



The Journal of **MacroTrends** in Social Science

Demographic Divide and its Impact toward Authoritarianism in Central Asia: A Comparative Study of Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan

Ario Bimo Utomo

University of Sydney, Australia

Abstract

Authoritarianism is undoubtedly an essential topic in the contemporary political science. Scholars have tried to answer some questions like what factors retain it and why do some authoritarianism transition. In regards to authoritarianism, Central Asia offers an exceptionally interesting case study. Coming from a post-Soviet background, the states in the region were occupied by the need to assert sovereignty in their corresponding newly-built states. While the institutional features of the Soviet Union remained intact in those new states, their efforts have created a unique pattern of authoritarianism in this region. However, as time goes by, not all Central Asian countries go within the same trajectory. Some countries remain authoritarian, and some others are gradually becoming more pluralistic—if not democratic. In this case, Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan represent two different polar. Turkmenistan retains its authoritarianism, whereas Kyrgyzstan is increasingly becoming more pluralistic. This article argues that the demographic composition is the main defining factor which determined the next steps of statehood in both countries. This article concludes that Turkmenistan is more authoritarian due to its more homogeneous demographic composition, leading to a less complicated choice for the leaders to retain authoritarianism. On the other hand, a more heterogeneous Kyrgyzstan has driven its leaders to adopt a more pluralistic approach to ensure its stability.

Keywords: *Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Central Asia, authoritarianism, pluralism*

1.1 Introduction

Following the dissolve of the Soviet Union, Central Asia has evolved from a political backwater into independent entities in the international politics. Central Asia is an exceptionally interesting region, as the states in this region had never experienced statehood beforehand. Consisting five states: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, the

modern political boundaries of Central Asia were actually a product of the Soviet national delimitation policy (*natsional'noe razmezhevanie*) during 1924-1936. Through this policy, the newly-ruling Soviet leaders carved out 15 Soviet Socialist Republics (SSR) which represented several nationalities, five of which are Central Asian: Kazakh SSR, Kyrgyz SSR, Tajik SSR, Turkmen SSR, and Uzbek SSR. From there, Soviet planned to create more communist cadres from different nationalities, as well as to avoid resistance due to a perceived sense of forced Russification. Before this policy, therefore, Central Asian "nations" did not exist; what existed back then were loose nomadic groups under clan leaderships (Akcali 2003, p.414). As the result of this policy, those various ethnic groups were forcibly assimilated (or "consolidated" in a more euphemistic fashion) into five aforementioned titular nations. Soviet provided those republics with the quasi-state structures such as by installing political apparatus led by a leader from their respective ethnicities, creating standardised languages, and designing relevant social policies (Delanty and Kumar 2006 p.451). Therefore, paradoxically, the nationalism which Central Asian states possess today did not emerge inherently; rather, it was unintentionally given by the now-defunct Soviet Union.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 was possibly a shock for the Soviet Central Asia, as the republics were not prepared enough to be independent states. This region had already quite comfortable with Moscow as their guarantor, and there had been no quest for independence even until the late 1980's. Consequently, those titular republics were highly busied with their newly-acquired independence. In her article, Olcott (1991) calls this phenomenon as a "catapult to independence". In this troubling moment, sovereignty was the main concern, such as how to exclude external actors from their respective authority structures, and how to cement domestic legitimacy in order to exercise control over their defined territories (Cummings 2012, p.58). Moreover, due to the isolationist policy of the Soviet Union, Central Asia had always been unexposed to the "democratic tradition" which would enable them to easily depart from the Soviet-era authoritarianism. The most realistic choice for those new states, therefore, was to adopt the remaining ex-Soviet political system into the new system. In this case, the Communist Party elites in the former republics had effortlessly risen to power as presidents thanks to their Soviet-era popularity. Hierarchical social structure in the clan system in those states was easily replicated in the political life, creating a fertile soil for authoritarianism to survive (Kubicek 1998, p.30). Those historical explanations can help us understand the peculiar pattern of authoritarianism that remained in place during the first years of the post-communist Central Asia.

