
THE CHANGING ROLE OF THE OPPOSITION IN POST-COMMUNIST KYRGYZSTAN

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EUGENE HUSKEY, STETSON UNIVERSITY

Introduction

Recent history in Kyrgyzstan provides a reminder that *when* you write about the course of post-communist development helps to determine *what* you write. If this conference had been held two years ago, in the fall of 2009, an assessment of political opposition in Central Asia may well have stressed convergence across the region. Although at that time the space for opposition activity was somewhat more expansive in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan than in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, no Central Asian country tolerated genuinely competitive politics in the public square.¹ Specialists on Kyrgyzstan might have been forgiven for concluding that, after unsuccessful attempts to institutionalize a legitimate political opposition in the early 1990s and the mid-2000s, the country was finally succumbing to the reverse wave of democratization that had rolled over much of the post-Soviet world. Certainly, the hegemonic party regime that the Bakievs imported in 2007 from Russia and Kazakhstan sought to neutralize, if not eliminate altogether, the opposition forces that were struggling to limit the exercise and concentration of state power in Kyrgyzstan.

We are now located at a very different moment in history. An extraordinary array of intervening events—the April Revolution, the failed counter-coup in May, the inter-ethnic violence of June, a national referendum and parliamentary elections, the first, uncertain months of parliamentary government, and now a presidential election campaign—encourages us to embrace the widely-held view that Kyrgyzstan’s path of political development makes it an outlier in Central Asia. Despite the inefficient governance and the messy, almost shapeless, politics of the last 12 months, Kyrgyzstan offers to political forces in opposition an arena for contestation that is without rival in contemporary Central Asia. No one would confuse the Kyrgyz som with the Swiss franc--Akaev’s dream in the first heady days after independence--but

¹ I say in the public square because politics in the corridors of power remained competitive in many ways.

neither is it easy to confuse politics in Bishkek with politics in Ashgabat, or for that matter politics in Astana.

Serious doubts remain, however, about whether political opposition, a concept derived from the Western experience, has a place in analyses of Central Asian affairs. In a widely-read piece published in the wake of the April Revolution, Eric McGlinchy argued that post-communist Kyrgyzstan lacked the concepts of government and opposition characteristic of Western political systems.² It had instead a formless elite that "ran in circles" and took turns moving in and out of power. In this view, the events of April 2010--and of the Tulip Revolution before it--did not represent a popular revolution but a hijacking of the state by a small group that simply moved from the back of the plane to the front.³ The implication of this analysis was that the method by which power changes hands dooms the current regime to the fate of its predecessors.

McGlinchy also argued that, when compared to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, the small scale of Kyrgyzstan's governing class helped to explain the greater vulnerability of its central leader to elite rebellion. With a very limited number of people "on board" the ship of state, the country's "pilot" has few options for replacement personnel, a fact that emboldens the "passengers" in the cabin, who know that their skills and support are essential to the success of the regime. In McGlinchy's words, "because Kazakh and Uzbek ministers know they can easily be replaced, they are far less likely to prove meddlesome in the first place."⁴

Scale does matter in politics, and the differences in intra-elite dynamics between Kyrgyzstan and its larger neighbors reflect in part the size and spatial and social proximity of members of its ruling class. Part of the reason that politics is so personal in Kyrgyzstan is that politicians know each other too well. However, in spite of the obvious limits on political talent in a small, relatively poor post-communist country, the range of available personnel depends as much on the country's political opportunity structure and the cadres policy of the political leadership as on the overall size of the population. Countries with competitive politics and/or vibrant governments at the regional and local levels develop a large reservoir of political talent that can be recruited to serve in the capital. Kyrgyzstan has denied itself this talent by restricting

² Eric McGlinchy, "Running in Circles in Kyrgyzstan," New York Times, April 9, 2010.

³ One reason for Kyrgyzstan's instability, in McGlinchy's view, was a different method of extraction from authoritarianism. Unlike its Central Asian neighbors, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, whose Communist Party elites were more or less united under the leadership of figures installed by Moscow at the end of the Soviet era, Kyrgyzstan entered the independence era with a leader for whom, like Yeltsin, the local Communist Party represented a potent opposition force. Even if one accepts this logic--with the caveat that Kazakhstan's and Tajikistan's elites clearly had very serious fissures in the transition from communist rule--it is not clear how the bifurcated elite of 1991 developed into the highly fragmented ruling class of a few years later, whose members frequently moved in and out of power. Kyrgyzstan's exit from communism was certainly different and less tightly managed than that of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, but its responsibility for the subsequent pattern of elite circulation in the country is problematic.

