

Informal Governance and Corruption – Transcending the Principal Agent and Collective Action Paradigms

Kyrgyzstan Country Report Part 2 Micro-Level

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1 Introduction

1.1 Informal practices as drivers of corruption

The lack of effectiveness of conventional anti-corruption interventions has been convincingly documented (Mungiu-Pippidi 2011) and is reflected in the so-called implementation gap, whereby countries that have adopted the legal and organizational reforms associated with anti-corruption best practices continue to experience very high levels of corruption. This situation appears to be linked to a lack of empirical support for the principal-agent assumptions presuming the existence of “principled principals” capable of holding officials accountable and willing to enforce the anti-corruption reforms. A prominent school of thought seeks to re-frame the problem of endemic corruption as a collective action problem (Persson, Rothstein, and Teorell 2013, Mungiu-Pippidi 2013). A problem so far with this latter approach is that, while it can describe why corruption appears extremely hard to eradicate in some contexts, it has failed to deliver clear insights on how anticorruption may be pursued to optimize impact given the acknowledged constraints. Bringing in the dimension of informality is an essential step to overcome the limitations of the principal-agent and collective action approaches and offers better chances of delivering insights that are useful for purposes of policy making.

This report identifies informal practices operational in selected countries and establishes their universal and specific features in comparative analysis; assess their functional ambivalence based on the functions they perform in their respective economies, and indicate the extent to which they fuel corruption and stifle anticorruption policies. In doing so, this report produces evidence for the relevance of informality for the ‘localisation’ of anticorruption strategies, thus enhancing their impact, and for a new generation of policies harnessing the potential of local patterns of informality.

1.2 Mapping lineage leadership in Kyrgyzstan: lineage associations and informal governance

*“There are both written laws and unwritten laws in Kyrgyzstan and one cannot work without the other”
(local genealogy teller, Azis, during the lineage gatherings of Cherek lineage group).*

In Kyrgyzstan there are formal and informal rules of law; both are very important and play a crucial role in political and economic processes in the country. Kyrgyz is also a kinship rich society. In the genealogies of Kyrgyz, there are forty lineages that unite all Kyrgyz people as the Kyrgyz nation. Kyrgyz people believe that they stem from these lineages which were headed by their respected elders (*aksakal*). During the Soviet times the lineages were prohibited, being considered as backward in public and mass media channels, however people continued to rely on their kinship networks regardless. Lineage or descent groups were not destroyed during this era, rather kinship was preserved and incorporated into the Soviet state and economic structures (*kolkhoz* and *sovkhoz*).

In the post-Soviet context, kinship systems have continued to flourish and function as a result of the nation building projects of the state and because of the absence of a strong state to oppose kinship groups. Moreover, the introduction of new electoral processes under the umbrella of democracy also contributed to the strengthening of kinship networks. As political institutions were weak, a kinship argument was needed for the parties to mobilise people and gain their support.

There are also forty ‘lineage associations’ (based on the existing forty lineages) that are legally registered and are actively involved in a variety of activities in Kyrgyzstan; many involve cultural events such as organising evenings, festivals, social gatherings, publishing genealogical books, websites, and

constructing monuments. Simultaneously they are actively, but informally engaged in politics. Each lineage association has its own symbols, law, and responsibilities. Formally, the associations are not allowed to engage with politics, but informally they challenge the state in many ways. It is important to note that many sponsors of such lineage associations are influential politicians, party leaders, opposition leaders, and businessmen.

Non-members of such lineage associations view them as being detrimental to society because the associations divide people according to lineage, which has the potential for conflict. Furthermore, the associations are accused of appointing people to positions of power according to kinship lines rather than on merit.

The state has also a dual and ambiguous relationship with the lineage associations. During elections, politicians and party members approach the associations for their support in order to secure the votes of their lineage members. However, once the politicians and party members find themselves in power, it is not unusual for them to accuse the associations of being negative, once more citing their propensity to divide people along kinship lines. This signals the presence of a double standard.

2 Research design

2.1 Rationale and conceptual approach

The conceptual approach is grounded on the work of (Baez-Camargo & Ledeneva, 2017) and identifies three key patterns of informal governance – namely co-optation, control, camouflage and conformity.

- Co-optation is associated with recruitment or strategic appointments into public office of allies, who are granted impunity in exploiting the power and resources associated to public office in exchange of mobilizing support and maintaining loyalty to the regime. Co-optation is a mechanism of regime survival because it addresses the problems of intra-elite splits, constructing loyalties and preventing the strengthening of groups contesting power.
- Control mechanisms are instrumental to manage clashes of hidden interests, ensure elite cohesion and enforce discipline. These tend to rely heavily on personalized networks based on kinship, geographical location, and/or institutional positions that work to manage hierarchical relationships through reliance on loyalties and unwritten rules that often tie members together creating obligations and responsibilities vis-à-vis the group.
- Camouflage refers to the distance between formal status and real power implied by the institutional façades that coexist with the realities of political co-optation and control. Thus, the formal rules and institutions of the public sector are sustained, but often only to manipulate, undercut, divert, or exploit for the sake of informal interests.

The comparative research design is applied in two distinct country groups: East Africa and Post-Soviet countries.

