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The Invention of Legitimacy: Struggles in Kyrgyzstan to Craft an Effective Nation-State Ideology

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DASTAN SARÏGULOV, THE FORMER STATE SECRETARY under the current President of Kyrgyzstan, Kurmanbek Bakiev, agreed to set aside time in his schedule to meet with us.[1] He had clearly prepared himself enthusiastically for the meeting, ready with a small pile of books and brochures, all of which he had written himself. 'Do you know what these are?' he asked, producing one of his props. He seemed a little surprised when this pair of researchers, a foreign man and a young, very modern Kyrgyz woman, quickly recognised them as the knuckle bones of sheep, used for divining the future. He nevertheless went on to explain with precision how they are used and he then produced an illustration in one of his books, showing that such bones were found in burial mounds in the Altay Mountains dating from sometime about 3,000–4,000 years ago. His point was that the Kyrgyz, which he identified with what archaeologists refer to as the Andronovo Culture inhabiting a huge span of the interior of Eurasia, have a very ancient and enduring culture characterised by a unique spirituality and a harmony with nature, among other things.[2] Thus began his two-hour long account, into which we inserted our questions, about the reasons why there has been such a prolific discourse around the issue of developing an ideology for the new state of Kyrgyzstan. In the context of the broader debates in Kyrgyzstan, Sarïgulov appears as a rather idiosyncratic figure, but his interest in history, moral values, and what makes the Kyrgyz people special and potentially strong are all themes that resonate in the discussions of ideology.

This article addresses the puzzle of why the leaders of Kyrgyzstan, a country beset by one economic or political crisis after another over the nearly two decades since

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[1]Interview with Dastan Sarïgulov (Parliamentary Deputy, 1995–2000; State Secretary, 2005–2006), Bishkek, 19 November 2008; interviews for this article were conducted primarily by A. Murzakulova, though a minority of them were conducted jointly by both authors.

[2]Sarïgulov's account did not take into consideration the generally accepted view among archaeologists and historians that the Andronovo Culture is associated with the Indo-Iranian peoples—the Saka/Scythians—who inhabited this region before the arrival of Turkic groups, the linguistic heritage of which the Kyrgyz are associated with.

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independence, have devoted considerable attention to things like sheep bones, mythical heroes, slogans and flags. What has it all been about?

> Why do we need ideology? The main function of ideology is to stimulate positive changes both in mass and individual social consciousness. Ideology unites the nation; it explains the meaning of the processes taking place in society, and helps to conceptualise the goals and tasks of developing the country. A society, when it possesses a strong ideology, itself becomes strong. The people, united by a single idea, are capable of a great deal in their enthusiasm. But before this is possible, we must create such an ideology that would find resonance in the hearts of millions, and would awaken the dormant potential of the nation. (Rakïmbay uulu 2005)

> The goal of ideology is to mobilise the citizens to achieve the happy present and future, to secure reliable prospects for the generation that is coming of age, and to preserve moral values. (Nazarov 2006)

> At first we were the periphery of the Russian Empire, and then we became the Soviet provinces. The cattle farm of USSR, with an educated population, whereon, by-the-by, they produced torpedoes and cartridges. And what are we now? (Beshimov 2008)

Problem orientation and methodology

As Kyrgyzstan embarked on the project of state building following the collapse of the USSR in 1991, this has been accompanied by broad discussions of the role of state ideology in this process. Ideology is held to be a key to successful state building, which sometimes seems to be more important than any more practical area of policy. Often, the failures of state building are blamed on the absence of a suitable state ideology. Political and ideological leaders generally express their dissatisfaction with previous iterations of post-Soviet ideological programmes, but they remain engaged in the project trying to produce a better one. One might be tempted to explain this as sheer inertia of a belief—inherited from Soviet times—in the crucial role of ideology in the functioning of the state. Or perhaps instead that ideology is deployed as a sort of smokescreen to turn public attention away from more practical issues such as rebuilding a failing economy or combating corruption.

We will argue that it is most useful to analyse these debates as a key feature of the post-Soviet political environment which helps to reconstruct relations between the state and society. Central Asian regimes are usually conceptualised in authoritarian terms, in a system where agency is concentrated in the regime. Thus, ideology is analysed as something that emanates from the political elite and acts on a passive population (Akbarzadeh 1996, 1999; Marat 2008; Adams 2004, p. 94). But the fact that the discourse about ideology is permeated with notions of its mobilising power points to the need for considering the agency of the population in this framework. This study suggests that the system from which discourse about ideology emerges is not solely driven by elite concerns but also by those of other social actors. Thus, we should not consider ideology as subterfuge and empty symbolism, but as the idiom in which concepts of freedom, responsibility, and a just social order—the concepts which give shape to the relationship between the state and the society—are formulated and

contested in a process which involves actors 'from below' as well as policies issued 'from the top down'.

Furthermore, studies of ideology in Central Asia generally assume a relatively simple process, wherein ideology is viewed as a homogeneous product, the impact of which is assumed to be contingent mainly on its message (Hegarty 1995; March 2002, 2003). In our study, we go further, to analyse the changing manifestations of ideology as they relate to the changing political context, noting that it is impossible to understand the meaning of the specific ideological initiatives and debates that occur at a given time without reference to the political context from which they emerge. The variegated post-Soviet period, now almost two decades long, provides the possibility for such an analysis, in contrast to previous work treating ideology as largely a product of what is imagined as a static political environment. And we consider the way that the ideological message is interpreted in the political process based not only on the message itself, but also on the context in which it is produced, and specifically, on the roles played by people who are charged with producing it, presenting it, and interpreting it in the public discourse.

The project is formed by some of the basic assumptions which underlie Antonio Gramsci's concept of 'cultural hegemony' (1971), and Michel Foucault's concepts of power (1975) and 'discursive formation' (2002). With Gramsci, we recognise that state power is enacted, not only through coercion, but also through persuasion. The state ideology is thus a means by which a vision of the relationship between state and society is promoted, such that loyalty to the state is attained among the population. However, we do not see this process as exclusively serving the interests of the elite ideology producers. Rather, with Foucault (1975, 2002), we see a more dynamic process whereby the ideological system is formed by processes that mediate the engagement of a wide variety of social actors. What comes out of this—the formulations of ideology—must be understood as a product of multiple actors' engagement.

