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Observing or participating in regime change?

Kyrgyz perspectives on the role of international election observation missions in 2005

Stina Torjesen and Indra Øverland [Eds.]

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Observing or participating in regime change?

Kyrgyz perspectives on the role of international election observation missions in 2005

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[Abstract] This report offers an in-dept analysis of the role of international election observation missions in during the political upheavals in Kyrgyzstan in 2005. It presents the work of three leading, young academics from Kyrgyzstan. The report forms part of the 'NUPI Network for Election Observation and Exchange'. This is project that is supported by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The starting point for the assessments presented here is the realisation that international election observer missions played a central part in the events that eventually lead to the toppling of President Askar Akaev's administration in march 2005. Kyrgyzstan is also a case that highlights the immense challenges that face election observation missions in non consolidated democracies of the former Soviet Union. Many of these countries, Kyrgyzstan included, have developed traditions of deep-seated and sophisticated manipulation of election procedures. Given these preconditions, the three articles aim to assess from differing perspectives how election observation was conducted in the country in 2005.

NUPI Network for Election Observation and Exchange

The present volume is the first publication produced within the project NUPI Network for Election Observation and Exchange. This initiative, funded by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, has both a research and a practical component. The research part seeks to facilitate research on election observation and democratic developments in Moldova, the Caucasus and Central Asia. A key aim is to enable and facilitate research by scholars from the region.

Increasingly, international election observers are playing a prominent role in political developments in the former Soviet states. Some election observation missions have been criticised for being too influenced by Western ideas and for unjustly propagating Western standards and practices in the new countries of the East. A core idea behind the project is that election observation should not create a top–down relationship between Western and non-Western countries, but that all countries should have the chance to participate in the international community and be involved in efforts to strengthen democratic and human rights norms.

Key project outcomes from the first phase include:

- 27 observers from Moldova, the Caucasus and Central Asia monitored the Norwegian parliamentary elections on 12 September 2005. The Norwegian Helsinki Committee (NHC), with the support of NUPI, organised this mission. A report detailing findings and suggesting improvements has been submitted by NHC to the Norwegian Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development.
- 24 observers from Moldova, the Caucasus and Central Asia monitored the local elections in Kyrgyzstan on 18 December 2005. Their report, with findings and suggestions for improvements, has been submitted to the Central Committee for Elections and Referenda.
- WebPages with election observation resources and news have been launched, http://www.cac-elections.net.
- Networking among election experts, researchers and civil society has been enhanced in the sphere of election observation in the region.
- Two NUPI reports comprising nine articles by scholars from the region are being published – one of which is the present volume. The other report offers in-depth analyses of key aspects of the legal and political framework for election observation in Azerbaijan.
- A seminar has been conducted at the OSCE Academy Bishkek: 'Role, Effect and Status of Election Observation in Central Asia and the Caucasus'.

Observing or Participating in Regime Change? Kyrgyz Perspectives on the Role of International Election Observation Missions in 2005

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Introduction

Stina Torjesen & Indra Øverland

The purpose of this report is twofold: to offer an in-depth analysis of the role of international election observation missions during the political upheaval in Kyrgyzstan in 2005, and to present the work of leading young academics from Kyrgyzstan. This is the first scholarly publication within the project 'NUPI Network for Election Observation and Exchange'.[1]

Kyrgyzstan is an interesting case, for two reasons. First, whether willingly or unwillingly, the international election observer missions played a central part in the events that eventually led to the toppling of the administration of President Askar Akaev. Second, Kyrgyzstan highlights the immense challenges that face election observation missions in the non-consolidated democracies of the former Soviet Union. Many of these countries, Kyrgyzstan included, have developed traditions of deep-seated and sophisticated manipulation of election procedures. Given these two features, how were the international election observation missions carried out in Kyrgyzstan? The three articles presented here provide differing answers and insights on this issue.

Kyrgyzstan was in 2005 (and arguably still is in 2006) a non-consolidated democracy. At a superficial level Kyrgyzstan embodied key features of a liberal democracy. It had elected officials, frequent elections and a constitution articulating liberal principles. There were relatively high levels of freedom of expression, and the populace had access to alternative sources of information. People were free to form independent associations, and there was inclusive citizenship (See Dahl, 2002.). There were also, however, some striking visible shortcomings. These included little or no change in political leaders and the political elite since 1991, and the dominance of the executive over the judicial and legal branches.

Additional and less apparent features of Kyrgyzstan's political system were closely associated with the composition of state structures themselves. Arguably the state was not so much a coherent top–down governing

[1] The key aims of this project have been to enhance the participation of observers from Moldova, Central Asia and the Caucasus in international observation missions and to facilitate research on the role of election observation in democratic developments in Moldova, Central Asia and the Caucasus. Further information on the project is presented in a separate section of this report.

structure, as an arena where informal groups competed for position, influence and resources. Kyrgyzstan exhibited many features of a 'patronage democracy': a democracy in which access to resources, jobs and services is concentrated in the state; and elected or appointed officials have the power to distribute these resources to voters and associates, which they prefer to do in an personalised, rather than formalised, way. (See Chandra, 2004.) This was paralleled with the near-total absence of movements, interest groups or political parties that could coherently channel specific political demands or platforms stemming from the broader populace to the level of the governing elites. With a few exceptions, most of Kyrgyzstan's independent associations had been elite NGOs or person-centred political parties. Politics was more about the competition for scarce goods through securing access to government positions – and less about competing political visions for the development of the country.

Moreover, Kyrgyzstan had inherited from Soviet times a long and deep-seated tradition of holding elections as manipulated and symbolic spectacles rather than as expressions of the preferences of the voting public. This merged with manipulation techniques that developed in the post-1991 transition period. New and sophisticated ways of manipulating democratic processes have taken hold in many post-Soviet countries, argues Andrew Wilson in his *Virtual Politics: Faking Democracy in the Post-Soviet World* (2005). He highlights how the administrative machinery of the state on the local and central levels has been mobilised so as to secure a favourable outcomes for those in power; how opposition groups and parties create 'clones' so as to deflect attention away from real opponents; and how widespread 'black PR' from central media outlets undermines opponents. Wilson's book underlines, as does Karagulova's article on Kyrgyzstan in this volume, the fact that most regimes in former Soviet space employ proactive, deliberate and comprehensive strategies to manipulate election processes and their outcomes. Similarly, Susan Hyde (forthcoming) has pointed out that international election observer missions may have encouraged innovations in cheating during elections. She terms this cheating 'prudent manipulation' – the idea being that rulers, like the Machiavellian 'Prince', know 'when to be good and when not to be good, while maintaining at all times a superficial appearance of goodness'.

What were the implications of these aspects of Kyrgyzstan's political system for election observation missions in 2005? An immediate implication was that any efforts to uncover manipulation became a political act, since manipulation was such a central feature of the ruling elites' political strategies. As Elnura Osmonalieva points out in her article in this volume: '[the election observers'] presence was an annoyance to [the heads of the Precinct Election Commissions] on a very stressful day. It was often a hindrance: it is hard to cheat, intimidate, bribe and falsify when there are people around who do not depend on you in any way, and who have the authority and possibility of telling the wider audience that you cheat, and, more importantly, to the bosses in [the capital] that you did not manage to cover up the cheating.'

The formal and informal political practices of Kyrgyzstan and other countries that share features of 'patronage democracies' raise questions as to

what should be the criteria for labelling an election 'free and fair'. In what ways – if any – is, for example, vote buying a violation of free and fair election procedures? Do we have the appropriate methodologies to capture sophisticated manipulation strategies – and is it the role of international election observation missions to do so?

These are questions in urgent need of debate, but unfortunately they do not fully fall within the proper scope of this volume. The purpose here is merely to highlight the challenges that have faced election observation in Kyrgyzstan – and to do so through presenting assessments from scholars from Kyrgyzstan.

The articles collected in this volume examine various aspects of election observation. A key argument that surfaces in all three articles, despite the differences in focus, is that election observation often becomes a political activity – whether or not the mission organisers make efforts to either prevent or augment participation in the political struggles associated with elections.

Emil Juraev, in his 'Election observation: an institution under threat? The case of Kyrgyzstan', profiles the various international observation missions that operated in Kyrgyzstan during the parliamentary and presidential elections. His article highlights the sharp differences in how these missions reported on the elections, and argues that the government deliberately ensured that there were 'pro-government' election missions operating, as a strategy to neutralise the effect of critical observation reports. Juraev also voices significant concern over the future of election observation as an international institution, noting that the work of all international missions during the presidential elections in July 2005 was highly problematic.

'Danger ahead: the government discourse in Kyrgyzstan on elections and observation before 24 March 2005' by Anara Karagulova examines the rhetorical tactics that government-affiliated media used against protest movements, opposition politicians and election observation missions prior to the ousting of President Askar Akaev on 24 March 2005. The article presents fascinating material from three major newspapers in Kyrgyzstan in the period January–March 2005. Karagulova uses the insights of discourse theory and critical security studies as a starting point for assessing how the government media affixed notions of 'danger' and labels such as 'indigenous/alien' to local and international actors – including observation missions. Her article indicates that the government-affiliated media published news stories and comments that carried biases against some observation missions. In many cases the media also failed to report when official statements of the observer missions noted failures or shortcomings. Karagulova argues that the negative information campaign against foreign activities, including international observation missions, in advance of the elections undermined the activities and statements of observers during and after the elections.

Elnura Osmonalieva discusses the important roles played by interpreters in election observation in 'Wearing two hats: interpreting during election monitoring in Kyrgyzstan'. She debates this in the context of the elections in 2000 and 2005, with particular reference to her experiences as interpreter in Jalalabad province and the constituency of Kurmanbek Bakiev during the

parliament elections in February and March 2005. The article highlights the many important intended and unintended functions interpreters take on. It also voices concern over the level of recognition, status and training that international observation missions tend to give interpreters. Osmonalieva points out the difficulties that observers and interpreters have in appearing as neutral observers, and how international observers are often seen as affiliated with particular political segments in a county.

Election Observation: An Institution Under Threat? The Case of Kyrgyzstan

Emil Juraev

1.Introduction

This contribution looks at international election observation in Kyrgyzstan during the two national elections in 2005. International election observation is an institution in the important sense of being a time-tested norm or practice, accepted and respected internationally. Its place in the architecture of international governance is widely recognised.

Here it will be argued that the original ideas behind this international practice – in terms of the ends to be achieved – are certainly still present. These include: fairness and honesty; legality and legitimacy; the transparency and 'democraticness' of the conduct; and the results of the elections. But in practice, the original aims are not the only ends to which international election observation is used. The case under consideration shows the various and at times contradictory ends to which such observation may be conducted.

In presenting this case, the article also invites further academic research on the theme of election observation, especially of international observation. Whilst there are plenty of scholarly works on most other topics related to elections, election observation has, oddly enough, received very little attention.[2] Yet the effect of observation on electoral processes, and the broader (and not readily visible) implications of observation on various political structures, would seem to warrant more focused study.

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2 One significant input to the academic study of international election observation should be the forthcoming doctoral dissertation by Susan Hyde at the University of California, San Diego. See also Bjornlund, 2004.

Sources

The paper is primarily based on the reports, and other documents, of the various election observation missions sent to Kyrgyzstan for the 2005 parliamentary and presidential elections.

These reports carry different perspectives and cannot be taken as ultimate sources of 'the truth'. However, the reports, and other public statements made by the missions, form a good starting point for discussion. Along with the observations made on the election days themselves, these texts are perhaps the most appropriate basis from which to draw some conclusions about these missions.

Other sources for this contribution include: media coverage of these missions (in various forms); published interviews with relevant persons; and a few select, informal interviews with individuals involved in the observation. The scholarly literature on election monitoring has not been consulted to any substantial extent, as the main intention here has been to offer some field considerations which in turn may contribute to further, larger-scale research.

A Cause for Concern

The most important observation that this paper puts forward is that, in the cases observed, international monitoring missions were clearly implicated in political games. This calls for caution in how the institution is understood and applied, lest it ultimately lose credibility and respect. When implemented true to its principles of impartiality and objectivity, international election observation is very important. It is a strong instrument for making elections cleaner, more honest, more democratic and more transparent. It is also an authoritative voice that can protect the legitimacy and respectability of elected governments (and representatives) in young democracies against ill-devised slander and contestation. These important tasks of international observation require that such missions be carried out with the utmost seriousness of purpose and care.

2. Kyrgyzstan in 2005

Kyrgyzstan was scheduled to have two national elections in 2005. The first was the parliamentary election, which was held as scheduled on 27 February and 13 March. The second election, however, had to be held in July, rather than at the end of October as originally planned. The mass demonstrations that culminated in the removal from power of Kyrgyzstan's first president, Askar Akaev (now known as 'The Tulip Revolution')[3], caused the presidential election to be moved forward to 10 July. The way in which this

3 What to call this event has itself been a perhaps over-debated question. Besides calling it a popular revolution, other suggestions included coup d'etat, 'putch', leadership change, and even pogrom. In this paper, 'revolution' will be used, while acknowledging that it is a contested term.

popular revolution took place, and what caused it, as well as what it in turn caused, are of direct relevance to the more general topic of election observation.

