

Conflict Studies Research Centre



Kyrgyzstan After Akayev

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Key Points

- * President Akayev's tolerance of corruption and mismanagement within his administration brought about violent protest.
- * His unwillingness to accept that there was a problem and then to meet violence with violence resulted in his downfall.
- * Those who inherit his powers can only succeed if they work together and involve all major national parties and non-extremist movements.
- * If they fail, the relatively bloodless revolution will carry on, claiming many victims and may make Kyrgyzstan a regional hot-spot.
- * A careless pseudo liberalism and inefficient new administration could create a fertile ground for regional radical movements and organised crime.
- * Prolonged instabilities in Kyrgyzstan will provoke regional tensions and may force the regional powers into action.

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Why Did Akayev Fall?

President Askar Akayev stood out among post Soviet Central Asian hard-nosed leaders as a mild mannered scientist projected into the political limelight by the shockwaves of the fragmentation of the USSR. The author of more than 80 scientific works, Akayev had in the 1980s been a successful scientist cum communist activist. Between 1986 and 1987, Akayev headed the department of science and scientific establishments of the Central Committee of the Kyrgyz Communist Party and later became the head of the Kyrgyz Academy of Science. In October 1990, almost a year before the final collapse of the USSR, Akayev became President of the Kyrgyz Republic. Regarded as the most liberal and progressive among the Central Asian leaders, Akayev gradually lost popularity because of illegal manipulations of the electoral mechanism; allowing his family and friends to monopolise the most profitable business ventures; and by tinkering with the constitution, attempting to achieve limitless power for what looked like life-long rule. As the economies and investment prospects of Kyrgyzstan's neighbours began to improve, its own economy began to stagnate. Corruption was rife, political patronage blossomed and the Kyrgyz media were expected to support the president or were gradually shut down.

Politically arrogant, reluctant to learn from his own mistakes but genuinely mild mannered, Akayev lost touch with reality. Had he given orders to deal harshly with his opponents and rioters at the earlier stage of the "tulip revolution" he would have been vilified by most of the world's democratic community but he would probably still be in power. He:

- refused to recognise that he was facing several growing political problems, such as corruption, the division between the north and south of the country, economic stagnation, increasingly strong legal non-violent opposition, and his own inefficient administration.
- defended a rigged election, although all outside observers pointed to specific irregularities in the electoral process.
- failed to learn the lesson of Aksy where in 2002 police shot demonstrators, which showed clearly that he needed well trained riot control formations not panicky trigger happy policemen.
- refused to believe that the protest might turn violent and the protesters march on Bishkek. He also failed to stop the demonstrators from reaching the capital.
- rejected the crisis management advice allegedly offered by the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO).¹

Finally he made an honourable decision, refusing to give orders to fire at demonstrators and fled the country.² How he left Kyrgyzstan, if indeed he did, remains a mystery.

Rumours as to Akayev's whereabouts began after Kyrgyzstan allegedly closed its airspace to military flights on 24 March, 1630 Moscow time.³ It is possible that Akayev spent some time in Kazakhstan as a guest of president Nazarbayev, to whom he is related by the marriage of their children.⁴ The first sign that he was probably abroad came with his email message on 28 March to the Kyrgyz news agency Kabar, in which he claimed that by leaving the country he avoided civil war.⁵

The Riots

President Akayev caved in facing an unruly but unarmed mob of mostly young males, probably supported by clans opposing Akayev. Although their intentions were apparently known, they were allowed to enter the capital unopposed. Most of the rioters behaved like mindless hooligans, happy to damage or steal as much as they could without any agenda. They were not ideologically or ethnically motivated. However, the seemingly disorganised crowd included some exceptionally enterprising and well focused individuals. During the takeover of the Government House in Bishkek someone removed the hard disks from some computers and stole classified documents. For the time being it is impossible to assess the value of the information lost.⁶

There was no ethnic animosity towards the Uzbeks, who represent 14% of the country's population or towards the Russians, representing 13%. No attempts have been made to abolish Russian as the second official language.

The Leaders of the Post Revolutionary Period

In contrast with Georgia or Ukraine there was not one but several leaders in the Kyrgyz opposition movement. They will now have to find a common language and agenda with each other and with 30 regional leaders emboldened suddenly, if only temporarily, by the absence of a functioning central leadership. The sad lesson for the present leadership in Bishkek may be that the organisers of the riots might attempt to try this method of persuasion again.

