

# A Kyrgyz Déjà Vu

When I arrived in Bishkek, the capital of the former Soviet republic Kyrgyzstan, I was stunned. The primary schools I saw on the way from the airport reminded me too much of the one I attended – in East Berlin. Not only did the countries on the 'other' (well, my) side of the Iron Curtain apparently share a deep ideological conviction, they also economised on architectural blueprints. Some hotels looked like exact copies of ones I had stayed in during trips to Romania or Bulgaria, making these encounters a very personal déjà vu. Although Bishkek is closer to Islamabad than to Moscow, the place reverberates a distinctly Soviet echo.



Before the Tulip Revolution, landlocked Kyrgyzstan featured Western headlines during the War on Terror, when the USA installed a military base near Bishkek in October 2001

During my two months in this remote and landlocked Central Asian country last summer, I tried to familiarise myself with the political scene while I was working with an international election watchdog organisation. The political games at play were difficult to grasp, yet nevertheless totally fascinating – part of the reason I got completely

captivated by this remote country. My Kyrgyz friends, who made the stay an unforgettable experience, themselves struggled to make sense of the shadowy manoeuvring of the political elite. As Jamilya once told me, "It is like a big puzzle – to which only a few people seem to have all the pieces."

I kept her advice in mind and remembered it many months later, in London watching the run-up to the parliamentary elections that were held on this year's February 27th. While the international media was largely ignoring the issue (until it turned violent), my instincts told me that this time, something would happen. What exactly was unclear, but *something*. Those few journalists on-site predicted a 'colour revolution' like the ones witnessed in Georgia and the Ukraine. Like most Kyrgyz, I was sceptical, writing off these journalists as hacks hoping for a good story that would convince their editors of the usefulness of their stay.

On the 13th of May, however, events flared. Only eleven days later, (ex-) President Akaev fled to Moscow via Kazakhstan. What had happened in this short span of time?

Now that the dust has settled and the shards in front of the looted shops have been swept away, it is time to ask some specific questions about the 'Tulip Revolution' – as events in late March have been poetically dubbed. It was, as my friend Elnura

Osmonalieva said, an 'unexpectedly short and easy revolution' that saw most of its action during a single, tumultuous afternoon on the 24th of March. "No one expected that the White House, the seat of the government, would be captured in 2 hours." A revolution by chance?

## Building up popular anger

A friend of mine who is a member of a student organisation in Bishkek wrote to me some days after the elections, saying that she and her friends were preparing protests against the rigged election results. The Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) had branded the election procedure and the preceding campaign as 'falling short of international standards' on February 28th. Never having witnessed such a 'flawed' election myself, I was thankful when Elnura sent me some pictures she took while observing the procedure in the rural Kara-Suu district, where a re-run of the first round was convened on the 13th of May. The pictures reveal not only serious procedural shortcomings that marred the the run-up to the elections, but also the flaws of the polling day itself.



Voters in voting booth reinterpreting the notion of a 'secret vote'



Where else would you have your campaign banner if not at the doorstep of the polling station?



Eager voters are watching behind the windows despite cold weather as the committee proceeds with the ballot counting



Similar manipulations were reported from across the country. Most vividly, they were reaching us from the university district in Bishkek, where Bermet Akaeva, the president's daughter, ran against an independent journalist (and where Rosa Otunbaeva, a main opposition figure, had been suspiciously disqualified). Students of the main universities reported that they were asked to hand in pre-filled ballots in return for *not getting* expelled



*A protester with head injury after a horseback military unit attacked the crowd*



*Drunken youth set fire on government car behind the White House*



*The hall where the government used to have its meetings*

from their schools. No surprise, then, that Bermet won her constituency by a landslide. Elsewhere, opposition candidates who hadn't been disqualified beforehand nevertheless lost their races against wealthy businessmen known to be (superficially) faithful to president Akaev.

It was widely held that the government under Akaev tried to create a situation in which the incumbent would be able to step down after his second term in office and see someone strategically close to himself succeed to the presidency. But let's not oversimplify the power brokering in this tiny Central Asian state. Government pressure was not the only force negatively affecting the polls. Very often local and regional clan affiliations influenced the voting lists. Another unsettling truth: in 2003, a pro-government official told the Crisis Group in one of their reports "We should not divide people according to government and opposition, but into categories of honest and not honest. If you go to *Dasmiya* [popular Bishkek restaurant] you'll see the opposition sitting there with the White House."

Maybe now you can understand why I and many Kyrgyz were so confused.

### **Burst of protests**

Immediately after the fraudulent elections, Bishkek was quiet. Meanwhile, in Jalalabad, a sleepy town in southern Kyrgyzstan, the beginnings of a revolution took root. As early as March 15th, some 15,000 protesters gathered to contest the election result. The situation remained tense until five days later, when the demonstrations turned violent, erupting into full-scale street riots. The protests then spread to Osh, Kyrgyzstan's second-biggest city and the major urban center in the mainly Uzbek-inhabited Ferghana Valley. It rapidly became obvious to anyone looking that the government had lost control of the South.