However, one common mistake is to treat all the Central Asian states as the identical kind of authoritarianism. In reality, Schatz (2006) suggests that one should also acknowledge that there are different shades between democracy and authoritarianism. At the softer end, there are some autocratic regimes which apply a certain degree of electoral features, or "competitive authoritarianism". At the other end, there are some more rigid regimes like "sultanistic regime" or "neo-patrimonial regime" (p.265). Thus, grouping those states within the same box is inaccurate. In this case, we can examine Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan. To begin with, Turkmenistan is one of the most authoritarian countries in the world. In their report, The Economist Intelligence Unit (2015) puts Turkmenistan in the 162nd place out of 167 countries under the "authoritarian" category, making it the most authoritarian state in Central Asia. Freedom House (2016) indicates the same result, where Turkmenistan classifies as the "not

free” country, receiving the lowest possible score of 7. Moreover, Turkmenistan retains its authoritarian regime with a personality cult which was developed by the first president, Saparmurat Niyazov. Turkmenistan has only experienced presidential succession following the death of Niyazov in 2006, where Gurbanguly Berdymuhamedow replaced him as the new president.

On the other hand, Kyrgyzstan is widely regarded as the odd man out in Central Asia. Even though Kyrgyzstan is still yet to be a fully democratic, the country has demonstrated a relatively higher degree of pluralism compared to its neighbours. Unlike Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan is classified as a “hybrid regime” by The Economist (2015), ranking 93rd out of 167 countries. Whereas, Freedom House labels Kyrgyzstan as a “partly free” state with the score of 5, two points better than Turkmenistan (Freedom House 2016). As the result, Kyrgyzstan is widely regarded as the “island of democracy” amidst the sea of authoritarianism (Anderson 2000, p.78).

1.2 Research Question

From those two instances, this article raises a research question: “Why has Kyrgyzstan become more pluralistic, whereas Turkmenistan remains authoritarian?”

1.3 Main Argument

This article highlights the importance of observing the initial demographic compositions in examining the differences between Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan. I argue that Turkmenistan, with its more homogeneous demographic composition, has been abler to create a stable authoritarian regime. The homogeneous population has brought easier choices for the elected leader to accumulate the resources and to minimise political oppositions. On the other hand, a multiethnic Kyrgyzstan was more naturally inclined toward competitions, as the leaders need to deal with reducing possible ethnic conflicts following their detachment from the Soviet Union. These differences in demographic compositions, therefore, have brought some impacts upon their next state-building courses.

This article suggests that we should not be quickly satisfied by assuming that political pluralism is a success. Rather, I agree with the idea of Way (2015) that political competitions occur because the state is too fragmented, or too weak to monopolise political control (p.8). In other words, a competitive political climate happens as the most feasible option in order to survive troubling political environments. In Way’s concept, this condition is called the “pluralism by default”.

Generally, I observe that there are three major approaches about the main factors contributing to the authoritarian durability in Central Asia. The first approach highlights the ability to create a common national identity. The more diverse a country is, the more difficult the process of nation-building will be. As the result, the authoritarian regime in a country with the homogeneous demographic composition will be, according to this approach, more durable. This factor is mentioned by authors such as Akcali (2003), Fuller (1994), and Way (2015). Second, a more voluntarist approach observes that leadership decision is another determining aspect. In this case, authors like Kubicek (1998) agrees with the main argument that Central Asia’s governance stability is also determined by the choices of their respective leaders. Lastly, there is also an approach that focuses on the ability of the state to gather the resources and to

install a strong authoritarian institution in their respective countries. Dahl (1973) and Way (2015) are the proponents of this thesis. In accordance with the discussion of this paper, I argue that those three factors matter, and are closely related to each other. We cannot simply separate the three factors in analysing the difference between one Central Asian country and the other ones. Thus, within the next paragraphs of this article, I will dissect how those three factors sequentially frame the differences between current trajectories of Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan.

2.1 Demographic Divide and Nation Building

To begin with, we can understand the difference between Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan by observing their obstacles toward nation-building. In this case, demography is a relevant departure point. I will draw mainly from the work of Akcali (2003), who says that the automatic detachment from the Soviet Union has consequently made the republics to start to adopt the policy of “de-Sovietization”. There were two overarching issues being addressed by this policy: (1) how those new independent republics build the sense of being new “nations”, and (2) how to form the political-legal framework as the base of such discourse (Akcali 2003, p.414). Therefore, the different governmental trajectories between Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan were also determined by what sort of “de-Sovietization” projects those countries have chosen, in relevance with their demographic compositions. Way (2015) also adds that a high level of national divide hinders authoritarianism, as it enables oppositions to minimise elite collusion thus increasing the “external constraints on authoritarian behaviour” (p.22)

Demographic-wise, Turkmenistan had always been having a better potential to evolve as a stable country. The country was the most homogeneous in Central Asia with the Turkmen, as the titular ethnic group of Turkmenistan, had already been the significant majority by representing 73 percent of the total population. On the other hand, the other minorities had never been above 10 percent. For instance, only 9.8 percent of the population were Russians; 9 percent were Kazakh; 2 percent were Uzbek (CIA 1995 in Kubicek 1998, p.30).

