



BULLETIN

No. 59 (135) • April 20, 2010 • © PISM

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Overthrow of Kyrgyzstani President Bakiyev: Causes and Implications

by Tomasz Sikorski

Following a wave of demonstrations and street riots on 6–7 April, Kyrgyzstani President Kurmanbek Bakiyev was forced to escape from the country's capital and, on 15 April, to resign his office and leave the country. A provisional government took over the power, seeking to bring the situation under control. The takeover by the opposition is expected to halt the country's slip towards authoritarianism, while in the foreign policy the new authorities will continue seeking to maintain a balance between Russia, the US and China.

Course of the Crisis. The turmoil began in the town of Talas, where on 6 April a crowd of several hundred forcefully entered into the local government building in reaction to rumours of a member of the opposition being detained there. The next day, unrest spread to the northern part of the country. In Bishkek, where the police used live ammunition, demonstrations turned into street riots, with the protesters gradually capturing the whole city. Within two days, the opposition took over power in almost the whole country. President Bakiyev did not step down, taking refuge in a home base in the south of the country, seeking to consolidate support.

A provisional government, formed on 8 April and led by Rosa Otunbayeva, announced a new presidential election and democratic reforms, while upholding Kyrgyzstan's international commitments, including military base lease agreements with Russia (Kant) and the US (Manas). Russia immediately came up with a *de facto* recognition of the new cabinet. The US took a wait-and-see approach, offering humanitarian aid and support for the process of democratic reform in the country. With time, thanks to joint efforts of Russia, the US and Kazakhstan (holding the OSCE's presidency), an agreement was reached between the provisional government and the toppled president, under which Bakiyev resigned and left for Kazakhstan on 15 April.

The latest developments were reminiscent of the so-called tulip revolution of 2005, when a wave of demonstrations, stirred by electoral fraud, brought Kurmanbek Bakiyev to power. But then, the incumbent government refrained from resorting to arms. In contrast to the virtually bloodless events of 2005, the toppling of Bakiyev resulted in some 80 deaths and injuries for more than a thousand people.

Causes of Protest. The public outburst reflected dissatisfaction with Kyrgyzstan's economic and political situation. After his takeover, Bakiyev quickly moved towards building an authoritarian system, a trend which intensified after his re-election on 23 July 2008, in a presidential poll marked by violations of democratic standards. An October 2009 reform widened the presidential powers further. The recent years saw a rise in corruption and nepotism (with presidential family members assuming numerous official positions), coupled with the privatisation of large state-owned enterprises, which was criticised by the opposition.

The authorities stepped up pressures on the opposition and independent media. Several independent editorial offices were closed in March and early April 2009, under the pretexts of slurring the presidency or using pirated software. Steps were taken to block online news services, instances of harassment and persecution of NGO and opposition activists were reported, and on 25 March the Parliament voted new laws making citizens' surveillance easier.

The greatest source of popular dissatisfaction, though, was a poor economic condition, exacerbated by the global crisis, which led to GDP slowdown. Not without importance was the restriction of access to the Russian market for Kyrgyzstani labourers, and there were also the consequences of

populist measures taken in the run-up to the elections, such as a 50% raise in government sector pay, from 1 June 2009. The resulting inflationary pressure sent up electricity and heating bills, as from early this year, and just prior to the upheavals the government announced an increase in petrol prices.

With varying intensity, opposition protests continued since the 2009 presidential election. They grew last March, with kurultai rallies convened throughout the country to be held on 7 April. The demonstrations were indirectly spurred by a visit to Bishkek by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon on April 3.

Russia's Reaction. The immediate recognition of the provisional government by Russia reflected that country's disappointment with Bakiyev's policies. Tensions in Russia-Kyrgyzstan relations were clearly deteriorating throughout 2009. Russia expected that, in exchange for a loan and free aid, Kyrgyzstan would close the US air base in Manas, but Bakiyev did not live up to the expectations. In June 2009 he signed a one-year agreement with the US, transforming the base into a "logistic centre" operating along unchanged lines. The US, in return, increased its financial assistance to the country. Russia grew convinced about President Bakiyev's pro-American leanings following successive developments, such as Kyrgyzstan-US talks on the construction of another base (anti-terrorist centre). Probably in reaction to the president's moves, Russia reneged on its 2009 promise to provide US\$1.7bn credit facility to finance the Kambarata-1 hydro power project.

As a matter of fact, the policies of the Kyrgyzstan government were motivated by financial considerations and security concerns, including the intention to have an additional military base in the country's wayward southern part, threatened by Islamic fundamentalism and sharing a troubled border with Uzbekistan. Yet the earlier deterioration in Kyrgyzstan-Russian relations provoked ungrounded suspicions about Russia's having instigated the April events.

Prospects. Within a fortnight or so, the new government is expected to bring the rest of the country under its control (for now, this control is pretty illusory in the regions of Osh and Jalal-Abad), announce the date of the new elections and formulate its programme. The constitution will very likely be changed within the next six months, towards increasing the powers of the Parliament and restricting the presidential prerogatives. But the new government will have to cope with the consequences of the economic crisis, the country's division into conflicted north and south, and hard-to-eradicated corruption. Still worse, the new authorities comprise people at loggerheads with one another, often accused of shady business dealings. Last not least, they are the former leaders of the 2005 revolution who failed to consolidate democracy and the rule of law when they had opportunity.

The Otunbayeva government will go on with Bakiyev's foreign policy line of seeking a balance between US and Russian influences, with a view to getting maximum political and financial gains. Thanks to Bakiyev's departure, there has already been an improvement in the relations with Russia, skilfully building its image as a force for regional stabilisation. Not inconceivably, talks on Kambarata 1 funding may resume, and the memorandum of 1 August 2009 on the construction of a second Russian base in the south of the country may take effect. But one should not expect any durable reorientation in policy towards Russia.

In relations with the United States the biggest problem is caused by the US government's initial distrust of the new authorities as well as the resentment of the past US cooperation with Bakiyev, felt by some in the new Kyrgyzstan's government. But it is all but certain that the Manas base, which is of key importance for the Afghanistan war, will continue to operate, as several times confirmed by Otunbayeva who also said the agreement would be prolonged to mid-2011. Recurring reports about a possible closure of Manas should be seen as a means of pressure on the US to get better financial terms, but they also indicate differences of opinion among the former opposition.

China's reaction has been confined to expressing concern at the situation, a restraint that may reflect the belief that the new Kyrgyzstani authorities will continue with the previous policies.

Given the relative stability of other Central Asian regimes, an outbreak of a similar crisis elsewhere in the region is unlikely. Kazakhstan's engagement in stabilising the situation in Kyrgyzstan, motivated by the country's commitments as the OSCE presidency and intention to play the regional leadership role, deserves mentioning.