

## TRIBAL CONNECTIONS WITHIN THE POLITICAL PROCESSES: THE CASE OF KYRGYZSTAN

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### ABSTRACT

*Following the collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of the year 1991, the fifteen successor states of the Soviet Union have found themselves in a struggle of survival as independent states. The overall process of breaking up from the union and establishing their own states represented a totally harsh circumstance for all the countries under the rule of the Soviet Union for more than 70 years. However, among all these states, Central Asian countries suffered the most because these countries lacked necessary equipment for state-building with regard to social, economic and political aspects. In that sense, since their declaration of independence, each Central Asian republic has been mostly challenged by divergent factors initiated due to their internal dynamics. As for the Kyrgyz case, it has been mainly 'tribalism', which is tempering state formation, having an important role in distribution of political power, tribal affiliations cause conflicts for the competitive nature of elite selection, and*

### INTRODUCTION

*continue its dominancy over the political leaders in political processes of state-building.* Kyrgyzstan has been in an overall struggle since the date of their 'surprise' independence, to which they were caught undoubtedly unprepared, just as the other four natives of Central Asia; Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Having never been tried to survive as an independent state, now each of them is determined to build nation-states in their own territories. In that sense, it would be so much of an optimism to consider that, this way will be a pure one. In any cases, there exist so many factors engaging as a challenge in their attempts of state-building. In that regard, Central Asian's historical identities and loyalties have been seen as one of those challenges. In this study, specifically 'tribalism' will be evaluated as a subtitle of those historical and at the same time structural loyalties within the region.

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Thus, that is the aim of this paper to analyze the existence and effect of tribes and tribalism within the specific case of Kyrgyzstan in its post-independence state-building process. In that sense, in the first part, the focus will be on the ‘tribal factor’ in Central Asia as whole for a broader understanding. Under the subtitles, the definitions of tribe/tribalism, and effects of tribalism in Central Asia will be detailed. As for the second part, the Kyrgyz case with the subtitles of ‘Kyrgyz tribal units’, ‘tribalism in Kyrgyzstan’, and ‘effect of tribalism in state-building process of Kyrgyzstan’ will be directly mentioned. Finally, in the conclusion a brief summary about the particular issue will be taken part.

## **1. The Tribal Factor in Central Asian Political Life**

### **1.1. Definition of Tribe/Tribalism**

Evaluating such an issue of ‘tribal connections within the state system in Kyrgyzstan’ highly required a definition of what tribe and tribalism is, as the first step. To understand how tribalism act, a clear definition of what it is, is necessary, at least. In that sense, defining tribalism is no easy task. In accordance with the main problem of the paper, a definition, which links tribalism to its political sanctions, makes more sense.

However, highly related to the fact that the term tribe has been used to describe many different kinds of groups or social formations, a single all-encompassing definition is difficult to create. In that regard, Tapper has offered that of definition:

*‘Tribe may be used loosely of a localized group in which kinship is the dominant idiom of organization, and whose members consider themselves culturally distinct (in terms of customs, dialect or language, and origins); tribes are usually politically unified, though not necessarily under a central leader, both features being commonly attributable to interaction with states. Such tribes also form parts of larger, usually regional, political structures of tribes of similar kinds; they do not usually relate directly with the state, but only through these intermediate structures. The more explicit term confederacy or confederation should be used for a local group of tribes that is heterogeneous in terms of culture, presumed origins and perhaps class composition, yet is politically unified usually under a central authority’<sup>1</sup>*

Additionally, Kenneth Christie, the author of the ‘Ethnic Conflicts, Tribal Politics: A Global Perspective’, also stated that tribalism is a difficult and often misplaced term. According to his sentences, ‘the term ‘tribe’ derives from the Latin

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Tapper, “Introduction”, Richard Tapper (Ed.), *The Conflict of Tribe and State in Iran and Afghanistan*, (London: St Martin’s, 1983), p. 4.

term 'tribus', and was initially used in a biblical connotation. Tribes were self contained groups; they were autonomous and based on kinship ties. Anthropologist often tend to define tribe as a group with certain characteristics in common such as self-sufficiency, a distinct language, culture and sense of identity including a shared set of mythologies, taboos, and heroes or a defined set of relationships, including a clear hierarchy of power and definite rules of behavior, and a loosely defined territory utilized for hunting or gathering.<sup>2</sup>

Moving from here, in his book of 'The Middle East and Central Asia: An Anthropological Approach', Eickelman has signified tribe as a group of people often conceptualized in terms of genealogy and continued as 'in fact, even the language of genealogy is applied to wide range of organizational systems, including pastoral nomads, settled farmers, or even urban dwellers; tribes are often, although not always, politically unified,'<sup>3</sup> in order to highlight the political soundings of tribes. In any cases, the notion of tribe, as an organizational level, theoretically stands somewhere between 'bands' and 'states', which means tribes are indeed something different from states but also something thought to be the evolutionary predecessors of states. According to this formula what attracts attention is the stress upon the political notion of tribes. In that sense, Eickelman has stated that tribes are based on their uses as an administrative device in contexts. 'Thus administrative assumptions concerning the nature of tribes are generally based, to some degree, on locally maintained conceptions modified for political purposes,'<sup>4</sup> he added.