On the other hand, Kyrgyzstan was the least homogeneous country in Central Asia at that time it acquired independence. The borders which were drawn by Moscow has made them being a weak majority even in their titular republic. Even according to 1995 census, the Kyrgyz people reached only 52 percent. Russians and Uzbeks were two significant majorities with 22 percent and 13 percent respectively. Moreover, the demographics have already been segregated geographically, where the Kyrgyz were more concentrated in the northern part, and the significant minorities of Uzbeks were concentrated in the south. Even in Bishkek, the capital city, the presence of Kyrgyz people was not dominant since the sizable Russian minorities were also concentrated there.

The different demographic compositions of both countries have then brought a foundation to two diverging leaderships as well. In Turkmenistan, the more homogeneous environment had made it smoother for the Turkmen SSR elites to transform their old institutions into a new republic. Saparmurat Niyazov, the First Secretary of the Turkmen Communist Party, rose unchallenged as the only presidential candidate. Not only having the background as a Turkmen, Niyazov was also a member of the Akhal Teke clan, the strongest clan in Turkmenistan. His identity had considerably contributed toward Niyazov’s leadership

legitimacy. Realising an immediate need to cement a national identity, Niyazov then quickly responded by campaigning the “revival of Turkmen culture and glorifying its past history” (Akbarzadeh 1999, p.273). Given their small population, as well as their dependency on a well-functioning state, the minorities of Turkmenistan had no significant power to resist this project. Niyazov then established the Turkmen language, which had already been spoken by more than 70 percent of the population, as the official language. Besides of campaigning a Turkmen identity revival, he also established a personality cult, putting himself as the symbol of the national identity. Niyazov called himself *Turkmenbashi* (Father of the Turkmens), to evoke the image of a national guarantor during the era of traditional khanates.

The relatively homogeneous population had also benefited Niyazov politically. For instance, Niyazov had no problem in turning the Communist Party of Turkmenistan into the Democratic Party of Turkmenistan. This change was a mere lip-service to bring an image that he was committed to democracy, as the party largely retains the highly centralised Soviet systems.

Next, Niyazov had also successfully fused the traditional Turkmen leadership with the modern statehood. For instance, he created the *Khalq Maslehaty* (National Assembly), consisting of Turkmen elders, the Supreme Judge, the Prosecutor General, and uniquely, the President himself (ibid, p.276). *Khalq Maslehaty* is the highest authority in Turkmenistan and has the power to ratify treaties, adopt a constitutional amendment, declare war, and impeach the president should he violates the law. However, as the president himself is included as the member, the latter power is highly unlikely to be practised. In brief, *Khalq Maslahaty* only “mask the authoritarian nature with a structure intended to hark back to the tribal assemblies in the past” (Al-Bassam 2003, p.397). For that reason, this institution plays an extremely key role in retaining the authoritarian durability in Turkmenistan. Economically speaking, Niyazov was also considerably quick in taking control over the important resources. The Turkmen government directly nationalised their vast gas and oil reserves, leaving virtually no space for foreign investment. This condition was backed also by the remaining Soviet institutions of control, as well as the absence of a troubling demographic divide, making Niyazov more able to immediately monopolise the economy (Way 2015, p.156).

