The president-elect Almazbek Atambayev won 63% of the votes in the elections endorsed by the State Department and, more vaguely, by the OSCE\(^1\). Regional preferences emerged quite saliently in Kyrgyzstan, with the more developed and richer “north” (provinces of Chuy, Talas, Naryn, Issyk-Kul and the capital Bishkek) preferring pro-Russian Atambayev, while in the more rural and poorer “south” (provinces of Osh, Jalal Abad and Batken) the ethnic Kyrgyz vote was split between two candidates, with the Uzbek minorities either abstaining or voting for Atambayev. The major reason for the Uzbek abstention seems to be fear of election-connected violence in the southern regions, which are only just recovering from the bloody interethnic clashes of June 2010\(^2\). An important nuance in regional voting was that while southern candidates failed miserably in the north, Atambayev performed quite well in the southern constituencies\(^3\).

The “north” put forward a single candidate, backed and endorsed by regional allies, while the southern vote was split between two candidates running on similar nationalist platforms: Kamchybek Tashiev and Adahan Madumarov. Both promised to revise the constitution with a stronger presidency and to imprison members of the transitional government. Both also had high-level posts in the ousted regime and are very critical of the transitional government.

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\(^1\) All official election-related data are from Kyrgyz Central Election Commission database available in Russian at http://cec.shailoo.gov.kg/. The US President’s Statement dated October 31, 2011 is available at http://www.whitehouse.gov and OSCE’s Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions is available at http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/84573.


\(^3\) Election results at cec.shailoo.gov.kg (Russian and Kyrgyz only).
Such “revanchist” attitudes alienated the liberals and ethnic minorities and enraged the caretaker government, which threw all its influence behind Atambayev⁴.

The elections were marred by allegations of multiple voting, incorrect voters’ lists, ballot box stuffing and voter intimidation, but these could not have significantly affected the outcome. The OSCE Election Observation Mission could not dismiss the elections as unjust and unfair, and the big divide between the winner and runners-up (63% vs. 15%) provides further evidence. Two losing candidates claimed there was wide use of the notorious adminresursy⁵, but no supporting evidence was presented. Moreover, effective use of adminresursy was unlikely by a coalition government, where six ministries were controlled by the losing side.

The overall turnout was 60%; much higher in the northern provinces where it ranged between 65 and 82% against the southern turnout of 49-51%. Experts have attributed the northern activism to fear of nationalist and revanchist southerners⁶, while the southern low turnout was partly blamed on the Uzbek minority's abstention.

The two prominent southern presidential hopefuls started protesting before the preliminary results were even known and demanded a repeat vote, complaining of significant electoral fraud and wide use of state apparatus to skew the electoral results⁷. Later, however, it became clear that a repeat vote would not be held, and currently it seems a power-sharing agreement has been reached between northerners and southerners, though there is no consensus on which specific positions will be offered to the losing side.

Notwithstanding serious electoral violations and potential instability, the October poll was a historic and unprecedented event in the history of Central Asia: a peaceful transfer of power took place in a region where, as a rule, leaders are thrown out violently, pass away or have remained in power since the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991. Moreover, the October elections were some of the few in which the result was not known in advance.

### Background facts

After the break-up of the Soviet Union, Kyrgyzstan elected Moscow-trained physicist Askar Akayev as its first president. Akayev’s academic credentials, soft manners and outspoken liberalism endeared him to the West, and international aid flowed in exchange for radical political and economic reforms. Not inheriting much from the Soviet Union in terms of industrial infrastructure and without any strong opposition from the communists, Kyrgyzstan underwent its privatization program much more easily than other shock privatizers. Akayev also acquiesced to international pressures and greatly liberalized the political system, earning the international community’s praise that Kyrgyzstan was an “island of democracy” in the region. The country opened up to a foreign military presence and is the only country in the world to host American and Russian airbases. The American-run Manas airbase is key to military supplies to Afghanistan and the authorities have regularly used it as a negotiation card with American diplomats.

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⁵ Adminresursy is a popular term in Russian-speaking Eurasia denoting a set of practices where government employees and resources are mobilized in favor of the incumbent e.g. state employees are instructed to vote in a certain way or mobilized to serve the incumbent’s electoral campaign.
Attempts at liberalism and democracy were most likely necessitated by dire economic performance and the acute need for foreign aid. In that light, liberal overtures were more a sign of economic emergency than a genuine interest in democratization.

As time went by, Akayev consolidated his power and brought the country out of post-Soviet chaos, but became increasingly authoritarian and paternalistic. The presidential family members became actively involved in politics and business: no serious appointments would be made without a bribe to Akayev’s ubiquitous wife Mayram, and no big business that his son Aydar did not want to take over would remain. The tipping point came in March 2005, when it became clear that Akayev was set to staff parliament with his family and supporters and to monopolize power. The regional elites who lost their parliamentary seats to Akayev’s people quickly mobilized crowds and the angered public ousted Akayev in the “Tulip Revolution”.