As for Hvoslef, a tribe is a congregation of many clans. The clans that make up a tribe are related to each other through common ancestors and because they feel that their roots are located in a certain region. A tribe branches off into sub-tribes and sub-sub-tribes all the way down to the level of a clan. It is possible for an individual to draw a genealogical map which clearly shows his position in the tribal structure. Throughout history knowledge of the genealogies has been compulsory for an individual.<sup>5</sup> Even 'it was and in many areas still is customary for male, and in some cases female, children to learn in early infancy to recite their paternal lineage back to at least the seventh generation. This helped to maintain awareness not only of historical continuity, but also of the family as a defining feature of an individual's

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<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Christie, "Introduction: The Problem with Ethnicity and Tribal Politics", in Kenneth Christie (Ed.), *Ethnic Conflicts, Tribal Politics: A Global Perspective*, (London: Curzon Press, 1998), p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> Dale F. Eickelman, *The Middle East and Central Asia: An Anthropological Approach*, (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1998), pp. 72-73.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126.

<sup>5</sup> Erlend H. Hvoslef, "Tribalism and Modernity in Kirgizia", in Muhammed Sabour & Knut Vikor (Ed.), *Ethnic Encounter and Cultural Change*, (London: C. Hurst & Co., 1997), p. 99.

identity.<sup>6</sup> In that sense, especially the Kyrgyz nation has preserved its tribal structure as well as the sense of genealogical unity of the whole people. Even there is a local proverb saying that ‘any Krygyz at a large table will inevitably meet a relative among unknown people. Both will start checking their relations and discover that at least ten generations earlier they had a common ancestor’.<sup>7</sup> Tribalism, in this sense, keeps its importance in self-identification of Central Asians and consequently in determining Central Asian’s choices in administrative issues.

According to Collins, despite of the fact that tribes pose a central role in social, economic, and political life in Central Asia, many scholars have mistakenly dismissed the concept ‘as mere journalistic ‘primordialism’<sup>8</sup>, however; in sense with the recent event of Hamid Karzai’s interim government in Afghanistan, the critical role that clans play in this part of the world has highlighted. Having been accepted that clans in Afghanistan somewhat differ from the ones in Central Asia, Collins stated that due to the seventy four years lasted Soviet domination in the region, who evaluate even the small clan units as a threat to Soviet power and ideology, Central Asian clan identity has transformed from large tribal structures into smaller clan-based units. Statistically, ethnographic evidence indicates that clans today range in size from 2,000 to 20,000 members, which makes them much smaller than the large tribal confederations of the nomadic period.<sup>9</sup> As for her definition, a clan is an informal social institution in which actual or notional kinship based on blood or marriage forms the central bond among members.<sup>10</sup> She added that ‘clans are identity networks consisting of an extensive web of horizontal and vertical kin-based relations. If clans can be seen as ‘horizontal’ by virtue of their capacity to bind members through relations of mutual trust, they can also be seen as ‘vertical’ by dint of their tendency to include both elite and non-elite members from different levels of society and the state.’<sup>11</sup>

Oliver Roy has also proved the key role of the tribes, clans or regionalism within the Central Asian political life. He stated in his famous book of ‘La Nouvelle Asie

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<sup>6</sup> Shirin Akiner, “Social and Political Reorganisation in Central Asia: Transition from Pre-Colonial to Post-Colonial Society”, in Touraj Atabaki & John O’Kane (Ed.), *Post-Soviet Central Asia*, (Leiden: The International Institute for Asian Studies, 1998), p. 4.

<sup>7</sup> Irina Kostyukova, “The Towns of Kyrgyzstan Change Their Faces: Rural-Urban Migrants in Bishkek”, *Central Asian Survey*, No: 3, 1994, p. 428.

<sup>8</sup> Kathleen Collins, “Clans, Pacts, and Politics in Central Asia”, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol: 13, No: 3, July 2002, p. 141.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 141-143.

