

# Kyrgyz government falls

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The main opposition groups in Kyrgyzstan claimed yesterday to have assumed power, with President Kurmanbek Bakiyev reportedly fleeing the capital, Bishkek.

“We have reached an agreement that the government will resign,” said Galina Skripkina, a spokesperson for the opposition Social Democratic Party. “For now we have only achieved the government’s resignation... The president himself has not resigned. He must resign and formally submit his resignation to parliament so we can appoint a caretaker government,” Skripkina told Reuters news agency.

Agence-France Press reported that Bakiyev had flown out of Bishkek to the southern city of Osh. Russian news agency RIA stated that it understood the president was still in the capital.

Opposition leader Temir Sariyev said that Prime Minister Daniyar Usenov had agreed that the government would resign. However, Usenov told Reuters by telephone Wednesday that he and President Bakiyev were still in power.

Sariyev returned from a visit to Moscow yesterday and was instantly arrested. Opposition activists freed him from prison shortly afterwards, together with several other detained anti-government figures.

Following mass anti-government protests in the western city of Talas on Tuesday, thousands marched on the presidential building in Bishkek on Wednesday. Police and troops at first fired tear gas and rubber bullets into the crowd, but failed to disperse the demonstration. They then fired live ammunition, killing scores of protesters and injuring hundreds more.

Protesters are reportedly in control of several government buildings in Bishkek and other provincial

cities, as well as the state broadcasting corporation’s headquarters. The opposition also claimed to have taken over several regional governments.

Kyrgyzstan is a former Soviet republic of 5.3 million people located in Central Asia, bordering China and close to Afghanistan. Desperately poor, the government relies heavily on cash payments from the United States and Russia for the use of military bases in the country. The US airbase at Manas is one of the main logistical centers for Washington’s occupation of Afghanistan.

“Right now the transit center at the Manas airport is functioning normally,” said a US State Department official. “It’s an important facility connected to our Afghan operations and it’s functioning normally.”

Bakiyev himself came to power in 2005 following anti-government demonstrations—the so-called “Tulip Revolution,” when then-president Askar Akayev was forced from office in a de facto palace coup led by Bakiyev, the former prime minister.

There have been frequent anti-government demonstrations since March this year, with thousands protesting in Bishkek and other cities over power outages as well as the poverty, high unemployment, and official corruption that blight the country. The government recently increased prices of basic necessities such as water and gas, heightening popular opposition to the regime.

Bakiyev had placed Bishkek and two other centers of anti-government protests, Talas and Naryn, under curfew in an attempt to quell opposition. Bakiyev’s government has also clamped down on independent media and the Internet over the past few weeks.

Power cuts have become a regular occurrence in spring, due to the crumbling state of Kyrgyzstan’s Soviet-era

hydroelectric power facilities. Unlike its Central Asian neighbors in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, the country has virtually no hydrocarbon resources.

Around one-third of the population lives below the official poverty level, and many families rely on remittances from workers in Russia, which have suffered due to the severe impact of the global economic crisis on that country.

Demonstrators have also expressed opposition to the Bakiyev administration's backing for the US-led war in Afghanistan. There are widespread reports in the country that the US has established a "counter-terrorism training center" in Kyrgyzstan, reportedly a base for CIA and Pentagon "black ops."

The Kyrgyz Ministry of Health reported that 40 people died in clashes between demonstrators and security forces on Wednesday; the opposition puts the figure at over 100 killed. One hospital in Bishkek reported "dozens" of people coming in with gunshot wounds to the head.

Many of the casualties came from the seizure of the state prosecutor-general's office in Bishkek, stormed by an estimated 1,000 demonstrators Wednesday.

Deputy Prime Minister Aklybek Japarov and Interior Minister Moldomusa Kongantiyev were reportedly caught and beaten by protesters, who forced them to denounce their boss, Bakiyev. Their whereabouts remain unknown.

International human rights groups and the United Nations have repeatedly condemned the regime in Bishkek for violations of basic rights. Several journalists critical of Bakiyev have been intimidated or killed, and TV channels and newspapers shut down. Prisoners are routinely abused, and opposition politicians attacked and forced into exile.

In February, the murder of journalist Gennady Pavluk sparked large protests in Bishkek. The journalist was thrown from the top of a six-floor building, a slaying viewed as payback for his criticism of government corruption and his association with opposition figures.

Bakiyev won a presidential election last year that was widely regarded, both in Kyrgyzstan and internationally, as rigged. Unlike the disputed election in Iran in 2009,

Washington refused to condemn the results of the Kyrgyz poll.

The brutal regime in Kyrgyzstan is one of Washington's key allies in the "war on terror." The US military established a base in the country in 2001 as part of its invasion of Afghanistan. The Manas airbase has played a crucial role in the eight-year occupation of the country, as well as the current "surge" of thousands of additional US troops and equipment into the now expanded "AfPak" war.

In 2009, the Kyrgyz government demanded an increase in rent from the US military for the Manas base from \$17 million to \$60 million, threatening to end the lease if Washington refused to pay up. The US and Bakiyev agreed to a new deal, with the increased rent, in which American forces will remain at Manas, essentially free to do as they wish at the base.

The heavy US military presence in the country is a source of concern to the Russian elite. The Russian government has denied involvement in the anti-Bakiyev takeover. Prime Minister Vladimir Putin issued a statement on the protests: "Neither Russia, nor your humble servant, nor Russian officials have any links whatsoever to these events," he told Russian media.

However, events in the country appear for now to be out of the control of any single faction of the Kyrgyz elite or the major international powers. Both Washington and the Kremlin have called for calm in the country, and both powers will quickly seek to impose their will on whatever new government forms in Bishkek.

China is also a major player in Kyrgyzstan, with trade between the two neighbors increasing rapidly over the past decade. The government in Beijing, like its rivals in Washington and Moscow, sees Kyrgyzstan as an important link to the energy-rich Caspian Basin.



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