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The role of Kyrgyzstan's political elite in shaping socio-political cycles

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Abstract

The purpose of the study is to analyse the factors driving the evolution of Kyrgyzstan's political elite, particularly through the lens of its cyclical involvement in revolutionary events. The methodology involves a comprehensive examination of the political elite's structure, legislative framework, historical

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events, and a comparative analysis with other Central Asian countries. The findings reveal that Kyrgyzstan's political elite remains entrenched in a clan-based, elite-patronage system, characterized by elements of corruption, which perpetuate ineffective governance and cyclical political instability. The study highlights the paradox of frequent revolutions, which reflect both a desire for democratic development and the difficulties of establishing a new political elite. Although Kyrgyzstan exhibits higher levels of female political participation than other Central Asian countries, significant gender gaps remain, emphasizing the need for stronger measures to ensure gender equality. Furthermore, the study observes a decline in press freedom, signalling a retreat from democratic principles and free speech.

Keywords: political regime, regional conflict, democratic principles, citizen engagement, political stability, national identity.

El papel de la élite política de Kirguistán en la configuración de los ciclos sociopolíticos

Resumen

El propósito del estudio es analizar los factores que impulsan la evolución de la élite política de Kirguistán, en particular a través de la lente de su participación cíclica en acontecimientos revolucionarios. La metodología consiste en un examen exhaustivo de la estructura de la élite política, el marco legislativo, los acontecimientos históricos y un análisis comparativo con otros países de Asia Central. Los resultados revelan que la élite política de Kirguistán sigue atrincherada en un sistema de élite y clientelismo basado en clanes, caracterizado por elementos de corrupción, que perpetúan la ineficacia de la gobernanza y la inestabilidad política cíclica. El estudio destaca la paradoja de las frecuentes revoluciones, que reflejan tanto el deseo de desarrollo democrático como las dificultades para establecer una nueva élite política. Aunque Kirguistán presenta niveles de participación política femenina superiores a los de otros países de Asia Central, sigue habiendo importantes diferencias entre hombres y mujeres, lo que subraya la necesidad de adoptar medidas más enérgicas para garantizar la igualdad de género. Además, el estudio observa un declive de la libertad de prensa, lo que indica un retroceso de los principios democráticos y de la libertad de expresión.

Palabras clave: régimen político, conflicto regional, principios democráticos, compromiso ciudadano, estabilidad política, identidad nacional.

Introduction

Since Kyrgyzstan gained independence, a complex and long process of establishing democracy in the political system began in parallel with complex political changes that continue to this day, including periodic elections, protest movements and changes in government, which led to the multilevel evolution of political elites. The study of the dynamics and transformation of the political elite as a key component of the government apparatus in this context is key to assessing stability and democratic progress in the country and further developing effective strategies to strengthen democracy and the rule of law, especially at a time when the country is in an unstable economic and political situation.

Understanding the processes of political elite development in Kyrgyzstan has a broad regional context in Central Asia, where similar processes are taking place in other countries. The establishment of political elites in Central Asian countries has common features, which significantly influenced its establishment in the post-Soviet period. A special situation has arisen in Kyrgyzstan, where the national elite began to emerge during the time of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and with the country's independence became part of the political elite. When studying the transformation of political elites in Kyrgyzstan, researchers face several key problems. In parallel to the increase in the level of desire for democracy among the people and some political figures, the main part of the political elite still shows regressive behaviour in achieving democratic

values, which provokes destabilisation of internal and external processes in the country, and a response from voters.

In the early 1990s, after the collapse of the USSR, the Central Asian republics got a chance to become democratic states, and their leaders promised to abandon the authoritarian system that originated in the Soviet Union and carry out political reforms aimed at establishing democratic values and creating a new civil society. Abazov (1999) highlighted that political structures became more liberal, but this does not always mean the automatic creation of mechanisms for the implementation of the principles of liberalism and their effective implementation in practice. Kirman (2014) analysed the factors that contributed to the development of an unreliable democratic image of the political apparatus. M.B. Olcott (1995) highlighted that the influence of the Soviet period on the socio-economic sphere, especially in Muslim regions, remains significant and noticeable, since the Soviet government controlled the Muslim population through local clans or leaders of certain regions, which contributed to the development of corruption, nepotism, and mafia structures.

The problem of the effectiveness of revolutionary events in the context of the transformation of the political elite of Kyrgyzstan was investigated by Kazak kyzy (2018) and Zhunushova (2018). Haerpfer and Kizilova (2020) conducted a comparative analysis between the countries of the region, highlighting both common and distinctive features in the overall context of the region's development. Their research focused on the desire of Kyrgyz voters to democratise political elites, which underlines the importance of democratic changes in Kyrgyzstan. Although these revolutions often led to changes of power and promises of political reform, they often did not lead to stable and effective

governance (Lottholz, 2022). Alymkulov and Momunbaeva (2019) analysed the consequences and previous aspects of the first significant change of political elites of the Tulip Revolution in 2005. Pelkmans (2005) investigated the influence of the Kyrgyz people on the change of the political apparatus of Kyrgyzstan through riots and protests leading to revolutionary events in 2005, 2010 and 2020, emphasising the connection of these processes with the actions of the political elite, which cause a negative reaction of the people.

The problem of hybridity of political regimes formed in Central Asia was considered by Kumar Biswal and Pradhan (2022), who highlighted the need to consider many contradictory aspects that influenced the establishment of political nomenclature in Kyrgyzstan both historically and regionally. Engvall (2022) has extensively examined religious dynamics and its impact on the political process in Kyrgyzstan. The researchers highlighted the tensions between state secularisation and the growing influence of Islam, and the effectiveness of the government's efforts to maintain dialogue and find compromises in the country to ensure religious security. Comparison of the political systems of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan by Nurtazina and Serikzhanova (2021) highlighted the combination of traditionalism and appeal to democracy: both countries retain certain traditional aspects in the political system, however, in parallel they show an active desire for democratic principles and institutions.