<sup>10</sup> Kathleen Collins, “The Political Role of Clans in Central Asia”, *Comparative Politics*, Vol: 35, No: 2, January 2003, p. 172

<sup>11</sup> Kathleen Collins, “Clans, Pacts, and Politics in Central Asia”, p. 142.

centrale ou la Fabrication des Nations' that tribalism makes so much sense from the aspect of political affiliations. He argued that irregardless of the sociological background (tribe, region, family etc.), very kind of this 'solidarity group' named as tribes means not only in the social space and the daily activities (marriages, social networks, mafia etc.) but also in the political life (political factionalism, social base of a leader or a party etc.) Even Roy defined tribes as the key notion of Central Asian Republics' political frame.<sup>12</sup>

The author of the 'Pre-Tsarist and Tsarist Central Asia', Geiss has represented a very rich work, which is so much detailed. As for him, one way to define tribe is to conceptualize it as a unit of exogamy. Tsarist and Soviet ethnographers tended to define lineages as an exogamous unit in contrast to tribe, which is often represented an endogamous confederacy of several lineages. They applied this differentiation to describe all Central Asian tribal societies, however; this is not the case, he stated. As the criterion of exogamy supplied too implicit a definition of 'tribe', Tsarist and Soviet ethnographers use the term tribe (plemia) to describe larger groups which consisted of exogamous subdivisions and sometimes these larger units were identified with military units which shared a common war cry, which were consequently cited as tribal symbols.<sup>13</sup>

According to Bacon, who brought the term *obok* to her notion of clan, obok is a structure of social organization based on common descent which includes gradually, relatively open, interlocked segments with a decreasing degree of mutual rights and responsibilities from the smaller family units through the larger lineages to the tribe.<sup>14</sup> 'The newly formed components do not break sharply from the parent group but simply change their position in the line leading up from family to tribal subsection and beyond.'<sup>15</sup>

In this regard, what seems to be the common about the related terms operated by various scholars is that tribalism is an organizational form based upon strong ties to a relatively corporate family and then to a clearly defined clan. Thus, needless to say, to keep up with the traditional organization of Central Asian society 'tribalism' was a very important topic throughout the historical process. Thus, to clarify the political structure in Central Asia, it is obviously referring the local clan identifications in the region.

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<sup>12</sup> Oliver Roy, *Yeni Orta Asya ya da Uluslann İmal Edilişi*, (Trans. Mehmet Moralı), (İstanbul: Metis Yayınları, 2000), pp. 42-43.

<sup>13</sup> Paul Georg Geiss, *Pre-Tsarist and Tsarist Central Asia*, (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 28-30.

<sup>14</sup> İbid., p. 31.

<sup>15</sup> Elizabeth E. Bacon, *Obok: A Study of Social Structure in Eurasia*, (New York: Wenner Gren Foundation, 1958), pp. 42-43.

## 1.2. Tribalism in Central Asian Political Life

As it is mentioned above, historically Central Asians had strong ties with family, clan and tribe; mostly because of their nomadic way of life. As Manz has noted ‘nomads traditionally organized in tribes or sections might switch their allegiance to a different tribe but their tradition dictated that they belong to one tribe or another.’<sup>16</sup> In any cases, the societies of post-Soviet Central Asia have always been traditional in nature, and majority of its populations represents kinship-based groupings. Moving from here; during the long history of Central Asia, tribalism can be re-evaluated in pre-Soviet, Soviet and post-Soviet eras in accordance with its referring and its role of implementation in power distribution. Mentioned above, in pre-Soviet era, keeping the slight cultural and linguistic differences beside, the people of this vast region distinguished themselves surely according to clans and tribal lineages. In that sense, the reality of clan politics traced back to very early history of the region. Throughout history, nomadic, as well as sedentary, peoples of Central Asia have organized their politics according to the tribal rules and tradition and clans and larger tribes survived as the predominant mode of social and political organization in the region.<sup>17</sup>

As for the Soviet period, ‘tribalism/ tribes have continued to represent a crucial sphere of familial relations and have remained dynamic and flexible bases of societal organization. Under the Tsarist regime, in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it is observed that tsarist Russia did not take valuable step for the aim of changing conventional way of life in the region. That was merely because their shifting priority toward the protection of its southeastern borders from Great Britain. Thus, the government did not start any administrative reform in the era and the Central Asians were able to continue practicing their habitual lifestyle under tsarist administration.’<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, things have changed during the Soviet period, within which especially under Stalin rule intensive anti-clan policies were carried out in Central Asia and tribalism was officially denied, criticized, and attacked by Soviet government and the Communist Party’<sup>19</sup>. It is a fact that during the Sovietization of Central Asia, most of the tribal communities were disintegrated; however, they have

<sup>16</sup> Beatrice Forbes Manz, *The Rise and Rule of Tamerlane*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 33.

<sup>17</sup> Janna Khagai, “The Role of Clans in the Post-Independence State Building in Central Asia”, *ECPR Joint Sessions of Workshop: Comparing Transformation: The Institutional Paradigm*, Uppsala, 13-18 April 2004, p. 8

<sup>18</sup> Paul Georg Geiss, *Pre-Tsarist and Tsarist Central Asia*, pp. 33-35.

