I

An Introduction to Political Development and Transition in Central Asia

In 1994, I had the opportunity to monitor the local elections in the Kyrgyz Republic. I was then given a first glimpse of clan politics. I talked with local elders who had come in to vote for their twenty or thirty closest relatives. The election monitors didn’t mind. “This is our practice here,” they said. They did not stop the elders, nor report incidents of fraud. Election observers in other districts recounted the same story. This seemed odd in a country recently deemed a “democracy.” The election results were even more odd, as political parties gained less than 20 percent of the seats in parliament and did not even field a candidate in the presidential elections. Just as bizarre were the 1994 and 1999 Uzbek and Tajik parliamentary elections, where new authoritarian regimes had attempted since the Soviet collapse to create mass, pro-regime parties, based on their renamed Communist Party institutions, but had widely failed. As in the Kyrgyz Republic, the majority of seats went to so-called independents. None of these regimes was able to combat the widespread practice of voting for personalistic leaders along clan lines. Moreover, in spite of massive campaigns by all three governments since 1991 to create national, civic identities, at the mass level, in all regions of each country, most people strongly identified with their local clan networks, not with parties, not with ethnic groups, and certainly not with either the democratic opposition or the state. In other ways, the Central Asian presidents actively drew on clan ties and practices during elections. In the subsequent presidential elections, the Kyrgyz government informally pressured local elders to organize a traditional “democratic” kurultai to endorse the incumbent president and to use their kin and patronage networks in the villages to vote for him.

The Central Asian elections offer just one example of “clan politics.” This study explores the causes, dynamics, and implications of this general type of political behavior – politics organized by and around informal identity networks commonly known as clans. After the Soviet collapse in 1991, neither scholars nor policy makers had anticipated the rise of a primarily
informal, clan-based politics throughout Central Asia. While the optimists predicted that democracy could and would spread to the far reaches of the former Soviet Union, the naysayers expected either the rise of Islamic fundamentalism or the persistence of communism even after the Central Asian republics were forced to exit the defunct Soviet Union. Indeed, the basis of such uncertainty and pessimism was strong; Central Asia, the Soviet Union’s southern, Islamic, and Asian rim, had never before experienced statehood and nationhood, much less democracy. For 130 years these republics had been colonized, first by the Russian empire and later by the Soviet empire; they thus shared a similar authoritarian political legacy.

While Russia has long viewed this region as its Muslim periphery, Central Asia was at the heart of multiple civilizations long before Russia’s entry into the region. The pre-Russian Islamicization, under the influence of Persian and Arab neighbors, and a pre-Islamic history characterized by tribal political alliances and a clan-based social organization are just as important to Central Asia’s cultural, social, and political history and identity. Indeed, the complexity of identity and history in Central Asia makes it a region of rich interest for studies of comparative politics.

This book is a study of regime transition, transformation, and state building in Central Asia, from Soviet colonization to decolonization; in particular, the book explores the informal politics that shapes these processes, the political systems that emerge, and the durability of these systems. Creating a democratic regime and creating a durable one are two issues that should be linked, yet most scholars and practitioners of the “third wave” of democracy have focused on building democratic regimes while neglecting the fundamental issue of regime stability. This study integrates these issues.

Building on very similar cultural and social foundations, and coming from nearly parallel experiences with Soviet political and economic institutions and development strategies, the five new states of Central Asia surprisingly embarked on distinct political trajectories. While the Kyrgyz Republic rapidly adopted democratic and market reforms, its neighbors – Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan – settled into a post-communist authoritarianism. Moreover, while four of the five Central Asian regimes survived the transition and have subsequently maintained internal stability, Tajikistan’s regime did not. In 1992, the Tajik regime collapsed in the midst of a bloody civil conflict that would last until 1997, with violent repercussions and flare-ups into early 2004. This is one central puzzle addressed in this book: What explains this initial divergence of trajectories – in both the type and the durability of these emergent regimes? Is democratization possible in Central Asia? And why do some regimes survive decolonization

and transition? That is, why are some regimes durable while others abruptly collapse in conflict?

Going beyond the transition, this study asks: What kinds of regimes emerge in the longer term? Can they be understood by examining only the formal institutions of the regime, when in fact in-country research suggests that clans play such a critical role? Why and how have clans and clan politics been shaping these political trajectories? We must explain the informalization of power in regimes that had once seemed so solidly institutionalized, consolidated, and even modern under the Soviet system. This book shows how clans have played a major role in this process. The book offers a historical and broader theoretical explanation of the persistence of clans and the rise of clan politics. Clan politics creates an informal regime, an arrangement of power and rules in which clans are the dominant social actors and political players; they transform the political system. Clan networks, not formal institutions and elected officials, hold and exercise real power. Clan politics has a corrosive effect on the formal regime, especially on democratic institutions; it further erodes the durability of both democratic and authoritarian institutions over time, as fragile, personalistic regimes cling to power.

