

2012 Pluralism Lecture: Roza Otunbayeva

Prospects for Democracy and Pluralism in Central Asia: Lessons from the Kyrgyz Republic*

May 28, 2012 – Ottawa, Canada

Your Highness Prince Aga Khan,
Chief Justice Beverley McLachlin,
The Right Honourable Adrienne Clarkson,
Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you very much for your welcoming words and the invitation to address this esteemed gathering.

This year marks the twentieth anniversary of establishing diplomatic relations between Canada and the Kyrgyz Republic. As the first Kyrgyz foreign minister who visited Canada and later as my country's first ambassador to the Land of the Maple Tree – I am very glad to be back in Ottawa and see so many old friends. During these years Canada not only became the top foreign investor in Kyrgyzstan but a source of many important contributions in social development, culture, human rights and education. Canada and the Kyrgyz Republic are now connected by many family bonds, university alumni, business ties and civil society networks. We have a lot to celebrate, and as our relationship matures, I am confident it will grow even stronger in the years to come.

Dear colleagues,

Allow me to congratulate the Government of Canada and His Highness the Aga Khan on launching this new important institution - the Global Center for Pluralism.

As is rightly pointed out in the mission statement of the Centre, “pluralist societies are not accidents of history. They are products of decision and public investment”.

In these turbulent times full of historic upheavals; when so many newly empowered forces have taken their rightful seats at the global decision making table; when the new technologies gave

* Check against delivery

voice to the billions previously unheard of; when the face of the planet is fast changing and the youth around the world questions each and every political model from the past, - it is exceptionally important that such institutions as the Global Centre for Pluralism function as both the anchor of stability and the beacon of inspiration.

It is especially imperative that the Centre offers its guiding light for those of us, who in the effort to liberate their countries from one man dictatorships, risk creating new systems of oppression, this time - of the few by the many.

The Global Center's mandate must be not only in accumulating the best practices from Canada and other successful pluralist societies of the North but also in celebrating peace and prosperity in the communities where despite the lack of rule of law and in the absence of a responsible national leadership - humanity is alive and people of various cultures and backgrounds have found their own unique ways to enhance mutual respect and security.

I am confident that the Centre for Pluralism will employ global perspective as well as display balance in assessing historical context, show interest in the intellectual nuance and pay attention to the dynamics of social life at the micro level.

I am reassured by the fact that the Global Center for Pluralism is a partnership with the Aga Khan Development Network and other institutions under the patronage of His Highness. For I know no other international development organization that at the same time directly belongs to the developing world and represents interests of an ancient community scattered on all continents around the world. The Aga Khan has earned the trust and enjoys unique credibility in developing countries that many others simply lack or are never able to attain in the first place.

The Aga Khan Development Network and charitable work led by His Highness are well known in Kyrgyzstan and held in high esteem around Central Asia. My compatriots remember and will never forget the generosity of His Highness in providing humanitarian aid, especially in the difficult first phase of the transition in the 1990s. Peacemaking efforts by His Highness the Aga Khan played an important role in ending the civil war in Tajikistan.

Currently, the Aga Khan Network is making most effective and lasting impact in the area of civil society development.

Just two months ago I visited the most remote and mountainous town of Naryn - the site of the Kyrgyz campus of the Central Asian University - the flagship regional initiative of His Highness. It was truly inspiring and heartwarming to see how the entire community is being transformed thanks to the multimillion investment into the campus construction. One can only imagine the future of this previously depressed town when Naryn will welcome students and faculty from around the world and become a center of academic excellence for the entire region. This new University is just one example how the Aga Khan institutions have become an indispensable and important part of our region.

Today we are opening a new page of our cooperation with Canada and His Highness the Aga Khan. Earlier this afternoon, we had a very fruitful and frank exchange of ideas with the governing board of the Global Centre for Pluralism and discussed concrete areas of expertise of the Centre and possible work in Kyrgyzstan. It is clear that the Global Centre for Pluralism has

great potential and can help all of us think clearer and act bolder in promoting, defining and building democracy.

Ladies and gentlemen!

The tragic four days of June 2010 that claimed lives of 442 Kyrgyzstani citizens in interethnic conflict clearly demonstrate that we have failed and failed miserably in our work to build a pluralistic society – a successful multiethnic nation of shared citizenship.

