



UNISCI Discussion Papers

THE KYRGYZ REVOLUTION: CIVIL SOCIETY ONLY WORKS WHEN IT IS REAL

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1. Introduction

The events of March 24, 2005, pushed Kyrgyzstan onto the world stage for a few brief days. Comparisons with the recent “civic revolutions” in former Soviet Republics like Ukraine and Georgia were inevitable but facile. Like all real political change, the Kyrgyz revolution was very much rooted in the details of Kyrgyz political life in the period since independence.

The Kyrgyz Republic, or as it is sometimes known, Kyrgyzstan, is located at the outskirts of what was the Soviet Union – it borders China, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Compared to its neighbors Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, the country is relatively poor in hydrocarbon resources but does have fairly substantial gold reserves. Similar to its other neighbor Tajikistan, the country also boasts of substantial hydroelectric generating potential and is the source of vital rivers that water most of the population of Central Asia in the volatile Ferghana Valley.

The country has been governed since independence by Askar Akayev, a former physicist. In the early 1990s, the country was labeled the “island of democracy” and was widely seen as the Central Asian country most open to democratic values. However, most observers have also noted a backsliding since the mid-1990s, so that by the Parliamentary elections of February 2005, the Kyrgyz republic was only democratic when compared to its immediate neighbors. Nevertheless, a loud civil society and struggling, though generally free, press also continued to exist.

The Parliamentary elections at the end of February 2005 were going to mark a new chapter in the country – President Akayev had forced through a referendum in 2003 which profoundly altered the constitution by creating a unicameral legislature and greatly increasing Presidential powers. Although it was widely expected that President Akayev would also obey the new constitution and not run again for president, it was assumed that he would use the Parliamentary elections to push as many supporters as possible into power. Some of these supporters were family - at least seven direct relatives (including his son and daughter) were standing for the 75 seats.

The campaign period saw large-scale interference by the Akayev regime in the period before elections – the courts deregistered many candidates for small infractions, laws were

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passed to disallow other candidates from standing, state-owned mass media was used to discredit the opposition, opposition media was clumsily silenced for the period of the campaign, large scale vote-buying took place and the President himself made many statements alleging that opposition to him was either led by Islamic fundamentalism or was unpatriotic people funded by foreign governments. The OSCE Elections report on the 27 February elections was surprisingly harsh in its condemnation of the pre-election activities. The OSCE noted that while the day of the election was relatively calm, the government had fallen short of its commitments by its actions during the campaign period.

The government responded by only playing the positive comments in the state media and relying heavily on the comments of “other” observer organizations to “counterbalance” such criticisms. Groups such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the CIS observer team, the hitherto unknown London International Democratic Institute (LIDA) – all pronounced the election a success. These observers were oddly chosen – the fact that Chinese observers commented on the fairness of elections when none are practiced in China was not noted. One amusing side-note occurred in the CIS observer mission – the Ukrainian member noted in the press conference that actually he had seen several violations and had tried to include them in the report but these were edited out. The head of the CIS observation team was forced to explain that while technically Ukraine was still part of the CIS, however the observer team they had sent were a part of a bilateral rather than a multilateral observation effort and therefore the points from the Ukrainians would not be part of the CIS observers report. The appearance of LIDA was apparently supposed to suggest they were similar in scope to either of the large American electoral assistance NGOs, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) or the International Republican Institute (IRI). This organization cannot appear to be found through the Internet or other contact information. In short, the government seemed to attempt to confuse the situation by having other pro-government election monitoring efforts.

It was widely assumed among analysts that the opposition would generally complain as they had in past election and that some small protests would continue to smolder on but that most people would probably save their energy for the October presidential campaigns. In previous elections and in civil society in general, there have been sporadic and rather hastily organized protests so these new actions seemed much as previous ones had.

However, the people did not act as planned. Protesters, who had been taking to the streets to complain about the deregistration of particular candidates increased rather than decreased. More and more people took to the streets to protest decisions that seemed to be arbitrary and random. The situation escalated when protesters began to occupy government buildings, mainly in the south and rural areas. There is a cultural divide between the north and the south, and over a couple of weeks, the opposition managed to capture the main government and administrative buildings in the key southern oblasts of Osh and Jalalabat.

President Akayev responded dismissively saying that there was no coherent opposition to talk to and that while in principle, he would talk, there was no one worth talking to. He also put out contradictory messages – one day he stated that investigations would be conducted on parliamentary districts where fraud might have occurred and the next day, he swore in the new Parliament. This apparent ignorance of the scale of the opposition’s real size was to play a key factor in the events of 24th March.

The aftermath of the 24th was also widely reported – one night of looting, followed by several nights of disorder made many think that this was a revolution that had gone amuck. Many reporters latched on the looting and the anger and assumed that this was a revolution motivated by severe poverty and anger toward the wealthy.



