

# Lessons of “The Tulip Revolution”

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Kyrgyzstan’s Revolution: Causes and Consequences

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Thank you so much for the opportunity to testify before you today.

For the third time in 18 months seriously flawed elections have brought down the government in a CIS state, and for the first time this has occurred east of the Urals, demonstrating that popular expectations in the Asian states of the former Soviet Union are not appreciably different from those in the European ones.

Like Georgia’s Rose Revolution, the catalyst for Kyrgyzstan’s Tulip Revolution was flawed parliamentary elections. This time too, like in Georgia, the elections were more democratic than the previous parliamentary election, but fell short of being “free and fair” and more importantly did not meet local expectations. Poverty, corruption, and the fear that the president would sabotage the succession struggle during the last months of his presidential term, made the opposition and masses take to the street in now familiar fashion.

If it succeeds, the “tulip revolution” could prove to be the most remarkable of all, causing positive reverberations throughout a region that many had written off as lost from the point of view of building democratic societies. It will put all of the other leaders in the region on notice that they too must take seriously the need for popular political enfranchisement or risk that they will be driven from power.

And if it fails, it will not be because the masses in Central Asia failed to meet the test, but because the ruling elite in Kyrgyzstan managed to sabotage the process of political change. For that reason, even the failure of the Kyrgyz revolution will not leave Central Asia’s other leaders feeling more secure.

## **President Akayev Was the Master of His Fate**

While Askar Akayev was frequently described as the captive of a domineering wife, and rapacious relatives, the former Kyrgyz president was always in control. Although he may not have orchestrated the electoral abuses that occurred, he obviously never tried to stop them.

The preconditions of President Akayev's political demise developed as a result of his poor management of a public protest in spring 2002. The protest was a result of Azimbek Beknazarov, now interim Prosecutor-General and then chairman of the Jogorku Kenesh (parliament) committee on Judicial and Legal Affairs, called for Akayev's impeachment, after the government decided to cede 125,000 hectares of territory to Chinese control during border negotiations between the two states. Beknazarov claimed that these lands contained valuable water resources, as well as the graves of people who died fleeing to China to avoid arrest by Russian troops in the 1916 uprising.

Shortly afterwards, on January 5, 2002 Beknazarov was arrested, charged with exceeding his official powers as an investigator in the Toktogul regional prosecutor's office, seven years earlier. Beknazarov was put on trial in January 2002 and his supporters began to picket and some even began a hunger strike. When one of the fasting demonstrators died of a stroke, tempers flared even more, and demonstrations in his hometown of Ak-Sui in the province of Jalalabad grew in size, so that by March hundreds, if not more, were participating. Intimidated by the size of the demonstration, on March 17-18, 2002, the local police used force to break them up, leaving seven unarmed people dead. Their deaths quickly became the cause of nation-wide protests leading to calls for President Akayev's resignation.

The deaths in Ak-Sui, and the government's response to them, unified Akayev's political opposition for the first time. The scale of public protests grew, and people from provincial cities started marching to the capital. Advisors close to the president feared that if a way out of the crisis was not found, Akayev would be forced to resign. In May 2002, in an unsuccessful effort to satisfy the opposition Akayev fired his Prime Minister, Kurmanbek Bakiev (now serving as Prime Minister), and named Nikolai Tanayev, a Russian who had long worked in the republic, to replace him.

In the weeks that followed, Akayev demonstrated his political mastery. He simultaneously promised to negotiate with the legislators and threatened to disband the parliament, which would strip the current members of all privilege. It was in this period that Akayev first reached out to Russia's Ministry of Interior for tactical assistance. Meeting halls became impossible to rent and marchers were turned away from Bishkek.

Akayev also sought to open new channels for political dialogue, inviting the whole country to debate what changes to the country's constitution should be made in order to open up the political process. At the president's behest, a committee of jurists, politicians, and political activists was organized, and they recommended restricting the power of the presidency, enhancing the independence of the prime minister and the cabinet, and converting Kyrgyzstan's two house legislature back into a one-chamber body.

The version of the constitution put to the voters, on February 2, 2003, was not that offered by the committee, but a rewrite done in the office of the president, which left the presidency stronger than the committee of specialists had envisioned and made it almost impossible for the president to be impeached. The referendum, which also included a call for President Akayev to serve out his term of office, passed overwhelmingly. Just to make

sure that Akayev would do this without undue public pressure, in the run-up to the referendum the Kyrgyz authorities added a number of constitutional amendments that made it permanently more difficult for opposition groups to get permits for large public meetings.

