

Kyrgyzstan's Governance Modernization: Transformation Challenges and Future Paths

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Abstract. This paper provides a systematic analysis of the transformational challenges in the modernization of national governance in Kyrgyzstan. The study begins by outlining the issues stemming from the legacy of Soviet governance, such as institutional instability, fluctuating power structures, and implementation obstacles. It then discusses problems including restricted civic participation, low administrative efficiency, judicial corruption, and the limitations of digital reform. Finally, drawing on international experiences and regional cooperative approaches, the paper offers a series of recommendations for institutional restructuring, enhanced social engagement, and technological empowerment. The aim is to provide both theoretical and practical insights for governance modernization in transitional Central Asian states.

Keywords: Governance Modernization, Institutional Restructuring, Civic Participation, Digital Governance, Transitional Central Asian States

1. Introduction

After the Soviet Union broke up in 1991, the countries that make up the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) tried to change their governance systems and deal with the challenges of transition by making changes to their institutions. Most Central Asian countries, except Kyrgyzstan, have a system of government where the president has a lot of power. This is meant to make the country politically stable. For example, the presidents of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are also heads of government and have complete control over the country's resources. Kazakhstan and Tajikistan have made it easier for the president to rule by changing their constitutions, which has made centralization stronger.

However, Kyrgyzstan has repeatedly changed between parliamentary, presidential and hybrid systems. Since it switched back to a presidential system in 2021, the political situation has been unstable. It has experienced the 'Tulip Revolution', a change of regime in 2010 and unrest in 2020. This shows that there are problems with how well institutions are set up and how well people are integrated into society. Even so, Kyrgyzstan is still making changes to its constitution, improving how it uses digital technology to manage things, and trying to stop corruption. It is trying to make the country more modern by focusing on how well institutions work and on building the skills of the people who work in them. Academics say that the way Kyrgyzstan's politics have changed over time

is similar to the difficult journey of countries who are trying to find stability and good leadership when things are unclear.

2. The essence and evolution of the concept of governance

The term “governance” originated from 14th-century French, meaning 'control' or “guide.” In 1989, the World Bank introduced the concept of a “crisis in governance,” which rapidly popularized the term. In 1992 and 1994, the World Bank published *Governance and Development* and *Governance: The World Bank's Experience*, promoting the concept of “good governance” and developing governance indicators, which prompted countries to pay attention to governance quality.

In recent decades, extensive academic research on the concept of governance has led to a subtle transformation in its connotations within political science theory. Today, it is generally accepted that governance is the process by which political authority maintains social order and exercises administrative power. In 1995, the United Nations Commission on Global Governance noted in its report, 'Our Global Neighborhood: The Report of the Commission on Global Governance', that governance encompasses the various ways in which individuals and institutions manage public affairs, including the use of formal power, the existence of informal institutions, the reconciliation of conflicting interests and the achievement of cooperative action. While governance involves a broader range of actors and more blurred public-private boundaries than rule, authority and power remain indispensable components of this political process.

3. The connotation and manifestation of governance modernization

3.1. Definition and connotation of governance modernization

Governance modernization involves improving government efficiency and the rule of law, encouraging citizen participation, establishing inclusive institutions and promoting sustainable development. Chinese scholars such as Yu Keping emphasize a 'people-centred' approach; Wang Puqu advocates the dual modernization of governance systems and capabilities; Hu Angang emphasizes technological innovation to drive governance transformation; and Zheng Yongnian focuses on the rule of law and social participation. Foreign scholars such as Fukuyama and the OECD emphasize institutional checks and balances, the role of civil society and digital governance. However, varying degrees of consensus exist among scholars and international organizations regarding the three fundamental goals and pathways of the rule of law, institutionalization, and transparency.

The rule of law emphasizes that power is constrained by law to safeguard citizens' rights and maintain order. The legitimate rights and interests of citizens should be fully protected, and social order and public affairs should operate in an orderly manner in accordance with legal provisions. Institutionalization involves clarifying and stabilizing governance rules to prevent the abuse of power. Transparency involves the government and social organizations disclosing information about their decision-making processes in order to protect the public's right to know, prevent corruption and enhance credibility.

3.2. Manifestations of governance modernization in national governance

Governance theory originated in the West in response to civil society's failure to manage the state, emphasizing the coordination of multiple stakeholders. National governance refers to the effective exercise of power within a legitimate framework, recognized by society. Governance modernization

is characterized by a transformation of ideology and practice. Ideologically, the focus shifts from a power-centred approach to a governance-centred one that emphasizes social needs and citizen interests. In practice, it promotes institutional improvement, digital government services, public participation and transparent channels.

