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The Transformation of Askar Akaev, President of Kyrgyzstan

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In terms of democratization, among the post-Soviet countries, the Kyrgyz Republic—and I put it quite reasonably—is one of the leading countries. And I do not want to minimize my personal role in this process.

*—Askar Akaev, President of the Kyrgyz Republic, CSIS,
Washington, D.C., September 24, 2002*

Upon Kyrgyzstan's independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, prospects for this liberal-leaning, mountainous country inspired commentators to refer to it as the “Switzerland of Central Asia” and an “island of democracy.” The latter metaphor paints a particularly vivid picture, as Kyrgyzstan lies land-locked in the heart of Central Asia,¹ surrounded by communist China, civil war-ravaged Tajikistan, and two other newly independent states with authoritarian tendencies, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.

Unlike its neighbors, however, Kyrgyzstan committed to radical economic reform in the early 1990s. It was also the first newly independent state to convert to its own currency, the som, in 1993, as well as the first to join the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1998. Land reform and privatization policies were adopted and the country secured significant amounts of international financial aid bilaterally and through international financial institutions. A vibrant civil society, including independent media outlets and non-governmental organizations, flourished despite 70 years of Soviet rule.

By the mid-1990s, however, the tide began to turn. Crackdowns on independent media outlets became frequent, and regional opposition to the ruling regime heightened. International observers characterized the 2000 presidential elections as full of voting irregularities, bribing, and intimidation. And despite drastic reforms and assistance, the economy remained fragile and underdeveloped, with poverty levels climbing to over 50% in parts of the country. Kyrgyzstan's transition experience over the course of the 1990s thus raises two crucial questions: why did the country liberalize upon independence, and why did it subsequently move away from this reform agenda?

In the 15 years since the collapse of the Soviet Union, scholars have offered various explanations of both Kyrgyzstan's liberalization and subsequent turn towards more authoritarian trends. This study emphasizes a variable that has been largely neglected—the role of leadership—and analyzes how this approach compares with existing literature in explaining Kyrgyzstan's trajectory.²

Leadership analysis traces the phases of leadership with a particular focus on how a leader builds authority with various audiences and the constraints the leader faces during his tenure. The concept of building authority differs from coercive strategies and also from consolidating power once in office. According to Breslauer, building authority refers to the process by which “leaders seek to legitimize their policy programs and demonstrate their competence or indispensability as problem solvers and politicians.”³ This process of persuading, inspiring, and mutually identifying with audiences is crucial for a leader to effect change in a politically competitive system.⁴ While some approaches to the study of leadership view leaders and their situations as static and unchanging, this approach highlights the interaction between individuals and their environment over time. Using a leadership analysis approach also avoids the pitfall of viewing the role of the individual in politics and the course of events in black and white terms—as either highly significant or completely dispensable.

I proceed to explain the evolution of Akaev's leadership strategy in two sections: first, his political ascent and his first few years in power from 1989 to 1993; and second, the year of crisis in 1993 and the subsequent repercussions of his initial political and economic policies from 1994 to the present. The third section reviews five alternative approaches to understanding Kyrgyzstan's trajectory over the course of the 1990s and summarizes the benefits of incorporating leadership as a variable in understanding Kyrgyzstan's transition. To preview the conclusion, I argue that an analysis of Akaev's leadership helps to explain Kyrgyzstan's initial liberal trajectory. A full explanation of the shift to more authoritarian tendencies, however, requires inclusion of other variables discussed in existing literature.

In October 1991, the people of Kyrgyzstan voted for a relatively unknown scientist, Askar Akaev, to be the first president of their newly independent country. Born in northern Kyrgyzstan in 1944, Akaev spent about 15 years from 1962 to 1977 in Leningrad (St. Petersburg), Russia, studying optics and computer science. He returned to his home capital of Frunze (renamed Bishkek in 1991) to pursue an academic career, publishing over 100 articles and training a new generation of Kyrgyz scientists. Friends and colleagues highlighted his commitment to the pursuit of knowledge in his field, and suggested that he would be a great scientist from an early age.⁵

Akaev entered the world of politics in 1981 by joining the Communist Party.⁶ After only five years in the Party, he accepted an invitation to become head of the Central Committee Department of Science and Higher Educational Institutions and then head of the Kyrgyz Academy of Sciences, where he served as vice-president beginning in 1987 and then as president in 1989.⁷

Akaev's ascent coincided with Gorbachev's policies of liberalization and reform in the USSR during the late 1980s. As with the central Soviet system, each republic had a parallel governing party and state apparatus, with power resting in the party. While the policies of *perestroika* and *glasnost* originating from Moscow did not directly cause the transitions of the Central Asian Republics, the reform process provided the "... the immediate political context and catalyst for the first stages of regime change in Central Asia."⁸ Thus, decisions made in the headquarters of the USSR in Moscow had a great impact on the possible courses for the union republics, including Kyrgyzstan.

One particularly important reform in 1988 altered the USSR's institutional structure, shifting power to non-Party institutions. In that year, Gorbachev created a new body, the Congress of People's Deputies, via a Supreme Soviet decision. The first elections in March 1989 brought a number of non-Party leaders and intellectuals into the body for the first time, including Akaev as representative from the Naukat district in northern Kyrgyzstan. Akaev's new position allowed him to gain insight into the realities of political life in Moscow. There he witnessed

critical debates about the future of the USSR and mingled with reformers such as Gorbachev, Aitmatov, and Sakharov. As Eugene Huskey observed: “If Leningrad introduced Akaev to serious science, Moscow gave him schooling in serious politics.”⁹

This new all-Union body significantly altered the political landscape in Kyrgyzstan in two additional ways. For the first time, the Kyrgyz delegation did not stand united in Moscow. A branch of open supporters of Gorbachev, including Akaev, comprised a small but significant minority of the delegation. Second, the changes underway in 1989 unleashed opportunities for new actors to participate in the political process. Social groups and movements began to openly challenge the conservative leadership of First Secretary Absamat Masaliev.¹⁰

The turning point in Akaev’s political career came in mid-1990. During his tenure as a member of the Kyrgyz delegation to the Congress of People’s Deputies, Akaev’s personal characteristics and political leanings became apparent. He rarely spoke in parliament, and when he did, he did so in a measured way. His voting patterns tended to support political and market reform, counter to the opinion of the otherwise united conservative Kyrgyz delegation.¹¹

In addition to promoting more liberal political and economic reform, Akaev distinguished himself from the conservative Communist leadership in social policy.¹² Already in 1989 and early 1990, there were signs of tension in Bishkek (the capital in the north of the country) over social issues, including lack of housing and general poverty. The republic’s first autonomous organizations and political groupings emerged to protest these social and economic conditions.¹³ Siding with conservatives both in the republic and in Moscow, the head of the Kyrgyz Communist Party, Absamat Masaliev, was unresponsive to the protesters. Masaliev increasingly turned against Gorbachev and sought to limit the effects of Gorbachev’s radicalizing reform program.¹⁴

In the summer of 1990, deadly riots erupted in the south of the republic, which proved to be a political blessing for Akaev. The cities of Osh and Uzgen lie in the densely populated and agriculturally rich Ferghana Valley, which extends through Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. The Kyrgyz section of the valley is home to both ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks. For two decades prior to 1990, the region had suffered from land and housing shortages due to rapid

agricultural development. Over time, ethnic Uzbeks perceived themselves as disenfranchised, while ethnic Kyrgyz were convinced that Uzbeks had the best retail and consumer jobs.¹⁵ Riots erupted when ethnic Kyrgyz tried to redistribute local land from Uzbeks to ethnic Kyrgyz herders, igniting a violent reaction and the death of hundreds of people. Some Uzbeks responded with calls for Uzbek language recognition, while others went so far as to demand the reincorporation of the southern oblasts into Uzbekistan. These events unleashed further demonstrations by reformist members of the political establishment throughout the country.¹⁶

In the eyes of the population, Masaliev had been discredited for failing to address the country's socioeconomic problems and ethnic tensions, especially because he came from the south of the country himself. Akaev used this opportunity to not only disagree with Masaliev and other conservatives on economic and land reform policy, but also to openly blame the leadership and the Party for not responding to socioeconomic crises and simmering ethnic tensions.¹⁷

Masaliev's missteps, stemming from his inability or unwillingness to address ethnic and economic tensions, provided the political opening for Akaev to rise to the republic's top leadership position. In April 1990, prior to the riots in Osh and Uzgen, Masaliev had introduced a reform measure that would elect a president of the republic for the first time. Masaliev ran in October assuming that he would win. However, having been discredited by the events of the summer, Masaliev failed to obtain the majority in two run-offs in the Supreme Soviet against two opponents, thereby disqualifying all three candidates from the election. After a few days of procedural uncertainty, a new slate of nominees was put forth. A group of deputies who supported democratic renewal and civic harmony nominated Akaev, and he narrowly won days later, on October 27, 1990.¹⁸ As Akaev himself subsequently noted on the election process: "Many deputies saw the nomination of a totally new person for the presidency as a real way of bringing the groups together and getting them to agree."¹⁹ Akaev embodied that totally new person.

