

## Revolution, Kyrgyz Style

A power-sharing deal at the top is not popular participation

by Borut Grgic

**The trend was started by youth movements that swept away Serbia's Milosevic, Georgia's Shevardnadze, and Ukraine's Kuchma in elections and demonstrations. It has now removed Kyrgyzstan's Akayev as well. Yet that doesn't mean that democracy is just around the corner.**

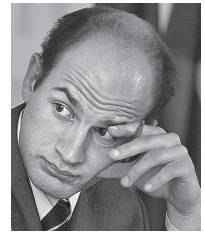
The birth of the Kyrgyz revolution last spring was somewhat unexpected, both for the government of then President Askar Akayev and the opposition on the street. It took only a few days for the government in Bishkek to collapse, leaving behind a vast power vacuum that in many ways persists.

Unlike in Georgia and Ukraine, the Kyrgyz revolution has not yet produced a sense of democratic legitimacy. The hope of many was that the July 10 presidential election would be free and fair and would restore a sense of democratic legitimacy. The election was indeed largely free and fair, according to the mission from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe that monitored it. The team certified "tangible progress by the Kyrgyz Republic toward meeting OSCE commitments, as well as other international standards for democratic elections." In other words, there was a huge improvement over the previous election. "Fundamental civil and political rights, such as freedom of expression and the freedom of assembly, were generally respected, and the improved media environment provided the field of candidates with opportunities to present their views," the team reported. Candidates conducted televised debates; there were no real obstacles to campaigning; the media operated with considerable freedom; and the presidential debates were broadcast in the Uzbek language. There were irregularities, but these were exceptions.

However, it remains to be seen whether the new government will manage to stick to the reform agenda and produce the momentum needed to restore public and international confidence in the political process. Long-term success now depends on the government's ability to sustain meaningful social, political, and economic reforms. The mountainous republic, which Akayev once ambitiously called Central Asia's Switzerland, is only at the beginning of what possibly could turn into a real transformation. In the best case, it could now begin the slow transition to democracy. In the worst case, this transition too will end in yet another power-grab.

The biggest problems in Kyrgyzstan are low overall resource capacity, underdeveloped security infrastructure, economic decay, and clan-based loyalties. This is a lot to deal with in terms of democracy and state-building, but there are compelling reasons for the European Union and the United States to make a commitment to help Kyrgyzstan become a reasonably well-functioning state.

Certainly Central Asia needs reform. The status quo is unsustainable in the long term and dangerous to Euroatlantic security in the medium term. A successful transition in Kyrgyzstan could set the precedent for overdue regional change. The violence against demonstrators in neighboring Uz-



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Uzbekistan confirms that regional security and stability, when built on the backs of regional strongmen who merely profess to be pro-Western and pro-democracy, are highly unstable. Real change is possible, but hoping in illusions about how fast it could come would be dangerous. If the Central Asian democracy project is to succeed, it will require a long-term commitment from the West.

### A Perfect Storm

Obviously, Kyrgyzstan is not Ukraine or Georgia. Even today the opposition lacks a well-defined leadership. In fact, the quiet power-sharing deal between President Kurmanbek Bakiyev and his main political rival and now political mate, Prime Minister Felix Kulov, demonstrates that the new Kyrgyz leadership is a product of post-Akayev political horse-trading and not the result of a genuine revolutionary alternative. The revolution was not based in ideology—and unlike in Ukraine and Georgia, periods of violent uprisings have been a common occurrence in Kyrgyzstan.

What happened in Kyrgyzstan instead was a perfect storm of unrelated events: weak central security; a strong student movement led by the Kel-Kel (which is often compared with the Serbian student Otpor that helped bring down the Milosevic regime in 2000); and a deep north-south divide. The nexus between these three best explains why Akayev's government collapsed so swiftly; why the new political situation continues to give off the whiff of illegitimacy; and why, despite successful elections and a landslide victory for President Bakiyev, the central government remains weak.

The Kel-Kel activists were instrumental in the initial phase of the revolution—but their original aim, as they explained in talks with the author, was to make the students more relevant as a political group rather than to overthrow the Akayev regime. For them, the electoral fraud in the parliamentary election in March simply offered a welcome opportunity to further their cause.

