

## Q&A: Kyrgyzstan's President on Democracy, Islam, and Being Friends with Putin

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Kyrgyz President Almazbek Atambayev attends Russian-Kyrgyz talks at the Grand Kremlin Palace on June 20, 2017 in Moscow, Russia Mikhail Svetlov—Getty Images

You don't read much about [Kyrgyzstan](#) in the international press, but it's a fascinating part of a fascinating region. A predominantly Muslim former Soviet state of 6 million that borders China along its eastern border, it contends with competing currents created by Russia, China, the United States, and the Muslim world. And it's a genuine democracy in a part of the world that doesn't have many.

President Almazbek Atambayev came to power six years ago, inheriting a country with weak institutions dominated by kleptocrats. It still doesn't have many resources, but it now has plenty of committed democrats, among them Atambaev. In fact, he's preparing to step down after a single term as president, as laid out in the country's constitution. Kyrgyz elections take place on Oct.15; watch this space.

Speaking to TIME after the UN General Assembly, Atambaev speaks with unusual candor about the challenges facing his country — about his disappointment with U.S. leadership and its approach to the fight against ISIS, his [friendship with](#)

[Russia's Vladimir Putin](#), and how Kyrgyzstan has thrived as a Muslim majority democracy.

*This conversation has been edited for length and clarity*

**TIME: Let's start with the big geopolitical issue for the Kyrgyz Republic. Your country has great relations with Russia, a country that also is increasingly tied economically to China. Do you see growing tensions between your Russia relations and your China relations?**

Atambayev: You know, I don't see big problems with it. All the neighboring countries, including the big ones, have gotten used to the fact that Kyrgyzstan has its own foreign policy and its own opinions. Most importantly, all our neighbors—including Russia and China—now understand that we don't have any bad intentions towards them; we only want to be good neighbors. Of course, some countries in the region don't approve of our chosen path of parliamentary democracy. They don't like it that the President of Kyrgyzstan has decided to be in office for only a single term. Some leaders think we are giving a bad example for their people.

**Do you think that there is a broader future of democracy beyond the Kyrgyz Republic in your region, and even in the world?**

If there's no democracy, then neither the region nor the world will have a bright future. Let me give you one example: there's a big spike of terrorism in the world. Currently it's Daesh [the Islamic State], but later it will be something else. What's the cause of this terrorism? And why only in Muslim countries? Because it's in Muslim countries that the inequality and social injustice is most visible among the people; because some regimes call themselves republics but in fact are authoritarian and dictatorial where there's no justice and there's a wide social gap between the rich and poor. In such situations, when ordinary people don't have the opportunity to change power in a democratic way, where there's a lack of social mobility, then radical ideas start ruling.

There had been radicalism in the past too, but back then it was called Anarchism or Bolshevism. What is an "Islamic caliphate"? It's what Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin had proposed, a society of justice. But this time it's one based on the ideas not of Marxism but the so-called ideas of Islam. And as long as there's no democracy or social justice in these countries, this fight against terror won't lead to victory. As long as Muslims don't see a third way—that there can be a Muslim country with democracy and one that prospers under it—then we can't stop the radicalization of Islam. In Kyrgyzstan, we want to show just that to Muslim countries; our population is 90% Muslim.

This is all interconnected, but the foundation for it can only be social justice. And the way to social justice is through democracy. So if we don't build democracy in Kyrgyzstan, and democracy doesn't spread across the region and the world, the world has a bleak future.

**Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan – your neighbors are not democracies, and aren't moving in that direction. How does having these types of neighbors affect your ability as President to conduct effective external relations?**

You know, it's tough. Kyrgyzstan is not rich, and six years ago it was on the verge of collapse, but we got credit and financing from China and Russia.

**Do you feel as if the U.S. understands the position you're in?**

I was a big fan of Obama's, but I [have been] shocked by the actions of the U.S. government and its State Department. For example, in 2014 the late Uzbek President Islam Karimov said "there will probably be war in the region." The U.S. then gave Uzbekistan 328 MPCs [military personnel carriers] at no cost four months after his statement. Investments and assistance from the U.S. doesn't come to democratic Kyrgyzstan, but Uzbekistan got 328 MPCs, each costing over half a million dollars.

**Did you tell President Obama that was a bad idea? Did you complain, at that time, that the U.S. shouldn't be doing this?**

After that happened, Secretary of State John Kerry visited us, and I asked him [how they could do this] while talking loudly about democracy. I have been President for six years, and I have always seen such attitude from the U.S. — the government, that is, not the people.

I've realized that democracy in our country is only for ourselves, for the Kyrgyz. What I want to say is that instead of spending billions of dollars on Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, if there were real assistance to Kyrgyzstan to build a democratic country, a fully-developed democracy, that would have been a great example for the Muslim world, for the whole Islamic world. And it would have been much cheaper. But instead all we see is obstacles.

At the same time, on Oct. 15 the country will elect a new president. Some neighboring countries have been financing some presidential candidates who want to bring back the old order, an authoritarian system that's dubbed "presidential." But for the U.S., we've realized that what matters most to them is oil, gas and other interests they have. The U.S. doesn't need democracy in the world. That deeply disappointed me when I realized it. I was disappointed with Obama. And the current U.S. president is saying that he will only be dealing with U.S. issues.

**What do you think of how the Americans are pursuing the "war on terror"?  
What would you want them to do?**

To fight terrorism, you have to look into the true source of terrorism, which is social inequality and the lack of democracy. If there's an authoritarian regime, then there's no justice, no democracy, no fair elections, no social mobility. An ordinary person may not be able to achieve justice and reach an office based on his talents and skills. That can only be achieved through democracy. The U.S. bombing of the Islamic State will only lead to its creation somewhere else. Then it'll appear somewhere else after another bombing.