This study is based on three main sources of information: our interviews, published texts by contributors to the ideological debate, and sources on the general political context in which the ideological process is played out. In the period from September 2007 to December 2008, we conducted 12 in-depth interviews of members of the ideological elite, selected for their prominence either in the process of formulating state ideology or in the public discourse in which these debates have been articulated.[3] We were particularly interested in those who lead or otherwise are influential in the state institutions that are responsible for promoting ideology, morality and culture among the population—the ministries of education and culture, universities, the state agencies responsible for Islam (the State Committee on Religion and the Muftiyat). Meanwhile, we were also interested in those who contributed substantially to public discourse, promoting positions that were sometimes counter to those of state actors. We did not particularly try to embrace the full diversity of views, but rather concentrated on views that were integral to the wider debates. The interviews were semi-structured, working from a list of 14 questions asking for assessments of the specific features of post-Soviet state ideology and the debates about them.

[3]Most interviews were conducted primarily in Russian, although Kyrgyz was also used.

We also draw on textual materials including speeches, publications, press interviews and other materials, containing the views of key figures in the ideological debates, many of whom we also interviewed. The prolific debates on ideology have been played out at numerous conferences, policy round-tables, press interviews and editorials which have contributed to a wealth of relevant textual materials. For these purposes, we made a thorough survey of the Kyrgyzstan newspapers with the largest and widest circulation—*Slovo Kyrgyzstana*, *MSN*, *Obshchestvennyi reiting* and *Vechernyi Bishkek*—as well as the internet-based information agencies Tazar, AKIpress and Kabar. We complemented this with a survey of scholarly and media sources for analysis of the political context in which the ideological debates are situated.

The producers of ideology whom we focused on represent a diversity of social positions: government ministers, university rectors, teachers, journalists, NGO staff, Islamic leaders, and so on. Some were central figures in the official initiatives to produce state ideology. For example, Kusein Isaev (a prominent university professor) and Muratbek Imanaliev (a former Foreign Minister and current head of a think-tank) were members of the group charged by the current president with elaboration of the official ideological programme for Kyrgyzstan (Razvitie cherez edinstvo 2007). Alibek Jekshenkulov, another former Foreign Minister (2005–2007), and leader of an opposition political bloc, had initiated the adoption of an ideological frame for external politics aimed at promoting an image of the state projected outward on the world arena. Jolbors Jorobekov twice headed the State Commission on Religion (1999–2002, 2006–2007). In 1992–1993, Askar Kaikeev held the post of State Secretary (head of President Akaev's administration) and was the Minister of Education from 1993 to 1998. Muratalï ajï Jumanov has served as Mufti of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan since 2002.

Other interviewees were in roles outside of state-sponsored institutions: Tashmambet Kenensariev is a prominent member of the opposition party *Erkindik*, alongside his role as rector of Jalal-Abad State University in southern Kyrgyzstan, and he also played an active role in the so-called 'Tulip Revolution' which led to President Askar Akaev's ouster. Denis Toichiev, leader of the NGO Youth Parliament of the Kyrgyz Republic, was associated with the politics of 'new internationalism' during the Akaev period, and he was also a member of the governing council of the Assembly of the People of Kyrgyzstan. Turat Akimov, Editor-in-Chief of the newspaper *Obshchestvennyi reiting* (2007–2008) was an initiator of a special rubric in the newspaper dedicated to questions of national history, genealogy (*sanjïra*), and the search for an appropriate ideology.

In Kyrgyzstan, there has been a wide array of ideological initiatives which range from appeals to the multi-ethnic character of the state to claims about the moral heritage and the ancient roots specifically of the Kyrgyz people and their special role in the Kyrgyz Republic. Though our analysis is not comparative, it is nevertheless instructive to consider Kyrgyzstan in the context of other Central Asian countries, where there has also been a tremendous emphasis on the production of national ideologies. The year 2009 in Tajikistan, for example, has been dedicated to the legacy of the founder of the Hanafi Islamic legal school which predominates in the region. Turkmenistan's national ideology has featured such symbols as Makhtumkuli (a seventeenth century Turkmen poet), the melon, the horse, and the ideological text, the

Ruhnama, attributed to President Niyazov whose eccentric rule ended with his death in 2006. Historical state-builders feature prominently in these ideological initiatives, such as Timur in Uzbekistan and Ismāil Sāmāni in Tajikistan, both of whom founded empires and dynasties.

If we characterise the trends in ideological debates from 1991 onwards, all across the region the early 1990s saw relatively coherent, if hurriedly formulated discourse focused on the idea of independence and 'national self-determination'. However, already by the mid-1990s, changes occurred regarding the character of public discourse, and in many countries the matter of state ideology became the exclusive purview of the heads-of-state. Hence, in Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and to a lesser extent in Kazakhstan, the debate turned into a monologue coming from the institution of the presidency.

In this regard, the case of Kyrgyzstan is not typical, for though the presidents have remained engaged in initiating ideological programmes, it is not their exclusive domain, and the discussions are still very open. Where other Central Asian states, like the Soviet state that preceded them, have been relatively successful in maintaining a monopoly over the production of symbols, in Kyrgyzstan this constitutes a field of competition and negotiation in which the state is only one among a variety of actors, and often not a particularly decisive one. As a result, we consider that the state-centred analysis that has dominated scholarship on Central Asian states is inadequate—certainly for the study of Kyrgyzstan, and undoubtedly for the study of other Central Asian countries, as well.

Kyrgyzstan's 'ideological space'

The 'ideological space' in Kyrgyzstan is characterised by a diversity of positions as well as actors. This is in contrast to what existed during Soviet times, when ideology was produced and disseminated by a set of central institutions under the control of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.[4] In Kyrgyzstan since independence, there is no analogous centralised process or institutions. This creates the opportunity for a wide-ranging political field of contention, encompassing actors who are making appeals and critiques not only from above. There is even the possibility to promote alternative rules and values, by which state ideology should be defined. New conditions in access to information make the field of ideas a highly competitive one. There are the traditional institutions of ideology, such as state-run schools and universities, and the state sources of information (including press offices and government-friendly information agencies), while there is also a range of new actors, such as private schools and universities, mosques, independent media, NGOs, and independent scholarly centres and think-tanks.

