

Kyrgyz president flees country

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The deposed president of Kyrgyzstan, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, has left the country for neighboring Kazakhstan and is possibly en route to another destination. Bakiyev was ousted from power last week by street protests.

His departure, which may have forestalled the outbreak of civil war, was reportedly orchestrated by the United States, Russia and Kazakhstan, with the active participation of the United Nations, the European Union and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. However, the political situation in Kyrgyzstan remains unstable.

Bakiyev was flown out of Kyrgyzstan shortly after attempting to address a rally of his supporters in the southern city of Osh on Wednesday. Witnesses claim that just after the former president took the stage to address the crowd, his security detail fired gunshots into the air, possibly in an effort to frighten off a group of opposition protesters. Bakiyev then quickly left the event.

At some point later in the day, he boarded a military transport plane in his hometown of Jalalabad and left the country for the Kazakh city of Taraz. There are unconfirmed reports that he may continue on to Turkey or Latvia. According to press accounts, Bakiyev's wife and two young daughters accompanied him.

The interim government in Bishkek, led by Roza Otunbayeva, reports that Bakiyev has signed a formal letter of resignation.

Bakiyev's flight to Kazakhstan followed a week of escalating political tensions in Kyrgyzstan, a small resource-poor former Soviet republic in the heart of Central Asia. The acting Kyrgyz government, as well as the Kremlin, had been warning that the country was on the verge of descending into violent conflict.

After being driven from the capital by anti-government demonstrations sparked by huge hikes in utility rates, Bakiyev and his extended family holed up in their hometown in the south of the country. He threatened to foment civil war and insisted that any attempt to arrest him would be met with force. Akhmat Bakiyev, a relative in residence with the ousted leader in Jalalabad, told the Associated Press early this week, "We are in full combat readiness," and the former president promised "bloodshed."

Bakiyev demanded that the Otunbayeva regime guarantee his safety and that of his family in return for his resignation. The interim government called on Bakiyev to give himself up and agree to stand trial, presumably for corruption and the shooting

of protesters during last week's demonstrations. While the terms under which Bakiyev was allowed to leave the country are unknown, publicly Otunbayeva had refused to extend protection to Bakiyev's family members, who are implicated in the recent violence in Bishkek and extensive financial corruption.

On Tuesday, Russian President Dmitri Medvedev told an audience at the Brookings Institution in Washington that Kyrgyzstan was in danger of splitting along north-south lines. He insisted that if the country fractured, it could become a haven for Islamist forces in Central Asia and develop into a "second Afghanistan."

Medvedev's warnings were aimed at enlisting the participation of the US in ending the standoff in Kyrgyzstan. Bakiyev has close ties to Washington, which provided political and financial backing to his regime in return for the stationing of a major American military installation on Kyrgyz soil. The Manas base outside of Bishkek is the principal center for funneling troops and supplies to US and NATO occupation forces in Afghanistan. The US had a central role to play in getting Bakiyev to concede to a peaceful resolution to the crisis.

The Obama administration had already made clear earlier in the week that it would not back Bakiyev's efforts to regain power. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton phoned Otunbayeva shortly after she had assumed power and sent an envoy, Robert Blake, to the country to hold talks with her government. On Wednesday, Blake issued a statement expressing his optimism about Kyrgyzstan's interim leadership and applauding its efforts to "restore democracy."

Washington's initial fears that it might lose the Manas airbase were allayed when the interim government announced shortly after taking power that the "status quo" would be maintained. Washington believes that Otunbayeva, who served as Kyrgyz ambassador to the US for many years and has longstanding ties with the Americans, is someone with whom it can do business. The Obama administration calculated that whatever the risks associated with the transition to a new regime in Bishkek, these were less than those posed by the country's disintegration into civil conflict.

The Otunbayeva government has welcomed relations with the US. While government corruption surrounding contracts with the US airbase is a major source of popular discontent and had

been a focus of the opposition's criticisms of Bakiyev's regime, Otunbayeva has already backed away from this issue. In an interview with the *Washington Post* on Friday, Otunbayeva responded to a reporter's question about whether there is corruption involving the US facility by saying, "I can't tell you now." She went on to praise Washington's cooperation with the new government.