<sup>19</sup> Rakhmat Achylova, “Political Culture and Foreign Policy in Kyrgyzstan”, in Vladimir Tismaneanu (Ed.), *Political Culture and Civil Society in Russia and the New States of Eurasia*, (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1995), p. 326.

notably reshaped in the form of region-based groupings. Actually, the fact is, in Central Asia the Soviet policies and institutions have headed towards to make the locus of their political identities shift from tribe to region by creating and institutionalizing regional political identities while at the same time eliminating tribal, religious, and national identities, weakening them or confining them to the social and cultural spheres.<sup>20</sup> In that context, within the Soviet era the Soviet-product collective farms became the primary point of organization in the country side. Organized around the old tribal or clan structures and ruled by a titular Communist party leader in such a feudal-tribal manner, those collective farms have in a way retained the aspects of clan-oriented 'feudal authoritarianism' alive throughout the republics of Central Asia and in a way the collective farms kept extended kin units intact. Instead of destroying clans, kolkhoz, at first froze clans in place but then fostered their growth and network throughout the Soviet period.<sup>21</sup> In doing so, the traditional tribal structure unintentionally achieved 'an unexpected symbiosis with the Party system'.<sup>22</sup> Eventually by 1940s, under the Brezhnev period, it became possible to reestablish the clan politics at the republican level, the powerful networks started to gain power in the system owing to the stabilization of Communist apparatus in Central Asia.<sup>23</sup> Simply put, in line with Brezhnev's policy of 'stability of cadre', as long as Central Asia and other republics were politically submissive, he would turn a blind eye to practices such as informal patronage of network. However; after the Brezhnev era, the Soviet regime became a threat for the clans due to the gradual purges of Andropov and Gorbachev, by which political and economic cadres were renewed with ethnically Russian ones. However; by 1989-90, while the Soviet regime got weakened, clans are reasserted themselves within their republics and regained the power from Moscow.<sup>24</sup> Shortly, clan networks have become stronger instead of being weakened during the era.

After the independence, as a result of their shared Soviet institutional legacy, the continuation of regionalism's impacts among political leaders and activists within each state has continued. Especially the regional clusterings have survived in the

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<sup>20</sup> Pauline Jones Loung, *Institutional Change and Political Continuity in Post-Soviet Central Asia*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 52-53.

<sup>21</sup> Kathleen Collins, "The Logic of Clan Politics: Evidence from the Central Asian Trajectories", *World Affairs*, Vol: 56, No: 2, 2004, p. 239.

<sup>22</sup> Patricia M. Carley, "The Legacy of the Soviet Political System and the Prospects for Developing Civil Society in Central Asia" in Vladimir Tismaneanu (Ed.), *Political Culture and Civil Society in Russia and the New States of Eurasia*, (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1995), pp. 297-298.

<sup>23</sup> Janna Khagai, "The Role of Clans in the Post-Independence State Building in Central Asia", pp. 9-10.

<sup>24</sup> Kathleen Collins, "The Logic of Clan Politics: Evidence from the Central Asian Trajectories", pp. 239-240

name of holding monopoly of power and patronage during the post-Soviet era. Beside, a re-emergence of pre-Soviet tribal division upon that of Soviet-oriented regional and administrative bases, has also observed.<sup>25</sup> As Akiner has stated, 'colloquially referred as the modern type of networks, 'clans' simply was a tight cluster of individuals linked by some shared experience, interest and strong moral imperatives and the 'pyramids', the largest clan structures based on regional networks, have the ability to mobilize support vertically throughout the society, thus have retained considerable political significance within the region.'<sup>26</sup>

To sum up, these tribal structures seem to pose very significant shadows on the political, social and economic developments of the region since the very early of the region's history.

## **2. Tribalism and Kyrgyzstan**

### **2.1. Kyrgyz Tribal Units**

The nature of clan divisions varies from one country to another. As for the Kyrgyz case, the main division is territorial; between the North and South. While 'North' specifically refers Bishkek and Talas; 'South' refers to the three provinces (Osh, Jalal-Abad and Batken) in Kyrgyzstani politics. That North-South divide also encompasses a variety of clan and tribal divisions that could be said in the sense that the state political class comes primarily from the North and thus controls far greater resources than the South.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Oliver Roy, *Yeni Orta Asya ya da Ulusların İmal Edilişi*, p. 130.

<sup>26</sup> Shirin Akiner, "Social and Political Reorganisation in Central Asia: Transition from Pre-Colonial to Post-Colonial Society", pp. 18-20.

<sup>27</sup> Askat Dukenbaev & William W. Hansen, "Understanding Politics in Kyrgyzstan", *DEMSTAR Research Report*, No: 16, 2003, pp. 8-9.