This research is really important because it helps to better understand the complex aspects of the transformation of political elites in Kyrgyzstan. There are gaps in the literature in the study of the role of the political elite in Kyrgyzstan. It is necessary to consider the influence of cultural and social characteristics on the process of post-Soviet transition. The issues of national and religious identity,

which have a significant impact on the development of political institutions and processes in the region, also remain unexplored. It is also worth analysing the obstructive and encouraging actions of the political elite on the way to the embodiment of democratic values of voters. This may not be clear to foreign researchers, who may be more focused on the institutional aspects of politics.

Thus, studying the transformation of political elites in Kyrgyzstan is a complex task that requires taking into consideration many factors and features, and overcoming various methodological and practical obstacles. Therefore, the purpose of the study was to analyse the role of the political elite in Kyrgyzstan to identify factors determining its influence on the political process and social development of the country, and also analyses mechanisms to combat authoritarian practices and corruption in the country's political system to achieve democratic goals. The main objectives of the study were to identify the problems and challenges faced by the political elite, and to propose recommendations to strengthen its role in building a stable democratic system in the country.

1. Materials and methods

To ensure the reliability of the study, a thorough analysis of the data was carried out, since the existing methodology on this topic often contains subjective assessments of the actions of political figures. The study required comparing various events and data, especially in the context of other countries, in particular, the countries of Central Asia, to identify common trends and features. For a deeper understanding of the changes in socio-political life and the transformation of the political elite, attention was paid to statistical data and graphs of international organisations. The results of the study were based on data from the World Bank,

namely, a graph of the dynamics of annual gross domestic product (GDP) growth in Kyrgyzstan from 1991 to 2022 (The World Bank, 2022). The Monthly ranking of women in national parliaments (2024) was used to analyse information on the structure and leadership, gender and age distribution of parliamentarians, and provisions regarding quotas and reserved seats in the Jogorku Kenesh (Supreme Soviet). The data on press freedom in different key periods was analysed on the basis of the global ranking of freedom of expression from 2002 to 2023 “2023 World Press Freedom Index – Journalism threatened by fake content industry” (2023). Interviews with political analysts, researchers, activists, and representatives of the political elite were analysed. The content of textual materials was analysed, including speeches by political leaders, for example, a dispute between Deputy Prime Minister Surabaldieva and deputy U. Kydyraliev, published by the opposition publication “Kloop”, which was censored by the government (Whether there was..., 2020; Speth & Steinmillerere, 2023). A review of discussions in social networks on the topic of freedom of speech, such as Instagram, Twitter, TikTok and other open sources of information was also conducted to understand the sentiments within the Kyrgyz society.

During the study, attention was paid to the legislative framework of the Kyrgyz Republic, using data from the Centralised data bank of legal information of the Kyrgyz Republic (2024), and various constitutional projects and laws were analysed, for example, the Law of the Kyrgyz Republic “On state civil service and municipal service” (2021), Law of the Republic of Kyrgyzstan “On freedom of religion and religious organisations” (1991), or Law of the Kyrgyz Republic “On enactment of the Constitution of the Kyrgyz Republic” (2010). To obtain expert assessment and analysis of the current situation, and to elaborate development

prospects, the effectiveness of the political elite was assessed through an analysis of the results of the reforms carried out in the country, including an assessment of achievements in the field of democratisation, human rights and legal development. The effectiveness of the political elite was also assessed by analysing election promises and campaigns conducted both on the Internet platforms and during speeches at rallies. Additionally, reports from independent international organisations, such as the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (Kyrgyz Republic parliamentary..., 2016), participated in the assessment. The degree of fulfilment of promises indicates the level of effectiveness of the actions of the political elite and the degree of its responsibility to voters.

This helped to identify general trends and features of the institutionalisation of authoritarianism in Central Asia. The discourse analysis revealed not only the recognition and legitimisation of the norm, but also possible contests or alternative interpretations. This helped to understand the complexity of perception and interpretation of the norm in various socio-cultural contexts and to identify potential contradictions or conflicts in its perception. Thus, discourse analysis has played a key role in the study of the processes of recognition, legitimisation and acceptance of norms, allowing the study to identify their role in shaping political processes and public consciousness.

2. Results

The study of the establishment of the political elite in Kyrgyzstan cannot be carried out without considering the context of events taking place in the Central Asian region as a whole. Kyrgyzstan, as a part of this region, is influenced by many political, ethnic, and geopolitical factors. Moreover, as the most multiethnic

society in Central Asia after Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan faces unique challenges related to ethnic diversity and strained interethnic relations. The geopolitical strategy of other states and regional conflicts have an impact on the political elite and the dynamics of internal processes. In this context, it is necessary to consider not only the historical and ethnic characteristics of Kyrgyzstan, but also its interaction with other countries in the region. When studying the system of environmental security, it is important to note that this concept assesses the state of the environment and identifies factors that cause deterioration of the environmental situation and pose a direct threat to the life and health of the citizens of the state.

A common feature in the process of establishment of political elites in the context of Central Asia is the presence of elements of illiberal solidarity in Central Asia through the prism of institutionalisation of the authoritarian regime. The reason is that after the collapse of the Soviet Union, states faced uncertainty and sought to fit into international norms and institutions created without their participation. Copying certain practices becomes a way of adapting to a new environment (Buranelli, 2020). Examples can be seen in the fact that the leaders of Central Asia, observing each other's experiences, strengthened their positions through constitutional referendums, appropriated honorary titles to strengthen their absolute power and copied the behavioural norms and discursive practices of the group they sought to join. Similarly, mutual approval and support between actors who adhere to certain normative scenarios enhances socialisation within a broad socio-strategic system. Encouraging a particular behaviour contributes to its preservation and development.

Central Asian political regimes can be characterised as hybrid, that is, these regimes combine elements of various political models and ideologies (Kalaganov et al., 2018). However, there are features of authoritarianism, patronalism, and nepotism that are characteristic of many countries in the region, and the desire for democratic representation and a technocratic, rational elite (Laruelle, 2021). Different Central Asian countries faced different challenges and this influenced the consolidation of power and stability during the transition to independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, the new leaders managed to consolidate power more successfully during the transition to independence, which allowed them to retain power and remain in office even after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

In Kyrgyzstan during the late Soviet period, openness in politics was conditioned by the fact that the first secretary was unable to establish strict centralised management due to the opposition of the northern regions. This led to a more unstable situation and a weaker regime during the transition to independence. For example, consolidating power and ensuring legitimacy at the elite level played a key role in the strategies of Islam Karimov in Uzbekistan and Askar Akayev in Kyrgyzstan. Both leaders realised the importance of maintaining a balance between the interests of various clan and regional elites in order to strengthen their political position.