To my last days I will never forget the shock, the pain, and the worst of all - feeling at times powerless to stop the catastrophic tragedy taking place on my watch when I, in the capacity of the chairman of the then two month old Interim Government, directed efforts to put down violence and restore peace.

I remember every hour of those darkest days and horrific nights.

As the city of Osh went into chaos, I was receiving updates, not so much from government or police officials but human rights defenders and civil society activists, with urgent calls for action and help. The local law enforcement units and military in the area were either overwhelmed and outnumbered, demoralized and in some cases themselves simply unreliable to stop violence. The reinforcement units from barracks outside the region took many precious hours to arrive while they too did not have the adequate equipment and experience to deal with large scale civil disorder and ethnic conflict.

As the acting head of state I took the measure of the last resort and in an extraordinary step appealed to our most trusted ally – the Russian Federation with the call to provide assistance and send troops to Osh to stop the bloodshed and restore peace.

The help never arrived.

Twenty years ago, back in 1990 in the same heat of June – when the ancient city of Osh and the surrounding areas also witnessed large scale interethnic conflict – it took weeks for several battalions of the Red Army paratroopers and specially equipped police reinforcement from the entire Soviet Union to put down violence. The state of emergency was lifted then as late as in November.

This time it took us four long days and nights. Less than a month later we were able to conduct constitutional referendum nationwide and in all affected areas. I personally chose to travel to Osh to cast my vote in the city where I grew up and that I call my hometown.

Dear Colleagues,

There are many post factum theories and explanations which have circulated as to what forces originated the riots, which ethnic side, political grouping, internal and external enemy should bear the largest share of blame.

I want to state loud and clear that we all, the whole people of Kyrgyzstan, must now move to accept the responsibility for horrible violence, barbaric bloodshed and destruction that took place in Osh.

It was in our streets, it was our kids, it was our neighbors, it was our elders who allowed hate to take root in our hearts and commit these atrocities against each other. It was our government, local municipalities, police and the military that first failed to prevent and then to act swiftly and boldly. We must acknowledge and own up to the fact that the law enforcement in the months after the tragedy was not free from ethnic discrimination and harassment.

We must face the reality and seek out bitter truth! We must ask ourselves and each other tough questions! We must not avoid the discomfort and the hurt in order to rebuild our communities and to achieve lasting peace and security!

I provided exhaustive reporting on my own actions in numerous testimonies to the Special National Commission set up to investigate the June events, as well as to several other parliamentary, public and international commissions on the matter. I also directed all state officials and government bodies to turn over any required evidence and witness testimony to ensure highest degree of accountability and transparency.

In my address to the special session of the Parliament, the Jogorku Kenesh, a year after the June events, – I specifically warned against any attempt to initiate campaigns of witch-hunt, to assign blame on one ethnicity, or to politicize the conflict and use it in the narrow party interests. I called upon the nation not to forget how we never learned from the previous conflict in 1990 because back then the events were quickly overshadowed by our Independence and deep economic crisis of the subsequent years.

It is clear that so far we have not succeeded building the society of ‘shared citizenship’ where everyone is empowered to participate and feels safe and protected.

But this is not the case when the ethnic majority, the Kyrgyz, have excluded minorities and established systematic ways of mistreatment and oppression, as sometimes we read from irresponsible international reporters who are quick to apply their stereotypes. For most of them it is always easy, you jump off your airplane, identify the majority group as bad villains and the story is written. But as we know, the reality is much more complicated and multidimensional. While the disappointment with the status quo is shared by all ethnicities, it is the Kyrgyz who are frustrated and insecure at least as much as their neighbors.

I would like to cover briefly three issues that, in my mind, represent main sources of interethnic tension and without resolving which we cannot move on towards building a pluralistic and inclusive society. These are the status of the Kyrgyz language, the lack of rule of law, and the issue of poverty.

At the end I want to ask for your feedback and will be most thankful for your insights and ideas. With my colleagues we came to Canada to learn from you so it is me who asks the questions today.

