



TSPC
Policy
Note

CSOs Evolving in Kyrgyzstan

There is frequent debate in the Kyrgyz Republic about the power of civil society organizations. From foundations that may fund them, to local activists themselves, the question is often asked: How influential are CSOs and NGOs (nongovernmental organizations) and their representatives here? Recently this debate – particularly focused on the political programs of civil society organizations – was renewed following a visit to the country by a representative of the Varieties of Democracy Project.

The Varieties of Democracy project is a research effort led by fifteen social scientists on three continents, assisted by hundreds of country experts and an international advisory board, focused on measuring degrees and types of democracy around the world (see v-dem.net). Professor Staffan Lindberg of the University of Gothenburg in Sweden, a principle investigator for V-Dem, was in Bishkek to provide an update on the undertaking and to give a general overview of how a closer look at a large number of indicators may help to show how democracies are developing or regressing. V-Dem has a regional manager and a number of research assistants in Kyrgyzstan.

During discussions at the presentation, one of the participants voiced a concern about the political structure of Kyrgyzstan, with its strong parties and lack of member districts. He stated that leaders of the main political parties have a great deal of power since anyone who wants to run for office under a major party banner cannot do so without the approval of the party leader. He added that a member of parliament elected under the party name has a greater incentive – if he wants to run for office again – to do what the party leader says rather than to listen to any member of the public or any group. Many countries, he said, have instituted primary election systems to avoid allowing party leaders to have such power.

In reply, Professor Lindberg responded that in fact some advanced, developed countries – some of them Nordic Countries – have strong party systems and no primaries also, and yet these are strongly democratic. He noted, however, that a good part of the reason why democracy works well there is that these particular countries have a large number of strong civil society organizations to balance the power of party leaders, which he said did not seem to be the case in Kyrgyzstan.

This subject came up again just a few days later in a seminar organized at the University of Central Asia. On one side it was argued that evidence that civil society organizations were growing stronger was exemplified by: (1) the role of nongovernmental organizations' representatives in the writing of the new Constitution for Kyrgyzstan, and (2) the success of civil society groups in keeping a particular individual (name withheld) from being elevated to the Supreme Court. Other conference attendees argued strongly that civil society organizations in Kyrgyzstan are still quite weak, and that examples of any significant influence on their part are very rare. The only marginally influential groups, they claimed, are those NGOs that are funded by international organizations.

Outside the UCA meeting, other observers and analysts might make the case that civil society organizations have influence. Several months ago, for instance, a bill was introduced in the Jogorku Kenesh (parliament) that would have dramatically altered the Labor Code. This draft law was opposed by organized labor. Labor representatives met with parliament members, a labor-sponsored demonstration occurred outside of the government buildings, and a short time later the bill was withdrawn.

Groups concerned about the lack of a comprehensive government policy on migration and unhappy that the two government ministries dividing the migration portfolio have not been working well together recently have seen the development of a new draft government migration policy and the reestablishment of a government ministry – Labor, Migration, and Youth – that is at least designed to consolidate government migration policy. A group of human rights activists have secured a Memorandum of Agreement with the government that provides for spot inspections of detention facilities to prevent abuse of prisoners. Further, the Jogorku Kenesh holds committee hearings on matters of substance and invites NGO representatives to attend and testify, sometimes incorporating their verbal or written suggested language changes. A few NGOs seem to receive some media coverage for their serious democracy/transparency/accountability and election-monitoring work.

Yet many activists continue to maintain that the members of parliament and of government are basically unresponsive to civil society organizations and that government officials are disengaged, self-serving, big-spenders, and worse. These representatives argue that if civil society organizations had more power the governing process would be more democratic and the country's development would proceed more expeditiously.

The 15th edition of the USAID-sponsored Civil Society Organization Sustainability Index gives Kyrgyzstan a mid-range (4.1) rating for influence and viability. This study notes both strengths and weaknesses of the civil society sector. The report notes that, "Due to financial constraints, CSOs continue to face problems maintaining, much less expanding, their core personnel." It finds that CSOs "have not developed a close enough relationship with journalists to encourage positive

coverage.” It states that these organizations have problems with strategic planning and project management. Perhaps most importantly, the Index Report concludes that the broad public does not have a particularly favorable view of the civil society groups.

If the reputation of CSOs and NGOs is truly lagging and their influence limited, it does not augur well for the development of power to balance out the dominance of the party, government, and other elites. So what might be done, given that the constitution and electoral systems are unlikely to be changed anytime soon? It may be that civil society organizations need to begin to develop a more sophisticated system of representation of constituents, especially as it relates to the recurring elections of members of parliament, the president, parties, and local officials.

In many countries, organizations that represent the interest of teachers, of health care workers, of miners, of truck drivers, and others prepare well in advance for the next election. The goal is to educate their members and the public on the specific voting record of those running for elective office as elections approach. This is their way of making the candidates for office pay attention to their organizational priorities and interests. When many groups do this it has the benefit of balancing out the power of elites.

The organizations go through a process of identifying priority legislation and then keeping track of exactly how existing elected officials and parties vote on their priority legislation. They will often ask legislators to fill out questionnaires about how the legislators intend to vote on specific issues. Many organizations then design and distribute grids listing, by name or number, the most important legislative measures and show how each official voted on each of, say, 10 or 20 bills. At the end, each legislator (or candidate) gets a score. These grids and scores are distributed widely by leaflets handed out in public places and through radio, television, and other advertising – most effectively, just before the election. Over time, the candidates and parties begin to pay attention, because bad scores come to mean lost votes and support.

Of course, this is not the only way to educate voters. There are many ways. The point is to conduct the education. During the last election in Kyrgyzstan, the great majority of attempts to “educate” voters came in the form of banners and television advertisements from parties and candidates, not from groups of teachers, health workers, or laborers.

There are other things, obviously, that civil society and nongovernmental organizations can do to increase their strength and to promote democracy and transparency. Working together on identified fundamentals would be important. Some organizations are working very hard now to end the proxy voting – where JK leaders cast votes for absent or intimidated MPs – that is going on in the Jogorku Kenesh. Proxy voting concentrates power among elites and is profoundly

undemocratic. In addition, the influence of civil society would be enhanced if citizens and groups – in Naryn, or Talas, or Osh, elsewhere – could readily provide their opinions and information directly to legislators through email. At present, individual members of the JK do not have email addresses listed on the JK website, despite repeated requests that they set this up.

Those individuals that came together to write the new Kyrgyzstan Constitution clearly were worried about factionalism, potential ethnic conflict and separatism, and the need to pull the country together. In creating a stronger parliament to counter the power of a president, they recognized the importance of the “balancing powers.” Now, if political theory has anything to say at all, civil society groups need to develop new tactics and take their proper place in the political system of this strategic country in Central Asia.

*by Rodger Dillon
Executive Director
Tian Shan Policy Center
March 6, 2013*