They acted by entering into informal agreements and political deals to demonstrate their willingness to compromise and take into account the interests of local elites. This allowed them to strengthen their legitimacy and ensure the stability of their rule. The inclusion of representatives of various clan and regional groupings in the new government, and the replacement of Soviet appointees with

their own, contributed to strengthening local support and reducing the likelihood of internal conflicts (Akchurina, 2021). However, despite these efforts, maintaining a balance between the various clans and regions was a difficult task that required constant attention and effort on the part of the leaders. Ultimately, the success of such strategies depended on their ability to effectively manage the interests of diverse elite groups and prevent their conflicts. In 1994, when President S. Niyazov of Turkmenistan extended his presidency by referendum, this behaviour was repeated in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan in 1995. This has become a legitimate practice in the region, recognised and legitimised by the presidents of Central Asia. Even in Kyrgyzstan, where democratic institutions were considered more developed, President A. Akayev applied this practice in an attempt to extend his rule.

The establishment of the political elite of independent Kyrgyzstan took place under the close influence of factors that had a historical context and were conditioned by the country's stay in the Soviet Union. During the Soviet period, the low level of representation of Kyrgyz in state bodies provoked the nationalization of the Kyrgyz elite and the political apparatus during its establishment after the collapse of the Soviet Union. This was due to the policy of discrimination against indigenous peoples carried out by the Soviet government. Paternalism and authoritarian practices are deeply rooted in the cultures of the large republics of Central Asia (Serikzhanova et al., 2024).

This enabled the former communist elites to retain power and caused obstacles to democratic reforms, which is why nationalist rhetoric became popular among the local population in the post-Soviet period. As a result, the Kyrgyz elite did not have enough experience and resources to govern the country after

independence. The Soviet system did not contribute to the development of democratic institutions, so after the collapse of the USSR in these countries there was neither experience nor knowledge of how to build democracy.

There was also a weakening of clan structures, but the preservation of their influence at the local level, since collectivization was weakened in mountainous and remote areas of Kyrgyzstan, and the local population sought to preserve traditions under the influence of the oppressive policies of the USSR. Clan ties promote solidarity and support within the political elite, where members of the same clan or family support each other, which contributes to their effective cooperation and the achievement of common goals. But clan ties can also contribute to opacity in the political system and increase corruption. Clan members use their family ties to gain privileges, access resources, and circumvent laws, which undermines trust in political institutions.

Competition between different clans or families for power and resources leads to political crises and strained relations. In a clannish environment, members of the political elite who do not belong to a particular clan or family may find it difficult to advance their careers and implement their political ideals due to limited access to resources and support. The split of Kyrgyzstan into traditional warring regions – North and South – is conditioned by historical factors such as cultural differences, ethnicity, and the level of economic development. This split has had a significant impact on the evolution of the country's political elite, contributing to the development of political forces that protect the interests of each region. In response, the political elite began to actively advocate for regional interests, which led to increased political competition between the north and the south (Rozumiuk, 2022).

The first president, Askar Akayev, showed preference and support for members of his family clan and close allies when appointed to key positions or important positions in public administration. This has created conditions for the dominance of certain groups in the political elite. His family members and close relatives held key positions in the government and other institutions. A. Sarkisheva served as Deputy Governor of the Talas region, S. Dzhamakeeva was the State Secretary of the Agency of the Kyrgyz Republic for Civil Service Affairs – they are sisters of the wife of the former president. The eldest son of A. Akayev, ex-adviser to the Minister of Finance of Kyrgyzstan, ex-deputy of the Jogorku Kenesh of the Kyrgyz Republic, A.A. Akayev, was the owner of the country's largest Global System for Mobile Communications operator BiTel (Higashijima, 2022).

One of the most important tasks for Akayev was to achieve statehood in a country divided along ethnic and clan lines, but preference for personal interests rather than state interests led to a policy that did not meet expectations. As a result of the elections held in February and March 2005, opposition parties made accusations of electoral violations and fraud in favour of a party close to the regime of President A. Akayev, who was already in his third presidential term. These charges mainly concerned the Ak Zhol party, of which Akayev's children were members.

After the announcement of the results of the vote, the opposition began large-scale protests across the country. The peak was the April 2005 events, when thousands of rallies in the centre of Bishkek demanded a review of the elections and the resignation of President Akayev. The protests led to an escalation of violence and clashes with government forces. As a result of opposition pressure

and international pressure, Akayev was forced to leave the country. These events led to changes in government and a new political course in Kyrgyzstan. The revolution has strengthened regional factions of leaders, especially in the north and south of the country. The political elites of these regions have become more visible and influential in national politics. But the conducted research determined that a year after the Kyrgyz revolution, they identified it as unsuccessful, disappointment followed due to the lack of economic reforms, the persistence of corruption, and the aggravation of the lack of freedom of speech (Huang & Zuo, 2022).

The failure of the revolution to achieve stability and improve the quality of life of citizens has led to a loss of confidence in political institutions and leaders. This contributed to the demoralisation of the population and the emergence of a cycle of political apathy and dissatisfaction (Caron-Diotte et al., 2022). All these factors combined led to the fact that the Tulip Revolution could not be successful in achieving its goals and bring long-awaited changes in Kyrgyzstan. Instead, it has left the country in a state of political instability and social disorganisation. Akayev's opponents, in turn, could use this situation to manipulate vulnerable populations and undermine reform and stabilisation efforts (Tekir, 2023).

The 2010 revolution in Kyrgyzstan, known as the April People's Revolution, opened a new chapter in the history of Kyrgyzstan. As the first parliamentary-presidential republic in Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan attracted the attention of the West, which followed the developments in the country with high hopes. The result of the regime change in 2010 was profound institutional changes aimed at limiting the previous human-centred approach to governance (Biró, 2022).