The best known and the most colourful personality of the Kyrgyz revolt is **Roza Isakovna Otunbayeva**, the acting Kyrgyz foreign minister. Otunbayeva graduated with distinction in 1972 from Moscow State University. The title of her post-graduate dissertation was 'A Critique of the Frankfurt School Falsification of the Marxist-Leninist Dialectic'.⁷ She worked briefly as a senior lecturer at the dialectical materialism faculty of the Kyrgyz National University and then for several years was a communist party official in the city of Frunze (now the Kyrgyz capital Bishkek), from which she was mysteriously propelled to the position of Foreign Affairs Minister of the Kyrgyz SSR. Otunbayeva got her first foreign posting as a chairwoman of the Soviet UNESCO Commission. She was then briefly ambassador to Malaysia and later, the first ambassador of an independent Kyrgyzstan to the USA and Canada. She represented Kyrgyzstan in London and after returning to Bishkek was appointed the Kyrgyz foreign minister. At the end of the century she began to work for the UN. In 2002 Otunbayeva became deputy special representative of the UN secretary general in Georgia and was there when the

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opponents to Shevardnadze removed him, which she admitted to have found a valuable experience. In the last Kyrgyz election, Roza Otunbayeva decided to run against Akayev's daughter, but was not allowed to register as a candidate because for most of the last five years she had lived abroad. Her opponents claim that when working in Georgia she made contacts with foreign personalities and NGOs, which assisted her in organising the Kyrgyz revolt. As their most experienced diplomat, Roza Otunbayeva will be particularly valuable for the new Kyrgyz leadership on the international arena.

Kurmanbek Bakiyev, acting President and Prime Minister, is the only southerner in the new team. He has excellent contacts with many local clans. His other asset, especially when dealing with Moscow, is his Russian wife. A former CPSU official, Bakiyev in 1994 was given the post of deputy chairman of the State Property Fund and a year later he headed the Jalalabad region. In 2000, when Bakiyev was governor of Chuy Region, Akayev appointed him prime minister. Two years later when a Kyrgyz - Chinese border agreement was signed, and, in accordance with the treaty, most the disputed border territories went to China, there were riots on the streets of Bishkek. Bakiyev was accused of secret collusion with China and was retired by Akayev, who must have been fully aware of the one sided nature of the treaty. Bakiyev asked for his old job in Chuy Region. Akayev refused and Bakiyev joined the opposition.

The potentially most formidable of the new front line politicians is **Feliks Sharshebayevich Kulov**, an Interior Ministry general and until March 1999 Akayev's loyal supporter. He was regarded as a maverick already at the end of the Soviet period when in 1990 he refused to disperse a democratic rally in Bishkek. Under Akayev he was first vice-president, a position abolished later by the president. In 1997 he became minister of national security and in 1998 he was given the post of mayor of Bishkek. In March 1999, increasingly disillusioned with Akayev's policies, Kulov resigned. In February 2000 he announced his intention to run against Akayev in the presidential elections and a month later he was arrested, charged with abuse of office and fraud and sentenced to seven years imprisonment. He was liberated from prison by the opposition on 23 March. After helping the present leadership to control the rioters in Bishkek, Kulov insisted that his appointment as security chief was only temporary to stem the violence, to re-establish public order and that he would then go back to prison until his sentence was revoked or completed. On 30 March, parliament relieved Kulov from the post in charge of power-wielding agencies at his request. He is now waiting for the revision of his case.⁸ He does not want to be President. As he had already announced, he would be happy if Kyrgyzstan moved from the presidential form of government to a parliamentary democracy. Whoever becomes the next president will probably need Kulov to coordinate law and order policies.

However, he may have some opponents in the regions because of his strong views on law and order issues. The pro-Russian politicians and officials in Bishkek may also be concerned by his pro-US views, although he is not anti-Russian. He is also critical of the banned Hizb-e-Tahrir for their lack of support for the 'uniting national idea'.⁹

Prospects for Stability

Present and future Kyrgyz leaders will have to work hard to stabilise the country. They will have to please the poorer, southern regions, without upsetting the north.

President Akayev's official tenure will expire in October 2005. The new leaders and the new parliament may be tempted to talk to him. He has already stated his readiness to relinquish the presidential powers in accordance with all legal procedures and guarantees.¹⁰ He will probably insist on getting as much as Boris Yeltsin, that is peace and protection for himself and his family.

It is yet to be seen whether the new leaders are different from Akayev or the Kyrgyz are experiencing just another struggle for power. They will have to be able either to bring regional leaders onto their side or to convince them that any attempts to organise politically motivated riots will be dealt with promptly and firmly. They may, at least for a while, have to ignore the drug trafficking lobby and they will have to monitor Hezb-e-Tahrir very carefully, for they will need particularly strong support from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in settling the country.