⁴ Ibid.

competitive politics to the national level and by limiting dramatically the responsibilities accorded to regional and local governments. The talent pool has also been shallow because the political leadership in Kyrgyzstan has been reluctant, unlike President Nazarbaev in Kazakhstan, to recruit younger personnel into leading government posts. Thus, the talent in the passenger cabin, to use McGlinchy's metaphor, depends on the choices of the flight crew and not just the size of the country.

For the purposes of this paper, the most important question raised by the McGlinchy piece is whether one can profitably use a term like opposition in a country such as Kyrgyzstan, where the structure of the elite and the relations between those in and out of power are fluid, and at times inscrutable. If one restricts the meaning of opposition to an institution that enjoys an official status and operates under a highly institutionalized set of rules as a counterpoint to the government of the day, then the term is indeed out of place in Central Asia. Opposition in this sense requires a highly-developed party system, where political struggle is framed less by loyalties to personality, region, or state organizations than by party allegiances and discipline. If Bagehot were alive, he would surely not say of the Zhogorku Kenesh, as he did of the House of Commons, that "party is inherent in it, is bone of its bone, and breath of its breath."⁵

However, political opposition as an activity rather than a formal institution has occupied an important place in Kyrgyzstan's post-communist history. Even if the sources of resistance to *vlast'* are diverse and shifting, they represent a central feature of the political landscape. The pages below examine the changes in opposition activity since the early years of post-communist Kyrgyzstan and the impediments to the emergence of an institutionalized opposition under the parliamentarism of Kyrgyzstan's Third Republic.

The Development of Political Opposition in Kyrgyzstan

The vitality and effectiveness of opposition politics depends on numerous factors, including the breadth of the consensus on values among the elite and the range and intensity of cleavages in society. Two factors seem paramount, however. The first, and more important, is the political opportunity structure, which includes both the formal and informal rules of the political game and the willingness of the governing elite to regard opposition demands as legitimate and therefore subject to debate, if not bargaining. In Milton Esman's words, "[t]he political opportunity structure establishes the context in which...[opposition forces] shape their strategies and tactics, and perhaps their ideologies and goals as well. It furnishes incentives,

⁵ Walter Bagehot, *The English Constitution* (London: Fontana, 1993), p. 160, as quoted in Gallagher, Laver, and Mair, *Representative Government in Modern Europe: Institutions, Parties, and Governments*, 4th edition (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2006), p. 58.

limitations, permissible boundaries, potentials, and risks that inform [their] behavior....”⁶ To borrow the language of Hirschman, whether opposition-oriented elites choose the route of exit, voice, or loyalty in politics depends in large measure on a country’s political opportunity structure.⁷

Having the space to compete in politics does not, however, assure the emergence of a robust and cohesive opposition, and so to assess the importance of opposition politics across time and space one must consider the organizational capacity to oppose as well as the political opportunity structure. In addition, as the literature on collective action reminds us, psychological disincentives to cooperation may be as important as externally-imposed barriers in explaining the limits of organizational capacity. For these and other reasons, the degree of opposition cohesiveness is not a simple function of the political environment, where the more open the political opportunity structure, the more organized the opposition. In fact, as we shall argue below, attempts to restrict the field of play create incentives for cooperation among opposition groups, who may circle the wagons to protect themselves against the actions of a hostile regime.⁸

Matrix 1 (see below) offers one lens through which to view the relative vitality of opposition politics in Central Asia. It plots the current position for three states in the region along “political opportunity structure” and “opposition cohesiveness” axes, with the former ranging from closed to open and the latter from low to high. It also places on the matrix the “location” of earlier regimes in Kyrgyzstan, which we have divided into those from 1991-1993; 1994-1999; 2000-2004; 2005-2006; and 2007 through the April Revolution. I hasten to add that the periodization of the post-communist history of Kyrgyzstan and the “values” of the positions of regimes along the axes are little more than informed estimates, which are designed to begin and not settle the debate about the role of the political opposition in post-communist Central Asia. As one would have said in the Soviet era, this matrix and the one that follows are offered *v poriadke obsuzhdeniia*.

What conclusions might one reach about opposition politics in Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia from Matrix 1? First, that the path of *vlast'*-opposition relations in Kyrgyzstan diverges decisively from that of its neighbors. Only under the Bakiev regime does one find a political opportunity structure approximating that in neighboring countries, and even at this moment the level of opposition cohesion was unusually high, reflecting a desire of opposition leaders to exhibit

⁶ Milton J. Esman, *Ethnic Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 31. Esman was writing here about ethnic movements as a form of political opposition.