Ladies and gentlemen,

If anyone wants to know how the Kyrgyz feel – look no further but assess the state of the Kyrgyz language. If during the Perestroika years the perceived low status of the language served as the rousing call of the active national revival movement that ultimately resulted in the break up of the Soviet Union - twenty years after we achieved Independence - the situation is much more grim and hopeless.

During the USSR years, the Soviet state supported publication of hundreds of titles of work by native writers and translations into the Kyrgyz of foreign books in many millions of copies. Current annual numbers of published titles range in a few dozens with maximum number of copies rarely exceeding one thousand. In the main social medium of today – in the Internet – the size and quality of the Kyrgyz language content is catastrophically low. Even the most nationally conscious ethnic Kyrgyz choose to communicate online with each other in languages other than Kyrgyz. Our children are totally deprived of books or cartoons in Kyrgyz. A well described phenomenon takes place when young children who start in nursery and kindergarten change overnight the family dinner table language. Parents are made to speak Russian since, believe it or not, the number of quality Kyrgyz language pre-school facilities in the whole country can be counted on the fingers of both hands. This very sad fact is, of course, explained by the already mentioned lack of children content, work materials and methodology in Kyrgyz.

Although we always had the de-facto policy of bilingualism, the 1998 national plebiscite approved recognition of Russian as the official language of the country, supplementing the Kyrgyz, that carries the title of the state language. Thus the permission to carry all your affairs in Russian has further eroded the status of the Kyrgyz language and removed any motivation whatsoever to develop it.

I understand that this language situation can be quite typical in the post-colonial world when the native language is increasingly marginalized and subjugated by the more powerful lingua franca. But I would caution you not to celebrate this as an achievement towards the pluralistic society. This state of affairs is not permanent. The Kyrgyz language is not a Creole tongue. It is an ancient mother language of the four million speakers with rich culture and history. The largest epic “Manas” consists of million lines of poems.

The failure to consolidate national life around the Kyrgyz language and increase its use and prestige is causing great pain to the Kyrgyz. The pride is hurt. This unattended frustration further leads to irrational and increasingly dangerous manifestations. I would like to remind you, that a week before the blood was spilled in Osh, the national headlines were dominated by youth groups which criticized the Interim Government’s decision to translate and distribute the draft of the new Constitution in Uzbek. Just recently we had a major scandal with street protests and a parliamentary debate with calls to do away with the national school examinations in the Uzbek language.

Canada has the unique experience of bilingualism and knows how futile were the attempts to ask the people to drop their language for the sake of the supposed larger good.

Therefore let us agree that while every measure should be taken to ensure that ethnic minorities preserve their languages; with the Russian language continuing in its important role in the regional economic life; there is no doubt that without fluency in Kyrgyz no citizen of Kyrgyzstan can participate in public life and politics, or otherwise fully realize his or her potential.

This existing language divide explains the lack of shared space for national discussion today. There are two large communities operating in parallel. We learnt today that in Canada, you faced the same situation forty years ago- two solitudes as you call this phenomenon. One in Russian and the other in Kyrgyz, each complete with its own set of newspapers, TV, entertainment, political agenda, with very limited communication in between. I don't mention here the fact that there is a very large number of Uzbek families who never watch Kyrgyzstani television but are fully immersed in life of a neighboring country. Neither they are fluent in Russian. We also have to take into account the changing demographics of the country with the large outflow of the Russians in the last decades. The Uzbeks have replaced Russians as the largest ethnic minority. But Kyrgyz and Uzbek languages belong to the same Turkic group and it would be wrong to accept Russian preserve its status as the language of interethnic communication.

The language issue is a very sensitive area, full of details and nuances, as you understand. Let me just conclude on this topic, that one criterion of our success in the coming years could be the high number of young men and women who are very fluent in the state language and are thus fully capable of not only representing their ethnic communities, but of claiming their due right to govern the entire country.

Dear Friends,

Much has been written on the unique history of Kyrgyzstan as the very promising island of democracy in early 1990s that later turned into the sad story of large scale graft, corruption and injustice.

All these years, our compatriots – Russians, Uzbeks, Tatars, Dungans, Koreans, Uighurs and all other 80 ethnicities that together with the Kyrgyz make up our nation – endured the hardships and did their best to build their lives and newly independent country.