Traditional governance systems are often characterized by rigid hierarchies, centralized decision-making and closed processes, which makes them inflexible and opaque. However, governance modernization aims to achieve clear delineation of responsibilities, standardized procedures and efficient systems. The deep integration of digital technology with government services, as seen with China's "One-Stop Online Service" platform, has successfully achieved data-driven decision-making and process optimization, significantly enhancing transparency and adaptability. New governance approaches today emphasize cross-sectoral collaboration, forming a new framework of 'co-construction, co-governance, and shared benefits', which is widely applied in community governance, environmental management, and digital regulation. This effectively enhances policy implementation and public satisfaction. Furthermore, smart governance enhances the ability to address complex issues through proactive service delivery. Overall, governance modernization represents a systemic transformation encompassing ideology, institutions and methodologies.

4. The evolution of Kyrgyzstan's national governance model

Since gaining independence in 1991, Kyrgyzstan has undergone a complex transition from a highly centralized, Soviet-style governance model to a modern, pluralistic system. The country's governance structure has oscillated between presidential centralization and a parliamentary system, indicating instability.

4.1. Sustaining the traditional Suzhou bureaucratic system

In the early years following independence, Kyrgyzstan maintained many features of the Soviet-era centralized administrative system, with decision-making concentrated in the hands of central authorities. This resulted in limited public participation and weak mechanisms for local oversight, while executive power remained concentrated around the presidency and affiliated elites. Although local governments were nominally autonomous, their operations were heavily dependent on fiscal transfers and approvals from the central government, significantly limiting their actual autonomy. The state, as the dominant provider of public services, operated with minimal engagement from other governance actors, leading to inefficiencies and delayed responses.

Also, informal networks from clans, families, and regions were very important. They greatly influenced governance outcomes. These networks often come before formal institutions. This undermines modern systems based on rules. For example, in some southern areas, leadership roles like village committee chairs are frequently decided by informal talks. Local elders and tribal leaders handle these discussions. Not through democratic elections. Authority comes from traditional legitimacy. Not from legal-rational processes. Showing the persistence of informal power.

4.2. Constitutional reform and attempts at a parliamentary system

After two revolutions that ousted authoritarian presidents in 2005 and 2010, Kyrgyzstan adopted a parliamentary form of government, and multiparty coalitions have since been the norm [1]. The reform aimed to limit presidential authority, strengthen parliamentary oversight, and establish a proportional multi-party system, thereby promoting separation of powers and a more balanced

political structure. Parliament received more power in several key areas, including the ability to scrutinize budget, supervise government and remove presidential. These changes encouraged more transparent governance. They also helped to improve media freedom, leading to more open reporting. The score change, which resulted in the country's overall democracy rating improving for the third consecutive year, made Kyrgyzstan the first state in Central Asia to rise out of the category of consolidated authoritarian regimes [2].

However, institutional reforms have not resolved deeper structural issues. Political parties are still very fragmented. They also lack clear and consistent ideologies. The state continues to depend on powerful local elites. This situation contributes to instability in parliament. The 2010 constitution formally shifted Kyrgyzstan from a presidential to a parliamentary system, reducing presidential powers on paper. But informal networks of patronage remained strong. Presidents also kept control over the security sector, allowing them to hold onto real influence. The result is a hybrid political order, where formal changes and informal power mechanisms exist together and clear gap between theory and practice. For example, Akaev's authority to appoint key positions enabled him to elevate his family and kin to the highest levels within the first five years of his presidency [3].

Furthermore, civic participation is still not well organized. The growth of NGOs faces many rules and political limits. Governance is still mainly led by the state, with limited integration of public opinion into policy-making. Because of this, inclusive mechanisms such as co-construction, co-governance, and benefit-sharing remain underdeveloped. These problems show a clear pattern. Even with a better constitution, Kyrgyzstan's political change is still affected by old informal habits and weak institutional accountability.

4.3. Repeated constitutional reforms and institutional backlash

Following constitutional amendments in 2016 and the 2021 referendum, Kyrgyzstan progressively shifted back toward a presidential-centered system. Partlett points out that the 2021 constitution significantly strengthened presidential powers, enabling the president to directly appoint leaders of key institutions. This structural change has pulled Kyrgyzstan back from a semi-presidential system with checks and balances toward a traditional strong presidential rule, resembling the "imperial presidency" model commonly seen in the post-Soviet space [4]. These changes effectively weakened the institutional mechanisms established in 2010, undermining principles of rule of law and balanced governance.