An important acquisition of this period was the decentralisation of executive power, the purpose of which was to limit the corrupt presidential rule that the country faced under A. Akayev and K. Bakiyev. However, according to Freedom House and other international organisations, democratic progress has somehow declined over the years. According to the 2010 version of the Constitution of Kyrgyzstan, it was established: approval of the parliamentary system of government; The President of the Kyrgyz Republic does not have the right to run for President of the Kyrgyz Republic in the next elections in 2011; the President of the Kyrgyz Republic does not have the right to membership in a political party for a transitional period and must observe political neutrality and refrain from any actions related to the support of which- or a political party; none of the parties has the right to occupy more than 65% of the seats in parliament; the absence of religious or ethnic parties (Law of the Kyrgyz..., 2010). Despite the seemingly positive changes, the arrival of new people, the change of the constitutional regime, subsequent events showed the collapse of democracy in Kyrgyzstan. The provisions consolidated in the new constitution only aggravated the situation, creating political and economic instability, which stimulated corruption and seriously weakened the legitimacy of the state (Eurasia Center, 2020).

The World Bank data clearly shows the economic consequences of each of the revolutions. Kyrgyzstan's GDP showed short-term growth in the period 2005-2007 and remained approximately at the same level between 2007 and 2008, after which it declined, down to -0.5% per annum in 2010. The revolution of 2010 gave an impetus to the development of GDP, which in 2013 reached one of the highest values during the existence of the independent Kyrgyz state at 10.9% per annum. However, the following years again showed stagnation and a decline in GDP,

reaching -7.1% per annum in 2020, the reason for which, of course, was not least the coronavirus epidemic (Israilov, 2022).

The “school” of training the political elite in Kyrgyzstan, as in the rest of the republics of the Soviet Union, was based, not least on training personnel outside the republics. After the collapse of the USSR, some educational institutions focused on training civil servants and located within the country, as it happens, suffered from underfunding, outdated resources, and outflow of qualified personnel. The period from 1991 to 2004 was characterised by small amounts of training for civil servants, mainly in training centres or ministries. In the period 2004-2012, the Law of the Kyrgyz Republic “On state civil service and municipal service” (2021) was adopted and the Agency of the Kyrgyz Republic for Civil Service Affairs was established.

The latter has repeatedly tried to develop a mechanism reflecting the goals of the training system for civil servants, but the revolutions of 2005 and 2010 blocked its approval. Starting in 2013, by Decree of the President of the Kyrgyz Republic dated July 12, 2013, the Programme for the development of the training system for state civil and municipal employees in the Kyrgyz Republic for 2013-2017 was approved. The Decree was based on advanced training courses for acquiring new knowledge, and improving the theoretical and practical knowledge, skills, and abilities of civil servants (Kazak kyzy, 2018).

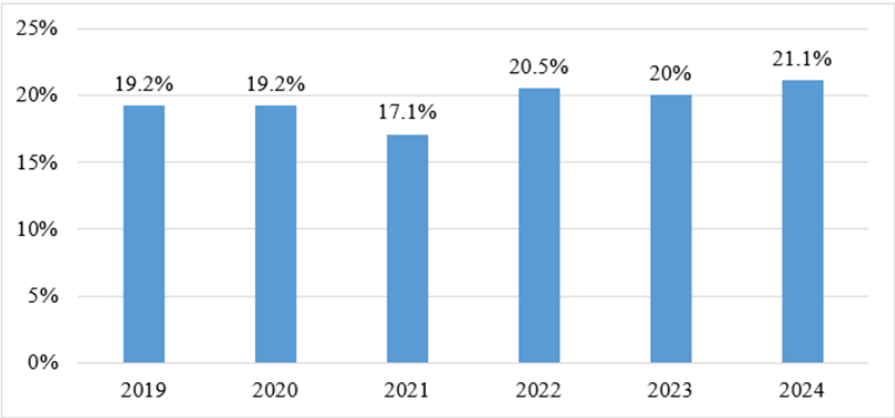
The decisions taken on paper were supposed to qualitatively lead to the transformation of political elites, pushing the Soviet party elite into the background, with its inherent desire for power over economic resources and willingness to suppress dissent by force. Nevertheless, the level of corruption in Kyrgyzstan suggests, among other things, about the inefficiency of training

government personnel. Kyrgyzstan's positions according to the Corruption Perceptions Index remain critical, occupying 141 positions out of 180 countries in the ranking in 2023 (Corruption Perceptions Index..., 2023). In the 2015 elections in Kyrgyzstan, as noted by international observers, certain steps were taken to ensure freedom and justice, including the participation of women in political life and the prevention of election fraud through biometric data verification (The World Bank, 2022).

When allocating mandates received by a political party, at least 30 percent of the total number of mandates are initially provided for female candidates who received the most votes. If the female candidates did not receive votes, the remaining mandates within the quota for women are distributed in accordance with the order of their placement on the party's list approved by the Central Election Commission. Quotas in the lists should be provided at the time of registration, but not at the stage of allocating seats in Parliament. However, the Law does not require the retention of quotas after the registration of the list, which negates the effectiveness of measures aimed at increasing the participation of less represented groups, especially women (Kyrgyz Republic parliamentary..., 2016).

There are fewer women in Kyrgyzstan's political elite than men. Using the example of statistics on changes in their representation in parliament, there is a tendency to increase their number. At various times, laws have been passed and reforms have been implemented to ensure more equal representation of women in political life (Erisheva, 2023; Kazak kyzy & Ismailov, 2018). The introduction of quotas or other mechanisms encouraging women's participation in politics has led to an increase in their number in Parliament (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Number of women in Parliament from 2019 to 2024, in %.



Source: Compiled by the authors based on Monthly ranking of women in national parliaments (2024).

