



Issue Brief

Recent Developments in Kyrgyzstan: Domestic and Foreign Policy Concerns

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Within the span of five years, Kyrgyzstan has witnessed two regime changes forced by mass protest movements. The first was the West-inspired ‘colour revolution’ called ‘Tulip Revolution’ on March 24, 2005, when faced with mass protests, the first President Askar Akayev, a northerner, suddenly fled the country for Russia. This enabled Kurmanbek Bakiyev, belonging to one of the southern Kyrgyz clans, to become the next President. Five years later on April 7, 2010, mass protests again rocked Kyrgyzstan leading to regime change. In the first case, force was not used against the protesters. However, during the second time Security forces fired at them leaving more than 80 people dead and fifteen hundred wounded. President Kurmanbek Bakiyev fled to his native village. The coalition of opposition parties formed a provisional government led by a former foreign minister and ambassador, Roza Otunbaeva. Initially, Bakiyev refused to resign and tried to rally support in the south fuelling speculation about possible civil war between the northern and southern parts of the country.¹ Subsequently, on April 15 Bakiyev left the country and took refuge in neighbouring Kazakhstan. On both occasions, unruly mobs looted the department stores in capital Bishkek that shook business confidence in the newly opened market economy.

Kyrgyzstan has a unique distinction of hosting the military bases of both Russia and the USA that are located near Bishkek at just 40-km distance from each other. In December 2001, Kyrgyzstan leased Manas airbase to the US for carrying on anti-Taliban operations in Afghanistan. In 2003, Russia set up an air base at Kant under the auspices of Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).² Like other Central Asian states, Kyrgyzstan follows a multi-vector policy balancing among major powers and important international players.

Kyrgyzstan shares a long 858-km border with the Xinjiang Uigur Autonomous Region of China. The number of Uigurs living in Kyrgyzstan is estimated at 50,000 as compared to nearly 200,000 in Kazakhstan. China is interested in ensuring that its own restive Uigur population does not get any encouragement or support from across the border in Central Asia. China’s creeping presence continues to expand. In the year 2008, China was Kyrgyzstan’s second biggest trade partner, which exported 13 times more goods to Kyrgyzstan than it imported from there and that too mainly raw materials.

Kazakhstan is Kyrgyzstan's elder brotherly neighbour in the north. Uzbekistan, the most populous Central Asian state with the largest standing army in the region, is Kyrgyzstan's western neighbour. Fifteen per cent of Kyrgyzstan's population comprises of ethnic Uzbeks concentrated in the Fergana Valley region of southern Kyrgyzstan. Part of Uzbek-Kyrgyz border remains disputed. Another source of friction in inter-state relations is the dispute over sharing of water. With Tajikistan also, its neighbour in the south, Kyrgyzstan has disputes over border and sharing of water and electricity. There also exists a looming threat of terrorism and Islamic militancy emanating from the southern direction from Afghanistan via Tajikistan. Beginning with the summer of 1999 till the overthrow of the Taliban militia from Afghanistan by the US forces in late 2001, Islamic militants belonging to the IMU (Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan) made annual incursions in the southern Kyrgyz region of Batken. The influence of *Hizb-ut-Tahrir*, which works through small-dispersed groups and aims to establish an Islamic Caliphate in the region –although purportedly by peaceful means--, is also believed to be growing, especially in southern Kyrgyzstan.

Socio-Economic Hardships

Kyrgyzstan lacks hydrocarbon resources, but it has immense hydropower generation potential estimated at 142 billion KWh.³ Some of the electricity plants and large water reservoirs on the Naryn River were built during the Soviet times. The building of new reservoirs and hydroelectricity plants requires billions of dollars and long time --about 10-12 years. Kyrgyzstan does not have the resources to build them on its own.

Post-Soviet economic transition was particularly painful as state-owned factories closed down resulting in mass unemployment and economic distress. Hundreds of thousands of Kyrgyz nationals work in Russia and Kazakhstan as migrant workers. Many Kyrgyz work as petty traders, buying cheap Chinese consumer goods and selling them back home and to neighbouring Central Asians. Kyrgyz economy was hit hard by the recent world financial crisis as remittances from workers in Russia and Kazakhstan went down. Recent protests were provoked by hike in utility costs in the backdrop of widespread public discontent over economic hardships and corruption.

An Island of Democracy

In the early post independence years, the West looked on with approval and admiration at the Kyrgyz economic reforms, emergence of a large number of NGOs, many political parties and independent press⁴ as proof of growing democratization. Kyrgyzstan seemed like an 'island of democracy' in the former Soviet space. President Akaev spoke of building civic nationalism in plural and multi-ethnic Kyrgyzstan. The mountainous republic was projected as the "Switzerland" of Asia. It became the first former Soviet country to join WTO in 1998.

On the flip side, extensive foreign loans made Kyrgyzstan one of the heavily indebted countries. At the end of 2001, external debt stood at 125 percent of the country's GDP.⁵

Contradiction between Democratic Pretensions and Authoritarian Core

The Kyrgyz political and system –like other Central Asian states— remains based on patronage networks linked to clans and tribes. President Akaev, an academician with liberal image, apparently played the democratic game, but kept intact his control over all the levers of political and economic power. The growing tension between democratic and authoritarian tendencies erupted in the March 24 ‘Tulip Revolution’.

Although Moscow objected to the West-inspired ‘colour revolutions’ in the former Soviet space, it decided to do business with the new leaders in Kyrgyzstan. The newly appointed Prime Minister and Provisional President Kurmanbek Bakiyev (who has a Russian wife), influential politician Felix Kulov, and other important leaders all reiterated that friendship with Russia continued to occupy the priority in the country's foreign relations. Moreover, new leaders were familiar faces as former members of Akaev's team.

Kurmanbek Bakiyev

Bakiyev rose to power on the tide of a popular revolt. However, once firmly in saddle, he concentrated all powers in his hands and reduced Parliament to a subservient position. Allegations of official corruption and ineptitude multiplied. Bakiyev openly practised nepotism. His elder brother was made the head of the security structure. His Son Maksim, reportedly, controlled the financial processes. There were allegations that the stage was being prepared to hand over reins of power to Bakiyev's son.⁶ Southern tribes and clans occupied positions of power at the expense of the northern clans. Bakiyev administration tried to muzzle the press. There were attacks on journalists. In fact, the assessment of the Bakiyev regime by both the Western and Russian experts was remarkably similar. In 2009, Freedom House, a US-based advocacy group, for the first time categorised Kyrgyzstan along with other central Asian states as a "consolidated authoritarian regime."⁷

Speaking on April 7, the day Bakiyev fled the capital, Russia's Prime Minister Putin denied that Russia had a hand in the Kyrgyz developments, but added that Bakiev had criticized the previous leader Akaev for nepotism, but it seemed that he had “fallen into the same trap.”

US Air Base at Manas Airport near Bishkek at the Centre of Controversy

Kyrgyz flip flops at the Manas air base have been in news for quite some time. In the wake of March 24, Kyrgyz revolution and violent incidents in Andijan (Uzbekistan) in May 2005, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit in Astana (Kazakhstan) adopted a resolution on July 5, 2005 asking the USA to set a timeframe for

the withdrawal of bases from Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan ordered the eviction of the US base at Karshi-Khanabad by the year-end. Kyrgyzstan later on consented to the continuation of the US base for increased rent payment.

Following the loss of the Uzbek base, Manas airbase acquired greater strategic importance for the US-led coalition as the only facility in Central Asia. Roughly 20% of Western logistics destined for Afghanistan flow through this base. According to reports, the US also has intelligence facilities embedded in the base.⁸

During President Bakiev's February 2009 visit to the Russian capital, Moscow offered a hefty aid package of \$ 2.15 billion comprising \$ 150 million in grant, \$ 300 million loan at nominal interest rate and \$ 1.7 billion investment pledge for the construction of Kambarata -1 hydropower plant on the upper reaches of Naryn River. In return, Moscow reportedly wanted the Manas airbase closed. On February 3, 2009, Bakiyev announced that the US airbase at Manas would be closed, but did not specify any time limit. The media speculated about the possible negotiations over increased rent payment by the US for the continuation of the base as the Kyrgyz President was essentially interested in getting financial advantage from both Moscow and Washington.

Finally, in June 2009, Bishkek agreed to allow the US to stay at the base for a year in exchange for tripling of the rent. The USA agreed to pay \$60 million against \$17.4 million per year that it paid earlier. The base acquired a new name -- "Manas Transit Center." However, most of the operating clauses in the new agreement remained the same as in the previous agreement.⁹

In the meanwhile, Kyrgyzstan also extended by 49-years Russian lease of Kant base. It was announced that Russia would open a second base in the Fergana Valley part of Kyrgyzstan.¹⁰ Neighbouring Uzbekistan promptly expressed strong objection to the possibility of a Russian base in the Fergana Valley. In response, Russia said that the base at Fergana would be of a defensive nature and mainly cater to training requirements.

