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Revolution in Kyrgyzstan - Again

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Introduction

In scenes reminiscent of the Tulip Revolution five years earlier, when a broad coalition of antigovernment forces managed to swiftly oust Kyrgyzstani President Askar Akaev, on April 6-7 spontaneous clashes erupted across Kyrgyzstan as protesters demanded the resignation of President Kurmanbek Bakiev, leaving 81 dead and over 1,000 wounded. The collapse of the Bakiev administration took place with remarkable speed, reflecting the depth of the population's grievances.

Causes of the Unrest

While the immediate cause of the protests was the sharp increase in electricity and utility tariffs coupled with the arrest of prominent opposition leaders on the eve of the revolt, the violent protests followed months of tension between opposition members and the Bakiev-led government, which had become a by-word for rampant nepotism and corruption. Under Bakiev's political model, family members and friends filled the ranks of the government apparatus as presidential powers were strengthened and the pauperization of the population continued apace. While one of the President's brothers chaired the State Protection Service, another served as the ambassador to Germany and Norway, and yet a third as the State Trade Representative to China. A fourth brother headed a village administration, and a fifth was a successful businessman in Bakiev's stronghold region of Jalal-Abad. It was widely asserted that Bakiev's son, Maksim, who was in charge of a state investment and development agency, was being groomed as the president's successor. This powerful 'Central Agency' was given ultimate control over the economy, depriving the Prime Minister and the cabinet of any viable powers.

Amongst other acts of corruption, Bakiev's government stood accused of annually siphoning off some \$80 million in profit through the re-export of Russian and Kazakhstani petroleum products—purchased at preferential rates—to US military forces at the Manas airbase, a key hub for US and NATO troops and supplies going to and from Afghanistan. Not least, civic freedoms had declined precipitously: the country's traditionally vibrant civil society experienced restrictions, opposition figures faced harassment and imprisonment and the relatively liberal media took a beating. In March of this year alone, Kyrgyzstani police raided local television channels, banned two newspapers with ties to the opposition, fining them \$110,000 on charges of insulting the President.

The Establishment of a Provisional Government

A provisional government under the leadership of political veteran Roza Otunbaeva was quickly established after the outbreak of the violent clashes. The armed forces transferred their allegiances without a struggle to the interim Defence Minister, Ismail Isakov, in large part owing to his sterling reputation. Similarly, the majority of interior police forces and local government officials professed loyalty to the self-styled caretaker government.

Otunbaeva's current position as leader of the interim government was set in motion in mid-March, when she was selected during a gathering in Bishkek of the main opposition parties to head a shadow government. She has greater international experience than any other Kyrgyzstani politician, having served as either foreign minister or acting foreign minister on three occasions since the country became independent in 1991, in addition to her postings as Kyrgyzstan's ambassador to the United States and Canada and to Great Britain and Ireland. She has been a leading critic of Bakiev's government from the virtual outset of his rule: after failing to gain the parliamentary approval required to become foreign minister in the Bakiev administration, she immediately moved to the ranks of the opposition.

Yet, it remains to be seen how the provisional government will set about sharing power in the coming days. Otunbaeva has announced that presidential elections will be held in six months. However, her election at that time is far from assured, given her lack of a strong domestic base and the presence of a number of potential presidential contenders within the provisional government, such as Temir Sariev, who ran against Bakiev in the 2009 presidential elections. According to Kyrgyzstan's prominent political figure and former prime minister, Felix Kulov, the members of the interim government should aim to accelerate the holding of elections since they will not be able to work together for long as 'they all have their own views on things'.

Geopolitical Repercussions

In stark contrast to his labelling the ouster of Akaev as 'illegitimate' five years earlier, Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin became the first foreign leader to offer support to the self-styled interim government when he telephoned Roza Otunbaeva on April 8. The Russian government has offered a humanitarian aid grant of US \$20 million and a subsidized loan of US \$30 million.