On the contrary, the business of nation-building was much trickier in the multinational Kyrgyzstan. The animosity between different ethnic groups was the greatest potential danger at that time. Reaching the end of the Soviet Union, Kyrgyz SSR was already afflicted by an ethnic conflict between the Kyrgyz and the Uzbeks in Osh, a province in the southern part of Kyrgyzstan. The conflict had eventually made the popularity of Absamat Masaliev, the First Secretary of the Kyrgyz Communist Party, to drop significantly. Amidst this condition, Askar Akayev, a pro-reformation activist, rose to popularity and got elected as the first president of Kyrgyzstan. Therefore, Akayev was the only Central Asian first president without the background of Communist Party leadership in his country. A physicist by occupation, Akayev was notable due to his commitment toward inter-ethnic harmonisation. He argued that without ethnic harmony, Kyrgyzstan could not make any progress (Liu 1998, p.81). Unlike Niyazov, Akayev was heavily cautious in creating a rigid national identity, as the divided population was the most fundamental aspect which could spill-over to other problems when not managed carefully (Achylova 1995, pp.326-327). As the result, instead of imposing a strong assimilation project, he showed a bigger emphasis on democracy and market liberalisation, making Kyrgyzstan a poster child for democracy in the post-communist world. Akayev banned the

Kyrgyz Communist Party, allowed opposition groups to develop, and privatised domestic resources. As the result, his commitment to liberalise his country had attracted the Western states. Kyrgyzstan received a heavy amount of foreign aid, particularly from the United States. A report from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) indicates that during 1992 to 2001, Kyrgyzstan received 168.6 million US\$ total aid, this figure is the largest among the Central Asian states, and approximately five times larger than Turkmenistan which received only 31.5 million US\$ (Schatz 2006, p.275).

However, despite his positive inclination toward pluralism, Akayev's leadership has left some institutional instabilities for Kyrgyzstan. In 1994, Akayev dissolved the parliament following several protests from the communists and national-democrats who rejected market liberalisation and the establishment of a Russian university in Bishkek. They accused Akayev of betraying the Kyrgyz nation (Kubicek 1998, pp.37-38). At this time, Akayev survived because the referendum wanted him to stay in power. In 1998, the opposition groups grew even bigger as the Kyrgyz economy collapsed following the depreciation of the Russian ruble. Once again, the protesters pointed out the idea of economic liberalisation which was conducted by Akayev as the scapegoat (Shoemaker 2012, p.253). After that, his regime experienced some more fluctuations which eventually led to him being overthrown in the Tulip Revolution in 2005. Kubicek observes that Akayev's decision to open the country for liberalisation was an "awry" experiment (1998, p.36).

According to Way (2008), authoritarianism tends to be less durable when the regime (1) has relatively high links with the West and (2) has a strong support from the incumbent party (p.55). From this starting point, we can examine what makes authoritarianism prevails in Turkmenistan under Niyazov, but not in Kyrgyzstan under Akayev. To begin with the first thesis, Kyrgyzstan's decision to expose itself to liberalisation was attractive for the West, thus creating a linkage which increased "the extent to which Western powers are willing to invest in regime change" (Way 2008, p.60). On the other hand, Turkmenistan directly nationalises the economy, isolating itself from Western involvements, thus indicating low ties with the liberal democracies. In another article, Dahl (1973) supports this thesis by arguing that a highly concentrated economy favours the authoritarian durability. When the oppositions have no access to the resources, the chances for competitive politics are "practically non-existent" (p.50).

Next, if we are to analyse the second thesis, Akayev had always been a weaker leader compared to Niyazov. First, Akayev was a political outsider: he emerged as an independent candidate following the dissatisfactions over Masaliev's previous leadership. Thus, he did not possess the necessary support from a strong incumbent party. Meanwhile, Niyazov was previously the leader of the Turkmen Communist Party, and he had the authority to turn the party into a new entity, creating a platform to cement his political legitimacy. In contrast, instead of evolving the Kyrgyz Communist Party into a new party to support him, Akayev banned the party following the independence of Kyrgyzstan, making his political stature became even frailer as opposition parties emerged to the surface.

After the end of both regimes, Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan continue the path that was already paved by their respective leaders. After the demise of Saparmurat Niyazov, the presidency is continued by his successor, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow. Albeit initial expectations that he would bring a reformation to Turkmenistan, it turns out that

Berdymuhamedow retains the autocratic system thanks to the rigid autocratic institutions that have been in place. In contrast, the liberalisation legacy of Akayev has made Kyrgyzstan becomes more oscillated. After the 2005 Tulip Revolution, another revolution occurred again in 2010 to oust the ruling president Kurmanbek Bakiev. Following that event, the country decided to limit the power of the president by switching to the parliamentary system, making Kyrgyzstan the only country in Central Asia to adapt parliamentarism.

