

# CASE VII-C

## Lineage Associations and Informal Politics in Mapping Kyrgyz Leadership

*Aksana Ismailbekova*

**K**yrgyzstan is a kinship rich society. In this patrilineal society a Kyrgyz man's identification is relational, meaning that he cannot be identified as Kyrgyz without being linked to other male relatives such as fathers, grandfathers, and forefathers. More specifically, the Kyrgyz view their lineage identity or ancestral belonging as a given or natural part of identity, thus it cannot be changed, removed, or left out of any matter. Exclusion of any kind from such lineages equates with an existential threat to being a man, of not being identified as Kyrgyz any more, and being marginalized from the extended networks of kinsmen. Such exclusion also equates with the betrayal of one's family, children, and community.

In Kyrgyz genealogy there are forty lineages that unite all Kyrgyz people as a nation. Kyrgyz people believe that they stem from lineages that were headed by the respected elders of lineage groups (*aksakal*). During the Soviet times such lineages were banned, being considered backward and regressive in public and mass media. Nonetheless, people continued to rely on kinship networks. Although kinship was spoken of as being backward, the underlying reason

for its prohibition was that the lineage networks were those most able to push back against the state. Lineage groups or descent groups in Kyrgyzstan were not destroyed or eradicated during the Soviet era; rather, kinship was preserved and incorporated into the Soviet state and economic structures—e.g., collective farms (*kolkhoz*) and state farms (*sovkhos*) and other institutions—partially because kinship was so embedded in the local culture and mode of life.

In post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan, however, kinship systems have continued to flourish and function because they are compatible with the nation-building project of the state and because the state itself is not strong enough to oppose kinship groups. Consequently, these lineage groups deeply penetrate contemporary Kyrgyz politics, and the increasingly visible and organized forms that lineage seems to be taking in Kyrgyz politics and society in the guise of lineage associations. Relationships of trust are possible in these types of associations in ways that are not found in the state.

These lineage associations not only promote local culture and tradition, they also function as mutual aid societies, providing jobs and support to individuals

in need. These associations have become much more than just self-help organizations. They hold their own congresses and sports events; they have their own consulates, their own youth wings and women's divisions, and their own symbols. They even play a critical role in the process of electoral mobilization and penetrate deeply into institutions. In short, they almost function as lobbies or even as quasi-political parties. Close observations of the functioning of lineage associations highlight the dynamic relationship between modernity and traditionalism. One can discover modernity at the level of "modern" associations, formal meetings, registrations, and slogans and yet discover traditionalism at the level of lineages, kin networks, and local cultural values.

There are forty Kyrgyz lineages, and each one has its own unique history, with its own genealogy. The forty lineages are divided into three political factions: left wing (*sol kanat*), right wing (*ong kanat*), and internal wing (*ichkilik*). Each wing has its own consulate (*ordo kengesh*). The lineage associations have forty lineage leaders, each of whom is entitled to be represented at the state, business, and community level. These lineage associations are united under the umbrella of the Kyrgyz People's Unification Associations. Each faction and each lineage association has its own respected leader, with the head of the Kyrgyz People's Unification Association being appointed annually from among the heads of each division. In other words, every year there is a change of leadership by faction. The heads of the factions and representatives of each lineage meet regularly and discuss many questions and issues, such as producing genealogical books, promoting young people's politics, and discussing means of supporting each other in times of need.

To give a sense of how these asso-

ciations work, I turn to the Sarybagysh lineage, which has a particularly rich history. In 2014, for example, a former head of the State National Security Committee, Keneshbek Duyshebaev, was elected head of the Sarybagysh lineage group. In summer of 2014, an informal gathering (*kurultai*) of the Sarybagysh lineage was held on the shore of Lake Issyk Kul, with the participation of almost 450 people. Delegates from the Sarybagysh lineage included historians, public figures, politicians, businessmen, thirty-nine elders representing the other Kyrgyz thirty-nine lineages, and some members of parliament; all were selected based on their professional qualifications. They met and shared their thoughts on electing Duyshebaev as the leader of the lineage. According to Duyshebaev, together with close colleagues and associates, they established a public association known as Sarybagysh—Tagay bij uulu. The declared agenda of the project was to clarify the history of their own ancestors in genealogy and to educate the younger generation in the basics of kinship values as inherited from their forefathers.

