



View Point

A peaceful transition of power but Kyrgyzstan still faces several challenges

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Almazbek Atambayev was sworn in as the new President of Kyrgyzstan on 1 December 2011 after winning 63 percent of the total votes. The October Presidential election is significant for many reasons. Kyrgyzstan for the first time since independence witnessed a peaceful transition of power. It being the first Presidential election after the country opted for a Parliamentary system, the only country in the region to have a Parliamentary democracy. There have been a few allegations of foul play but the election in general was hailed free and fair by international observers. Interestingly, none of the Presidential elections in the region so far has been termed free and fair. The interim President, Roza Otunbayeva's decision not to contest the election is an example for the region. This is unlike the other Central Asian Republics (CARs), except for Turkmenistan, who have Presidents holding position since independence. Turkmenistan elected a new President only after the death of its former President Saparmurat Niyazov.

Kyrgyzstan has been continuously in news for the past one year. In April 2010, public protest threw former President Kurmanbek Bakiyev out of power, making him the second President to be forced out of power since independence. Earlier in 2005, Askar Akayev, the first President met with a similar end. Corruption and nepotism were the main grievances, which led to the ouster of the two Presidents. After Bakiyev was forced to flee, Otunbayeva took over as the interim President.

However, before the situation could normalize, the country experienced fierce ethnic violence in southern Kyrgyzstan. The violence widened the gap between the two already polarized groups in the country-ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks.

By a national referendum held in June 2010, Kyrgyzstan became a Parliamentary democracy. No single Party got the required majority in the Parliamentary election held in October 2010. After series of negotiations, a coalition government comprising of Social Democratic Party (SDP), Ata-Zhurt and Respublika was formed in December 2010. Since its inception, differences among the coalition partners have raised doubts about the future of democracy in Kyrgyzstan.

Given the prevailing uncertainties, the road ahead for the new President will not be smooth. Atambayev has been politically active for long and was the Chairman of the SDP from July 1999-September 2011. He contested for the post of President in 2000, which he lost. For a short span, he was the Prime Minister in the Bakiyev government, which he resigned due to differences with Bakiyev. He was made Prime Minister by Bakiyev, despite being in the Opposition. He became the first Prime Minister of the country after it opted for a Parliamentary democracy. Will his long political career help Atambayev save the country from the current impasse? The litmus test for Atambayev will be maintaining stability and ethnic unity. Tackling domestic issues like corruption, poverty, economic development and ethnic cohesion would help Atambayev address the genuine grievances of the people, which would also consolidate his position. However, achieving these targets will not be easy.

Kyrgyzstan is one of the smallest and poorest countries among the five CARs. In the past two decades, the country has witnessed two of its Presidents deposed by public unrest. Political stability is crucial at this moment. One of the challenges will be dealing with the fragile democracy. The coalition government formed last year had collapsed just a day after Atambayev was sworn in as President. Differences among the coalition partners over judicial, political and economic reform issues led to the deadlock.

If Kyrgyzstan becomes a failed state, instability and violence could easily spread to the entire region. The other CARs are deeply worried about the

developments in Kyrgyzstan. Democracy in the region will also have deep impact on the region. If it succeeds, it would set an example in the region. If Kyrgyzstan falters, it will give a signal to the other republics that the region is not yet ready for democracy, strengthening the hands of the forces opposed to democracy. Will Kyrgyzstan preserve its nascent democracy or move towards a strong Presidency? Before the election, Atambayev has hinted that the Constitution may be amended, raising speculations that a stronger Presidency will emerge in the coming days. The answer lies in how soon a new government is formed and how effectively it functions.

The Ferghana valley, which has seen rise of extremist ideology, is shared by Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Instability and poverty would strengthen the hands of the extremist forces in the region. With the Afghan security situation in doldrums and resurgence of Taliban forces in Afghanistan, the fear of extremist ideas spreading in Central Asia, particularly in the Ferghana Valley has been worrying the CARs. Any instability in the Ferghana Valley could easily spill over to the entire region.

Although the 2010 ethnic violence was controlled, the underlying tensions between the two communities remain. Preserving national unity will be one of the prime agendas of the new President. Ethnic Uzbeks are mainly concentrated in the south while ethnic Kyrgyz are in the north. The 2010 conflict has created further rift between northerners and southerners. One of the toughest jobs for the President would be reconciling the differences between the two groups. Atambayev comes from the north and his greatest challenge will be gaining confidence in the south. Both of his main opponents are from south. The former President Bakiyev also comes from the south and still enjoys a strong support base in the south. Atambayev has to carefully take into confidence the opposition forces.

Apart from domestic issues, Atambayev also has to deal with geo-political complexities in the region, especially the competition among the three major powers- Russia, China and U.S. The fragile political, economic and social conditions make it vital for Atambayev to delicately balance Kyrgyzstan's ties with the three key players. The future depends on developments in Kyrgyzstan and in the region, including the situation in Afghanistan.

Amidst these uncertainties, the prime concern for Kyrgyzstan is to maintain peace and stability. If the situation escalates, the country would go into deeper crisis, a development worrying its neighbours as well as the extended neighbourhood.

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