- East Africa: Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda
- Post-Soviet countries: Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Russia

2.2 Research design and methods

The research was conducted in various places in Kyrgyzstan, namely: Osh (12- 30 June 2016) Naryn (1-18 July 2016) Zhalal-Abad (19-30 July 2016), Bishkek, Kant, Sokuluk (1-31 August 2016) , and Issyk Kul (September-October 2016).

The research comprised mapping local actors and lineage associations as well as conducting interviews with professors and key informants. For this, it was important to identify those actors that actively engaged in the kinship networks and informal governance, such as representatives from civil society (Non-Governmental Organisations), lineage associations, state institutions, religious leaders, elderly courts (*aksakal*) and community leaders.

Interviews were conducted with representatives of lineage associations, independent actors (without linkage to lineage associations), police officers, NGOs and citizens. In order to grasp the perspectives of state authorities, interviews were also conducted with the representatives of the state administrations of Naryn, Issik-Kul, Osh, Chuy, and Zhalal-Abad provinces. In addition, focus group discussions were organised with lineage associations in Bishkek, Kant, Naryn, Issik-Kul, and Osh, and Jalal-Abad, where the participants shared their experiences, challenges, and future prospects regarding the lineages. The researcher also participated in the gatherings of the lineage associations in Ala-Buka (Zhalal-Abad province), Bishkek, and Sokuluk (Chuy province). The findings have been anonymised in order to protect the confidentiality of the informants¹.

3 Background on lineage associations

3.1 Introduction

The forty lineages of Kyrgyz are divided into three political factions, namely, left (*sol kanat*), right (*ong kanat*), and internal wings (*ichkilik*). Each wing is led by a respected leader and has its own consulate (*ordo kengesh*). The forty lineage associations too have their own leader that is entitled to be represented at the state, business, and community level. All the lineage associations are united under the umbrella of Kyrgyz People's Unification Association. The head of the Kyrgyz People's Unification Association is appointed annually from the head of each division in turn. 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 to discuss various questions and issues.

The lineage associations also have their own Youth wing and a Women's division. The Youth wing is responsible for uniting young men from their own lineage and organising different cultural and sport events. In addition, the Youth association is responsible for finding job opportunities for the young unemployed. The Women' division aims to unite women from the lineage by strengthening their network and offering support to each other in times of need. The Women's wing includes a group of very strong leaders made up of businesswomen, politicians and state officials. They actively support

¹ Initially, interviewees were not prepared to be open in their responses, therefore, it was necessary to visit them a number of times in order to gain their trust. In addition, some of the rival lineage associations were suspicious and assumed that the researcher was a member of the state security services. Interestingly, the researcher was accepted into to her own lineage group *Mongoldor* as their own daughter without question, and similarly into her husband's lineage group *Solto* simply by virtue of being a daughter-in-law.

each other in various life cycle events, as well as in finding job opportunities for their children. Both the Youth and Women's factions urgently seek to strengthen their groups in the regions.

Lineage associations bring together all the influential people from their own group in annual gatherings held in different locations in Kyrgyzstan. These meetings are called *kurultai* (gathering of lineage) and allow the members of each lineage association to meet each other; stimulate inter-regional learning; acquire information about regional activities and discuss further important questions related to their own lineage.

Every year each region takes on the responsibility of hosting lineage members in their own region, with the aim of showing them the nature of the local area and to offer sightseeing opportunities to their kin from other parts of the country. Activities may include producing genealogical books; promoting young people's engagement in politics; and discussing means of supporting each other in times of need. During these gatherings, members of the lineage group from one place try to learn about other people from their own lineage group - in effect it is about establishing networks and contacts.

Many members use their lineage associations as a starting point for finding solutions for a number of problems, ranging from getting access to medical treatment and hospitals, to finding jobs. The lineage associations have different levels of budget. Some lineage members contribute to them annually; others lineage organisations are supported by rich politicians or businessmen. Members of associations living in the capital (Bishkek) meet on a regular basis but regional members may meet only once a year. Each region has its own coordinator who is responsible for organisation and providing information about the activities of the lineage associations to the local villages.

3.2 Kyrgyz identity and genealogy

In a patrilineal society like Kyrgyzstan, a Kyrgyz man's identification is relational, meaning that he cannot be identified as Kyrgyz without him 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 marginalised from the extended networks of kinsmen. Such exclusion also equates with the betrayal of one's family, children and community.

Two cultural mechanisms constrain and regulate the behaviour of Kyrgyz men within (and outside) lineage groups. These cultural mechanisms of *uiat* (shame) and *namys* (honour) are meaningful for people as they are linked to their own personal and communal identification. Kyrgyz people perceive kinship as the main institution in their society and as a result the conduct of lineage members reflects on the entire lineage. This influences the way in which lineage members see themselves but also the way in which they are perceived by other lineages. In order to be accepted by their lineage and experience a sense of belonging, it is imperative to fulfil the expectations of kin members. Nevertheless, these are the ideal parameters and exceptions or violations of such rules exist.

The lineage ideology of 'shame' and 'honour' functions as a control mechanism. Many lineage association leaders remind members during their meetings that 'we are relatives and should not betray each other' and 'we are relatives and should support each other by hiding our bad sides and showing our good sides'. The sub text is that in the case of betrayal by a member, punishment will mean exclusion from the lineage association and group. This punishment can affect not only an individual but also his father, children, and distant relatives because each Kyrgyz man identifies himself as part

of a larger group. In a similar vein, each lineage association competes for good leadership that works effectively and seeks to avoid damaging the reputation of the whole lineage by putting it in a bad light.