While the immediate prospect of a Bakiyev-led attempt to overthrow the interim government has been averted by his departure, the political and economic situation in Kyrgyzstan remains tense and unstable.

The interim government had made a point of demanding that Bakiyev be put on trial, and Otunbayeva has indicated that he will be brought back to Kyrgyzstan in the future for prosecution. If this fails to happen, popular disillusionment with the new regime, which promised to bring Bakiyev to justice, will grow.

The same holds true with regard to Bakiyev's family members, many of whom are implicated in the crimes of the former regime and are still in Kyrgyzstan. Zhanybek Bakiyev, the former president's brother, was head of the state security services. He reportedly gave the order to police to shoot at anti-government protesters last week, resulting in the deaths of upwards of 80 people.

Bakiyev's son, Maxim Bakiyev, is the country's wealthiest businessman. He has made himself rich through the misappropriation of government funds and by securing sweetheart contracts with the US airbase. He is deeply despised by the population. The demonstrations that ousted his father were sparked by a sharp increase in utility rates charged by companies under his control.

The present leaders in Bishkek are in a precarious political position. They lack a base of support within the broader population. They were not brought into power by a mass movement. Rather, the keys to the presidential palace fell into their hands when Bakiyev was driven from office by street demonstrations.

Otunbayeva's "democratic" credentials are seriously lacking. She is a long-time political operative in Kyrgyzstan. She had been a member of the autocratic government of Askar Akayev and was a backer of Bakiyev until she fell out with his regime. She and the entire "opposition" government are viewed with skepticism by ordinary Kyrgyz people, who have already had an experience with "opposition" leaders—Bakiyev himself was such a figure, brought into office by the "Tulip Revolution" in 2005.

Furthermore, while Bakiyev himself may have fled the country, the web of familial and business interests he headed remains. Over the course of the past week there have been reports of looting and theft carried out at mining sites and businesses across the country. The South African-based company Golds Field was forced to evacuate staff from its camp in the northwest earlier this week, after a gang seized

hold of its operations.

Some suspect that individuals with close ties to the ousted president are behind the raids. Their aim is to grab hold of whatever riches they can before the Bakiyev clan is fully driven out of its privileged position in the state bureaucracy and business elite.

"Crime is never detached from politics in this country. Bakiyev's people are fleeing the capital. The redistribution of property is happening, from local markets to shops to bigger companies," one Bishkek resident recently told the *Washington Post*.

The United States and Russia are working to prop up the new regime. The Kremlin, in particular, is lending substantial support to Otunbayeva's government. Speaking about the importance of helping "friends" in need, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin announced that Russia is offering Kyrgyzstan \$50 million in financial aid, 25,000 tons of fuel, and 1,500 tons of seed.

While this is less than the \$150 million the government requested, it is a much-needed lifeline for the state, whose treasury has reportedly been emptied. Russia, which was the first government to recognize the legitimacy of the Otunbayeva administration, will also increase the volume of fruits and vegetables it imports from Kyrgyzstan. Agriculture is a significant part of the country's economy.

Russia was pleased to see the Bakiyev regime fall. It had come into conflict with the former president over the continued presence of the US airbase on Kyrgyz territory and over control of a Soviet-era weapons manufacturing plant, among other things. Bakiyev had repeatedly reneged on deals worked out with the Kremlin that would secure Russian interests and undercut the position of the US in Kyrgyzstan. However, although Moscow is a strong backer of Otunbayeva, her elevation to power by no means guarantees that Russia's interests in Kyrgyzstan will be protected.

Otunbayeva has already made clear that she intends to court the US. The speed with which she gave assurances to the Obama administration that the lease for the Manas airbase would be honored was a sign of her commitment to accommodating American interests.

While Russia and the US appear to have worked jointly to resolve the power crisis created by Bakiyev's ouster, the two countries will continue to come into political conflict in Kyrgyzstan and throughout Central Asia.



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