A significant role in the discussions has been played by the Kyrgyz intelligentsia, whose independence has greatly increased following the collapse of the USSR, although their social status has declined. Their engagement in this process allows them to aspire to a role close to the authorities, as a sort of court intellectual. Whether or

[4]For an analysis of how Soviet ideology was propagated, see Kara-Murza (2006) and Voslenskii (2005).

not they curry favour with the regime, their authority on issues of ideology—such as their knowledge of history or ability to assert positions on moral issues—enables them to reclaim some of the social role that had been accorded to them through high salaries and privileged status during Soviet times.[5] The role that the intelligentsia plays is understood simultaneously as meeting the needs of the state and fulfilling a demand from society. Understood in these terms, both the intelligentsia and ideology play a role in mediating relations between state and society, which, despite the social and economic shocks of the 1990s, maintains continuity with rules and procedures familiar from Soviet times, as well as with concepts such as 'the Soviet people'. Ideology thus provides a framework for understanding both past and future, and the intelligentsia, adapting to new political conditions, provides a connecting link with traditions established in Soviet times. Chinghiz Aitmatov (1928–2008), the author who spoke in many ways for the late-Soviet generations, described it thus in an interview with a journalist:

> Given that behind us we have a common life that was difficult and complex, we all derive from the Soviet system. From the USSR. Yes, Soviet ideology was decisive. But during all those years, we got to know each other. Culture and scholarship penetrated and enriched one another. In just such a context we were formed. Remember that the first priority at that time was to define oneself as a Soviet individual. Only after that came the question of who one was by nationality. (Karlyukevich 2003)

Our interviewees also stressed the way that ideology is firmly rooted in the Soviet past. For example, one respondent declared:

> We are a society with a strong ideological past, educated on the ideology of the USSR. It is difficult for our generation to think of itself outside of a framework, in which ideology is necessary both as a kind of projector, and as that which can unite.[6]

According to another, 'We need to live out the consequences of the communist ideology. Many people are thinking according to this stereotype. The attempt to create a new ideology for Kyrgyzstan comes precisely from this'.[7]

So a particular attitude seems to be a part of the Soviet legacy, involving the assumptions that every state needs an ideology, that it is the job of the political leadership to develop and promote that ideology, and that the intelligentsia has a special role to play in this. This assumption operates all across Central Asia, and is articulated implicitly or explicitly, though what unfolds based on it varies greatly. In Turkmenistan, it takes the form of a personality cult, which even three years after President Niyazov's death, still reverberates in the country. In many places, it takes the form of historical claims of continuity with a great past, such as in Tajikistan, where a

[5]Concerning post-socialist elite formation in Kyrgyzstan and the role of the intelligentsia in it, see Koichuev (2007) and Nogoybaeva (2007).

[6]Interview with Maksat Begaliev (Instructor at Bishkek Humanities University), Bishkek, 7 October 2007.

[7]Interview with Askar Chukutaev (State Secretary, 1992–1993; Minister of Defence, 1993–1998, 2000–2005; current Rector of Kyrgyz National University), Bishkek, 18 December 2008.

'kinship' is claimed between current President Rahmon and the founder of the great 'Tajik' Sāmānid dynasty of a millennium ago. Even though Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and other Central Asian countries are politically quite different in many ways, including the basis on which they have sought to legitimise the regimes (in Kyrgyzstan, as supporting democracy; in Uzbekistan, as developing their own special model), in all of these countries, ideology is a major component of state building programmes (Akaev 2002; Karimov 2001; Turkmenbashy 2005).

In our view, an important key for the understanding of post-Soviet ideology is recognition that the process of new state formation in the aftermath of the state reconfiguration, such as in the case of the break-up of the Soviet Union and the end of the monopoly of communist ideology, is conceptualised as a liminal condition, wherein the old order no longer holds and a new order is ultimately introduced (Turner 1967). The major trope in conceptualising this liminal condition is the notion of an 'ideological vacuum', which allows the perception of a radical break with the old order, and an unstable interim condition which requires specific operations—here, measures to establish a new ideology—in order to usher in the new order. The procedures that aim to achieve this include renaming: all across Central Asia 'non-national' names—especially 'communist' names such as 'Leninabad' or 'Marx Street'—were traded for names marking out a landscape of personalities and events that make up the new national ideology. Ritualised events also play a major role in this, such as anniversary celebrations in Uzbekistan of figures such as Timur (the empire builder whose 660th anniversary was in 1996) and Baha-ud-Din Naqshband (founder of a major Sufi order whose 675th anniversary was in 1994). Ideology producers are thus bridge-builders, constructing a connection between the past, the present and the future. The image of a vacuous present or recent past serves as justification for the need to create an ideology. Ideology creation thus becomes a part of the rules and procedures in the process of state building. This is simultaneously necessitated by the legacy of ideologised statehood in the region, and by the imperative of providing strong ideology to ensure stability in the process of state building. Furthermore, the discourse about ideology becomes the focus of the elites' ideas about the available means for communicating with the population, and it becomes a mechanism for linking social groups from top to bottom and for mediating relations between state and society.

In analyses of the political systems of contemporary Central Asia the state ideology is also understood as a resource that is capable of providing for elite legitimacy (March 2003; Cummings 2006; Marat 2008). Ideology reinforces a narrative about discontinuity with the past, representing a radical break, via the 'ideological vacuum' with the de-legitimised Soviet past. At the same time, it is precisely in their continuity with the authoritarian state of Soviet times that leaders appeal to ideology for bolstering legitimacy, because ideology is a familiar idiom of state legitimacy inherited from Soviet times.

The political context of ideological production

In the period since independence in Kyrgyzstan, ideological debates have continued unabated. Sometimes they have been tightly linked with political events, such as the

discussions of 1993–1994, or the debates which followed the so-called 'Tulip Revolution', while at times they have gone by the wayside of broader public opinion. There have been a large number of ideological initiatives put forward on an even larger number of themes. On two occasions, these ideological initiatives had a comprehensive character and were adopted as formal state ideological programmes: during Askar Akaev's presidency, there was the 'Ideological Programme of Kyrgyzstan: Charter for the Future' (Ideologicheskaya programma 2003), while the second was adopted under President Kurmanbek Bakiev, entitled 'Development through Unity: The Comprehensive National Idea of Kyrgyzstan' (Razvitie cherez edinstvo 2007). These programmes were devised to provide ideological underpinnings for the state-building process. They were accompanied by the publication of various books and brochures, as well as the performance of state-organised celebrations, such as the 1,000 year anniversary of the Manas epic, Osh-3000 (marking the antiquity of Kyrgyzstan's 'southern capital'), and 2,200 years of Kyrgyz statehood.[8] On one level, these events led to a certain public apathy in relation to the project of building ideology. At the same time, they stimulated the participation of different actors in public discussions, including criticism of projects promoted from above and articulation of alternative approaches.

In an analysis of this field of ideological competition, the prominent themes that can be identified include nationalism, 'new internationalism', Islam and '*Tengirchilik*'.[9] These themes are not necessarily well-articulated, and do not represent discrete, mutually opposed concepts, but rather they are intertwined components of various initiatives and programmes. Indeed, typically, these themes are articulated as inter-related components of ideological campaigns; for example, *Tengirchilik*, criticism of Islam, and a history-oriented nationalism often go hand in hand. Each of these themes entails a core set of values, which serves to justify the orientation as a moral imperative. In Islam, this core is 'Muslim values' (rules and procedures of behaviour and social justice); in the new internationalism it is a substitution of Soviet values (of patriotism, solidarity, and the key role of Russian culture); and in Tengirchilik it is notions of prosperity, heritage and social justice, based on the Kyrgyz culture and language. The rhetoric of nationalism is present in virtually all of the discussions of state ideology, and hinges on the necessity of a coincidence of the cultural and political borders, as well as the role of the state in preserving that culture. In asserting one or another position, there is always a subtext regarding the issue of who may legitimately define the directions of state building. Also always present is an assumed threat of a loss of identity, statehood and social cohesion.

[8]Manas is an epic hero, to whom the Manas epic—the largest epic text recorded anywhere—is devoted. Celebration of the anniversary of the epic revolved around extracting from the epic story such elements as could be useful for promoting a national state with moral values rooted in tradition.

[9]*Tengirchilik*, sometimes referred to in English as Tengriism (in Russian, as *tengryanstvo*) is an ideology of post-Soviet origins, also enjoying some interest on the part of the political elite in other Turkic regions of the former Soviet Union (Laruelle 2007), which appeals to '*Tengri*', a supposedly monotheistic, pre-Islamic concept of a deity, as well as other customs and beliefs which are supposed to be pre-Islam. *Tengirchilik* is also related to a concept of '*Kyrgyzchilik*', designating the essence of being Kyrgyz. See for example Aitpaeva and Molchanova (2007).

Changes in the balance between these different orientations have accompanied changes in the political context. The projects which were promoted during the 1990s, following the agenda largely set by President Askar Akaev, put the emphasis on a vision of ideology which was on the whole consistent with the values of the Soviet intelligentsia. The rhetoric of Islam as opposed to *Tengirchilik* as alternative foundations for national-state ideology began to gain force in the late Akaev period, and especially following the 'Tulip Revolution'. The common thread that unifies all of the orientations is a notion of the imperative to achieve national unity as a necessary condition for prosperity and stability.

In general, the themes raised at various times under the Akaev administration have continued to set the agenda for ideological strategies of the main actors, even after Akaev's demise in March 2005. These themes are represented in slogans which were promoted under Akaev: 'Kyrgyzstan—our common home', 'Kyrgyzstan is a state of human rights', 'The seven commandments of Manas', '2,200 years of Kyrgyz statehood', among others. The concepts which Akaev proposed have been interpreted differently by different groups. On the positive side, there was agreement, whatever the intrinsic merits of the symbolism, that it was aimed at strengthening statehood. Others, meanwhile, dismissed these initiatives as intended to distract attention from the country's economic and political problems. Muratbek Imanaliev, a Foreign Minister under Akaev, told us, 'I supported the idea to celebrate 2,200 years of Kyrgyz statehood, not because I also share it, but because for the future this idea will have an important effect and significance for statehood'.[10]

The components of Akaev's ideological programme ranged from short slogans, for example, 'Kyrgyzstan—our common home', to much more elaborate formulations, such as the 'Charter for the Future', various book-length publications and public celebrations (for example, those associated with the 2,200 years anniversary of Kyrgyz statehood, and the Manas epic). It should be noted that the slogan of the common home, which found institutional expression in the Assembly of the People of Kyrgyzstan (APK), remains today one of the principal elements of the policy of new internationalism not only in Kyrgyzstan, but also in Kazakhstan.[11]

The ideology of civic nationhood, proposed by Akaev and embodied in the Assembly of the People of Kyrgyzstan, serves today as the main focus of criticism on the part of those promoting ideologies of Islam and Kyrgyz nationalism. Meanwhile, many other features of Akaev-era ideology have received such criticism, such as the 'Seven commandments of Manas' and '2,200 years of Kyrgyz statehood'. This criticism came to a head with the 'Tulip Revolution' in March 2005. Almazbek Atambaev, one of its leaders, said 'All this foolishness, such as the seven commandments of Manas, which the previous regime was constantly harping on about, is a load of rubbish, Putin is not endlessly talking about the commandments of

[10]Interview with Muratbek Imanaliev (Foreign Minister, 1997–2002; current president of Institute for Public Policy), Choq-Tal village, Ïsïq-Köl Province, 16 August 2008.

[11]The APK was created in 1994, and an analogous structure has existed in Kazakhstan since 1992. With the constitutional reform in 2007, the APK in Kazakhstan was assigned the role of selecting nine deputies to the parliament. In Kyrgyzstan, there were also attempts to enhance the status of the APK; after the constitutional reform in 2002, the status of the APK was upgraded as a deliberative body under the President of the Kyrgyz Republic.