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more likely to remain an exception. Uzbek President Islam Karimov used his Presidential Guard ruthlessly to crush the uprising in Andijan. Unlike Kyrgyzstan, which turned to the OSCE and the West for immediate help, he turned to Moscow for support, and even floated the idea of direct Russian military intervention in Uzbekistan.

This is certainly a departure from reforms and Western orientation and is dangerous, since Russia has limited capacity to administer security and stability effectively in Uzbekistan, let alone in Central Asia as a whole.

In Kyrgyzstan, by contrast, many players saw in the fraudulent parliamentary elections an opportunity to hold Akayev responsible and force him into a new power-sharing arrangement with others outside the presidential circle. Under pressure from two fronts—students in Bishkek and new political opportunists in the south—the Akayev structure began to crack. This emboldened rivals like Kurmanbek Bakiyev, Roza Otumbayeva, and Bayman Erkinbayev to go further and use the moment of government weakness to campaign for Akayev's resignation. The resulting flood of instability eventually swept away Akayev's government.

At the same time, the security structure was surprisingly ineffective in keeping order and preventing looting. The Kyrgyz police were poorly trained and inadequately equipped to deal with demonstrators, and many in the security forces had no overriding loyalty to the central authority. Clan loyalties and opportunities to make that extra dollar on the side were too strong. Under these circumstances it was easy for the southern self-styled fighters on horseback from the south to overwhelm the security system in the capital.

Unfortunately, today's security forces exhibit little improvement in training, equipment, and loyalty. The current government is not immune to pressure by criminals and self-made political figures from the south, or even from outside players. The future tilt of Kyrgyzstan is of interest to at least three powers—the US, Russia, and China—that are engaged in a race to control Central Asia.

North-south strains remain a serious problem and a potential source of future conflict in Kyrgyzstan. Local chieftains in the south are often more powerful, and wield more influence in their areas, than does the central government. The south is also host to various organized criminal activities and borders the notorious Fergana Valley—a Central Asian equivalent of Georgia's Pankisi Valley. It is a major transit point for Afghan heroin, and an attractive safe haven in many respects for extremist groups like Hizb-ub-Tahrir. Many political personalities, including Erkinbayev, are profiting greatly from this arrangement, and are using the proceeds from trafficking to buy political power and influence.

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This ever more obvious link between organized crime and the southern clan leaders is an element that perpetuates struggle for influence and power between the government and the peripheries, and could conceivably keep the government out of the south indefinitely.

#### Post-revolutionary reality

While the revolution itself was characterized by inconsistencies and confusion, the post-revolutionary phase is not much better. Tensions in Kyrgyzstan remain high; the struggle for power continues. Civil society is again being pushed aside, while little has changed in terms of power-sharing, particularly following the Bakiyev-Kulov duumvirate.

The previous rivalry between Kulov and Bakiyev risked spinning off into violence and instability. But a brokered deal between two of the most powerful political figures in Kyrgyzstan raises serious questions about the future of reforms and the development of truly competitive and legitimate governing structures in the country. Bakiyev's landslide victory on July 10 says a great deal about the state of democracy in Kyrgyzstan.

The international community is partly to blame. In an effort to sustain the fragile stability, it took the easy way out and settled for or even encouraged a power-sharing deal between the two politicians. This ensured a relatively uneventful pre-election and election period—at the cost of not letting Kulov run a free and fair presidential race without interference from Bakiyev. In the long run, this price could sacrifice Kyrgyz democracy; there is again no strong opposition that the West might have been able to use to keep the government

in check. There is real reason for concern, especially given the highly controversial exit by Kulov from the interim government and Bakiyev's subsequent questionable efforts to eliminate him from the political stage.

It is too early to say just how balanced the roles of the president and the prime minister will prove to be or how long this balance might last, but for now, the political process in Kyrgyzstan remains predominantly a presidential affair. The parliament is largely an echo of the president's voice, with political affinities based on personal connections rather than party lines. Parliamentarians do not run on party platforms; instead, they compete for seats individually and finance their own campaigns. Buying influence in the Kyrgyz political process is therefore easy.