Source: <http://freenet.bishkek.su/kyrgyzstan/pict/map.gif>

In fact, the divide between the two parts of the country was sourced from two particular aspects: historical and geographical. Owing to the natural divide inside the country, the two regions have been stayed disconnected since the pre-Soviet period, when the Kyrgyz settled on other sides of the mountains and thus failed to establish close links among their selves.<sup>28</sup> As for the historical division, Hvoslef stated that ‘There has always been a great difference in opinions, both culturally and politically, between Northern and Southern Kyrgyz. The Kyrgyz from the north accuse the southerners of acting and behaving like Uzbeks, while the Southern Kyrgyz on their side, accuse the northerners of behaving like Russians and taking up a dominant role in politics.’<sup>29</sup> In fact, the kinship-based identities developed on these dual regional split and these ties are profoundly important so that Kyrgyz themselves lacked national cohesiveness and they often defined themselves as members of different tribes or tribal groups with distinct dialects, dress, and political affiliations.<sup>30</sup> Beside, the loyalties of the Kyrgyz, like those of Central Asians, most notably the Kazakhs, lay first with family, clan, and tribe.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>28</sup> John Anderson, *Kyrgyzstan: Central Asia's Island of Democracy*, (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publisher, 1999), p. 40.

<sup>29</sup> Erlend H. Hvoslef, “Tribalism and Modernity in Kirgizia”, pp. 100-104.

<sup>30</sup> Ainura Elebayeva, Nurbek Omuraliev, Rafis Abazov, “The Shifting Identities and Loyalties in Kyrgyzstan: The Evidence from the Field”, *Nationalities Paper*, Vol: 28, No: 2, 2000, p. 343.

<sup>31</sup> Eugene Huskey, “Kyrgyzstan: The Politics of Demographic and Economic Frustration”, in Ian Bremmer & Ray Taras (Ed.), *New States, New Politics: Building the Post-Soviet Nations*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 635.

In that regard, throughout the history, Kyrgyz land has been divided between many big tribes, which were organized in the form of two wings referring the mentioned division of North and South. Kyrgyz identity in public and private life is said to be determined primarily by membership in one of these clan groupings (*right* or *ong*; left or *sol* and *ichkilik*) and secondarily by membership in a particular clan within a wing. (In fact, there also exist different data about the tribal compositions of the Kyrgyz at the end of the nineteenth century. All sources identify two wings *Ong* and *Sol* of a tribal confederacy. In addition, a third grouping, the *Ichkilik*, is sometimes mentioned as a separate unit.)<sup>32</sup>

Although there is an uncertainty about the number of tribes in Kyrgyzstan, some scholars claim that it is up to eighty different tribes existing within the country.<sup>33</sup> Among them, the large Kyrgyz tribes (plemias) are the *Bugu*, *Sary Bagysh*, *Solto*, *Adigine* or *Saruu*, which were tribal confederacies rather than tribes, since their compositions changed and located in the northern part. Thus the *Sary Bagysh*, for example, consisted of the four divisions *Bulat*, *Temir*, *Nadyrbek*, and *Tynai* at the beginning of the nineteenth century; whereas it was reported seventy years later that *Sary Bagysh*<sup>34</sup> included five divisions. (*Isöngül*, *Assyk*, *Tynai*, *Chirikchi* and *Nadyrek*).<sup>35</sup> However, *Bugu* is the one which is considered to be the most popular and well-known tribe, as the inhabitants of the region is mostly members of *Bugu* tribe. As for the southern Kyrgyzstan, there exist relatively small tribes as *Munduz*, *Kalmak* or *Döölös*.<sup>36</sup>

## 2.2. Tribalism in Kyrgyzstan

Having gained independence in 1991, the newly formed Kyrgyz Republic has met different political, social and economical problems, including issues commonly related to tribalism. Similarly, also the scholars generally agreed upon that today the role of tribalism is of crucial importance, while it has direct influence over the ongoing process of constructing the new political system in Kyrgyzstan. That of

<sup>32</sup> Paul Georg Geiss, *Pre-Tsarist and Tsarist Central Asia*, p. 39.

<sup>33</sup> Aleksey Kolpakov, *Managing Diversity in Kyrgyzstan*, (Bloomington: Indiana University, 2001), p. 10.

<sup>34</sup> *Sary Bagysh* tribe's members have occupied the leading positions in the capital. For details, see Erlend H. Hvoslef, "Tribalism and Modernity in Kirgizia".

<sup>35</sup> Paul Georg Geiss, *Pre-Tsarist and Tsarist Central Asia*, p. 41.

<sup>36</sup> Lori M. Handrahan, "Gender and Ethnicity in the Transitional Democracy of Kyrgyzstan", *Central Asian Survey*, Vol: 20, No: 4, 2001, p. 474.

influences have improved twofold actually; state formation in general and the development of democracy in particular.<sup>37</sup>

In that sense, keeping in mind that the tribal structures and activities have involved since the era of early nomadism, now it is asserted that at present time a reappearance of tribalism has existed in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>38</sup> As evidence, especially, during the elections in late 1980s and early 1990s, it was observed that candidates were often selected on the basis of their tribal affiliation.<sup>39</sup> The explanations of the leader of Democratic Movement of Kirgizia (DMK) Zhypar Zheksheyev highlighted the situation. He said that:

