

The Role of Civil Society in the Democratization of Kyrgyzstan: Mobilization, Resilience, and Repression

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ABSTRACT

Kyrgyzstan's path since leaving the Soviet Union has mixed hope for democracy with steps toward control. Civil society—groups like NGOs, activists, and media—has led this struggle. It sparked two big uprisings in 2005 and 2010 against bad elections and corrupt leaders. This article looks at how civil society helped Kyrgyzstan try democracy, from pushing for change to fighting new controls under President Sadyr Japarov. Using history and examples, it shows civil society's strength in building participation. But it also faces issues like foreign money, ethnic fights, and harsh laws. These limit its power. The article offers lessons for countries with mixed governments. It says democracy needs civil society and the state to work together.

Keywords: Civil society, Democratization, Kyrgyzstan, Revolutions, Authoritarianism, Central Asia

INTRODUCTION

Kyrgyzstan is different in Central Asia. It's called the “island of democracy” because it tried elections and freedoms unlike neighbours like Uzbekistan (Radnitz, 2010). Since 1991, it faced three big protests—in 2005, 2010, and 2020. Civil society, like NGOs, activists, and media, led these changes. They fought corrupt leaders and fake votes (McGlinchey, 2011). Civil society builds democracy by giving people a voice and checking government power (Putnam, 1993). In Kyrgyzstan, over 20,000 NGOs grew by 2010 with help from Western money (Marat, 2016). But problems like poverty, ethnic splits, and pressure from Russia and China make it hard.

This article studies civil society's role in Kyrgyzstan's democracy. It looks at three times: uprisings (2005–2010), building systems (2010–2020), and new controls (after 2020). Using books and articles, it shows how civil society pushes democracy but struggles with limits. The goal is to understand its work and what it means for countries with mixed governments.

Kyrgyzstan's story matters because it shows hope

and challenges. Civil society led big changes but faces new threats. Its work can teach other places how to keep democracy alive. The article uses simple ideas to explain this complex story. It aims to show why civil society is key and what stops it from doing more.

Historical Context: From Soviet Legacy to Post-Independence Openness

Kyrgyzstan's civil society started in Soviet times. People made informal groups to help each other when the state didn't (Jones Luong, 2002). These groups shared food or support. They built trust that later helped activism. When Kyrgyzstan became independent in 1991, President Askar Akayev wanted democracy. He made a 1993 constitution that gave rights to free speech and groups (Anderson, 1999). This let NGOs grow fast. By the late 1990s, thousands of NGOs worked on human rights, women's issues, and nature (Marat, 2016). The U.S. and Europe gave over \$1 billion to help them (Huskey, 2008).

Groups like the Kyrgyz Committee for Human Rights watched elections. Others, like BirDuino, fought corruption. These NGOs made people feel they could

speak up (Marat, 2016). Unlike Uzbekistan or Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan let media and groups work freely. This earned it praise as a democratic hope (Radnitz, 2010). But things weren't perfect. Akayev started controlling media and favoring his family. This made people angry (Huskey, 2008). Economic problems, like job losses from new market rules, added to the anger (McGlinchey, 2011).

Civil society grew strong in cities like Bishkek. Rural areas had less access, but local leaders joined in (Jones Luong, 2002). By 2000, NGOs were ready to act. They trained people to vote and report fraud. They also spread news through small media outlets. This set the stage for the 2005 uprising. The openness of the 1990s gave civil society tools to challenge bad leaders. But it also showed risks, like depending on foreign money and weak state support (Anderson, 1999).

This period shows civil society's roots. It grew from Soviet habits and new freedoms. It became a voice for people. But it faced early tests, like government pushback and money troubles. These issues would shape its future fights.

Civil Society in Revolution: Catalysts of Change (2005–2010)

Civil society shone in the 2005 Tulip Revolution. President Akayev rigged elections in February 2005. People were mad about corruption and his family's power (Huskey, 2008). NGOs and activists led protests. Unlike Georgia or Ukraine, where city youth drove change, Kyrgyzstan's protests mixed rural and urban voices (Radnitz, 2010). The People's Movement of Kyrgyzstan, a mix of NGOs and local leaders, planned rallies (McGlinchey, 2011). They started in Jalal-Abad and spread to Bishkek. On March 24, 2005, crowds stormed government buildings. Akayev fled to Russia (Huskey, 2008).

NGOs did key work. They taught people about voting rights. They watched polls for fraud. They used radio and flyers to share news (Marat, 2016). This helped unite people across regions. After Akayev left, civil society pushed for a new 2007 constitution. It gave more power to parliament and courts (Laruelle&Engvall, 2015). But the revolution wasn't perfect. New leaders, like Kurmanbek Bakiyev, kept old habits. They used bribes to control power (Radnitz, 2010). Civil society couldn't fix everything alone.

In 2010, another uprising came. Bakiyev raised

energy prices and stole votes. People struggled to pay bills (Marat, 2016). Women's groups and youth activists led protests. On April 7, 2010, clashes in Bishkek killed dozens. Bakiyev fled (McGlinchey, 2011). Civil society helped the new leader, Roza Otunbayeva, make a 2010 constitution. It created a parliamentary system, rare in Central Asia (Laruelle and Engvall, 2015). NGOs gave advice on laws and rights. This showed their power to shape government.

