

Bringing Down the “Family”¹: Implications for Central Asia

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Drawing on information and opinions of friends on the ground in Central Asia, Suleymanov comments on the recent Kyrgyzstan upheaval, its links to other recent revolutions in the region, and what is to be done to assure the change is a positive one.

As I was about to write the second part of the article² on the implications of the Ukrainian “orange revolution” on Central Asia, anti-government protests started to unfold in Kyrgyzstan. Dissatisfied with the parliamentary elections’ results, unhappy with the way the two rounds of elections were conducted, and trying to prevent the continuing downfall of the state into authoritarianism, members of the Kyrgyz opposition started a wave of public protests. Although they were small in the aftermath of the February 27 round of elections, in less than a month the protests had grown into massive rallies involving thousands of people. Covering Kyrgyz events, international media outlets have been reporting on protesters seizing key government buildings, demobilizing police, taking down President Akaev’s portraits from the streets, and establishing popular rule in the biggest cities of the Kyrgyz south.⁴ Although the government made an attempt to recapture its offices, this has failed, and opposition leaders were reportedly claiming their control expanded not only to the southern but also in the northern regions.⁵ From my personal contacts, I learnt that smaller scale protests had been taking place in the capital and that the opposition youth movements had been distributing leaflets covering events in the south. Amidst the informational war waged by the Kyrgyz government and pro-governmental

¹ In Kyrgyzstan the regime of President Akaev was commonly referred to as a “family.”

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³ Suleymanov, Muzaffar, *The Orange Revolution*, opinion paper published in Conflict Monitor (February issue), University for Peace on-line journal (<http://www.monitor.upeace.org/>)

⁴ Finn, Peter, *Kyrgyz Protesters Seize Sites in South*, Washington Post Foreign Service, (March 22, 2005) also available on-line at www.washingtonpost.com (accessed on March 23, 2005); see also Eurasia Insight, *Revolutionary Momentum Builds in Southern Kyrgyzstan*, also available on-line at www.eurasianet.org (accessed on March 23, 2005)

⁵ Finn, Peter, op. cit.

mass media⁶, which hardly covered the protests and their scale, leaflets became the only source of information.

All this had been taking place prior to March 24, 2005 – the day when masses of protestors stormed and took over President Akaev’s office, ousting him and his regime from power. Although what followed next – looting, pillaging, and arson – does not quite follow either Georgian or Ukrainian scenarios, the link between current and preceding events nevertheless exists. The fact that opposition leaders have been heavily relying on the protesting masses and trying to immobilize the government in the outlying regions shows that Kyrgyz opposition had been learning lessons from the two preceding revolutions. Hence, there is no need to argue on the effects of Georgian and Ukrainian events on other states run by authoritarian leaders. Rather, one should realize that these similar “revolutions” are no coincidence and they have shown time and again that authoritarian regimes collapse under popular pressure like dominoes. Although in the case of Kyrgyzstan the opposition did not expect the events to unfold the way they did⁷, the general ousting scenario has seen success in all three cases and has certain implications. In the paragraphs to follow I will summarize how the events unfolded and present my opinion on their implication for Central Asia.

Background Information

Similar to other ex-Soviet republics, Kyrgyzstan received its independence owing to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Likewise, its President was elected in 1990 as the President of the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic (further Kyrgyz SSR) and in 1991 as the President of the independent Kyrgyz Republic. A former academician and president of the Kyrgyz Academy of Sciences, Askar Akaev won both elections and became the only Central Asian president with no work experience in the Communist Party structures. This

⁶ Examples of the informational war include: lawsuits against printed media, technical obstacles for the printing house and radio stations, hacker attacks on oppositional media outlets, etc. This has been accompanied by the fierce attack against representatives of opposition in the pro-governmental media.