At the end of the meeting, they read the Qur'an in memory of the heroes of their lineage such as Tagay Byi, Manap Byi, and Kalygul. This is a common practice among Kyrgyz when they pray for their ancestors by reciting Qur'an. During the informal gathering, according to Duyshebaev, the meeting was not convened for discussions about the unification of the Sarybagysh lineage; rather, the point of the gathering was simply to get to know each other better. At this *kurultai* there was no talk of politics. The main discussion concerned the friendship of all Kyrgyz people. At present, the lineage association is involved in a project to publish books about famous people from the Sarybagysh lineage. Members are also actively engaged in efforts to

unite lineages and promote peace and cooperation among the lineages.

According to the Sarybagysh lineage association's leader: "It is important to preserve the unique phenomenon of our lineages and genealogies, that have been preserved for centuries. The importance of Kyrgyz kinship is that children should know their seven fathers and the need to transfer the genealogical knowledge to the offspring is great." However, according to some reports, during the kurultai people also discussed preparations for the upcoming (at the time) 2017 presidential election. More precisely, they discussed the possibility of nominating a candidate for the presidential elections from the Sarybagysh lineage—such as Kanat Isaev, who has served as mayor of Tokmok, Chuy oblast governor, and deputy of two convocations of the Kyrgyz parliament and is seen as an experienced politician whose reputation has been growing among the Kyrgyz people. It is said that a well-known psychic, Melis Karybekov, told people that the next president would be a representative of the Sarybagysh lineage. But just before the presidential elections in October 2017, Isaev was arrested on suspicion of preparing a forcible seizure of power. Following the kurultai meeting, the lineage members did not put Isaev forward as candidate for president, but they declared that if he decided to run for president, then the lineage would support him, just as they had supported then president Almaz Atambaev, who belongs to the Kytai lineage. In spite of the difficulties that former president Kurmanbek Bakiyev's behavior caused the lineage associations, it appears that lineage associations are still heavily involved in selecting possible presidential candidates.

The lineage associations are legal entities in Kyrgyzstan. Their main mission is to promote local culture and tradition,

thereby contributing to the nation-building project of Kyrgyzstan. However, the lineage associations are engaged in politics, which is not allowed according to law. They get around questions of legality by conducting their politically oriented activities in informal ways.

The duality of lineage associations also consists in the fact that there is still a lingering sense in Kyrgyzstan that open politics by the lineage associations should be taboo since it openly promotes principles of cronyism in society and politics. In other words, the dualism of lineage associations is based on how they support culture and tradition but also advance a political agenda. Nonetheless, this is the reality of the situation because of the linkage of conceptions of genealogies in constructing nationalist symbols and national identity. Indeed, there is an older Soviet-educated generation of people who view these associations in a strongly negative way, even though they themselves function as part of these networks. A group of members of the older generation (above fifty years old)—imbued with strong Soviet propaganda, education, and knowledge—continue to consider lineage association as criminal, savage, and a betrayal of modern society. However, members of this group of Soviet-educated elders are nevertheless part of the large extended networks, and they actively participate in the life-cycle events of their own relatives. They would prefer such networks to be private, domestic, and small. The reality is that the lineage associations are increasingly gaining and striving for open forms within Kyrgyz politics and society, controlling patronage, mobilizing voters, organizing protests, and inhabiting various parts of the state bureaucracy.

Some have called for the associations to come out of the shadows and take on a formal, legal, constitutional role, in-

cluding even the creation of a national kurultai based on the associations. In contrast, some representatives of NGOs, state authorities, politicians, and local political experts view the lineage associations through a prism of tribalism and backwardness. I argue that the lineage associations function as a kind of constraint and control mechanism on the political sphere, ensuring that no single leader is able to gain sufficient power to become a dictator. At the same time, the associations help contain local corruption. Many members use their lineage associations as a starting point for finding solutions for a number of problems, ranging from finding jobs to getting access to medical treatment and hospitals.

Questions remain as to whether the associations should take on a more

open formal role in Kyrgyz politics or should continue as informal entities behind the scenes. Underlying this debate is the question as to whether it would be better for political stability if the lineage associations operated behind the scenes or in a more formal role in the political structure. Either way it seems that lineage associations will not disappear from the political scene. And there would be enormous risks involved in politicalizing lineage by bringing it out of the closet and into the open. Thus, the stability of Kyrgyzstan may in fact depend on the continued functioning of this duality with regard to lineage and the persistence of informal politics. The tension between formal and informal political influence is important yet often overlooked when focusing on state-approved actors.