As president of the republic (independence would not occur until the following year), Akaev presided over a period characterized first and foremost by the disintegration of the USSR. His presidency also commenced during the unraveling of republican-level power and institu-

tions, accompanied by a general sense of instability and political confrontation. Referring to the summer riots and the controversial republican presidential election, one journalist stated that the “... complex, dramatic days are over. It seemed that it would not take much for a civil war between north and south to begin.”²⁰ Indeed, it would be difficult to overestimate the political and social tension within the country when Akaev came to power at the end of 1990.

At the beginning of his presidency, Akaev revealed that he had not expected to be president nor had he sought power. His wife confirmed that she too had never thought that her husband would become president, and “involuntarily began to laugh” upon hearing the news of his nomination.²¹ Yet Akaev had amassed some authority as a compromise candidate, and certain politicians in Moscow, including Gorbachev, as well as a former first secretary of the Kyrgyz Communist Party, Turdakun Usubaliev, who was also from the north, believed him to be credible. However, he had neither significant political experience nor solid political backing at the republican level. Unlike the presidents of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, who were all former first secretaries of their respective republics, Akaev came from outside the system and therefore had to build authority within the republic over the coming year.

One of Akaev’s first moves in his new position was to broaden his constituency while balancing the interests of Communist Party members who were still in office. During the election in October, hunger strikers affiliated with the democratic opposition demanded the resignation of Masaliev and others in his cadre and supported Akaev’s candidacy for president. He met with the democratic-leaning hunger strikers as one of his first priorities, and proactively incorporated into his government leaders of all ethnic communities who supported economic and political reform.²²

In his first decree as president, Akaev signaled the priority he placed on addressing the economic malaise of the country, also a concern of the protesters. He formed a State Commission for Economic Reform after identifying the need for “a more profound scientific elaboration of the concept for the transition to market relations.”²³ This scientific approach to gathering infor-

mation and assessing the situation before deciding on a plan reflected Akaev's background as a scientist.

Akaev's ideas for economic reform were not new. He had articulated a position on the economy as early as December 1989, when he clashed with Masaliev and the conservative republican elite who resisted reform. Acknowledging the obstacles to market reform, including the possibility of high unemployment and a growing division between rich and poor, he stated that there was no alternative to the market: "Among countries with market economies there are rich and poor states, but among the countries with a command economy there is not one that is rich."²⁴ Akaev staked himself out as a dissident, and a proponent of economic reform. He articulated a strategy for implementing this reform after seven months in office:

"We have prepared a very original law on foreign investment. It will be the most liberal one in our country and the constituent Union Republics. We have decided to take a risk. We hope that our parliament will support the bill I am convinced that without a major inflow of capital investment, without an inflow of foreign investment, we ourselves will be unable to accomplish anything. We want to analyze all the problems, all the needs, all the aspirations which exist today. We must quietly start solving them, together with you."²⁵

He thus advocated a concrete policy for promoting foreign investment while appealing to the entire population by emphasizing an inclusive approach to solving the republic's problems.

As Akaev proposed new reforms, he also adhered to his initial platform to remain part of the USSR, a position he had articulated from the onset of his presidency, thus consoling the Communist wing of the political spectrum. In his keynote speech upon becoming president, he prioritized strengthening the prestige of the Supreme Soviet and the People's Deputies, and envisioned a sovereign Kyrgyzstan within a renewed USSR.²⁶ The historical, legal ambiguity of the term 'sovereignty,' as Walker argues, "... helps explain why many of those who proved most ardent in asserting the 'sovereignty' of the union republics ... were equally passionate in their opposition to the dissolution of the Soviet Union."²⁷ Indeed Akaev, upon becoming president, capitalized on this ambiguity.

It is important to stress that the debate over the future of the USSR was *not* between advocates of its dissolution and advocates of its preservation. In fact, both Yeltsin and Gorbachev vocalized support for a reformed USSR in 1990, although Gorbachev accused Yeltsin otherwise. The important dynamic was one of political polarization between the two leaders, and the issue of sovereignty was used by Yeltsin to put Gorbachev and other central leaders on the defensive.²⁸ This polarization also occurred at the union republic level, where conservative forces aligned with Gorbachev in the later years pitted themselves against those espousing speedier reform as advocated by Yeltsin.

Such a power struggle ensued between the Communist Party in Kyrgyzstan, still headed by Masaliev, and the newly created state institution of the presidency, with Akaev at its helm.²⁹ In December 1990, Masaliev resigned from the position of chairman of the republican Supreme Soviet allegedly to concentrate on his Party activities, and by early April 1991, Masaliev had also resigned from the position as head of the republican Communist Party organization. Later that month, a full reorganization of the Party took place in which virtually the entire leadership was replaced.³⁰

In his first year as president, Akaev succeeded in defusing a tense atmosphere by including numerous groups in the political process. He also began to initiate political and economic changes within the republic. However, in August 1991 he faced a crisis. The coup against Gorbachev in Moscow was accompanied by a similar drama in Bishkek, albeit on a smaller scale, against Akaev. As in Moscow, the effort was led by military and Communist Party officials who sought to preserve the Soviet state and the Party's monopoly of power.

In a bold move, Akaev spoke out against the coup and proclaimed that he would defend the law of the Kyrgyz Republic over that of the USSR.³¹ This prompted a threat from the GkChP (Putsch Emergency Committee) that Soviet troops would invade unless he retracted his statement. The split hardened between Akaev, who stood against the coup, and members of the Communist Party in Kyrgyzstan, who supported the coup in order to retain power. Akaev countered the Party's attempt to reinstate their power by establishing a new body, the State Council,

under the executive, and declared his “full support” for President Yeltsin of Russia and the reform-minded president of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev.³² The country declared independence just days later, on August 31, 1991.

Huskey calls this event “the most severe test of Akaev’s political maturity” and notes that only “Boris Yeltsin among republican leaders behaved with such resolve during the coup.”³³ In a later interview, when asked about the events of the August coup, Akaev said the following about Yeltsin: “I got to know [Yeltsin] much better during the time of my work in the Supreme Soviet of the USSR ... I began to feel respect, sympathy towards him and supported him.”³⁴ He therefore appears to have empathized with Yeltsin and supported him politically, and as a result he emerged from the coup with significantly augmented political authority.

In the country’s first direct presidential elections a few months later (October 12, 1991), Akaev ran unopposed. Once again he was considered the consensus candidate for a majority of political and ethnic organizations in Kyrgyzstan. This time, however, he had weathered a tough storm and staked his political future on reform. Whereas Akaev was elected only narrowly by parliament in 1990 at a time when he was viewed as a supporter of Gorbachev and *perestroika*, he was given the stamp of approval October 1991 after having sided with Yeltsin. He became a symbol for the Kyrgyz nation, as Collins describes: “In 1991, not unlike Lech Walsea, Vaclav Havel, or Boris Yeltsin, [Askar] Akaev ... symbolized the birth—or rebirth—of the Kyrgyz nation.”³⁵

Akaev was, however, the leader of a newly independent country with no previous history of independence. In fact, the collective memory of the people of Kyrgyzstan was based on pastoral nomadic culture, not that of a nation-state. Akaev thus faced the challenge of forging policies amenable to a diverse society the included a significant population of ethnic Russians and Uzbeks.³⁶

Not only was the population divided ethnically, the skills base of the various groups also varied. Over the course of the Soviet period, Russians dominated technical and engineering professions in the north of the country, while Uzbeks tended to be engaged in retail trade in the

south and Kyrgyz held positions in bureaucratic, educational, agricultural, and cultural realms. This division of labor gradually engendered tensions. Since the professions of the Kyrgyz did not represent market-based ones, they worried that they would be unable to compete in market conditions. Uzbek resentment was fed by the economic deprivation of the Uzbeks in the south compared to the wealth and investment in the north, as well as under-representation of Uzbeks in local governing bodies. In addition to these north-south divisions, subdivisions based on Kyrgyz regional identities divided the north of the country.

Akaev's challenge as a northerner was to create policies that addressed the various interests within the country without alienating ethnic Kyrgyz or his own northern networks. As a foundation for his policies, Akaev stressed a conception of national identity that rested on citizenship while incorporating traditional Kyrgyz symbols and stories. First, as he did in 1990, he met with various groups and avoided adopting policies that would further split the country along regional or ethnic lines. In February 1992, he assembled leaders of the national cultural centers and social organizations and formed the more institutionalized "Assembly of the Peoples of Kyrgyzstan," which drew together leaders from 27 ethnic communities and gave them a voice in the political process.³⁷ He restored indigenous holidays and place names, and he attempted to implement language and land policy that favored the ethnic Kyrgyz. However, he also took various measures to appease other ethnic groups.

These policies, however, did not come without opposition. When nationalists in parliament passed reform measures that favored ethnic Kyrgyz in land ownership and use, Akaev boldly vetoed the legislation, fearing that it would incite non-Kyrgyz citizens. Three versions of a land code were drafted in parliament before Akaev signed it.³⁸ However, the 1990 riots and the perception that initial drafts of the language and land policies favored ethnic Kyrgyz led hundreds of thousands of highly skilled ethnic Germans and Russians to flee the country. Acutely aware of the economic and intellectual loss that Kyrgyzstan would suffer if it were to lose large portions of the Russian population in particular, Akaev worked to halt their outflow by establishing a Slavonic University for Russian Studies and the Russian language, among other pro-

grams.³⁹ As a testament to his efforts, a government-sponsored poll in 1992 showed that Russian respondents had almost as high approval ratings for Akaev as Kyrgyz respondents. By 1994–1995, emigration diminished considerably.⁴⁰

Akaev's personal management style also facilitated the incorporation of groups and opinions into the policy making process. Upon becoming president, he stated: "I think it is this diversity of approaches that will facilitate our choice of the correct action strategy and tactics."⁴¹ He signed liberal legislation allowing civil society organizations such as newspapers, non-governmental organizations, and other social movements to flourish. By February 1993, the Justice Ministry had registered 258 social organizations, a figure would reach 1000 by 1997. Akaev was also open to the establishment of moderate religious groups as well as democratic parties and political associations.⁴²

Second, he created metaphors to build unity around the new Kyrgyz nation-state. According to Huskey, Akaev was the primary craftsman of the country's new national identity. He used the phrase "Switzerland of Central Asia" as an attempt to create a temporary national identity. This conception of national identity rejected the communist and authoritarian past by placing the country in relation to another more favorable and ideal model. For Akaev, the "Switzerland of Central Asia" provided for an apt comparison because of the mountainous and landlocked geographical position of both countries as well as their policy of neutrality surrounded by strong regional neighbors.⁴³

Akaev also used the "Silk Road" metaphor to describe Kyrgyzstan as a country that bridges East and West. As he put it: "We want to be a small nation open to the whole world, just as we were beside the old Silk Road."⁴⁴ Later, in the 1990s, he would publish a foreign policy doctrine entitled "Diplomacy of the Silk Road," which details Akaev's vision for the relationship between Kyrgyzstan and the neighboring Silk Road countries. In these speeches and documents, he stressed that the mix of Asian and European makes Kyrgyzstan unique: "History has arranged for us to be an amazing amalgam of the Asian and the European: in our thinking, in our emotional makeup, in our behavior."⁴⁵ As will be discussed below, Akaev's embrace of images like

the “Switzerland of Central Asia” and the “Silk Road” was designed to appeal to all interests—the West, the international community in general, regional organizations, its Central Asian neighbors, Russia, and China.

Maintaining stability and improving ethnic relations were Akaev’s first priorities, and he reiterated them at almost every occasion in his early speeches. He also explicitly outlined a staged approach to his policies: “If we are unable to improve interethnic relations and achieve civic harmony, then we will fail to implement a single economic program.”⁴⁶ Thus, while maintaining civic harmony was his first priority, transformation of the economy was an undisputable second.

Kyrgyzstan is, however, a small, landlocked country with few natural resources, so his economic program faced profound challenges. Already in 1990 the economy was in crisis, with prices rising and store shelves empty. One of the country’s main assets, its huge hydroelectric generation potential due to its water reserves, was seriously underdeveloped. The country also depended on Russia and Uzbekistan for transport routes and energy reserves. As if the Soviet legacy of the command economy and the country’s dearth of natural resources were not enough, huge natural disasters hit the country in 1992, including a massive earthquake (seven on the Richter scale) in Jalalabad and Osh that left tens of thousands of people without shelter and torrential rains and mudslides that damaged 10,000 homes and left 80,000 people homeless.⁴⁷

The embrace of a program of rapid economic liberalization can be credited largely to Akaev’s leadership.⁴⁸ His numerous priorities included price liberalization, halting subsidies to most state enterprises, introducing a convertible currency, and privatization. Akaev believed that successful reform measures would be adapted to conditions on the ground as determined by local leaders and governors (*akims*). Only in this way would regional interests be considered in the process. Additionally, advice from regional leaders would help the inexperienced president create and implement reforms.⁴⁹ In short, Akaev relied on consensus and regional input to carry out his economic reform program.

The component of economic policy that received the most international attention, however, was the extent of Western and international development assistance he attracted. Akaev received a large IMF stabilization loan to alleviate the shock of leaving the ruble currency zone, which Kyrgyzstan was to do in May 1993. In attracting international aid, Anderson argues that “Akaev was motivated in part by realizations of Kyrgyzstan’s limited resource potential and its inaccessibility, and thus took the view that only by adopting such a pro-reform position in advance of many neighboring states could his country hope to attract investment and economic support from the outside world.”⁵⁰ By the end of 1993, Western donors had pledged almost half a billion dollars in assistance to the country.

An early indicator of the importance of Akaev’s role as statesman came early in his tenure. In 1991, during the August attempted putsch, he had called on the international community, including the UN, to assist the country: “We are a small state. We have no army, but we will defend our sovereignty and our freedom. However, we have no chance of withstanding [the Soviet] army armed with tanks and airplanes. Can you calmly sit by and watch as our freedom is trampled and our legally elected state authorities are overthrown?”⁵¹ Thus from the outset Akaev understood the importance of reaching out to the international community given the country’s geopolitical and military weakness.

While he forged ties with Western countries and international financial institutions, relations with Russia remained of utmost importance, not only because of Kyrgyzstan’s economic dependence on Russia and the Russian population living in Kyrgyzstan, but also because of Russia’s sensitivity over Kyrgyzstan’s ties to the West, and in particular to the WTO and NATO. In interviews with the Russian media, Akaev repeatedly reassured the Russian population: “I would like to firmly stress that no matter what new ties we establish in the West and East, no matter how great our urge to merge into the eastern, western, or worldwide economic community, our ties with Russia and our friendship and cooperation with the Russian people will always be special and we will give this priority.”⁵² In fact, Yeltsin’s first foreign visit as president was to Kyrgyzstan, and the two countries signed a treaty of friendship and cooperation in 1991.

Akaev also consistently attributed great importance to relations with other members of the Commonwealth of Independent States, the successor organization of the Soviet Union. He used the image of gravitational pull to underscore the strength and importance of the CIS to Kyrgyzstan: “We [the CIS countries] are like the planets of the solar system, which can never drift apart because they are held together by universal forces of gravity.”⁵³ Akaev saw the need for good relations with neighbors such as Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan for cross-border trade and for energy resources, in particular.

In 1992–1993, Akaev confronted myriad challenges over the economy, foreign policy, and domestic politics. The table below highlights the major developments during the period, and the remainder of this section expands on how these events and policies yielded significant challenges and obstacles that influenced the evolution of Akaev’s leadership strategies.

Kyrgyzstan becomes a member of the World Bank	September 1992
Parliament adopts plan for privatization of SMEs	December 1993
Negotiations over constitution and electoral system	Throughout 1993
Diplomatic relations and embassies established	Throughout 1993
Kyrgyzstan introduces the som (leaves the ruble currency zone)	May 1993
Kyrgyzstan adopts IMF stabilization program	May 1993
World Bank approves an Import Rehabilitation Credit (\$60 million)	May 1993

While many of the policies have been touted as significant positive steps or “successes,” a closer look reveals obstacles that would later constrain Akaev’s options and the course of the country.

On the economic front, one of the most controversial reforms, the privatization of state-held enterprises, began in 1992–1993. Severe problems, including inflation, a massive decline in industrial and agricultural production, and allegations of corruption, plagued the economic reform process in the early 1990s. Despite significant opposition, Akaev attempted to legitimize the continuation of these painful economic reforms using references to the external environment:

“It is my conviction that radicalization of the reforms is the only correct way for Kyrgyzstan. A comprehensive and decisive breakthrough in every course of the reform is required, while we enjoy serious support from CIS countries, the world’s economically developed nations, and international finance organizations. We have no right to miss this historic opportunity.”⁵⁴

The introduction of the Kyrgyz currency, the som, in May 1993 was also often used as an example of the progressive nature of the Akaev regime. Akaev failed, however, to consult with regional neighbors before introducing the som, a move that was subsequently considered a serious diplomatic misstep. While the intent of this policy was to free Kyrgyzstan from Russia’s accelerating inflation and also to allow the country to attract significant international aid to stabilize its currency, neighboring countries perceived it as a unilateral and unfriendly act. The introduction of the som also significantly hampered trade. Kazakh and Uzbek traders found little use for the som, and disruption of cross-border trade hurt the Kyrgyz economy. The Uzbek and Kazakh regimes responded forcefully with border closings and other measures. While Akaev apologized to both leaders, the incident underscored the deeply rooted suspicion of Akaev’s western-oriented policies by regional neighbors.⁵⁵

On the domestic-political front, two trends and events would greatly impact future political relations in the country. First, Akaev decentralized political power as a means of building relations with regional governors (*akims*) and forging policies that represented the needs of the local communities. He achieved this primarily by the “Soviet-style practice of promoting [regional leaders] from within.”⁵⁶ Akaev himself admitted this in an interview in 1994:

“Indeed, many key positions are still occupied by the ‘old guard.’ If you do not keep the reality of a situation in mind, however, you can destroy everything. Let’s say I appoint a democrat, but he is not accepted in the region. He will be rejected. Everything will stop. The reforms will stop. It is easier for me to direct a conservative akim than to appoint a democrat and then suffer because the people do not understand or accept him.”⁵⁷

He also began appointing allies and friends to top political positions. For example, Felix Kulov, who played an integral role in ensuring Akaev’s security during the coup ordeal, was appointed to the position of head of the Ministry of Internal Affairs.⁵⁸ Akaev chose these strategies over

others, such as appointing more liberal reformers, to maintain stability and ensure that he had the opportunity to continue along the reform track.

A second highly significant event on the domestic-political front occurred during negotiations with regional leaders from the north and the south over the establishment of an electoral system in 1993. Opposition to Akaev from former Communists, among others in parliament, existed from the onset, when they blocked the centrally-controlled TV and radio broadcasts of Akaev's swearing in oath to protest his victory. Opposition became particularly heated during the negotiations over a new constitution, resulting in a struggle between the executive branch and parliament in 1992–1993. Akaev feared parliamentary supremacy because he felt that regional groups and networks would be pitted against each other, leading to conflict between the north and the south.⁵⁹ He managed relations with the parliament during this time in part by forging an informal pact with the speaker of the assembly, who had his own significant power base, which he was able to use to restrain opposition to Akaev's policies.⁶⁰

Tensions between Akaev and the parliamentary opposition came to a head during negotiations over the electoral system. Disputes included how candidates should be nominated, how electoral commissions should be selected, and the number of seats and structure of parliament. A complex bargaining process ensued between central and regional leaders, with nascent political parties also playing a role. This process highlighted Akaev's leadership strategy: while he could have caved into regional leaders' demands or coerced them into adopting his proposals, he often chose the path of offering counterproposals and compromises. Akaev clearly attached higher priority to the preservation of political stability than to achieving his optimal outcome.⁶¹

Thus, over the first two years of his presidency, Akaev managed to prevent ethnic conflict, minimize tensions with Russia and Uzbekistan, and embark on dramatic economic reforms. He used bargaining and negotiating to forge compromises amenable to some extent to both the north and the south, and created stories for international audiences to attract foreign aid and balance neighboring interests.

Yet 1993 was a crucial year. As a result of the events and challenges of the early years, a change in Akaev's leadership tactics became visible by 1994. While he entered the presidency in many ways as an 'outsider,' intent on implementing overarching economic and political reforms, he quickly shifted to becoming an 'insider,' embroiled in an elite struggle for political survival in the midst of a collapsing economy. Moreover, in 1992–1993 Akaev and other high-level government officials became embroiled in a controversial corruption scandal that would sour Akaev's reputation and cast doubt on his intentions.⁶²

Akaev was also becoming increasingly threatened by parliamentary opponents who were against reform. Former Communists were reluctant to face reelection in a newly created bicameral legislature, while reformers who initially sided with Akaev were growing increasingly disillusioned with the state of the economy.⁶³ Under threat of being accused of corruption and malfeasance by these groups, Akaev decided to strike preemptively at his political opponents so that he could regain central authority. He thus "engineered a quiet revolution" in 1994 by disbanding parliament and putting his own loyal supporters from his region into legislative positions.⁶⁴ Akaev allegedly used bribery in the process, promising allies monetary and in-kind rewards in exchange for support in the new parliament.⁶⁵

While the new parliamentary elections were finally held in February 1995 and judged to be "fair and free" by the international community, it was clear that serious corruption and manipulation had plagued the process. One of the primary results of the bargains struck over electoral reform (described above) was that the legislation thwarted political parties and national-level candidates and gave concessions to regional leaders and local businessmen. In attempting to promote his own loyal allies in parliament, he further legitimized non-central power.

In addition to the parliamentary elections of 1995, presidential elections that same year confirmed Akaev's strategy for consolidating executive power and remaining in office. Instead of holding elections in October 1996 as scheduled, he called for a referendum in late 1995, apparently because he feared that his popularity would not long survive the deteriorating economic situation. He also timed the referendum to occur during the 1000-year celebration of the Kyrgyz

national hero, Manas, during which time Akaev enjoyed greater support among the population. After parliament refused to sanction the referendum, to Akaev's disappointment, it allowed the elections to be rescheduled for December 1995, which satisfied Akaev's timing concern. Thus Akaev ran against Masaliev as well as a former parliamentary speaker, neither of whom was very popular. As a result, he won over 70% of the vote.⁶⁶ While Akaev lost 20% of the electorate in the south that had previously voted for him, he had gained popularity in the north where he and his wife were from by staffing the administration with family and other network connections.⁶⁷

Akaev also strengthened the position of the presidency unilaterally via referendum. As Huskey explains: "By appealing for an up or down vote of the populace on constitutional changes, Akaev avoided the compromises and concessions that parliament or a constitutional convention would have exacted."⁶⁸ This technique of going to the population for change effectively bypassed the legislature and allowed Akaev to consolidate power in the executive branch.

Nevertheless, pressure continued to grow on Akaev to deliver on the many promises he had made in the early 1990s, especially regarding the economy. His economic policies were having devastating effects on the social safety net and were held responsible for a rapid increase in poverty. Average yields dropped 20–40% for all major crops (wheat, barley, corn, potatoes, vegetables) between 1989–1991 and 1995–1997.⁶⁹ And with the exception of potatoes, bread products, and fruits and berries, consumption of all other major food groups decreased between 30–80% between 1990 and 1996.⁷⁰ While the country pulled out of the severe shock it had experienced with the introduction of the som in 1993 and was improving by the mid-1990s, the trend quickly reversed with the Russian financial crisis of August 1998. By 2000, the som had fallen to 50 to the dollar from 4 to the dollar in 1993.