⁷ Peuch, Jean-Christophe, *Kyrgyzstan: Eyewitness To The Revolution*, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, available on-line at www.rferl.org (accessed on March 25, 2005); see also AkiPress news agency, *Nyneshnyaya Vlast Priznala, Chto 24 Marta Sluchaino Zakhvatila Doma Pravitelstva*, March 26, 2005 report available on-line at http://www.akipress.kg/ru_news.php?id=18242&AKI=2f0a76d2de6442c53ea310e6308847da

probably explains his first years of rule, as well as the liberal policies his regime implemented in the early 1990s. In recognition of this fact, western scholars and politicians called Kyrgyzstan an “island of democracy” in authoritarian Central Asia. Recognition came also from major international financial institutions, western governments, and business interests who started investing into the Kyrgyz economy. This has been the case for almost a decade following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Indeed, in Kyrgyzstan people have been enjoying freedom of speech, press, assembly, belief, and others – most of which either do not exist or are harshly violated in the rest of Central Asia. However, around the second half of the decade the social, political, and economic situation started to deteriorate in Kyrgyzstan.

In 1993 Kyrgyz Parliament adopted a constitution, which was a logical action of an independent state – since independence had been proclaimed in 1991, the main law of Kyrgyzstan was a Constitution of the Kyrgyz SSR adopted in 1978. In contrast to the 1978 version, the 1993 constitution guaranteed protection of human rights and freedoms and provided legal grounds for the creation of civil society. Adapting to the contemporary political environment, it has also divided the state into three branches and provided for checks and balances on the president. But constitutional amendments adopted by national referenda after 1993 delegated a substantial amount of power to the president, thus increasing his power at the cost of a weakened parliament.⁸ Furthermore, adoption of the new constitution prompted the regime to abuse it for the sake of access to power. After toying with the old and new versions of the constitution, President Akaev ran for his third term in office and won the 2000 Presidential elections, a result which was criticized by OSCE for not meeting international standards.⁹

The political situation further declined with the imprisonment of Felix Kulov¹⁰, a state crackdown on the independent mass media, forged charges against oppositional groups and parliament members, the 2002 firing on a peaceful demonstration, and

⁸ Dukenbaev, Askat and Hansen, William W., *Understanding Politics in Kyrgyzstan*, DEMSTAR Research Report N 16, September 2003 also available at <http://www.demstar.dk/papers/UPKyrgyzstan.pdf>

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Felix Kulov is former head of Interior Ministry (general), vice-President of Kyrgyzstan, mayor of Bishkek, governor of Chui region, and Minister of National Security. He was sentenced for a combined seventeen-year prison term and charged with abuse of power. For more information see Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, *Profile: Felix Kulov*, available on-line at <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2005/03/ec9e9641-1632-4981-a435-21505d93a517.html> (accessed on March 28, 2005)

restriction of the right to public assembly and protest. The economic situation has been deteriorating owing to the alleged control of both state and private businesses by the current incumbent's family/kin/clan members, widespread corruption, flaws in the tax code, collapse of the welfare system, and rising international debt. The combination of the two, along with certain external factors¹¹, resulted in a skyrocketing poverty rate and an increasing level of public dissatisfaction with the current regime. It should be noted however, that President Akaev's regime has nevertheless been the most liberal in Central Asia. Despite the increasing level of authoritarianism, opposition parties have been represented in the Parliament, and the independent mass media have been criticizing the government. Dukenbaev and Hansen argue that, "one must also acknowledge that Akayev and the dominant state class have not created a bizarre personality cult such as that of Saparmurat Niyazov in Turkmenistan. Neither have they created police states replete with torture such as is Karimov's Uzbekistan. Kyrgyzstan may not be a democracy, but neither is it the authoritarian dictatorship that is Nazarbaev's Kazakstan or Rakhmonov's violence prone Tajikistan."¹²

