

A different kind of revolution in Kyrgyzstan

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The series of events that led to the toppling and exile of the president of Kyrgyzstan, Askar Akayev, followed a rapid course [1]: from demonstrations in the southern cities of Osh and Jalalabad in mid-March against allegedly fraudulent parliamentary elections, spreading to the capital city of Bishkek on 24 March, and leading swiftly to the installation in office of interim president Kurmanbek Bakiyev.

The new government quickly reached a compromise with the newly-elected parliament, and proceeded to make preparations for the next key date on Kyrgyzstan's political calendar: the presidential elections of 10 July. But the very speed of the "tulip revolution [2]" has left important questions unanswered: what was the nature of the Kyrgyz events, what was the role of foreign agencies in the change, and what do the events tell us about the prospects of democracy in central Asia?

Myth and reality in Kyrgyzstan

Askar Akayev, who led "Kyrgyzia" when it was part of the Soviet Union, liked to tell visiting foreign economic advisers that his acquaintance with their subject derived mainly from a reading of Joseph Schumpeter's classic text *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*. Perhaps he should have read more carefully the bit about the "circulation of elites" – Schumpeter's description of democracy as practised in countries like Britain and the United States, where it means the right to change the dominant ruling group from time to time. If he had, he might have been better prepared for the events that led to his deposition.

Also on the Kyrgyzstan "revolution" in openDemocracy:

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In fact, a rather different meaning of revolution [2] is now used within Kyrgyzstan itself to describe the March events – one intended to take advantage of the sanctity of such a concept in what is still an overwhelmingly post-Soviet political culture. By defining them as a "real" revolution, Kyrgyzstan's new rulers have tried to settle a number of awkward questions about the motives (political and private) of those who led and encouraged them.

The major question concerns the legitimacy of the sudden elevation of Kurmanbek Bakiyev – from defeated opposition candidate in the 27 February-13 March parliamentary elections to acting head of state. But another issue is the responsibility of citizens (some of them arriving in

Mercedes) who took advantage of the paralysis of the security services on the night of 24 March to join the mobs looting almost every major supermarket and shopping centre in Bishkek – whose Chinese and Turkish owners were targeted no less than locals suspected of links to the Akayev family.

In Kyrgyzstan, the revolutionary “myth” also sanctifies, as vanguard of a democratic uprising, members of the liberal intelligentsia who joined the charge on the “white house” seat of power – including students from the American University (and some of their professors), staff of foreign-funded non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and various defeated candidates in the parliamentary elections.

The talk of revolution may offer hope of ultimate relief to the majority of those affected by the March events – ordinary Kyrgyz citizens of various national origins, who are struggling to make a living after a decade of virtual economic stagnation amidst an inexorable deterioration of basic public services. But it is less certain if it will sufficiently reassure foreign private investors, and local entrepreneurs, on whom any genuine improvement of living standards depends in the long run.

Bakiyev’s government has vocally proclaimed its determination to respect international commitments and pursue vigorously a reform programme aimed at attracting foreign investment and maintaining credits from the IMF and the World Bank – sources of the state’s current solvency. Its pledge includes a priority to eradicate corruption, which it presents as the most notorious aspect of the Akayev regime.

The seeds of change

The long-term impact of Kyrgyzstan’s brief resort to anarchy [2] on the country’s political institutions has yet to be fully tested. It may be no clearer even after the presidential election on 10 July. Apart from the occupation of the supreme court, the seizure of land on the outskirts of Bishkek, and a sharp increase in bank robberies (traced to hardened gangsters sprung from prison during the politically-motivated rioting), there is no widespread breakdown of law and order.

Indeed, in leafy Bishkek it is in most respects business as usual: some of the gutted supermarkets are already replenished and open-air restaurants frequented by foreign consultants are again thriving. In the countryside and in many provincial towns, the state administration has apparently begun to reassert the authority it lost in March to self-appointed local grandees, some with links to the southern mafia.

Meanwhile, Kurmanbek Bakiyev is already deploying the extensive patronage essential to electoral success in Kyrgyzstan, even at local levels. To enter government house by the legal route requires the same time-consuming and complex formalities as before, though the fresh faces among the security guards and secretaries display what appears to be a southern gentility and politeness in place of the slightly rougher northern treatment of officials of the old regime.

Askar Akayev’s difficult legacy [3] to Kyrgyzstan includes key advisers from his entourage still in place – especially those well connected to the international community and responsible for major reform programmes. At the same time, the new incumbents have wasted little time in finding jobs for their own relatives and other clan members. The international community is especially upset that the finance minister placed three close relatives in charge of key departments, including the lucrative customs agency (which Britain’s department of international development had been desperately trying to purge of corrupt practices).