Moreover, under the new power-sharing arrangement, decision-making is shared between Bakiyev and Kulov, not between Bakiyev and the parliament. And since Kulov attained office through a bargain with the president, he too has no real responsibilities to parliament. He is extremely weak politically; he serves at the will of Bakiyev and in the future can easily be bypassed or even sacked.

In effect, the only real checks on power monopoly by Bakiyev are the self-appointed southern warlords who are financed by drug money. At present

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this element of power remains highly corrosive, but it might not be completely unreasonable to begin thinking of ways to cut off the lucrative drug trade, streamline the power base in the south, and include these leaders in the national political process. To do so, the government would first have to put together a functioning security structure and work with those external powers that have the resources to help Bishkek address this problem—presupposing, of course, the center's willingness to share its power.

However, the pervasive level of corruption, favoritism, and nepotism at the center of the political system is not encouraging. Allegations against Bakiyev and his government are on the rise. Many in civil society claim that the new government has been particularly unrestrained in giving top positions to family members and other "revolutionary friends." Many parliamentary deputies have also been accused publicly of similar malpractice.

The immediate priority must now be to build the governing capacity that is so sorely lacking in Kyrgyzstan. This means that the new government, and especially Bakiyev and Kulov, will have to stay committed to the separation of power between the different branches of government, to transparency, checks-and-balances, economic development, and a functioning security structure. Since democracy is best protected through the practice of good governance, transparency is crucial.

In the long run, there is no better security guarantee than a functioning democracy, and it is important to ensure that no future government in Kyrgyzstan defines security and democracy as competing principles. For democracy to be functional, the parliament needs to gain additional competences and be reformed. Efforts to develop well-defined left, center and right political options are desperately needed as well. The judicial branch must be independent from the government, and the independence and transparency of the judiciary must be guaranteed as a prerequisite of economic vitality, as well as of democracy.

Second, the security structure must be reformed. This could be achieved through cooperation with external powers that have the means to improve Kyrgyz intelligence and security capabilities. A functional democracy and market-based economy depend on the government's capacity to enforce the rule of law. A functional security structure is also needed to secure the nation's borders against such external threats as organized crime, terrorism, refugee flows, instability in neighboring states, and other state or non-state incursions.

The new government must confront organized crime, as this threatens legitimate democracy and a vibrant economy. If vast portions of the country are run by organized criminal syndicates, it will be impossible to build a functioning government. And since it is impossible to combat organized crime on the national level alone, a regional approach is essential. The OSCE, but especially the US and Russia (and perhaps also the EU) should help coordinate and finance regional cooperation in this sphere.

Further, without a new economic base, it will be impossible to sustain a modern democracy in Kyrgyzstan. Poverty is widespread; close to 40 percent of the population lives below the international poverty line. Much of Kyrgyz wealth is concentrated in the hands of the governing elite, while the production sector is either unprofitable or non-functioning. The small- and medium-size business sector should be given a boost by developing favorable lending conditions and by stimulating private ownership. Property laws must be clearly defined and private property vigorously protected. Finally, there is an urgent need to improve human capacity. There are thousands of registered civil-society groups, yet this sector remains largely inefficient, ineffective, and marginalized from the political process.

The new government must confront organized crime; it threatens democracy.

Even with all its faults, though, Kyrgyzstan has opened a new window of opportunity for reshaping the Central Asian political landscape. Since September 11, 2001 political reforms in the Middle East have been at the center of American and also European geostrategic discourse. But no comprehensive vision has been discussed for reforms in Central Asia. This omission is shortsighted and could even become a serious strategic blunder.

In order to have a stable, secure, and democratic Middle East, and a secure eastern periphery of the Euroatlantic community, Europe and America will have to become engaged proactively in reforming the Central Asian landscape. Sitting idly by as local strongmen fail to exercise their sovereignty responsibly is a policy prescription Europe and America can hardly afford in the wake of terrorist attacks in New York, Washington, Madrid, and now London. Political pluralism and economic dynamism are the means for ensuring sustainable progress and lasting stability in Central Asia.

If Europe and America let instability fester and democracy deteriorate in Central Asia, they will only make it harder to sustain democratic transitions in the Middle East, Caucasus, and Moldova. Instability and corruption spill over. In the vast and complex Central Asia, transformation is a monumental task—but it is an urgent priority that can no longer be ignored by decision-makers in Brussels and Washington.