⁷ Albert O. Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Declines in Firms, Organizations, and States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970). Exit can mean, of course, departure from the country or the joining of an irreconcilable opposition or moving into the political underground.

⁸ In constructing a matrix on oppositions in Central Asia, we shall assume that the cohesiveness of the opposition can refer to the whole or its parts, so that discipline within opposition groups or parties may be as important as cooperation across them.

solidarity as a means of self-protection and to give themselves a greater chance of mobilizing the public against what they regarded as the dangers of a Bakiev dictatorship.

Not surprisingly, moments of fear or opportunity may encourage closer cooperation between opposition forces. It is at these times in post-communist Kyrgyzstan that one has seen the formation of formal opposition blocs or alliances designed to enhance their collective security or seize the political advantage presented by a vulnerable regime. The latter logic led to the formation at the end of 2004 of opposition alliances that sought to unseat the long-serving and increasingly unpopular president, Askar Akaev. These blocs included *Ata Jurt*, led by Roza Otunbaeva, and *Narodnoe dvizhenie Kyrgyzstana*, headed by Kurmanbek Bakiev. At the collapse of the Akaev regime, the latter group formed the core of the country's new leadership.

A desire for self-protection and electoral justice prompted the formation of an opposition bloc, *Za spravedlivost'*, on January 14, 2008, following parliamentary elections in December 2007 that were widely recognized as fraudulent. Twelve parties and twenty-one NGOs came together to form this opposition organization, which warned that the Bakiev regime was establishing a "police state."⁹ A little over a year later, in April 2009, virtually the entire field of opposition leaders--minus Temir Sariev--put forward a unity candidate for the July presidential election, Almazbek Atambaev. Although the primary glue holding together the opposition in this period may have been fear, there was also a belief that concerted action by the opposition could topple a regime that many regarded as increasingly vulnerable and out of touch with the nation. In early 2010, this opposition coalition launched a series of *kurultai* that contributed to the overthrow of the Bakiev regime in April.

There are certainly examples of opposition cooperation at various moments in the post-communist history of neighboring states, most notably in Tajikistan, but at the moment the relatively closed political opportunity structures elsewhere in Central Asia discourage the development of a cohesive opposition. As we have written elsewhere, "...rising levels of intimidation will actually trigger and deepen intra-opposition cooperation until such intimidation reaches a point where the costs of 'voice' in politics become unbearable—a point that is different for each individual and society."¹⁰ That point was reached very early in the post-communist era in the regimes in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, where the only space for cooperation among opposition forces has existed underground or overseas.

⁹ "Segodnia v Bishkeke proshel forum dvizheniia 'Za spravedlivost'," *Tazar*, January 14, 2008.

¹⁰ Eugene Huskey and Gulnara Isakova, "The Barriers to Intra-Opposition Cooperation in the Post-Communist World: Evidence from Kyrgyzstan, *Post-Soviet Affairs*, no. 3 (2010), pp. 228-262.

Matrix 1 also suggests that the most favorable environment for opposition activity in Kyrgyzstan occurred in the immediate transition from communism. At the risk of romanticizing the early 1990s, I would argue that as the country exited the communist era, there were several features of the political landscape that encouraged the development of a vibrant opposition, features that have not been repeated since. These included a mobilized society, where the public, through demonstrations and newly-formed associations, such as *Ashar*, brought considerable pressure to bear on the government of the day. Numerous leaders emerging from this nascent opposition, including figures like Jypar Jeksheev and Topchubek Turgunaliaev, continued to play an active role in Kyrgyzstan's opposition politics over the next two decades.

There was also in this period a bias toward political tolerance, which was in part a reaction against the dogmatism that characterized the Soviet-era Kyrgyz Communist Party, in part a reflection of the political tone set by President Akaev in his early years in office, and in part a desire to please--or least not antagonize--the West, which was a source of political ideas and funding. All three of these sources of political tolerance have long since faded in Kyrgyzstan. During the early 1990s, the full costs of this tolerance--which offered an expansive space for political opposition--gradually became apparent to the leaders of the day. By the end of 1993, with the attacks on the discretion of the new ruling class in the gold scandal and other controversies, leaders began to close the political opportunity structure. Political learning, therefore, explains some of this shrinking of the field of play. Thrown off balance by the unexpected collapse of the USSR, the authorities took several years to work out the mechanisms needed to consolidate their hold on power and constrain the opposition.