In these respects, understanding clans in certain societies is critical to responding to one of the key theoretical and policy questions of our time: why and how does democratization sometimes fail, and why is political order often a victim as well? Instability, collapse, and conflict are the brutal consequences. Since the late 1990s, the U.S. government, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) have been both intrigued and confounded by democratization and its failures in Central Asia. Scholars and policy makers alike have viewed Central Asia through theoretical models that fail to grasp the complex sociological basis of either its pre-transition politics or its transitional and post-transition regimes. Most observers have viewed the post-communist countries uniformly as cases of democratization, implying that significant forces within society or the state were pushing for democracy. But while Central Europe succeeded, Central Asia failed. Thomas Carothers recently inserted a reality check into the “transitions debate.” Carothers countered that Central Asia, the Caucasus, and even Russia have not in fact been struggling toward democracy. They are not temporarily trapped between communist dictatorship and liberal democracy. Rather, like many failed (or half-heartedly attempted) African transitions of the 1950s and 1960s, and again in the 1990s, these regimes have comfortably settled into new forms of authoritarianism that might continue for decades. Not just in post-Soviet

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Central Asia, but in Afghanistan, Somalia, the Sudan, and Iraq, tribal and other identity networks have similarly attained greater salience as socialist dictatorships were swept away. The Central Asian cases therefore present a remarkable opportunity for scholars of regime change and democratization. In comparatively tracing three distinct post-communist transitions – democratization in the Kyrgyz Republic, authoritarianism in Uzbekistan, and regime collapse and disintegration in Tajikistan – this study tries together and examines both regime transition and democratization and political order and collapse.

I. AN OVERVIEW OF THE CENTRAL ASIAN TRAJECTORIES

In the heady days of the early 1990s, the Kyrgyz Republic seemed the exemplar of democratization theory; democratization had made significant strides, even in the most unlikely and unfavorable of circumstances. Neither socio-economic deprivation and decline, nor the “Leninist legacy” of seventy years, nor Islamic or Asian values – all factors that earlier scholarship had highlighted as detrimental to democratization – seemed to have thwarted the spread of democracy. Following the adoption of its new constitution in May 1993, the Kyrgyz Republic was internationally touted by the Western media as “an island of democracy” surrounded by a sea of authoritarianism. The president of the Kyrgyz Republic (more commonly referred to as Kyrgyzstan) was Askar Akaev, a former academic who became renowned in Western circles for his supple references to Alexis de Tocqueville and Thomas Jefferson. Kyrgyz legislators and judges flew to Washington, D.C. for training in democratic principles, the rule of law, and market economics. Where civil society had been nearly nonexistent, nongovernmental organizations suddenly proliferated, defending human rights, supporting women in business, developing a free press, and even creating a Silk Road Internet. Kyrgyz youth watched Dynasty, listened to Bruce Springsteen, wore American flag tee shirts, and even studied at Georgetown, Indiana University, and Notre Dame. These changes were foreign not only to communism but also to the region’s Asian and Islamic culture. The globalization of capitalism and democracy seemed at its apex.

A neat discussion of the Central Asian transitions would end with 1995; by then, the second set of presidential and/or parliamentary elections had taken place, a point that many democratization theorists use as the marker to end the transition. Kyrgyzstan had liberalized and established an electoral democracy by late 1991, according to Joseph Schumpeter’s minimalist


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criterion of free and fair elections. Civil and political liberties were rapidly expanding. While hardly a full-fledged liberal democracy, much less a consolidated one, Kyrgyzstan surprised the world during this early period. In Kyrgyzstan’s neighbors, however, elections were manipulated, and some doubted that any transition had taken place. In Uzbekistan, President Islam Karimov won a referendum and appeared to have consolidated his dictatorship, described in the American press as Stalinist. In Tajikistan, the former communist leadership was run from power during the civil war, and the newly elected president, Emomali Rakhmonov, emerged from the chaos of the civil war and recreated an authoritarian regime with Russia’s backing.

Yet the story of transition does not end here. As political uncertainty subsided and the new institutions and rules of the game were established, Central Asia’s regime trajectories increasingly converged. By 2000, these regimes looked quite similar – similar in their inability to consolidate their formal institutions, similar in their informal division of political and economic resources, and similar in their increasingly precarious grasp on domestic stability. By 2002, not merely democracy, but the durability of these regimes appeared to be in question. Why were these democratic and authoritarian institutions unable to consolidate their power? These cases suggest important implications for our understanding of institutions, the role of social actors in transitions, and the importance of informal politics.