*'It is difficult to unite the Kyrgyz politically, because the different political parties, and their supporters, are connected to certain regions of the country. 'The Republican Peoples party', for example, is connected to the region Talas and 'Asaba to Osjskaja and Djalalabadska Oblast'. Kirgizians tend not to vote according to party programs, but rather according to the tribe or clan of the party leader. That means, if your relatives come from Talas you will normally vote for The Republican Peoples Party. This tendency is mainly due to the fact that an individual during history, has received help and access to scarce positions in exchange for political support. People believe that supporting a member of own tribe/clan may secure the future for an individual and his family. Qualifications are increasingly important, but still secondarily. Until this day the membership in the right tribe or clan has been more important.'*<sup>40</sup>

In that sense, the data of 1995 and 2000 parliamentary elections were approval of Zheksheyev's sentences. In line with the issue of tribalism, the data showed that in the 1995 parliamentary elections, 64,8 percent of deputies were elected from their place of origin; while that ratio has raised up to 74,4 percent in the 2000 parliamentary elections.<sup>41</sup> Additionally, according to the Kyrgyz newspaper, *Kirgiz Rukku*, in the Alai electoral okrug of 2000 parliament election, voting was conducted strictly according to the candidates' tribal membership.<sup>42</sup> A similar situation was observed in the Kara-Buura okrug of the Talas region. The opposition leader, Feliks Kulov, who was clearly winning during the first round, brought many

<sup>37</sup> Djenish Djunushaliev & Vladimir Ploskih, "Tribalism and Problems of Development of Kyrgyzstan", *Central Asia and Caucasus*, Vol: 3, No: 9, 2000, p. 148.

<sup>38</sup> Raya Osmanalieva, "Tribalism in Kyrgyz Society", *Central Asia Monitor*, Vol: 10, No: 5, 1999, p. 11.

<sup>39</sup> Djenish Djunushaliev & Vladimir Ploskih, *Tribalism and Problems of Development of Kyrgyzstan*, p. 149.

<sup>40</sup> Erlend H. Hvoslef, "Tribalism and Modernity in Kirgizia", p. 103.

<sup>41</sup> Ouran Niazaliev, "Failed Democratic Experience in Kyrgyzstan: 1990–2000", (Ankara: METU, 2004), p. 132

<sup>42</sup> For details, please see, Nina Greger & Paul Kostov, *Central Asia, the Soviet Union and Recent History*, (California: California University Press, 1999).

supporters on the day election results were announced to picket the local administration in Kara-Buura in protest at the outcome. At the same time, inhabitants of neighboring regions, Bakai-Ata and Manas-Ata, (inhabited by tribes opposing Kulov) held meetings to support the official results of the parliamentary elections. These results obviously reflected that tribalism keeps itself as the strongest pattern, which has remained since the former way of Kyrgyz's life, in the distribution of power. The process of tribalism's engagement in the distribution of power operates with the tribal solidarity requirements, which order that people should support their tribal elite as much as possible in its struggle with other tribal leaders. At this point, Pauline Jones Loung's research<sup>43</sup> needs to be displayed. According to her interviews held by central, regional leaders and political activists in Central Asia within the years of 1994-95, the main source of political and electoral support was considered to be the region of origin.

Actually, there exist also criticisms about the tribal connections within the state system in Kyrgyzstan. Defending the modernization theory, which generally viewed traditional social organizations -lineage, clan and tribe- as a challenge to political development<sup>44</sup>, some politicians have argued that such a political system based on tribalism is not especially convenient in a modern multi-ethnic democracy and such a system was only appropriate and good at the time of no state. Then it was one of the means for peaceful existence. It is at present, however, incompatible with full participation in a modern multi-ethnic state.<sup>45</sup>

Among these criticals, the former President of Askar Akaev has also involved from the very outset. He has criticized the role of tribalism in the politics and other areas of public life of the country. In that sense, many politicians put forward different proposals on making tribalism more civilized and more accountable to serve society. Different administrative strategies such as rotating senior public servants among the different regions of the Kyrgyz Republic were aimed at diminishing the role of tribal relations in solving local problems.<sup>46</sup> However, even Akaev found himself ironically and dramatically relying on clan support to keep him in power, while once he publicly called for discarding clan norms and adopting fair

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<sup>43</sup> For detailed results, see Pauline Jones Loung, *Institutional Change and Political Continuity in Post-Soviet Central Asia*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 158-162.

<sup>44</sup> Kathleen Collins, "The Logic of Clan Politics: Evidence from the Central Asian Trajectories", p. 225.

<sup>45</sup> For further discussion, see, Erlend H. Hvostef, "Tribalism and Modernity in Kirgizia"; Kathleen Collins, "The Logic of Clan Politics: Evidence from the Central Asian Trajectories", and Paul Kubicek, "Authoritarianism in Central Asia: Curse or Cure?", *Third World Quarterly*, Vol: 19, No: 1, 1998.

<sup>46</sup> Aleksey Kolpakov, *Managing Diversity in Kyrgyzstan*, p. 11.

and democratic ones<sup>47</sup> and later on 'promoted most prominently by Akaev, Kryrgyz tribalism contributes greatly to the tribal nature of politics and resource allocation.'<sup>48</sup> In that point, a brief explanation about Akaev's background seems to be necessary. The former president, Askar Akaev, who ruled the country as president from 27<sup>th</sup> October 1990 up to April 2005, unsurprisingly belongs to the biggest and strongest northern tribe, the Sary Bagysh (Kemin specifically) and his advent to power was also supported by the Talas elite, which is announced as the most 'aristocratic' regional tribal community of Kyrgyzstan. Akaev's relations to that tribe come from his wife, who is a member of Talas tribe.<sup>49</sup> Even it has been argued that in Kyrgyzstan politics became the art of family ties and loyalties that occupied the upper classes of society and it was also said that in Kyrgyzstan, there is no actual political elite but only Akaev and his clan referring Talas and Kemin people.<sup>50</sup>

According to some scholars, as Djunushaliev and Ploskih argued in their article<sup>51</sup>, there are three basic reasons laying on the strengthening of tribalism especially in the post-Soviet era. First of all, tribal relations constituted the ground of social relations for thousand of years. That's why two or three generations of people were not able to change this situation. So, tribalism adapted itself to the new socio-political conditions. Secondly, the present economic crisis of the transitional period, constant decrease in the living standards of people and struggle for survival resulted in the unity of people in accordance with blood ties. Privatization of state property led to the emergence of clans that could compete for property ownership. As a final reason, independence paved the way for tribalism to operate openly and influence state building. As an additional aspect, the political leadership has also interested in tribalism because it can be an instrument of controlling political elite and also it is a fact that present political leadership stays in power mostly by means of tribalism. As Anderson has stated in his book, 'They (tribal nuances) utilized their position to aid Akaev in the dissolution of Parliament and in ensuring satisfactory results during referenda, and in return enjoyed considerable leeway in the governance of their own territories.'<sup>52</sup> Put simply, having survived up to now, clan-tribal memberships and tribal affiliations loose nothing from its importance. In that

<sup>47</sup> Kathleen Collins, "The Logic of Clan Politics: Evidence from the Central Asian Trajectories", p. 248.

<sup>48</sup> Lori M. Handrahan, "Gender and Ethnicity in the Transitional Democracy of Kyrgyzstan", p. 472.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 473.

<sup>50</sup> Roger Kangas, "State-Building and Civil Society in Central Asia," in Vladimir Tismaneanu (Ed.), *Political Culture and Civil Society in Russia and the New States of Eurasia*, (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1995), p. 273.

<sup>51</sup> Djenish Djunushaliev & Vladimir Ploskih, "Tribalism and Problems of Development of Kyrgyzstan", p. 153.

<sup>52</sup> John Anderson, *Kyrgyzstan: Central Asia's Island of Democracy*, p. 41.

sense 'regional loyalties continued to be critical for career advancement, especially as leaders surrounded themselves with member of their own clans.'<sup>53</sup>

### **2.3. Tribalism within State-Building Process: The Kyrgyz Case**

Tribalism, in one sense, has played a uniting role within the Kyrgyz tribes and clans. However, in the other side of the coin, it has played a destabilizing role for nation in the sense that it prevented the total unity between the all tribes over Kyrgyzstan, which seems indeed an obstacle in state-building process of Kyrgyzstan. Also as Achylova has briefly stated,<sup>54</sup> in Kyrgyzstani case especially that of northern-southern division constitutes a possible big threat for its development to a nation-state. In that sense, it is important to keep in mind that the processes of nation-building and state-building are reciprocal.<sup>55</sup> Therefore, specifically tribalism seems to a real threat toward the existing stability in society and integrity of the sovereign state<sup>56</sup>, while gradually regionalism is reinforced by the remnants of tribal loyalties<sup>57</sup>, which later can be turned to separatism. So, unless the tribes and clans bring under the same aim, the certain problems in their state building process will continue to destroy it. Here the sensitive point is the structure of state-building, briefly as the other five, also Kyrgyzstan attempts to build up a nation-state, within which the promulgation of a national unifying policy became much of an urgency.<sup>58</sup>

Tribalism, last but not least, has made democratization difficult to be realized in a sense that tribal networks create problems for the competitive nature of elite selection.<sup>59</sup> For example, as it was mentioned above the Bishkek based elites, who are from the Northern tribes, traditionally control the state and therefore the resources; while the Osh and Jalal-Abad elites have been excluded from this bounty.<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, strictly due to the fact that the tribal and regional affiliations

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<sup>53</sup> Roger Kangas, "State-Building and Civil Society in Central Asia", p. 275.

<sup>54</sup> Rakhat Achylova, "Political Culture and Foreign Policy in Kyrgyzstan", p. 326.

<sup>55</sup> Gregory Gleason, *The Central Asian States: Discovering Independence*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997), p. 14.