Meanwhile, opposition from the akims was growing. To appease them, Akaev distributed the country's resources among members of the political opposition and members of his social network. In particular, international aid was embezzled by various state agencies and bureaucracies, thus empowering informal networks instead of the state institutions the money was intended

for.⁷¹ As Eric McGlinchey has argued, foreign aid allowed Akaev to “reign in political contestation and . . . rebuild authoritarian rule.”⁷²

By 1998, Akaev had begun to use criminal proceedings to silence critics of the regime. In perhaps the most blatant power grab, Akaev manipulated the constitutional court to allow him to stand for a third term. In 1998, with another presidential election on the horizon in 2000, he attempted to secure a third term in office, arguing that he should be allowed to remain in power for two reasons: the first election did not count because it was held prior to the establishment of the constitution in 1993; and he was the only one who could keep the country together and prevent social violence. To achieve this goal, he appointed a well-respected but loyal judge as head of the constitutional court, who remained silent when charges against the executive arose and rubber-stamped the legality of executive decrees. She also ignored the clause of the constitution stating that elections prior to 1993 were to be considered valid. Thus, despite protests from the international community, the constitutional court allowed Akaev to stand for a third term.⁷³

During the presidential elections of 2000, Akaev sponsored a new form of coercion. The criminal prosecution arrested three of the most prominent candidates for the presidency, and used a language law requiring the president to speak Kyrgyz to disqualify eight challengers. Akaev also offered ambassadorial and executive posts to potential opponents and overtly manipulated all forms of the media—newspapers, radio, and television broadcasts. On election day, voting irregularities, ballot stuffing, bribing and intimidation were all cited by organizations such as the National Democratic Institution and the OSCE, both of which deemed the elections “not fair, free and accountable.”⁷⁴

Tensions between the north and the south, which Akaev had earlier tried to hard to mitigate, began to flare up again as a result of Akaev’s policies. According to Collins, Akaev’s inner circle from the north, which had helped elect him in 1990 and 1995, “had become his direct clients after the parliamentary elections, won out in the legislature’s battle for resources. Rather than engage in substantive representation and legislation, deputies from both houses focused their energies on using the [parliament] to bring economic wealth to themselves and their net-

work of supporters, as well as to their broader clan and regional base.”⁷⁵ Akaev started appointing northerners to southern governor positions as he felt his control over local resources slip. Investment continued to favor heavily the northern regions, even though more than 50% of the population lived in the south and agricultural and industrial opportunities were concentrated in the Ferghana Valley. Akaev’s policies accordingly engendered serious friction among the southern population.

Regional groups and their control of the country’s economic resources have constrained Akaev’s ability to act independently in pursuing economic and political reform. While he sought to build up relations with regional leaders and businessmen to implement reform, he could do little to stop them from greedily amassing economic and political power. He then shifted to the role of “manager” of these networks to ensure that no one became too powerful.⁷⁶ To this day, the political and economic situation remains fragile. The country relies on a single authority—Akaev—to maintain stability and balance interests. The cycle of appeasing and reshuffling members of his political and personal network continues to invite resort to coercive methods, which in turn increases instability and weakens state capacity to effect change.

As Akaev concentrated power within the executive branch in the mid-late 1990s, he also began to face significant external security challenges. There were in the first place a number of perceived threats emanating from the south—in particular, the instability in Afghanistan and the civil war in Tajikistan. Over the course of 1996–1997, Akaev called for a dialogue on possible ways to settle the unrest in Afghanistan. His particular concerns were twofold: he saw the possibility of the conflict drawing neighboring countries into its orbit, and he foresaw a significant public health risk and black market arising from the poppy production and opium transport from Afghanistan north through Kyrgyzstan. He believed that drug trafficking and drug-related crimes were “a cancerous tumor on the body of the republic ...”⁷⁷ Akaev’s emphasis on the instability emanating from the south proved prescient—only a few years later world attention would shift to the region.

Perhaps the most significant direct security challenge arose in 1999 when militants affiliated with the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) entered Kyrgyz territory. Seeking to overthrow regional governments and establish an Islamic caliphate in Central Asia, the IMU twice succeeded in infiltrating Kyrgyz territory and causing instability by taking hostages and invading villages. These events highlighted the dismal state of the Kyrgyz security forces and caused heated diplomatic tensions between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan has since accused Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan of harboring terrorists, and in retaliation Tashkent has mined its borders with Kyrgyzstan. This has disrupted trade patterns and turned off energy supplies to the country as an additional means of leverage. Uzbekistan has also criticized Akaev's liberal policies, accusing Kyrgyzstan of allowing Islamic radicals to flourish in the south, thereby threatening the regime in Uzbekistan.

Further complicating the situation was the establishment of U.S. and international forces at a base at Manas airport outside Bishkek as a result of the military campaign against Afghanistan. While drawing criticism from Russia and China, neither country outright "vetoed" the development. However, in December 2002 Russia signed an agreement with Kyrgyzstan to open its own military base at Kant, also outside Bishkek.⁷⁸ In addition, Kyrgyzstan, along with other Central Asian countries, Russia, and China, is a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, founded in June 2001.⁷⁹ This organization, while still in its infancy in terms of concrete policy and action, had focused on security and counter-terrorism initiative.

Until recently, Kyrgyzstan, unlike many of the other Soviet successor states, has been able to avoid mass protest and violence. However, it was clear by 2000 that economically vulnerable groups, such as teachers and pensioners in the south of the country, where some 50% of the population lives under the poverty level, were growing increasingly hostile to the regime. In 2002, plans by Akaev to sign border agreements with neighboring Uzbekistan and China that would cede Kyrgyz territory to those two countries sparked heated parliamentary and public outrage. After the arrest of Azimbek Beknazarov, a popular deputy from the southern region of Jalalabad who had vocally repudiated the border agreements and the closure of regional opposi-

tion newspapers in January 2002, protests erupted in the region. The protesters called for Beknazarov's release, but they also used the opportunity to criticize Akaev's policies toward the southern regions, citing corruption and disenfranchisement as their main concerns.

The incident finally exploded into violence in March when five demonstrators were killed by the local police in the southern town of Asky. For the first time since independence, Akaev confronted the question of using state security organs against the population. He fired key ministers allegedly involved in making the decision to fire against the population, which resulted in the resignation of the entire government. Mass protests in the south only subsided after an appeals court lifted the charges against Beknazarov.⁸⁰

In February 2003, Akaev pressed ahead with a constitutional referendum that he argued would enhance the system of checks and balances in the political system and promote reconciliation after the riots and shootings in Asky the year before.⁸¹ After less than one month of public debate, the referendum was passed under allegations of massive fraud. The referendum provided for the replacement of the existing bicameral parliament with a unicameral one, and it confirmed that Akaev had enough popular support to serve out his term until 2005.⁸² Yet discontent simmers underneath the surface as opposition leaders continue to call for Akaev's resignation and increased autonomy for the southern regions.⁸³

Almost 15 years since the collapse of the Soviet Union, numerous studies have set out to explain why the newly independent states of Central Asia, which seemingly shared common historical legacies and institutions, have pursued diverging political and economic reform strategies upon independence. They have also tried to explain why one country in particular, the Kyrgyz Republic, reversed its liberal trajectory in the mid-1990s and today resembles its more authoritarian neighbors. Here I review existing explanations to these two questions—why the Kyrgyz Republic liberalized upon independence, and why it has since reversed its trajectory. After summariz-

ing these explanations, I discuss how a focus on the role of leadership contributes to our understanding of the initial liberal trajectory.

Five main explanations exist for understanding Kyrgyzstan's post-independence trajectory, two large-N comparative studies and three smaller-N case studies.⁸⁴ In his comparative study of post-Communist countries, M. Steven Fish focuses on a subset of those countries that have reversed their initially democratic trajectories, including Kyrgyzstan.⁸⁵ After summarizing and evaluating existing arguments for this phenomenon, he offers his own tripartite explanation for democratic reversion: concentration of power in the presidency (super-presidentialism); oppositional weakness as defined by an inability to communicate with citizens and mobilize resources and people; and powerful external patronage, usually from Russia and Western countries.⁸⁶ Yet Fish's analysis, which focuses on why these countries reversed their initial trajectory and on the initial commitment to liberal reform, does not explain the mechanism and timing of the increase in authoritarian measures. For example, why did the institutional concentration of power in the president occur in Kyrgyzstan beginning in 1994 and not before?