Democracy in Kyrgyzstan: Theory and Practice

Ever since gaining independence, Kyrgyzstan has made clear its determination to build a democracy. Indeed, this is reflected in its Constitution. Former President Akaev kept emphasising how democracy was a target – unlike some of the other presidents of the former Soviet countries, who changed their rhetoric from 'democracy now', to 'first economy, then politics',[4] or some other convenient formula. Elections, truly seen as 'instruments of democracy' (to borrow from Bingham Powell's book title of 2000), have regularly been carried out in the country – also unlike the case in many other countries.[5] In almost all elections for positions in government and representation, multiple candidates have competed for limited seats. Several referenda (an instrument of direct democracy), whatever their virtues might be, have also been held in less than fifteen years of independence.

The controversial point concerned the quality of these elections and referenda. Many in Kyrgyzstan came to view these alleged attributes of democracy as sheer hypocrisy on the part of the government, with President Akaev at the forefront. Elections were held with regularity and the people were asked to make decisions on important issues through referenda. Furthermore, there were other obvious democratic attributes to the election process, such as the diversity of the press, multiplicity of the political parties, and a large NGO sector. Yet these factors were dismissed as ways of giving an impression of democracy, rather than genuinely building it. From one electoral cycle to another, the public perception had been that manipulation had grown more sophisticated, and that the election results were more and more corrupt. The culmination of this ever-growing election manipulation came with the 2005 parliamentary election, where the complex government scenario included the organisation of loyal election observation teams.

What were probably the best elections under Akaev were the first, in 1991, when his presidency was confirmed in a national election for the first time.[6] Those elections were not competitive: Askar Akaev was the only person running for presidency. Much in the fashion of the Soviet times, the percentage of voters supporting this single candidate was in the upper nineties. All the same, this is widely seen as being the best election because it was conducted in a manner almost devoid of the illegal schemes which were to become rites of the later elections. Akaev had been serving as the president of the then Soviet Kyrgyz Republic since the autumn of 1990; at

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4 This is the formula popularly known to be implemented by President Karimov of Uzbekistan. The author recalls strong defence of this notion, with reference to Karimov's books, by Uzbek students at regional Central Asian student events.

5 In all other four countries of Central Asia, most famously led by Turkmenistan's President Niyazov, incumbent presidents have extended their terms in office through referenda, without going to elections.

6 This observation was made by many people during the parliamentary elections of 2005, leading up to 24 March.

that point the previous leader of the country had been voted out of office by the parliament. Akaev had been voted in, a new politician recruited from the sphere of academia. The reasoning goes that, as his political experience grew, he learned and began to use methods of political manipulation in later events. These included: shuffling government positions; holding frequent nationwide referenda; using respected elderly people to speak in his favour; and the manipulation of elections. Back in 1991, these were not attributes of his political character.

The Electoral Revolution

The 'high point' of this quasi-experimentation with democracy, the revolution of March 2005, may have been possible due to various conditions in Kyrgyz politics. In particular, however, it was due to certain peculiarities of the parliamentary elections of that year. The term 'electoral revolutions' applies to the Kyrgyz case as strongly as it does to other recent revolutions (see e.g. Silitski, 2005). In Georgia, Ukraine, and earlier in Eastern Europe, just as in Kyrgyzstan, elections provided the immediate triggers for these revolutions. In each case, the conduct of the elections was fiercely challenged, and this presented the windows of opportunity that enabled the long-suppressed dissatisfaction and protest to become mobilised and burst into open action.

Ground Conditions

The ground conditions for the Kyrgyz revolution were such that many people did not expect anything radical to happen. The country's long-term problems (corruption, poverty, and a growing sense of the unfair concentration of wealth in the hands of the political elite) were all seen as constant. The period immediately prior to the elections was not seen as being radically different from the months and years before. The limited freedom within the political realm was certainly not greater than at any earlier time; even though there were opposition parties and politicians (as well as an opposition-minded media, and NGOs), repression of their activities, and limitations on what they could effectively do, were in place as always. The long-standing problem of the opposition being highly disconcerted and fragmented remained largely the same. There were changes on this point only in a very short period leading up to 24 March. Under such conditions, many factors were potentially conducive to a change of regime by force, but they had existed for some years already; nothing pointed to a possible escalation of action in March, had it not been for the elections.

The Catalyst

The elections were the trigger that led to the escalation of protest. Most commentators, particularly election observers, acknowledge that the conduct of the parliamentary elections was very problematic. Contrary to the rhetoric

of the officials, and particularly of President Akaev (who claimed that they were calling for, and promising, free and honest elections), the actual elections were carried out amidst blatant corruption, selective application of legal restrictions, and the massive use of so-called administrative resources.

The specific tricks of manipulation used in the 2005 parliamentary election were somewhat different. Instead of attempting to get the desired outcomes by falsifying voting results, as had previously occurred, the greater emphasis was on the campaign period. Vote buying, de-registration of strong opponents, placing obstacles to the campaigns of opposition candidates, and many other tricks were applied. On Election Day, the new trick that was used was to publicise widely, on TV and newspapers, the highly favourable and 'legitimising' opinions of certain foreign election observers. Overall, this strategy was quite successful – but then it backfired, less than two weeks later. The overly aggressive, overly hypocritical, and overly 'all-encompassing' strategy triggered a similarly aggressive, critical and all-out reaction.[7]

3. International Election Observation Missions and their Election Assessments

All elections in Kyrgyzstan have been attended by election observers, both local and international. The number of international election observers has grown steadily with each election. This year, during the two rounds of elections, an unprecedented number of outsiders were watching the conduct of the peoples' choice. A record number of observers came for the presidential elections: the Central Election Commission (CEC) accredited 947 foreign observers, as well as 277 foreign journalists.[8] At each election, the government has attached high importance to international observation missions.

The Parliamentary Elections

International Groups

The major international groups observing the parliamentary elections were:

- the International Election Observation Mission (IEOM), composed of missions from the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the Office for Democratic

[7] Various publications analyse and describe the 24 March events. For a good comprehensive analysis, see the International Crisis Group (2005)

[8] For this and more details on each monitoring mission see the CEC website: http://www.shailoo.gov.kg/president/akkredit/?all=1 Information on the monitoring of parliamentary elections is not available; very likely because of the presence of rather shady monitoring groups, as noted further down.

Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and the European Parliament;
- the European Network of Election Monitoring Organisations (ENEMO);
- The Commonwealth of Independent States election observation mission (CIS);[9]
- the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation observers (SCO);
- the London International Democratic Institute (LIDI).

Most observers arrived only a few days before Election Day, but some (particularly from the IEOM, ENEMO and CIS) were present to observe the election campaign period as well.

Conclusions of the Reports

Of the written reports by the observation missions on the parliamentary elections that were made available, all agreed on only few points. This included recognition of the increased competition in almost all districts, and some positive vote transparency and anti-fraud measures (specifically, finger-inking and transparent ballot boxes).

As for the remaining points, the reports exhibited important differences.

IEOM and ENEMO were critical to the elections, whilst the CIS, Shanghai and LIDI groups declared the elections to be satisfactory. Actually, the latter two did not produce any official reports, and their assessments were primarily made public through media coverage.[10] The CIS report deemed the 13 March (run-up) parliamentary elections 'legitimate, free and transparent',[11] while the IEOM report concluded that the same elections 'fell short of OSCE commitments and other international standards for democratic elections, in a number of important areas'.[12]

In election observation reports, the most important and most cited points concern compliance with international standards (in particular, in terms of legitimacy, fairness, and transparency). However, any report will have further details on the observed violations, achievements, improvements, or deterioration, and so on. If we look at these details, then the CIS observation report is not a completely uncritical document. It notes several problematic areas, including voter lists, the status of both local and international

9 The CIS election observation mission here is different from non-governmental organisation called CIS-EMO, which also conducts observation, and which observed presidential elections in KR as a separate team of 29 persons. This curious coincidence in the name of the organisation is noted in a Eurasianet.org article, see note 28.

10 CIS monitoring is reported in a medium sized not-very-formal paper, though a more formal report is said to come for delivery to member-state officials at a later point. Curiously, the most criticised report on 27 February vote is unavailable (the link for it produces the 10 July vote report instead). See: http://www.ec-cis.org/main.aspx?uid=1774

11 Ibid.

12 IEOM Final Report on parliamentary election observation, p. 1

observers, some procedural shortcomings during the actual voting, as well as a few comments on the campaigning process (including 'public speeches violating the dignity and honour of the citizens and certain candidates').[13] On the whole, however, the CIS report is characterised by its conciliatory and mild tone, as well as the absence of any serious criticism, and repeated assertions that all the reported problems did not affect the overall quality of the elections.

The IEOM report has a much harsher tone, and cites more serious violations. Briefly noting the positive fact of the competitiveness of the elections, with wide choices, the report notes that this was undermined 'noticeably in the run-up to both of the rounds of voting, by widespread vote-buying, de-registration of candidates, interference with the independent media, and a low level of confidence in electoral and judicial institutions on the part of candidates and voters'. On the same page, the report lists several areas where major shortcomings were observed, all involving the pre-election period and election-preparation administration. Of the Election Day observations, the IEOM report notes: 'incidents of vote buying, infringement of the secrecy of the vote, pressure on students, multiple voting, and voter intimidation were directly observed'. In addition to the IEOM official conclusions, in a separate paper, a member of IEOM from Nordem, Linda Kartawich, specified voter education, voter registration, freedom of the media, and gender issues as areas in need of improvement.

While the differences in the texts of the two major reports are not as stark as may appear from the three-word conclusions, neither are they very close. Hence, 'legitimate, fair and transparent' accurately describes the overall tone of the CIS observers. By contrast, the gist of IEOM's report is quite well captured in the accounts of the failure to meet international standards in 'a number of important areas'. The conclusions of the LIDI and SCO observers, stated in less formal ways, were in line with the CIS assessment, and at times more resolutely approving than the latter. The report of the ENEMO mission was consonant with IEOM but much harsher. The Summary of Conclusions section opens as follows: 'though both rounds of elections were conducted in a peaceful manner, many violations took place which seriously influenced the outcome of the elections. ENEMO has concluded that the parliamentary elections in Kyrgyzstan fell dramatically short of minimum international standards for free and fair democratic elections'.[14]

LIDI (of which nothing has been heard or can be found after the parliamentary elections), made a statement on 14 March, which was published by the Kyrgyzinfo news agency and reprinted in the newspaper *Vecherniy Bishkek*,[15] concluding that the elections were 'legitimate and fair'. 'Like the first round of elections, this round was conducted in a professional manner. State organs responsible for the elections once again achieved

13 Op. cit., at: http://www.ec-cis.org/main.aspx?uid=1774

14 ENEMO Statement on Parliamentary Elections in Kyrgyzstan, p. 1.

15 The statement appeared in the newspaper, as a reprint from Kyrgyzinfo website, on 14 March, indicating the statement had was already been made on 14 March, the actual day of elections. See 'Legitimny I Spravedlivy' at: http://www.vb.kg/2005/03/14/tema/2.html

success in the provision of guarantees for independence and impartiality of the whole electoral process, in the essential majority of the electoral districts and precincts.'

The Presidential Elections

While these assessments were still being discussed, and the two opposing views of the elections were still being sorted out,[16] events took a rather unexpected turn. On 24 March, President Akaev abandoned the country, and the Government House was taken by the opposition and the demonstrating crowd. After a short period of governmental void, a new interim government, led by Kurmanbek Bakiev, was able to establish itself and effectively claim control of the country. After some discussions within the government and the parliament,[17] early presidential elections were scheduled for 10 July.

In the period between the two elections, the OSCE-ODIHR mission produced several interim reports and an interim recommendations document.[18] These documents, together with the recommendations after the parliamentary elections, were favourably received, and to some extent acted upon by the Central Elections Commission of the Kyrgyz Republic. Major issues requiring immediate attention and action, as emphasised in these recommendations, included the following: the composition and competence of the district and precinct electoral commissions; the independence of CEC itself; the quality of the voter lists; interference by local administration officials in the electoral process; and various issues relating to the pre-election campaign period (access to media, freedom to campaign, a level playing-field, and more). As noted in the IEOM Preliminary Report after the presidential elections, several of these important recommendations were implemented, though many others remained unchanged.

There were some changes made to the composition of the observation teams for the presidential election. This time, there was no London organisation. However, a large number of CIS, ENEMO and IEOM observers arrived, more than in the parliamentary elections. This time, assessment reports did not contain any principal disagreements, and all of the missions noted significant improvements in meeting OSCE and other democratic election standards.

Problems During the Presidential Elections

In an election seen by many to be more of a referendum for the approval of Kurmanbek Bakiev than a truly contested multi-candidate election, and in a

16 A BBC news report carried a controversial official Russian statement, negative to the OSCE's critical report, on 21 March. See http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/4369065/stm#

17 Today's KR Parliament is the one elected in February and March 2005, despite these elections being the principal reason for 21 March. This was a long and difficult process, not discussed here for reasons of space and theme.