<sup>56</sup> Djenish Djunushaliev & Vladimir Ploskih, "Tribalism and Problems of Development of Kyrgyzstan", pp. 151-153.

<sup>57</sup> Rafis Abazov, *The Political Culture of Central Asia: A Case of Kyrgyzstan*, Conflict Studies Research Center, March 2003, p. 50.

<sup>58</sup> Annette Bohr, "The Central Asian States as Nationalizing Regimes", in Graham Smith et al (Ed.), *National Building in Post-Soviet Borderlands: The Politics of National Identity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 141.

<sup>59</sup> Ouran Niazaliev, "Failed Democratic Experience in Kyrgyzstan: 1990–2000", p. 137.

<sup>60</sup> Askat Dukenbaev & William W. Hansen, "Understanding Politics in Kyrgyzstan", p. 25.

have rootly located in the political mentalities of the region's republics, and in that sense those of tight loyalties do not introduce much of healthy and fair results in terms of administrative cadres, who are directly responsible for the implementation of state building processes. Even among the politicians who most strongly want to build up a modern democracy, there certainly remain aspects of behavior and thoughts that are closely related to ideas connected to tribalism.<sup>61</sup> So, it is a fact that the Kyrgyz native political traditions and political culture, that are expected to influence the nature and route of political change in the country, are highly under influences of tribalism, and clan and tribal structures remain still dominant as political actors in the present political atmosphere. As Zheksheyev – the leader of Democratic Movement of Kyrgyzstan - has stated in his own words;

*'Here we can see a clear contradiction. On one side we have the wish among the politicians to construct a democracy built on a better model. On the other side we have present, in a significant part of the population, the idea of a tribally organized society. As I see it, this contradiction reflects the different opinions between modernists, many of them city dwellers and quite Russified, and traditionalists. The latter are mainly represented by the population in the countryside and those who have recently arrived in the capital. It is important to underline, however, that there are no strict borders between these two categories. Even among the politicians that most strongly want to build up a modern democracy, there certainly remain aspects of behaviour and thoughts that are closely related to ideas connected to 'tribalism'.<sup>62</sup>*

From an another point of view, it is also a fact that Kyrgyz political leaders, irregardless of their attitudes, seek indeed protection in family and tribal ties, cause only after obtaining their support they begin to feel confident to act.<sup>63</sup> In that sense, it is my opinion that, these subnational identities have twofold in nation-state building; one of it is about the 'nation' building part and the other is related to the 'state' building part as explained above.

## CONCLUSION

Tribalism actually is a kind of problem, which has existed within the Kyrgyz society since the very beginning. Throughout the history, despite of the harshly imposed social reforms of Soviet era, the traditional institutions in Kyrgyz society could not be destroyed, and the traditional tribal or regional rivalries could not be overcome.

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<sup>61</sup> Ouran Niazaliev, "Failed Democratic Experience in Kyrgyzstan: 1990–2000", p. 137.

<sup>62</sup> Erlend H. Hvoslef, "Tribalism and Modernity in Kirgizia", p. 105.

<sup>63</sup> Raya Osmanalieva, "Tribalism in Kyrgyz Society", p. 11.

Therefore, intertribal relations keep themselves strained, and clan and tribal loyalties still play an important part in power structures of Kyrgyzstan. Even, today it is observed that the political process is dominated by a hidden power struggle between major clans that represented traditional rivalries between various tribes, clans or communities. In that sense, as Hvoslef argued, the arguments of those, who are defender to an organization based on 'tribalism', rest on the notion of tribalism is a Kyrgyz form of organization and thus suitable in the Kyrgyz state. They also say that it is good to respect and have obligations to the family, relatives and the land of the Kyrgyz. This attitude will lead to a correct and strong relationship with the Kyrgyz state, thus, support for 'tribalism' transform itself to support for the Kyrgyz culture and history. Short to say, these relations have still preserved themselves and they became, in Akiner's words, 'a parallel system of power'.<sup>64</sup>

However, in such a process of nation-state building, tribalism is obviously a tempering notion. In any cases, as a nomadic society for years, Kyrgyz have been suffering from the adaptation of a settled life, additionally they have had no experience of political issues, and briefly they have had no statehood of their own. They have also been lack of development in political life and political parties, which makes the leaders to direct to the family and tribal loyalties for support.

In that sense, those of intertribal relations, nonofficial tribal laws or tribal affiliations within the society and most importantly within the political cadres of Kyrgyzstan, disturb the state-building process. Very shortly, tribal mentality has involved in nation-building process with its negative features beside as the unique source of Kyrgyz's political loyalties, and tribal affiliations have directly involved in the distribution of key political posts within the state by ignoring the competitive nature of elite selection.

Despite of the fact that state-building is a long process to complete and Kyrgyzstan is a beginner in that sense; it seems that tribalism, with all its expansions in the mentality, culture, daily and political life of Kyrgyz, will continue its dominancy and its damage over the political processes mainly related to the state-building process of Kyrgyzstan.

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