Concentration of power in the presidency has eroded political accountability, weakened parliamentary oversight, and curtailed civil society and media freedoms. Between 2021 and 2024 the state advanced legislation that, on 7 February 2024, the OSCE/ODIHR described as granting "state authorities the right to compel NCOs that receive foreign funding to register as 'foreign representatives,' and introduce new burdensome reporting obligations, unannounced inspections, and broad discretion to suspend or dissolve NCOs," provisions that the OSCE warned would "severely restrict the right to freedom of association" and "have an overwhelmingly negative impact on civil society, human rights defenders, and the media" [5].

Decision-making increasingly reflects short-term, personalized governance style, while local governments continue to suffer from limited competence and insufficient resources to effectively implement policy. Kyrgyzstan has undergone a significant democratic backsliding, and its growing economic and political dependence on Russia and China has reduced the country's room for manoeuvre.

In short, these constitutional reversals demonstrate that institutions in Kyrgyzstan remain fragile. Despite formal institutional reforms, the system for checks and balances remains largely

undeveloped, and institutions are still learning to use their powers effectively [6], impeding sustainable governance transformation.

4.4. Modernization of the administrative and judicial systems

Despite constitutional instability, Kyrgyzstan has made progress in modernizing certain aspects of its administrative and judicial systems. Since 2015, the government has implemented measures with the support of international institutions to streamline functions, optimize approval processes and outsource services, aiming to enhance administrative efficiency. The digital government platform Tunduk has been established to enable cross-departmental data sharing and support multiple online government services. As noted in the World Bank report, “The Kyrgyz Republic has...implemented a number of shared digital platforms, including in the area of digital identification, interoperability platform, and e-services, among others” [7]. This demonstrates the positive outcomes of process reengineering and technological empowerment.

However, judicial system reforms have lagged behind. Despite the establishment of a Judicial Reform Commission and anti-corruption institutions, as well as efforts to advance court digitization and trial transparency, political interference and institutional shortcomings continue to severely undermine judicial independence and the effectiveness of anti-corruption measures.

Overall, while administrative and judicial reforms face significant obstacles, they have achieved initial progress in enhancing government efficiency and responsiveness to governance, serving as a crucial pillar for advancing the modernization of national governance.

5. The transformation dilemma in Kyrgyzstan's governance modernization process

The country's governance modernization process has revealed a significant discrepancy between the design of institutions and their actual implementation. This reflects deep-seated contradictions in areas such as the rule of law, administration, social participation and digital governance. These contradictions have resulted in a stalemate in the modernization process.

5.1. Gap between rule of law design and implementation

Since independence, Kyrgyzstan has undergone several constitutional reforms aimed at establishing a political system grounded in the rule of law and separation of powers. The 2010 Constitution weakened presidential power, strengthened parliament and the judiciary, sought to establish a modern political system based on checks and balances. According to Freedom House, “The 2010 constitutional reforms aimed to ensure political pluralism and prevent the reemergence of an authoritarian, superpresidential system.” [8] However, this progress has been eroded. For example, a 2021 constitutional amendment restored the president's authority to appoint Supreme Court judges, resulting in a return to centralized power. Judicial independence remains fragile; A lack of faith in the independence of judges, widespread corruption and the extremely slow speed of many legal processes have all fuelled public disaffection with the court system [9]. Despite multiple anti-corruption laws, enforcement has become a political tool used selectively against opponents. In Central Asia, the governments facilitate corruption not by working around the law, but by working through the law—manipulating it to their own ends and shaping it in the first place [10]. Moreover, informal social norms coexist alongside legal norms, creating a semi-institutionalised legal governance structure that undermines the rule of law.

5.2. Citizen participation and democratic space are shrinking

Simultaneously, citizen participation and democratic space have contracted. The 2021 Foreign Agents Law imposes strict regulations on NGOs receiving foreign funding, severely restricting the activities of many organizations. Media freedom is declining, as “states and other political forces are playing a decreasing role in protecting press freedom.” [11] Although legal mechanisms for public participation exist, they are often merely formalities, with insufficient transparency and weak grassroots participation mechanisms. Digital governance initiatives have been promoted, but their interactive functions remain weak, and the digital divide limits participation of vulnerable groups, thereby exacerbates inequality and prolongs poverty in some of the world’s most vulnerable communities.

