

# Kyrgyz opposition struggles to consolidate power

Alex Lantier  
10 April 2010

Opposition politicians in Kyrgyzstan who came to power after popular protests on April 7 toppled President Kurmanbek Bakiyev faced an explosive political situation, with continuing protests and street fighting yesterday.

Though he has fled the capital, Bishkek, Bakiyev has not resigned, and there are growing fears of a civil war in Kyrgyzstan that might draw in several major powers, including Russia and the US.

Provisional government leader Roza Otunbayeva announced at an April 8 press conference that she would cut utility costs by 50 percent. Anger at the doubling of utility prices since the 2008 privatisation of energy companies by Bakiyev was a major factor in the April 7 mobilisations.

Otunbayeva also promised constitutional reforms, and a provisional constitution with basic details about the operation of the state was reportedly passed last night. Otunbayeva claimed that the opposition controlled four of Kyrgyzstan's seven provinces.

The provisional leader said that "nothing will be changed" in a US-Kyrgyzstan agreement granting US forces the use of an airfield in Manas that is critical to the US war in Afghanistan. Officials at the US Central Command confirmed that US flights to Manas air base had resumed yesterday.

Otunbayeva declared Friday a day of mourning for those killed when police units fired live ammunition into massed protestors. Kyrgyz interim authorities estimate the death toll at 75, with more than 1,000 wounded.

Bakiyev, who is originally from the southern city of Jalalabad, has fled to the south of the country, where he is attempting to rally support. In a telephone interview with the BBC yesterday, he said that Otunbayeva's government is "completely incapable" of restoring order.

However, he admitted he had no control over "the levers of power" and proposed to negotiate. "If this so-called 'temporary' government that has appointed itself is prepared to begin negotiation talks, then I'm prepared to listen to them and see what they want," he said.

RIA Novosti reported yesterday that Otunbayeva had no plans to negotiate with Bakiyev, calling his plans to return to power "unrealistic." However, she offered to guarantee his safety if he decided to leave Kyrgyzstan.

Not only is the opposition's hold over the south tenuous, it faces continuing opposition in the north. Several bombs were discovered in Bishkek yesterday, and Otunbayeva accused Bakiyev, saying, "Today three bombs were defused [in Bishkek]. All this is being set up by Bakiyev's forces. They do not intend to surrender."

The April 7 ouster of Bakiyev was itself the product of the collapse of discipline in the army, according to an eyewitness report by David Gauzère in *Libération*. He noted that extensive gunfire was heard inside the barracks "between protesting and loyalist soldiers." This was shortly before the arrival of armored vehicles that liberated opposition politicians from prison and then broke through loyalist forces guarding key government buildings.

There were reports of small arms fire in Bishkek on the night of April 8-9, as vigilante groups loyal to the opposition fought protestors and looters. Protestors attacked businesses associated with Bakiyev's business empire, burning his houses and ripping apart "Narodni" ("People's") supermarkets.

Also, houses and shops belonging to Dungans (Muslim Chinese) and Uighurs (Turkic people from the nearby Xinjiang region of western China) were attacked in the northern Kyrgyz city of Tokmok. Xinhua, the Chinese state wire service, reported that many Chinese businesses had been attacked, including the prominent Guoying commercial center.

Otunbayeva herself seems to have been chosen as leader to smooth over differences within her government. The *Financial Times* quoted a political activist, Edil Baisalov, who described Otunbayeva as a "mother figure" who would be forced to lead by consensus. "She will have to coordinate her decisions with so many people who may think they have a veto power over her actions," he said.

Aleksandr Knyazev, a prominent political analyst in

Bishkek, told the *New York Times*: “She does not understand the Kyrgyz mentality and lacks clan support. I doubt that she will run for president. Judging by her skills, she would make a good Parliament speaker.”

Divisions between Russia and the US are rapidly emerging over how to treat the Otunbayev regime. Russian President Vladimir Putin personally called Otunbayev on the telephone and offered “humanitarian aid” on April 8, and the Russian military has moved to reinforce its position in Kyrgyzstan. Two extra companies of paratroopers arrived yesterday at the Russian air base in Kant, near Bishkek. There are also discussions of a possible Russian troop deployment to the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border.

Washington is hedging its bets, however, as it tries to come to grips with the collapse of its allied regime. US State Department spokesman Phillip Crowley commented, “There is a president who has not yielded power. There’s an interim leadership that claims to be in charge of the government. We are talking to both. It is not for us to take sides one way or the other. Our interest here is with the people of Kyrgyzstan and a peaceful resolution of the situation.”

There were reports yesterday that the US embassy had been closed and some of its personnel moved to the Manas air base.

There are rising fears that the US might lose access to the Manas air base, despite Otunbayeva’s assurances, due to internal divisions in the government or popular hostility to the US presence. Referring to Russia’s past opposition to Kyrgyzstan’s allowing the US to use the base, deputy interim government leader Omurbek Tekebayev commented: “You’ve seen the level of Russia’s joy when they saw Bakiyev gone. So now there is a high probability that the duration of the US air base’s presence in Kyrgyzstan will be shortened.”

While this might refer to a renegotiation of the terms of the US lease on the base, such comments on a crucial base are enough to concern Washington. Most US troops and 20 percent of US matériel bound for Afghanistan pass through Manas; US President Barack Obama’s “surge” of forces into Afghanistan means that more than 1,500 US soldiers pass through the base every day. The base’s tanker planes also refuel NATO fighter jets patrolling Afghan airspace, making it easier for NATO to carry out bombing missions around the clock.

The unpopularity of the US deployment in Afghanistan and its use of the Manas air base heighten these concerns. Last year, Bakiyev insisted that the US cease referring to it as a base, calling it instead a “transit center.”

Alexander Cooley, a Central Asia expert at Barnard College, told CNN: “The United States stayed silent as Bakiyev built a criminal state.” Cooley added that US rent

paid for use of the air base “went to companies and shady off-shore enterprises controlled by [Bakiyev’s] family. It’s the actual site of tacit deals and corruption.”

Ruling circles in the West clearly fear a wide backlash in the Kyrgyz population. Centerra, set up as a subsidiary of the Canadian mining firm Cameco, is unpopular in Kyrgyzstan after a 1998 cyanide spill from operations at its major Kumtor gold mine. Even though Centerra’s operations have not been disturbed, its stock plunged 16 percent in the first two days after Bakiyev’s ouster.

The opposition’s attempt to profit from popular opposition to Bakiyev is shot through with hypocrisy. Its attempt to win Washington’s favor by keeping Manas defies popular opinion, and its attempts to keep energy prices down face profound obstacles.

Attempts to repair the country’s hydropower infrastructure face profound obstacles bound up with the economic collapse and rising national tensions that developed from the dissolution of the USSR. This infrastructure fell into disrepair, and repairing it involves large-scale investment that would have to be obtained abroad. It would also risk a hostile response from Uzbekistan, which uses waters from Kyrgyz rivers further downstream for its irrigation and industrial operations.

Under these conditions, Otunbayeva’s regime is appealing to both the US and Russia, but leaning more towards the latter. She sent a delegation to Moscow yesterday to ask for humanitarian assistance, including oil supplies, commenting: “We have a range of needs, above all, oil products, and we need finance.”

Deputy interim government leader Omurbek Tekebayev announced yesterday that “in event of a conflict, Russian troops could participate in bringing peace.” Tekebayev noted that while Kyrgyz law does not allow foreign forces to participate in internal conflicts, this law might be overlooked if his government lost control of the situation.

Such a deployment would heighten US-Russia rivalry for influence in Central Asia, with potentially explosive consequences.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**