A second study of all post-Communist countries argues that reform attempts by countries such as Kyrgyzstan have foundered because of their geographic distance from democratic countries that could financially support their transitions: "... location matters more than domestic policy itself in determining outcomes ..."⁸⁷ The authors use Kyrgyzstan as an example of a country that embarked on a liberal reform program but failed due to its geography and the lack of "capacity to attract sufficient Western attention to help it overcome the pressure of its immediate international environment."⁸⁸ As with Fish's analysis, this study does not explain the initial liberal reform. Moreover, in their explanation for Kyrgyzstan's reversal, the authors do not define what "sufficient" Western attention would be. In fact, Kyrgyzstan received significant attention and a great deal of aid from the United States and other international financial institutions.⁸⁹

Whereas these two arguments generalize across all post-Communist countries, Pauline Jones Luong, Kathleen Collins, and Eric McGlinchey adopt a small-N case study approach to

explain the democratic reversal in Central Asia. Jones Luong analyzes the variation in the establishment of one institution, the electoral system, in the early 1990s in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan.⁹⁰ She argues that a transitional bargaining game between central and regional leaders, shaped by institutional legacies of the Soviet period and the immediate strategic environment, determined the electoral system. In her analysis, bargaining strategies were a function of actors' perceptions in shifts of relative power throughout the negotiation process. The theory predicts an inverse relationship between the president's perception of his power and the level of political openness—the greater the perception of power, the less the desire for political openness. Using this analysis, she argues that Akaev liberalized to include other small parties in the political process because he was "... bargaining from a position of weakness relative to other established elites. This implies that he then withdrew his support for democracy later in the transition because he perceived that the balance of power had shifted in his favor."⁹¹

Collins also adopts a three-country case study approach (using Tajikistan instead of Kazakhstan) but probes very different questions and arrives at different conclusions.⁹² She asks why the three countries had such different outcomes upon independence (democracy in Kyrgyzstan, authoritarianism in Uzbekistan, and civil war in Tajikistan), and she also explains why Kyrgyzstan diverged from its liberal path in the mid-1990s. Her main independent variable is the role of clans and clan politics. In the case of Kyrgyzstan, she argues that clan pacts concluded prior to the transition allowed Akaev to come to power and also allowed him to implement a democratic-oriented program due to high levels of trust within the clan. Yet precisely these clan loyalties have required Akaev (and other Central Asian leaders) to distribute political power and economic resources among their clan members, leading to an over-reliance on his group to the exclusion of others. This has resulted in the more authoritarian policies that have been observed over the course of the 1990s.

Eric McGlinchey argues that neither clan nor regional identities are the primary determinants of regime outcomes.⁹³ Instead, he finds the leaders' "access to economic sources of rule" to be the most important determinant of political reform (in Kyrgyzstan) and authoritarian

tendencies (in Kazakhstan and later Kyrgyzstan).⁹⁴ In Kyrgyzstan, economic resources took the form of international aid, while in Kazakhstan there was considerable foreign direct investment in the energy sector. His main argument is that “only if central governments are consistently starved of the economic resources of rule, do opportunities for liberal change arise.”⁹⁵ In the case of Kyrgyzstan, in particular, he argues that the initial period of independence between 1991–1994 was characterized by political contestation and a lack of economic resources leading to liberal change, while in 1994–1995, upon the receipt of international aid, the leadership was able to use Soviet-era institutions (hierarchical patronage networks and a predatory judicial system) to exert control over political opponents. In effect, foreign aid was used to weaken the parliament.

These three small-N studies either make assumptions about the role of leadership in their cases or downplay the role of individual agency in their explanations. In particular, both Jones Luong and Collins, while identifying the role of the president and certain other elites as important actors, downplay the importance of Akaev’s leadership and ideas, focusing instead on perceptions of power between center and regional leaders in the case of Jones Luong, and on the role of clan politics for Collins. Jones Luong in fact argues that leadership and commitment to political or economic liberalization play no explanatory role: “Akaev did not liberalize his regime either because Kyrgyzstan faced a greater economic crisis than its Central Asian neighbors or because he was more committed to democratic reform than his counterparts in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, but because he was bargaining from a position of weakness relative to other established elites.”⁹⁶ Likewise McGlinchey argues against agency-based arguments: “Though many in the West interpreted Kyrgyzstan’s early political contestation as a result of purposive, Akaev-initiated liberal reform, my research finds that it was Akaev’s incapacity, his inability to control the political opposition, that enabled Kyrgyzstan’s initial democratic opening.”⁹⁷

My analysis suggests on the contrary that Akaev’s leadership played an important role in determining Kyrgyzstan’s initial liberal political and economic reform path. While it is beyond

the scope of this paper to defend this claim in general, I believe that leadership should be ‘brought back in’ to comparative analysis, especially in Central Asia where executive power and personal politics have a disproportionately large influence. In particular, the question I have tried to shed light on is not only whether leadership mattered, but also *to what extent* it mattered and *how* Akaev’s leadership strategies changed over time.

The evidence reviewed in this narrative suggests that Akaev came to power at a “critical juncture” in the country’s transition.⁹⁸ As one scholar has written in regard to “critical junctures”: “At the core [of the notion] is the very simple idea that the decisions of political actors are efficacious, or autonomous of a socioeconomic realm which generally changes in an incremental manner, and introduce a break or discontinuity in political patterns. Political choices, in short, stand behind and explain critical junctures.”⁹⁹ In the case of Kyrgyzstan, the critical juncture occurred not with the creation of the republican post of president—all other Central Asian republics created such a post as part of the incremental reform of Soviet institutional structures. Rather, it came on the eve of elections when an institutional crisis emerged. Whereas in the other Central Asian republics the reigning leader of the Communist Party became president, in Kyrgyzstan the situation differed. Masaliev, the Party first secretary, twice fell short of the votes he needed to become the first president, and as a result there was an unexpected political opening for other candidates. This opening, combined with the timing of Akaev’s entry into the political area in 1989 and his election into the Kyrgyz Supreme Soviet in August 1990, was essential to his coming to power. Thus in the broader context of the transition, one-time political choices made by high-ranking Soviet leaders regarding the electoral crisis led to a critical change in leadership.

Once in power, Akaev’s ideas and beliefs—expressed *before* he became president of the republic and then of the country—impacted his reform choices. A leader with different ideas about economic reform or political contestation might not have succeeded in easing the ethnic and social tensions that flared in 1990, or he might have pursued different strategies and levels of reform once in office. Whether or not Akaev was weak politically, lacked economic resources, or

was part of particular clan structures, did not alone determine particular outcomes. While such factors as political weakness, economic malaise, and political fragmentation may have shaped Akaev's options and environment, they did not predetermine policies such as the pursuit of market reform or the liberalization of the media and political space.

My analysis of Akaev's early initiatives and strategies also helps explain how his leadership changed over the course of the 1990s. Akaev pursued policies such as devolving political power to the regional leaders and painful economic reforms in the early 1990s that ultimately challenged his own authority. Here the previous studies mentioned above help to explain Akaev's increasingly authoritarian tendencies. Jones Luong sheds light onto important center-region tensions and the increasing perception over the 1990s that Akaev was losing power to the regions. McGlinchey highlights the important linkages between politics and economics, in particular how foreign aid became a resource for the executive to manipulate the legislative branch beginning in the mid-1990s. And Collins isolates the importance of clans and clan politics in constraining Akaev and stripping state assets by the late 1990s.

Akaev's leadership role in opening society and promoting liberal reforms has had a lasting impact. Unlike leaders in neighboring Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, who never liberalized to the extent that Kyrgyzstan did and relied on coercive measures from the onset of their rule, Kyrgyzstan remains home to an active civil society, including over 1,000 non-governmental organizations and numerous well-established and vibrant universities with ties to the United States, Russia, and Turkey. The general level of openness in society, while considerably constrained, is markedly higher than in neighboring Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, which rank among the 16 countries singled out as the most repressive regimes in 2003 as reported by Freedom House. Kyrgyzstan is noticeably absent from this list.¹⁰⁰ How the country's trajectory evolved over the 1990s, and why contemporary Kyrgyzstan both resembles its more authoritarian neighbors yet also differs significantly from them, is impossible to explain convincingly without reference to the leadership role played by Akaev.

NOTES

¹ I define Central Asia as the region including the five former Central Asian Republics of the Soviet Union, Afghanistan and western China. This corresponds to the historic understanding of Central Asia, sometimes termed also “Central Eurasia.”

² A case study is justified in this instance because the Kyrgyz Republic was viewed during the Soviet period as one of the most politically conservative and “backward” of all the republics and therefore least likely to reform. It therefore qualifies as a “deviant case.” As Lijphart explains: “[Deviant case studies] are selected to reveal why the cases are deviant—that is to uncover the relevant additional variables that were not considered previously, or to refine the (operational) definitions of some or all of the variables” (Arend Lijphart, “Comparative Politics and the Comparative Method,” *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 65, No. 3. (Sept. 1971), pp. 682–693). See also Harry Eckstein, “Case Study and Theory in Political Science,” in Greenstein and Polsby, eds, *Handbook of Political Science* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1973). According to Eckstein, Kyrgyzstan would be a “least-likely” case (see pp. 118–120).

³ George W. Breslauer, *Gorbachev and Yeltsin As Leaders* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002) p. 3.