Current events: "Stolen" Elections and the "Tulip" Revolution

What they now call the "tulip" revolution has its roots in the downfall of Kyrgyzstan into authoritarianism, which coincided with the economic and social hardships that a majority of the people has been facing for the last ten years¹³. Similar to the Georgian and Ukrainian cases, the Kyrgyz protests were triggered by the parliamentary elections scheduled for February 27 and the way these were conducted. Realizing that parliamentary elections results have significant influence on the presidential elections scheduled for October 2005, Akaev's regime had to make sure that the pro-presidential candidates got control over the Parliament and did not let opposition follow the Georgian-Ukrainian scenario. It needs to be mentioned that, reflecting on both events, authoritarian leaders of Central Asia (including Akaev) offered a unanimous condemnation and have

¹¹ These include: gas shortages during winter months – due to the Uzbek governments initiative to use natural resources as a means of political leverage; obstacles to the trans-border trade and introduction of the visa regime – both result from unilateral decisions made by the Uzbek regime.

¹² Dukenbaev and Hansen, op. cit.

¹³ Ibid.

been taking preventive measures. These include various forms of fraud during elections, harassment of oppositional candidates, bans on registration, an information war, etc. Independent observers have identified all of that during parliamentary elections in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in 2004, and in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in 2005. According to Radio Free Europe OSCE observers in Kyrgyzstan found that, “the runoff suffered from the same kind of problems that affected the first-round vote on 27 February, such as media bias, vote buying, and disqualifications of candidates.”¹⁴ As a result, elections to the unicameral 75-seat body resulted in only six seats being taken by the opposition candidates. The remaining sixty-nine seats were divided between independent and pro-presidential candidates, among them President Akaev’s daughter and son, Akaev’s sister-in-law, and other representatives of the governing kin/clan.¹⁵

The immediate aftermath of the 2005 parliamentary elections has been marked by popular protests in opposition to the alleged manipulation of the elections results. Dissatisfied with the fact that oppositional candidates lost elections to the pro-presidential ones, constituents in the north of the country started to block highways connecting the Kyrgyz capital with the outlying regions. In one of the electoral districts, the angry public blocked traffic on the highway connecting Kyrgyzstan with China, demanding an investigation into the election fraud.¹⁶ Within a two week period after the initial 27 February round of elections, protests spread to the south of Kyrgyzstan where opposition tested the Akaev regime’s response to the popular revolution. Backed by the critique of the elections coming from the international observers led by OSCE, protesters started demanding vote re-counts and calling President Akaev to resign. What happened next has already been mentioned: popular revolution, actual immobilization of the government in the outlying regions, and March 24, 2005 – the day when the Kyrgyz people established a precedent of popular revolution in a region dominated by authoritarian leadership.

¹⁴ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, *OSCE Criticizes Kyrgyz Elections*, March 14, 2005, article also available on-line at www.rferl.org (accessed on March 15, 2005)

¹⁵ Khamidov, Alisher, *For Kyrgyz President, the Parliamentary Vote is a Family Affair*, article available on-line at www.eurasianet.org (accessed on March 25, 2005)

¹⁶ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, *Analysis: Kyrgyzstan Rises To Meet Elections*, February 25, 2005, article available on-line at <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2005/2/C8F44DF1-75CD-43F6-BBC7-34F78B65342F.html>

Implications for the region

Similar to the Georgian precedent, Kyrgyz events have implications for the world in general and the Central Asian region in particular. First of all, the Kyrgyz revolution shows that public tolerance has its limits and that dissatisfied masses can oust regimes from power. This has been recognized by one of the regional governments and came from the authoritarian Uzbekistan. Regional news agency Tribune-Uz quotes Uzbek authorities as saying that the Kyrgyz events “(were) not a spontaneous, sudden process but foremost a result of long-increasing public protest of a people dissatisfied with the worsening social-economic conditions, hopelessness and corruption.”¹⁷ Although unusual, the reaction of the Uzbek authorities does provide an actual explanation of the events.