However, both authoritarian regimes that ruled our country, as they would lose their standing and legitimacy with the people, increasingly relied on playing up the interethnic stability card. The corrupt and criminal family regimes were interested in isolating ethnic minorities and pitching them against mostly rural, dominantly Kyrgyz opposition protesters. It was during those times that the regime would most actively throw around the sound bites and slogans on peoples' friendship, importance of stability and loyalty to the current regime. The message was clear and simple: 'yes, we could be corrupt, but we at least provide the security'. However, there were no genuine efforts to include ethnic minorities in the political process – they were just limited with the role of the crowd scene of mass support for the rulers.

Instead of respecting the right of ethnic minorities to independently voice their concerns and nominate their own representatives, the authoritarian regimes were most comfortable in dealing with self-appointed ethnic leaders – a bunch of like minded corrupt dealers, who specialized in

trading the nominal support of communities they supposedly represented in exchange for government preferences in privatization, contracts and other perks. These so called ethnic leaders have long lost ties with the real life of their diasporas but mostly speculated, blackmailed and otherwise abused the issues of utmost national concern with the goal of personal gain and enrichment. With time they grew to believe that their own well being and personal success in business and political ambitions meant the well being of entire communities.

In the situation when there were no free and fair elections and no open discussion was allowed, it was easy to revive the ages old feudal system of 'divide and rule' with mutual reliance of local barons and the national rulers.

With time the Kyrgyz grew to mistakenly associate the prosperity of the few ethnic minority figures with the general injustice and lack of opportunity for social advancement under the authoritarian rule. This is again a very well known situation around the world and no need for me to go further in all implications.

Much literature is available on the effects of the lack of rule of law and how every member of the society at the end is left vulnerable and insecure. You very well know how this situation of total mutual distrust poisons public life and how the ethnic minorities easily grow to believe that the state governance is owned by the ethnic majority; who supposedly have it much easier to navigate the system.

This basic lack of justice and rule of law is the principal source of not only interethnic conflict but of the general situation that increasingly fits the description of a failed state.

Injustice, lawlessness, total corruption, rotten statehood and alienation of the elites from the people have already caused two people power revolutions in our short history.

This was the reason why 87 young heroes in April 2010 chose to rather die then live in the country where one family with a bunch of corrupt crooks of various ethnicities usurped the state rule and ownership of the national treasures.

Since then we have made the required first steps to liberate our people but much is left to be done. The new Constitution adopted in the summer of 2010 provides for the first parliamentary democracy in Central Asia. Both the parliamentary and presidential elections held in the last two years were recognized by the people of Kyrgyzstan and the international community as unprecedentedly free and fair. We have laid the foundation for democratic government and took every measure to prevent the return of one man rule.

I feel both pride in our achievements but also share in the feelings of disappointment and resentment that many of my compatriots and friends abroad have about Kyrgyzstan. No, miracles do not happen overnight. As you see here, Canada was also not built in a day. It takes time and much effort to undo the injustices of the past and have people relearn the civic values. It takes time and many incremental, little noticed steps that cement the democratic breakthrough and create a new harmonious and inclusive country.

This brings me to the issue of economic development and the need to eradicate poverty, to give every citizen of our country an equal chance to improve his or her station – this is a key condition for the success of a pluralist society.

Every time in the past when we raised the issue of lack of democratic freedoms we were confronted by the authoritarian regime who claimed the priority of economic development. It was clear that they rationalized the need of personal dictatorial rule as a supposed requirement for economic miracle in the model of Singapore, South Korea or Indonesia. History has proven them wrong. At the end of the day, the lack of good governance served only the purpose of their personal enrichment and did not bring economic prosperity to the country.

We know for the fact that we, in Kyrgyzstan, have to have a democratic government with strong rule of law to succeed economically and must quickly build the strong middle class to prevent further sliding backwards into a clientele based, feudal system that leaves electoral democracy open for abuse by the affluent minority.

Kyrgyzstan cannot rely on the export of oil and gas to build its future. The one major natural resource development – the Kumtor gold mine developed in the mid 1990s by the Canadian corporation Cameco and currently operated by its offshoot Centerra Gold – is a story of government corruption unfortunately and criminal negligence of the national interest. One of my first major decisions as the head of the Interim Government was moving to embrace the principles of the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative and expanding its standards to the hydro-energy generating sector.