Ilya Muromets!' (Kabar Kyrgyz National Information Agency 2006). Immediately on coming to power, then Acting President Bakiev proclaimed, 'We should stop rushing for historical leadership. The Kyrgyz are an ancient nation, living among and together with other ancient nations'.[12] The Mufti of Kyrgyzstan, Muratalï ajï Jumanov, also can be heard making criticisms in a nationalist spirit: 'I think that the idea of Akaev, "Kyrgyzstan—our common home", did not take account of the interests of Kyrgyz people; that's why this idea will not meet with approval'.[13]

Although by the time of our interviews, the Akaev regime was already a thing of the past and the Bakiev regime had already begun to assert ideological positions, most of our interviewees tended to focus overwhelmingly on the concepts proposed under Akaev. From this, one may conclude that the Akaev-era notions, whatever shortcomings were seen in them, nevertheless set the agenda for later debates, and subsequent efforts were often focused on improving these ideas. The following statement by Tashmambet Kenensariev, a prominent intellectual, is typical:

> In order to unite the people, Akaev was trying to create a pivot and was searching for it in history. He was trying to create a basis on which the Kyrgyz would be proud of their past, but he left out the unifying elements. The role of Manas as a factor of ideology is more suitable for the northern Kyrgyz, while in the south, for example, in Batken or Osh Provinces, it is not really so important. Manas is important for Kyrgyz spirituality, but it cannot be accepted as a substitute for national ideology, because it is a type of folk creation, not an ideological one.[14]

The echoes of Soviet 'internationalism' were strong in Akaev's ideology, appealing to the vision of a civic nation in the good traditions of the Soviet intelligentsia. Early on, Akaev put forward the concept of 'Kyrgyzstan—our common home', appealing to the idea of the nation as a family:

> I would propose the following philosophy. Your country is your home. Thus, our Kyrgyzstan is our common home. Indeed, it has been built by all of us, including Kyrgyz, Russians, Uzbeks, Germans, Jews, Uyghurs, Koreans, and Karachays. They built it without any doubt that they will live in this home as a single family in friendship and harmony, for eternity. (Akaev 1995, p. 97)

The same theme continued to reverberate through the late Akaev period: 'We are a consolidated and stable nation of the Central Asian region, where the ideology of an amicable home inhabited by a united family became a firm foundation of the unified interethnic community of the Kyrgyz people' (Ideologicheskaya programma 2003).

The Assembly of the People of Kyrgyzstan is a clear example of how Akaev's ideology aimed to create a connection between images of the Soviet and post-Soviet societies of Kyrgyzstan. However, at the same time, Akaev clearly felt it important to

[12]K. Bakiev, 'Obrashenie ispolnyayushego ob yazanosti Presidenta Kyrgyzstana Bakieva narodu Kyrgyzstana', 30 April 2005, Bishkek, Kyrgyz Television and Radio. See also Bakiev (2005).

[13]Interview with Muratalï ajï Jumanov (Mufti of Kyrgyzstan), Bishkek, 16 January 2008.

[14]Interview with Tashmambet Kenensariev (at the time of the interview, Prorector of the Kyrgyz–Russian Slavic University; Rector of Jalal-Abad State University; candidate for deputy from the Erkindik party in the 2007 parliamentary election), Bishkek, 17 December 2007.

appeal to the Kyrgyz nationalism of those who were becoming the elite of the new country. Hence, in parallel with promoting this internationalism, Akaev rolled out a campaign promoting the symbol of Manas, which clearly was in a degree of tension with the new internationalism. In 1995 the Akaev government organised a celebration of the 1,000th anniversary of the Manas epic. Although planning for this celebration had already begun in Soviet times, the new symbol was claimed for Akaev in his effort to strengthen the Kyrgyz elite and the rhetoric of nationalism. Such appeals to nationalism have clear resonance:

> [The policy of] 'Kyrgyzstan—our common home' aimed to consider the interests of the non-titular population. I consider this to be wrong, because—since this is the state of the Kyrgyz people—it is necessary to put first and foremost the interests of the Kyrgyz people. Think about it: in France, the Arabs must learn French in order to be French citizens.[15]

Even one of those most engaged in the institutions of internationalism offered this ambiguous assessment of their social effect: 'I do not think that the Assembly [of the People of Kyrgyzstan] plays a role for preserving interethnic harmony; however, it is important as an element of popular democracy'.[16] The apparent utility of the Assembly is not in its institutional functioning, but in its symbolic value. The Assembly paints an image of multicultural Kyrgyzstan sustained by an ideology of 'interethnic harmony'. Even after Akaev's demise, the Assembly retains its importance. After his rise to power, President Bakiev also aligned himself with the Assembly, and it is apparent that the Assembly is treated as a resource for dealing with the deficit of legitimacy that widely affects politics in Kyrgyzstan. According to Askar Chukutaev, a prominent former Akaev government official, 'The Assembly, in general, is a successful idea, and that explains why it still exists. It is another matter that the Assembly has come to pursue pro-authority politics. It has come to be used for achieving certain goals'.[17] The two divergent concepts, 'Kyrgyzstan—our common home' and 'Manas', were intended for different audiences. These messages must necessarily be considered as parts of a single strategy; where one piece does not work, the other is deployed. Their common objective is to obtain the solidarity and loyalty of different groups within the society. In explaining the ideological dilemma, some people try to map their experience onto that of a country like America, where the nation concept does not have a strictly ethnic character. For example: 'Kyrgyzstan as a country inhabited not only by the Kyrgyz; or a state where the Russians, Tatars, Uzbeks and others call themselves the Kyrgyz people—here we ought consider what sort of future we imagine and what we aspire to'.[18]

While the Akaev regime's ideology focused on these two polar themes, other themes have also competed in this field and increasingly have come to the fore—most

[15]Interview with Kuseyn Isaev (professor at Bishkek Humanities University; president of the Sociological Society of Kyrgyzstan; member of the working group for the development of the state ideology in 2007), Bishkek, 16 December 2008.