As has already been noted, the social, political and economic situation in Kyrgyzstan has been worsening since the middle of the 1990s, and according to official statistics the poverty level reached the 70 percent mark. Keep in mind that this is not the case in Kyrgyzstan only. A similar situation is noticeable in the most of Central Asia, especially in its most densely populated area – the Ferghana Valley. This is a place that was arbitrarily divided by Stalin’s regime between Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan, where public protests toppled state authorities after the March 13 run-off. Prior to the recent Kyrgyz events, the Uzbek part of the valley was witnessing mass protests against the domestic policies of the Uzbek government for quite a long time. The wave of mass protests spread to other regions of the state in 2004 and these were triggered by precisely those conditions that the Uzbek officials mentioned in their reflection on the Kyrgyz revolution.

It is important to note that the Brussels-based International Crisis Group (ICG) has been warning Central Asian governments of increasing instability in the region caused by the regime’s poor social and economic policies and lack of opportunity for development¹⁸. None of the regional regimes, however, seem to have paid any attention, as events in Kyrgyzstan have demonstrated. Reacting to public protests sparked by the poor access to

¹⁷ Tribune-Uz news agency, *MID Uzbekistana: Sobytiya v Kyrgyzstane – “Resultat Protestnogo Vozmusheniya Naseleniya*, (Uzbek Foreign Ministry; Kyrgyz Events – Result of the Protesting Public Dissatisfaction), available on-line at www.tribune-uz.info (accessed on March 26, 2005)

¹⁸ International Crisis Group Central Asia reports available on-line at <http://www.icg.org/home/index.cfm?id=1251&l=1>

utilities, President Karimov of Uzbekistan adopted a decree¹⁹ that could be described as an operational conflict prevention approach: that is, addressing the trigger event rather than roots of the problem. Although it addressed the utilities issue, the decree also ended up outlining bureaucratic procedures to be taken by the Cabinet of Ministers - and according to the document the government identified the problem as non-timely payment for the consumed utilities for which the general public has to bear responsibility. In other words, the government misinterpreted the problem and left the public confused with yet another state ruling that offers a top-down approach to conflict resolution.

What is more important is that these policies parallel with the regime's unwillingness to step down. Being imbedded with widespread corruption and authoritarianism, and realizing that access to power secures their well being, political leaders keep manipulating the elections. This has been the case in all of the Central Asian states. The 2004 and 2005 parliamentary elections in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan have been criticized by international observers and were characterized by different types of fraud and manipulation to ensure that pro-presidential candidates get control over the legislative bodies. As has been pointed out, a harsh critique of democratic revolutions as well as a crackdown on potential challengers and international organizations (those that support development of civil society) by the regimes, preceded and/or accompanied these political events. The point here is that regimes have long been failing to recognize and address issues that cause people to block highways, burn cars, seize government buildings, and eventually topple the regimes. Instead of identifying structural causes and addressing them, Central Asian regimes have been encroaching on human rights and civic freedoms in order to perpetuate themselves.

As the Kyrgyz case demonstrates people *en masse* do get tired of the authoritarian leaders no matter what arguments regimes bring to justify themselves and restore their legitimacy. The case also shows that the collapse of authoritarianism in the Central Asia region is just a matter of time since Kyrgyz people provided the regional public with an example of how to bring down the government. So, one of the implications of the "tulip"

¹⁹ Uzbek National Information Agency, *O Merakh po Nedopusheniyu Neobosnoannogo Rosta Tarifov i Povysheniyu Otvetstvennosti Potrebitelei za Svoevremennyye i Polnye Raschety za Kommunalnye Uslugi*. (On Measures to Prevent Arbitrary Rise of Utility Tariffs and on Increase of Public Responsibility for Timely Payments), decree available online at <http://www.uza.uz/documents/?id1=2809> (accessed on February 12, 05)

revolution is that regimes had better address the issues that have been contributing to the accumulation of public grievances or the people will address those issues themselves.