5.3. Structural contradictions in public administration reform

Public administration reforms in Kyrgyzstan have aimed to improve service efficiency, notably through digitization and budgeting reforms. However, local governments “remain heavily reliant on central government transfers, which restricts their autonomy and weakens governance vitality. In general, national elites maintain control over local decision-making, while local governments struggle to put together sufficient funding to address local issues [12]. Challenges such as human resource shortages, high turnover, and inadequate performance management persist, while nepotism in administrative culture continues to obstruct progress. Moreover, despite digital advances, rural areas still lag behind in infrastructure and technology access, deepening inequalities in digital governance.

5.4. Obstacles to judicial system reform and persistent corruption

Judicial reform in Kyrgyzstan is progressing slowly. Many people view judicial independence as weak. This is due to frequent political pressure and interference that compromise judicial impartiality. A significant 2021 constitutional amendment further centralized presidential authority over judicial appointments, weakening the intended checks and balances designed to protect judicial autonomy. Corruption is widespread within the judiciary. Around 40% of cases are suspected to involve corrupt practices, severely undermining public trust in the legal system. Anti-corruption institutions face limitations in independence and effectiveness, often undermined by political motivations. Sometimes, they are used as tools against political opponents rather than enforcing the law fairly. Moreover, inadequate grassroots legal resources and limited access to legal aid disproportionately hinder vulnerable and marginalized groups, exacerbating social inequalities and constraining the judiciary’s capacity to uphold fundamental rights. Corruption and nepotism remain prevalent, and anti-corruption efforts are driven by political expediency rather than the desire for systemic change [13]. These ongoing challenges constitute substantial barriers to meaningful judicial reform and the establishment of a fair and independent legal system.

5.5. Limitations and development bottlenecks of digital reform

The “Sanarip 2019-2023” plan states digital transformation will “increase competitiveness, improve living standards, and boost state efficiency” using “advanced digital technologies such as artificial intelligence” [14]. However, rural and remote areas suffer from poor network coverage creating a significant digital divide. Low digital literacy among civil servants and citizens results in low platform usage efficiency. The absence of comprehensive data security laws and limited public trust

impede progress. Digital projects often lack inclusivity due to factors such as language barriers, insufficient support for persons with disabilities, and the absence of systematic performance evaluation mechanisms. Key priorities for the future include enhancing infrastructure, legal safeguards, digital literacy, and inclusivity.

6. Prospects for modernizing national governance in Kyrgyzstan

Kyrgyzstan's national governance is currently in a critical period of modernization. Although reforms are steadily advancing, the governance system still faces challenges such as the insufficient enforcement of the rule of law, low administrative efficiency, limited citizen participation and incomplete digital governance. In the face of these challenges, the only way forward is to build an efficient, transparent and inclusive modern governance system.

6.1. Pathways and challenges of institutional reconstruction

Kyrgyzstan's political landscape reflects a legacy of Soviet influence, oscillating between parliamentary and presidential systems. This has resulted in a concentration of power in the presidency, weak separation of powers, and limited political participation and oversight. Governance modernization thus requires decentralizing power, strengthening the independence of parliament and judiciary, and improving institutional checks and balances to foster stability and effectiveness.

Although a legal framework for the rule of law exists, enforcement remains weak, and judicial independence is undermined by administrative interference, judicial independence is compromised by executive overreach. For example, Kyrgyz president Sadyr Japarov consolidated control over the executive branch of power all the way down to local governance, and also oversaw key appointments in the judiciary [15]. Administrative inefficiencies are compounded by overlapping responsibilities and limited incentives, alongside centralized fiscal control that restricts local autonomy. Therefore, fiscal decentralization paired with transparent performance evaluations is essential to empower local governance.

Institutional reform must go beyond legal amendments to raise awareness of procedural justice and rule compliance. Digital platforms such as 'Tunduk' demonstrate potential to enhance administrative transparency and public participation, driving governance towards greater institutionalization.

6.2. Revitalizing civil society and innovating participation mechanisms

Modern governance emphasizes co-governance, where government and society collaboratively engage. However, recent restrictions on civil society and freedom of expression in Kyrgyzstan have led to a contraction of democratic space and declining public participation, causing a crisis of social trust. Revitalizing civil society is essential for governance modernization. Legislative reforms should remove or revise restrictive regulations, ensuring NGOs and media can operate freely, thereby supporting the sustainability of social organizations.