But the revolution was not, as many observers have suggested, simply rooted in the discontent caused by poverty. While Kyrgyzstan is, indeed, a very poor country, the World Bank reports that its level of poverty is decreasing (it fell 10.9 percentage points between 1999 and 2002) and that, generally speaking, the poorest of the poor (i.e., those living in rural areas) have benefited. Infant mortality in the country is also lower than that of Kazakhstan where the GDP is many times higher.

Instead, the key factor in the so-called “Tulip Revolution” was the cynical attempts by the former government to exploit civil society for its own benefit. It was this which really caused the events of downfall of the Akayev regime.

2. Hoisted on his own petard

Elected as Kyrgyzstan’s first president in 1991, Askar Akayev initially appeared to be the most liberal of CIS leaders, and he allowed multiparty elections to continue. However, in the late 1990s, he began to limit—though not end—political and economic liberties. An accomplished politician (a fact too rarely noted), he thought that he could manage civil society without destroying it. But he was wrong.

Akayev’s techniques were most often used to dilute or limit the messages of civil society (and thereby flummox the opposition) through GONGOs (government-organized nongovernmental organizations), control of the media and abuse of state resources. Using these tools, the Akayev regime confused the public by creating an artificial dichotomy: when the opposition criticized the government, “others” were ready to stand up and support it.

One Akayev GONGO was the Association of Non-commercial and Nongovernmental Organizations (or “the Association”). While authentic NGOs (like the Coalition for Democracy and Civil Society, or “the Coalition”) criticized the government, the Association condemned Kyrgyz NGOs’ use of foreign funds even as it accepted money from the World Bank. In the 2003 referendum in which Akayev successfully increased his presidential powers, the Association played a vocal role and even “monitored” the election. Not surprisingly, the Coalition was critical of the conduct of the election, while the Association defended it. The Association provided Akayev a useful front through which to legitimize his political actions (for example, it sponsored a petition drive asking him to run again).

Akayev also silenced opposition media through purchase, regulation or outright harassment. Some media outlets were purchased by Akayev supporters, while Kyrgyzstan’s only independent publisher suffered mysterious power outages. Radio Free Europe lost frequencies from its Kyrgyz language version, and independent radio and television stations leasing government equipment first abruptly lost and then regained their licenses. State media and those closely aligned with the Akayev regime also launched biased “investigative reporting” that was aimed at discrediting opposition members. State media also equated opposition with extremism, warning that any support of the opposition was likely to carry with it Islamic fundamentalism.

The government also used its position as an employer to compel state employees to demonstrate their support for the administration. For example, state employees (such as teachers) were required to attend pro-government demonstrations in order to receive their salaries. In 2003, my wife saw one of her primary school teachers in tears in the main Bishkek square “voluntarily” handing out leaflets in support of the President’s referendum. This compulsion was also present during the pro-government demonstration on March 22: teachers were told they would receive their salary only if they showed up. This sort of coercion was



almost habitual, and the regime little realized that such public support was built only on a foundation of sand.

Teachers and health workers have also been used by the administration as the main workers on election day – they usually formed the bulk of the Precinct Election Commissions (PECs). The PEC workers have a very difficult job - they work for free on election day for a very long period of time (from 8 am until usually close to 10 pm). They are also very subject to influence from their school directors or other local government officials. Being the lowest competent electoral agency, they are also useful scapegoats in any criticism of the elections.

The regime used a combination of these tools to compel university students. The President's daughter was running in the University district in Bishkek – other possible contenders were eliminated through administrative means (for example, one candidate was disallowed by an interpretation that forbid former Ambassadors to run because they had not lived on the territory of Kyrgyzstan for the required period of time). University rectors were very forceful in telling students who they should vote for – at some universities, ‘public’ meetings were held where students who were thought to support the improper candidate were called in front and humiliated in front of the group. Only one candidate, the President's daughter was allowed to make campaign appearances at the universities – leading one candidate (whose father was a diplomat and not able to run) to set up loud-speakers outside a dormitory and take questions that students wrote, crumbled into a ball and threw to him.

The regime followed this up by using the GONGO tool. A group of students protesting the coercion by the government created a group called Kel-Kel . The government responded by creating a student organization with the same name, used administrative resources to take away the group's webpage and created a KelKel-clone. This “student” group posted pictures of themselves at a local ski slope (which was owned by the Family) carrying signs that said “Down with Revolution” and the entire website was pro-government in tone. For the time being that website is still up: www.kelkel.kg

Akayev was also politically astute in passing legislative changes and negotiating deals at just the right moment. When it appeared that as many as 60 people in the President's administration or in positions appointed by him were planning on running for Parliament – he recognized the perception this would create would be damaging. He rather quickly pushed through a law requiring people to resign their government appointed positions if they stood as candidates – this eliminated one thing which would have really angered large numbers of people. A similar thing seem to have happened with his relatives – at the last minute, several of his direct relatives backed out of their races – only his two ambitious children continued their campaigns.

So what went wrong? How could this accomplished politician—who had managed to confuse and outmaneuver the opposition for several elections—fail so completely in March 2005?