Another implication of the event refers to individuals and groups representing the opposition. Similar to the Kyrgyz, existing opposition parties and movements in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and possibly in Turkmenistan lack unity, and this hampers their goal. Current regimes do understand that opposition forces lack cohesion and the capacity to challenge. When disbanded, these groups allow the regimes to neglect and easily suppress them in case of uprising. One should also realize that events might not unfold according to the Kyrgyz scenario in the rest of Central Asia. Hence whoever decides to challenge current regimes should unite to consolidate power and actions – the way they did in Georgia and Ukraine. This would posit opposition as a legitimate force rather than a group of separate individuals.

Opposition leaders should also recognize that if led by the idea of access to power rather than democratization and development, they do not actually differ from the current regimes. In Kyrgyzstan itself opposition leaders have to overcome differences that still exist despite the creation of a consolidating block. Otherwise, popular revolution will result in conflict over access to power between the representatives of opposition. Hence unification should be aimed at the creation of a democratic society by democratic means. This would contribute to the legitimacy and enable challengers to lead the people. Furthermore, current leaders have to analyze the roots of public discontents as well as policies of the previous regime that caused them not to repeat the same mistakes. Taking into consideration the fact that masses raise in response to the state inability to solve their problems, one should realize that the name of the regime does not matter. As people were able to topple an authoritarian leader, they have the capacity to do so with those calling themselves democrats. Hence, in addition to the consolidation of forces there should be a commitment to the cause. In Kyrgyzstan, current leadership faces a difficult task – the transition from words to actions, and regional democrats have a chance to learn by participating in the development of the state.

Instead of conclusion

As I have been writing this paper, events keep unfolding according to an unpredictable scenario. This made me stick to news channels and get the information from the people on the ground via phone and online conversations. Reflecting on the initial stage of public protests, I initiated an on-line discussion with my former colleagues from the American University - Central Asia that is located in the Kyrgyz capital. Following the events, we exchanged our ideas and beliefs, which sometimes grew into an intense debate and an exchange of information that substantially contributed to the paper. Although there were disagreements between the participants of the debate, most of them reached general consensus over the issues outlined above.

Representing the academic world with majors in social sciences and being closely familiar with Central Asian history, culture, politics, and society, all of the participants of the initiated debate are aware of the challenges the region is currently facing. Similar to the Central Asian public, regional and international scholars have been drawing conclusions from the Kyrgyz revolution and recognizing its implication for the entire region. To summarize, there is an agreement on the fact that the regional public, including those currently in power, will learn from the Kyrgyz experience and implement appropriate actions. There is a possibility that remaining authoritarian leaders will introduce harsh measures against possible challengers to prevent the spillover effect. However, Central Asian regimes have to recognize that President Akaev's regime has been toppled by a public dissatisfied with his domestic policies. Hence, repressions would only contribute to the accumulation of grievances and impel those oppressed to continue to respond. Sooner or later this will take place in the rest of Central Asia.

In light of the Georgian, Ukrainian, and now Kyrgyz revolutions, Central Asian opposition leaders should recognize that unless united on a national basis, they might not be able to introduce any positive change. They should also acknowledge the fact that their quest for power would not solve domestic problems but contribute to the level of public discontent resulting in further disturbances. Hence, democratization and development should lead and dominate the regional political agenda. International actors acting in the region have to learn that policies they implement and support in the region should foremost benefit its people. Finally, the Central Asian public should realize that change is possible despite the "Asian values" and "mentality" myths sold to the people by those in power. In

conclusion, I want to express my gratitude to all my friends²⁰ whose exchange of ideas contributed substantially to my work.

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²⁰ Those actively participated in the on-line debate are: Azamat Ababakirov, Michael Andersen, Kumar Bekbolotov, Julia Droeber, Askat Dukenbaev, Dariha Erketaeva, William Hansen, Merdan Halilov, Barrie Hebb, David Huwiler, Emil Juraev, Shairbek Juraev, Elnura Osmonalieva, Madeleine Reeves, Aziz Soltobaev, Kyial Toxonbaev, and Thomas Wood

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