

Political instability continues in Kyrgyzstan after president flees

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Ousted Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiyev arrived in the capital of Belarus on Monday. Having fled Kyrgyzstan on April 15 after his government was overthrown amid street protests against utility rate hikes and corruption, Bakiyev and his family had been in the neighboring Kazakhstan for the last several days.

Bakiyev's departure has failed to quell political tensions in the strategically important Central Asian country. Challenges to the authority of the new interim government, led by Roza Otunbayeva, are ongoing.

This past weekend Bakiyev supporters in the southern city of Jalalabad seized regional government buildings and installed a pro-Bakiyev police chief. This city, and much of the south of Kyrgyzstan, is the home of Bakiyev's traditional base of support. During his five years in power, the former president used state funds to cultivate a network of clan loyalties in the region.

A protest of around 1,000 supporters of the deposed president also occurred in Jalalabad on Monday, with demonstrators demanding a halt to any possible efforts by the country's new leaders to prosecute Bakiyev and his extended family for corruption, human rights abuses, and the shooting of anti-government protesters earlier this month.

There have also been pro-Bakiyev demonstrations in the southern city of Osh, where police officers and other security personnel are demanding immunity from prosecution for their role in attempting to put down the anti-Bakiyev revolt. Ethnic violence appears to have increased as well in recent days, with several reports of attacks by the country's ethnic Kyrgyz against minority Russian and Meskhetian Turkic farms and businesses. This week gangs of young ethnic Kyrgyz reportedly killed at least five Meskhetian Turks in the village of Mayavka, on the outskirts of Bishkek.

The interim government, led by Roza Otunbayeva,

has suggested that elements loyal to Bakiyev are attempting to stir up ethnic tensions in order to destabilize the new regime. In a taste of how the new government plans to deal with unrest, around 500 troops and armed police were sent to prevent a crowd of ethnic Kyrgyz from allegedly attempting to loot minority-owned homes and businesses near Bishkek.

Russian President Dmitri Medvedev has called on the Otunbayeva administration to intensify its crackdown on signs of ethnic fighting or pro-Bakiyev demonstrations. "We count on the interim government to take necessary and sufficient steps...otherwise anarchy will gravely hit the people of Kyrgyzstan and its neighbors," Medvedev told the press Monday in Moscow.

While Russia is a strong backer of Otunbayeva and was the first government to officially recognize the new regime in Bishkek, Moscow is concerned about the political implications of the fact that Bakiyev was ousted by a movement of the impoverished. Its fears are shared by the region's ruling elites. President Islam Karimov, the dictatorial leader of Uzbekistan, recently told the press during a trip to Moscow that events in Kyrgyzstan had created "the illusion that it is very simple to overthrow any legal form of leadership or government."

The Kremlin is keen on ensuring that Otunbayeva, who came into power not with popular support but because of the political vacuum created by Bakiyev's departure, maintain control over the situation in the country. Accordingly, it has promised \$50 million in aid to Kyrgyzstan and dispatched 150 paratroopers to reinforce a local Russian airbase.

Moscow also likely played a central role in getting Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko to offer Bakiyev safe harbor, in an effort to prevent the deposed

president from mounting a comeback that could spark civil war in Kyrgyzstan, destabilizing Russian economic and defense interests in the energy-rich region.

However, while Lukashenko has welcomed his fellow autocrat with open arms, describing the ousted Kyrgyz president as his “dearest friend” and “colleague,” Bakiyev’s ultimate fate still remains unclear.

Belarus and Kyrgyzstan, both former Soviet republics, have well-established economic and security ties. The new regime in Bishkek has sought to downplay suggestions of a dispute with Minsk over Lukashenko’s decision to shelter Bakiyev. A spokesman for the Otunbayeva government recently insisted that the two countries “shall remain friends,” but went on to state that Bishkek would request Bakiyev’s extradition. Whether or not this will actually happen is unknown.

Although Otunbayeva is under significant popular pressure to pursue Bakiyev and his cronies for their crimes, she is largely indifferent to the legitimate grievances of the Kyrgyz people. The new government will prosecute members of the deposed regime only inasmuch as doing so allows the ruling elite now in the presidential palace to wrest control of lucrative state contracts and businesses away from the Bakiyev clan. Furthermore, to the extent that the Otunbayeva administration needs to ally itself with elements of the old regime in order to stay in power, it will avoid pursuing investigations and prosecutions. At the same time, however, failure to bring Bakiyev “to justice,” or at the very least, make a show of doing so, will further inflame already widespread social discontent.

In an attempt to keep a lid on the explosive situation in Kyrgyzstan, the United States, despite its prior support for Bakiyev and rivalry with Moscow, is also working to shore up Otunbayeva’s regime. Further unrest in Kyrgyzstan could destabilize the entire region, including the US puppet regime in Afghanistan, and jeopardize a critical American airbase located in Manas, Kyrgyzstan.

Like Russia, the US has effectively recognized the Otunbayeva administration as the new government of Kyrgyzstan. It has promised millions of dollars in aid so long as the country’s new leaders can create a stable enough environment for US military operations to

continue. As was shown in its sponsorship of the Bakiyev regime, Washington will expect the new government to achieve this “stability” no matter the cost to the masses of Kyrgyzstan.



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