⁴ Implicit in this definition is that authority demands obedience of a particular population or group. See “What is Authority,” (Chapter 3), in Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin Books, 1978).

⁵ Melis Eshimkanov et al., *A. Akayev: The First President of Independent Kyrgyzstan*, Kyrgyzstan, 1995.

⁶ Akaev’s motivations for joining the Communist Party remain controversial. Numerous authors suggest that Akaev’s late entry into politics signifies that his reasons for joining were personal, relating to career advancement rather than ideological considerations. See Gregory Gleason, *The Central Asian States: Discovering Independence* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997) p. 95.

⁷ Eugene Huskey, “Akaev, Askar,” in Joseph L. Wiczynski, ed., *The Gorbachev Encyclopedia: Gorbachev: the Man and His Times* (Salt Lake City: Charles Schlacks, Jr., Publisher, 1993) p. 31.

⁸ Kathleen Collins, *Clans, Pacts, and Politics: Understanding Regime Transition in Central Asia* (Doctoral Dissertation: Stanford University, December 1999) p. 181.

⁹ Huskey in Wiczynski, ed., p. 31.

¹⁰ Eugene Huskey, “Kyrgyzstan: The Fate of Political Liberalization,” in Dawisha and Parrott, eds., *Conflict, Cleavage, and Change in Central Asia and the Caucasus* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997) pp. 251–3.

¹¹ Huskey in Wiczynski, ed., p. 32.

¹² Kyrgyzstan is a multi-ethnic country with many internal divisions between city and rural populations, ethnic Kyrgyz, Russian and Uzbek minorities, and northern and southern regions. Regional divisions grew in part out of Soviet administrative policy, which fostered competition between the northern and southern regions for control over economic and political resources in the republic. In particular, between the 1960s and 1980s, one particular northern region dominated the top leadership posts of the republic, causing resentment in the south and also in other northern regions. For more details of this Soviet legacy and regional cleavages in Kyrgyzstan, see Pauline Jones Luong, *Institutional Change and Political Continuity in Post-Soviet Central Asia: Power, Perceptions, and Pacts*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge

University Press, 2002) Chapter 3. Luong argues that Soviet institutional structures diminished traditional tribal and clan divisions within the country. Another scholar, Kathleen Collins, argues in her doctoral dissertation cited above in Footnote 9 that Soviet institutions in fact reinforced preexisting clan networks, which have reemerged with the collapse of the Soviet Union. It is beyond the scope of this paper to assess the validity of each argument, as it would entail asking questions about the structure of Kyrgyz society prior to Soviet rule, the precise Soviet institutional legacy as pertains patronage, tribal and clan groupings, and the mechanism through which clan networks reemerged (if they indeed did). For the purposes of this paper, I recognize the generally undisputed regional divisions between the north and south of the country and the subdivisions within the north of the country. I understand Akaev to be influenced by what I term “social networks,” which include relationships with a variety of groups based among others on patronage, clan, or professional background.

¹³ See Eric McGlinchey, *Paying for Patronage: Regime Change in Post-Soviet Central Asia* (Doctoral Dissertation, Princeton University, 2003) for details on groups such as *Osh-aimagy* and *Adolat*, pp. 111–113.

¹⁴ Brown, Bess, “Signs of Tension in Frunze,” *Report on the USSR*, vol. 2, no. 8, February 23, 1990, pp. 18–19 and Eugene Huskey, “The Rise of Contested Politics in Central Asia: Elections in Kyrgyzstan, 1989–1990,” *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 47, no. 5, July 1995, pp. 817–818. Masaliev allied himself closely with Egor Ligachev, a conservative Politburo member in Moscow. Ligachev became increasingly alienated by Gorbachev’s path of reform, and was ultimately dismissed by Gorbachev in July 1990.

¹⁵ See T. Razakov, *Oshkie sobytie* (Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan: Renaissance, 1993) as cited in McGlinchey. McGlinchey notes that, according to the 1989 Soviet census, Uzbeks constituted 26% of the Osh oblast population and controlled 84% of all retail, yet they held only 11% of all deputy seats in the Osh oblast city and regional soviets. See p. 111.

¹⁶ Eugene Huskey, “Kyrgyzstan: The Politics of Demographic and Economic Frustration,” in Bremmer and Taras, eds., *New States, New Nations: Building the Post-Soviet Nations* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997) pp. 660–662.

¹⁷ *Current Digest of the Soviet Press*, vol. XLII, no. 25, 1990, p. 14.

¹⁸ See McGlinchey for additional details on the election process, pp. 113–115. Akaev was elected with 179 votes, “three votes more than the minimum required and only eight votes more than Masaliev’s losing tally of 171.”

¹⁹ “Kirghizia’s Akaev Interviewed on Future Goals,” *Pravda*, November 2, 1990 as reported by FBIS, November 6, 1990 (FBIS-SOV-90-215).

²⁰ K. Bayalinov in *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, from October 30, 1990 as reported by FBIS, “New Kirghiz President Akayev Interviewed,” from November 5, 1990 (FBIS-SOV-90-214).

²¹ “Kirghizia’s Akaev Interviewed on Future Goals,” *Pravda*, November 2, 1990 as reported by FBIS on November 6, 1990 (FBIS-SOV-90-215); Melis Eshimkanov et al., p. 32.

²² Bess Brown, *Report on the USSR*, vol. 3, no. 16, April 19, 1991, pp. 12–15

²³ “President’s First Decree,” *Izvestia*, as reported by FBIS, November 4, 1990.

²⁴ Bess Brown, *Report on the USSR*, vol. 2, no. 48, November 30, 1990, pp. 17–20.

²⁵ “Interview With Kyrgyz President on Policies,” *Moscow Central Television First Program Network*, as reported by FBIS on July 2, 1991 (FBIS-SOV-91-127).

- ²⁶ “President Delivers Keynote Speech,” *Tass, Frunze*, as reported by FBIS, October 30, 1990.
- ²⁷ Edward W. Walker, *Dissolution: Sovereignty and the Breakup of the Soviet Union* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003) p. 7.
- ²⁸ Walker, pp. 79–80.
- ²⁹ Huskey in Dawisha, p. 253.
- ³⁰ Bess Brown, *Report on the USSR*, vol. 3, no. 16, April 19, 1991, pp. 12–15 and see also Gleason, p. 60.
- ³¹ Akaev stated that Kyrgyzstan “... considers a fundamental revision of the [Union] treaty’s text is needed, so as to strengthen the powers and interests of union republics in a decisive way.” August 26, 1991 as reported by the BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, “Speech by Akaev,” August 29, 1991.
- ³² *Current Digest of the Soviet Press*, vol. XLIII, no. 33, 1991, pp. 25–26 and *Current Digest of the Soviet Press*, vol. XLIII, no. 34, 1991, p. 48.
- ³³ Huskey, in Wiecznyski, ed., pp. 30–34.
- ³⁴ Eshimkanov et al, p. 108.
- ³⁵ Collins, p. 283.
- ³⁶ According to the 1989 Soviet census, Russians comprised over 20% of the population and Uzbeks over 12%.
- ³⁷ Huskey in Cummings, p. 77. See also Jones Luong, pp. 111 and 119 on how Akaev solicited parties and social organizations for policy-making advice.
- ³⁸ Jones Luong, p. 199.
- ³⁹ Huskey in Taras, pp. 662–663.
- ⁴⁰ Jones Luong, p. 120. It is unclear, however, whether the decline in emigration was a result of these policies or due to the fact that those who could afford to emigrate did so, leaving those who could not afford to do so.
- ⁴¹ “Kirghizia’s Akaev Interviewed on Future Goals,” *Pravda*, November 2, 1990 as reported by FBIS, November 6, 1990 (FBIS-SOV-90-215).
- ⁴² John Anderson, *Kyrgyzstan: Central Asia’s Island of Democracy?* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1999) chapter 2.
- ⁴³ Eugene Huskey, “National Identity From Scratch: Kyrgyzstan’s Role in World Affairs,” Draft Paper, November 26, 2000.
- ⁴⁴ “President Comments on Reform Program, Future,” *Dagens Hyheter*, March 20, 1992 as reported by FBIS, March 25, 1992 (FBIS-SOV-92-058).
- ⁴⁵ “President Akayev Criticizes Russocentric Press,” *Izvestiya*, March 23, 1992 as reported by FBIS, March 25, 1992 (FBIS-SOV-92-058).
- ⁴⁶ “Kirghiz President to focus on Ethnic Peace,” *Izvestiya*, November 14, 1990 as reported by FBIS, November 15, 1990 (FBIS-SOV-90-221).
- ⁴⁷ “President Akayev Interviewed on Moscow Visit,” *Moscow Russian TV Network*, May 28, 1992 as reported by FBIS, June 3, 1992 (FBIS-SOV-92-107).

