

In a sea of Soviet-era failures, one state stands alone

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By Ahmed Rashid

A democratic leader in Central Asia who surrenders power as she promised to do two years ago is as rare as a spring of fresh water in the Karakum or Black Sands desert. But that is exactly the case with Roza Otunbayeva, 61, whose two-year term as interim president of Kyrgyzstan ends on December 1, when she will step down to hand over to a fully elected president.

Ever since the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, the story of democracy and political and economic reform in the five Central Asian republics has been pitiful and largely a miserable failure. Unlike the western parts of the Soviet Union which saw rapid reforms, in Central Asia communist leaders hung on to power, refused to change their ways and plunged their peoples into dire poverty and misery, with some exceptions.

Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are still ruled by the most repressive regimes on Earth where the jails are full, torture is common and the economies are run by mafias close to the leaders' families, - cruder copies of Russia itself. Tajikistan remains weak, vulnerable to Islamist extremist threats from Afghanistan and run by an inept authoritarian regime. Tajikistan has suffered enormously from a five-year civil war, lack of resources and an economy that is wholly dependent on workers' remittances from Russia and drug smuggling from Afghanistan.

Politically, Kazakhstan is only marginally better - a virtual one-party state with a former communist president who has ruled the country since 1991. Yet Kazakhstan is full of unparalleled riches - oil, gas, uranium, coal and wheat, making it a magnet for investment from China.

The Kazakh president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, is advised by none other than Tony Blair, who may have had something to do with convincing him to hold multi-party elections in January so that the one-party parliament may look more respectable - but nobody is expecting a flowering of democracy.

Yet tiny Kyrgyzstan has desperately sought a democratic path even though it has been beset with ethnic and clan violence and rivalries, is squeezed between China, Russia and Afghanistan, has no economic resources and is on the front lines of the US-led war in Afghanistan, hosting a major US air base.

Kyrgyzstan has been fortunate in that it had President Otunbayeva, a rumbustious, feisty, worldly, highly intelligent diplomat and politician with a great sense of humour who for more than a decade has been at the centre of trying to democratise her country. In a few days time she just may have succeeded.

She has achieved this only because she is also a tough, wily and often ruthless politician. For the first time in Central Asian history there will be a peaceful and democratic transition of power.

Ms Otunbayeva is expected to swear in her rival and leader of the opposition, Almazbek Atambayev, who was once her former prime minister in the interim government. Mr Atambayev was elected president on October 30 in an election that international observers said was the cleanest and fairest that Central Asia has ever held. Central Asian states are better known for their Soviet-style rigged elections.

Much of the credit goes to Ms Otunbayeva. In the 1990s she was considered such a political threat that the first dictator-ruler, President Askar Akayev, packed her off to become ambassador in London and Washington. A stint with the UN peace keeping mission in Georgia followed. But she imbibed the best and the worst of western democracy, made excellent high level contacts (she counts the US secretary of state, Hillary Clinton,

as a friend) and above all was anxious to learn and read about everything.

All that has stood her in good stead in Kyrgyzstan, where riots and political unrest were endemic and two presidents were forced into exile after pursuing cronyism rather than democracy. A popular uprising in which ninety people were killed forced out her predecessor Kurmanbek Bakiyev in April 2010, and she became interim president, promising a full transition to democracy.

She implemented a new parliamentary-style constitution in which presidential powers have been considerably curtailed. This was followed by elections won by Mr Atambayev, who has already declared that he wants to get closer to Russia and will close the US Manas air base near the capital Bishkek. Her major failure has been her inability to heal the deep ethnic divide between the majority Kyrgyz and the minority Uzbek population who live in the south. Violent ethnic clashes in 2010 led to entire Uzbek villages being razed and hundreds killed. A major political effort is needed to reconcile the two sides.

Kyrgyzstan is still poverty-stricken, lacks exportable resources while 90 per cent of its terrain is covered by some of the highest mountain ranges in the world. It has more sheep and goats than people. And it has to balance a delicate relationship between two giants Russia and China. But Ms Otunbayeva has put the country on the right path. Unlike all the other Central Asian states, the debate over leaders' succession, what political system to adopt and whether democracy is suitable to Central Asia, is now hopefully over for Kyrgyzstan.

Ahmed Rashid has travelled and written about Central Asia since 1986. His latest book is *Descent into Chaos*, the US and the disaster in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia.