

THE KYRGYZ REVOLUTION OF 2010: THE CAUSES AND POSSIBLE POST-REVOLUTIONARY DEVELOPMENTS

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Introduction

In April 2010, Kyrgyzstan was shaken by the second revolution in the last five years. Discontented people led by the opposition took power by storm. President Bakiev escaped to the country's south; on 8 April, the country acquired an Interim Government with Rosa Otunbaeva at its head. This made the revolution (very much needed in Kyrgyzstan according to the opposition) an accomplished yet not final fact. The deposed president, a refugee in Belarus, refuses to accept his defeat and is determined to fight, if his contradictory statements are to be believed.

The coup came as no surprise to the country's neighbors or the world community: everyone knew that the president's clan had been shamelessly plundering the country's meager national wealth. Changes were in the air, but the timing was a surprise. Russia, which was getting

ready for the 65th anniversary of the victory over fascism, the United States prepared to "reset" its relations with Moscow, and Kazakhstan busy implementing its program as the current OSCE Chair found the revolution ill-timed.

The "peasant riot" (the best possible description of the unbridled looting) put an end to the era of Color Revolutions in the post-Soviet expanse when presidents voluntarily parted with power with hardly any bloodshed. The time of noisy regime changes of the "flower period," when the presidents "elected by popular vote" promptly abandoned their posts to avoid bloodshed, has ended.

The tragic events in Kyrgyzstan, which claimed 80 lives and left behind looted and burned down offices, shops, and private homes, raised the question: *Qui bono?*

The Causes and the Driving Forces

In the spring of 2005, the new rulers headed by Kurmanbek Bakiev presented the nation with a positive development program. On the one hand, they planned to defeat the nepotism, corruption, and inefficiency that persisted during the fifteen years of Akaev's regime; on the other, they promised a dignified life for all citizens. This called for constitutional changes; in 2006-2007, the Fundamental Law was amended three times against the background of the mounting disagreements among the leaders of the Tulip Revolution. The latest amendments not only augmented President Bakiev's powers, but also made him independent of the checks-and-balances system of developed democracies.

After concentrating power in his hands, however, the president did nothing to launch the promised radical changes. Over a million of the country's citizens had to go abroad in search of work. Experts believe that as many as 800 thousand of them will never come back. The exodus of Russian speakers went on unabated; society remained as regionalized and as criminalized as ever. The country remained even more dependent on foreign aid, which whetted the appetites of the elite and intensified the rivalry among its political groups. In other words, the social base of President Bakiev and his regime was shrinking by the day, while his own "partial inadequacy" was becoming glaring and the opposition was consolidating its core.

The government was drawing closer to criminal structures. The nation learned that the Tulip Revolution was financed by B. Erkinbaev, a parliamentarian, owner of the Karasu market and a prominent leader of the southern criminal community. The other side was funded by Zh. Surabaldiev, another criminal leader from the country's north who owned another market, in Bishkek. He had paid the "volunteers" who, on 24 March, 2005, stood opposed to the rally in front of the House of Government and later instigated rioting and looting in the capital. It was rumored that R. Akmatbaev, another criminal leader with a brother-parliament deputy, was also involved as a guiding force and a sponsor.

President Bakiev himself was not alien to criminal methods: scores of contract murders remained undisclosed; opposition deputies and journalists had to fight for their lives; people disappeared without a trace; criminal cases were cooked up.

After using force to replace Akaev, the country did not move closer to democracy. The chaos of the "velvet" revolution, the wild looting in the cities, and the inability to overcome the structural changes in a civilized and orderly way did nothing to improve the image of Bakiev and his crowd or earn them popular respect and political weight. The Kyrgyz president failed to move away from the clan-based system of state administration—something that he and his former comrades-in-arms had promised the nation.

It took Bakiev hardly any time at all to develop from a democrat into an authoritarian ruler who spared no effort to replace former supporters in the highest posts with his numerous brothers, other relatives, and loyal people. Violence was his instrument of power, but he ignored the specifics of Kyrgyz society, where (like in many other Oriental countries) the state rests on the clan-tribal system. Together with political opponents and rivals removed from their posts, he pushed aside their clans.

This cost him popular support; the standard of living deteriorated well below the level of Akaev's time. A typical revolutionary situation could not be avoided: the lower classes did not want to live in the old way, while the upper classes could no longer rule them in the old way. The experience of the Tulip Revolution of March 2005 came in handy. This time, however, the revolution was not spontaneous, while anarchy was well orchestrated.

