

Kyrgyz president forced to flee as opposition seizes power

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28 March 2005

On March 24, rioting protesters forced Kyrgyz President Askar Akayev to flee the small Central Asian republic over which he has presided for 15 years. In the wake of his departure, a loose coalition of opposition forces under the leadership of Kurmanbek Bakiyev seized power, setting up an interim government in the capital city Bishkek. New presidential elections have been scheduled for June.

Political tensions exploded in Kyrgyzstan after parliamentary run-off elections March 13. Marred by accusations of fraud, the vote handed an overwhelming victory to forces loyal to Akayev's ruling party. Representatives of the president won all but 6 of 75 seats, with a turnout of 59 percent.

The opposition "people's power" movement, which had been leading protests against the undemocratic methods used by the president to quiet critics of his regime since well before the first round of voting February 27, held demonstrations against the outcome of the elections in cities throughout the south of the country.

On March 15, they established a shadow government in Osh, Kyrgyzstan's second-largest population center, refusing to recognize the authority of Bishkek. Modeled on recent events in Georgia and Ukraine, the opposition claimed to be leading a "Tulip Revolution."

However, over the course of the following week, the protests went beyond the control of the opposition leadership. The demonstrations against Akayev's regime unleashed the widespread popular anger over economic and social conditions in the impoverished country.

Over the course of the past 15 years, living standards have plummeted as a result of IMF "free market" policies and the collapse of the infrastructure built up under the Soviet Union. Rejecting the peaceful methods advocated by the opposition, the protests took on an increasingly violent character, with participants taking control of administrative buildings, setting state property on fire, attacking police stations, smashing up businesses, and holding government figures hostage.

Initially contained in the south, where the opposition has the bulk of its support, riots spread to the capital on March 24. Thousands of protesters stormed the Kyrgyz White House and surrounding buildings, forcing Akayev out of office. For several days after the president fled to neighboring Kazakhstan

and then Russia, mobs continued to roam the streets of Bishkek and other cities throughout the country, attacking government property and looting stores.

While the interim government claims that the situation is now under control, there are reports that the violence is continuing in certain areas. Six people have died as a result of the rioting and another 400 have been injured.

Over the weekend, 3,000 pro-Akayev supporters from the former president's hometown rallied in Chym Korgon and began a march on the capital. Police in the capital are anticipating that their arrival in Bishkek could result in further violence.

Though the opposition has ridden the wave of protests to power, it does not hold political sway over the social layers that overthrew Akayev and has no real mass base within the population as a whole. A fractured coalition of former figures from the Akayev government, the opposition is riven by infighting and offers no solution to the desperate social conditions that prevail in Kyrgyzstan.

The "people's power" movement is largely the product of US intervention in the country, owing its existence to the financial and logistical resources provided either directly from Washington or through US-funded non-governmental organizations (See: "US money and personnel behind Kyrgyzstan's 'Tulip Revolution'").

While Kyrgyzstan lacks the oil resources that have made neighboring states so critical to the Bush Administration's efforts to establish global hegemony, the country is of great geopolitical significance due to its proximity to oil-producing countries. The US military base near Bishkek is also critical to American efforts in Afghanistan.

Since assuming power last week, the interim government has been embroiled in a series of crises. Although Akayev fled the country, he has thus far refused to resign from office or return to the country to do so. According to the Kyrgyz constitution, the interim government is illegitimate until Akayev resigns. In addition to sections of the population of Kyrgyzstan, foreign governments hostile toward the opposition are expected to use this fact to avoid recognizing the new regime.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has said for the moment that Moscow will not break ties with Bishkek and is prepared to

work with the new authorities. Nonetheless, he described the manner in which they gained power as “illegitimate,” implying that the “Tulip Revolution” was really a coup.

Sensing the opposition’s weakness, Putin appears to be inclined toward working with the interim government at the moment in an attempt to protect Russian political and economic interests by exerting influence over the chaotic situation in the country. However, this could easily change should events unfold in a manner that threatens Moscow’s interests.

