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KYRGYZSTAN: POLITICS IN THE HEART OF ASIA

At the heart of Asia lies a former Soviet republic whose democratically elected president has been driven from office. Kyrgyzstan, located on China's western border, has witnessed a people's revolt in the streets following a flawed parliamentary election on Feb.27.

Kyrgyzstan (KER-gees-STAN) is a landlocked country surrounded by China and three other former Soviet republics, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. This mountainous country is compartmentalized by some of Asia's highest mountain ranges. Much of Kyrgyzstan's 76,640 square mile (198,640 sq. km.) area is too high for cultivated agriculture, requiring its residents to rely on grazing sheep and goats on the high mountain slopes.

About 58 percent of Kyrgyzstan's population is composed of native Kyrgyz people, who are ethnically distinctive from their Chinese neighbors. Although many other ethnic groups are part of the remaining 42 percent of the population, ethnic Russians make up about 17 percent. This is a holdover from the Soviet days, when the Russian presence in all of the outlying republics was significant. Since the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1990, many Russians and other Europeans have emigrated from Kyrgyzstan, fearing persecution by the majority Kyrgyz.

Less than 40 percent of the total population is urban. Most urban

dwellers and particularly the ethnic Russians live in the two largest cities. Bishkek, with a population of 600,000, is the country's capital and located in the Chu valley near the northern border with Kazakhstan. Osh, located in the western Fergana Valley, has a population of about 250,000. The rural population is concentrated in these two fertile valleys whose rivers are fed by glacial and snow melt in the high mountains.

Kyrgyzstan became a democratic and secular republic soon after the Soviet breakup. It took three years of intense negotiation to complete the country's first constitution. After centralized control and domination by the Russians for more than 70 years, Kyrgyzstan's population became committed to democracy.

Kyrgyzstan's president is elected for each five-year term, but the constitution allows him to serve only two consecutive terms. The president appoints the prime minister and his cabinet of ministers. Amendments to the constitution in 1994 and in 1996, broadened the president's power to call for elections and appoint cabinet ministers without legislative

while Apas Jumagulov served as prime minister. Akayev's administration has been very authoritarian, despite being democratically elected. His administration has strongly supported the ethnic Russian population, not unlike the previous administrations in Georgia and Ukraine.

In the February 2005 parliamentary election called by President Akayev, loyal parties to his administration won 90 percent of the popular vote. Kyrgyzstan's opposition groups, joined by European governments and the United States, however, called the elections "seriously flawed" (*Christian Science Monitor*, Mar. 22, 25, 2005). Election officials were accused of skewing the parliamentary election toward legislators who favored Akayev's interest in serving a third term, which violates the constitution.

Protesters stormed the presidential quarters, forcing President Akayev to flee the capital city of Bishkek, ostensibly to Russia. Street riots broke out and shops were looted.

Kyrgyzstan's opposition parties are deeply fragmented and fiercely nationalistic. Not only has there been conflict between the old and new legislatures, but between the two houses of the bicameral legislature, as well. So far, a distinct leader has not emerged and there are calls for another election by summer or fall. Meanwhile, things are in limbo.

A political geographic pattern is emerging, as first generation post-Soviet governments, including Kyrgyzstan's, are falling across Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Perhaps the second generation of governments will be more attuned to the needs of the majority populations and less controlled by the Russians.

And that is Geography in the News™. April 22, 2005. #776.

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Kyrgyzstan Nationalists Misrepresented?



approval. The legislature is bicameral, meaning that there are two bodies, one elected locally and the other nationally (*Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia*, 2001).

Until the recent conflict in Kyrgyzstan, President Askar Akayev, an ethnic Russian, held the elected office,