As the political opportunity structure narrowed through the 1990s, the nature, locus, and intensity of the political opposition changed.¹¹ With the demobilization of society and the increased reliance on repression, the primary arena of opposition contestation shifted to the parliament, whose members had not only immunity from prosecution but the votes that President Akaev needed to introduce key legislation and to support his Government. Although this parliamentary opposition was not united, owing in good measure to electoral rules that returned independent-minded deputies with deep local roots, it did not have to be because the president had not invested in the formation of a vibrant pro-presidential party. The result was a constantly realigning parliamentary opposition that forced Akaev into successive compromises over policy and personnel decisions.¹² Thus, despite targeted attacks on individual members of the opposition and referendums that extended the formal powers of the presidency, opposition forces in the parliament served as a formidable check on executive

¹¹ For a brief survey of the development of the opposition in Kyrgyzstan, see Alisher Khamidov, "Kyrgyzstan: Organized Opposition and Civil Unrest," Eurasianet.org, December 15, 2002.

¹² Eugene Huskey, "Eurasian Semi-Presidentialism: The Development of Kyrgyzstan's Model of Government," in Robert Elgie (ed.), *Semi-Presidentialism Outside Europe* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2007), pp. 170-173.

authority, delaying or blocking legislation on such areas as land and language policy and denying the president his preferred choice for prime minister.

The electoral cycle in 2000 marked a further closing of the political opportunity structure. The Akaev regime relied heavily on administrative resources and the disqualification of parties and politicians to return a parliament where opposition voices were less prominent and effective.¹³ As a result, the locus for opposition activity began to shift from the state to society. Frustrated with their inability to influence the policies of state through parliamentary means, opposition leaders launched a second wave of political mobilization in Kyrgyzstan, which began in earnest in 2002 with the Aksy events and has continued, in fits and starts, to the present. This wave of mobilization differed in several respects from its predecessor in the early transition period. First, the inspiration for popular protests was less likely to be a desire for policy or institutional change than a desire to defend a threatened leader of the opposition. The weakness of formal institutions like parties meant that the vehicles of opposition protest were solidarity groups mobilized to support individuals or localist interests. Second, whereas those citizens active in the first wave of mobilization tended to be established or newly-arrived residents of the capital, the participants in the second wave of mobilization were more likely to be from rural and southern constituencies. Increasingly through the early 2000s, opposition protest acquired a regional coloration.

The Tulip Revolution in 2005 was a decisive moment in the development in Kyrgyzstan's political opposition. Because virtually all of Akaev's previous allies had abandoned him by the February 2005 elections, there was for a moment after Akaev's departure no real opposition in the country. Everyone of any importance seemed to belong to *vlast'* or at least not to be openly opposed to it. This government by grand coalition was sanctified in May 2005 in the consociational arrangements agreed between Kurmanbek Bakiev and Felix Kulov, who were the de facto representatives of northern and southern elites. Thus, not only did the consociationalism of 2005 temporarily efface the distinction between government and opposition, it also assured that north-south divisions would eventually emerge as a primary fault line between those in and out of power.

The distinctions between government and opposition--and north and south--came back with a vengeance in 2007, when the consociational model of governance finally collapsed and the new bearers of power, President Bakiev and his family, began to construct a hegemonic party regime.¹⁴ As we suggested earlier, the Bakiev regime's dramatic narrowing of the political opportunity structure encouraged the opposition to cooperate with each other for reasons of

¹³ A shift of power from parliaments to executive was common in the post-communist world in this period.

¹⁴ This process of "party construction" remained, of course, incomplete. For example, even though Ak Zhol was Bakiev's party of power, party discipline was not perfect. In the parliamentary vote to ratify a treaty that granted border land to neighboring Kazakhstan, 12 of the party's 71 deputies voted against the territorial concession. Personal interview of the author with Zainidin Kurmanov, July 2008, Bishkek.

self-protection. They adopted an "irreconcilable" stance toward *vlast'*, especially after the failed attempt of Atambaev to moderate the policies of the regime as prime minister.

The relationship between the tactics of *vlast'* and those of the opposition is captured in our second matrix (see Matrix 2 below). Whereas for *vlast'*, the choices range from outright suppression of any opposition activity to a sweeping tolerance of political action, the opposition is able to adopt tactics that range from cooperation with the authorities within the established rules of the political game to a strategy of overthrowing the leaders and the regime that has sustained them in power. Although for a portion of the post-communist era, there were conditions in place for a constructive opposition, the adoption of ever harsher tactics by *vlast'* in the run-up to the revolutions of 2005 and 2010 encouraged the adoption of maximalist tactics by the opposition.