It is important to mention the term *kurultai*. The people's assembly known as *kurultai* is a not street gathering of people; rather it is a people's congress in which one delegate (lineage leader) is appointed for every 3000 electors. 'This is the assembly of people which determines the fate of the people and the country.'

4 Use of the three Cs as mechanisms to manage the lineage associations

4.1 Control mechanism I: *uiat* (shame) aspect in lineage associations

During the Presidency of Kurmanbek Bakiev (2005-2010), the President publically stated that 'those who promote lineages and lineage associations should be put in front of a wall and shot'. Bakiev belonged to the Teiyt lineage and was born and raised in southern Kyrgyzstan. During the time he was in power, Bakiev was involved in corrupt activities and nepotism (his son started to monopolise many businesses in Kyrgyzstan), in addition the prices of electricity and food, along with other consumer products increased significantly. As a consequence, and as a direct result of popular protest, Bakiev was ousted in 2010. Many members of his lineage expressed the view that Bakiev and his son had brought shame, not only upon their own family but also upon the whole Teiyt lineage of southern Kyrgyzstan. Bakiev was felt to have betrayed and disgraced the Teiyt lineage and left a stain upon their reputation.

Subsequently, representatives of the Teiyt lineage met to decide on the election of someone who might be considered 'worthy' of being the Head of the lineage; someone they were confident would not bring shame upon either himself or the good name of the group. Abdygany Erkebaev was seen as a natural contender. A Doctor of Philological Sciences, he had been President of the National Academy of Sciences for many years. However, during Bakiev's Presidency, he had openly criticised the President's policies and activities and as a result had not been given any important state position.

According to Erkebaev, in 1986, at the beginning of the period of *perestroika* in the USSR, there was a gathering of lineage experts in the Issyk-Kul region. Many people came together seeking to restore the traditions of their ancestors and venerate them over the previous seven generations. This was seen as an important moment in the development of Kyrgyz statehood; from this time forward the Kyrgyz people re-acknowledged and reconnected with their past. (Although many politicians and bureaucrats pretend that they do not care about their ancestors, in actual fact they ensure that they do not miss local feasts (*toi*) or other lineage gatherings and meetings at expensive restaurants and other notable places).

In August 2014, an informal gathering (*kurultai*) of the Teiyt lineage took place in a remote area of Leilek of the Batken district. This assembly took the form of an ordinary meeting and was attended by representatives of the local authorities and the security services. More importantly, 600 Kyrgyz delegates attended this meeting from Turkey, China, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, as well as delegates from all parts of Kyrgyzstan. During this *kurultai* (and without any publicity), academician Abdygany Erkebaev was proclaimed leader and presented with a certificate (*en tamga*) confirming his position as

head of the Teiyt lineage. Erkebaev was elected as the head both because he was a famous and respected person in the country but more importantly because he was viewed as being 'clean' in the eyes of his lineage fellows and thus not affected by the influence, support, or patronage of Bakiev. In response to being offered the position, Erkebaev acknowledged that to refuse the offer of his lineage members would have been considered a betrayal of his own fellows, furthermore, he accepted the honour and trust imbued in him by his people. He reiterated that he would not forget the responsibility attached to the status. Furthermore, Erkebaev emphasised that he had never moved away from his own roots or those of his own ancestors. In his speech Abdygany Erkebaev said:

“As a former state and now a public figure, scientist and academician, I decided to accept [the] people’s offer because the division into lineages among the Kyrgyz people is a scientific phenomenon, in which there [are] no politics is involved. We need to know our own ancestors and our genealogies. This is great. We should not make politics out of this, and there should not be any political slogans. As human beings, we should support each other, not to forget our own origins. Unfortunately, Bakiev left a bad impression of [the] Teiyt lineage. In addition, our current President Almazbek Atambayev has some linkages to our lineage family because he comes from the south.”² (Abdygany Erkebaev was also born in the south in Kara-Teiyt village of Osh district).

As head of his lineage association, Erkebaev holds an honorary title of genealogy, signifying his high status within the lineage group. Relatives can approach Erkebaev in the case when a complicated matter arises and ask for advice, suggestions and support, as is expected from Kyrgyz tradition. Lineage members also on occasion come to him and ask for his blessing before they start a new venture such as a business or seek his support in bringing about the success of cultural initiatives such as concerts. In lineage associations, there is both the expectation of a social or public duty, as well as a moral responsibility towards members. Erkebaev’s speeches to his relatives always highlight the example of unity that lineage members should share with all relatives, as well as striving for unity with the Kyrgyz people in general.

Erkebaev has played an active role in improving the name of the Teiyt lineage following the disgrace that Bakiev brought upon it. Today members of the lineage are actively engaged in educating their fellow lineage members so that Bakiev’s mistakes are not repeated. The lineage members no longer accept the family of Bakiev as their relatives, and as a consequence the Bakiev family are all excluded from the lineage and live outside of Kyrgyzstan. Even if members of the family were to approach the lineage, the members would not accept them and they would be demonstratively ignored. *Uiat* (shame) is a very strong factor that regulates the behaviour of people within lineages. The norm is to conduct oneself in a way that will not violate the reputation of the lineage. The lineage head is able to control their lineage members through this notion of *uiat* (shame). The lineage members may not betray each other, otherwise they face the existential threat of being excluded, as Bakiev’s case illustrates.