[16]Interview with Denis Toychiev (head of the Youth Parliament NGO, 2000–2001; member of the Council of the Assembly of the People of Kyrgyzstan), Bishkek, 3 November 2007.

[17]Interview with Askar Chukutaev, Bishkek, 18 December 2008.

[18]Interview with Denis Toychiev, Bishkek, 3 November 2007.

prominently, Islam and *Tengirchilik*, both of which also are put forward as the potential basis for state building.

Islam, as an ideology, presents the problems of the development of the state in the light of a moral lapse in society. With the help of Islam, the Kyrgyz—or indeed, society more widely in Kyrgyzstan, among which Islam is considered naturally to play a pre-eminent role—will overcome their current problems, which are primarily conceptualised as having a moral character. Appeals to Islam are contingent on the expectation that the religion will provide a set of guidelines—rules and procedures—for addressing society's ills. As Kyrgyzstan's Mufti put it, 'Missionaries come to us from foreign countries, and mass culture fills up our screens, and this has a negative influence on Kyrgyz morals, traditions, and culture'.[19] This position is articulated, not only by the traditional Islamic leadership, but also by young voices with a more secular appeal:

> Ideology must possess the power of suggestion ... to influence people's behaviour through an impact on their consciousness. ... The time has arrived to make up our minds, for with every day there is an increasing risk of repeating the same mistakes of the Mayram-Akaev epoch of poetic Manas commandments.[20] Furthermore, we are being asked to return to the very sources of dark ignorance of the archaic stage of paganism.[21] For what purpose? ... The majority of the population historically associate themselves with traditional Islam. Is it not here that we should seek the possibility for ... active work of the state? ... Is it not here that we have the possibility to create our counterbalance as a more modernized, progressive traditional Islam of an orthodox orientation? ... It is necessary to create under the government a committee for state (national) ideology and propaganda. This can involve and make use of the resource of religion in work among the population, especially the rural population. (Malikov 2005)

Here, there is a high degree of contrast with Uzbekistan, where the discourse in opposition to Islam is the concept of a secular society and a strict isolation of Islam from the state, education and other domains.[22] In Kyrgyzstan, there is also a sharp competition between Islam and appeals to an image of the Kyrgyz people's primordial, pre-Islamic condition in '*Tengirchilik*'. The central concern of this ideology is to formulate a version of Kyrgyz culture which is free of Islam. From the perspective of *Tengirchilik*, Islam is dismissed as exogenous to Kyrgyz identity, and as fundamentally at odds with the essence of Kyrgyz character. In the words of Dastan Sarïgulov,[23] the most prominent proponent of the *Tengirchilik* ideology:

> We need to return from Islam to the ideology of *Tengirchilik* .... Islam is a system with the help of which it is easy to control people, and which came here through the migration of Tatar mullahs. Islam is the death of the spirits of nomads....[24]

[19]Interview with Muratalï ajï Jumanov, Bishkek, 16 January 2008.

[20]Reference here is to Mayram, the unpopular wife of the former president.

[21]This reference is to *Tengirchilik*.

[22]For example, Adeeb Khalid's concept of 'secular Islam' (2003).

[23]The most prominent proponent of the *Tengirchilik* ideology, Dastan Sarïgulov held the post of the State Secretary of the first presidential administration of Bakiev in 2005, during which time he devoted considerable public attention to the cause. For an exposition of his views, see Sarygulov (2001, 2007).

[24]Interview with Dastan Sarïgulov, 19 November 2008, Bishkek.

Kusein Isaev, who was also involved in developing the official state ideology under Bakiev, further argued: 'The activisation of Islam in our social conditions is wrong. Among the Kyrgyz, the holy fire, water, stones, moon, and many "holy sites" are sacred even today, and they are still revered by the Kyrgyz'.[25]

Concern with the loss of identity is a theme that runs through discourses about Islam and *Tengirchilik*, as well as nationalism more generally. The discourses are filled with parallel processes of 'loss' and 'searching'. Globalisation and other attributes of modernity are viewed as threats to identity, and the loss of historical and cultural memory is a persistent motif in the *Tengirchilik* narrative: 'We have no immunity that would answer the challenges of globalisation, since we have lost ourselves and our past'.[26] Those who appeal to *Tengirchilik* also see in the Kyrgyz past their period of greatness, as typified by the great Manas—in contrast to the poor and marginal position of Kyrgyzstan in the world today.

At the core of all of the ideology projects—including even the project of new internationalism—is the problem of how to preserve what is essential to the Kyrgyz identity. In all cases, it is backward looking, appealing to the morality of a previously prevailing social order, whether it be a primordial Kyrgyz essence, as in *Tengrichilik*, a focus on issues of language and culture preservation, as in nationalism, a focus on Islamic morality and just social order, or a focus on the respect and appreciation for other cultures from Soviet times in the more civic and secular orientation of internationalism. Assumptions about the role of Kyrgyz identity as a principal object of 'protection' to be provided by the state ideology, define the field of ideological competition. Kyrgyzstan's vulnerable position in the face of powerful global forces is a common refrain: 'It is vitally important to realise and to understand that we are the part of a modern, interconnected world, and not the isolated provincial corner' (Ideologicheskaya programma 2003). As Chinghiz Aitmatov put it in a newspaper interview:

> We are choosing the path of our involvement to the modern system. It is simply absurd to close ourselves into our shell, while the world is being shaken by the processes of globalization. I don't dispute that at one time such isolation was necessary and retreating into our shell did save us from destructive outside forces. But not so today.... (Karlyukevic 2003)

It is important to emphasise that these concerns with loss and with the need for finding the right path for society today are not the exclusive domain of leaders trying to claim a following through ideological tropes. Rather, these concerns occupy a substantial part of the intellectual energies of the country. Manas is not simply a state ideology; there are people learning to recite the Manas epic and they are honoured by their communities. *Tengirchilik* may have been devised as an ideology in a rather deliberate way to offer a basis of identity in opposition to Islam, but it has found resonance, at least among a part of the elite who were formed by the Soviet experience and who are deeply concerned with what they view as the danger of Islam as a de-modernising force. Even those on various levels of society who are attracted to

