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Kyrgyzstan: Survey shows public still tentative - will the newly-elected Bakiev team be able to address lingering domestic concerns?

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Global media research institute **InterMedia** today released findings from a survey of 1,000 Kyrgyz conducted just prior to the recent elections in the strategic Central Asian republic. Despite widespread enthusiasm for a democratic process that saw Kurmanbek Bakiev elected as president July 11, concerns about fairness remain. Nearly one-third of respondents believe the candidate registration procedure for the presidential elections was unfair, because some potential candidates had been denied the opportunity to put their name forward. The InterMedia survey also found that the way in which the parliament was elected in February-March 2005 remains controversial: two-thirds (66 percent) of those surveyed would like to see new parliamentary elections.

Still, there are encouraging signs: apprehension among Kyrgyz has dropped slightly since April even among the countries' most worried groups, such as ethnic Russians; in April, 45 percent of ethnic Russians surveyed said they felt worried about the future compared to only 30 percent in June. "This is a positive sign because it indicates a return to normalcy for this important minority and suggests more ethnic Russians will stay in Kyrgyzstan for the time being rather than seeking refuge in Russia as many feared they would immediately after the March revolution," said Marjorie Winfrey, InterMedia Central Asia project manager.

Regional and ethnic variations in attitudes, confidence

Regional fault lines exposed in the March uprising can be seen in attitudes towards the election process. Residents of Jalal-Abad, where opposition to the now-deposed Akaev government was strongest, view the most recent presidential election process more positively than do residents of the capital Bishkek, where support for a regime change was weaker. More than one-third (37 percent) of respondents in Bishkek said the process was unfair; only 18 percent of Jalal-Abad respondents said so.

Responses show much greater confidence in the national government among Jalal-Abad residents, 77 percent of whom said they are confident in the national government, compared to 64 percent in Osh and 34 percent in Bishkek where the proportion of respondents reporting confidence in the central government slipped from 39 percent in an April survey.

As well, 59 percent of respondents from Osh and 56 percent of Jalal-Abad respondents feel the future of Kyrgyzstan will be more democratic. In the capital, there was a slight increase in proportion of respondents who thought the country's political future would be more democratic – 46 percent, up from 42 percent in April.

Jalal-Abad respondents in this survey were significantly less likely than in the previous survey to say they thought Kyrgyzstan would be democratic; the percentage of respondents selecting this category dropped from 69 percent in the first round to 56 percent, representing the only group exhibiting a loss of faith in democracy during the period between the two studies.

Kyrgyz and the outside world: belief in foreign interference, the U.S. most responsible, but that not necessarily seen as a bad thing

The image of the United States has eroded somewhat since the terrorist attacks of 9/11, at which time 65 percent held the country in high regard. Today approximately 47 percent said they are very favorably or somewhat favorably inclined towards the United States. Young Kyrgyz view the country much more favorably than do their older compatriots. More than half (55 percent) of those 15-24 view the United States positively, compared with 36 percent of those 50 and older. The U.S.' popularity lags considerably behind that of Russia which is viewed favorably by 90 percent of urban respondents in Kyrgyzstan.

Presidential elections took place in an environment in which 44 percent of the residents of Kyrgyzstan's three largest cities believe foreign governments interfered to influence the results of the February-March parliamentary elections. This figure is up slightly from April 2005, when on the heels of the country's Tulip Revolution, InterMedia conducted a similar survey. At that time, it found 41 percent of those interviewed thought foreign entities interfered in their country's affairs, with the United States topping the list.

“This foreign involvement, though part of many Kyrgyz' understandings of the current political situation, is not necessarily seen as a bad thing,” said Winfrey. “Those respondents who said they thought the United States had been involved in determining the results of the parliamentary elections in February-March were not significantly more likely to feel unfavorably inclined to the U.S. than were respondents who did not think outside parties or countries had interfered. Negative attitudes seem much more linked to age than to understandings of U.S. foreign policy in the region.”

With increased rhetoric in media about Islamist extremism, particularly following the events in Andijan, Uzbekistan, in mid-May, respondents mentioned religious tension as a problem facing Kyrgyzstan slightly more often than they did in the previous study. Still, less than 2 percent of respondents consider this the most pressing issue facing Kyrgyzstan.

Based in Washington, D.C., and London, U.K., **InterMedia** is a global leader in media, audience and public attitude research and communications solutions. Active in more than 120 countries worldwide and specializing in the developing world, InterMedia fuses regional expertise and a vast network of local contacts with high-quality research methodologies.

Survey note: InterMedia surveyed 1,000 adults 15 and older 20-27 June in Bishkek, Osh and Jalal-Abad. Range of error with a 95 percent confidence interval is +/- 3 percent.

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