4.2 Control mechanism II: *Namys* (honour) aspect of lineage associations

In July, 2016 an informal gathering of the Cherik lineage association (*kurultai*) was organised in Ala-Buka, southern Kyrgyzstan. The distance between Ala-Buka and capital Bishkek is almost 700 km. Many the cherik lineage members came from Bishkek due to their professional occupations. The Ala-Buka lineage members invited guests from northern Kyrgyzstan (Naryn, Issyk-Kul and Talas) to their village and organised their annual meeting. The whole Ala-Buka village was mobilised to host the

² Абдыганы Эркебаев: "Если бы я отказался от предложения возглавить род, то я бы стал невежественным манкуртом!" http://www.gezitter.org/interviews/35982_abdyganyi_erkebaev_esli_byi_ya_otkazalsya_ot_predlojeniya_vozglavit_rod_to_ya_byi_stal_nevejstvennyim_mankurtom/

guests who came from the same lineage but were representatives from the northern regions. The representatives of the Cherik lineage from the villages of Naryn, in the Issyk regions, as well as those from Bishkek gathered in Bishkek. The guests were composed mostly of men, representing each of their village lineages in the Naryn, Issyk-Kul, and Talas regions. The age category was wide, ranging from 18 to 85 years old. Seven buses were organised to transport the representatives of the Cherik lineage groups from Naryn to Bishkek. From Bishkek the lineage group members went to Ala-Buka. Once the men were on the buses the head of the lineage, Duishon and his assistant Mirbek, approached each member of the lineage with the recommendation that:

“We should not allow ourselves to be shamed (uiat) by drinking a lot of vodka and speaking of unnecessary things to the hosts in Ala-Buka. You should remember we are going to the South, people do not drink and are more religious there. We should follow their rules, please do not make us ashamed. Try to show your best faces, qualities, and speeches and hide your bad qualities such as drinking alcohol, saying bad words, and fighting. We should be the model for others to show that we also have dignity and honour and try preserve this dignity and honour of your lineage”.

Once they arrived in Ala-Buka, almost a hundred elders of the community greeted the members of the Cherik lineage from the north of the country. They hosted the guests in a huge restaurant, seating them in the most prestigious places. Three different kinds of food were offered and the guests were taken to host families. The host families offered their guests the highest level of hospitality - dignifying their visit with the slaughter of sheep, providing plenty of food, and offering suitable beds. They treated the guests as if they had known them for years in spite of the fact that the majority of the guests had only just met their host families. What linked them so closely was their genealogical relatedness based on sharing a common ancestor of Cherik.

During the dinner, the guests and hosts debated the history of their Cherik ancestor and forefathers. Discussions also included different theories about how and why one part of the Cherik lineage had come to be located in the north and the rest in the south. Each side shared their own version and knowledge of the origins of their Cherik ancestors. Moreover, they were able to reach a satisfactory conclusion with coinciding versions of their origin stories. It was agreed that their Cherik ancestor originated from southern Kyrgyzstan, but later one of the younger sons of the Cherik had moved to the north, therefore explaining why they continued to have a presence there.

On the following day, there was a huge feast with music and dance. Important elders, lineage association members, party leaders and politicians gave speeches. Their speeches related to the honour of the Cherik lineage and celebrated the pride of being Cherik's children. For the benefit of the younger generation, the speeches promoted the unity of Cherik by stressing the importance of pride in their lineage, and extended kin networks and implored the younger generation to keep its honour high.

The honour aspect was expressed in terms of reminding members not to shame the lineage by behaving inappropriately; instead it was proposed that lineage members work honourably (*taza ishtegile*), discipline themselves (*tak ishtoo*), and keep their word (*sozgo tur*). Each lineage member was reminded that he must honour the lineage, because the honour is not linked to him individually, rather it affects the social standing and self-worth of the entire Cherik group. Thus, Cherik lineage was viewed as the main source of honour. More than a thousand men agreed to follow these rules and pledged themselves to their Cherik lineage. Cherik lineage authorities noted that young people were prone to undertake extreme actions such as drinking to excess, addiction and theft, but the young people were told to rise above such behaviour.

The speakers also stressed the importance of lineage leaders as representatives in business and politics. They mentioned successful members by name, gave a traditional hat (*kalpak*) to each of them in order to honour them in front of the gathered crowd in recognition of their active public work and for advancing the name of the Cherik lineage. Lineage members from different localities were introduced to the local histories of the Cherik and to the success stories of the lineage's sons and daughters, thereby recounting their specific contribution to Kyrgyzstan. Moreover, they also emphasised once more that each member of the Cherik lineage association was willing to help any person who asked for their support or assistance.

4.3 Camouflage: a cultural and historical project?

The question remains: what is the main agenda of such lineage associations? Officially, they are considered as cultural and historical centres, responsible for the production of local knowledge, history and memory. But at the same time, it may be observed that other considerations are present. Since Kyrgyzstan's independence, it is apparent that all lineage associations have organised a large number of informal gatherings. Interestingly, participants included both former and current politicians and officials. This in itself underlines that it is not prohibited by the Constitution to engage with genealogies.