Russia-US Rivalry and Convergence of Interests in Eurasia

Much has been written on Russia-US rivalry in Eurasia. Russia claims to have a privileged sphere of influence in its backyard in Central Asia and Caucasus. On coming to power, Obama administration promised to 'reset buttons' in relations with Russia. However, the US remained opposed to special "spheres of influence." Russia feels squeezed by the expansion of NATO in Eastern Europe and suspects larger NATO designs. As regards the presence of US and NATO troops in Afghanistan, Moscow has mixed feelings. It welcomes the US/NATO troops fighting the religious extremist Taliban forces there as religious militancy threatens the security of Russia and Central Asian states also. Thus, Russia allowed the transit of non-military cargo across its territory for US/NATO forces in Afghanistan. During President Obama's Moscow visit in a landmark agreement on July 6, 2009, Russia allowed 4,500 over flights – about 12 per day — carrying military cargo for US/NATO troops deployed in Afghanistan. At the

same time, Moscow views with concern Washington's presence in the Eurasian heartland.

Reports of Russia Withholding Aid to Kyrgyzstan

In February 2010, twelve months after the promise of more than \$ 2 billion aid, reports came that Moscow was not satisfied with the way the first tranche of \$450 million¹¹ was used by Kyrgyz authorities. The report said that Moscow was withholding \$ 1.7 billion earmarked for the construction of Kambarata -1 hydropower project.¹² It seemed that Moscow was annoyed at Kyrgyz government going back on the promise to close the Manas airbase. Moreover, Moscow probably did not want to antagonize Uzbekistan, which is staunchly opposed to the construction of new dams and power stations on the upper reaches of the inter-republican rivers for fear of water shortages.

April 2010 Regime Change in Bishkek: Advantage Russia in the First Round

The US-led West seemed to have burnt its fingers by promoting 'democracy' through so-called 'colour revolutions' in the post-Soviet space. Subsequently, Washington appeared to have opted for the more cautious policy of doing business with the current regimes. Considerations of *realpolitik* prompted Washington to cosy up to Bakiev and family.¹³ The USA also spent millions of dollars in training and equipping Kyrgyzstan's security forces.¹⁴

While Russia was mulling the idea of opening a second base in the Fergana Valley region of Kyrgyzstan, the news came in March 2010 that the US intended to open an anti-terror training centre in the southern Kyrgyz city of Batken. Moscow viewed the report as yet another encroachment by Washington in the traditional Russian sphere of influence.¹⁵ Reflecting a certain hardening of Russian stand, the Russian media became increasingly critical of the Bakiyev government.¹⁶

Following the events of April 7, 2010, Moscow promptly recognized the new regime and expressed sympathy for those who had died facing the bullets of Bakiev's forces. Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin was the first foreign dignitary, who spoke to the head of the newly constituted Provisional government in Kyrgyzstan, Roza Otunbaeva, a former foreign minister and career diplomat, considered to be one of the most experienced politicians in the country. Roza Otunbayeva said in an interview with Ekho Moskvyy on April 8:

"We are grateful to the Russian Federation and to the Russian prime minister, because in those days there was the support, significant support from Russia that exposed the family of a criminal regime."

Apparently, Moscow had taken a leaf from the US policy of 'regime change' through mass protest movements. The regime change this time put the US on the back foot. It seemed like advantage Moscow in the first round. There were speculations

regarding the future of the US base at Manas. A prominent opposition leader, Omurbek Tekebayev, told Reuters on April 8 that Russia had "played its role in ousting Bakiyev" and that there was a "high probability that the duration of the US air base's presence in Kyrgyzstan will be shortened."¹⁷ Several Western commentators began to see in the developments in Kyrgyzstan the Russian determination to reassert its influence in the former Soviet space.¹⁸ New York Times editorial of April 9, 2010 advised,

“When President Dmitry Medvedev of Russia visits Washington next week, President Obama needs to convince him that the United States has no interest in remaking the political status quo in Central Asia.... Kyrgyzstan is in Russia’s backyard, and the fact that we depend on our air base there for our Afghan war doesn’t change that. Presenting a united front with Russia, however, would help Washington keep its air base and avoid another bidding war. It would also provide some political equilibrium that might keep those now on the outs in Bishkek from hijacking the Kyrgyz state again.”

Russia, US and Kazakhstan act together to maintain stability

Good sense appears to have finally prevailed. Leaders of Russia, USA and Kazakhstan with the active participation of peace missions of OSCE and UN acted together to prevail upon President Bakiyev to resign and leave the country on April 15. They appeared to have realized that if Kyrgyzstan further descends into chaos and civil war and becomes a failed state, the terrorists, Islamic radicals and drugs and arms peddlers would take advantage of the situation. Kyrgyzstan might become another Afghanistan. It appears that the sides realized that none of them could single-handedly stabilize Kyrgyzstan to the exclusion of its rival’s interests. During his visit to Washington to attend the nuclear summit on April 12-13, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev emphasized the need of preventing a civil war in Kyrgyzstan.¹⁹ On April 16, the Kyrgyz government announced the extension of Manas airbase --due to expire in July 2010-- for another one year. Earlier, on April 10, the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had spoken to Roza Otunbaeva. On April 13, Robert Blake the US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia visited Bishkek and offered help to the Provisional government. Russia also offered financial aid and fuel supply to the new government to meet immediate requirements. Maintaining stability in the region has been the prime concern of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) member countries. Foreign Ministers of six SCO member states in their meeting in Tashkent on May 22, underscored the necessity of maintaining security and stability in SCO region. In the current situation, they are inclined to support the provisional government and territorial integrity of Kyrgyzstan.²⁰