The Contours of Opposition Politics in the Third Republic

The April Revolution and the establishment of what is commonly, but erroneously, described as a parliamentary republic has altered yet again the relations between government and opposition in Kyrgyzstan. In the interregnum between the April Revolution and the formation of a new ruling coalition in December, 2010, the Interim Government faced a determined, if motley, opposition, which consisted of elites who lamented the new government's lack of constitutional legitimacy; its use of public office--especially law enforcement agencies--for private gain or partisan advantage; its handling of the Uzbek question and inter-ethnic conflict; and its cadres policy, which resulted in a shift of power from southern to northern elites.¹⁵ This division between the Interim Government and its adversaries helped to frame the parliamentary elections in October 2010, with three major parties--SDPK, Ata Meken, and Akshumkar--running as the incumbents, and four major parties--Ata-Jurt, Ar Namys, Respublica, and Butun Kyrgyzstan--standing as challengers to a government that had been in power at a moment of national tragedy.¹⁶ In this interregnum, however, the cleavages within government and opposition, loosely defined, were at times as strong the divisions between them. Thus, the country's political parties entered the parliamentary election campaign divided not only by their status as incumbents and challengers but by their regional base (north vs. south), by their approach to inter-ethnic relations (Kyrgyz nationalism vs. internationalism), by their perspective

¹⁵ For a different view of the contemporary opposition, see Daniar Karimov, "Novaia oppozitsiia Kyrgyzstana," 24.kg, 6 January 2011.

¹⁶ Many informed observers in Kyrgyzstan believe that the success of parties like Ata-Jurt, Ar Namys, and Respublica, was due in considerable measure to their criticism of the policies and leadership of the Interim Government. See, for example, the comments by Marat Sultanov and Dinara Oshurakhunova in "Kyrgyzstan: itogi vyborov dlia politikov i grazhdan," stenogram, Institute for Public Policy, Bishkek, October 20, 2010.

on the best model of government (presidential vs. parliamentary), and by their geopolitical orientation (an overtly pro-Russian or a multi-vectored foreign policy).

The most potent of these cleavages remains the divide between northern and southern Kyrgyz, which aligns with the nationalism--internationalism fault line (this is to say that southern Kyrgyz are more likely to support a more aggressively nationalistic agenda). In the wake of the October 2010 elections, it appeared for a time that a ruling coalition associated more closely with northern elites would take power, which would have placed the dominant southern party, and the top vote getter in the election, Ata-Jurt, in opposition. However, the failure of the three prospective coalition partners--SDPK, Respublica, and Ata Meken--to mobilize their parliamentary members behind the election of Omurbek Tekebaev (Ata Meken) as speaker doomed this arrangement. In its stead, a cross-regional coalition of the three top vote-getters--Ata Jurt, SDPK, and Respublica--assumed the mantle of government.

In many respects, the new institutional arrangements introduced under the 2011 Constitution have created a political opportunity structure for opposition activity that is radically different from that in previous regimes. First, as the previous paragraph suggested, a parliamentary regime using proportional representation is likely to produce a government that is far less unified than that under the strong presidential regimes of previous years. A coalition of at least two, and possibly three or four parties, should become the norm if Kyrgyzstan retains its current constitutional arrangements. Furthermore, because the current model of government in Kyrgyzstan is in fact closer to a semi-presidential than a parliamentary system, the presence of a directly elected president with certain reserved powers makes it likely that significant conflict will occur at times between the country's two executives as well as between the parties in the coalition. Put another way, an opposition that faces a fractious government may enjoy opportunities for influence that were not in place under a presidential system, where *vlast'* could act against the interests of the opposition in a unified and forceful way.

The inability of parties in power to impose discipline on their own members may further blur the distinctions between *vlast'* and opposition. Such is currently the case in Kyrgyzstan. In spite of the fact that elections are based on party lists, many deputies in the current Jogorku Kenesh have refused to accept their party's whip and have acted at times as independent agents. Perhaps the most remarkable example of this behavior was the defection of almost half of the members of Ar Namys, who sought, without success, to join the ruling coalition in the spring of 2010, but there have been many other cases where individual deputies have rebelled against their party (and one case where a party leader reportedly resorted to physical violence to bring a deputy in line).¹⁷ This kind of environment ensures that political conflict within the government may be as robust as that between the government and opposition. It also opens the way for cooperation across the government/opposition divide, as we saw in the middle of

¹⁷ The reference here is to the fight between two Ata-Jurt deputies, Tashiev and Suleimanov, in the office of the speaker, a leader of Ata Jurt.