In 2014, a *kurultai* meeting of well-known public figures and politicians of the Sarybagysh lineage group met in Issyk-Kul to elect former head of the State National Security Committee, Keneshbek Duyshebaev, as their leader. 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 on the basics of kinship values inherited from their forefathers.

An informal gathering (*kurultai*) was also organised in the city of Cholpon-Ata, with the participation of almost 450 people. Delegates included historians, representatives of the forty lineage elders and members of parliament. At the end of the meeting they read a Koran verse in memory of the heroes of their lineages from the Tagay Byi, Manapov Byi, and Kalygul. During the informal gathering, Duyshebaev stated that 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 meeting there was no talk of politics. The main discussion concerned the friendship of all Kyrgyz people³. At present the lineage association is involved in a project to publish books about famous people from the Sarybagysh lineage. They are also actively engaged in efforts to unite lineages and promote peace and interaction among them.

According to the Sarybagysh lineage association:

'It is important to preserve the unique phenomenon, 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 2017 presidential election. More precisely, they discussed the possibility of nominating the candidate for the presidential elections from the Sarybagysh lineage or supporting a candidate (Kanat

³ Duyshebaev, Kengeshbek, general-liutenant: "My vydvinem dostoinogo kandidata na prezidentskih vyborah " http://www.gezitter.org/interviews/51176_keneshbek_duyshebaev_general_leytenant_myi_vydvinem_dostoinogo_kandidata_na_prezidentskih_vyborah/

Isaev) from their own lineage⁴. According to the its members, the history of Sarybagysh lineage is rich; they are well travelled and members included well-known personalities, scientists, historians, rulers, and khans. Following the meeting, the lineage members did not put Kanat Isaev forward for President, but they declared that if he decided to run for President, then the lineage would support him, just as they had supported the current President, Atambaev. In spite of the difficulties that President Bakiev's behaviour caused the lineage associations⁵, it would appear that they are still involved with selecting possible presidential candidates.

4.4 Opposing changes in the constitution

The current President, Atambayev and members of parliament have proposed amending the constitution. Interestingly though, a moratorium agreed upon in 2010 states that there cannot be any changes made before 2020. Some observers suggest that by changing the constitution, Atambayev wants to decrease the power of the next President. Others speculate that the proposed reforms are a way for the present incumbent to ensure that his party (the Social Democratic Party) remains in power. Another factor influencing matters may be that the President wants to guarantee that he can go into retirement without worrying about the possibility of any future investigations, prosecution or legal proceedings. In addition, the constitutional reform would allow the followers of Atambaev to remain in power for as long as possible.

The proposed amendments in the constitution would compromise the independence of the court system, as any judge would be 'a man of the President, Office of the President and Government'. Critical voices also proclaim that the amended constitution would lead to the rejection of the supremacy of international treaties over national law and subsequently this could lead to the loss of democracy in the country. Moreover, there would be some changes in the manner in which crimes can be prosecuted. The implication of this is that crimes related to the Kumtor mine scandal will not be further persecuted once the court has made a decision⁶.

The attempt to change the constitution is likely to open the door to future accusations of rigging or favouritism from government opponents. One of the main opponents of constitutional change is the informal network of lineage associations. Many informants espoused: 'In Kyrgyzstan, there will not be a strong and centralised single leader and this is related to the culture of Kyrgyz'. The lineage groups associations or networks will not allow power to be usurped by such a single leader. Although the lineage associations compete, they are also at the same time able to consolidate with one another. Accordingly, they are actively engaged in protesting against changes in the constitution because they all believe that Atambayev's motive is to protect himself from prosecution or sentencing for previous convictions on charges that date back many years. However, if the constitution is changed then it would offer an opportunity to ratify the law on *Kurultai*.

⁴ Kanat Isaev, who has served as mayor of Tokmok, Chui oblast governor, and deputy of two convocations of the Kyrgyz parliament is seen as an experienced politician whose reputation has been growing amongst 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.

⁵ The presidential system was transformed into a mixed presidential-parliamentary system by elites and instituted by referendum in June 2010. As a result, informal networks have found channels, namely through political parties, to enter formal and visible structures of power. This practice has reinforced decentralisation and ensures that everyone gets 'a piece of the pie'.

⁶ In recent years there have been constant flashpoints of unrest between local communities and gold mining sectors (Kumtor) in the rural community of Kyrgyzstan. Despite the continuing tensions between the state authorities, local communities, and the mining company, attempts to avoid conflict have not been successful.

4.5 Introduction of institution of *Kurultai*

An important aim of the lineage leaders is to introduce the institution of *kurultai* into the constitution. This is a great people's congress' said many informants. Once the *kurultai* becomes a legalised institution, it will be able to convene with only the President and the administration of the *kurultai* institution present (composed of members of the forty lineages). The *kurultai* will be able to address very important political issues in which representatives of each lineage group will take an active part in. The idea is that once the *kurultai* is legitimised, state officials will be required to report annually on their activities, work, and projects to the lineage leaders of Kyrgyzstan. Consequently, state officials will be unable to lie to or to ignore citizens, because the lineage leaders within the institution of *kurultai* will be independent from the state, and thus will be able to evaluate the work of state officials objectively.

