

US outrage over “rigged” elections does not extend to Kyrgyzstan

Bill Van Auken
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The brazen rigging of an election, the repression of the opposition and the use of police violence and live ammunition against demonstrators has been met with silence and indifference on the part of the Obama administration and the US media.

These events were taking place Thursday not in Iran, but rather in the landlocked Central Asian state of Kyrgyzstan.

In their habitual diplomatic language, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe election monitors declared that the Kyrgyz vote “fell short of key standards” and constituted a “disappointment.”

A closer reading of the OSCE report, however, discloses genuinely criminal methods used to deliver a nearly 90 percent majority to incumbent President Kurmanbek Bakiyev.

The OSCE cites “ballot stuffing” and “multiple voting” on election day, while physical force, including the use of tear gas, was employed to stop observers from the opposition party from entering a polling place. “The process further deteriorated during the vote count,” the organization said.

When thousands of people took to the streets of Kyrgyzstan’s capital to protest the vote fraud, police attacked them with percussion grenades and tear gas, while firing live ammunition over their heads.

In the run-up to the election, the OSCE said, “The distinction between the ruling party and the state was blurred.” Concretely, this meant that the offices of Bakiyev’s Ak-Zhol party were set up inside government buildings. Government workers and students were coerced into attending the party’s rallies under threat of being fired or thrown out of school.

Campaign events by the opposition were blocked by the police and its leaders and supporters were subjected

to a reign of terror. One of the opposition leaders, Emilbek Kaptagaev, reported being kidnapped by a group of men, one wearing a police uniform, taken to the edge of the capital and brutally beaten. He received a call three weeks later warning him that if he didn’t stop campaigning for the leading opposition candidate—former prime minister Almazbek Atambaev of the Social Democratic Party—he would get more of the same and worse.

The opposition was virtually blacked out in the mass media. Three national television stations suspended all news coverage at the end of June as the vote approached. Over the past year, the government has carried out the systematic suppression of opposition newspapers, taking them to court on charges of libeling the president’s relatives, imposing massive fines and confiscating equipment.

Earlier this month, the journalist Almaz Tashiyev, who had published articles critical of the government, suffered a fatal beating at the hands of eight policemen. It was the sixth violent attack on journalists this year and the second fatal attack since October 2007, when independent journalist Alisher Saipov was gunned down execution style. No one has been arrested for that killing.

The electoral fraud hardly came as a surprise. During the run-up to local elections last year, the head of the Central election commission fled the country after saying that the president’s son had threatened her life.

Human rights groups say torture of detainees in Kyrgyzstan is common. Among the more infamous cases is that of the arrest of 32 people last year at a protest in the town of Nookat. While awaiting trial, police beat them on the soles of their feet, poured hot and cold water on them and brought them to the brink of suffocation by putting plastic bags over their heads.

When one of the women prisoners told her tormentors that she was pregnant, they assaulted her, causing a miscarriage.

Last month, President Barack Obama sent a letter to President Bakiyev, praising his regime for its “efforts in stabilizing the situation in Afghanistan and the fight against international terrorism.”

This remains Washington’s position. Why haven’t Obama and Hillary Clinton declared themselves “appalled” by the situation in Kyrgyzstan or saluted the “courage” of the demonstrators as they have in relation to Iran?

Obama’s letter was part of a negotiating process between Washington and Kyrgyzstan over the Manas air base, which has been used to supply US troops fighting in Afghanistan. The Bakiyev regime announced last February that it was shutting down the base, but then negotiated a deal unveiled earlier this month under which the US military will be allowed to stay in return for a nearly fourfold increase in rent.

On the day of the election, the *New York Times* published a cynical article entitled “Strategic issues, not abuses are US focus in Kyrgyzstan.” While referring to a “wave of violence” against the opposition, the *Times* approvingly noted that the Obama administration “has emphasized pragmatic concerns over human rights.”

It insisted that the Bakiyev regime was really not so bad, boasting a “more open political system” than some of its Central Asian neighbors. “It is not a police state,” the article assures *Times* readers, “and, in general, only those who overtly challenge the government are hounded by the security services.”

If this is its measure of an acceptable regime—Benito Mussolini would likely have passed muster—then what is the paper’s problem with Iran, where it has waged a non-stop campaign since election day, describing the ballot count as a “coup d’état” and its aftermath as “Operation Jackboot”?

Bakiyev, it should be noted, owes his office to the so-called “Tulip Revolution”—following the Rose Revolution in Georgia and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine—which was precipitated in 2005 with allegations of rigged elections by a US-backed opposition. Demonstrations and rioting succeeded in ousting President Askar Akayev. The demonstrators were rallied with denunciations of electoral fraud,

corruption and deepening poverty caused by the implementation of a series of IMF-dictated readjustment programs.

As the opposition itself subsequently admitted, its rise was funded and organized largely by Washington, acting through a series of Non-Governmental Organizations (CIA fronts). The US wanted Akayev out because his attempts to curry favor with Moscow cut across Washington’s strategic aim of establishing US hegemony in Central Asia. As it turned out, Bakiyev was also compelled by geopolitical realities to balance between Moscow and Washington, with equal or greater amounts of corruption, repression and electoral fraud.

In Iran, the “color revolution”—this one green—once again led by a US-backed opposition charging a rigged election, has yet to succeed, with the balance of power in the ruling clerical regime still in the balance.

In short, if the regime in question, like that of Bakiyev, facilitates US war aims and strategic interests, then rigged elections, repression and torture are perfectly acceptable to the “pragmatic” leaders in Washington and their loyal propagandists at the *Times*.

However, when Washington sees the overthrow of a regime—as in Iran—or at least a change at the top, furthering these same interests, charges of vote fraud and repression and the defense of “democracy” are turned into a veritable crusade.

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