

Interim government moves to consolidate power in Kyrgyzstan

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The government of Kyrgyzstan, which seized power in April from former President Kurnmanbek Bakiyev, has moved to clamp down on opposition protests and maintain its unelected rule for a protracted period.

Assuming office following violent anti-Bakiyev protests last month, the new government promised to hold fresh presidential elections this year. Drawn from the elite of Kyrgyzstan, many of whom were once closely associated with Bakiyev, the new regime sought above all to ensure that the anti-government demonstrations by workers in the country were brought quickly under their control.

Roza Otunbayeva, a former ally of Bakiyev, heads the provisional government. A leading political figure in the country since the 1990s, when she served as ambassador to Britain and the United States, Otunbayeva has declared that she will remain as interim president until the end of 2011, instead of the previously stated date of October this year.

A new constitution as well as the provision approving Otunbayeva's extended interim presidency is due to be voted on in a referendum in June.

In addition, the Otunbayeva administration has moved to suppress opposition in the south of the country, where Bakiyev's family is from and where much of his support remains based. The interim government has decreed a state of emergency and nighttime curfew in the southern city of Jalalabad, where there have been attempts by Bakiyev supporters to take control of local government offices.

In their consolidation of power Otunbayeva and the factions of the elite around her feel they have the support of the major powers and the rulers of neighboring Central Asian countries. Russia and the US both have airbases in Kyrgyzstan and want to ensure that their military presence is not disrupted by further

civil strife in the country. The US base at Manas airfield outside the capital, Bishkek, serves as a major logistical point for moving materiel and troops into occupied Afghanistan.

The US presence at Manas is widely opposed in Kyrgyzstan, and calls for shuttering the base were a common feature of April's protests.

Russia was the first country to recognize Otunbayeva's government, and the Kremlin has promised millions of dollars in aid to Kyrgyzstan. Notwithstanding its previous backing for the deposed Bakiyev, Washington has also worked with the new interim regime. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has pledged to "support the efforts of the Kyrgyz administration to resolve peacefully Kyrgyzstan's current political problems" and continue "humanitarian assistance and United States support for Kyrgyz efforts to stabilize their political and economic situation," according to the State Department's web site.

The mass demonstrations that precipitated the fall of the Bakiyev government and forced him into exile were met with undisguised hostility by the other despotic rulers in the region. Speaking to media in Moscow shortly after Bakiyev was forced from office, the president of neighboring Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov, stated that he would not allow such actions to take place in his country. In Kazakhstan, President Nursultan Nazarbayev was given the titled "leader of the nation" and granted lifetime immunity from prosecution in a change to the constitution passed by the country's parliament on May 13. The move is widely seen as an attempt to allow Nazarbayev, 69, to strengthen his grip on power while grooming a successor.

A meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Russian and Chinese-led economic and

security group that includes the ex-Soviet Central Asian states, in Moscow May 20 discussed the situation in Kyrgyzstan. The SCO declared that they supported the territorial integrity of Kyrgyzstan—a response to calls from some Bakiyev supporters in the south of the country for a “southern Kyrgyz republic” to secede from Bishkek, a move that would spark a civil war that could spread into Uzbekistan.

In a sign of tentative backing for the new regime in Bishkek, the SCO offered to allow the interim government to appoint a special envoy to the organization’s meetings, including a summit in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, in June. Speaking after the SCO meeting, Russia’s Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated: “As long as Kyrgyzstan remains a fully-fledged national entity and a full SCO member, its presence at the summit is absolutely essential.”

“At the same time, the level of its presence will be agreed with Kyrgyz leaders as they take steps to legitimize the new administration of Kyrgyzstan,” Lavrov continued.

The situation in the country remains highly unstable, however. The interim government in Bishkek lacks a popular base of support, presiding over an impoverished and deeply socially unequal society, and is confronted with powerful pro-Bakiyev supporters in the south of the country. This southern region is less economically developed than Bishkek and the north of the country, and has traditionally relied on subsidies from the central government.

The southern Kyrgyz elite, especially those with personal ties to the Bakiyev clan, is seething over its loss of patronage and sees little reason to support the new regime in Bishkek. This has fueled ethnic divisions in the region, as rival elites scramble to protect or advance their claim to the meager resources of the state.

Otunbayeva’s interim government declared a state of emergency in the southern city of Jalalabad on May 19 after two people were killed in clashes between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbek groups outside a private university mainly attended by Uzbek youth.

There were reports of gunfire near the university, with some claiming that police had fired shots to disperse the rival factions.

Local Uzbek leader Kadyrjan Batyrov funds the university and is accused by his opponents in Jalalabad of using the unrest in the country to advance his

position at the expense of Kyrgyz clans loyal to Bakiyev.

The government in Bishkek has blamed the clashes on pro-Bakiyev groups, with Otunbayeva condemning “all attempts to foment violence and sow the seeds of political discord among our people, especially between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz.”

There have been few violent episodes between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in the country’s recent history. However, in 1990, as the USSR broke up, there were ethnic clashes in the south of the then-Soviet Kyrgyz republic. The southern cities of Osh and Jalalabad had been largely Uzbek until the later 20th century, when formerly nomadic Kyrgyz people moved into them in search of jobs and housing. Forced to compete for scarce resources on the basis of their ethnicity, the groups clashed in June 1990, leading to an estimated 300 deaths.

Conditions in the country, as across the former USSR, are in many regards worse than they were 20 years ago, as the industrial and social infrastructure of the Soviet Union has been dismantled or left to wither. Workers and the rural poor—Kyrgyz, Uzbek and those from other minorities—remain mired in poverty and face chronic shortages of housing, farmland, jobs and services.

Added to this, the current power struggles between the local elites in Kyrgyzstan are threatening to ignite new and bloodier interethnic and north-south regional conflicts.



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