Given that Russia has traditionally supported authoritarian leaders in the post-Soviet states while eschewing regime change by revolution, the Kremlin's offer of aid to the provisional government in Kyrgyzstan came as a surprise, prompting some observers to speculate that Moscow instigated the violent ouster of the Bakiev government. While the Kremlin's infatuation with the Kyrgyzstani government, which it regarded as traitorous and fickle, had inspired an anti-Bakiev campaign in the Russian media that helped to fuel unrest in an already disgruntled Kyrgyzstani population, there are nonetheless definite limits to Russian soft power, as demonstrated by Moscow's ultimate inability to drive the United States out of Manas airbase in 2009.

To be sure, Russia's relations with Kyrgyzstan had begun to sour significantly in 2009, after the Bakiev regime accepted a large financial aid package from the Kremlin in what was widely regarded as a quid pro quo arrangement for terminating the agreement with the United States for the use of the Manas airbase. However, the unofficial deal was always a shaky one: just as it was unlikely that Russia would actually make good on its pledge to hand over US \$1.7 billion for the construction of a hydroelectric dam (although it did transfer US \$450 million in cash and credits), it was equally unlikely that Bakiev would forego his lucrative arrangement with the United States. In the event, Bakiev renewed the lease for the Manas airbase in July 2009 after negotiating an increase in the US rental payment and officially re-naming the base the Transit Center at Manas. To make matters worse, in March of this year the United States announced its plans to construct a training center in the south of Kyrgyzstan. Since 2002 Russia has operated an airbase at Kant, situated 25 kilometres from Bishkek, under the aegis of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). As a member of the CSTO, Kyrgyzstan supplies free of charge the territory and infrastructure for the base (which has been reconstructed at Russian expense).

In the months preceding Bakiev's removal, Russian media had engaged in exceedingly negative reporting, likening the Kyrgyzstani president to Genghis Khan and the deceased Turkmenistani dictator, Saparmurat Niyazov. The Bakiev government went so far as to send a formal complaint about the media attacks to the Russian Embassy in Bishkek. As many citizens of Kyrgyzstan obtain their news from Russian media outlets, the negative tone adopted in many reports might well have stoked the extant rage that was ultimately transformed into the ouster of the ruling regime.

Within a few days of the regime's collapse, US Assistant Secretary of State Robert Blake declared that Washington is prepared to help Kyrgyzstan's

interim government and expressed 'support for the steps that the provisional government thus far has undertaken to restore democracy'. Interim leader Otunbayeva announced that the lease on the United States air base would be "automatically" extended for a year beyond its expiration in July 2010, while allowing for the possibility that some of the legal arrangements could be re-examined. As long as the UN mandate supports international forces in Afghanistan, any Kyrgyzstani government is unlikely to terminate the lease agreement with the United States for the use of the Manas airbase, particularly given that the rent payments make up a significant chunk of the state's income.

Nonetheless, it could be some time before the leaders of the caretaker government lose their palpable resentment towards the United States for putting military and strategic interests above a commitment to democracy. In an interview with CNN a few days after the revolt, Otunbaeva declared that 'the United States was not interested in our democratic development, with what was going on within the country...for you [the US] we understand that the base is a high priority, and you focused only on the base.' At the same time as expressing her anger with the United States for not having concerned itself with the plight of the opposition during Bakiev's rule, Roza Otunbaeva relayed her gratitude to Moscow for its 'support in exposing the family of a criminal regime'.

The potential effects of the regime change in Kyrgyzstan are likely to be felt the most keenly within Central Asia itself, where authoritarian leaders have been observing current events with a degree of trepidation and uncertainty. Increasing democratization there could ultimately have a spill-over effect in neighbouring Uzbekistan, in particular. In response to the violent ouster, Uzbekistan stated that the unrest in Kyrgyzstan was an internal affair, closed its borders with that country and restricted media coverage of the events. Kazakhstan also partially closed its border and promised some humanitarian aid. Turkmenistan typically offered neither an official reaction nor any domestic media coverage of the events, while China expressed its hopes that order will be restored as soon as possible. The regime change is not expected to have any major ramifications for countries that are further afield, such as Turkey, Pakistan, India, Iran or the GCC countries.