This experience convinced Kyrgyzstan's opposition---and many people who had previously been politically rather apathetic---that the Kyrgyz president was not to be trusted, and that he would always find a way to cheat or outmaneuver his opponents. It explains why they were so fearful that Akayev would use the newly elected parliament to change the constitution.

At the very time that his hold on power was being challenged, Akayev found it easier to behave more like the leaders of neighboring Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, and to accept "technical assistance" from Russia designed to help shape Kyrgyzstan into a "guided" democracy, rather than a society that is recognizably democratic according to western norms. Instructors from special troops of the MVD came to help teach the Kyrgyz to better manage crowd control, while political analysts close to the Kremlin advised President Akayev's staff on how to manipulate parliamentary and presidential elections.

But as we saw in late March, even with help from both these groups President Akayev was unable to maintain control. Akayev received bad political advice, and even with extra training, Kyrgyzstan's security forces proved unreliable in crowd control.

At the center of the election turmoil was the opposition's unshakeable belief that Askar Akayev was determined to elect a pocket parliament in order to change the constitution, which barred him from running for president again in the planned October 2005 presidential elections. And the energy that Akayev and his surrogates extended to affect the parliamentary elections of February 27 and March 13 fed these rumors as well as squandering most of Akayev's remaining political good-will.

While the actual process of voting was judged more transparent than in the previous parliamentary election, the violations of democratic norms were rarely random. Dozens of people who got on the ballot were pressured into withdrawing their candidacy, generally to allow an Akayev supporter an easy election victory. Several prominent critics were denied places on the ballot due to legal loop-holes, including a number of popular former ambassadors, who failed to meet the residence requirements for parliamentarians because of their diplomatic service.

Former (and now acting) foreign minister Roza Otunbayeva was one of those barred from running. She returned to the country in 2004, from a U.N. diplomatic post in Sukhumi (Georgia) to try and unify the opposition to form the *Ata kurt* movement and, establishing the United Opposition group. Not only was Otunbayeva denied a place on the ballot, but Akayev's daughter Bermet won the seat in the district the former hoped to contend in.

Political independents and opposition figures were targeted for defeat, and most of the reports of vote buying came from their districts. A half dozen opposition figures, though,

received a majority of votes during the first round of balloting; and in all only a third of the 75 seats were filled at this time. But the Akayev machine refused to rest easy, and even more effort was put into defeating opposition candidates than previously. The country's independent media center found its electricity was cut, without explanation, and until they received help in finding generators, the country's small opposition press and opposition candidates were without the means to reach readers.

Two key opposition figures -- Adakhan Madamarov and Kurmanbek Bakiev -- who were expected to be easily reelected, went down to defeat in the second round, each charging fraud. The defeat of Bakiev in particular seems to have been a turning point. This former Prime Minister and declared presidential candidate had strong support from masses and elite alike in the country's densely populated and impoverished south, his home region. After his defeat Bakiev threw his support behind the United Opposition, who then sought to wrest control of the southern half of the country from Akayev, a goal they achieved in only a few days. The speed with which they stabilized their new "popular" or interim executives and legislative councils, undoubtedly gave confidence in the ability of the opposition to make a smooth transfer of power, as thousands of unhappy residents of the capital took to the streets on March 24. The march organizers did not expect that part of the march---mostly young people---would break off and storm the President's office (and seat of government). But when Akayev fled they were only too happy to pick up the pieces, and assume authority.

Askar Akayev, like his colleagues throughout the region, introduced political institutions that were intended to create an illusion of political participation. They were designed to assuage foreign and domestic critics and not to facilitate the sharing of power by the president and his entourage with other groups in society. When demands for real power emerged Akayev's first instinct was to try and stifle protest and when that failed he sought to push the offending groups from political life. But over time the Kyrgyz population and the opposition elite learned to anticipate his behavior, and in March 2005, they simply outsmarted him.

Akayev brought little honor to himself in the way he retreated. He swore in the newly elected parliament, after he had already lost control of the southern half of the country, and then took back his hastily offered resignation as president once he reached safety outside the country. Both actions further exacerbated the country's constitutional crisis and led Kurmanbek Bakiev, who was chosen as Prime Minister and acting president by the old legislature, to recognize the legitimacy of the newly elected parliament (save in 20 disputed districts), which in turn affirmed him as Prime Minister (but not acting president).

