

Kyrgyzstan: What does the fu

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The first step towards democracy was successfully accomplished in Kyrgyzstan by successful conduct of the Presidential polls. As promised by the new leadership, and confirmed by the 800 or so international observers, they were by and large free and fair. And if election process were an end in itself, one would be relieved by the outcome. But if election is a means not an end in itself, then one would have to look further towards the destination.

After all, the Kyrgyz nation had given so much sacrifice in life, liberty and property during the Soviet rule and then under the despotism of Askar Akayev, not solely for the purpose of having a grandiose electoral exercise costing millions of dollars to the kitty in a nation where 40% people live well below the poverty line. All they wished was to have a say in governance, a rule of law, an end to rampant corruption and a few glimmers of hope for a decent standard of life. Will Bakiev-Fulox duo be able to make it, is the million dollar question.

To begin with, even the 369 OSCE observers have not rated the elections as excellent or perfect but have given varied ratings from 'good' to 'very good'. They have agreed that the campaign was largely fair and on a

level playing field. No harassment for non-official candidates was carried out, although the number of candidates was reduced from 21 at the beginning of the hustings to only six on the D-day, as one after another candidate was knocked out on technicalities.

The two main candidates Kurmanbek Bakiev and his archrival Felix Kulov made an alliance that if the former became President, the latter would be nominated the Prime Minister, so effectively the electoral exercise was reduced to a formality. After the fifteen stifling years of Akayev's rule, Bakiev's interim administration was not at all unpopular and his five remaining Presidential contenders were political nobodies.

This partly explains the Bakiev landslide of 89% of the popular vote--- a figure reminiscent of the Communists era farcical poll results. Now whether the relative fairness in elections, by Central Asian standards, not European ones, is owed to a genuine commitment to democracy or to the fact that their victory was a writing on the walls any way, remains to be seen by subsequent conduct. After all, the same Bakiev as Prime Minister and the same Kulov as Security Minister had been responsible for killing of unarmed civilians in Aksy (2002) and elsewhere, as loyal

lieutenants of a dictator. The electorate of 2.5 million had voted all across the country as well as at polling stations in 11 Russian cities and 28 Kyrgyz embassies.

The Presidential hopefuls had to be Kyrgyz nationals, had to pass a test in Kyrgyz language, deposit \$2,500 as security and gather 50,000 signatures from supporters to be fielded as candidates. The OSCE had noted some problem with these conditions and had also expressed concern at some isolated incidents of ballot box stuffing, problems during counting and, at some places, implausible sudden rise in turnout figures. The decision of Bakiev and Kulov to resign from posts temporarily before elections was indeed welcome.

The promises for a fair and corruption-free democracy made by Bakiev, notwithstanding, it has been noticed all over the world, that the leaders with the best of intentions tend to concentrate power unless there are checks and balances within the system including an active and vibrant citizenry.

The Kyrgyz nation's courtship with democracy is only weeks old and a proper democratic culture takes time to evolve. In the meantime, the world community should try to

help Kyrgyzstan in embracing a sustained democracy, lest it falls within the Central Asian political culture of Stalinist governance and the fate of Kyrgyz nation gets sealed for another, Providence can tell, how many decades.

The first steps to be taken towards constitutional reforms are strengthening the Supreme Court, constitutional changes to transfer many powers to the office of the Prime Minister in order to create a balance between the two apex offices of the State, and new parliamentary elections, as this March's parliamentary elections were no more than a joke with the sovereignty of the people.

Besides the foregoing questions of purely legal nature, the new President has a number of political challenges before him; one, the fate of the US military bases, that the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is literally pressurizing Bakiev to say good bye to; two, tackling with the poverty where almost half the people cannot afford two meals a day; and three, grappling with all-pervasive corruption.

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tect on humanitarian grounds and Uzbek tyrant Karimov want them back for duck-shooting practice, threatening Kyrgyzstan with cutting off gas supplies otherwise according to unconfirmed reports, the four who were handed over to Uzbekistan by his interim administration last month have painfully died in acid baths. True, there is no Aladin's lamp with Bakiev and Kulov, yet they have a before them a well-trodden track of democracy and the rule of law, which if they opt for, can lead to a better tomorrow.

The Kyrgyz nation is in a state of flux and transition, and greater tact and statesmanship is called for at the hour. The supporters of losing parliamentary candidates of the March electoral farce that had instigated the chain of events leading to the 'tulip revolution', had occupied the Supreme Court building for a month, the election related violence claimed many lives, a leading politician was recently murdered in broad daylight in Bishkek, and the security forces had to use force to evict thousands of protestors occupying the main governmental building in the capital all this hints at a breakdown of stability. But these pangs are not unusual during such transitional phases after long and dark spells of dictatorship. A

strong will by the leadership and the nation will make the shreds of turmoil an a passing reference in the History textbooks.

The new President is a combo of an economist, an electrical engineer and a soldier. Born on 1st August 1949 in village Teyyit, near the Southern city of Jalalabad, he got his education in engineering from Russia, where he met his future wife (and now the first lady) at the Technical Institute, before joining the Army in 1972.

He came back in 1979, along with his Russian wife and two sons, to resettle in Kyrgyzstan. He joined Politics in 1990 and became Governor of Jalalabad in 1992 and held many positions until became the Prime Minister in 2001 and leading opposition figure, the following year, when he resigned after falling out with President Akayev.

How long can Bakiev remain a bedfellow with erstwhile first Felix Kulov is a moot point. the Central Asian political culture will he be able long to keep his sons, Marat, Deputy Chief of National Security, and younger Maksim, a private businessman, from becoming shadow Presidents? A combination of fate and circumstance has placed onerous responsibilities on Bakiev. Mr President, you must not fail your nation.