The best natural resource of Kyrgyzstan – its multiethnic people – is currently mostly employed abroad. My small country is one of the top five countries in the world in terms of the size of international cash remittances in the GDP. It is estimated that up to one million, or one fifth of the population, is involved in labour migration to Russia, Kazakhstan and increasingly to more remote destinations like Korea or Italy. The effect of this mass migration, of absence of the most productive and passionate members of the society on domestic and social life, is a topic of a separate discussion. It is another sad chapter that needs to be addressed. We just have to remember that in the short term we are not dealing with the many acute social problems just exporting this instability. In Osh we are dealing with the one manifestation when a lot of predominantly young Kyrgyz and Uzbek men are working abroad.

The current government in Kyrgyzstan has a very ambitious plan of attracting large international investment and spurring economic growth in the country. We must use our advantageous geographic location in the center of the large continent. One of the important priorities concerns with the construction of the new transcontinental railroad from Shanghai to Amsterdam via Kyrgyzstan. This railroad will open our direct access to the Pacific and Indian ocean as well as further develop our role as the hub on the modern Silk Road. Much hopes are, of course, related to stabilization of Afghanistan – then plans for exporting our electricity to Pakistan and India become most realistic.

It is no coincidence, that one of the main programmes of my own foundation is directed towards helping the Kyrgyzstanis to ‘discover Asia’: flight time to New Delhi is twice shorter from

Bishkek then to Moscow and the largest international trade city in our region is Urumqi. Our country is also to benefit from the expansion of the regional trade partnership with Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus into the full fledging Customs Union. Active efforts are needed that we all realize that Kyrgyzstan, far from being 'the middle of the nowhere', is actually located in the center of the fastest growing economies of the world.

Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,
Dear friends,

I want to conclude by going over a few areas of concern that will, in my mind, remain of key importance as Kyrgyzstan develops in the next decade.

First is the issue of the regional stability. What will happen to Central Asia as the international community will wrap up its active role in Afghanistan? We are also yet to see how smooth will be the transition in our immediate neighbors. We have already witnessed how disruptive and powerful can be the transnational narcotics networks. We are following with the increased concern the rise of the political religious movements. Despite the picture that is painted sometimes by the international press, it is an undeniable fact that today Kyrgyzstan is the most stable country in the region because the government is popularly elected and its legitimacy is not questioned. However, we are not immune and isolated from the larger region and the issue of the regional security will remain the biggest challenge for our peaceful development.

Secondly, much will depend on the success of our experiment with the parliamentary democracy. Despite our short term disappointments with sometimes ugly turns and wrong incentives of the electoral democracy in the society with the weak governance institutions, I strongly wish for my country to continue on the road to democracy. We must not give up. There will be difficulties but on this road there are no shortcuts. We cannot copy or import a model of governance, we must grow and build our own.

Thirdly, it is the issue of the economic development. The window of opportunity is quite limited. Either we catch up with the rest of the world or we are destined to stay in the gray zone of failed states. We must ensure strong inflows of foreign investment and modernization of our economy.

Fourth is the subject that I think can be most influenced by us and will in turn affect positively the three previous factors. It is the area of education. We need to instill in the new generations values of mutual respect, citizen participation and good governance. The strongest foundation for peace in the country can be built only in a well-functioning classroom. Kyrgyzstan at the moment dedicates 4% of its national product to education. This figure is as high as in the United States of America. In an illustration how misleading can be international development statistics, you should know that 4% of GDP means budget of \$2500 USD per secondary school student in America and \$56 USD per student in Kyrgyzstan. The world average is \$800 per student. From these figures alone you can see how urgent is our action in the sphere of supporting education in Kyrgyzstan and in the larger region.

Ladies and gentlemen,

His Highness the Aga Khan has compared a pluralistic society to “a kaleidoscope that history shakes every day” – meaning that pluralism is not an end in itself, but ever evolving process. I am very happy that this never ending kaleidoscope has brought us together today in one room for this learning opportunity.

I want to thank His Highness and the Board of the Centre for the invitation to address you and I conclude by wishing the Global Centre and its Secretary General Mr. McNee much success.

Thank you.