Lineage leaders assert that: 'we cannot be confident in the internal and external stability of Kyrgyzstan. We aim for two things: to strengthen our statehood but also to make sure that our state officials keep their promises once they are in politics'. The law on 'People's Kurultai', which was written in accordance with Article 52 of Basic Law and approved in the first reading of the parliament *Zhogorku Kengesh* of December 12, 2012, with 62 votes, has not been signed, although the proposition of introducing the 'institution of *kurultai*' was supported in public discussions in Bishkek and Osh in 2015.

'Since the law was proposed almost 4 years have passed but Parliament has violated its own rules and has not ratified the bill' says the head of *Cherik* lineage group. In response, members of the 'People's *Kurultai*' movement considered cooperation with opposition politicians as a possible solution. Nevertheless, there are also groups of people who distort the essence and meaning of the People's *Kurultai*. Some state officials used the *Kurultai* as a political tool to gain power. However, once they found themselves in office, they kept delaying the ratification process and refused to legitimise it. Other state officials raise the issue of holding *Kurultai* meetings, but somehow remain silent when the conversation comes to legalising the institution.

Lineage associations are constantly pressuring the deputies of *Zhogorku Kengesh* to adopt the law on the People's Kurultai. Only by legalising this institution would it be possible to ensure that the state functions properly without misappropriating budget funds and it would be forced to distribute state resources equally among all six districts of Kyrgyzstan.

4.6 Other activities of 'alliance' lineage associations: opposing corruption

Several lineages are found in each province. Together they form an 'alliance' of lineage associations that convenes social gatherings in each province based purely on their 'alliance' lineage names. This group of people focus not on lineage identity but on regional identifications by uniting several lineage associations under the umbrella of regionalism, common ancestors and Kyrgyz ethnicity.

There are cases where the lineage associations make sure that the state officials in the regions perform their tasks well. Many members of lineage associations hold high positions in state structures of the provinces. The 'alliance' of lineage associations are able to influence state officials (such as the mayor of the city, head of district or province administrations) both in formal and informal ways. In formal ways, they are able to use their own state positions but they are also able to approach state officials through the informal ways of the regional associations. Usually, the state officials of the region belong to the group of regional associations. They regularly meet for joint dinners, which see almost 400 people come together in an informal environment.

The main 'alliance' lineage association is Right Wing (*ong kanat*) meaning "from the northern lineage groups" and includes all the lineages of one district, such as Naryn, Issik-Kul and Chui. The aim of this regional association is to raise pressing issues with the President, the State authorities at district and regional levels as well as parliament *Zhogorku Kengesh*. *Right Wing* can also openly express discontent with the state and seeks to ensure that the representatives do their jobs in accordance with the rule of the law. The main leader of Right Wing, Keneshbek Muratbekov, was formerly the Governor of Naryn oblast. Muratbekov shared in an interview that as a state official, it is not possible to raise certain issues openly, therefore, the aim of this 'alliance' lineage association is to show the limitations of the state. Right Wing associations are in constant contact with the office of the Mayor, Governor of the district, and district authorities. As a public association, Right Wing also engages in challenging the central state to ensure that the budget is distributed in all districts equally.

As the Naryn region is rich in natural resources, the association is actively engaged in making sure that its resources are properly used. At present, the Kyrgyz government intends to develop the Kara-Keche coal mine and combined heat and power facility in Kara-Keche. This project might destroy the ecology of the Kara-Keche lake, and it is widely felt that the implementation of the Kara-Keche project would threaten the environment⁷.

Local people and the Right Wing association oppose the construction of the project in Kara Keche. Although the present government upholds the development, the offer of social payments has not enabled them to fully suppress the discontent of the people of Naryn. The current difficult situation in the country contributed to an earlier government proposal to carry coal from the Kara-Keche to Bishkek to fuel power plants which was dismissed in favour of the Kara-Keche project because the thermal power station in Bishkek is being modernised and it is not known how long it will take before coal can be supplied from the deposit. (Further investigations should have been conducted on site but the government has chosen not to follow this up).

The Right Wing Association did everything possible to stop this project: it wrote letters to both the President and to parliament showing the advantages and disadvantages of constructing the project, but to no avail; it was unable to influence matters on this occasion. As a last resort, the Right Wing Association can provoke popular unrest together with the local people.

4.7 Regional divisions between North and South

As noted before, Erkebaev's position as the President of the National Academy of Sciences of Kyrgyzstan, and simultaneously as the head of a lineage association raised concerns within certain groups of people who considered that membership of the lineage associations would lead to degradation and a return to tribalism and fragmented relationships in Kyrgyz society. But Abdygany Erkebaev sought to reassure them that this would not happen in contemporary Kyrgyzstan because the principal appointments would be made according to the education, experience, and professional skills of a candidate and not on the basis of favouritism. He stressed that democracy implies that there is a space for reasonable competition regarding political views. Indeed, his position is that for the future benefit of Kyrgyzstan, all lineage groups should unite and search for an alternative governance instead of dividing and competing for power. The main rationale of lineage associations is to unite all Kyrgyz people so as to find the best ways to resolve current problems.

⁷ The famous statesman, Turdakun Usubaliev, First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Kyrgyzstan, who was in power during the Soviet era cared about the environment and resisted purely economic beneficial developments. However, in present day Kyrgyzstan, the construction of the project would bring revenue and benefit to a small closed circle of self-interested people.

Since the 1990s, politicians have attempted to separate the South from the North or used their differences to legitimise their policy and power. Some even offered to form a southern and northern federation. These ideas have not been implemented but there has been a constant discourse about regionalism in Kyrgyzstan. Finally, through lineage associations, a solution to the problem has been suggested that unites people from south and north along the lineage lines. Lineage associations consistently emphasise the Kyrgyz proverb: 'if you are alone, you will be eaten by the wolves'. According to Abdygany Erkebaev, 'the split nation can lead to the destruction of the country. Kyrgyzstan is one country, the Kyrgyz are one people. The lineage should never be divided into regions, rather we should be consolidated and united by knowing each other's lineages, ancestors, and genealogies'. One of the former members of parliament from the Ata-Zhurt party, Nadir Narmatova, supported this view suggesting that instead of dividing the country along southern or northern lines, the parties should be organised in lineage systems, in the hope that this would help the country to overcome regional problems.⁸

Moreover, Erkebaev states that the lineage association policy reinforces the fact that all forty Kyrgyz lineages have their own unique histories with their own genealogical stories and legends. If the aim is to establish the unity of the Kyrgyz people in the spirit of friendship, it is necessary to combine these forty genealogies. If there is no friendship between the forty lineages, there cannot be a common cause or friendship between the Kyrgyz people. At present, the Kyrgyz people are undergoing a process of self-identification. However, it must be remembered that the representatives of lineages cannot readily leave their lineages, unlike politicians who can leave their party at will.

4.8 Tribalism: the main scourge of Kyrgyz society?

Another interesting perspective comes from groups comprising of former Soviet state officers, soviet educated intelligence officers, civil society activists and government officials. This group of people has a completely different point of view regarding the informal lineage associations. They are indignant that a division along lineage lines was encouraged by the scientific intelligentsia of the state. The Soviet party system used to ban kinship ties, therefore, this particular group of people shares the view that lineages are backward and bad. An interview with the current President, Almazbek Atambaev confirmed this view: 'It is scary, that in contemporary Kyrgyzstan, someone wants to promote the idea of separation of people into lineages, like in African jungle. In our realities, our scientists are becoming the head of lineages'⁹ (here he is referring to the aforementioned Abdygany Erkebaev)'.

This group believes that 'tribalism and regionalism are in the genes of the Kyrgyz, which has very negative effect on the society'. They are sceptical of the cultural and historical agendas of such associations; instead they blame them for bringing risks, instability, and division to society. They remind people that the reason that tribal blood, feuds and wars within a single ethnic group occurred in the past was due to the division of the Kyrgyz according to the lineage lines, recalling that in the nineteenth century a fight between the Sarybagysh and Bugu tribes led to the deaths of many young men.

Those opposing lineage associations claim that the associations' purpose is not preserving cultural and historical heritage or organising cultural events, rather they accuse them of being political actors with political agendas. They claim that the lineage associations exclude 'ordinary people', maintaining that the members of lineages are involved in a struggle for power. They argue that this is obvious from

⁸ Mamytova, Anata (2014) Vozhd krasnokojih. President Akademii nauk Kirgizii Erkebaev oprovergaet provozglashenie ego glavoi plemeni teit Published 29/08/14 <http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1409294220> Accessed 03.07.2018

⁹ Den 29 Avgusta: president svyazal obraznovanie s vojdyami plemen; <http://www.for.kg/news-280144-.html>

the kinds of people who lead such associations. State officials, ex-state authorities and businessmen are particularly criticised for their engagement with lineage associations. They warn that the election of leaders from lineage associations will once again separate Kyrgyz into lineages and there is a grave threat that this will push society into the abyss.

The opposing groups believes that the State National Security Committee representatives should fight against such lineage divisions rather than being part of them. The reasoning behind this thinking is that the lineage heads need positions in government; therefore, they are accused of mobilising their kin groups to gain power. This, the opposition declares, is a sign of conservatism, degradation and savagery. It is claimed that the whole of society is going back to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and is seen as returning to the old tribal traditions and relations. The criticism levied is that the Kyrgyz people are not progressing; rather they are regressing. This group is especially critical of state authorities or scholars and their active participation in *kurultai* and they do not understand how such people can be part of lineage associations and have leading positions in state or other organisations.

During the Soviet time however, this kind of regionalism or tribalism was prosecuted as it was considered a criminal matter. Tribalism did not disappear with the collapse of the Soviet Union, rather it was able to move from socialism to capitalism and incorporate itself nicely into the new systems of democracy, elections, and party politics. According to the informants, during the so-called sovereignty and independence of the country, in the absence of any restraint and prevention of parochial manifestations by Soviet state, many of such groups flourished. In the post-Soviet era, the term '*keminizm*' emerged and was used to refer to the fact that all the state officials were being appointed from the small region of former President Askar Akayev. Another term '*kushchizm*' also emerged and was used to imply that all the relatives of Akayev's wife received state positions.

Some people say that the manifestations of tribalism or regionalism can be seen at every step and its potential to damage society is great. They say, 'let us take any University, Ministry, Bank or any other business ... Starting from the Head and all the way down to the security, all are recruited on the basis of lineage groups'. A striking example of this can be found in one of the chairs of the Faculty of Philology of the Kyrgyz National University. The department, headed by an elderly professor - a native of At-Bashy district, was comprised almost entirely of representatives of that district. When it became a new department, the first thing he did was to makes some 'structural changes' in the department, by getting rid of 'non-lineage members' and choosing 'his own lineage members'. This would not have mattered if the new appointments had been made according to merit, however, this was not the case according to informants. They also stressed:

'With regionalism or tribalism people get accustomed to such practices being a common, self-evident phenomenon; it becomes entirely normative. Formal terms such as 'regional policy', 'regional interests', 'regional elite' (which to some extent have legalised these processes) are frequently used'.