[25]Interview with Kusein Isaev, 16 December 2008, Bishkek.
[26]Interview with Dastan Sarïgulov, 19 November 2008, Bishkek.

nationalism also feel a need to temper that with an affirmation of the value of a society which accommodates multiple cultures, especially the Russian culture which still retains a strong appeal in a great many realms. Furthermore, there is a broad social consensus that it is appropriate for a state to have an ideology, and indeed, that if lacking a good ideology, their state cannot flourish. There are many aspects of Kyrgyzstan society today which feed into the belief in this search for an ideology. The familiarity of the concept and role of ideology from Soviet times is no doubt a part of this, but this is not a matter of sheer inertia. There is also tremendous disorientation caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union, post-Soviet turmoil, and the country's uncertain future:

> Ideology emerges only when the people face desparation [sic]. Desparation is a situation in which it is impossible to resolve one's problems with the help of available resources and means. It seems to me that we are in this very situation, and it results in very large activeness in life. For instance, Kazakhs are better off; they have a lot of money and they do not want to change anything, whereas we want to change many things. All these talks [sic] about ideology, searching for a national idea—all of this means that finally there is a need in the society to answer the question: what should we do next? (Bogatyrev 2006)

In contrast to Soviet times, public discourse is filled with a huge diversity of positions, and individuals are faced with finding their own sense of the right path for their society. Ideology may not hold the answers to many questions that bedevil the future of Kyrgyzstan, but it has become the idiom in which possible paths to the answers are articulated.

Part of the turmoil which strengthens appeals to ideology is the crisis of leadership. There was general disappointment with Akaev, who as well as being seen as increasingly corrupt, authoritarian and weak as a leader, was also viewed as having failed to produce an adequate ideology. Those whom we interviewed were in almost every case eager to criticise the failings of Akaev's ideological projects, but they also almost invariably retained the conviction that ideology is vital. Perhaps even more surprisingly, some of those who had been involved in producing the Bakiev-era ideological programmes have not shown much confidence that they have devised the right formula. Thus, we see that the ability to provide leadership specifically in the realm of ideology is considered to be a key attribute of the good leader:

> We cannot find ourselves; we cannot find the leader who would lead us to our ideals. Our country is in search of an alternative leader. Today, pure chance is a characteristic feature of the Kyrgyz leaders (as in the rise to power of both presidents). We need a person with a heightened sense of what are state attributes. Today, in place of landmarks of the state, religious ones are appearing. The crisis comes from the fact that market values do not reflect our spiritual values, and they stand in conflict. That's why we need not just a leader, but the spiritual leader to serve as a landmark.[27]

[27]Interview with Turat Akimov (Editor-in-Chief of the newspaper *Obshchestvennyi reiting*), Bishkek, 17 December 2008.

Thus, ideology is seen as providing the social order—the rules and procedures—that define the moral and practical relationships between state and society, between leader and population, between intellectuals and the political order, and ultimately, between members of the society in general. A successful search for a state ideology is expected to yield a congruence of identity between the state and the members of the society.

Ideology as a key feature of state building

A curious measure of the explicit importance of ideology in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan can be seen in a survey that was conducted by the Ministry of Education to assess the state of ideology in the country in the aftermath of the 'Tulip Revolution'. It was a huge study in which 15,000 respondents were surveyed. An overwhelming 92% 'supported the idea of the creation of the national ideology' (Malikova 2006). It is indicative of the circumstances peculiar to Kyrgyzstan that such a study would be conducted, and that the results would be so definitive—people in Kyrgyzstan believe in the idea of ideology. What is more, although the results of the survey were not made available in full to the public, this definitive role for ideology is one thing that the ministry was keen for the public to know. Belief in the idea of ideology is also quite evident in Kyrgyzstan's opinion-leaders, who affirm that it is important for a national-state ideology to provide a set of values and a basis for power and solidarity.[28]

It is noteworthy that while Kyrgyzstan society, even nearly two decades after independence, has not become disillusioned with ideology, at the same time, there have been times when ideological debates are particularly active. Our survey of ideological debate in the Kyrgyzstan press yielded a clear picture: the most active periods of debate were in the periods 1993–1995 and 2005–2006, during the periods when important changes were taking place in the political system. In 1993, constitutional reforms took place which changed the principle of checks and balances in the relationship between the parliament and the presidency. In that reform, the unicameral parliament was replaced with a bicameral one. Then, in 2007 a new constitutional reform further weakened the position of the parliament, this time by means of a transformation from the bicameral system back to a unicameral one.

The first years of independence were characterised by enthusiasm for democratic reforms, and Akaev not only presided over a relatively pluralistic system in which power was only moderately concentrated in the presidency, but he also oriented his appeals for legitimacy to the commitment and success of political reforms. The constitutional reforms were an effort to reconcentrate power in the hands of the executive branch. This required a new relationship between the state and society, and efforts to work out that new relationship are mediated through ideological debates. A similar crisis emerged following President Akaev's ouster in March 2005. During this period, issues came to the fore regarding the roles in government of northern and southern regions of the country. Furthermore, the Bakiev regime was struggling to

[28]For example see the contribution to a newspaper discussion by Sultan Raev (Malikova 2006), Sarygulov (2005), Aliev (2006) and Togoybaev (2006). Such views were also expressed in our interview with Muratalï ajï Jumanov, Bishkek, 16 January 2008.

gain legitimacy in the wake of its coming to power by non-constitutional means. This was followed by the parliamentary reform mentioned above.

It is interesting to juxtapose excerpts from the presidentially sponsored ideological programmes that followed each of these periods of rapid political change. Examples include the following: 'We need a new national self-consciousness, based on the idea of state independence, on the principle of democracy, human rights and liberty, a new conscious economic philosophy and applicable code of behaviour of everybody and each person individually' (Ideologicheskaya programma 2003); 'The state without its own ideology cannot be powerful. Because every state must rely upon its own national foundation, and its own common national values, without this, there cannot be clear social development and the ability to provide guidelines for the future' (Razvitie cherez edinstvo 2007, p. 39).