⁴⁸ Gregory Gleason, *The Central Asian States: Discovering Independence* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997) p. 95.

⁴⁹ Jones Luong, p. 114. See also William Tordoff, "Local Government in Kyrgyzstan," *Public Administration and Development*, Vol. 15, 1995, pp. 495–505. Tordoff notes a 1995 speech by Akaev in which he stated that the local administration [governors], working with the local self-government, should become the "foothold of the state and the main level of reform."

⁵⁰ Anderson, pp. 75–76.

⁵¹ *Current Digest of the Soviet Press*, vol. XLIII, no. 33, 1991. pp. 25–26.

⁵² "President Akayev Interviewed on 'Live Dialogue,'" May 24, 1992 as reported by FBIS, May 29, 1992 (FBIS-SOV-92-104).

⁵³ "President Akayev Discusses Situation in Kyrgyzstan," *Ostankino Channel 1 TV*, November 23, 1992 as reported by BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, December 3, 1992.

⁵⁴ Askar Akaev, *Kyrgyzstan on the Way to Progress and Democracy* (Bishkek, 1995) p. 47. See also Jones Luong, p. 115.

⁵⁵ Martha Brill Olcott, "Ceremony and Substance: The Illusion of Unity in Central Asia," in Michael Mandelbaum, ed., *Central Asia and the World* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1994) pp. 39–44.

⁵⁶ Jones Luong, p. 108.

⁵⁷ Nikolai Andreev, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, vol. 50, no. 1, January-February 1994, pp. 52–54.

⁵⁸ Collins, pp. 267–8.

⁵⁹ Gleason, p. 98.

⁶⁰ Huskey in Dawisha, p. 257. Huskey argues that it was the speaker's own belief in the importance of avoiding open political conflict that led him to side with Akaev.

⁶¹ See Jones Luong, Chapter 5, for full details of this bargaining process. The concessions of the central leaders were the following: they revoked their support for proportional representation due to southern regional opposition, they accepted a bicameral parliamentary system to appease the northern leaders, and they also accepted a lesser role in the supervision of elections to accommodate both northern and southern leaders. Perhaps the most controversial electoral reform centered on the establishment of a bicameral parliament, a change that necessitated amending the Constitution. Akaev managed a heated north-south debate on this issue by creating an extra-parliamentary Constitutional Commission with leaders of the main regions in the north and south, as well as representatives of parties and movements. See also Pauline Jones Luong, "After the break-up: Institutional design in transitional states," *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 33, Issue 5, June 2000, pp. 563–592. While Jones-Luong sees the outcome of the bargain as a victory for the regional leaders, McGlinchey has interpreted the election law as "unambiguously favoring the executive." While he acknowledges that the electoral law increased regional representation, he argues that the reform to the upper chamber increased the executive's influence over the parliament. Many of these seats were filled by allies of the administration. See McGlinchey, pp. 175–79.

⁶² See McGlinchey, pp. 138–140.

⁶³ Collins dissertation, p. 345, and Jones Luong, p. 156.

⁶⁴ Gleason, p. 99; Huskey in Dawisha, pp. 257–9. Akaev did this by convincing a large group of parliamentarians to boycott the opening session of parliament in September in return for leeway in running their own regions. This caused a lack of quorum, which allowed the president to dismiss parliament and call new elections. See also McGlinchey, pp. 174–178.

⁶⁵ Collins, p. 347.

⁶⁶ Huskey in Dawisha, pp. 266–267. Masaliev, although discredited from his earlier political mishaps, won large percentages in Osh and Jalalabad in the south. Akaev won 90% of the north, and despite the horrible economic conditions in the south, 61% and 50% in Jalalabad and Osh, respectively.

⁶⁷ Collins, pp. 353–355.

⁶⁸ Huskey in Cummings, p. 83.

⁶⁹ Mohinder S. Mudahar, *Kyrgyz Republic: Strategy for Rural Growth and Poverty Alleviation*, World Bank Discussion Paper, No. 294, p. 127. Examples of these decreases include wheat by 20%, barley by 29%, corn by 33%, potatoes by 18%, and vegetables by 41%. Corresponding to these trends, trends in food industry production (processed foods) and livestock production, decreased in all major categories as well. See pp. 31–32.

⁷⁰ Mudahar, p. 106. Examples of these decreases include meat products by 28%, eggs by 79%, milk products by 30%, vegetables by 36%, sugar by 62%, and vegetable oil by 55%. Moreover, with the exception of fruits and berries that increased by 25%, consumption of the other two main staples, potatoes and bread products, remained constant.

⁷¹ Alexander Cooley, “International Aid to the Former Soviet States: Agents of Change or Guardian of the Status Quo,” *Problems of Post-Communism*, vol. 47, no. 4, July/August 2000, pp. 34–44.

⁷² McGlinchey, p. 221

⁷³ Collins, pp. 358–359.

⁷⁴ Huskey in Cummings, p. 87.

⁷⁵ Collins, pp. 366–368.

⁷⁶ Anderson, p. 59.

⁷⁷ “Kyrgyzstan’s Akayev on Afghanistan Peace Conference Idea,” *Moskovskiye Novosti*, August 14, 1997 as reported by FBIS (FBIS-SOV-97-226) and “Kyrgyzstan: Akaev approves of economic security measures,” *Interfax*, September 12, 1996, as reported by FBIS (FBIS-SOV-96-179).

⁷⁸ Some have suggested that Russian military entrance has occurred at a time of growing domestic instability in Kyrgyzstan. It would be the subject of separate analysis to investigate how these incursions and subsequent U.S. military involvement in the region have influenced Akaev’s strategies.

⁷⁹ Founded originally in 1996 as the Shanghai Five (Russia, China, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan), the organization was renamed the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in June 2001 with the addition of Uzbekistan.

⁸⁰ For a detailed analysis of these events, see the International Crisis Group’s Report “Kyrgyzstan’s Political Crisis: An Exit Strategy,” *International Crisis Group*, Osh/Brussels, August 20, 2002.

⁸¹ “Contentious Constitutions Referendum Campaign Winding Down in Kyrgyzstan,” *Eurasianet*, January 20, 2003.

- ⁸² “Referendum Ratchets up Rancor in Kyrgyzstan—Political Analysts,” *Eurasianet*, February 5, 2003.
- ⁸³ Meder Imakeev, “Kyrgyzstan: Southern Oblasts’ Autonomy Threat,” *IWPR Central Asia*, No. 166, December 4, 2002.
- ⁸⁴ For more detailed discussions of different theoretical approaches, see Fish chapter and McGlinchey Chapter 2.
- ⁸⁵ M. Steven Fish, “The Dynamics of Democratic Erosion,” in *Postcommunism and the Theory of Democracy*, Richard D. Anderson et al. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001) pp. 57–66.
- ⁸⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 66–75.
- ⁸⁷ Jeffrey Kopstein and David A. Reilly, “Geographic Diffusion and the Transformation of the Postcommunist World,” *World Politics*, Vol. 53, October 2000, pp. 24.
- ⁸⁸ *Ibid*, p. 33
- ⁸⁹ See McGlinchey, p. 43
- ⁹⁰ Jones-Luong book and article.
- ⁹¹ Jones-Luong, p. 28.
- ⁹² Collins, dissertation and article.
- ⁹³ See McGlinchey’s dissertation.
- ⁹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 11.
- ⁹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 51.
- ⁹⁶ Jones Luong, p. 275
- ⁹⁷ McGlinchey, p. 67.
- ⁹⁸ Ruth Berins Collier and David Collier, *Shaping the Political Arena: Critical Junctures, the Labor Movement, and the Regime Dynamics in Latin America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991). They used the term “critical juncture” to explain how Latin American states approached and incorporated labor.
- ⁹⁹ Gerardo L. Munck, “Between Theory and History and Beyond Traditional Area Studies,” Review article in *Comparative Politics*, vol. 25, no. 4, July 1993, pp. 475–498.
- ¹⁰⁰ See the 2003 Freedom House Report on “The World’s Most Repressive Regimes,” <http://www.freedomhouse.org/research/mrr2003.pdf>.