The Bakiev Stand-off

Following the ouster, Bakiev took refuge in his native village in the Jalal-Abad Region in the south-western part of the country, precipitating a week-long stand-off between his supporters and the provisional government. The caretaker government initially offered him a peaceful exit from the country in exchange for his formal resignation, but this offer was soon rescinded owing to the widespread desire to see Bakiev prosecuted for crimes committed while in office. The new leadership subsequently stripped him of immunity and issued arrest warrants for his two brothers and son.

Despite consistently maintaining that he would not resign as president, Bakiev later changed tactics, stating that he would step down in exchange for security guarantees for himself and his family. Several members of the provisional government favoured a 'special operation' to forcibly seize Bakiev, although this option was not pursued owing to the high risk of civilian casualties. In the continued effort to find a peaceful resolution to the crisis, suggestions were put forward to reinstate the disbanded parliament in order to initiate impeachment proceedings or even to collect signatures for a petition to remove him from his post.

Despite tension-fanning assertions by Russian President Dmitry Medvedev on April 13 that 'the risk of Kyrgyzstan breaking apart into the south and the north really exists', the southern regions remained calm overall and the number of Bakiev's supporters appeared to be shrinking by the hour. In the event, on April 15 Bakiev resigned and was given safe passage to Belarus via Kazakhstan after an agreement was forged by Kyrgyzstan's interim officials, international mediators and the Kazakhstani leadership, which currently holds the OSCE chairmanship.

Future Implications

Although hopes abound amongst the population that the ouster of the Bakiev regime will provide the country with a second chance to democratize, real change can only occur in Kyrgyzstan once power has been divided amongst the opposition and elections have been successfully held.

Perhaps the main lesson that the 2005 Tulip Revolution provided for today's provisional government in Bishkek is that it is not enough to simply remove an authoritarian regime. As a result, should the caretaker government remain in power following scheduled elections, it is likely to enact a deeper reform process, including an overhaul of the Constitution, the dismissal of the judiciary and security services and a revamping of many government bodies.

Given the huge budget deficit, the task of meeting popular expectations could prove very difficult.

In stark contrast to the Central Asian ‘petro-states’ of Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, for the second time in five years the Kyrgyzstani population has effectively demonstrated its unwillingness to tolerate a corrupt, authoritarian regime. The events of the last week have lent credence to the theory of ‘petroleum authoritarianism’, according to which the revenues provided by the sale of hydrocarbons enable autocrats to finance and balance the extensive patronage networks and security services that are so vital to the maintenance and longevity of their regimes. Conversely, in an impoverished nation such as Kyrgyzstan, there is no implicit social contract between the ruler and the ruled combining petro-prosperity and improved socio-economic conditions. Just as important, Kyrgyzstan has by far the most developed and vibrant civil society in Central Asia, making that country much less likely than its regional neighbours to submit to the whims of corrupt dictators.

Nonetheless, the prospect of a democratically governed Kyrgyzstan presents the greatest threat precisely to ruling regimes in Central Asia, in so far as it provides a clear example of how an angry populace with little to lose—and with a bit of help from the Russian media—can remove an autocrat from power. In the early years of independence, when Kyrgyzstan was still dubbed ‘an island of democracy, its burgeoning political parties and NGOs acted as a thorn in the side of the region’s authoritarian rulers and as a refuge for oppositionists of all persuasions. Even under Bakiev, Kyrgyzstan was a focal point for much of the Central Asian opposition, while the region’s youth aspired to study in the prestigious and Western-oriented American University of Central Asia in Bishkek.

For all its ‘multi-vectoring’, Russia still remains a more important ally for Kyrgyzstan than the United States. The small, impoverished nation is ultimately dependent on Russia for its security and much of its trade, not to mention the crucial remittances sent by Kyrgyz migrant labourers to family members back home, which account for more than a third of the country’s economy. Nonetheless, even though the caretaker government is currently smarting from US neglect in recent years, in the long term the new regime is likely to continue the old foreign policy of manoeuvring for advantage among the great powers. Given the country’s geographic and economic vulnerabilities, Kyrgyzstan will need to continue to use its territory as a bargaining chip, in the process weaving a web of complicated security and economic relationships with foreign states.