been wonderful to see the institution not only endure but thrive. I remember AUCA in the early days and AUCA today, and just the human capital, to say nothing of the actual physical capital, the human capital has grown around the institution. And if you look at alumni, the influence that AUCA has had and I think in a very positive direction is immeasurable for Kyrgyzstan. That's a wonderful achievement, so congratulations on 25 years and I hope with the new administration that, knock on wood, will be installed on January 20th here in the United States, there are even brighter days to come.

Andrew Kuchins: Thanks, Eric. It's really been fun talking with you and Shair this evening.



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