India also has considerable stakes in peace and stability in its neighbourhood and extended neighbourhood. On April 9, India’s Ministry of External Affairs issued a statement noting, "India is following closely and with concern recent internal developments in the Kyrgyz Republic, a friendly Central Asian country in our extended

neighborhood. We hope that the current political situation will be resolved quickly and that peace and stability would return to the Kyrgyz Republic.”

Conclusion

It may be too early to paint an overtly optimistic scenario. The image of Roza Otunbaeva is clean. However, it cannot be predicted with certainty that in the rough and tumble of Kyrgyz politics she will be able to keep in check the acquisitive instincts and potential misuse of power by all her colleagues. Kyrgyzstan needs rule-based and transparent governance domestically and cooperation among major international players externally so that stability is maintained. Nonetheless, it is likely that success or otherwise of ‘democratic experiment’ in Kyrgyzstan may have wider repercussions in the region.

It may be noted that the rising economic and military power China with growing economic stakes in Central Asia, including in Kyrgyzstan, remained a passive and cautious onlooker throughout the crisis. According to experts, China has the wherewithal to build costly infrastructure projects like the railway line across Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan westward to Europe and expensive hydropower projects in Kyrgyzstan. However, as the recent events demonstrated, China seems to lack instrumentalities when it comes to dealing with political turmoil in a neighbouring country.

Notes

¹ Despite seven decades of Soviet socialist ‘modernization’ and apparent Westernization, tribal and clan loyalties still persist in Kyrgyzstan. The Tien Shan mountain range that runs east to west in the centre of the country, divides the northern and southern clans. The rivalry between the two has been so strong that even the Soviets devised a way of alternatively rotating the first secretaryship of the republican Communist Party between the them.

² CSTO member are, Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

³ T.T. Sarsembekov, A.N. Nurshev, A.E. Kozhakov and M.O. Ospanov, *Ispolzovanie i okhrana transgranichnykh rek v stranakh tsentralnoi Azii*. 2004. *Izdatelstvo Atamura*; Almaty. p. 89.

⁴ In 2005, there were more than 3,500 registered public organizations, political parties and movements in Kyrgyzstan.

⁵ Comprehensive Development Framework of the Kyrgyz Republic to 2010: Expanding the country’s Capacities, National Poverty Reduction Strategy 2003-2005, Bishkek, 2003, p. 61.

⁶ <http://ferghana.ru/article.php?id=2607>, February 2, 2010.

⁷ Isabel Gorst, “Kyrgyzstan leader plays a skilful diplomatic game”, *Financial Times* (London), July 23, 2009.

⁸ Brian M. Downing, “Russian Concerns Weigh Heavily”, <http://www.atimes online.com>, April 13, 2010.

⁹ Isabel Gorst, *op. cit.*, no. 7.; Deirdre Tynan “Kyrgyzstan: US Air Hub at Manas Busier Now than Before,” Eurasia Insight at www.eurasianet.org, 12 August 2009.

¹⁰ Isabel Gorst, *ibid.*

¹¹ \$150 million in grant and \$ 300 million in low interest loan.

¹² “Kyrgyzstan: Moscow Withholding Promised Aid to Bishkek,” <http://www.eurasianet.org>, 16 February 2010.

¹³ M.K. Bhadrakumar, “US reaps bitter harvest from 'Tulip' revolution” <http://www.atimes.com>, April 10, 2010. Earlier the family of President Akaev allegedly made millions of dollars from the contract for supplying aviation fuel to the Manas airbase, later it was the family of President Bakiyev to do so.

¹⁴ Eurasia Insight, <http://www.eurasianet.org>, March 4, 2010.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ David Trilling, “Kyrgyzstan: Russian Press Bashing Bakiyev” <http://www.eurasianet.org>, March 30, 2010.

¹⁷ Gregory Feifer, “Russian Moves In Kyrgyzstan Raise Questions Over U.S. Base - Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty at <http://www.eurasianet.org>, April 9, 2010.

¹⁸ See, for instance, Lauren Goodrich, “Kyrgyzstan and the Russian Resurgence,” at <http://www.STRATFOR.com>, April 13, 2010.

¹⁹ <http://www.fergana.ru>. April 14, 2010.

²⁰ <http://english.ruvr.ru/2010/05/22/8348739.html>

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