But trouble followed. In June 2010, ethnic fights in Osh and Jalal-Abad killed over 400 people, mostly Uzbeks (Jones Luong, 2002). Civil society tried to stop the violence. Groups like the Foundation for Tolerance International talked to communities. But they couldn't handle the chaos (Radnitz, 2010). Ethnic splits and weak police made it worse. This showed civil society's limits. It could start change but struggled to keep peace.

Revolution	Key Triggers	Civil Society Role	Outcomes
Tulip (2005)	Rigged elections, corruption	Planned protests, watched votes	Akayev left; new parliament powers
April (2010)	High prices, vote theft	Led rallies, advised new laws	Parliamentary system; ethnic violence

These uprisings show civil society's strength. It could rally people and push reforms. But without strong leaders or unity, gains didn't last (McGlinchey, 2011). The revolutions taught civil society to adapt but also showed its weak spots.

Consolidation and Expansion: Civil Society's Peak Influence (2010–2020):

After 2010, civil society grew stronger. The new parliamentary system gave it space to work. NGOs helped make laws on women's rights, fighting corruption, and protecting nature (Marat, 2016). Groups like Bir Duino pushed for better courts. They trained judges and wrote reports on abuses (Laruelle and Engvall, 2015). In Osh, the Aga Khan Foundation ran programs to bring Kyrgyz and Uzbek communities together after the 2010 violence (Jones Luong, 2002). These efforts built trust.

Media played a big role. Outlets like Azattyk shared stories of government wrongs. They helped 79% of people vote in 2009 elections (Huskey, 2008). NGOs also taught civic lessons. They used booklets and workshops to explain democracy. This helped people, especially

youth, join politics (Marat, 2016). By 2015, Kyrgyzstan had the best freedom scores in Central Asia. Civil society kept democracy alive (Anderson, 1999).

In 2011, leaders tried a “foreign agents” law to control NGOs. Civil society fought back. Protests and letters stopped the law (Marat, 2016). This showed its power to resist. Groups worked together, using local and global support. For example, the EU and USAID gave money for training and projects (Laruelle and Engvall, 2015). This helped NGOs grow but caused problems. Most of their money—90%—came from abroad (Radnitz, 2010). Some people thought NGOs served foreign goals, not Kyrgyz ones.

Rural areas were harder to reach. Cities like Bishkek had many NGOs, but villages had few (Jones Luong, 2002). This split weakened civil society’s voice. In 2020, bad elections sparked protests again. Vote-buying angered people. President Jeenbekov quit, and Sadyr Japarov took over (Laruelle and Engvall, 2015). Civil society helped this change but faced new risks. The 2010–2020 period was its strongest, but it showed dangers like foreign money and uneven reach.

Current Challenges: Repression and Resilience (Post-2020)

Since 2020, civil society faces tough times. Japarov’s 2021 constitution gave him more power. It weakened parliament (Marat, 2021). New laws hurt NGOs. A 2022 “false information” law let the government punish critics. A “foreign agents” bill tried to control groups with foreign money (Freedom House, 2024). Over 20 activists were jailed for protesting border deals. Media like Kloop and Azattyk faced raids. Their websites were blocked (Marat, 2021). These moves cut free speech.

But civil society keeps fighting. Groups like BishkekSmog tie clean air to human rights. They rally people online (Laruelle and Engvall, 2015). Youth in Osh hold small events to teach democracy. They avoid police by staying quiet (Marat, 2021). The U.S. and others have pushed Kyrgyzstan to stop attacks on NGOs (Freedom House, 2024). This has slowed some laws. But money is a big problem. Foreign donors cut funds after Russia’s Ukraine war. This makes NGOs struggle (Marat, 2021).

Kyrgyzstan’s freedom score fell in 2024. Civil society got 2.50 out of 7 (Freedom House, 2024). Many groups now self-censor to avoid jail. But they find new ways to work, like secret meetings or online posts. Some try local fundraising, but it’s hard in a poor country

(Radnitz, 2010). These challenges show civil society’s toughness. It adapts but needs help to survive.

Challenge	Manifestation	Civil Society Response
Legal Restrictions	“Foreign agents” laws, false info rules	Protests, global appeals
Repression	Jailed activists, media raids	Secret networks, online activism
Funding Issues	Less foreign money	Local fundraising tries

This period tests civil society. It faces stronger enemies but keeps working. Its ability to adapt is key, but it needs more support to grow.

Theoretical Implications and Conclusion:

Kyrgyzstan’s civil society fits Putnam’s (1993) idea of social capital. Groups build trust and help democracy (Putnam, 1993). But too much foreign money can split them, as Carothers and Barndt (1999) warn (Carothers and Barndt, 1999). Kyrgyzstan’s ups and downs—revolutions then control—match Linz and Stepan’s (1996) ideas. Democracy needs strong civic groups and laws to last (Linz and Stepan, 1996).

Civil society led big changes in Kyrgyzstan. It sparked uprisings and built new systems. But ethnic splits, poverty, and government attacks hold it back. To do more, it needs local support and fair laws. Donors should focus on Kyrgyz-led groups. The government must work with NGOs, not against them. Kyrgyzstan’s story shows civil society’s power and problems. It’s a lesson for other countries with mixed governments. Civil society isn’t perfect, but it keeps fighting.

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