18 All accessible at: http://www1.osce.org/odihr-elections/14475.html

supportive international (Western) environment, there were nevertheless some important problems noted by observer missions. In particular, these included irregularities in voter lists and vote counts.[19] In an attempt to 'clean up' voter lists, significant numbers of people who were known to be outside of the country, but who had not changed their residence, were crossed out.[20] As for the vote-counting process, several observed instances of serious ballot stuffing were reported.[21] Both the voter list problem and the ballot stuffing apparently stemmed from the same fear: turnout was far too low for the election to take place (it was less than 50%). There were some incredible instances when the national turnout jumped by an unrealistic percentage in very short time. One instance cited in the IEOM report involved a rural precinct where 630 voters were reported to have cast their ballots in only 50 minutes.[22]

General Improvements

The positive changes in the presidential elections were seen in the campaign period, where both statements and actions were made in order to provide equal chances for all candidates to reach the voters. The illegal use of governmental resources was reduced significantly, though not completely eliminated. Candidates had significantly improved access to media coverage, as did the voters to information about the candidates. Besides extensive advertising on the national TV channel, there were candidate debates, organised by the CEC and aired live. Other improvements that were noted were the formation of the local election commissions, and the greater independence of media and electoral commissions from government pressure.

4. The 'Politicisation' of International Election Observation

During the two elections in Kyrgyzstan, a new element to international election observation missions was noted, in addition to their being simply what the name indicates. Besides providing observation reports, which claimed to be impartial, international election observation missions found themselves drawn into the broader political picture that existed around these elections. They were not really (seen as) entirely impartial, interest-free, and empty of political content or onlookers. Particularly during the parliamentary elections, the various observer groups, by their public presence, were clearly politically engaged – which means that they were not serving the idea behind this institution of international observation.

19 Ibid. See also ENEMO Preliminary Report on findings

20 Statement of Preliminary Conclusions, IEOM, p. 7.

21 ENEMO Preliminary Report on Findings.

22 IEOM Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions, p. 12.

As noted in the previous section, the parliamentary elections witnessed five major international observer groups: IEOM (OSCE PA, OSCE ODIHR, EU Parliament), ENEMO, CIS, SCO and the elusive London International Democratic Institute (as an independent group). All these groups, apart from the London institute, took part in the presidential election observation in July of 2005. An important question is, which of these observation groups were serious and professional, and which were truly impartial and willing to report what they actually saw? While they all observed the same election, their reactions varied in some important ways.

Examining the CIS

An article by Roman Kupchinsky published on the webpages of Eurasia Insight, on 2 April 2005, titled 'CIS: Monitoring the Election Monitors,' offers a quick introduction to the controversy involving election observers in the recent elections in several CIS countries. This example is also indicative of the possible political engagements that international observers might have had in the recent elections in Kyrgyzstan.

Kupchinsky (2005) reports on the Ukrainian government's criticism of, and unwillingness to be part of '[the CIS] Election Monitoring Organisation, which is a group that has gained notoriety by regularly proclaiming that the elections in the former Soviet republics are free and fair, in contrast to other monitoring groups that find the same elections to be flawed.'

Further on, considerable evidence is given of cases where the reports of the CIS and OSCE observer missions consistently differed in predictable ways: the former would find all elections in the CIS which ended in Moscow-friendly outcomes to be fair, legitimate and transparent, whereas the latter would be critical. 'This practice [of CIS monitoring], seen by many as nothing more than a KGB 'disinformation' operation left over from Soviet times, consists of groups of trusted CIS employees, from the secretariat in Minsk, who roam the CIS to observe elections and invariably announce that they are transparent, fair, and democratic, providing that the more pro-Kremlin candidates wins.' Notably, as Kupchinsky reports, the assessments of the CIS and OSCE observers exchanged polls in the repeated presidential elections in the Ukraine; CIS approved the one where Viktor Yanukovych emerged as the winner, and was strongly critical of the one that announced Viktor Yushchenko as winner. The converse was true of the OSCE monitoring reports.

While Kupchinsky's reading of CIS monitoring as 'ploys of the Kremlin' should be read with caution (though one should not wholly discount such a possibility), the truth of the controversial reports on the elections is obvious and verifiable. The same group centrally monitored the parliamentary elections in Kyrgyzstan in February and March 2005. As reported in the newspaper *Vecherniy Bishkek*, on the day of the first round of the parliamentary elections, the CIS head monitor and current Chair of the CIS Executive Committee, Vladimir Rushaylo, commented that he had 'no significant criticism of the conduct of the elections' at that time.[23] Another

23 'V rabochem rezhime' , *Vecherniy Bishkek*, 28 Feb. 2005, p. 1.

member of this group, who observed one of the electoral districts, made a separate comment: 'There are no principal differences in our electoral systems. Everything is transparent and democratic. There were no serious violations in the district.'[24]

The CIS election monitoring missions have been notorious for their consistent approval and praise of all of the elections in the region. A random search on the Internet on CIS election observation missions came up with a Wikipedia entry which describes a continued record of disagreements of various election assessments between the CIS and OSCE observers.[25] After the parliamentary elections in Kyrgyzstan, this CIS-OSCE observation standoff found expression in a BBC news report which quoted a statement from the Russian Foreign Ministry criticising the OSCE report. In the wake of the broad public protests in various electoral districts, Russia 'rebuked [the OSCE] for declaring that the elections had fallen short of democratic standards. It urged the body to be 'more responsible' in its election monitoring conclusions in order to prevent destructive elements from using these assessments to justify their lawless actions'.[26]

This shows that there was a Russian role behind the CIS election 'whitewashing', and it also gives a clue as to the Russian perspective on what election observation is about.[27] At face value, the comment above conveys the view that an election observation report should be 'responsible', or preferably approving of an election, in order to prevent threats to public peace. Certainly, this interpretation is subject to further qualification when the broader Russian foreign policy stance towards the OSCE, the West and their democratisation projects is considered; Russia has been orchestrating consistent CIS criticism of the work of the OSCE since early 2000, largely fuelled by OSCE criticisms of most of these countries for their undemocratic political processes.

Other Missions

Besides the controversial CIS mission, there were two other curious international election observation missions at work during the parliamentary elections: the London International Democratic Institute and the Chinese electoral observers' mission.

The London International Democratic Institute

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24 'Nasha aktivnost' udivila rossiyan', *Vecherniy Bishkek*, 28 February 2005

25 See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/CIS_election_observation_missions

26 See 'Protests Cause Kyrgyz Poll Review, at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/4369065/stm#

27 An interesting discussion is offered on several private discussion sites, such democracyguy.com, registan.ru, and others. On this instance, where OSCE missions are also said to be not always impartial and exemplary, see 'Russia Picking a Fight over Kyrgyzstan', at: http://democracyguy.typepad.com/democracy_guy_grassroots_/2005/03/russia_picking.html

Attempts to locate this organisation through Internet search engines did not produce any results (for any possible variations of the title of this reputed organisation). On 27 February, Election Day, representatives of this organisation were commenting on the process of the elections in general, and conclusively approving the terms. According to normal election observation rules, individual observers may not make general evaluative comments about the elections during election day itself. (See Norwegian Helsinki Committee, 2001: 20.) This organisation did not produce any reports, nor was it heard from after the elections, but it had a visible profile in the media coverage on the days of the elections on 27 February and 13 March.

The Chinese Electoral Observers' Mission[28]

While this group did not make prominent comments about the quality of the elections, the national TV and newspapers frequently presented them as being further evidence of the international attention on Kyrgyzstan's elections. The Chinese, like the London organisation, were not in any prominent exchange with the OSCE or ENEMO assessments, but their very presence is indicative of the possibilities of international election observation; as discovered in a personal interview with this group, their main interest was of rather a geopolitical nature, and they sounded more like an intelligence-gathering group than election observers. They appeared more interested in learning the set-up of US, European and Russian interests in Kyrgyzstan, and the possible future scenarios for these geo-strategic interest set-ups. In their capacity as election observers, they were shown and briefly interviewed on TV several times, and they dutifully stated favourable comments.

Parliamentary and Presidential Elections: Results and Analysis

Four months later, the early presidential elections saw the universal approval of the conduct of elections in all its aspects. There were remarks about various insignificant problems, but these had not broadly affected the overall outcome.

Shifting Perspectives

Contrary to the parliamentary election environment, the presidential elections did not seem to reveal obvious political involvement amongst the observation groups. If this is true, it is a good sign, but the very change in the tone amongst the various groups, in such an abrupt way, invites critical inquiry. We may have been observing a more balanced and objective assessment by the CIS and other missions, whose opinions were vividly inconsistent during the actual conduct of the parliamentary election vote. (See CIS Statement of International Observers on Presidential Elections.) On

28 The author personally met with all members of this group upon their request, for interview just before the elections.

the other hand, the assessments by OSCE and other previously critical observation missions appear to be overly approving of the presidential elections where important problems apparently persisted. Arguably, some of the problems seen during the latter elections were quite serious, and not insignificant. Ballot stuffing is perhaps the most serious violation in a voting process; the turnout numbers jumped rapidly across the country, which indicates that the ballot stuffing was not rare. The 'cleansing' of the voter lists (where the names of many thousands of voters were removed), was also very significant. However, the usually critical OSCE and ENEMO commented on these rather mildly. This uncritical assessment may be explained by the international community's choice to give the new government a helping hand, or a voucher of legitimacy. Nevertheless, it represents a mild compromise of the idea of international election observation.

The Challenges of Election Observation

The work of the various international election observation missions in Kyrgyzstan in these elections stands as a clear illustration of the possible ways in which observers can become politically engaged. It is perhaps impossible to be neutral as an election observer. However, it is quite possible, and required, that the observer should be impartial and objective in assessing the events. Impartiality and objectivity were compromised in Kyrgyzstan, by CIS and some other observers in the parliamentary elections, and arguably by all observers in the presidential elections. The idea behind international election observation is to observe the fairness and lawfulness of the elections, and, when and if that happens, to provide support for the legitimacy of the elected officials against accusations. During the parliamentary elections in Kyrgyzstan, legitimacy was given to the election results, even though these were clearly flawed, and the resulting criticisms were discredited, even though they were objective and unbiased. There was a clear attempt to use election observers for a cause was exactly the opposite of what they ought to serve.

5. Conclusions

The year 2005 was remarkable in the history of independent Kyrgyzstan. It is certain to be remembered in the future as a turning point, by both critics and supporters. It was the year when the fourteen-year-long reign of the first post-independence president of Kyrgyzstan was cut short. It was the year of two national elections, which proved not to be habitual and routine, but milestones of the process that started, and completed, a change of regime.

From the very beginning, the quality of the conduct of the elections was a major concern. Experience from past elections had led to heavy pressure to make special efforts for a more honest, and hence more legitimate, election that year. In this atmosphere, the role of the international observers was

important. The government, the opposition and civil society all saw the institution of international election observation as a strong instrument which could help to ensure honest and legitimate elections.

In both the parliamentary and presidential voting, many hundreds of observers from abroad were present, witnessing the Kyrgyzstan voters make their choices. The exclusive impact of these observation missions on the unexpected developments after the parliamentary elections is difficult to assess. However, considerable attention was given to these missions, and to what they said. The missions had somewhat mutually contradictory and publicly controversial assessments to offer, and various groups had high profiles among various audiences. While the actual exclusive input of the observers into the important events in March may not be quantifiable, it is surely significant. Using the example of their own contradictory reports, the observation missions, taken together, provided strong evidence of flawed parliamentary elections.

This paper has sought to consider the intended and possible roles of international election observation. It has offered a brief overview of the role of international observation in the outstanding 2005 election cycle in Kyrgyzstan, and indicated new questions that can be asked about international election observation, new problems to be aware of, and new areas for attention. While all these suggestions are significant, the most important suggestion is that international election observation should be recognised as an important institution. In the example of Kyrgyzstan, it should be obvious that when an undemocratic, corrupt regime pays so much attention to this institution – if only to use it to corrupt the elections – such an institution must be very significant. International election observation contains a strong potential, not yet realised, for the international democratic community to strengthen and expand its ranks around the world.

Danger Ahead: The Government Discourse on the Elections and Observation Before 24 March 2005

Anara Karagulova

1. Introduction

Arena for Change: the Parliamentary Election in Kyrgyzstan

The string of 'colour revolutions' in the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) focused global attention on the parliamentary election in Kyrgyzstan on 27 February These elections were marked to be an 'arena for the next revolution'. International organisations, NGOs, opposition representatives and governments took action in order to secure free and fair elections. This time it was not simply another election, but a turning point. The Kyrgyz people, the opposition and the international community had been waiting for a change in power and a time when former President Askar Akaev would step down. Also the media were important in these events, with both the government and the opposition seeking to influence the minds of the people.