2011 in the calls by Ata Meken and the SDPK to investigate the business dealings of Omurbek Babanov, the head of Respublica, and in the cross-party moves to unseat the head of the Judicial Affairs Committee, to remove Judge Bazarbekov, and to protest the firing of the Procurator-General, Kubatbek Baibolov.¹⁸

Both the logic of parliamentarism and specific provisions of the new Constitution encourage the institutionalization of a political opposition in Kyrgyzstan. When coalition partners recognize, as they have since the end of 2010, that they could easily find themselves in opposition, they are more likely to insist on rules of engagement that protect those who are out of power. Moreover, the opposition now enjoys by constitutional mandate the right to chair two of the most prominent committees in parliament, those on Law and Order and Finance.¹⁹ All parties in parliament also place members on committees in rough proportion to their presence in the chamber, and all parties--whether in the ruling coalition or not--are granted deputy speaker posts if they do not hold the speaker's chair.²⁰ Such provisions are important not just in providing avenues of influence for the opposition but in creating a discursive environment in which a political opposition is seen as a normal and legitimate part of the political system.

Under the Third Republic, the main barrier to the institutionalization of an opposition is not to be found in the political opportunity structure but in a deficit of cohesiveness and organizational capacity in the opposition, whether in traditional parties, like Ar Namys and Ata Meken, or in structures like the All-National Congress of Parties, which brings together under the leadership of Alikbek Dzhekshenkulov a loose association of parties that failed to cross the five-percent threshold in the October 2010 parliamentary elections. As the split in Ar Namys has illustrated in extreme form, the leadership of opposition parties has not been able to discipline its membership. Yet discipline within and between the parties of the ruling coalition has also been in short supply. To use the terminology employed in the study of European parliamentary systems, this dearth of organizational discipline has led to political competition

¹⁸ "Deputaty trekh fraktsii Zhogorku Kenesha napraviat v Sovet sudei proshenie ob osvobozhdenii Z. Bazarbekova ot dolzhnosti sud'ji," *Kabar.kg*, 16 August 2011. www.for.kg/ru/news/159376/;"Zaiavlenie ob'edinennoi oppozitsii: Kubatbek Baibolov postradal za to, chto nachal real'noe rassledovanie faktov korruptsii," *Bulak.kg*, 1 April 2011. According to press reports in April 2011, a group of former oppositionists from the Bakiev era met at the home of Melis Eshimkanov to discuss strategy. The other persons present were Kulov, Tekebaev, Baibolov, Sariev, and Omurbek Suvanaliev and Emil' Aliev. "Novyi Ob'edinennyi front? Transformatsiia oppozitsii v Kyrgyzstane," *AKIpress*, April 4, 2011.

¹⁹ There are reports that the ruling coalition is trying to diminish the role of opposition leaders in these committees by shifting some of their work to committees that are controlled by chairs from the majority.

²⁰ There are 108 members of parliamentary committees, whose sizes range from 5 to 11 members (the largest is the Energy Committee. The party breakdown is 25 each from Ata-Jurt and Ar Namys, 23 from SDPK, 20 from Respublica, and 15 from Ata Meken. "Sostav profil'nykh komitetov Zhogorku Kenesha," *Akipress.kg*, December 24, 2010. www.for.kg/ru/news/142659/

that is closer to the nonparty than the more traditional inter-party and cross-party models.²¹ Put another way, it is difficult today to identify the boundaries between *vlast'* and opposition, which are shifting and porous. Unlike in the past, when the president anchored the political system, it is unclear at the moment whose power the opposition should be seeking to constrain or expose to scrutiny.²² And as Temir Sariev remarked in an earlier era, "until a stable system of *vlast'* is established, you can't have a single consolidated opposition."²³ With several competing centers of state power, it is as if the bulk of the country's elite is in the cockpit, to return to McGlinchy's metaphor.²⁴ There are, therefore, worrying similarities between the two post-revolutionary moments in Kyrgyzstan: in both consociationalism and parliamentarism of the Kyrgyz variety, the effacement of the distinction between *vlast'* and opposition forces elites into a grand coalition that is unstable over the long term.²⁵

Conclusion

Domestic and foreign critics of parliamentary-style governance will invoke the shapelessness of power in present-day Kyrgyzstan as proof of the inappropriateness of parliamentarism for the conditions and culture of Central Asia. Before accepting this judgment, however, we should ask why parties--the essential building blocks of parliamentarism and a legitimate political opposition--remain weak in Kyrgyzstan. There are, without question, cultural patterns found in Kyrgyzstan and many other developing societies that complicate the emergence of stable, vibrant parties. One such phenomenon is the role of the "big man" in political organizations,

²¹ Rudy B. Andeweg and Lia Nijzink, "Beyond the Two-Body Image: Relations between Ministers and MPs," in Herbert Doring (ed.), *Parliaments and Majority Rule in Western Europe* (New York: St. Martin's, 1995), pp. 152-178. John Schoeberlein pointed out recently that one of the fallacies in Kyrgyz debates about parliamentarism is the tendency to compare political practice in Kyrgyzstan with Western ideals rather than Western reality. Another problem is an unfamiliarity with the diversity of democratic practices in the West. At times, Kyrgyzstan is criticized for falling short of the Westminster model of government-opposition relations, which in many respects is an outlier in Europe. "Parlament i parlamentskaia respublika v KR: Prognoz na 2011 god," stenogram, December 2010, Institute for Public Policy, Bishkek.