The popular riot of April 2010 was caused by the same factors that inspired the crowd to storm the president's palace in March 2005 to bring down the Akaev regime: social and economic collapse;

corruption at all levels; nepotism and the clan system; a weak central government; and a weak law-enforcement system. Criminal leaders acquired even more power than before; the drug mafia associated with them skillfully exploited the ineffective state administration and the fact that the local ruling elite lost touch with reality.

The opposition closed ranks. Early in 2008 it stepped up its activities: the numerous NGOs and human rights organizations began to correlate their actions with the opposition parties; they agreed on candidates for the "shadow government."

According to experts, the "countdown" for the Bakiev regime began in the latter half of 2008. It was triggered by the violent deaths of journalists Gennady Pavlyuk and Sayat Shulembaev, the intrigues around the status of the U.S. base in Manas, misappropriation of the multi-million Russian loan by Maxim Bakiev, one of the president's sons, the arrest of former defense minister I. Isakov, and other corruption scandals. The popular indignation aroused by the brazen-faced Bakiev family was steadily rising. The president and his cronies were meddling in executive power: they reorganized the defense and security structures to put the president's brother, son, and personal friend at their heads. The president's clan privatized large state enterprises. The Constitution was amended once more to avoid popular elections of the head of state.

These changes created the illusion that President Bakiev was tightening his grip on power; in fact, the pendulum of public support was swinging toward his opponents. It should be said that the dividing line between the president and the opposition no longer coincided with the dividing line between North and the South, where Bakiev had always been supported. The steadily rising electricity prices, which hit the already destitute majority, marked the critical point beyond which the president and his team were discredited even more. This was done despite the fact that Uzbekistan significantly lowered the price of its hydrocarbon fuel used by the power-producing sector of Kyrgyzstan.

It remained to be seen when and where the protests would break through; the republic was obviously moving beyond the Constitution and the law.

In 2005, the revolution was mainly accomplished by the criminalized youth. The inebriated young men responsible for the looting and rioting in Bishkek went unpunished. History repeated itself on 6 April, 2010 in the republic's northern city of Talas where the protest rallies caused by the upsurge in prices for electricity and heat developed into the storming of administrative buildings, prisons, and detention centers. As if by command, the popular unrest spread to other cities. Very soon numerous buses were carrying agitated young men to Bishkek where their ranks swelled with migrant workers (who arrived from the provinces) and people from the capital's poorest districts. Once more, just as five years ago, the local criminal structures consolidated the rioters. Experienced crowds moved on the government offices.

The parliament, the prosecutor general's office, and the office of the tax services were looted and set on fire. The crowds were unable to seize the House of Government, the buildings of the Ministry of the Interior, and the headquarters of the special services. The authorities allowed to use firearms against the rioters; people were killed on both sides; the rioters captured about 100 units of armaments. While some people stormed the administrative buildings, others plundered the houses of Bakiev's relatives and members of his government. The diplomatic quarter also had its share of troubles. Then the crowds moved on to shops, clubs, drugstores, and other property of "Bakiev's gang;" after taking care of them, the rioters went for all the other shops.

Skillfully manipulated by criminal leaders, the plunderers, looters, and marginal villagers who seized the landed property of others took the deposition of the "second khan" in the last five years as a signal for anarchy. The impunity of those who essentially escaped punishment in 2005 encouraged and inebriated the crowds in 2010. The culprits were obvious: Russian owners of country houses and Meskhetian Turks. With the militia absent from the streets for the last two weeks, looting and plundering was easy and enjoyable.

The army did its best to remain neutral; the militia preferred to keep a low profile; the special services, which retained their loyalty to the president, defended only a few of the official buildings. Like five years ago, the population organized self-defense units to prevent the capital's complete destruction.

Bakiev, who had obviously lost power, did not address either the nation, or friendly foreign states or international organizations. He preferred to fly to Osh and from there move on to his native Jalal-Abad. He refused to resign and leave the country. Instead, he demanded security guarantees for his closest relatives and suggested that Osh or Jalal-Abad be made the new capital of Kyrgyzstan.

The so far neutral army sided with the rebel nation; the militia and the special services did the same. It became clear that even the defense and security structures had abandoned the president. Only the special forces remained loyal to their patron and accompanied him to the south.