Government Discourse Management

This article argues that, prior to the parliamentary elections in February 2005, the Akaev government created a discourse of danger and instability. In this discourse, the key threat was the potential for chaos in the situation of a 'revolution' generated by outside forces. It was developed in order to de-legitimise the opposition and influence the public opinion. This situation created difficulties for election observers: their impartiality, independence and objectivity were questioned. For instance, the OSCE mission, being associated with the 'West' and 'Western outside forces,' was expected to side with the opposition.

In the following we look at this discourse around the 'political instability' and the responsibility of the 'outside forces', and present reflections on the 'Clean Kyrgyzstan' programme created by Akaev. The following section discusses how the existing discourse continued in relation to election observers, including the OSCE mission and the exit polls. Finally, some reflections are offered on the reports of international observers.

Government Discourse Management and the Media

A Voice through the Media

The pre-election period, January–March 2005, is particularly interesting due to the distinctive discourse found within the government-affiliated media. Analysis of the government press – the newspapers *Erkintoo* and *Kyrgyz Tuusu* (in Kyrgyz) and *Vechernyi Bishkek* (in Russian) – has indicated a coherent discourse regarding the elections, the likelihood of a revolution and, consequently, the risk to political stability.

It is hard to establish the exact agent responsible for generating the discourse. What is clear is that the government-affiliated press picked up on, and constantly elaborated on, the main themes of speeches made by the then-president. The government formulated and communicated certain messages through the government-affiliated press in the run-up to, and during, the elections. These included notions that the 'colourful revolutions' in Georgia and the Ukraine had brought political and economic instability in these countries, and that this would also threaten 'peaceful' Kyrgyzstan; and the idea that these revolutions had not come from the grassroots level, but had been 'organised and financed by outside forces', which had thereby de-stabilised the political situation. These 'outside forces' were identified as the National Democratic Institute, the (US-based) Soros Foundation, USAID, and the US State Department. The OSCE and the remaining international observers were also put in this category. Additionally, the newly introduced exit polls were seen as part of the strategy of the 'foreign de-stabilisers'.

The government discourse surrounding the elections contributed to a highly politicised atmosphere. The government press constructed discursive categories of 'us' and 'them', and election observers received different labels on the basis of this scheme. Whereas observers from CIS countries were accorded considerable attention in the government press and were regarded as 'independent, objective and highly respected observers', the OSCE missions, along with other Western observers, were seen as supporters of the 'outside forces' who were seeking to de-stabilise the political situation. They, it was said, were looking only for violations committed by the government side, while ignoring the violations of the opposition.

Methods

The findings presented in this article are based on an extensive review of the pro-government press in the Kyrgyz and Russian languages. This is not a media review in the standard sense of the term, which assumes the media to

be free and representative of the wider public view. In this work, I look at the press outlets through which the former government 'talked' directly to the public. Thus, this is an analysis of the former government's discourse as presented through the press in Kyrgyzstan.

I have examined issues of *Kyrgyz Tuusu, Erkintoo* and *Vechernyi Bishkek* from late December 2004 until mid-March 2005. *Erkintoo* and *Kyrgyz Tuusu* are circulated nationwide at subsidised prices. *Vechernyi Bishkek* is a daily newspaper; *Kyrgyz Tuusu* and *Erkintoo* appear twice a week. The latter two previously provided extensive coverage of government activities, including the texts of new laws and presidential decrees. The former paper is known for a more intellectual analysis of Kyrgyz politics. *Kyrgyz Tuusu* and *Erkintoo* were formally government-recognised newspapers. *Vechernyi Bishkek* was the most widely read newspaper in the capital; although it was not formally affiliated with the government, the public realised that this newspaper was on the side of the government – not least since it was believed that the son of the former president was the owner.

Due to subsidies from the former government, these newspapers were the most read, and the most widely distributed. In the case of *Vechernyi Bishkek*, this was also due to good financing, raised by the advertisements and commercials section in the paper, many of which were government affiliated. In remote villages and regions, only government newspapers would be delivered. In fact, they were even given instead of change, or together with, pensions and other forms of welfare payment. This contrasted with the opposition outlets, which could not be spread throughout the country but were confined to the capital and other oblast centres.

2. Defining Discourse

Defining Discourse Management

This analysis draws on the concepts of 'discourse' and a 'discourse of danger'.

Defining discourse management

> Strategies, as well as the control of the flow and direction of messages, choice of topics and techniques of guiding discussions in order to influence outcomes. (Isen, 2003: 2)

Discourse is not a sum total of semantics or rhetoric. It goes above and beyond the use of language and symbols, beyond messages never uttered but still communicated implicitly, or concealed in utterances.

Discourse management is partly a process of setting public agendas. Additionally, it determines the limits and flow of messages, monitoring their sources, their impacts, and limiting or remedying their damage. It also incorporates the choice of particular arrays of means, modes and media of

debate, selecting types which are conducive to the creation of favourable mindsets, ways of seeing, thinking, doing and being in the world.

A Method of Exploiting 'Identity'

David Campbell (1992: 70), writing within critical security studies, similarly puts forward two important arguments that are of relevance here. The first is the post-structuralist argument which holds that meaning is constituted in 'difference', and that, when logic operates within this difference, it has the potential to transform into a hostile 'otherness'. This means that the political identity of a state is created by continual practices of demarcating the self from the other, those inside the state from those outside, and the domestic from the foreign.

Critical security studies are not only concerned with the representation of 'danger' as abstract a notion. They also draw attention to the fact that the successful identification of a threat can allow a state to use extraordinary measures of control over its own population. As Rawnsley and Rawnsley argue, 'threats from an external power are used more often to secure internal benefits than external security' (2001; cited in Megoran, 2005: 7). Whereas realism takes the state as a given entity and asks, 'how can it be secured?' critical security studies take 'discourses of insecurity' or 'representations of danger' and ask, 'what do they do, how do they work, and for whom?'(Weldes et al., 1999, cited in Megoran 2005: 7). In other words, a discourse of danger is created not only to identify threats and destroy them, but also to use the image of that threat and danger in order to promote certain interests.

3. Discourse Around 'Political Instability'

Utilising the 'War on Terror'

Prior to the parliamentary elections in February 2005, the Akaev government arguably created a discourse of danger and instability. In this discourse, the key threat was the potential for chaos in the situation of a 'revolution' generated by outside forces. The government-affiliated press identified the 'crisis' of the 'velvet revolution' in Georgia as being a threat to the national security of Kyrgyzstan, and linked that revolution to 'external factors' (Akaev, 2004: 6). This resonates with Campbell's notion that foreign policy and foreign issues have implications for domestic politics and for the formation of identities. The foreign policy of Kyrgyzstan, joining in with the coalition against terrorism, while contributing to the international war on terror, played a significant role in identifying dangers at home. Moreover, it moved the global rhetoric on 'terrorism' to Kyrgyzstan. The notion that the majority of the countries in the world are engaged in a 'war on terrorism' has become embedded in the thinking of the people of Kyrgyzstan, and most accept the phrase without question. This was the government line before the

2005 elections. However, while that government further developed its policies against terrorism at home, the concept was also used as a tool to de-legitimise the opposition, by labelling them 'terrorists'. All the same, during the election period the former government positioned itself against the 'West'.

Government strategies

Let us now look into the following questions:

- Based on these 'threats', how did the Akaev government set the agenda for the government policies, and how did this government formulate the framework for the perception and analysis of such threats?
- How did the Akaev government determine the limit and flow of messages and monitor their impacts?
- How did the Akaev government, rather than protecting the population from 'objective danger', frame its domestic politics so as to create a powerful authority with the ability to 'describe' the present dangers?

Central Themes

From my analysis of *Kyrgyz Tuusu* and *Erkintoo* between late December and mid-March, two themes emerge as dominant: 'velvet revolutions' and 'clean Kyrgyzstan'. Both can be seen as forming part of this danger discourse.

The 'velvet revolutions' were presented as being a danger to the political stability held to exist in Kyrgyzstan under the leadership of Askar Akaev. The press portrayed the political stability in Kyrgyzstan as an achievement, presented in juxtaposition to the civil war in Tajikistan, the Afghanistan tragedy and the escalation of the 1990 Osh events. The country was prospering, due to independence, international recognition and the rule of law. And now its very stability was presented as being under threat from 'tulip revolutions' bound to lead to civil war, bloodshed and instability. The following quote, from an article written before the elections, is indicative:

> We remember how the Osh events divided us and our youth, and I hope very much that those who are organising meetings and pickets will not involve our children. Who can guarantee that there will be no 'small' wars and no bloodshed during a 'tulip' revolution? Thanks to the bright leadership by our president, we were saved from the development of the Osh events in the Tajikistan and Afghanistan tragedies. We have seen what it is like to be in war, and it is for this reason that we do not wish anything like this for independent and prosperous Kyrgyzstan.[29]

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29 'Joogazyn revolutsiasynyn ozgocholuu kesepetteri', *Erkintoo* 18 February 2005, p. 9

The velvet revolutions were also labelled as being dangerous when seen as part of an ideological extremism. In seeking to understand this discourse, we may well ask, what is real and what is created? It is a fact that people were setting governmental buildings on fire, that there were attacks on governmental bodies, massive marches were blocking highways, there were hunger strikes, threats of people setting fire to themselves, and demonstration murders. This is what happened in factual terms. In a different setting or from a different point of view, however, demonstration murders and attacks on governmental bodies would be referred to as crimes, and massive marches and the blocking of highways would be seen as political participation. The government-affiliated press was politicising the events, referring to a kind of ideological extremism which threatened the political stability in the country, because these actions were supported by 'some political organisations' and they ignored the law.[30]

De-legitimising Terminology

The use of the terms 'ideological extremism', 'terrorism', 'political extremism' and 'ideological radicalism' was intended to de-legitimise the opposition, who were engaged in demonstrations and velvet revolution. This de-legitimisation was done by creating a rhetorical link between the opposition and banned terrorist organisations such as 'Hizb-ut-Tahrir' and 'IMU'. In his speech to the National Security Council, 'On Measures Strengthening the Fight against Extremism and Terrorism', Akaev identified four types of extremism: terrorism, religious radicalism, ethnic and political extremism. According to him, almost all of them were to be found in Kyrgyzstan. Along with the Hizb-ut-Tahrir terrorism, he said that there were growing tendencies towards extremism, developed through 'demonstration murders, fires and attacks against governmental bodies'. The main characteristic of these crimes was that they had the objective of de-stabilising the situation in the country. Furthermore, he identified 'radicalism, through acts that ignore law, in the form of massive highway blocking, protesting acts, hunger strikes etc'.

According to Akaev, there was a new and especially threatening phenomenon, which he called 'ideological terrorism'. This was characterised by 'ignorance of the law and the state' and was an 'ideological attack against public order and security'. There were two forms of ideological terrorism: one of which involved Hizb-ut-Tahrir and its alleged overseas supporters, so-called human rights fighters. The second form was the 'aggressive circulation (by certain groups, organisations and media involved in the political fight) of their understanding of the country's development, social justice, democracy, freedom of speech and demonstrations, which is projected onto the society'. According to Akaev, it was not only the 'internal forces' (the opposition) that were revolutionary, but also the religious organisation 'Hizb-ut-Tahrir'. For this reason, this organisation was also

30 'Extremismu- nadejnui zaslon', *Slovo Kyrgyzstana,* 26 October 2004

seen as a threat to Kyrgyzstan's national security and political stability, as it had a single aim of seizing power.

4. Discourse Around 'Outside Forces'

The Threat of 'Neo-Colonialisation'

In addition to the threats of terrorism and extremism associated with the velvet revolutions was the threat of becoming a neo-colony in the 21st century. *Kyrgyz Tuusu* and *Erkintoo* published articles that explained what these 'colour revolutions' were, where they came from and who was behind them. According to them, the danger came from 'external aid' or 'external powers' (*vneshnie sily* in Russian, *syrtky kuchtor* in Kyrgyz). The colour revolutions had started in Serbia, Georgia, and the Ukraine; now they were threatening to come to Kyrgyzstan.

According to an article published in December, 'the scenario was worked out by the USA ambassador, first in Serbia, and, at the time, each ambassador was trying to implement it in his or her country. The USA was funding the preparations for such revolutions, directly or indirectly, through NGOs such as the National Democratic Institute, the International Republican Institute, the Carnegie Fund, and the Open Society Institute. For this reason, the Kyrgyz state was forced to ask whether Mr. [Stephen] Young, the US ambassador to the Kyrgyz Republic, was a diplomat, or an instructor who was interfering in the domestic affairs of the country and exceeding his competence.'[31]

Previously, all of these organisations had been welcomed, respected and recognised by Akaev. His government had quoted these organisations and referred to them as reliable institutions. However, due to the special political situation created by the parliamentary elections, as well as the events in the world regarding velvet revolutions, the government changed its rhetoric. Akaev's government denied the fact that the people demonstrating on the streets were just ordinary people, and instead presented them as 'agents of the external forces' who got paid by the hour and were provided with food and places to sleep, as had been the case in the Ukraine. If a 'velvet revolution' did occur, then it would mean that Kyrgyzstan had been demoted to the status of a neo-colony of the 'West' and its money. The newspapers blamed Ukraine's former opposition for what was seen as the present 'misfortunes' of that country (*Oppositisia Ukrainanyn ubalyna kaldy, Ukrainanyn koz jashy*) and stated that Ukraine was on the brink of a dangerous civil war.