²² It is easy, of course, to overstate the degree of discipline in the government in the Akaev years. When I interviewed Akaev in May 1993, he lamented his inability to insure "executive discipline" over the country's governors and ministers, whom he had appointed. Personal interview of the author with Askar Akaev, May 1993, Bishkek. The problem continued through his presidency.

²³ Personal interview of the author with Temir Sariev, July 2008, Cholpon Ata.

²⁴ Unlike Valentin Bogatyrev, who considers that President Roza Otunbaeva is "outside of *vlast'*," I prefer to consider the presidency as one of the centers of power, albeit a relatively weak one. Bogatyrev's comments are provided in "*Vlast' i obshchestvo: kak vyiti na obshchuiu povestku dnia*," stenogram, Institute for Public Policy, Bishkek, January 18, 2011.

²⁵ In the view of Kabai Karabekov, a new form of consociationalism may emerge in the aftermath of the 2011 presidential election. See Kabai Karabekov, "Kirgizii malo odnogo prezidenta," *Kommersant Daily*, August 16, 2011, p. 6.

which gives parties a personalist orientation that impedes the development of democratic internal governance and a clear ideology or integrating values.²⁶ Remove "big men" like Tashiev, Babanov, Atambaev, Kulov, and Tekebaev from their parties and it is doubtful that the organizations would survive.²⁷ As Baktybek Beshimov and others have argued, because personalism suppresses ideas in politics, opposition parties have not so much been for a particular model of development as against *vlast'*.²⁸

There are many other influences on party development, however, that have little or nothing to do with the economy or political culture. In the realm of institutional design, for example, ambiguities in the rules relating to the imperative mandate, drawn from the Constitution and the parliament's Reglament, have undermined party discipline by allowing deputies elected on a party list to view themselves as independent actors rather than agents of the party. Second, in constructing electoral lists, many parties were motivated more by a candidate's ability to contribute to the campaign, whether through their financial means or their popularity, than their loyalty to the party. Many would disagree with President Otunbaeva, who recently concluded that parties in Kyrgyzstan are no longer "simply pre-election alliances of capital and local supporters (*zemliaki*)."²⁹ In some cases, leading figures on the party lists in 2010 were not even members of the party. Thus, the recruitment decisions of the party leadership undermined the logic of closed party list systems under proportional representation, an institutional design that should contribute to the development of strong, disciplined parties. Instead, the composition of the current parliament mirrors in many respects the parliaments elected in the 1990s on the basis of single member districts, where wealthy, independent-minded businessmen represented a formidable share of the assembly.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the logic of parliamentarism, or any set of institutional arrangements, is not fully realized in a founding election. It is only through the learning and experience of multiple campaigns and multiple coalition governments that politicians come to

²⁶ In the view of the journalist, Ulugbek Babakulov, the only thing that unites oppositionists is that they have no clear, well-structured vision of the country's future. "They don't need ideas," he stated, "they need power [*vlast'*]." Personal interview of the author with Ulugbek Babakulov, April 2009, Bishkek.

²⁷ Ata-Jurt may be the exception here. In April 2009, Myktybek Abdyl daev--a former chief of staff for President Bakiev and number 1 on the Ata-Jurt party list in the October 2010 parliamentary elections--admitted that even he "didn't know who was number two" on the party lists under Sariev, Atambaev, and Tekebaev. Abdyl daev's position at the top of the Ata-Jurt list was not a reflection of his political weight--the sole exception to the pattern discussed here--but of the desire of the southern-based party to have a visible northern politician heading the ticket. Personal interview of the author with Myktybek Abdyl daev, April 2009, Bishkek.

