

Rival factions continue to vie for power in Kyrgyzstan

Niall Green
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Over one month since anti-government demonstrations in Kyrgyzstan forced President Kurmanbek Bakiyev from office, fighting continues between rival factions in the former Soviet republic. The provisional regime in the capital, Bishkek, faces intensifying opposition in the southern provinces of the country from forces linked to the deposed president.

Hundreds of supporters of the former president attempted to retake control of government buildings in the cities of Osh, Batken and Jalalabad on May 13. The following day, security forces and groups loyal to the interim government retook control of the buildings in Osh. In Jalalabad, several hundred pro-government and pro-Bakiyev supporters clashed, leaving one confirmed dead and around 60 people wounded.

Pro-Bakiyev forces have allegedly kidnapped the current governor of Jalalabad, who was installed after the demonstrations last month. Bakiyev, a former oppositionist of the 2005 Tulip Revolution turned authoritarian leader, was forced to flee the country amid mass protests in early April.

There have been several demonstrations recently in Jalalabad demanding the reinstatement of the deposed provincial governor, Mamsadak Bakirov, an ally of Bakiyev. The ex-president's family is based in the Jalalabad area, and he retains strong clan and political ties to the local elite.

Cut off from the patronage they had enjoyed under the previous regime and facing retribution from the provisional government, local elites in the south of Kyrgyzstan have attempted to secure their interests by force. As well as attempting to gain control of local government, there are reports that pro-Bakiyev clans have called for secession from the country and the establishment of a "southern Kyrgyz republic."

Anti-interim government forces, many of whom have

family or clan ties to Bakiyev, claim to have 25,000 supporters from the southern region ready to march to Bishkek. Russia's Interfax news agency reported that organizers of the march were preparing to gather supporters in Jalalabad this week.

The interim government, led by Rosa Otunbayeva, has initiated legal action against several senior figures from the ousted administration. It is seeking the extradition of Bakiyev from Belarus, where the former president and his family have been granted asylum.

Deputy Interim President Azimbek Beknazarov visited Jalalabad on Saturday. Surrounded by heavily armed bodyguards, Beknazarov promised to crack down on forces linked to the former president, warning that they were hoarding weapons and threatening the security of the country.

There are reports that elements of the security forces remain loyal to Bakiyev and may not step in to defend the provisional government in the event of an open conflict with forces from the south. Police in Bishkek and the southern region have publically protested against the Otunbayeva regime. There is widespread public opposition to the security forces for their role in brutally attempting to suppress the anti-Bakiyev uprising in April, during which over 80 demonstrators were killed.

The provisional government, comprised of sections of the national elite, was an entirely undeserving beneficiary of the April anti-Bakiyev protests. Otunbayeva is a longtime senior political figure in Bishkek, having served as foreign minister, ambassador to Washington, and an ally of Bakiyev during the Tulip Revolution.

Faced with mass outpourings of anger by the impoverished working class, primarily directed against price hikes and the corruption of Bakiyev, Otunbayeva

and her allies sought to assume control in the wake of the street protests in order to prevent any threat to the property interests of the elite. To the extent that the new regime had differences with the ousted administration of Bakiyev, it was over the distribution of lucrative state contracts, which the Bakiyev family had monopolized since 2005.

Expressing the true character of the new administration, one of Otunbayeva's first moves upon assuming office was to guarantee the continued operation of a US airbase at Manas, near the capital. The base—whose existence is widely opposed in the country—is a vital logistical center for the movement of US troops and materiel into occupied Afghanistan.

Opposition to Bakiyev among workers and the rural poor was driven by the massive social inequality in the country, which has been ruled by a venal elite that has looted the ex-Soviet economy. Infrastructure, such as the country's extensive hydroelectric system, has been left to rot, leading to frequent power cuts and contributing to the sharp increases in electricity prices, which sparked last month's protests. Unemployment in the urban areas and landlessness in the countryside have forced many to travel to Russia and other neighboring ex-Soviet states in search of work, much of which has dried up following the global economic crisis.

Faced with such poverty, and lacking any political leadership outside of the local elite, the working people of Kyrgyzstan are faced with the threat of civil war between the north and south, as well as ethnic fighting between the Kyrgyz majority and minority Russian and Turkic groups.

The Otunbayeva interim government has, for now, won the backing of Russia and the United States, who look to it to police the seething resentment of the masses in Kyrgyzstan. Washington and Moscow are worried that further civil strife in the country will threaten their military bases in the country and destabilize the entire region.

Events in Kyrgyzstan serve as a reminder of the precarious position of all the regimes in the region. Instability in this small Central Asian country could threaten to undermine neighboring Kazakhstan, ruled by the US-backed autocrat Nursultan Nazarbayev, as well as Afghanistan.



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