Externalising the Internal

31 'Myrza Young, diplomatby je instruktorby?' *Kyrgyz Tuusu,* 18–21 December 2004

In de-legitimising the idea of a velvet revolution, the government externalised internal opponents. The grievances and proposals of the opponents, such as Hizb-ut-Tahrir and the opposition, were never reasonably examined or explained.[32] This strategy externalised the opponents because, rather than being indigenous proponents of alternative forms of government, the threats to Kyrgyzstan were portrayed as external. Akaev spoke darkly of the 'outside forces', branding those citizens of Kyrgyzstan who joined them as traitors who were selling their dignity, their motherland, their stability and the unity of the nation for money. The labelled external forces were the National Democratic Institute, the Open Society Institute and the Soros Foundation Kyrgyzstan. Even though the opposition, which supported the idea of a velvet revolution, was local and indigenous, it too was dismissed as being external.

5. 'Clean Kyrgyzstan'

'Clean Kyrgyzstan' was a long-term modernisation strategy, declared by then-President Askar Akaev on 5 February 2005 at the 5th Kurultai of the People of Kyrgyzstan. From that point until mid-March, the official government newspapers, *Kyrgyz Tuusu* and *Erkintoo* allocated a page or two to the topic of 'Clean Kyrgyzstan', under the rubrics 'Clean Kyrgyzstan, You and Me,' and 'Clean Kyrgyzstan'.

Akaev identified five branches of his new ideology: *clean water, clean elections, clean technology, clean nature and clean hands.* The purpose of the programme was to renew and cleanse the country, and to develop the economy. The five branches of the president's programme were directed:

- against corruption *(clean hands);*
- towards the development of water resource management *(clean water);*
- towards the development of an information era *(clean technology);*
- towards the protection of nature *(clean nature);*
- towards conducting fair and free elections *(clean elections).*

Central Themes

The discussions on the pages of these newspapers went beyond simply restating Akaev's new programme. It is appropriate to analyse these themes

32 They performed the same role as the Kazakhstani terrorists in the Hollywood film *Air Force One,* who, Bichel argued, were essentially scripted to show that we live in a dangerous world and therefore their aims and goals were irrelevant. They were dismissed as evil Others, 'religious extremists' or 'international terrorists' whose beliefs are parodied and grievances ignored. Slavoj Zizek (2000: 112) has described this general process as the 'fetishisation of the radical evil of our neighbour into the absolute Otherness which is rendered untouchable, unpoliticisable, and impossible to be accounted for in terms of a power struggle.'

in terms of conventional and classic categories, such as economic, social and political stability, and national purity (or solidarity). Using Campbell's (1992) self/other dichotomisation, where boundaries are enacted discursively, the analysis will also be considered in terms of dichotomies such as economic stability versus instability.

'Clean' versus 'Dirty'

Once again, demonstrations and 'velvet revolutions' were presented as the work of the 'internal forces' serving as the catalysis of the external threat. This was done under the pretext of fighting for human rights and freedoms. Velvet revolution threatened the democracy of the Kyrgyz people, it was claimed. Similarly, the theme of 'Clean Kyrgyzstan' referred to political stability by presenting 'dirty' politicians as a threat. The underlying idea was that only 'clean' governors could guarantee political stability in the country. This political stability was now under threat, because the politicians promoting a velvet revolution were 'dirty'. The following is a quote from an article published one week before the election.

> A bad politician is '*koomdun kolkosuna chykkan jara*' (a disease of the whole society), and therefore in order to take care of the health of our fatherland, it is our responsibility to cure these 'ill' people by 'explaining' to them. The idea behind Clean Kyrgyzstan is that it proves, time and again, the holiness of our fatherland, and that nobody should touch it with dirty hands. Cleanness is a slogan of our holy *Ala-Too*. Our buildings, for the sake of our people and the future generations of the country, should be able to withstand earthquakes, should have clean internal ecology, and should be politically and seismically stable and strong. Certainly, no country has the right to intervene, from the outside, in our country-building. However, we need to punish and 'explain' this to the 'internal strangers' who want our buildings to be vulnerable to earthquakes.[33]

Here we note the analogy between the destructive force of earthquakes and the 'threat from internal strangers'.

Harmony

Another dominant theme was that of harmony. This also touched on political stability and stressed the importance of Akaev's leadership for the unity of the Kyrgyz people. According to the newspapers, Kyrgyzstan was stable politically because it was under a strong leadership. The Mufti of Kyrgyzstan was quoted as saying that the president was 'the shadow of Allah on Earth'.

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33 'Tazalyk -Ala Toonun uraany sen', *Kyrgyz Tuusu,* 15–17 February 2005, p. 8

> It was Akaev who led Kyrgyzstan after the chaos of the USSR collapse, when the Kyrgyz people did not know where to head and what to do. When Akaev is the captain of the White ship, which is being overcome by tsunamis, people do not worry about anything. They are wealthy with peace and prosperity![34]

This political stability was threatened when people questioned the power of the leader and 'hated' the president. To hate the president meant to hate the people, it was argued. Only '*ary joktor oz Ajosyn koralbait'*, which translates as 'only the stupid can hate their own *Ajo'* (the historical title for the head of Khanate).

The theme of harmony was used in order to defend the value of political stability over any other issue. Proverbs like '*Bekter ketet el kalat, betege ketet bel kalat*' (grasses are not eternal, but the mountain is, leaders come and go, but people stay), and '*eki too kagylyshsa, ortosunda mal olot*' (if two mountains crash, cattle die between them) gave the message that it is not worth sacrificing the harmony of the whole nation for politics. Furthermore, it stressed that innocent people should not be made victims of two fighting forces. From an article written right after the second round of the elections:

> Ancient, holy Kyrgyz people have always overcome any challenge with wisdom, national unity and harmony. The source and power of happiness is always found in harmony.[35]

The Kyrgyz proverb, '*Aiyldyn iti ala bolso da, boru korso chogulat*' (though dogs of a village are not united, they unite against wolves), was used to invoke the notion that the opposition and the government should unite for the holy motherland. Prior to the elections, the newspapers presented this social stability as inter-ethnic, inter-religious peace and stability. However, according to Akaev, the 'yellow plague' of the colourful revolutions was threatening the healthy Kyrgyzstan society. Everybody was aware of what a plague was for humanity:

> Our people will not allow the 'yellow plague' to enter our land and there is no reason for such disease. The western reactionary forces are greedy and evil. We need to understand that this type of politics will enslave us. Why should we sell our national interests and freedom for evil money?
>
> We have seen with our own eyes how the 'West' smartly used the religious factor to destroy the people of Yugoslavia. It is obvious that the leaders of the colourful revolution will not treat the 'colonised' country well. They are spreading the poison of slavery onto our people, but our people have always been free and will never let it happen.[36]

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34 'Ary joktor oz Ajosyn koralbait', *Erkintoo* 25 February 2005, p. 3

35 'Ata jurttun birimdigi yiyk', *Kyrgyz Tuusu,* 11–14 March 2005 p. 9

36 'Elibiz 'sary chumaga' jol berbeit', *Kyrgyz Tuusu* 18–20, 21–27, 27–31 January 2005, 4–7 February 2005

Expanding the Mankurt Myth

The velvet revolution was also portrayed as threatening the social stability by appearing as a *mankurt*. The Kyrgyz writer Chyngyz Aitmatov used the *mankurt* as a character in his novel, *One Day Lasts Longer Than a Century* (1988), which is well known among the Kyrgyz people. It is a legend about a bird that sang differently. During the invasion of Chyngyzkhan, a tribe called Naiman was enslaved. The Mongols tortured the captives and turned them into working 'machines'. They 'deleted' the memory of men by putting a hot camel's stomach on their head, which would then squeeze the head as it dried. The only son of a Naiman mother becomes one such slave. In the story, he shoots his mother when she comes looking for him. He is called 'Mankurt' because he lost his memory, he lost his identity and he killed his mother. This word is used widely to indicate someone who is faithless and who has forgotten his history. In the current situation, the danger of a revolution conducted by the USA was exaggerated so that it appeared as though that country wanted to enslave the Kyrgyz people and turn them into *mankurts*.

In early February, *Kyrgyz Tuusu* wrote that some forces wanted to turn the people into *mankurts.* It made references to certain groups that were supported by outside forces and planning to make a 'tulip' revolution.

> Imposing somebody's will on others is a violation of sovereignty. In a wider sense, it is a method of turning people into mankurts. By imposing their own ideas on the people, and deciding the results of the elections, outside forces are introducing, on a large scale, the creation of mankurts.[37]

The themes of clean Kyrgyzstan, velvet revolution and harmony appeal to the new national ideology were worked out after independence, around the ideas of the unifying theme of the legendary Kyrgyz hero *Manas*. One of the seven principles of Manas was national unity and the Great Kyrgyz Empire, the ancient Kyrgyz statehood.

'Clean Kyrgyzstan' and National Identity

'Our' Purity

The theme of 'Clean Kyrgyzstan' appealed to the idea of national purity by painting a picture of 'clear and innocent us' as the only ones entitled to carry out the new programme. A prosperous future and clear ideas were presented as being the future results of this new programme. One article written before the elections asserted that the Kyrgyz nation needed this new approach in order to impede those who wanted 'dirty money'.

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37 'Airymdar bizdi mankurtka ailandyruuga arakettenishuudo', *Kyrgyz Tuusu*, 2–3 February 2005, p. 5

> In order to facilitate the new programme, one already needs to have '*taza iyman'* (clean intentions/sense). If a person is clean then everything will be clean. Everything good starts from cleanness. Everybody who lives for the motherland, whose heart beats for our country, must contribute to this 'holy' beginning and must support the great idea of our *Ajo*.

The word *ak* (literally: white) has multiple meanings and connotations, among them: innocence, cleanness, good, milk products (thus food), and the colour white. To gain legitimacy and support, the government appealed to ancestral support for the idea of Clean Kyrgyzstan:

> Cleanness is sacred for the nomad Kyrgyz people, and white snow will clean evil intentions, sinful hearts, and dirty minds. Cleanliness is a great word, cleanness is a tradition for the generation of the *Khan Manas*. Kyrgyz people are always on the tops of mountains and will never bend. Kyrgyz people will not be sold for a 'dollar witch'.[38] She is coming to life and is swallowing the whole world. Beware of this witch and be clean. If the Kyrgyz people had not been clean since ancient times, they would not have lived to this date and would not have white hats on their heads.[39]

Presidential Purity

Alongside the idea of 'Clean Kyrgyzstan' a discourse evolved around the legitimacy of President Askar Akaev's rule. His image was 'clean', 'innocent' and 'blessed by Manas', to lead Kyrgyzstan on a new, 'clean' path. Happy and independent Kyrgyzstan was acknowledged to be an island of democracy under the leadership of Askar Akaev, but it still needed to clean itself from the dirt of colourful revolutions, the power of the 'dollar witch' and traitors. The legitimisation of Akaev's rule was presented within the framework of this theme by portraying him as a 'clean' person.[40] Only a clean person with clean hands and clean thoughts can propose a programme of Clean Kyrgyzstan – an unclean person cannot push through such a historical achievement. The Mufti of Muslims in Kyrgyzstan, Murataly ajy Jumanov, stated: 'the King is the shadow of God on Earth. Whoever respects the King, respects God.'[41] God is clean and likes cleanliness. The president of the country is on God's path. Akaev's good reputation is also promoted (whilst his unpopularity among the people is ignored) because 'bad persons are not capable of valuing true wealth'. According to one article in *Kyrgyz Tuusu*: '*Asyl barkyn asyl gana tushunot*' – only good people can understand good, so only intelligent and smart people can define *Ajo*'s rating. Certainly the programme 'Clean Elections' had the implication of electing only those

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38 This combination of words was chosen in order to negatively characterise the dollar and thereby personalise the USA as a witch.

39 'Tazalykty yiyk tut kochmon elim'

40 'Askar Akaevdin reitingi jonundo: Askar Akaev ak kishi', *Kyrgyz Tuusu*, 11–14 February 2005, pp. 9, 11

41 'Muz kozgoldu', *Kyrgyz Tuusu,* 15–17 February 2005, p. 13

who were 'clean' to rule the country. Clean hands are assumed to prevent corruption and to select those who are 'clean and loyal' to stay in power.

6. Election Observers and Exit Polls

The government's pre-election line about the presence of foreign election observers, and about the exit polls, can be observed in the government-affiliated *Vecherniy Bishkek*.