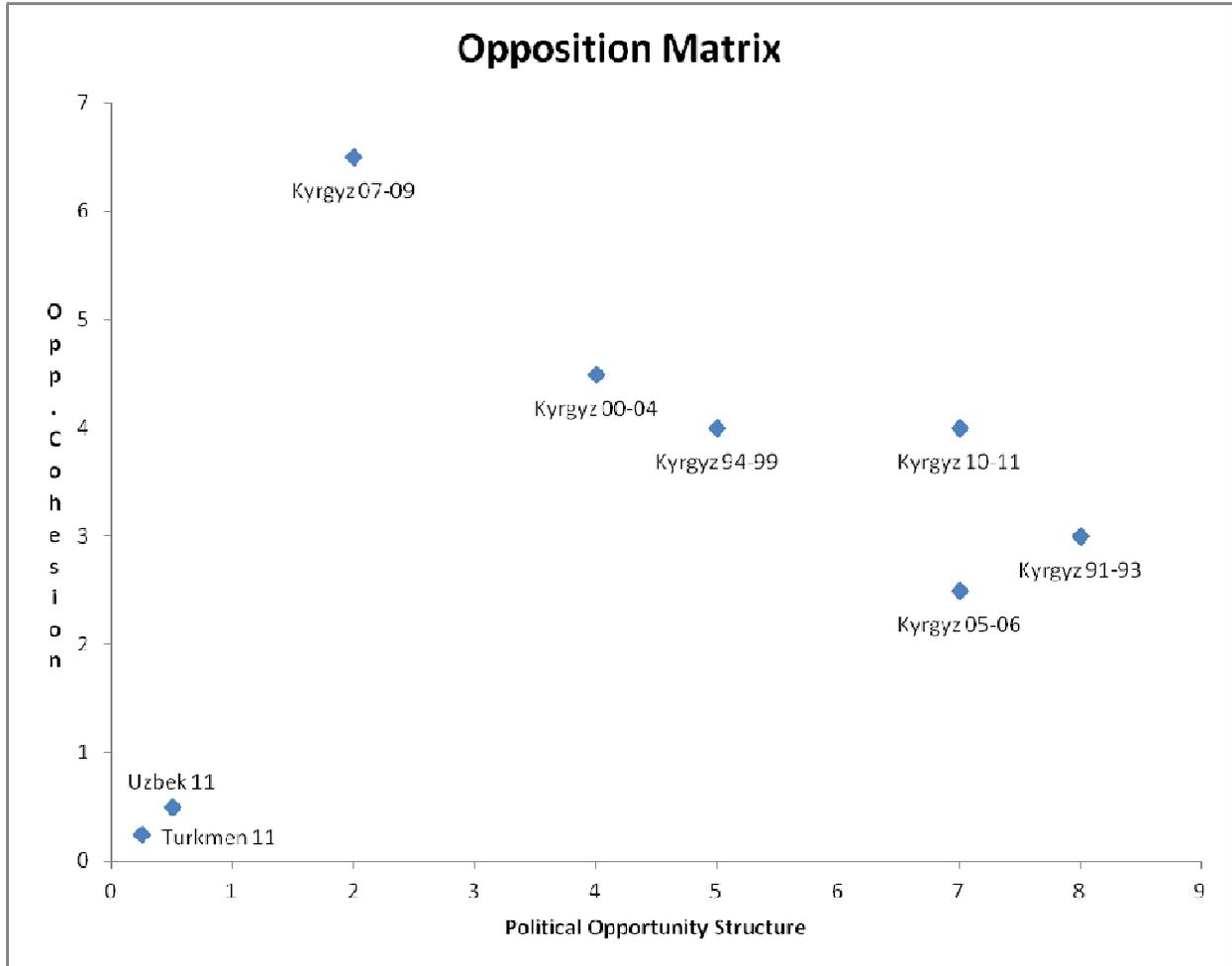
²⁸ Personal interview of Gulnara Iskakova and the author with Baktybek Beshimov, July 2008, Bishkek. One could argue that a longstanding exception to principle-less parties in Kyrgyzstan is Ata Meken, which has consistently favored institutional changes designed to check executive power. One could add that the parliamentary election campaign in 2010 encouraged other parties to develop a clearer set of priorities, and Ata-Jurt's associated itself with southern regionalism and ethnic Kyrgyz nationalism and Ar Namys' advocated internationalism and an overtly pro-Russian foreign policy.

²⁹ Illarion Zviagintsev, "Oppozitsiia: vmeste veselee?" Polit.kg, March 28, 2011.

recognize the advantages of intra-party and intra-coalition discipline and the benefits of establishing stable rules that govern relations between government and opposition.³⁰ The question is whether, with the country's biggest men seeking the office of the presidency, the logic of parliamentarism will be allowed to continue to reshape the structures of incentives that govern relations within and between *vlast'* and opposition.

³⁰ On the need for a period of party construction, see the comments of Cholpon Dzhakupova in "Vlast' i obshchestvo: kak vyiti na obshchuiu povestku dnia," stenogram, Institute for Public Policy, Bishkek, January 18, 2011.

MATRIX 1



MATRIX 2