Equally important is establishing consultative governance mechanisms that promote genuine public involvement in decision-making processes. Participatory budgeting and community deliberation have been recommended to empower citizens to influence public resource allocation and policy development directly. Advances in digital technology provide additional tools to broaden participation: e-government platforms can improve transparency and responsiveness through enhanced policy consultation, feedback channels, and online voting capabilities.

Furthermore, strengthening civic education and promoting awareness of the rule of law and social responsibility are crucial to cultivating a vibrant civic culture. Thus, restoring an active civil society and fostering innovative participation mechanisms are vital steps toward sustainable governance reform.

6.3. Deepening digital governance through technological empowerment

Digital governance represents a critical pathway to enhancing governance efficiency and transparency. To make it, effective collaboration across government agencies and sectors is essential to foster an integrated “Digital Government” that can drive coherent and successful digital inclusion initiatives, as well as ensuring basic ICT and other digital infrastructures (including public digital infrastructures, such as national digital identity and digital payment mechanisms) are in place [16]. Kyrgyzstan has made important strides, particularly with the 'Tunduk' platform, which has significantly simplified business registration and tax processes, improving service delivery. Nonetheless, the uneven development of digital infrastructure—especially in rural and remote regions—hampers equal access and exacerbates the digital divide. In addition, the absence of unified data governance frameworks and comprehensive data protection laws restricts trust and broad adoption. Civil servants and citizens alike often lack sufficient digital literacy, limiting the effectiveness of online platforms.

To advance, Kyrgyzstan must develop resilient digital infrastructure, digitize public services, foster a supportive legal framework, ensure access to digital financial services, and empower citizens through digital skills development [16]. The strategic use of big data and artificial intelligence can help. These tools can support data-driven policy-making and improve risk assessment, which lead to more decision-making precision and execution efficiency. Including public feedback in digital governance systems is also crucial. This helps combine technology with democratic engagement. Overall, success depends on coordinated efforts. These must connect high-level plans with local implementation to ensure that technological gains turn into real governance strength.

6.4. Regional cooperation and international resource integration

Governance modernization in Kyrgyzstan cannot happen alone. It requires active regional and international cooperation. The country is located at a crossroads of Eurasian geopolitics. It takes part in regional groups like the Eurasian Economic Union and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, leveraging these partnerships to advance institutional capacity and governance reforms. These collaborations provide critical financial resources and expose Kyrgyzstan to advanced governance concepts and international standards.

However, some challenges remain. Local capacity to run projects is often limited. The geopolitical landscape is also complex, which can make cooperation difficult. Kyrgyzstan should move beyond being a passive aid recipient to becoming a proactive participant in project design. This shift would improve local relevance and adaptability. Promoting regional co-governance is also valuable. This can be done through cross-border platforms. It is especially important for shared resources like water and the environment. Security is another key area where can strengthen collaborative governance frameworks. Effectively integrating external resources helps alleviate reform pressures while injecting international experience and rules that support Kyrgyzstan's sustainable development goals.

7. Conclusion

Modernizing governance in Kyrgyzstan is a complex, long-term process that extends beyond formal legal reforms. It requires fundamentally restructuring institutions to break entrenched power imbalances and enable genuine decentralization. Strengthening legislative and judicial bodies is very important. They need more independence and capacity to help create effective checks and balances, which upholds the rule of law. It also protects the rights of citizens. At the same time, revitalizing civil society is essential to foster a political culture where citizens engage as active participants rather than passive observers. Empowering social organizations and expanding meaningful channels for public involvement can rebuild social trust and accountability, forming the foundation for sustainable reform.

Digital governance plays a vital role in enhancing transparency, streamlining administrative processes, and bridging the divide between the state and society. But technology is not enough alone. Technological advances must be accompanied by investments in infrastructure, digital literacy, and data governance to ensure equitable access and safeguard rights, preventing new forms of exclusion. Furthermore, Kyrgyzstan's changes must fit with regional and global dynamics. The country should actively join cooperation platforms, because international partnerships are also valuable and these efforts can provide needed resources and knowledge. They also bring in useful standards, which make reforms stronger and more suitable for the local situation. Overcoming these governance challenges demands an integrated strategy. This strategy must optimize institutional design, nurture civic engagement, harness technology, and leverage external collaborations. The final goal is to build a modern, accountable system that supports sustainable development and fulfills the aspirations of the Kyrgyz people.

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