Exit Polls

In the context of the pre-election atmosphere (combined with the discourse of danger from 'colour revolutions'), exit polls were regarded as 'another tool' of the outside forces in influencing the elections results. Articles published in *Vechernyi Bishkek,* such as 'Exit Polls. Checking whom?' and 'Why are Exit Polls Dangerous?' talk about exit polls as a 'technology of pressure' and 'technology of filth'. Referring to the history of exit polls in the USA in the 1980s, and their recent failure during the last two presidential elections in the USA, such polls are defined as 'manipulative'. According to *Vechernyi Bishkek*, exit polls were used extensively during the 'colour revolutions' in the CIS countries to 'create the general public idea that a national movement had won the election, and thus, when the Central Electoral Committee announced the results, street forces were mobilised, demanding the announcement of the true results'. They were presented as a service, with a 'customer' and 'executor': the 'customers' during the 'revolutions' were the US State Department, USAID, the RAND Corporation and the NATO Centre for Information and Documentation. With the help of exit polls the 'mechanism of manipulating the electorate opinion' is very easy, wrote *Vechernyi Bishkek* . The results of the survey are regularly given to the Western media. After the closure of the polling stations, the 'parallel counting of votes' starts. The results of the 'parallel canvass' match the 'necessary data' and, from the very beginning, contradict the results of the district electoral commission, 'creating the illusion of falsified elections results'. Furthermore, it takes only a technique to bring the masses to streets and storm administrative buildings. The main function of exit polls is to 'fulfil the order of the customer'.[42]

The Central Electoral Committee (CEC) also expressed its opinion, through the press, concerning exit polls right after the Election Day. The official line of the CEC was that the 'parallel canvass' could be used to intentionally discredit the elections results. Moreover, it was emphasised that exit polls did not have legal force, and that the survey results were unreliable, since they could assert totally different results, based on a

42 'Technologia davlenia. Chem opasny exit polls?' *Vechernyi Bishkek*, 23 February 2005

sample of only 10 people. Therefore, exit poll results should not be released before the official results are made public.[43]

Election Observers

Reports and Reactions

A line of discourse was also created around the observers, dividing them into two groups and presenting them in certain shades. Observers from the CIS countries were regarded as 'our people', whereas the Western observers, including the OSCE mission, were referred to as 'them'. A positive tone regarding the CIS observers was expressed throughout the many interviews and articles focusing on CIS Chairman Vladimir Rushailo and the deputy chairman of the executive committee of the CIS, Asan Kozhakov. Representatives of the CIS observers reported that the polling stations had been well prepared. Concerning election constituencies, CIS observers pointed out that they met the Kyrgyz Republic Elections Code requirements. The co-operation between the CIS observers and the local authorities (the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Central Electoral Committee) was also highlighted. Moreover, the CIS observers allegedly did not find any 'violations' during the pre-election period. Even if there had been some minor violations, it was stressed that these had been dealt with by legislative means and through appropriate judicial organs. Moreover, these irregularities, according to CIS delegation, were not great; they did not prevent people from voting freely and did not affect the poll results. CIS observers also emphasised the serious measures taken 'legally and legitimately' by the government in order to guarantee free and fair democratic elections, and to guarantee the fundamental rights of the citizens to elect and be elected. More than 100 independent observers from the CIS countries, under the leadership of the deputy chairman of the executive committee of CIS, had been welcomed to observe elections, and, they affirmed, the government had shown deep respect and trust towards the objectivity of these observers.

The articles concerning the OSCE and other Western observers, both prior to and after the elections, underlined the 'readiness' of the government to do everything necessary to permit free and fair elections. 'The first vice minister of foreign affairs, Talant Kushchubekov, noted our government's firm adherence to conducting fair and transparent elections'. It can be concluded that this was the reason why the government was co-operating with Western observers, and organising a series of round table meetings together with the OSCE mission and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Newspaper coverage after the election on 27 February focused on the findings of the CIS observers. Several articles were published, with interviews and quotes from the CIS observers from various press conferences and briefings. Accented and emphasised were the reports of the CIS observers that noted the 'free and fair' conducted elections, the high level of organisation and legality of the pre-elections campaign, and the open

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43 'Exit Polls: Kogo proveriaem?' *Vechernyi Bishkek,* 28 February 2005

expression of the people's will. They hailed the elections as well organised, free, and fair. The CIS observers also praised the local authorities for showing restraint and competence in dealing with the political unrest in several regions. Moreover, the press coverage referred to as many sources as possible with regard to the 'independence and objectivity' of the parliamentary elections. One of these sources was the London International Democratic Institute observers' mission (LIDI),[44] which stressed the success, professionalism and independence of the election process. LIDI also noted the high voter turn-out. According to LIDI, 'some violations that were reported are only technical and cannot anyhow cast a shadow on the general electoral process.'[45] In several 'positive remarks' concerning the legitimate, free and fair elections from CIS observers, the press coverage quoted independent observers from Russia, China and representatives of local observers (the Public Council for Democratic Security, the chairman of the executive committee of CIS, the deputy chairman of the same institution and the London International Democratic Institute). Li Hua, from the Chinese delegation of international observers, found the elections to be transparent and fair, and gave a high evaluation of the work of Kyrgyz government in creating the conditions to enable elections to be conducted in a peaceful and calm atmosphere. Here we can trace the continuation of the discourse surrounding the importance of political stability and peacefulness for the people of Kyrgyzstan that had been present in the previous cases of Clean Kyrgyzstan and the national unity ideology.

The press emphasised a statement made by chairman of the CIS executive committee Asan Kozhakov, that observers from the CIS had carried out their duties under the principles of political neutrality, impartiality and non-interference into electoral process.[46] Among the 'violations' noted by the CIS observers were the 'pushy and even aggressive behaviour by some experts developing exit polls', the 'long lines due to thumb markings', the 'inappropriate behaviour of the candidates' and some 'other technical, not particularly serious violations'.[47] The CIS delegations opined that the practice of marking the voter's thumbnails with inedible ink slowed down the voting process, but the general conclusion was that there had been 'free and fair elections in accordance with international standards'.

A former pro-governmental politician, Toktayim Umetalieva, published an article just prior to the elections, in which the practice of marking voter's thumbnails was judged as the 'interference of the West' and that it 'treated the Kyrgyz people like cattle'. In the words of Umetalieva, the revolution in Ukraine took place because the 'people of Ukraine were annoyed by the clear interference of a foreign country (Russia) in their domestic affairs, not because Yukoshenko was pro-Western'. Umetalieva went on:

> Yanukovich allowed himself to be presented as a slave waiting for the command of his lord. For this reason, this example should be a lesson for the so-called

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44 Concerning the LIDI, see also Emil Juraev's article (ed. comment)

45 'V sootvetstvii so standartami', *Vechernyi Bishkek* 16 March 2005

46 Ibid.

47 'In compliance with democracy', *Vechernyi Bishkek,* 16 March 2005

> 'home-grown' opposition in Kyrgyzstan. The opposition was living on Western grants alone, and was grown by NDI and Freedom House. The only analogy between the Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan was the pressure coming from outside and nothing more. The ambassador of the USA was himself inspecting our polling stations. The so-called opposition betrayed the national interests of our country and allowed us to be humiliated. Our voters will be 'marked' to the American money, as cattle are to pasture, or as a drug addict is to a filthy club. The author of this idea was a diplomat from the US. Our people are literate and know where to sign on the ballot. There are things which are much more important than electoral procedures and formality reporting. These are the interests of our country. We need to say that we respect our neighbours, we respect 'Vesti' and NDI, but we will live our own life and decide the politics of Kyrgyzstan in Bishkek, not in Washington. There is no need to conduct the elections under the dictation of the West. There is nothing to elect on these elections. Moreover, the money for the marking procedure was provided by the OSCE in Georgia.[48]

The OSCE Mission

There was a noticeable absence of quotes from the OSCE representatives in the press coverage of the observer reports issued just after the election. The OSCE mission was generally mentioned indirectly, as a participant at round table meetings organised by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (where reports stressed how the representatives of the MFA assessed the elections to be open, transparent and in accordance with international standards).[49] This created the impression that the OSCE mission agreed with such statements by virtue of their participation at these governmental round tables. Even though the press mentioned the name OSCE very often, only a single article in *Vechernyi Bishkek* was devoted to covering the views set forth in the OSCE mission report. Thus, press coverage effectively put the violations that OSCE had observed in secondary place, mentioning them only briefly, in only a sentence or two. This single article concerning the OSCE report was titled 'OSCE Approves the Elections'[50] – despite the fact that Kimmo Kiljunen, head of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly delegation, had been critical to the elections and pointed out various shortcomings. According to the *Vechernyi Bishkek* article: 'The election displayed some improvements, including the fact that voters were offered a real choice among the contesting candidates in many constituencies.' By contrast, the following critique offered by the OSCE observers regarding the elections was published on the Internet and in other non-governmental media:

> However, the competitive dynamic was undermined, throughout the country, by the de-registration of candidates, interference with the independent media, vote buying, and a low level of confidence in the electoral and judicial institutions on the part of candidates and voters. The shortcomings during the election campaign

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48 'Poshechina kyrgyzskoi 'oppositsii', *Vechernyi Bishkek,* 12 January 2005

49 'V sootvetstvii s normami', *Vechernyi Bishkek* 9 March 2005

50 'OSCE vybory odobriaet', *Vechernyi Bishkek* 1 March 2005

> affected the overall conduct of the elections. The interpretations of the Election Code were at times controversial and particularly restrictive. The de-registration of candidates was inconsistent, resulting in several protests by opposition supporters.

Furthermore, the government press made no mention of the fact that Ambassador Lubomir Kopaj (who headed the OSCE long-term mission) had urged the Kyrgyz authorities to rectify some of the shortcomings in time for the second round of the elections. 'We appeal [to the authorities] not to revoke the registration of candidates for unsubstantial reasons, to refrain from interfering with the work of the mass media, and to refrain from making provocative statements, accusing the opposition of having connections with extremism', Kopaj said. 'All of these steps can be undertaken immediately and they can improve the second round to a great extent.'

One article by an alleged expert, Viachislav Smirnov (published in *Vechernyi Bishkek* with his name given 'expert', but it did not specify why this was so), between the two rounds of the elections, talked about the 'revolution' that was supposed to occur during the parliamentary elections.[51] Stressing the geopolitical uniqueness of Kyrgyzstan, the author wrote that 'outside forces' could not create a revolution situation like that of Ukraine and Georgia, due to the 'laziness' of the opposition and the 'wisdom' of the people. According to this article, the parliamentary elections were of such interest to the West that as many as 700 'troops of OSCE observers landed' in Kyrgyzstan for the Election Day. Smirnov criticised the OSCE observers' outrage at the fact that the president had compared the appeals to an 'orange revolution', and discarded the remarks of the OSCE observers as the 'usual rubbish'.

The same article noted that the elections were free and fair, and that the government had fulfilled its duty by cancelling the registration candidates' for reasons of bribery. Smirnov stresses that the Western observers did not 'see' the collection of violations from other candidates (including 'colourful' candidates) because 'they only need violations from the government'. It is suggested that the international observers simply cannot understand that one can bribe a whole village with a table full of food for five hundred people, with meat, bread and green tea. Moreover, observers should exhibit 'responsibility' and not give in to 'destructive elements' that could justify unlawful acts. Western 'revolution technologies' cannot be implemented in Central Asia. If Ukraine considers itself to be part of Europe, and Moldavians want to be 'almost Romanians', then 'Asia is Asia', with a totally different logic and way of thinking. Western 'revolution production engineers' want a precedent in Asia and they deeply want to prove that 'velvet revolutions' are possible in the Muslim world. If they can demonstrate that these are possible, then the US Congress will really pour 'golden rain' onto the 'revolution production engineers'. Yet, it is to be hoped that the American people understand that 'orange matches' in the

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51 'Samaia effektivnaya kontrrevolutsia-prozrachnye vybory', *Vechernyi Bishkek,* 10 March 2005

hands of local 'liberals' can cause 'green fire' which cannot be stopped even with the united efforts of the USA and Russia.[52]

7. Conclusion

Long before the parliamentary elections were scheduled for 27 February 2005, it had become clear to the observers of Kyrgyzstan's political processes that this parliamentary election had the potential to change the course of the country. Such expectations certainly sharpened preparations for the forthcoming elections, on the part of the former government and Akaev. The closer the election date came, the clearer was Akaev's rhetoric on his position towards the West and 'producers of the revolution'. In the pre-elections period the government actively tried to set the agenda. The findings illustrated above through a review of the government-affiliated press show that election observation took place in a highly politicised setting due to the discourse created by the government.