On 8 April, the victorious opposition set up an Interim Government with Rosa Otunbaeva as its head. It had discovered that it was much easier to take power than to restore law and order in Bishkek. Looting and plundering even continued on 9 and 10 April, the days of national mourning. Crime and violence continued unabated. Amid the hustle and bustle, several enterprises were raided and captured. Local people tried to seize, plunder, or ruin the recreation facilities on Issyk Kul Lake. Outside Bishkek vast landed stretches were seized; houses began being hastily built in protected natural zones.

Those who did this were convinced that the so-called revolutionaries would be pardoned and that the new owners would be able to keep everything they had grabbed. Meanwhile, the number of casualties exceeded 80; about 1,500 people were wounded, nearly 500 of them were taken to hospitals, some in a critical state.

Resetting Kyrgyz Style

Who will rule post-revolutionary Kyrgyzstan and how? Will democracy, which has lived through recurrent authoritarianism, be able to strike root? Whom will the world community have to deal with? What position should Russia take?

These are practical questions which so far defy clear answers mainly because of the highly specific nature of the structure and the mode of functioning of the national elite, its heterogeneity, its strong regional bonds, and the large number of criminals (who have grown rich on drug trafficking) in its ranks.

In recent years, the financial side of forming the political elite in the government and in the opposition has come to the fore, which echoed in the society's total criminalization. The defense and security structures became inculcated with criminals; this further undermined state power.

The local political parties carry practically no weight. They lack political and ideological doctrines, while their programs are almost indistinguishable. The party system remains undeveloped, while the leading political forces are known for their leaders (some of them more charismatic than others).

Unlike their predecessors, the present victors did not come from the lower social stratum—they descended from the Olympus of state power. Rosa Otunbaeva, head of the Interim Government, twice filled the post of foreign minister under two presidents; Omurbek Tekebaev, her deputy for constitutional reform, served four terms as deputy of the parliament and its speaker; Temir Sariev, Otunbaeva's deputy for finances, was deputy of the parliament and candidate for speaker; Almazbek Atambaev, her deputy for economics, was minister of industry, trade, and tourism and acting premier in the Bakiev Cabinet; Azimbek Beknazarov, the current deputy for the public prosecutor's office and financial police, filled the post of public prosecutor; Bolotbek Sherniazov, the current minister of internal affairs, sat in the parliament where he was deputy speaker; and Keneshbek Dyuyshebaev, who heads

the National Security Service, is former minister of internal affairs. All of them in the past were Bakiev's political allies and comrades-in-arms.

The current developments in Kyrgyzstan do not look like radical revolutionary changes—they are better described as another restructuring of clan relations concentrated around the main problem of the Asiatic mode of production—power/property—in which power is not used for governing but for personal enrichment. With few exceptions, most of the Kyrgyz politicians are ambitious leaders who place regional and clan tribal interests, and/or avarice, before national and party interests. In the absence of stable norms of political life, a large number of people who regard themselves as part of the Kyrgyz political elite have the chance to realize themselves as the nation's leader. Strange as it may seem, there are far too many of them for a small and poor republic.

The Interim Government has brought together people with very different views and approaches; by the October parliamentary elections they are unlikely to still be acting as a unified team. Each of the new leaders is using his or her time in power to address some future tasks instead of making the urgent decisions very much needed for legitimization of this power. Most of the top bureaucrats are too busy re-dividing property. This allows the criminal community to feel free to go on with their illegal activities. The law-enforcement structures (the Ministry of Internal Affairs, state security, and others) are completely demoralized. Many of their members suffered during the recent riots; deprived of moral and material support, they were essentially accused of crimes against the people and will not hurry to the rescue of the current authorities.

The people in power were obviously taken by surprise by the developments, which means that in the mid-term perspective the republic might find itself in a power vacuum once more. The people are growing more and more concerned about the lack of progress in the fight against crime and the extremes of illegal appropriation of property against the background of the continued economic decline.

In the short-term perspective, the new government might demonstrate some progress in tax collection mainly by expropriating the property of the Bakiev clan. It is abundantly clear, however, that the wave of crime, seizure of enterprises, and sociopolitical instability will rise high to dampen business activities and create new problems in industry in a republic that is not very rich anyway.

The Interim Government has not offered (nor is it working on) a new positive program of economic or social reforms: it has limited itself to weeding out Bakiev people from the administrative structures. The peasants drawn to the capital in large numbers by the prospect of land seizures left two-thirds of the farm land unattended, which means that a grave food crisis is looming ahead. The grim prospects look even worse: the closed borders with Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan cut short trans-border and border trade. The country's leaders are obviously determined to let the future "legitimate government" which will appear "after the October elections" grapple with the problems of feeding the country and improving the economic situation. This means that the current political crisis will be aggravated by the advancing economic crisis coupled with weak governance.