The new round of political uncertainty surrounding the ouster of Akaev, followed by Bakiev's consolidation of his position, for example, led to the creation of a working group on ideology, which produced Kyrgyzstan's second major ideological programme, as cited above. Meanwhile, the work of this group has not been distinguished by 'new thinking', and in essence it repeated the appeal for legitimacy already familiar from the Akaev period, using the same kinds of appeals for legitimacy.

Our analysis of the state ideology programmes of the Akaev and Bakiev regimes has shown a fundamental similarity of their positions. However, our interviews demonstrate that the programmes are interpreted differently: the programme put forward by Bakiev is presented as more oriented to the Kyrgyz in contrast to Akaev's programme. In our view, this does not reflect a difference of programme content, but is more related to the post of State Secretary in Bakiev's administration.[29] Two of the previous State Secretaries in the Bakiev administration, Madumarov and Sarïgulov, have played particularly strong roles in the ideology realm, and both have been perceived as using nationalistic rhetoric.

As we noted previously, the field of ideological competition is in some ways not typical for the region. The state in Kyrgyzstan is not an all-pervasive institution, penetrating all aspects of the society with strong vertical linkages in the system of power and with tight bureaucratic control. The state's role is in many ways as a mediator rather than a system of control. Ideology must be seen then as playing a crucial role in the state's ability to mediate with the society.

> Kyrgyzstan is weak state, first of all intellectually and spiritually. Our people has lost itself in self-identification. Some are southerners, while others are northerners, a third group includes ardent Muslims, while others are atheists. We also have the *Tengirchilik* people [*tengryantsy*], democrats, autocrats, right-wingers and left-wingers, Bugus, Bostons,[30] and so on. Who don't we have? Accordingly, there are many different ideas. Mainly they are small and personal. There is no sober, united view on the principles for development of the country. Correspondingly, everyone is weak: the authorities, the opposition, and ordinary people.

[29]Key roles of the State Secretary include public relations duties and what in American terms might be called the 'Ideology Czar'.

[30]Bugu and Boston are names of Kyrgyz lineage groups.

> Weak ideas mean weak spirit. That's why we aren't taken seriously. They will do with us whatever they want. (Junusov 2007)

This refrain of dissatisfaction with the quality of Kyrgyzstan's ideology is striking, especially when most of the critics also remain convinced that effective ideology is crucial to successful state building. What is it that is lacking, then? How is the success of ideology to be assessed?

> The current stage of the development of Kyrgyzstan has put on the agenda the objective of a search for our own national identity and its elaboration of basis of national ideology and statehood. One way this has taken form since 2006 is in the armchair format for work on writing 'national ideology'. This chosen approach has no prospects and has been exhausted. This was confirmed by the discussion of the latest 'document', which no one takes seriously. The reason is simple: the ideologies should not be written in offices ... They are born in the boiling of daily life, crystallizing themselves in concrete ideas, which are understood and shared by the majority. (Omarov 2007)

This vision of the 'natural' development of ideology, of course, has nothing in common with the way that ideologies are in fact formulated in the political process of Kyrgyzstan. Here ideology is always characterised by abstract formulations, self-consciously put forward in the form of public discourse. This critique of ideology in Kyrgyzstan is characteristic of the ideological environment overall: there is a broad consensus that ideology is needed as the glue to hold Kyrgyzstan society together, but there is an equally strong sense that attempts to date to create a state ideology have been unsuccessful. There is a sense that ideology should be something 'natural' for a people—something that grows out of their history and moral qualities—but with all forms of ideology under heavy debate and critique, there is a sense that everything that is on the table is somehow 'artificial'. Thus, it may be that the Soviet-style vision of ideology is not compatible with a society such as Kyrgyzstan where it is possible to debate things so extensively.

If we consider ideology as a system, one thing that is most striking about the debates in Kyrgyzstan is how little the vision for ideology has changed since Soviet times, despite the dramatic changes that the society has undergone. The object that ideology is meant to impact for all ideology-producers is the same: the 'hearts and minds' of the population. And the main tools to which they appeal for achieving this effect are the same: ideological production is to be carried out by government committees with the participation of ideological specialists among whom the intelligentsia plays a special role; the ideological initiatives thus devised are to be propagandised via education and the mass media (Malikov 2005; Malikova 2006; Toygobaev 2006). There is great continuity with the vision of the 'mechanism of ideology' from Soviet times.

At the moment, we are in a relative lull as regards ideological debates, following the most recent burst of activity in 2005–2007. This reflects the fact that the political system has for the moment stabilised, following Bakiev's consolidation of his position. However, we can expect that if there is a new contestation of the balance of political forces in society, there is likely to be a renewed focus on ideology. Furthermore, we

may observe a strong tendency to return to the same ideological symbols, thanks to the fact that Kyrgyzstan inherited from Soviet times a set of concepts of nation, ideology and social consensus which continues to give form to the ideological debates. Thus, for example, Manas is a theme which was first promoted in a context where Islam was being played down, and Manas as a mythic hero was traced to pre-Islamic times. But more recently, he is being reinterpreted in the context of Muslim values, and has already been transformed into a sort of 'believer hero'.[31]

The persistence of appeals to ideology is explained by the fact that ideology is considered to be a fundamental element of statehood—a means for achieving regime legitimacy and effective state building. As such, ideology is understood as having concrete and vital effects in providing coherence in state and society. It is also understood as the space in which social consensus can be achieved, especially in periods of political destabilisation such as 1993 and 2005. Those who make appeals to ideology view it as a mechanism by which it is possible to meet the deficit of political trust and to provide for social justice and solidarity.

The fact that ideological debates in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan have revolved around the themes of nationalism, internationalism, Islam and Tengirchilik is not incidental. These themes capture many of the issues that are at play in the definition of relations between the state and society in Kyrgyzstan today. The debates about ideology are thus not a disconnected elite discourse, but rather an integral part of the process of seeking social consensus. The fact that there is so much dissatisfaction with state ideology in Kyrgyzstan today—but still a conviction that state ideology is needed—reflects the severe lack of social consensus that characterised the post-Soviet period in Kyrgyzstan, as well as the resilience of Soviet concepts and practices aimed at achieving that consensus.

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