The discourse in the government press tried to appeal to national unity through the heroic-historical 'Manas' ideology; the press tried to create an image of 'danger' coming from 'destructive outside forces' and mobilising the 'internal betrayers' (seen as threatening political stability, unity, cleanliness, democracy and clean elections). According to this discourse, national unity and political stability could be maintained only under the leadership of a 'clean person'. This legitimised Akaev as the 'blessed' leader of the Kyrgyz people, who had saved the country from the bloodshed that had taken place in Tajikistan and in Afghanistan. 'Colour revolutions' were further equated to natural catastrophes like earthquakes and tsunamis, from which Kyrgyzstan was saved due to its 'cleanliness' from 'dirty Western money'. This discourse management employed the technique of drawing a line between 'self' and 'other', with the Western group of election observers categorised into the 'Other' ('them') camp, while the CIS delegation was placed within the 'self' group, and its findings and reports were extensively covered by the government press. The OSCE mission was associated with the list of 'outside forces', such as the National Democratic Institute, Open Society Institute, USAID, US State Department and Carnegie Fund. Exit polls were also branded as an attempt to 'discredit' the official election results of the Central Electoral Committee.

Certainly, any election is a political event that takes place under tense conditions. There will always be winners and losers. Nevertheless, the discourse used by the government of Kyrgyzstan in order to de-legitimise the opposition and influence the public opinion created several difficulties for election observers. The impartiality, independence and objectivity of the observers were questioned. Being associated with the 'West' and 'Western outside forces', the OSCE mission was expected to take the side of the opposition. That also meant that the Kyrgyz opposition also placed high hopes in the Western observers: they were expected to reveal violations

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[52] All quotes are from 'Samaia effektivnaya kontrrevolutsia-prozrachnye vybory' (see n. 50)

during the Election Day. The government created a favourable atmosphere for itself because it was able to 'think' and 'see' through the press. For this reason, the critical report of the OSCE mission was dismissed as being 'the usual (response)' and 'blind to any violations other than those of the government' because 'these (the government violations) are needed for the 'customers' who have paid big money in order to create a de-stabilising situation through the use of the 'destructive elements' included in the election observation reports.' Election observers – particularly those of the OSCE mission – experienced a particularly difficult work situation. The plausibility and authority of their reports could be questioned because of (unofficial) accusations of 'revolution plotting'. They had to work under conditions of 'expectation' from the opposition, and, on the other hand, under the internationally accepted principles of independence and impartiality.

Wearing Two Hats: Interpreting During Election Monitoring in Kyrgyzstan

Elnura Osmonalieva

Introduction

This article highlights two challenges associated with election observation: the requirement of the impartiality of observers, and the role of the interpreter.

These challenges are discussed in the context of the elections held in Kyrgyzstan in 2000 and 2005, with particular reference to the politically important electoral district of Karaunkur: this is where Kurmanbek Bakiev stood for election during the parliamentary elections in February and March 2005.

1. Background

The Growth and Consolidation of Opposition

In February 2005, no.25 Karaunkur electoral district became one of the main battlegrounds of Kyrgyz politics. This set off numerous protests throughout Jalalabat Province in the days following the second round of parliamentary elections, and resulted in the ousting of former President Askar Akaev on 25 March. Kurmanbek Bakiev, currently the newly inaugurated President of Kyrgyzstan, and at that time Akaev's most feared opponent, was contesting for a parliamentary seat. This was not for the presidency, but it was still a potential way of continuing Bakiev's popularity within the increasingly disenchanted Kyrgyz population.

Bakiev had been Prime Minister under Akaev's command from 2001 to 2002. He left Akaev's team after the infamous Aksy incident of April 2002, when police forces fired at a crowd of peaceful demonstrators, killing six and injuring dozens. After his resignation, Bakiev's rating shot up and he started to be regarded as the opposition to President Akaev. In 2002, he won

a parliamentary seat, having competed in no.15 Ala-Buka electoral district (in Jalalabat Province), and grew increasingly vocal about his distrust and disappointment with Akaev's government. In the year preceding the 2005 parliamentary elections, Bakiev came increasingly to be viewed as the sole figure with the potential to unify the otherwise divided opposition.

The Rose Revolution in Georgia and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine found great resonance in Kyrgyzstan, stirring excitement within the groups that desired change. 'If they did it, why can't we do it?' was the question heard at dinner conversations and on online forums. Increasingly, civil activists, particularly the foreign-educated youth, were coming to the conclusion that Kyrgyzstan needed its Saakashvili. However, they realised that there was nobody one could name as 'the Kyrgyz Saakashvili' at that point, nor was there a united group of opposition forces with a shared programme and popular support. All the same, they decided to make an attempt to unite. Besides the indiscrete and often overly demonstrative salutation of these two revolutions, the opposition was strengthening its efforts to join together.

In the autumn of 2004, Bakiev was elected the Chair of the Central Council of the Union of Political Forces, the 'Popular Front of Kyrgyzstan', which included nine political parties. This was a loose union, possibly held together more by the need to gather material and human resources than by shared ideas and programmes. Neither the examples of the Georgian and Ukrainian revolutions, nor the increasing realisation that the next presidential elections were drawing closer and that Akaev would not give up easily, were sufficient to truly unite the opposition. This did not happen until a month before the parliamentary elections. Even then it was still more of a formal unification, stirred by the desire to show Akaev that the opposition was going to 'play hard', rather than a union formed on the basis of a shared platform. The real unification came shortly before the 24 March uprising.

The Government Reaction

Months before the parliamentary elections in February 2005, the Akaev government started preparing for a backlash against the opposition forces, openly stating that 'there would be no colour revolutions in Kyrgyzstan'. They had prepared the notorious 'White House lists' of all pro-governmental candidates that the CEC, its branches and all local officials, as well as everybody employed by the state (including teachers, nurses, and police), were expected – and in many cases ordered – to support.

In fourteen years of rule, the Akaev administration had built up a wide-ranging arsenal of techniques to manipulate electoral processes. The ultimate success of the election fraud that occurred under the Akaev government depended mainly on the three following factors:

- the loyalty of the Central Election Commission (CEC), the administration at all levels, and of the head of CEC (appointed by President Akaev);

- the presence of poor, dependent, and thus vulnerable state employees (mostly teachers and medical workers), in election commissions; and
- the loyalty of local state administration heads, most of who were appointed directly by the President or his proxies.

This system worked perfectly in a corrupt state with a weak media and poorly developed mechanisms of civic control.

The Election Period

On 27 February 2005, I went to no.25 Karaunkur district to witness the 'battle' and to see just how far the government proxies were ready to go to in order to quash the opposition leader. Supplied with a CEC registration card which accredited me as an international observer from the European Network of Election Monitoring Organizations, (ENEMO), I started the day as an interpreter to one of the fifty-four ENEMO observers.

A Highly-Charged Atmosphere

The then up-coming parliamentary election held much at stake for both parties. There were rumours of that Akaev and his aids were conspiring to get Bermet Akaeva into the parliament, turning Kyrgyzstan into a parliamentary republic and giving Bermet the seat of the prime minister. In fact, as if confirming that such rumours were not just hot air, Bermet Akaeva and her brother Aidar Akaev declared that they would run for parliament. This period, in which post-Akaev Kyrgyzstan is referred to as 'the beginning of the end of Askar Akaev', served only to fuel the people's anger and certainly did little to stop their protests. Furthermore, it meant that they would not consider President Akaev's appeal to keep order and stability, or his plea that they ignore those politicians who were calling the people to take part in civil disobedience in pursuit of their own interests (Kyrgyz State Television, 16 March 2005).

Weak or strong, the Front later directed the mass uprising against the falsifications that had occurred during the parliamentary elections in February and March 2005 and that resulted in the ousting of President Akaev. But that was to happen later. In late 2004 and early 2005, the prelude had only just begun to squeeze the juices out of the White House inhabitants, with their allies repeating, 'There will be no colour revolutions in Kyrgyzstan' as their magic chant.

Government Tactics

No.25 Karunkur district is considered to be one of the most difficult districts. Aside from being located in a high mountainous area with little infrastructure, it is home to very poor communities, consisting mainly of Kyrgyz but also a considerable number of Uzbek voters. The White House decided to take advantage of this and placed a candidate with an Uzbek-

sounding name to compete against Bakiev. This candidate, Saidilla Nyshanov, a middle-scale entrepreneur, had no popularity to match Bakiev's, but did have huge and incomparable support from the Akaev government. With power to abuse and willingness to bribe voters, and to intimidate state employees and workers, the Akaev government was ready to do whatever necessary to make Bakiev lose.

Bakiev's Advantage

The stakes were high, but Bakiev had the potential support of the southerners, who were feeling left out of the power sharing in a country dominated by northerners. Thus, Bakiev was liked not merely for being in outspoken opposition to Akaev, he also symbolised an opportunity to get a fair share of the power for the impoverished southerners. Bakiev's southern origin would later win him numerous votes, with many voters saying that they were 'voting for him because he is a southerner'. Notwithstanding the programme or platform, electoral preferences in Kyrgyzstan can often be based on the mere geographical origin of a candidate.

The Unwanted Third

Besides Bakiev and Nyshanov, there was third contender. The owner of a medium-sized enterprise in his early thirties, Aibek Chomoev was 'the unwanted third'; he was almost out of the game and out of view. Few people spoke of him and it seemed as though everybody knew he would lose. After all, he was even less known than Nyshanov, and people thought he was merely trying to gain popularity by running against the 'bigger fish'.

3. Election Monitoring

A Symbol of Hope

Where can one appeal if the CEC, the law enforcement bodies and the higher court offices are all loyal to the president? If almost everything can be bought and sold, or faked, if nothing else worked? The few politicians who dared to challenge the system, and Akaev, were perceived as the brave and true representatives of the people – although many regarded them with scepticism, having lost their trust in politics in general. The indifference of the latter also helped corrupt officials to get away with their deeds. The few thousand citizens who were working in NGO and community groups could not garner enough mass support and material resources to present a serious challenge to Askar Akaev. Thus it is not surprising that civil activists and local observers looked up to international observers, and the institutions they represented, hoping that the international community could put pressure on the Akaev administration.

Election Monitoring

The idea of election monitoring in Kyrgyzstan was introduced and widely promoted by such international organisations as the OSCE and the National Democratic Institute. All local election-monitoring initiatives were instigated, funded and supported by external international organisations. Thus, the language used by the observers was derived from manuals provided during pre-election training; these had been designed by international organisations and were based on the ideas of fairness, transparency and accountability. Prior to the presidential elections of July 2005, elections in Kyrgyzstan had been conducted in violation of national legislation and had fallen far short of meeting international standards. After the presidential elections in 2000, the OSCE election observation mission concluded: '(they) failed to comply with the OSCE commitments for democratic elections', and that, 'the international standards for equal, free, fair, and accountable elections were not met'. The National Democratic Institute's statement on the same elections confirmed this: '(the) election process failed to break a cycle of troubled elections in the Kyrgyz Republic. Serious flaws during the pre-election period, and on Election Day, meant that the overall electoral process fell short of international standards for democratic elections.'

Election Monitors and Officials

Underlying Attitudes

Known for orchestrating and covering up fraudulent electoral practices, most members of the national and local election commissions, as well as state officials, despised both the internal and external observers. The observers' rhetoric reflected their perception of the officials as members of a corrupt political system who were working in favour of the acting government. Observers assumed that local officials, and members of the precinct election commissions, were supporting pro-governmental candidates and trying to fail opposition candidates. Opposition candidates and their representatives were seen as 'the good guys', i.e. pro-democracy, who were unfairly treated and thus deserved more attention than those representing 'the bad guys'.

Interaction

Verbal interaction between members of the Precinct Election Commissions (PECs) and observers usually followed the question–answer mode, with observers trying to obtain data about the precinct, the work of the commission, and voter turnout. The responses of the heads and members of PECs were usually respectful and positive, but not necessarily genuine, and were motivated by the desire to avoid getting into trouble with an international observer. Apart from a few cases, the international observers received VIP treatment. PEC members wished to be accommodating, and

made an effort to please and even win observers' sympathy, in hopes of getting excused from violations and unprofessional conduct. In less-important precincts, with only three hundred voters, PECs were under less pressure to falsify election results. Here PEC members did not put on this act, but treated international observers as if they were trivial.

It appeared as though PEC members had been instructed to be very careful when dealing with international observers and avoid trouble wherever possible. It was important for the government to get good election monitoring statements, in order to support its lies about democracy having a strong hold in Kyrgyzstan. The government forces also needed these statements so that they would be able to parade them to anyone in Kyrgyzstan who might question the legitimacy of the country's election practices. When an observer made a request, the PEC tried to fulfil it as soon as possible – unless it was a request to stop violating the law, in which case the PEC members would either pretend that they were doing something about it, or would shrug their shoulders and say, 'these are the realities of our lives in Kyrgyzstan and we are just doing our jobs'.

At a PEC in no.25 Karaunkur district, where we conducted the evaluation of the opening procedures in 27 February 2005, I spotted the presence of a local official (the head of the local forestry, as I found out later from one of the PEC members). He was well dressed, round-faced and had a big belly, a must-have among Kyrgyz officials. He was bossing the PEC members around, almost shouting orders in the minutes proceeding the opening hour. Arrogant, with an angry face, and talking on a satellite mobile phone, he was more than intimidating, and his equipment, in a village where even the most privileged do not have telephones, seemed like divine armour. When asked why he was on PEC grounds, he hid that magic armour and disappeared in the corridors of the school where the PEC was quartered. The international observer who was working with me said that this was evidence that the government had prepared its 'troops' well.