According to the data provided by the Inter-Parliamentary Union, women make up about 20% of the total number of deputies in the Jogorku Kenesh. These results do not confirm that the Kyrgyz authorities are really striving to ensure compliance with the gender quota. Parties were required to include women in their candidate lists at least 30%, which was an important step towards ensuring gender equality in the political sphere. Participation in the political life of the country’s minorities was also provided. None of the political parties represented in the new parliament after the elections met the gender quota set at least 30%. Only 24 of the 120 newly elected members of Parliament were women, which is only 20%. This discrepancy between the number of registered and elected candidates shows that the lack of a requirement to comply with the gender quota up to the allocation of mandates has reduced its effectiveness.

The Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan won the parliamentary elections in 2020 and won the majority of seats in parliament. However, over time, due to subsequent constitutional changes, there was a danger that the diversity of political views could be suppressed and the predominant power of the president or the monopoly of a certain group or family could be established. The dispute between Kydyraliev and Surabaldieva represented one of the dynamics within the political landscape of the country before the revolution. This dispute reflected the intrigues and contradictions within the elite, the various aspirations and interests of various political forces in the country. However, their conflict was not the only reason for the revolution. Parliamentary elections were held in October 2020, which were contested due to massive complaints of violations, including vote buying and falsification of results.

This has led to increased voter disillusionment and discontent among opposition political forces. Kyrgyzstan has faced serious economic problems such as rising unemployment, corruption, and uneven distribution of wealth. This has increased social inequalities and discontent among the population. The population began to feel tired of the authoritarian methods of government used by various political regimes in the country. Election irregularities and suppression of the opposition have only intensified this discontent.

During the 2020 revolution, the behaviour of political elites, and especially opposition forces, changed compared to 2005 and 2010. In 2020, opposition leaders did not show such activity and did not seek to directly seize power after the protests. This was due, in particular, to the fact that many of them already had experience of participating in the political life of the country

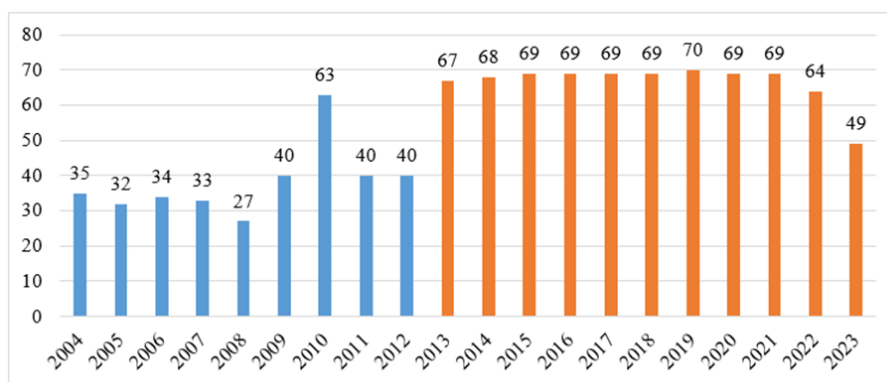
and realised the difficulties of governing after the revolution. The events of previous years served as an example for them that power can easily change, but governing the country remains a difficult task (Terzyan, 2021). Therefore, when Sadyr Zhaparov came to power, it was partly the result of chaos and a power vacuum after the resignation of the president, as well as the inertia of the political system in which the elites retain their positions, some experts say. According to other expert opinions, Sadyr Zhaparov's rise to power was facilitated by his high rating among residents of the country's regions, and in rural areas about 90% of young people supported him as the future leader of the country.

The presidential elections and the constitutional referendum held in January 2021 were an attempt to consolidate a new political order in the country, but they can also be challenged in the context of legitimacy and democratic principles. During the parallel referendum, almost 80% of voters supported Zhaparov, and even more supported the presidential system of government instead of the parliamentary one. A bill was also under consideration, where the dissemination of information contrary to "accepted moral values and traditions" becomes a criminal offence. These changes represent a clear rejection of the democratic principles and the rule of law established by the 2010 revolution, and have also exacerbated the problems of freedom of speech. However, the concept of a strong president who ensures order and justice is attractive to nationalists and conservatives, who make up the bulk of Zhaparov's supporters. Despite the criticism of democratic shortcomings, it does not harm his popularity (Schmitz, 2021).

Overall, Internet freedom in Kyrgyzstan is better than in many other countries in the region. But exposing this theme leads to drawing a clear line of connection between changes in the political apparatus and the dynamics of deteriorating or improving press freedom. Political elites may restrict access to certain information resources or censor certain topics that may harm their interests or reputation (Spytska, 2024). This includes banning the publication of materials critical of political decisions or the activities of the elite.

The restriction of freedom of the press allows the political elite to form a certain public opinion by controlling the information that reaches citizens (Zelenov, 2024; Tsaurkubule & Zlenko, 2024). This includes creating a positive image of the ruling structures and discrediting the opposition forces. In June 1994, the government began to restrict the freedom of the media by closing two newspapers, including the independent and highly critical of the government parliamentary newspaper Svobodnye Gory (Free Mountains). In the report “Freedom in the world” by Freedom House (2016), Kyrgyzstan is designated as a “not free” country. This is reported on the official website of the organisation. In 2015, the republic was designated as “partially free” (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Dynamics of changes in the Press Freedom Index in Kyrgyzstan from 2004 to 2023.



Note: from 2004 to 2012, the index was measured according to another system, where it is lower – press freedom is higher there. From 2013 to 2023, on the contrary, the lower the indicator, the less freedom of the press is allowed.

Source: compiled by the authors based on 2023 World Press Freedom Index – Journalism threatened by fake content industry (2023).

An analysis of the dynamics of changes in the Press Freedom Index in Kyrgyzstan in the year before and after the revolutionary events shows a weak degree of influence of protests on restrictions on media rights, that is, during the entire transformation, political elites adopted tactics of increasing their authority through restrictions on freedom of expression in the media and criticism of their actions from year to year. In 2023, the index fell sharply, indicating deterioration in media freedom during the cadence of Sadyr Zhaparov. Overall, state-building in Central Asia is a complex process in which state institutions, policies, and cultural factors interact and influence each other in an effort to shape national identity. Islam plays a significant role in the cultural identity of many Central Asian countries. Conversion to Islam is used as a way to strengthen national identity and legitimise power.