3. Conclusion

This article acknowledges that authoritarianism in Central Asia is a complex matter. However, this article tries to highlight a facet of it by examining the variation of demographic compositions as the departure point. From there, we can analyse the differences between Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan. Unlike Niyazov who had to manage a relatively homogeneous country, Akayev faced a more difficult nation-building process caused by the fragmented identity in Kyrgyzstan.

From those two different conditions, we can also observe how the initial process of nation-building in Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan have determined the next trajectories of both countries. As the manifestation of his careful approach toward differences in Kyrgyzstan, Akayev laid a foundation for a pluralistic state by eliminating Soviet influences, such as banning the Communist Party and liberalising the economy. Unfortunately, those seemingly-popular decisions were undertaken at the expense of his regime's durability. However, Akayev was left with no other choice, especially considering that the divide was already high. In other words, Kyrgyzstan have been inherently destined to be a pluralistic country. In Turkmenistan, the uniform national identity has made it easier for Niyazov to build a strong national identity by promoting the traditional Turkmen culture. At the same time, Niyazov was successful enough to secure state resources to deter his opponents. When there is no significant resistance from the minority groups, Turkmenistan sees no problem in retaining its authoritarian regime.

Albeit its modesty, this article aims to rise a further discussion on how ethnic bonds and democracy are closely intertwined. I conclude that pluralism is not a moralistic choice, but rather a political one. One should not assume that democratic pluralism is a sign that a certain leader is morally correct. Rather, we should bear in mind that state leaders have to consider their intrinsic variables of their countries when adapting what they perceive as the most suitable type of governance.

Bibliography

- Achylova, R., 1995. *Political Culture and Foreign policy in Kyrgyzstan. Political Culture and Civil Society in Russia and the New States of Eurasia*, New York: ME Sharpe.
- Akbarzadeh, S., 1999. National Identity and Political Legitimacy in Turkmenistan. *Nationalities Papers*, 27(2), pp.271-290.
- Akali, P., 2003. III. Nation-State Building in Central Asia: A Lost Case?. *Perspectives on Global Development and Technology*, 2(3), pp.409-429.
- Al-Bassam, K., 1997. The Evolution of Authoritarianism in Turkmenistan. *Demokratizatsiya*, 5(3), pp.386-405.
- Anderson, J., 2000. Creating a Framework for Civil Society in Kyrgyzstan. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 52(1), pp.77-93

- Cummings, S.N., 2013. *Understanding Central Asia: Politics and Contested Transformations*. London: Routledge.
- Dahl, R.A., 1973. *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*. London: Yale University Press.
- Delanty, G. and Kumar, K. eds., 2006. *The SAGE Handbook of Nations and Nationalism*. New York: SAGE.
- Fuller, G.E., 1994. *Central Asia: The Quest for Identity*. *Current History*, 93(582), p.145.
- House, F., 2016. *Freedom in the World 2016, Anxious Dictators, Wavering Democracies: Global Freedom under Pressure*. Accessed from https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FH_FITW_Report_2016.pdf (15 November 2016)
- Kubicek, P., 1998. Authoritarianism in Central Asia: Curse or Cure?. *Third World Quarterly*, 19(1), pp.29-43.
- Levitsky, S. and Way, L., 2002. The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism. *Journal of Democracy*, 13(2), pp.51-65.
- Liu, G., 1998. Ethnic Harmony and Conflicts in Central Asia: Origins and Policies. In Y. Zhang & R. Azizian (eds.) in *Ethnic Challenges beyond Borders* (pp. 73-92). London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.
- Olcott, M.B., 1991. Central Asia's Catapult to Independence. *Foreign Affairs*, 71, p.108-130.
- Schatz, E., 2006. Access by Accident: Legitimacy Claims and Democracy Promotion in Authoritarian Central Asia. *International Political Science Review*, 27(3), pp.263-284.
- Shoemaker, M.W., 2012. *Russia and the Commonwealth of Independent States 2012*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.
- Economist, T. *Democracy Index 2015: Democracy in an Age of Anxiety*. 2015. Accessed from: <http://www.eiu.com/Handlers/WhitepaperHandler.ashx> (15 November 2016)
- Way, L., 2008. The Real Causes of the Color Revolutions. *Journal of Democracy*, 19(3), pp.55-69.
- Way, L., 2015. *Pluralism by Default: Weak Autocrats and the Rise of Competitive Politics*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press