Corruption

In the best Kyrgyz traditions of hospitality, most PEC heads and members offered tea and meals. 'Shall we have some tea?' or, 'Have you eaten yet?' they would ask, as if they had nothing else to do on Election Day but have tea with observers. 'We are at work and should be working. Thank you', was our polite and clear reply. The system of corruption in Kyrgyzstan is sustained through quiet talks and negotiations that take place during 'tea', which can expand into a sizeable feast consisting of a range of dishes and plenty of alcohol. The person who accepts 'tea' owes a favour to the one who 'gave tea' (or various favours, depending on the outcome of the 'tea negotiations'). So, basically, 'having tea' means accepting a bribe – not necessarily in cash, but agreeing to bend the rules and provide favours – and this was what the PEC members wanted from the international observers.

A Final Point

It was not so difficult to note that the observers and PEC members interacted as representatives of two opposing camps, suspicious of each other's conduct. Observers assumed us that the job of PEC members in this 'battle' was to support pro-governmental candidates, while PEC members assumed that the observers were there to control their work and support the opposition candidates (and their observers and proxies). Their presence was an annoyance on a very stressful day. It was often a hindrance; after all, it is hard to cheat, intimidate, bribe and falsify when there are people around who do not depend on you in any way, and who have the authority and possibility of telling the wider audience that you cheat – or even worse, telling your bosses in Bishkek that you did not manage to cover up the cheating.

Election Monitors and Opposition Candidates

A Biased Position

Some PEC members and representatives of pro-governmental candidates complained that the representatives of the opposition were violating rules. Since it was widely assumed that the opposition candidates were 'the good guys', such complaints received little attention. In fact, they most often lacked evidence. It is not too difficult to understand why some international observers would often side tacitly with the opposition. Election monitoring missions primarily consist of people who work for, or are somehow connected with, international organisations or foreign governments that promote democracy. Still others are individuals not linked to any of the above, but who care a great deal about the democratisation of Kyrgyzstan and other developing countries.

During pre-election training, international observers were briefed on how the government had harassed and violated the rights of the opposition candidates and their proxies. From the very start, the election setting was presented as being divided into two camps: there were the 'bad guys' who were seen as anti-democratic, and 'the good guys' who were vocal about their criticism of 'the bad guys' and who were harassed and threatened. They thus received the support of the international community, through the international organisations who sent election observers.

Some of the ENEMO observers came from other former Soviet republics and were in opposition to their respective governments: given that background, it was natural for them to sympathise with the Kyrgyz opposition. For a foreigner, be it from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Europe or North America, with little or limited familiarity with the dynamics of Kyrgyzstan politics, the 'us and them' scheme seemed an easy one to follow. It put all new names, faces and alliances into convenient and understandable categories.

Such a division did in fact exist, to a certain extent, as shown by the attitude of election commission members towards the international observers. Because of the global framework in which election observation missions operate and exist (to promote liberal values and democracy), and because the Kyrgyz opposition forces were seen to be fighting for the same

ideas, international observers automatically considered them as team-mates, colleagues, partners, and allies.

Election Monitors and Protestors

After observing the second tour of the elections in February this year with two international observers, I returned to Osh and witnessed one of the first mass rallies in protest at the outcome of the elections. In the square in front of the Kara-Suu District Administration, hundreds of angry voters were demanding the resignation of the head of the local administration for failing to address their concerns about election results.

The observers spoke to some of the organisers, having taken them aside. They wanted to give advice based on what they had seen during Kiev's Maidan a few months earlier. 'Do not give up. Do not disperse when night falls, or they will follow you to your homes and arrest you during the night. Bring food for the people, put up tents and yurts and demand that the election results are recognised as illegitimate.' The response with a confident nod of the head was, 'We are not going to give up. We are not going to leave the square.'

It seemed as though the observers felt like their presence made a difference. One of them was returning satisfied with the work carried out during the day, and seeing a big rally and the brave voters added to the satisfaction.

Commentary

I believe that observer impartiality is not breached by the fact that the observers side with the opposition, because that in itself does not provide grounds for observers to conceal or ignore violations done on the part of the opposition candidates. Even if this might happen, it will be on such a small scale as not to affect the overall result of the elections, and is certainly miniscule when compared to the scale of violations concealed by pro-government observers and officials. Opposition forces and their supporters, including local NGOs and civic groups, treat international observers with great respect. The intimacy, bound by a commitment to democracy, has only served to strengthen the democratic initiatives in Kyrgyzstan. (Whether this commitment is genuine or not is, of course, another question.)

Election Monitors: Local, External and Foreign Observer Interaction

Most local, external and foreign observers treated each other as colleagues and team-mates. However, observers representing pro-governmental candidates were excluded from this, since they were seen as 'the bad guys'. Generally, external and foreign observers were better informed of their rights, less dependent on the local authorities (who were running the show), and thus more bold and confident in their conduct. Many local observers

(aside from whether or not they represented pro-governmental, opposition or neutral candidates), appealed to them for help, advice and even protection.

The most common form of mistreatment that local observers received from PEC members was restriction of movement within the voting area. They were often forced to observe whilst being told to sit down. Their complaints and protests were hushed by threats of removal for 'disturbing the work of the PEC'. However, external and international observers asked local observers about the conduct of PECs and often received important information about violations or particular cases. Local observers were willing to act as witnesses as well.

Local observers representing the Coalition of NGOs for the Democracy and Civil Society were perceived as the closest allies to the NDI observers (in 2000), and to the ENEMO observers (in 2005). This was because they represented the largest local monitoring network and were condemned by the government as being part of the opposition and 'sell-outs for Western money'. The Association of Non-commercial and Non-governmental Organizations was another local NGO that monitored elections across the country. It was assumed within Kyrgyzstan's NGO circles that it had been set up by the Akaev government in order to obstruct the work of the Coalition, and to produce reports that would boost the government's image in and outside of the country. This was the way I described the Association to the ENEMO observer, so we treated its observers with some scepticism, although they seemed to be doing their job well enough.

Election Monitors: Conclusion

The presence of international monitors did not stop PECs and local authorities from violating the law, though the international observers were able to pinpoint violations and get some of them corrected.

Bakiev lost the parliamentary elections to Nyshanov, having received a little more than a third of the total number of votes cast. The result of the elections in no.25 Karaunkur district might have taken a different course if there had been no election monitors; Bakiev's results might have looked even dimmer had the government officials been given more opportunities to run things their way.

There were considerable problems with the lists of the voters. The villages in this constituency were not separated into streets with names, so all voters would have their residence registration at a given village. In villages with more than one PEC, people had a chance of voting more than once, by getting their name on additional voter lists.

4. The Role of an Interpreter

Interpreters: Advantages and Disadvantages

Interpreters played an important role during the election observation, because the success of the observation depended on their knowledge of the

law and, to an equal extent, their acuteness. As a Kyrgyz, I was able to get a better feel of what was happening in a given precinct – whether PEC members were really doing their job or just putting on a show for the international observer.

PEC members approached me more often than they approached an international observer. I spoke the same language and thus might have come across as somebody easier to approach, or as 'one of them', perhaps. For instance, tea and meals were usually offered through me. The members often tried to convince me to ignore some of the violations, appealing to my patriotism by calling me *ozubuzdun kyzybyz* ('our daughter'). What they could not understand was that I wanted to make sure that the elections were fair and transparent, precisely because of my patriotism.

Besides the obvious advantage of speaking the local languages (Russian, Kyrgyz and Uzbek), I had the advantage of familiarity with the local non-verbal communication, and could therefore better understand the dynamics of the interaction between the PEC, voters and observers. For example, during the last parliamentary elections, I separated from the international observer in order to see what was happening in the local administration building, which was in close proximity to the PEC we were visiting. There, in a room crowded beyond capacity, I found an official who was issuing residence permits to voters. It seemed highly suspicious that this activity was taking place on the day of the elections. I observed the procedure for a few minutes before I was spotted and asked to leave the room. No explanations were provided. When I returned with the observer, the room was locked.

In no.25 Karaunkur district, where Kyrgyz and Uzbeks live side by side, the politicians have the possibility of playing the 'ethnic card'. In this area it was advantageous to be able to differentiate between different ethnicities. For some reason, Uzbeki voters seemed less informed about their electoral rights and thus more susceptive to intimidation. They also gave preference to an Uzbek candidate over a non-Uzbek. Just as Russians win in constituencies where Russians are a majority or a substantial proportion of the electorate, Uzbeks tend to win in Uzbeki constituencies.

Interpreters: Other Areas of Responsibility

Logistics and Finances

Besides the interpreting and the monitoring itself, I was also responsible for the logistics and finances. Travelling in rural Kyrgyzstan can be difficult in wintertime, and yet this is usually when the parliamentary elections take place. If things go wrong, there is a possibility that the election monitoring might fail to be done properly. Important factors include having vehicles capable of driving on bad roads, and having food and drink available in places where there are no cafes and where shops sell only cold food. Ensuring that observers had access to a telephone was another task. Mobile phones worked in some places, but in areas that the mobile networks could not reach we were dependent on the government-allied Kyrgyz telecom providers. Though I never ran into a problem, this was an additional strain.

Safety and Security

Safety and security are also on an interpreter's agenda. In a land where bandits rule, law-abiding observers and interpreters are not welcome. The threat of attack from pro-government forces was minimal, but it was still a concern. Back in 2000, during the first round of the parliamentary elections, I had to protect an observer with whom I was working from agitated voters. We had initiated a conversation with a group of voters, trying to find out whether there were instances of vote buying or campaigning on the day of the elections. This took place in a small, poor village in no.27 Bazarkorgon-Suzak electoral district. As we were speaking, people grew angry at the observer: they felt embarrassed in front of a rich foreigner, for being poor and for having to be witnesses. They felt and acknowledged the fact that they had been subjected to the intimidation and violation of law, yet there was no way of admitting this without hurting their dignity and admitting their powerlessness. I did my best to explain that the observer was not to blame and it was up to us, the citizens of this country, to change things. In the end, I had to position myself physically between the observer and the crowd.

Interpreters: Status Issues

In general, interpreters manage these multiple tasks well. Nevertheless, they have a subservient status to the observer (although unofficially) because they are there to assist the observer. For instance, at the last parliamentary elections, ENEMO did not require its interpreters to conduct their own assessment. Interpreters were not given assessment sheets; instead, they were there to help the observer in collecting data and to make possible the necessary observation.

An interpreter does not have much power over an observer's conclusion-forming process, even though the observers are heavily dependent on the 'local' knowledge of their interpreters. For instance, when working with ENEMO observers, my opinion carried less authority, even though I had just as much experience in election observation as the observers. But I was present only as an interpreter. For this reason, I provided my personal assessment to the ENEMO headquarters verbally (over the telephone) on the day of the elections.

Interpreters: Different Attitudes

For many interpreters who work with election observers, it is a way of making sure that the elections go well whilst also supplementing their income. Most are students from Bishkek and the regional centres, and they care about their country having open, fair and transparent elections.

The CEC registration card provides interpreters with the status of the international observer, so that they have the authority to demand access to all PEC and DEC sites, and so that they can observe all parts of the voting process (except the actual ticking of the ballot, of course). In this way, they have an opportunity to participate fully and to make a difference. However,

for some interpreters, election monitoring is just a job. For example, there were instances when interpreters fell asleep during the vote count, which usually took place late at night.

Interpreters: Suggested Areas of Improvement

I have interpreted and monitored during two parliamentary elections and one presidential election. I have never let my role be limited to interpreting, though one observer tried to restrict it to that. I fully participated and worked in the same manner as the international observers, and in some cases even more so than they did. While international election monitoring organisations put more emphasis on preparing international observers than interpreters, it would be unfair to say that these organisations fail to understand the importance of interpreters during election observation. Interpreters are invited to attend pre-election preparation and they receive manuals (and copies of relevant legislation), although there is no comprehensive discussion about the importance and complexity of their jobs.

Though the criteria used in the selection of interpreters do include a preference that they have an understanding of local political processes, some are hired only because they speak English.

Interpreting during election monitoring is challenging and exciting work. It is multi-faceted and dynamic, and requires thorough preparation. Election monitoring organisations need to have a better understanding of interpreters' role in election monitoring, and should improve their selection and preparation practices for interpreters. If interpreters and observers were regarded as equal, and the selection and preparation procedures in place for interpreters were improved, then election observation could be made more effective.

5. Conclusion

As with the elections of 2000, election monitors could not change the course and outcome of the elections. This is because election monitoring is just one of many methods that can ensure fair and transparent elections; Kyrgyzstan will have to change its electoral laws and pull its forces together in order to fight poverty. In the meantime, election monitoring will remain an important asset of democratisation, and the role of interpreters will continue to be of great importance.

Now that Bakiev and his 'mates' are in power in Kyrgyzstan, and it has become clear that their commitment to democracy is of questionable validity and durability, interpreters will also need to explain to international observers that 'opposition' does not necessarily equal 'democratic'.

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