Indeed, we find that, despite the postcommunist regime, institutions turn out to be less significant than the informal clan relationships that organize society and politics. In adopting a more historical and sociological view of political development in Central Asia, this work situates the short-term regime transition within the longer-term political development of this region – from its pre-Soviet and pre-modern society, through Soviet “modernization,” to a post-Soviet transition, transformation, and state building. In this light, the post-Soviet transition is indeed a sharp and uncertain break with the past. The divergence of Central Asia’s immediate post-Soviet trajectories is puzzling. The post-transition period, from about 1995 to the present, exhibits an ongoing dynamic between the formal and informal elements of politics, and a surprising reemergence of informal organizations embedded in both the Soviet and the pre-Soviet political order of this region.

Clans have not played a political role only in Central Asia. Yet they have greater resilience and political power in some societies than in others. For example, clans declined or disappeared in many states in Western Europe, and have sometimes been controlled by states in East Asia. Yet in post-Soviet Central Asia, we find that clans adapted to the Soviet system, were

5 See Joseph Schumpeter’s classic, Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy (New York: Harper and Row, 1975 [1947]).
Clan Politics and Regime Transition in Central Asia

Table 1.1. Political trajectories in the post-Soviet Central Asian cases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Formal Regime Type</th>
<th>Regime Durability</th>
<th>Informal Regime</th>
<th>Regime Durability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kyrgyzstan</td>
<td>Electoral democracy</td>
<td>Durable</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uzbekistan</td>
<td>Autocracy</td>
<td>Durable</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tajikistan</td>
<td>Collapsed regime</td>
<td>Not durable</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kazakhstan</td>
<td>Autocracy</td>
<td>Durable</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkmenistan</td>
<td>Autocracy</td>
<td>Durable</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Short Term: 1991–94**

**Medium–Longer Term: 1995–2004**

a Regime type is measured according to Freedom House scores.


c Clan politics is much more limited and controlled in this case, as a result of economic prosperity.

both repressed and fostered by it, and now play a transformative role in the post-colonial conditions of these new states. (See Table 1.1 for an overview of the cases and trajectories.)

One of the objectives of this book is to explore the relevance of two major theoretical arguments about democratization for understanding regime transition in Central Asia and, by implication, in other clan-based societies. Comparative historical analysis of the Central Asian transitions finds that neither the “preconditions” school nor the “transitions” school adequately explains the type of transition that takes place in these cases. However, this inquiry goes beyond the rather narrow focus of these approaches to post-communist studies, situating these transitions within a broader set of political

processes under way. In developing an alternative approach that puts clans at the center of a theory of political development, I draw upon the classic political sociology of Weber and Durkheim, as well as upon insights taken from the more recent literature on political development, informal institutions, norms, and networks, to explain these political processes. Clans are the critical informal organizations that we must conceptualize and theorize in order to understand politics in Central Asia and similar developing states. This work finds that the dynamic interplay among clans and between clans and the state helps to explain the central elements of the political trajectory: (1) regime durability, that is, whether or not the regime will be viable or collapse during and after the transition; and (2) regime type, not just the formal governing arrangements and distribution of power (e.g., democracy, autocracy, state socialism), but more importantly, the informal governing arrangement and distribution of power beneath the formal façade.

II. LINKING POLITICAL TRANSITION AND POLITICAL ORDER

In this book, I bring together two major literatures often treated disparately: studies of transition and democratization, and scholarship on political development and the social foundations of political order. This analysis both builds from and critiques earlier approaches, and contributes to them by offering a theory that connects clans and political trajectories. The post-communist cases are indeed a “laboratory” for theories of democratization. Yet they are also a laboratory for understanding the dynamics of political development and state building in post-colonial and post-imperial societies. Indeed, the two issues are deeply intertwined. Before delving into a discussion of a theory of clan politics and transition, in chapter 2 of this book, it is important to understand what the prevailing paradigms for studying transition tell us, or in fact fail to explain, in these cases.