The plan of the new leadership to run elections on 26 June sounds like a good policy move, but does not guarantee a fair and smooth electoral process. The OSCE observers in Kyrgyzstan have already announced that they regard the plan to have elections in June as unrealistic.¹¹ If the present coalition wins convincingly and is unhappy with President Akayev's early and peaceful retirement demands, it may want to reduce the president's constitutional role. They are likely also to try to avoid impeaching him, a process which could be legally complex, long and give Akayev briefly his power back.

Russia & The Neighbours

Bishkek's most important foreign partner is still Russia, separated from Kyrgyzstan by the vast territories of Kazakhstan. Kyrgyzstan under Askar Akayev became almost like a Russian Alaska, without the natural resources. On 23 October 2003, at the official opening of the Russian Air Force base in Kant President Akayev said 'Russia was given to us by God and history'.¹² Moscow has been a particularly important security partner for Bishkek, providing financial assistance and military training. In 2003 alone Russia provided military assistance, mainly to the Kyrgyz special forces, worth about £2m.¹³ Russia also pays substantial sums for the Kant air base, the ASW test centre in Issyk-Kul and for the upkeep of the CIS antiterrorist centre in Bishkek, commanded by a Russian General, Boris Mylnikov.

Kyrgyz Foreign Minister Roza Otumbayeva said on 28 March that the status of both Russian and US air bases in Kyrgyzstan would not be reviewed by the new leadership.¹⁴ The Kant air base is to play its planned role in the Rubezh 2005 Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) command post exercise in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan starting, slightly late, in early April.¹⁵

Bishkek may be upset by the suggestion made by the head of the CSTO, General Nikolay Bordyuzha, that the Kyrgyz events might lead to problems in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan¹⁶ but as long as no other powerful country or a coalition is willing to step in with military/security assistance the Kyrgyz will have to be careful not to upset Moscow. Acting President and Prime Minister Bakiyev said in an interview with Russian Pervyy Kanal TV that he was convinced that the relations with Russia would develop and deepen.¹⁷

Uzbekistan and China are concerned by the changes in Kyrgyzstan, although Beijing reacted very calmly to the 'tulip revolution'. Worried what effect the events in Bishkek may have on the Uighur secessionist movement in its Western region,

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China closed its border with Kyrgyzstan on 25 March. A number of Chinese citizens – reported only as more than 10 – were injured during the Bishkek riots. The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs warned its citizens against travelling to Kyrgyzstan.¹⁸ Chinese Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing had telephone discussions with his Kazakh, Uzbek and Tajik counterparts about the events in Kyrgyzstan, emphasising the need for stability and continuation of cooperation within the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).¹⁹ If for some reason Bishkek attempts to loosen its ties with Moscow, China would probably be happy to fill in the gap. At the moment it is in the interest of both Moscow and Beijing to strengthen the SCO.²⁰

Uzbekistan is also concerned, partly because of the Uzbek minority in Kyrgyzstan and the radical Islamic movement Hizb-e-Tahrir, said to have up to 4000 members, mainly in the Uzbek community in Southern Kyrgyzstan.²¹ At the beginning of the Kyrgyz revolt, Uzbekistan allowed Kyrgyz nationals to return to Kyrgyzstan but no one was allowed to cross the border from Kyrgyzstan to Uzbekistan.²² On 22 March the Uzbek Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a mild and diplomatic statement hoping that Kyrgyzstan would become sovereign, prosperous and democratic.²³ Uzbek President Karimov agreed in a telephone conversation with acting President and Prime Minister Bakiyev to cooperate on resolving problems of mutual concerns.²⁴ The Uzbeks, worried mainly about Hizb-e-Tahrir activities, will watch the events across the Kyrgyz border particularly carefully.

The strongest reaction to the events in Kyrgyzstan came from Astana. On 24 March Kazakhstan closed its borders with Kyrgyzstan and strengthened security in the border area.²⁵ The following week the Kazakh president Nazarbayev, in a telephone conversation, offered the acting Kyrgyz president Bakiyev unspecified assistance.²⁶ Kazakh Security Council Secretary Bolat Utemuratov allowed himself to make a particularly strong statement, expressing his country's regrets that Kyrgyzstan failed to 'avoid disturbances and fatalities'.²⁷

Only Tajikistan kept its border crossings with Kyrgyzstan open, reinforcing at the same time its border guard units.²⁸

Kyrgyzstan's neighbours and Russia may not be particularly worried by its closer links with European or Far Eastern countries, but could become nervous if the US is given permission to strengthen its contingent in Ganci air base. At a press conference on 28 March, the experienced Roza Otunbayeva allowed herself to fall into a trap set by answering a journalist's hypothetical question, that she would look into a possible deployment of the US AWACS planes in Kyrgyzstan.²⁹ No such request has apparently been made, but the shockwaves of this response were felt in Moscow and probably in Beijing.