The non-members of lineage groups highlight that with the emergence of new 'leaders' of lineages, lineage leaders can play a crucial role in appointing lineage members to important positions, increasing the number of appointments of their relatives and countrymen in entire regions, which negatively affects the state's human resource capacity throughout the whole country. Indeed, it is possible to witness the extent to which the representatives of one region can be widely represented in the government and other state structures, although it remains challenging to give meaningful measurements or statistics these dynamics.

The argument is made that the vitality of parochialism and persistence of localism is due to the extreme low levels of political culture. The reason for this is that in previous times it was a predominantly rural population that came to the city and received appointments to positions within the bureaucratic structures of the state. According to the respondents, this localism is deeply entrenched in the soul of the Kyrgyz people and therefore is very hard to eliminate.

Critical voices further stress that the current division of Kyrgyzstan by lineage has reached a level not seen since the Middle Ages. What is interesting, in their opinion, is that the khans and tribal leaders are no longer grey-bearded elders as before but rather they are educated academics and generals, officials, and businessmen with political ambitions. While on the one hand, such tribal emergence is viewed as an integral part of the political landscape of sovereign Kyrgyzstan and officials explain this phenomenon as national ideology and identity, on the other hand, critics view this as an ‘uncontrollable phenomenon’.

In the opinions of non-members of lineage groups, localism has penetrated all aspects of Kyrgyz society and has become a threat to national security. They believe that the Soviet government was unable to quickly eradicate this tenacious trend (throughout the history of Kyrgyzstan in the Soviet period) as tribalism continued to affect both the public and personal relations of the Kyrgyz. In their view, the tribal structure of society is part and parcel of present day Kyrgyzstan. Consequently, it is critical to consider these dynamics when addressing pressing issues in society. According to them, party members, state officials, including the Head of State, devote much of their attention to lineage associations. It is necessary therefore to raise the issue in order to fight against nepotism in Kyrgyzstan. The non-members of lineage groups suggest that this matter should be:

‘on the agenda of the National Defence Council and be discussed during sessions of Parliament. Given the scale of the negative impact of regionalism on the development and security of the society, it is possible that the introduction of the relevant article of the Criminal Code for offences of this kind should be introduced. As in the nineteenth century, it is important for today’s head of state, like the tsar Ivan Grozny, to have the power to unite the Kyrgyz lineages. The healthy forces of the nation will support all measures and guidelines to bring about the cohesion of the Kyrgyz people and to overcome the outmoded complexes of spiritual development which are so firmly rooted in the Middle Ages’.

4.9 Duality of lineage associations and its relationships to state

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 the law) but they do their activities in informal ways to avoid accusations of illegal behaviour.

The ambiguity of lineage associations is twofold. Firstly, one can observe the Soviet heritage which views such associations in a negative and backward way. A group comprising of members of the older generation (above 50 years old) imbued with strong Soviet propaganda, education, and knowledge continue to consider lineage associations as criminal, savage, and a betrayal. Secondly, members of this group of people are nevertheless part of large extended networks and actively participate in life cycle events of their own relatives. They would however prefer such networks to be private, domestic and small.

The lineage members, however, have also a dual understanding of their associations. They were also recipients of Soviet education; therefore, they find themselves conflicted by social memory that evokes feelings of wrong doing. They try to hide their connections with lineage associations, feel as if they are

doing something negative by being involved in tribalism but at the same time they also see the importance and usefulness of such associations.

The lineage associations are therefore full of ambiguity. Many members voice the benefits of being part of a lineage association since they are able to learn about their ancestors and relatives in greater depth and it gives them the opportunity to meet relatives. They are proud of maintaining an understanding of the long history of their ancestors. They seem to hold on to the 'old' and 'backward' traditions but they also emphasise the uniqueness of being part of lineage groups and having an extended network of kinsmen.

Furthermore, being a member of the associations makes lives more secure and stable as it helps provide jobs, facilitates support from distant relatives and gives access to a wider kinship network. But the fundamental benefit of lineage associations is the promise of mutual support in times of need. Many expressed the view that lineage associations are beneficial in terms of not only providing support but also in acting as a counter to only one individual determining policy for the people and the country. In other words, being united in a group of kin members allows them to challenge the state.

Another interesting aspect is the relationship between the lineage associations and the state, in which there also some dual or ambiguous aspects that are important to highlight. Many state authorities are part of lineage associations but they try to conceal this to not evoke public discussions, fearful that otherwise they would be accused of acting in violation of the law. Therefore, during meetings, many lineage associations prefer not to share details of membership with the mass media or with state authorities.

At the same time though, there is a constant involvement of state authorities in lineage associations and they even actively engage them during election campaigns. Even those politicians who criticise such associations are inclined to approach them for support in mobilising people in the course of elections. During the last election campaign, some of the highest-ranking state officials promised their own lineage associations that they would support members by making designated appointments once they were elected. These promises were rarely honoured though. It would seem that other considerations came to the fore once officials found themselves in government.