I believe that today Muslims face two options; The first one is inequality and a bare existence in their own countries. The second option is radicalism; people want to build an Islamic caliphate, just like the Bolsheviks were attempting to build socialism.

We need to show them that a third way exists, one where we can build a democracy and social justice in a secular Muslim country, like the one in Kyrgyzstan.

**Are there other countries would you say represents this "third way" you're talking about? Tunisia? Indonesia?**

I believe that this experience is unique only to Kyrgyzstan. I believe only we have it. Many Islamic organizations that are banned in our region are still allowed in Kyrgyzstan, but at the same time, we're not seeing the rise of radicalism. Quite the opposite.

We are not cutting beards like in neighboring countries, we are not banning particular clothing. It's impossible to achieve anything without particular reforms in Islamic societies. This is where we want to be the first ones, we want to be the example. We are not afraid to be the example.

**You're close to Russian President Vladimir Putin. And in America today, Putin is this object of fascination. Everyone wants to understand him.**

I actually think that Putin's image in the West has been demonized in some way. If you look at Russia today, there are many things that are hard to imagine happening in neighboring countries. There are websites that openly criticize Putin, and nobody is being dragged away at night like they were during Stalin. I know that Putin was really interested in a Europe that would stretch from Brussels to Vladivostok. I've known him well since 2010—we disagreed a lot in those first years, had very spirited debates.

**What about?**

About different things. But I remember when I asked him about Ukraine and why it happened. It appears the issue was emotional for him. As you remember there was the signing of an agreement between Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich, Ukraine's opposition, the ambassadors of several European countries and representatives of the U.S. that Ukrainian elections would be held in the fall. And Putin told me: "If they had waited only several months, Yanukovich would have left on his own." Why they did it this way.... In fact, neither Russia nor Putin incited the conflict. We just have to have an objective assessment of these issues.

Putin is a person that knows how to listen. I've debated a lot with him and in the end when I was right, he would accept my opinion. That's why we became friends, I guess because very few people debate with him. We debate even now sometimes. He's a very smart person with a broad knowledge of things. And to me, instead of demonizing Putin, major powers and their leaders have to find common ground because when major powers quarrel, then something like North Korea happens. And that poses a real threat to all humanity.

### **What about the allegations about Russia interfering in the elections?**

Well, look at how the Democratic Party juggled things in such a way to help Hillary Clinton top Bernie Sanders. And even though Sanders was more sympathetic to me, I think Clinton's loss was a natural loss.

That's the imperfection of the U.S. electoral system. If most people voted for Clinton and through the electoral college President Trump is declared the winner, it means that the system is to blame. People in the U.S. looking for a culprit and blaming Russia and Putin, I'd recommend that you look at your own reflection in the mirror. The U.S. and the Democratic party should look into the mirror and redesign the electoral system which would ensure that every citizen's vote is counted instead of keeping this system which is 200 years old.

There's a witch hunt in the U.S., and that's not a good thing ... It's actually very funny to think that somebody could interfere with elections in the U.S., when it's the U.S. affecting elections everywhere through their own NGOs funded by the U.S., through Radio Liberty which we call Azattyk.

I think it's all leading towards a dead-end, the way sanctions and threats lead to a dead-end. Putin's also a human being, a little older than me. If somebody thinks that after Putin's departure it'll be better... a much tougher person might come to succeed him. Then you'll be recalling Putin with nostalgia.

**Putin has made life a lot more difficult in terms of political liberties for his citizens, whether it's opposition parties or journalists. Can you say what he thinks about that?**

Only Putin knows what Putin thinks.

**The U.S. and European Union sanctions have also hurt his people, haven't they?**

Sanctions and threats of war will achieve nothing with Russia and Putin. Quite the opposite, the Russian people will only unite around Putin and the ratings of those against Putin will only fall. These sanctions lead to an absolute dead end. You should have supported Putin's desire to have Russia as part of bigger Europe, from Brussels to Vladivostok. If necessary, these efforts should be revived again.

**What you would want your legacy as President of the Kyrgyz Republic to be?**

First, that we have achieved peace, unity, and stability in the country. Secondly, that we have waken people's high spirits and belief in the future. People now have different attitudes; we've reminded them of the thousand-year-old roots of our people, their sense of national self-consciousness. And most importantly, we've helped people realize they have to decide their own future for themselves. To that end, we have achieved absolutely fair elections. We now hold elections using biometric data verification of voters. Election fraud like in the U.S. isn't possible in Kyrgyzstan.

And over the past few years, government officials and authorities have started respecting and listening to public opinion, even becoming afraid of public opinion. Public opinion has become so important in Kyrgyzstan. This was my dream: to make the authorities and government officials take into account people's opinion, respect their opinions, and be afraid of the people's opinion. And the most important thing we've done is build a country of free people. This is probably one of the achievements that I can boast about, that the citizens of Kyrgyzstan now have this sense that they are deciding their own fate, their own future.

**And you personally? How would you want to be remembered?**

I think I would want people to remember me as a person that showed that it's wrong to divide people by race or nationality. I'm reminded of the meaning of the word "Kyrgyz." "Kyrgyz" means "forty peoples." From the very beginning we were grouped together by different nationalities. People, I hope, will remember me as the person that established unity in the country, and the person who gave power to the people, to ordinary citizens.

Of course, I haven't had enough time to accomplish many things too. But with God's help, in the last six years I've accomplished a lot. Of course, I'd want people to remember me in good terms, as someone who did everything for his people. That was my goal.