The Inadequacy of Theories of Regime Transition

Two schools of thought have dominated the literature on regime transition and democratization, as well as the literature on post-communism, for

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7 Some scholars have argued that we should view the post-communist cases as transformations, suggesting a deeper change than a mere formal regime transition. See László Bruszst and David Stark, Post-Socialist Pathways: Transforming Politics and Property in East Central Europe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Katherine Verdery and Michael Burroway, Uncertain Transition (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999); and Valerie Bunce and Maria Csanádi, “Uncertainty in the Transition: Post-Communism in Hungary,” East European Politics and Societies, vol. 7, no. 2 (Spring 1993), p. 262.

decades. Since 1989, these schools have shaped the debate about the causes and failures of democratization in the post-communist transitions. In the 1960s and 1970s, one school of thought, generally known as “preconditions” or alternatively “modernization” theory, emphasized the causal role of macro-social, macroeconomic, and macro-cultural variables in explaining regime change and democratization. This school looks at rising GDP, literacy, and economic development, at the rise of a middle class, and at the presence of a secular, individualist culture as preconditions for democracy. Focusing on one social structure – class – Barrington Moore formulated the hypothesis: no middle class, no democracy. He would not have anticipated democratization in Kyrgyzstan, or anywhere else in the former Soviet republics for that matter. In fact, in 1991, except for their literacy rates (estimated at 97 to 99 percent) and their partial industrialization and urbanization, the Central Asian republics would hardly typify societies on the brink of democratization. (See Appendix, Tables A.3 and A.4.) Almond and Verba, representing another strand of the “preconditions” school, would have been skeptical because of the lack of individualistic and civic values, much less a civil society, across the region. On the one hand, large segments of society did remain independent of the state, especially after the Stalinist period. Yet, much like what has been termed “traditional society” in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, Central Asian society is organized around an array of clan, kin, and Islamic institutions. Social organization is largely ascriptive and involuntary, promoting communal norms and values, unlike the individualist and voluntary associations that de Tocqueville and others have argued are the basis of Western and democratic civil society.


probably not be sustainable. An unanswered question, however, is what mechanism or mechanisms undermine democracy in less modern countries.

For the past two decades, the “transitions” school has become the predominant approach for explaining transitions from authoritarianism and democratization. Dankwart Rustow, and later Guillermo O’Donnell and Philippe Schmitter, in a sharp break with their pessimistic predecessors, set out the central argument of democratization theory: elite actors can willfully reject authoritarianism and both initiate democratization and consolidate democracy irrespective of social, cultural, and economic conditions or historical legacies. While giving hope for democracy around the globe, this view often explains the short-term, elite-led initiation of democracy at the expense of anticipating and understanding the medium-term retrenchment toward authoritarianism, especially given the absence of social support for democracy. Indeed, the central hypothesis of this theory is that elite choices, in the form of often-exclusivist elite pacts are, paradoxically, the most likely path to successful democratization. Conversely, paths that involve society, the theory predicts, are more likely to end in failure. A large corpus of subsequent literature has focused overwhelmingly on the formal and elite level, on getting the formal institutions right to consolidate democracy, rather than on the often more powerful informal level. Less scholarship has been devoted to explaining the factors working against democratization, much less against consolidation. O’Donnell himself did warn that informal, particularistic relationships lead to low-quality, “delegative democracies” in much of the developing world, but he expects them to be durable regimes.

The Central Asian cases call us to rethink the central hypothesis of O’Donnell and Schmitter, since pacts in Central Asia have generally been followed by autocracy; they were followed by a brief period of democratization only in Kyrgyzstan, where Askar Akaev and a handful of civil society activists, not a pact between regime elites, were mainly responsible for...
the democratization that briefly occurred. The Central Asian cases offer a different hypothesis: pacts, when made between clan elites, are not a mode of transition to democracy, but an informal agreement that fosters the durability of the state, irrespective of the regime type.18

Recent contributions to the transitions school have often focused on the “post-communist” cases and the peculiarities of the “Soviet legacy,” without distinguishing the vast variation in that legacy from Hungary to Tajikistan. Again, they highlight the role of elite actors, ideology, and leadership choice in designing democratic institutions.19 However, they fail to explain why democratic ideology resonates in some societies and not in others, why some leaders matter and others do not, or how society may constrain transitions.20

A related problem is that few scholars have systematically incorporated the role of society and social organization, either in driving, facilitating, or inhibiting democratization and democratic consolidation. This is somewhat surprising, given the powerful role of social movements in the political transitions in Eastern Europe and the Baltics, in contrast with the silent role of society in most of Central Asia, where autocracies emerged. Those who have examined society’s role in democratization typically focus on class, labor, and parties – **formal** social organizations that are largely irrelevant in Central Asia since the Soviet collapse.21 Examining the role of **informal** social actors is just as critical.

Studying Central Asia further forces us to examine non-democratic trajectories – either the rise of new autocracies or, conversely, regime collapse. These phenomena have received surprisingly little attention in the transitions literature until recently, as scholars of post-communism struggle to explain...

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