3. The house Akayev built

First, the public was deeply shocked at the disclosure by an opposition journal of pictures of a large house said to be for the president along with a clever poem listing all businesses supposedly owned by his family. A necessary fiction for many Kyrgyzstanis was that Akayev was a modest scientist (perhaps maneuvered by his smart family) who wanted nothing more than to guide the country in the right direction. The newspaper also included a clever poem that listed the many businesses which were allegedly owned by relatives of the President – and



for many people this long list was surprising but also rang true. The publication of the poem and the photos exposed Akayev's personal wealth, and Akayev himself seemed truly thrown by the intensity of the public's disgust and anger.

4. A run-off election

Second, the government did all it could to promote the success of Akayev's daughter in her campaign for a parliamentary seat in Bishkek's University district. An exit poll conducted during the election (Kyrgyzstan's first) predicted that Akayev's daughter would win the election with more than 55% of the vote. However, the actual count put her votes in the low 40th percentile and set the stage for a run-off. This news spread quickly and students in the district realized that they could vote for whomever they wished as long as they told the pollster they voted for the government candidate. Thus, they did not have to be part of Akayev's civil society myth.

This reality became clearer in one university, where rather than demanding or threatening them, the rector apparently beseeched and cajoled the students to vote the "right" way. More and more students began to see that they really could vote as they wished. In the end, students played a key role in the March demonstrations.

The second round of elections in the University district was riddled with imperfections. Many people complained about fraud, such as people filming the casting of ballots and of outright cheating. In short, anti-opposition forces were obliged to turn to brute force to win rather than relying on their facade of civil society promotion.

5. The White Hats and the use of thugs

Thirdly, the regime began to use proxy fighters to provoke the demonstrators and create chaos. These seemed to appear at the beginning of that momentous week – they appeared in large numbers and seemed solely present to provide non-police, extra-legal "security" for the administration. They first appeared at the pro-government rally and were responsible for taking down and ripping up any anti-Akayev signs that protestors might have. The next day during the small student rally, large numbers of them stood silently behind the police. During the break-up of that demonstration, they provoked fights with some of the demonstrators. On the 24th, several hundred of them provoked the demonstrators by throwing stones and instigating fights. It was when the crowd out-numbered and turned them back that the events began to get out of control.

It is still uncertain as to exactly whom these people were but they were clearly organized. They had no fear about pushing and shoving older, younger or any demonstrators. Rumors flew that they were private security guards, Kazakhs from across the border, sportsmen from the Kyrgyz Olympic Committee that the Akayev's son headed – any or all of these could be true. The white hats were also a possible peace of mis-information – people wearing white hats had, for a time, provided public order in Osh and Jalalabat after those cities were taken over by the demonstrators. But whoever instigated the 'white hats', on the 24th of March they were part of a crucial miscalculation by whomever had employed them.



6. March 24th

The detailed history of the events of March 24th remains for future writers. Too many questions still remain unresolved. But a rough chronology of the events that day can demonstrate how the kinds of missteps described above prepared the way for Akayev's departure.

The demonstrators began two rallies on the outskirts of Bishkek. They included people who had seen the candidates of their choice disqualified from the election, people who had purchased the opposition's newspapers or people who were tired of government pressure. Students also formed a large group of demonstrators – they had been put under considerable pressure by the regime. One group peacefully marched down the main street, Chui Avenue, past the Kyrgyz White House to the main square. The other group came from the other side of the city and went directly to the square.

The Kyrgyz White House was ringed by hundreds of riot police, but they peacefully let the demonstrators march by. Once inside the square, the demonstrators were confronted by government thugs who attempted to provoke a fight. These strongmen were similar to and probably composed of the White Hats mentioned above. Both this group and the White Hats were examples of how the regime was losing control – the regime did not even pretend to be supported by civil society but by brute force. Initially successful, the pro-government thugs were eventually driven off by the numerically superior crowd. But this confrontation changed the mood of the crowd. They had been attacked and were angry. They wanted to show their displeasure at the seat of power. Turning back, they walked the short distance to the Kyrgyz White House and began to demonstrate.

In front of the Kyrgyz White House, the demonstrators and the security forces engaged in a dialogue and seemed to reach a compromise. However, a sudden cavalry charge of some 50 horsemen dispersed the crowd. It appears that Akayev chose this moment to flee the presidential residence in an armored truck. Surprised and afraid, the crowd poured back into the square, but moments later, realizing their strength, turned around and began to stone the horses and riders. Within a matter of hours, the crowd took control of the White House and President Akayev's authority was no more.

7. The transition begins

Despite Akayev's initial democratic promise and many political gifts, this then was his end. Unlike President Karimov in Uzbekistan, he had not relied on a powerful army or security services; unlike his President Nazarbayev in Kazakhstan, he did not have the support of numerous oligarchs who benefited from a growing economy; and unlike President Rakhmonov in Tajikistan, he couldn't vilify his opposition as Islamic extremists. In the weeks following March 24, 2005, it was clear that whatever would come next, this was the end of the Akayev era for Kyrgyzstan.