Akayev’s successor Kurmanbek Bakiyev was a one-time Premier who was believed to be one of the richest men in Kyrgyzstan. Bakiyev overwhelmingly won the subsequent elections, thus legitimizing his rule, and pushed through a new constitution that gave him extensive powers. President Bakiyev did not bring anything of value to Kyrgyz democracy or economic development, his term being marred by monstrous embezzlement, ruthless authoritarian rule and violent repression of political rivals. Bakiyev’s son Maksim took over the business empire of the previous president’s son and went as far as monopolizing all economic activity under the new super-agency he headed. Bakiyev was ousted in a bloody uprising in April 2010, leaving 87 dead and many wounded. Unlike his predecessor, Bakiyev did not hesitate to use weapons and did not step down immediately. A prolonged political crisis and the subversion of state authority that the Bakiyev family seems to have deliberately caused are believed to have led to bloody interethnic clashes.

The inter-ethnic clashes broke out on June 10 in the city of Osh, following a dispute between a young Uzbek and a Kyrgyz who quickly gathered crowds of friends. This personal conflict instantly spilled over into mass mobilization and violence by ethnic Uzbeks, that was heavily retaliated by ethnic Kyrgyz over the following four days. Law enforcers and the military were reported to be involved in facilitating acts of violence in compact Uzbek neighborhoods, either on purpose or unwittingly. While it is true that both sides were engaged in violence, the percentage of ethnic Uzbeks among the victims was disproportionately high. Even more troubling is that the Uzbeks made up virtually all those convicted of rioting, terrorism and similar charges in the aftermath, by the law enforcement structures. Most international and local humanitarian aid and human rights groups have indicated that the Uzbek minorities’ rights were severely violated. The Kyrgyzstan Inquiry Commission, an international panel headed by former Finnish MP and OSCE Representative for Central Asia Kimmo Kiljunen, concluded that the violations committed in June 2010 could qualify as crimes against humanity.

The conflict left 470 dead and 1900 wounded, 2800 properties.
destroyed and around 400,000 persons displaced\textsuperscript{14}. In the city of Osh, whole Uzbek neighborhoods were set alight and demolished. Human rights groups report that gross, mass-scale human rights violations have continued until today. The Kyrgyzstan Inquiry Commission recommended that the government initiate a truth and reconciliation process and bring perpetrators to justice, but since the general conclusions enraged the Kyrgyz elites, the recommendations were rejected and Kiljunen was declared persona non grata.

\textbf{Implications}

Currently a deal is being brokered between the winners and losers, and Atambayev will eventually take office. Hopes are high for his presidency and Atambayev is expected to ally Kyrgyzstan closer with Russia. The pro-Russian stance was hinted at immediately after the elections, when it was announced that the American airbase in the country will be closed in 2014. Russia hosts many Kyrgyzstani labor migrants who have a significant impact on the Kyrgyz economy\textsuperscript{15}. The majority of the population views Russia positively, hoping closer ties will bring economic development and greater stability. Given Kyrgyzstan's geography and economic ties, no political leader can choose to circumvent Russia and whoever comes to power will have to negotiate with Moscow and seek favor from it. Therefore, Atambayev will most likely play by the book, promoting closer integration with Russia in the Customs Union framework which currently involves Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus. He may also do so in the framework of the recently-proposed Eurasian Union, a loosely-defined structure for economic and political cooperation put forward by Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. Closer integration with Russia should also be expected, given the intensive labor migration from Kyrgyzstan to Russia and Kyrgyzstan's commercial ties with Russia.

Political stability remains the largest problem in Kyrgyzstan, undermined by its lack of rule of law and rising ethno-nationalism in political discourse and praxis. Poverty and limited economic opportunities add to public discontent and further fuel the potential for conflict. Crowd politics has become the order of the day; the blocking of highways and storming of government buildings have been normalized as accepted repertoires of contentious politics. On the positive side, however, mass repression by central government to protect itself no longer seems to be an option. While episodic and even systematic violations of human rights may occur, visible suppression of mass discontent by the armed forces has proven to be ineffective and is considered unacceptable nowadays.

The current elections will certainly boost Kyrgyzstan’s political rights score, and are in general terms a great step towards parliamentary democracy. With power fragmented among the multiple regional elites, political initiatives will be much harder to move forward but deliberative processes will hopefully lead to better democracy. Even though the quality of the deliberation and negotiation processes is currently very low due to the uneducated electorate and the populism that characterizes any developing democracy, the consistent practice of deliberation and deal-making may lead to change.

Although being a weak state is generally an obstacle to democracy, it may be one way to achieve democracy in this region where strong states tend to use their strength to monopolize power and intimidate their citizens. The fact that no single regional group is able to monopolize power might indicate that the country will most likely turn into a type of competitive oligarchy, to use Robert Dahl’s


term\textsuperscript{16}, or an “exclusive” electoral democracy, to use Larry Diamond’s typology\textsuperscript{17}. Kyrgyz democracy will be exclusive because the rights of minorities will remain a problematic issue.

Political uncertainty due to continuing instability may motivate the elites towards pacted transitions along the lines of Southern European or Latin American transitions, and lead to fair elections and a stable constitution becoming consistent practice. After all, this region where democracy has never been a frequent guest, surprisingly boasts one new democracy that came to the fore by itself – Mongolia, and the hope is that Kyrgyzstan will follow the lead.