The concept of spiritual security is seen as an attempt to preserve traditional values and ensure the protection of the religious foundation of social well-being. However, as in many other countries, this causes criticism and controversy from the international community and human rights organisations. They point to violations of international human rights standards and the principles of state neutrality in religious matters. This is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that has a significant impact on the legal status of religious organisations in various countries, including Kyrgyzstan. On the path of democratisation and building institutions that guarantee the freedoms and rights of citizens, Askar Akayev adopted a new Constitution in May 1993. In this regard, on December 16, 1991, the Supreme Council of Kyrgyzstan adopted Law of the Republic of Kyrgyzstan “On freedom of religion and religious organisations” (1991). The purpose of this law was to restore the role of religion in society and regulate relations between the state and religious organisations.

The law was based on the norms established by the final document of the Vienna Conference of January 19, 1989. The law minimised state and legal interference in the activities of religious organisations and guaranteed their full participation in public life and independence from the state. About 1,800 Muslim organisations and 300 Christian organisations were registered. Each religious organisation had to be registered separately and have at least 10 founding citizens. The only restriction was the ban on the creation of political parties on a religious basis. Despite this, Kyrgyzstan received positive feedback from organisations such as the U.S. Department of State and the Helsinki Commission, which noted the high level of protection of

human and minority rights compared to other Central Asian countries (Political conditions in..., 1993).

The Batken conflict, provoked by the Islamic movement of Uzbekistan in 1999 and 2000, led to a revision of the legal situation. The Kyrgyz government has taken steps to counter religious extremism and the politicisation of Islam. This was reflected in the international arena, especially after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and subsequent military operations in Afghanistan. The Kyrgyz political elite have revised its approach to international and national security. Within the framework of regional cooperation in Central Asia, various treaties and agreements have been signed aimed at ensuring regional security and combating terrorism and extremism (Shanghai Convention on..., 2001). In June 2006, at the Kyrgyz National Conference on Religious Legislation in Bishkek, the Secretary of State of Kyrgyzstan, A. Madumarov, proposed to strengthen legislation in the religious sphere to prevent the spread of extremist ideas and activities and tighten control over their financing.

After the constitutional and electoral changes of 2011, introduced in response to the dramatic events and violent clashes of 2010, during the reign of President A. Atambayev's term, which lasted from 2011 to 2017, marked a new stage in relations between the state and religion. A. Atambayev began to use stronger nationalist rhetoric and publicly expressed his rejection of religious extremism, which, in his opinion, was imported from abroad. He condemned the Arabisation of the population and the wearing of the hijab. The president also pursued an inconsistent policy of introducing secular values. However, this policy proved to be counterproductive and led to new

polarisation and conflicts in society. However, it should be noted that the perception of the threat of Islamic radicalism and extremism may vary in different countries of Central Asia. For example, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan may adopt different approaches to “non-traditional” Islamic groups, such as Tablighi Jamaat.

While in one country this group may be recognised as extremist and banned, in another it may legally function and have the support of religious authorities (Kazak kyzy & Zhunushova, 2018). In modern conditions there is an unprecedented growth of the role of Islam in the life of society in the region, which requires from the states of the Central Asian countries, new, balanced, coordinated approaches to building relationships between states and religion in the region.

Men and women are increasingly turning to religious symbols such as growing beards, wearing headscarves and niqabs. These changes are related to the spread of Salafism and investments from the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf. There is a high level of diversity of religious identities in Kyrgyzstan, including Islam, Buddhism, and even traditional beliefs such as Tangrianism (Wilensky-Lanford, 2020). Islam is also used by the elites of the region to strengthen their legitimacy and power. Religious symbols and vocabulary are used as tools to distance themselves from Soviet atheism and consolidate the power of the elites. The principles of Islam, such as justice, equality before the law, and respect for women's rights, can be embedded in democratic institutions to ensure a more just and equitable society. It is important to maintain a balance between religious and secular principles in the state to ensure freedom of religion for all citizens and at the same time

protect secular institutions and principles of democracy (Kedeibaeva et al. 2020). Thus, the complex dynamics between the secular state, religion, and ethnicity continue to influence public and political life in Kyrgyzstan, requiring constant attention and adaptation from the state and society (Zhunushova, 2018).

Constitutional changes in Kyrgyzstan should be an organic product of internal discussion and consideration of the country's specifics, and not a simple copy of models from other regions. The pursuit of stability and development must be balanced with respect for the rights and freedoms of citizens, and with the strengthening of effective institutions capable of ensuring law and order and justice (Buribayev et al., 2015; Omarova et al., 2017). Institutional changes must be based on consensus and broad discussion in society to ensure their legitimacy and sustainability. This will avoid constant fluctuations, revolutions and instability, which negatively affect the development of the country and the well-being of its people.

The development and implementation of constitutional changes should be focused on the long-term interests of the country and its citizens, and not on the short-term political benefits of certain elite groups. Only then can sustainable and balanced development be achieved that can lead to prosperity and well-being of all segments of society.

3. Discussion

This paper provides an opportunity not only to analyse the dynamics of the development of the political elite of Kyrgyzstan during the period of independence, it also includes an in-depth analysis of aspects and events that

influenced the establishment of the political nomenclature in different periods, as a result, it also highlights the prospects for its development in the future, forming different scenarios. The results of the study emphasise the influence of the cyclical use of clan practices by elite members on the development of an authoritarian regime in the country.

The influence of the historical context on the establishment of the political elite allows analysing how historical events, such as the period of Soviet rule and national discrimination, shaped the characteristics of the political elite in independent Kyrgyzstan, which factors had the greatest impact on the development of political structures and elite groups in the country. The role of nationalist rhetoric in shaping political discourse in Kyrgyzstan after independence, combined with the need to build a democratic political apparatus, influenced the formation of hybridity of political regimes. These phenomena arose as a response to the weakness of Central Asian political institutions, unable to adapt to democratic foundations after the collapse of the Soviet Union due to the lack of experience of political figures who entered the new parliament, most of whom were former Soviet politicians. The rest were new politicians who adhered to nationalist rhetoric, due to the long restriction of freedom of national identity, among other things, who also needed more experience in building a rational and successful political apparatus.