To his credit though, Askar Akayev did learn one thing from the events in Aksy, that firing on an unarmed crowd could lead to civil war, and for all his unwillingness to resign, he choose to draw the line at that. However, there is no reason to assume that all of Akayev's Central Asian colleagues would make the same choice.

### **The Kyrgyz Elite Must Step Up to the Challenge**

The political elite in Kyrgyzstan is a fractious group, which has yet to demonstrate whether it is democratic or as potentially corrupt as the outgoing office-holders. If the latter proves to be true, the population may decide that they have been shortchanged and once again take to the streets in protest.

The “Tulip Revolution” has been suffering a lot of bad press lately, fed in part by the frustration of Kyrgyzstan’s young political activists--from student groups and other non-governmental organizations--who had very idealized versions of what a transfer of power was likely to bring. They looked to Georgia and Ukraine and --with the distance and some idealization--saw them as much more fundamental and revolutionary than what went on in their own country, when a group of politicians quite familiar to them began dividing power in what many saw as all too familiar ways. But it is not too late for these young people to have at least some of their idealism restored.

Like Ukraine and Georgia, one faction of a divided political elite took over from another. But unlike Georgia, power was not transferred from one generation to another. Kurmanbek Bakiev, the acting president is only a few years younger than Askar Akayev, as is his principal rival former vice-president Feliks Kulov. And unlike Ukraine, the worldview of the newcomers doesn’t vary differently from the incumbents, the foreign policies that they pursue will be identical.

But it still remains to be seen whether the domestic politics that they pursue will closely resemble that of the Akayev regime. The key now is for the interim authorities to develop public confidence, and to maintain it through the presidential elections. This means concentrating on good government, rather than a division of the spoils. Looked at coldly it is sometimes hard to believe that the running interim government is primarily preoccupied with finding the most qualified person for each job, or keeping talented senior officials and experts in place. It seems instead, that parallel with trying to keep things afloat, there is a desire to reward every major opposition figure with a prominent position to compensate them for their years of sacrifice. One wonders, too, how much of the division of jobs is being made with an eye to building alliances in the upcoming presidential election.

Many observers have always used the clan structure of the Kyrgyz people as the explanation for all that was bad in Kyrgyz political life. But the perpetuation of patrilineal based kin-groups simply helps give shape to the patronage networks which have become more pervasive since independence. In small countries like Kyrgyzstan, elites sometimes believe that stability can be maintained if all the major interests---or patronage groups---are given a continuing stake in the political system.

In his final few years in power former president Askar Akayev sought to restrict the power of key patronage groups, and as a result drove more and more of the country’s leading political figures into opposition. But as this was occurring the country was growing more complex as well. Economic reforms had led to a small group of independent businessmen, who while willing to pay some “tribute” also wanted market conditions to regulate

economic opportunities. While they may be happy to benefit from preferential treatment and trade support (and funding of campaigns) for it, when choices begin to be made among them, those who fall from favor will once again be pressing for a level playing field in the economy.

Similarly, the Kyrgyz population has also changed a lot in recent years, or it wouldn't have believed that it was its right to press for the ouster of a president who was abusing its electoral rights.

For this reason it is really incumbent upon the new Kyrgyz leadership to concentrate on rebuilding public confidence through insuring that the upcoming presidential election meet international norms of competitiveness and the conduct of the balloting be both free and fair. Having never had an election that fully complied with democratic norms this will really be an ambitious task for the Kyrgyz government to organize in under three months. Yet there is very little wiggle room available to them to get it wrong.

Moreover, following the presidential election, the newly elected president should further legitimate his or her authority by sponsoring a national dialogue to solicit opinions on what key groups in society see as necessary constitutional changes. The way that the last constitutional modifications were handled left many dissatisfied, and the current balance of power between president and parliament needs to be redressed in a way that provides more constitutional checks on the former's authority. The debate should culminate in a referendum followed by pre-term elections. The current parliament, elected in controversy and sworn into office when the central government had already lost control of half of the country, will never enjoy legitimacy and should be replaced by a democratically elected body. The adjudication of 20 disputed seats is not a sufficient remedy.