This is fraught with dual power; the transition period is too long: from 10 April to 10 October 2010, the election date, during which the Interim Government has no official rights to launch radical reforms. Until confirmed by the future government, parliament, and the president its decisions will remain "interim."

Late in April, the disbanded parliament staffed with Bakiev's supporters and appointees suddenly moved into action in the capital where the rallies in support of the "legally elected parliament" put the Interim Government into a quandary.

The planned constitutional amendments, drafted by the Constitutional Conference which is going ahead at full speed, will shake the republic's political system once more. The constitutional referendum scheduled for 27 June, 2010 will cost nearly \$3 million. The discussions of constitutional reform have already created camps of enthusiastic supporters and irreconcilable opponents of the draft. The

new Constitution will transform Kyrgyzstan into a parliamentary republic: the basic draft made public in the name of the chairman of the Constitutional Conference considerably extends the powers of the parliament (Art VIII) and significantly limits those of the president (Art III). The People's Kurultai (the analogue of a nationwide conference or referendum) is described as a source of people's power. A compromise among the "revolutionaries" made many of the fundamental provisions of the future Constitution expected to identify the leading political party too vague. One thing is clear: as a multi-party parliamentary republic, Kyrgyzstan will live amid kaleifoscopic changes of cabinets, parties, and political movements.

Positions of Near and Far Neighbors

In the globalized world, where the eruption of a volcano in Iceland becomes an international sensation, a coup in a country at the crossroads of the world powers' interests cannot remain its domestic affair. The violent regime change in Kyrgyzstan and the bloodshed that followed endangered not merely regional stability, but also the counterterrorist operation in Afghanistan, an issue of global importance. So it comes as no surprise that the presidents of the U.S., Russia, and Kazakhstan deemed it necessary to discuss the Kyrgyz developments.

The country's closest neighbors were very much concerned when Bakiev suddenly left the capital. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan immediately closed their borders; the Chinese tightened the regime along the over 800 km-long border with Kyrgyzstan. Tajikistan was worried; the U.S. called off the bilateral diplomatic consultations with Kyrgyzstan scheduled for 8 April and suspended its use of the Manas base.

President Obama, who met President of Kazakhstan Nazarbaev early in April, asked him as current OSCE Chairman to take measures to stop the bloodshed.

Russia's position was clear and unequivocal. President Medvedev pointed out that the outburst of the nation's latent discontent and its outlet in a coup were the republic's domestic affair.

On 14 April, the government of Russia passed a decision on humanitarian aid to Bishkek in the form of a grant of \$20 million and a soft credit of \$30 million, as well as 20 thousand tons of diesel fuel and gasoline for spring sowing sold at reduced prices and 1.5 thousand tons of seeds. It was decided to buy much more fruit and vegetables from the republic (commodities which earn it \$200 million every year).

Russia offered an official assessment of the events in Bishkek. On 16 April, President Medvedev said: "The collapse of the existing political system was provoked by his (Bakiev's.—*Ed.*) inability to maintain proper social and economic development of Kyrgyzstan and take into account the people's interests. On the other hand, the structure which replaced it looks very much similar to its predecessor, a system based on clan relations, nepotism, and redistribution of businesses little concerned with other problems." The Russian president deemed it necessary to point out that "this scenario could repeat itself anywhere where the government loses contact with the people."¹

The Russian political establishment obviously preferred a peaceful outcome of the rioting, however certain experts in the NATO and some of CIS countries hinted that the Kremlin set the ball rolling by provoking the April coup. These statements hold no water, but the far from smooth relations between Russia and Kyrgyzstan in 2009-2010 remain a fact.

¹ [www.kremlin.ru].

Russia was seriously concerned about the inappropriate use of two loans totaling \$450 million extended in the spring of 2009: the money was used to set up an investment fund to finance the Bakiev family's commercial projects. An additional loan of \$1.7 billion to pay for the final stage of the Kambarata Hydropower Station-1 construction project was suspended. In February 2010, at its 11th meeting, the Intergovernmental Russian-Kyrgyz Commission for Trade, Economic, Scientific, Technical, and Humanitarian Cooperation failed to resolve the financial disagreements.