In this uncertain environment, Central Asian states often turned to authoritarian regimes as role models. Political leaders who run authoritarian regimes encourage or condemn other countries, depending on how much they follow or deviate from authoritarian practices (Bocheliuk et al., 2019; Kawiana et al., 2023). For example, after A. Akayev came to power in Kyrgyzstan, his

authoritarian style of government became a model for other political leaders of Kyrgyzstan who were elected after him, so they sought to strengthen their power in conditions of instability and uncertainty. Central Asian leaders often encourage countries that impose strict control over the opposition and the media, while condemning countries where democratic institutions are becoming stronger. This process is supported by both political and economic interests of regional actors, who see the strengthening of their own regimes as a guarantee of stability and security in the region.

Buranelli (2020) also explored the use of mechanisms of political socialisation, such as mimicry/imitation and praise/blame, to ensure the survival and stability of the regime. It was highlighted that an illiberal form of regime-centric solidarism has been formed in Central Asia, which is based on the institutionalisation of an authoritarian regime. The study focuses on copying the behaviour by political leaders inside Kyrgyzstan. It analysed which models of government and discursive practices are adopted and adapted by political elites within the country, especially in the context of constitutional changes and the establishment of political institutions, but focuses on the hybridity of the political regime in Kyrgyzstan, which contains elements of both authoritarianism, patronalism, nepotism, as well as the desire for democratic representation and a technocratic elite. The researcher focused on the institutionalisation of authoritarian practices in the region through copying by political leaders of all Central Asian countries, highlighting only this regime of government as dominant. Both studies emphasise the importance of mechanisms of political socialisation and the impact of interaction between regional leaders on strengthening the authoritarian regime in Kyrgyzstan.

Similar conclusions about the diffusion of authoritarian practices as a phenomenon and within the political apparatus of Kyrgyzstan were reached by Koch (2019), highlighting that many other leaders of Central Asian countries focus on a strong state as a guarantor of stability and order, and also try to discredit alternative models of governance, such as democracy, presenting them as sources of instability and danger, citing Kyrgyzstan as an example. In the conducted study of the transformation of the political elite of Kyrgyzstan, it was highlighted that the haste of revolutions undermines the lack of radical changes in the style of organisation of power by political elites in comparison with their predecessors. It is also emphasised that they use the same levers to consolidate power by restricting freedom of the press and, practically, there is no improvement in the media freedom index with the arrival of new leaders in the political apparatus, even with changes in leadership, the main features of authoritarianism remain, which indicates the presence of mimicry and emulation processes in the political apparatus of Kyrgyzstan.

The researcher also highlights that this is often due to the fact that authoritarian leaders seek to maintain their power and control, ensuring their legitimacy by creating an image of themselves as a “stable” and “reliable” ruler capable of countering any threats inside and outside the country. Both studies point to the fact that despite revolutionary changes of power, new leaders in most cases do not adopt radically new approaches to governing the country. Instead, they often resort to the same methods and techniques that were typical of previous regimes, including restricting press freedom and strengthening control over the media.

The instability of government, the absence of the rule of law and weak institutions make the country vulnerable to elite manipulation and mass protests (Hysi et al., 2024; Akhmetov & Zhamuldinov, 2025). The study by Tekir (2023) concludes that Kyrgyzstan continues to plunge into an ochlocratic regime, where political events are determined by the sentiments of the masses, manipulated by populist leaders. These judgments are reinforced by the frequency of revolutionary events and the destabilising consequences that accompany them. However, based on the conducted research, it is impossible to characterise the political regime of Kyrgyzstan as completely ochlocratic, due to the weak freedom of speech in the country, and with a limited choice of candidates in post-revolutionary elections, where the choice is towards opposition leaders, but even among the opposition there is a spread of nepotism that prevents the emergence of new independent candidates, which hinders democratic reforms.

Constitutional changes in Kyrgyzstan after the 2010 revolution included the approval of the parliamentary-presidential system, the restriction of presidential rights, and the introduction of political neutrality for the president. However, subsequent events have shown a deterioration of the democratic process and economic instability. The decline in the country's GDP after the revolution, after a short growth in the period 2005-2007, showed negative economic consequences.

Engvall (2022) also addressed constitutional reforms in Kyrgyzstan since 2010, which aimed to transition to a parliamentary form of government. However, despite this, the researcher notes that the parliamentary experiment did not bring the expected results due to the ambiguity of the constitutional changes, which did not reduce the powers of the president sufficiently. Thus, the presidents of Kyrgyzstan continued to be key figures in the political system, which led to

authoritarianism. This resonates with the results of the current study that constitutional changes by the political elites in Kyrgyzstan should be carefully considered and implemented based on the specifics of the country, and not as copying models from other regions. The desire to achieve stability and progress must be balanced with respect for the rights and freedoms of citizens, and with the creation of effective institutions capable of ensuring law and justice (Abdrasulov et al., 2015; Apakhayev et al., 2024). Otherwise, Kyrgyzstan will remain vulnerable to constant fluctuations, revolutions and instability, which will negatively affect the development of the country and the well-being of its population.

The emergence of conservative Sunni traditionalism in Central Asia occurred as a result of the stigmatisation of “traditional or good” Islam and the rejection of “foreign or bad, dangerous.” The rise of conservative Islam, especially among traditionalist Muslims, poses a threat to human rights and the building of democracy in Kyrgyzstan, which forces political leaders to take certain steps at the legislative level to ensure security in the country. Zhussipbek et al. (2020) also raised the topic of the impact of the Islamic renaissance in Central Asia, especially in light of the development of an inclusive society and the protection of human rights. It is noted that the increase in conservative Sunni traditionalism has become a challenge to universal human rights norms and has hindered progress in the development of an open and inclusive society. The results of both studies present similar perspectives on the role of Islam in Central Asia and its impact on society and human rights. Analysis by the researchers emphasises that the fear of Islamism and fundamentalism in Central Asia may be largely mythical and unfounded, and that Islamic extremism and radicalism are not widespread or the main trends in

the region. Similar to the current study, the authors highlight the progressive potential of Islam as a tool to support the principles of human rights and social justice. Political leaders strengthen their power and ensure public legitimacy by focusing on the fight against religious radicalism (Ternov et al., 2024; Shaituro et al., 2025).