Despite threats that ethnic tensions between the Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in the region might erupt again (after 1992, when 300 died in inter-ethnic clashes), relations between the two groups remained calm during the protests, and are still calm.

On the 23rd of March, the protesters left the South to cross the Tien Shan, heading to the capital in the North – Bishkek. They arrived on Thursday, the 24th of March 2005, and were joined by other peoples from all across Kyrgyzstan and even citizens of the capital. The total number of protesters is unknown, but it was upward of 20,000. People from outside Bishkek brought with them yurts and intended to convene a non-violent sit-in in front of the White House, the seat of the president. It never got that far. While assembling on the main square opposite the building, agents provocateurs hit the stage and started a nasty street-fight. The anti-riot police, positioned to protect the house, attacked as well.

The protestors were courageous enough to strike back, and after some back and forth, they then stormed the White House. Akaev had already left the scene some 30 minutes before. It remains a small miracle that no one got killed during the clashes. Elnura witnessed these historic moments and luckily, she had a camera at hand.

Ask anyone who took part in the protests, and they will heatedly dismiss any allegation that the sudden but violent toppling of the government had always been the aim of the protests. "The Kyrgyz Opposition and demonstrators were expecting to protest peacefully on the Ala-Too Square as long as it would take for the resignation of Akaev," says Damira Umetbaeva, a member of the Kyrgyz student movement KelKel.

The fact that the 'revolution' happened so quickly reveals two points. First, Akaev's administration was unexpectedly weak and



*Kurmanbek Bakiev speaking from the tribune under the Freedom Statue (photograph: Elnura Osmonalieva). From 2000–2002, Bakiev served as Prime Minister under Akaev.*

did not have the full-scale support of the wider populace. But second, – and here one must credit the ex-president – he did not resort to using force. When he was heading for his helicopter, he explicitly urged the defending troops not to use their weapons.

#### The days of uncertainty

That night, Bishkek experienced frightening lawlessness and widespread looting. Businesses of the Akaev clan came under heavy attack, many of which were completely robbed. Some looters and policemen were killed. The situation was tense with fear and violence. All the people I phoned that day were staying

at home, barricading themselves in their flats and waiting for calm to return. It took the new interim authority several days to reinstate law and order.

The first few days after the overthrow revealed another two distinct features of the Kyrgyz revolution: The fact that many opposition activists, including the two most prominent candidates for presidency were high-profile members of Akaev's administration must have been a weird kind of déjà vu for many Kyrgyz. Also, those who swiftly took over power and formed an interim government were actually not as coherent and united a bloc as many would have wished before. While there was the common aim to push Akaev out of office, many commentators fear that now fragmentation shall begin.

Zamir, who had to witness the events in his home country from Turkey, has argued that what we are now seeing in Kyrgyzstan is really just another act in an eternal struggle of paradigms that has shaped the Turkic nations throughout their history. He is afraid that 'decentralised micro-politics' could lead to regional fragmentation and even civil strife. He sees the alienation of the Kyrgyzstani South from the North as a critical problem.

Because of vastly different historical trajectories, the regional differences today are such that the North is more industrialised and more Russified while the South is poorer and more conservative or traditional.

However, others feel that these conflicts are only hiding a deeper structural defect: the derelict economy. Akaev, who pushed through an ambitious reform package lauded by the IMF and the World Bank, could not halt the post-Soviet economic decline. What is worse, his term in office shall eternally be associated with self-enrichment, corruption and nepotism. Most of the lucrative business operating in Kyrgyzstan today can be traced to the



A KelKel member from Jalalabad has a head injury after the hooligans attack

wider Akaev family in less than two steps. This opulent wealth, easily discernible by the great number of German limousines on Bishkek's tarmac, is starkly contrasted by the sobering figures for the rest of the nation: the majority of the population lives below £100 a year.

Also, there is another matter, related to my friends in this country, which makes me worry. All of them speak fluent English, understand modern politics and economics better than many government officials, and work in international NGOs active within their country. They are among the best-qualified individuals, yet do not see any career opportunities for themselves in their own government, as the meagre pay cannot compete with lucrative NGO wages. Kyrgyzstan may end up in the strange situation of having so many of its promising young people employed in organisations filing critical reports about the country – listing all the shortcomings to which they themselves might be the solution!

The irony deepens, in ways that are simultaneously positive and negative. Once, now an age ago, when Akaev nurtured his image of a pro-Western, reform-committed statesman, Kyrgyzstan became known as the 'Island of Democracy' within a sea of authoritarian countries. This image guaranteed a steady flow of Western soft loans and proved to be Kyrgyzstan's cash guarantee. And there was a dire need for these funds: unlike northern neighbour Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan does not sit on abundant oil and gas resources. The key for reviving the economy, the panacea in solving Kyrgyzstan's problems, might hence lie in the establishment of a democratic and stable country – assuring the

goodwill of international donors and promoting tourism.

Elections are currently scheduled for July this year – and the outlook is more than uncertain. The country is finding itself standing at an important crossroads.

But that is merely a *déjà vu*, as Kyrgyzstan has done this so many times before.

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