The talks were crowned with a program of economic cooperation for 2010-2013, which contained about 60 joint projects in the trade, economic, scientific, technical, and humanitarian spheres. The two countries agreed in particular to promote their cooperation in the oil and gas sphere by setting up a joint venture (to realize this the Kyrgyzgas Joint Stock Company was expected to sell some of its shares to Gazprom). It was also planned to revive, in 2010-2011, geological surveying in Kugart and Vostochnoe Maylisu IV. However, no decision on a loan for Kambarata Hydropower Station-1, the meeting's main aim, was reached. The Russian side explained the failure by the need for feasibility studies and asked for a WB expert opinion on the project.

In addition, Russia accused Kyrgyzstan of illegal re-export of oil products totaling 370 thousand tons which the republic had received from Russia on easy terms. In 2009, Kyrgyzstan re-exported 298 thousand tons of fuel; 9 thousand tons of gasoline; 47 thousand tons of diesel fuel; and 15 thousand tons of furnace fuel oil, while the Bishkek Thermoelectric Power Station operated amid a glaring deficit of fuel. Therefore, on 1 April, 2010, Russia introduced customs fees of \$193.5 per ton for all fuel exporters and discontinued deliveries of fuel and lubricants.

Relations in the military-political sphere were far from simple, too. President Bakiev's double dealing over the American air base in Manas, which was closed down to be shortly reopened, and the training center in the republic's south (the Batken Region), the funding of which was entrusted first to Russia and then to the United States, were two of the strongest irritants for Moscow.

The increasing flow of drugs from Kyrgyzstan remained the most sensitive, and most suppressed, issue of bilateral relations. Out of the ten known routes of Afghan heroin, six cross Osh in the south of Kyrgyzstan. On 1 April, 2010, in the course of a special operation, officers of the republic's Ministry of Internal Affairs seized over 160 packets of Afghan hashish (about 107.8 kg) and 24.4 kg of heroin. Less than a week later, on 7 April, the republic woke up to a "revolution," more than a telltale coincidence.

At all times, the country pursued (and will pursue) a multivectoral foreign policy, which brings material advantages in the form of foreign grants, soft credits, and investments. Balancing interests is a tricky thing—Bakiev has already learned this. He tried, but failed, to maneuver when closing a deal with the United States on the Transit Center in Manas and attempting to capitalize on the rivalry between America, Russia, and China on tactical and even strategic issues. In January 2010, he invited China to cooperate in some of the priority hydropower projects being carried out using Russia's loans. This drew negative comments. The same can be said of the leaks in the media about America's plans to set up a counterterrorist training center in Kyrgyzstan.

The multivectoral approach will remain one of the foreign policy priorities of the new leaders. This has been already shown by the decision of the Interim Government to automatically extend the agreement on the Manas air base for another twelve months. They have already confirmed the republic's previous international obligations. The international community is invited, on an unprecedentedly wide basis, to be involved in the organization, observation, and administration of the coming October elections. The Interim Government is obviously determined to intensify cooperation with all sorts of international institutions.

On the whole, the international consensus which promptly took shape among the country's near and far neighbors did not favor Bakiev, who wanted, without success, to personally profit from his multivectoral foreign policy, a smokescreen for his attempts to turn the country into his personal feudal possession.

In Lieu of a Conclusion

The new leaders should take the experience of their predecessors and its lessons into account. This applies both to domestic and to foreign policy: so far, none of the Kyrgyz leaders has managed to be the servant of two masters and keep the post. The choice belongs to the people of Kyrgyzstan. At the present stage, Russia (which refused to interfere in the republic's domestic affairs and promptly offered material aid) is the staunchest of allies.

The choice of a genuinely strategic alliance with Russia looks like the best and logical option. The two countries are bound by a common and rich past. Russia extends practical aid to the Kyrgyz people rather than to the elite groups.

It should be said that the joint statement the CSTO members adopted on 8 May, 2010, which pointed to the unconstitutional regime change in Kyrgyzstan, caused an acute and painful response not so much from the Bishkek leaders (very much aware of the "revolt's" unconstitutional nature) as from the intelligentsia.

This means that Russia should move ahead with caution (hardly acceptable, however, in the context of the emerging dual power in the republic). International recognition of the new government and its confirmed adherence to the earlier legal agreements has become very important for the Russian Federation. This is related primarily to the status of the Russian language and the rights and interests of the Russian-speaking population, as well as the signing of the already coordinated documents on military cooperation and state guarantees for Russian business.

Russia's position regarding the American military facilities in the republic's territory will take into account the importance of a joint, with the United States, struggle against international terrorism. We cannot exclude the possibility of constructive cooperation between NATO and the CSTO, which will, in the final analysis, strengthen regional stability.