In their extensive study, von Einsiedel et al. (2018) analysed Kyrgyzstan's engagement with international organisations such as the United Nations (UN). For example, in Kyrgyzstan in 2012, the regional coordinator of the organisation used their personal contacts with the president of the country to initiate cooperation with the United Nations in the field of peace-building. The researchers emphasise that this helped to establish an entry point for the UN and to ensure the support of the president in the implementation of the organisation's projects and programmes in the country aimed at strengthening peace and stability. This study highlights the need highlighted in the results for the Kyrgyz political elite to cooperate with international organisations to avoid tense and violent situations in the country, and the contribution of Kyrgyzstan and the United Nations to conflict prevention in Kyrgyzstan and stimulation of stabilisation of the situation in the country after the crisis of 2010.

Studies on the preparation of the political elite of Kyrgyzstan by Kazak kyzy and Zhunushova (2018) highlight the need for changes in approaches to the development of the political elite in Kyrgyzstan. The renewal of the political system requires the renewal of the elite itself, and education plays a key role in this process. Paying great attention to the training of future statesmen is a prerequisite for the renewal of the political system (Sheryazdanova et al., 2020). The personnel policy system should be based on democratic principles and

transparency, which ensures fairness and efficiency in the work of government agencies (İsmayilov et al., 2022). The conclusions highlight the importance of creating institutions for the formation of the future political elite and supporting their development by the existing elite. The studies emphasise the need to ensure transparency of the electoral system, in addition to high-quality training of political leaders and access to modern management and leadership methods, and the importance of ensuring equal opportunities for all who have received appropriate education. The key aspects of career advancement should be professionalism and visible achievements, not nepotism and corruption.

These phenomena arose as a response to the weakness of Central Asian political institutions, unable to adapt to democratic foundations after the collapse of the Soviet Union due to the lack of experience of political figures who entered the new parliament, most of whom were former Soviet politicians. The rest were new politicians who adhered to nationalist rhetoric, due to the long restriction of freedom of national identity, among other things, who also needed more experience in building a rational and successful political apparatus.

In an extensive study, Dubois-Sénéchal (2021) emphasised the importance of analysing democracy considering the historical context, the values of civil society, and the role of openness for its development. It was noted that research on the development of democratic values in Kyrgyzstan has yet to be conducted. The researcher emphasises the need to consider territorial features in the context of the political regime of Kyrgyzstan. It is important to integrate local issues and dynamics in order to understand how the system works at the local level and what factors influence the democratic process. These aspects also coincide with the result of the study that revolutions as a way of democratising political elites are

ineffective, since this process requires step-by-step implementation at each level of the organisation of power and cannot take place in such a short time. The application of the experience of other countries should also consider the cultural characteristics of Kyrgyzstan, building its own unique path of democratisation.

The presented study as a whole allows analysing the dynamics of the development of the political elite in Kyrgyzstan since its independence. A comparison with the papers by other researchers highlights the influence of the cyclical use of clan practices by elite members on the development of an authoritarian regime in the country. This comparison shows the juxtaposition and interrelationship of various factors that influence the establishment of political elites, such as historical events, religious dynamics, social and cultural factors, power strategies, and the use of political instruments to maintain regime stability. The discussion highlights the importance of studying the political elite, allows understanding which groups and leaders have influence on decision-making in the country, what interests they represent and what strategies they use to retain power. This is important for analysing political stability, conflicts, and development prospects in the region.

Conclusions

This study examined the role of the political elite of Kyrgyzstan in the development of cyclicity in socio-political life, where revolutionary events play a key role in changing the political landscape. An analysis of events was carried out, which revealed that after each revolution, a new leader who comes to power begins the process of forming an autocratic regime, which leads to a gradual loss of

support from allies and the emergence of a negative reaction from the people, which emphasises the lack of a stable political regime.

An analysis of the clan heterogeneity of Kyrgyz society has shown that cronyism plays an essential role in the dynamics of political processes, causing the consolidation of absolute power in the hands of one leader or group, undermining the principles of equality and justice, which are fundamental to a democratic society. Consideration of the events of the three revolutions is a necessary part of the study of the dynamics of the actions of the political elite to highlight the nature of the interaction of political elites and voters, which directly determine their composition. The first revolution in 2005 testified to democratic ambitions and a desire for change. However, the next two showed that the political institutions created after the collapse of the Soviet Union were not stable enough, and the political elite was not sufficiently prepared to ensure stability and cope with the challenges of revolutionary sentiments and regional conflict.

Based on the analysis of the results, it can be concluded that political parties have failed to ensure equal representation of women in parliament despite the relevant legislative requirements. This indicates the need for stricter monitoring and measures to ensure compliance with gender quotas. The analysis of the dynamics of press freedom in the years preceding the revolutions, and in the period after the revolutionary events, confirms the claim that political elites copied the behavioural norms of their predecessors, and also demonstrates the reluctance of political elites to change their tactics of retaining power.

The principles of Islam, such as justice, equality before the law, and respect for women's rights, can be embedded in democratic institutions to ensure a more just and equitable society. It is important to maintain a balance between religious

and secular principles in the state in order to ensure freedom of religion for all citizens and at the same time protect secular institutions and the principles of democracy. It is important to establish a system of transparency that would allow society to monitor the activities of political leaders and evaluate their actions. To improve the quality of the actions of the political elite of Kyrgyzstan, it is necessary to strive for greater openness, develop their professional skills and competencies through training and exchange of experience at the national and international levels, strengthen mechanisms for monitoring their activities, and actively involve citizens in the political process.

Further research should be directed to studying the impact of the transformation of the political elite on democratic processes, including their impact on freedom and pluralism of the media, protection of human rights and civil liberties. The study may be limited by the available data and sources of information, and the lack of accurate statistics in certain areas, which is caused by the variability of the political situation and dynamics in the region.

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