But an unmistakably upbeat mood, especially among the younger intelligentsia, suggests the beginnings of a serious momentum for radical, long-term political change. There is a sense that things ought not to, and will not be, quite the same ever again.

This emergent political revolution is, paradoxically, being animated by the *Jogorku Kenesh* (single-chamber parliament) elected in the allegedly flawed elections that sparked the March agitations. Although a majority of its members are assumed to owe their seats to the support of the Akayev family (in some cases at substantial personal expense), and Kurmanbek Bakiyev's initial reluctance to consider constitutional reform before the July election, the *Jogorku Kenesh* has formed a "constitutional council" with a mandate to draft an amended constitutional text by the autumn.

The aim is to agree at least on a new "concept" for constitutional change before the presidential election campaign that would gain the support of the leading candidates. The council is an unwieldy body which includes President Bakiyev and other leading members of the new government, as well as over a hundred nominated representatives of a wide range of public bodies. But the working group that will administer the drafting process (including consideration of views submitted by citizens through a public website) is chaired by Asiya Sasykbaeva, who formerly worked with (George Soros's) Open Society Institute and is director of an American-funded NGO with long experience inside the country of helping civil-society representatives gain a better voice in public affairs. In excellent English, she presents an articulate, balanced, and immaculately liberal case for constitutional change as a basis for long overdue economic, social, and political reforms.

If strengthening constitutional safeguards over human and civil rights is one vital issue for the new regime, others are an increase in the role of parliament and an introduction of genuine pluralism and transparency into an executive power long dominated entirely by the personalities of the president and his entourage.

Some would interpret such reforms as an opportunity for previously excluded groups (especially the southern clans) to get an improved share of the spoils of office. Others – including the informal networks of intellectuals, NGO activists, and ex-ministers and officials rejected by the old regime – would see them as a means finally to break the centralist, Soviet-style monopoly of power.

The politics of reform

The moderate reformers in Kyrgyzstan have tended to look for leadership to a potentially charismatic figure, ex-security chief Felix Kulov. Kulov – Akayev's ally-turned-enemy, whose dubious prison sentence for embezzlement has now been overturned by the judiciary – might have been a contender for the presidency but for two factors: his imperfect acquaintance with the Kyrgyz language (Akayev had included a language-test as a qualification for election precisely in order to damage his then rival) and the lack of opportunity during his imprisonment to cultivate the provincial patronage links he would need. As former mayor of Jalalabad as well as the incumbent, Kurmanberk Bakiyev is far better placed.

In perhaps the most significant political development since the March events, Bakiyev and Kulov agreed that Kulov become first deputy prime minister on condition that he does not contest the election, and trusts Bakiyev to appoint him as prime minister in the event of a Bakiyev victory on 10 July. This outcome promises to leave all the main players satisfied, while avoiding what might have been a confrontation between Kyrgyzstan's political clans.

The agreement means that the presidential election will yet again be effectively uncontested, but it also carries the exciting prospect of longer-term political change – if Felix Kulov turns out to be capable, with parliamentary support, of shifting the balance of executive power in favour of the office of prime minister.

But if the reformers succeed, it will be despite, rather than because of, massive foreign assistance to Kyrgyzstan – most of which (money and advice alike) seems to have run into the dry dust of the Kyrgyz plains. Their rule would herald the kind of quiet, rather cerebral revolution, more interesting to scholars and bureaucrats than to the western media, over which Askar Akayev perhaps dreamed of one day presiding.

Such a benign outcome is still highly unlikely [4] without an awful lot of messy horse-trading and underground appeasement, especially of the southern-based drug-dealers. As the 10 July presidential elections approach in a fraught political atmosphere [5], the planned experiment in power-sharing could turn out to provide a very useful model for this unstable region, which still appears defiantly medieval in the face of would-be colonial modernisers, either communist bureaucrats of the Soviet era or the international aid agencies who succeeded them.

Further Links

Eurasianet:

<http://www.eurasianet.org/resource/kyrgyzstan/index.shtml> [6]

IWPR

http://www.iwpr.net/index.pl?centasia_kyrgyzrev_00.html [7]

InterBilim

<http://www.civilsoc.org/nisorgs/kyrgyz/interbil.htm> [8]

Source URL:

http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-protest/Kyrgyzstan_2601.jsp

Links:

[1] http://www.iwpr.net/index.pl?centasia_kyrgyzrev_00.html target=_blank

[2] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kyrgyz_revolution_of_2005 target=_blank

[3] <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav051005a.shtml> target=_blank

[4] http://www.iwpr.net/index.pl?archive/rca2/rca2_386_3_eng.txt target=_blank

[5] <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav061305.shtml> target=_blank

[6] <http://www.eurasianet.org/resource/kyrgyzstan/index.shtml> target=_blank

[7] http://www.iwpr.net/index.pl?centasia_kyrgyzrev_00.html target=_blank

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