Currently, the interim government is gripped by a crisis over whether the old pre-election parliament should remain in office or whether the recently elected deputies from the contested elections should be awarded their posts.

Bakiyev, who was awarded his position as interim prime minister by the old parliament, is clashing over this issue with Feliks Kulov, a critic of Akayev’s regime who was freed from prison last week and is now the interim head of security. Bakiyev and Kulov, the two best-known figures in the opposition, are widely seen as leading warring factions within the new regime.

Following several days of tense negotiations, Kulov issued a statement declaring that the old parliament is illegitimate. However, it appears that he was not speaking with the support of the interim government. According to numerous news reports, the situation is now descending into complete confusion, with both parliaments claiming authority.

In an attempt by the West to gain some control over the situation, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) is sending representatives to Kyrgyzstan to try to resolve the situation.

While Bakiyev and other leading opposition figures are claiming credit for the collapse of the Akayev regime, the course of events that unfolded over the past two weeks was neither anticipated nor desired by the opposition or its backers in Washington.

In the period immediately following March 13, when Akayev was still in power, the opposition leadership began backing off its initial calls for the president’s resignation and instead demanded negotiations with the ruling authorities. As the demonstrations became increasingly violent, the opposition consented to the creation of joint street patrols with the Kyrgyz police in an effort to bring the situation under control.

According to Bakiyev himself, the opposition had no idea the morning of March 24 that in the evening they would be in power. The keys to the Kyrgyz White House were not delivered to the opposition leadership by a mass uprising led by the “people’s power” movement. Rather, they fell in its lap as the result of the political vacuum created by Akayev’s sudden departure in the face of rioting demonstrators.

Washington was similarly unprepared for recent events in Kyrgyzstan. On March 20, two days before Akayev was deposed, the US called for an end to the violence, urging “all parties in Kyrgyzstan to engage in dialogue and resolve

differences peacefully and according to the rule of law.” While US Ambassador Stephen Young had been issuing bellicose statements criticizing Akayev’s regime for several weeks, as the protests spun out of control, he began working with both sides in an attempt to find a negotiated solution to the crisis.

The failure of Kyrgyzstan’s “Tulip Revolution” to follow the carefully scripted events of Georgia’s “Rose Revolution” or Ukraine’s “Orange Revolution” poses potential problems for the Bush Administration and a threat to US interests in Central Asia.

As is made clear by Putin’s relatively moderate response to events in Bishkek, the chaotic character of the collapse of the Akayev regime and the weakness of the pro-US opposition have denied Washington a decisive victory in its efforts to undermine Russian influence in the region.

The Bush administration is fearful of the social forces that brought down Akayev’s regime. The desperately poor population that stormed the Kyrgyz capital has little in common with the students and more middle-class layers that played a critical role in Georgia in 2003 and Ukraine in 2004. Rather, it shares many characteristics with the impoverished Muslim masses in the surrounding countries of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, where pro-US regimes are in power.

Should events in Kyrgyzstan activate the discontent of the population in nearby states, this could undermine the US’s position in the region. On March 25, Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev issued a statement expressing concern over the implications of the Kyrgyz events for the political situation in his country.

“We should draw conclusions from the situation in Kyrgyzstan and come to understand the reasons behind the events that happened there. It is absolutely obvious that the socioeconomic problems that had been piling up in that country for years have led to mass poverty and unemployment. This triggered spontaneous protests in many regions of the country,” said Nazarbayev.

Efforts to mitigate the negative fall-out of the Kyrgyz “Tulip Revolution” will demand increased US intervention in the region.

Regardless of how events in the country work themselves out in the immediate situation, the social discontent and rage expressed in the overthrow of Akayev’s regime will only deepen as the masses of Kyrgyzstan quickly discover that the “people’s power” movement has nothing to offer the people.



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