Moscow won't really mind if Kyrgyzstan becomes slightly more pro American, if at the same time it doesn't become anti Russian. What Kyrgyzstan's neighbours are most afraid of is that it will become a hot spot in which radical Islamic groups establish their Central Asian outposts and the drug trafficking groups improve their transit routes to Russia and Europe. If Bishkek fails to achieve political stability and lets the Hizb-e-Tahrir and Uighur separatists get out of the bottle Kyrgyzstan should not expect its neighbours to look the other way.

Conclusion

Whatever were the reasons for the Kyrgyz revolt, it succeeded only because of the sheer incompetence of President Akayev and his team. Some of the Central Asian states will now look again at their security arrangements, possibly paying less attention to armed forces but investing more in security services and police riot squads. If the Kyrgyz revolution is a failure, the western NGOs and foundations operating on their territory will be scrutinised much more carefully. The so-called western democratic model will also be looked at with greater suspicion, benefiting mainly Moscow and Beijing.

ENDNOTES

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- 1 *Russkiy Kur'yer*, 25 March 2005, pp1 & 10.
 - 2 According to Kabar news agency Akayev requested political refugee status in Russia (27 March 2005). This however has not been confirmed officially either by Akayev or the Russians.
 - 3 Interfax-AVN, 24 March 2005, BBC Monitoring Service (MS).
 - 4 In July 1998 President Nazarbayev's daughter Aliya married Akayev's son Aydar.
 - 5 Kabar, 28 March 2005.
 - 6 Ibid.
 - 7 *Moskovskiy Komsomolets*, 26 March 2005.
 - 8 Interfax, 30 March 2005.
 - 9 Ibid.
 - 10 BBC, 30 March 2005.
 - 11 Lenta.ru, 29 March 2005; AKIpress, 27 March 2005, BBC MS. The results of the recent parliamentary elections were annulled by the Kyrgyz Supreme Court on 24 March, ITAR-TASS, 24 March 2005.
 - 12 *Yiyk Mildet*, October 2003, p3.
 - 13 *Yiyk Mildet*, April 2004 p7.
 - 14 Kyrgyz TV 1, 28 March 2005, BBC MS.
 - 15 Interfax-AVN, 30 March 2005; Public Educational Radio and TV, 30 March 2005. This exercise may be linked with the arrival in Kyrgyzstan of an unspecified group of Russian advisers.
 - 16 RTV Vesti, 25 March 2005, BBC MS.
 - 17 *Pervyy Kanal*, 25 March 2005.
 - 18 *The Hindu*, 30 March 2005.
 - 19 ITAR-TASS, 29 March 2005; *The Hindu*, 30 March 2005.
 - 20 Kazakh Foreign Minister Kasymzhomart Tokayev announced at a UN forum held in Almaty that as a result of the events in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and China had agreed to strengthen cooperation within the SCO. He added that the organisation 'should play a very important role in ensuring security and stability in the region'. Interfax-Kazakhstan, 29 March 2005, BBC MS.
 - 21 *Pervyy Kanal*, 27 March 2005, BBC MS.
 - 22 Interfax-AVN, 21 March 2005, BBC MS.
 - 23 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Uzbekistan, 22 March 2005.
 - 24 Uzbek TV 1, 28 March 2005, BBC MS.
 - 25 Interfax-Kazakhstan, 24 March 2005, BBC MS; ITAR-TASS, 25 March 2005.
 - 26 Interfax – Kazakhstan, 28 March 2005, BBC MS.
 - 27 Interfax-AVN, 29 March 2005.
 - 28 ITAR-TASS, 25 March 2005.
 - 29 ITAR-TASS, 28 March 2005.

Want to Know More ...?

See: J H Saat, "*The Collective Security Treaty Organization*", Conflict Studies Research Centre, 05/09, Central Asian Series, February 2005, <http://www.da.mod.uk/csrc>

Henry Plater-Zyberk, "*Kyrgyzstan Focusing on Security*", Conflict Studies Research Centre, K41, November 2003, <http://www.da.mod.uk/csrc>

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