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The study of informality has generally defined research on Central Asian politics since 1991. Such a trend is not without justification, formal institutions such as parliaments, constitutions and political parties are largely subservient to the whims of personal political power in Central Asia. However, the lack of focus on formal institutions does not mean parliament and parties are not important, nor a fundamental element of the mosaic of authoritarian logic in the region. Therefore, Esther Somfalvy’s monograph on parliamentary representation in Central Asia is a much welcome, insightful, and analytically detailed intervention into our understanding of formal institutions in the region.

While Somfalvy uses the ‘institutional turn’ within comparative authoritarianism as a departure point, her focus on parliamentary representation is a shift from observing legislatures as a mechanism by which dictators’ control, co-opt and bargain with opposition elites. It is, ultimately, an attempt to explore the endogeneity of parliaments in authoritarian systems, rather than just consider their function vis-à-vis executive power. As Somfalvy reminds us, in the literature on authoritarian legislatures parliamentary deputies are largely perceived as agents of the regime, with little consideration given to their role as representatives and whether they have any leeway vis-à-vis presidential executives. In broader abstract terms, the book seeks to address the general question of whether parliamentary representation needs democracy as a precondition. In other words, Somfalvy urges us to take seriously the role of representation in authoritarian legislatures, while at the same time recognising the institutional constraints placed upon deputies by the nature of the regime.

In seeking to explore patterns of representation in authoritarian legislatures across different types of authoritarian regimes, Somfalvy adopts the cases of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. In this comparison lay the central argument of the book that ‘patterns of representation that develop in competitive authoritarian regimes (Kyrgyzstan) and in fully authoritarian regimes (Kazakhstan) are a result of the specific ways in which politics is structured under their respective institutional configurations’ (148). Differently put, the forms and practices of representation which take place in authoritarian systems, is dependent upon the extent of authoritarianism. Somfalvy grounds her analysis in an impressive range of in-depth interviews with deputies from the Mazhilis (the Kazakh parliament) and the Jogorku Kenesh (the Kyrgyz parliament).

Theoretically, the work conceptualises and measures representation by adopting Hanna F Pitkin’s classic conceptualisation of the multiple ways in which political representation can be viewed. The theoretical chapter outlines in detail Pitkin’s different dimensions of representation (formalistic, descriptive, and substantive – the notion of symbolic representation is substituted for the concept of “constituency”) and how the different characteristics of competitive versus non-competitive authoritarian regimes can affect these different dimensions of representation. The following chapters then take each of these views of representation and applies them to the cases of the Mazhilis and Jogorku Kenesh.

The first of these chapters focuses on formalistic representation. Somfalvy’s analysis reveals how, despite similar electoral frameworks, the conditions under which citizens becomes representatives in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are distinctly different. The dominance of Nur Otan (now called Amanat) in Kazakhstan, ensured that the governing party tightly controlled candidate selection and consequently could retain control of deputies and ensure party discipline once candidates were
elected. In Kyrgyzstan, the competitive nature of the electoral system has made candidate selection ‘a sellers’ market’ - wealthy and well-connected individuals can gain a place in parliament if they can bring either the money or votes to win for a party (something which has been noted in the work of Johan Engvall).

This centralisation of the Kazakh system is highlighted again in chapter four’s focus on descriptive representation. The analysis illustrates how Nur Otan has maintained informal power in shaping descriptive representation, ensuring that women are reasonably well represented in the Mazhilis, without the government needing to resort to formal quotas. Somfalvy argues that this demonstrates that the Kazakhstani regime cares about descriptive representation. The situation in Kazakhstan has changed since the writing of the volume. Reforms introduced in 2020 included a 30 percent quota for women and young people in party lists. In this sense, the reforms follow what occurs in Kyrgyzstan where, as the analysis notes, the legal framework maintains a formal quota system, which does not guarantee the adequate representation of under-represented groups as while party elites can follow the letter of the law for quotas for party lists, it does not mean those party lists are fulfilled or translated into seats as there are many ways in which the list can be gamed by party elites.

Chapter five seeks to explore the claims representatives make about which constituents they represent. Following the broad argument of chapters three and four, the top-down model of authoritarianism in Kazakhstan indicates a ‘nation-wide’ representation with a focus on expertise rather than geography, and in which the party hierarchy generally controls to which region deputies are sent. In Kyrgyzstan, on the other hand, deputies instead see their region of origin as their primary constituency of representation, driven by paradoxical electoral rules which one and the same time fosters an abstract nationwide mandate while also incentivising parties and candidates to pursue a localised and personalised relationship with specific constituencies.

The final empirical chapter analyses substantive representation, highlighting he ways in which in Kazakhstan again the centralised control of the party means deputies have little autonomy. Kazakhstani MPs roles are reduced to explaining government policy, with little agency for policy initiative, their tasks and activities funded and managed by the party hierarchy. In comparison, Somfalvy analyses how Kyrgyzstani deputies’ representational activities are more ‘atomised’. While they lack material resources, and have little guidance or involvement from parliamentary factions, they are more involved in legislative initiation, and they do have agency to use their resources in their constituency and spend a great deal time of addressing a variety of personal requests from constituents, many of which are outside the typical remit of parliamentary deputies.

While this is a very good monograph, broadening our appreciation of formal institutions in Central Asia, given that Pitkin’s conceptualisation of representation has been advanced considerably in representation studies, one is left to wonder what more contemporary advances in theorising representation could have bought to bear on the Central Asian case. Not least, the work of Nadia Urbinati who made fashionable the idea of representation as advocacy. This could have helped bring out a little more the voice of the ‘represented’ in the book. Simultaneously, both cases still demonstrate the power of informality over above the formal in Central Asian politics. They remind us that it is hard to tell a genuine story of formal institutional endogeneity in Central Asia. Nevertheless, this is a strong work which represents a substantial contribution to the study of political institutions in Central Asia.