The "tulip revolution" has been messier than its Georgian and Ukrainian predecessors. The result is that the interim government in Kyrgyzstan will have an uphill battle to demonstrate its democratic credentials. But while the major tests are yet to come, the Kyrgyz deserve credit for not standing still for an election filled with irregularities, from the time that opposition figures were barred from running on technicalities, to potentially independent candidates intimidated into stepping down, to irregularities at the ballot boxes. The new government in Kyrgyzstan will enjoy a short honeymoon period, and they had better use it wisely.

For the last fifteen years the leaders of all of these Asian states have been warning the west that their populations were not ready for democracy, and that without the guidance of strong authority figures, the situation would degenerate to one of mob rule. But the mob in Kyrgyzstan was easily quelled, with promises that new office-holders would take their public trust more seriously than their predecessors. But if the Kyrgyz elite degenerate into "business as usual Central Asian style" the hope for democratic reform in the region more generally will be dashed. And if the Kyrgyz masses take to the streets once more--in a year or two, or even sooner--it is unlikely that their protests will be broken up without the use of force, and without considerable bloodshed.

### **The Impact of the Tulip Revolution in Central Asia**

The messy exit of President Akayev may not mean that his colleagues in the region will also be pushed from office, but it certainly does increase the likelihood that secular and religious opposition groups will try and oust them. The current presidents may still be strong enough to retain power or stage-manage its passage, but not to create risk-free environments for their successors to try and secure their authority. But throughout the region disgruntled members of the elite, some long-time opponents and others who previously were silent, are likely to try and take advantage of what most view as the growing weakness of each of the region's presidents. Those who seek political power are going to use all the potential tools at their disposal to advance their cause. Many will see these contests as their final chance of a lifetime to take power, which could make substate identities and ethnic loyalties more generally of greater importance than they have been in the past few years. The existence of these loyalties introduces an element of greater volatility into the situation. With the exception of Tajikistan though, the elite in Central Asia have been quite sensitive to the incendiary capacity of attempting to mobilize populations along ethnic or sub-ethnic lines and there is no evidence to suggest that either today's political elders or the next generation coming up will seek to advance their claims in a dangerous fashion.

This is only one source of potential danger. Throughout Central Asia, there are various "have-not" groups that have been waiting to make their presence felt. These include those from the presidential entourages who will feel slighted and damaged by the choice of a successor, as well as out-groups from among the old-Soviet elites and their children, many of whom have accumulated economic "markers" or levers to use in advancing their cause. Added to this are the remnants of the alternative elite, who had counted on independence providing them with new economic and political opportunities, but who were thwarted in their plans. The alternative elite include both those with secular and religious orientation. The mix of forces, though, varies quite substantially from country to country, as do the tools that are available for them to use in their struggle for power. But most had added to their traditional arsenal of tools ---manipulation of political position or of position in ethnic and sub-ethnic communities ---new economic and cultural tools of "global outreach."

Throughout Central Asia, members of the elite from disfavored clans and families have been sitting by, waiting for the opportunity to grasp more economic and political power. As institutions to ensure a peaceful transfer of power do not exist, there is no foundation on which for them to rest their hopes. The Rose, Orange and Tulip revolutions have changed their perspective, and have given them new incentive to try and plot the downfall of the current regime.

This is particularly true in Kazakhstan. The political system in Kazakhstan most resembles that of Kyrgyzstan, in that in both countries there is already a strong penetration of civil society institutions, the political and economic elite is partially fragmented, and the president has been associated with a pattern of corruption. But there are important differences.

Kazakhstan is a much wealthier society than Kyrgyzstan, with a much larger economy. Both countries have pursued relatively similar policies of economic reform, but Kazakhstan attracted vastly greater sums of foreign investment due to its large oil and gas reserves, which also have allowed the Kazakhs to benefit from high global oil prices. As a result, poverty is much less of a problem than in Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan's poor are relatively dispersed across the country's enormous territorial expanse, making them much more difficult to organize.

Kazakhstan is likely to be the next state targeted by its opposition for a democratic revolution. Some might argue that civil society institutions are not as well dispersed in Kazakhstan, but the biggest difference is that the majority of the political elite is still unwilling to break with the country's president.

Things may change between now and the planned presidential elections in 2006, when Nursultan Nazarbayev plans to run for a final, and constitutionally permitted, term in office. Most political opposition groups in the country---who have organized as a bloc For a Just Kazakhstan--- have decided to support a single candidate, former parliamentary speaker Zharmakhan Tuyakbai, in a conference held in Almaty on March 20, 2005.

The opposition---which took a real beating during the 2004 parliamentary elections--- hopes to turn the next presidential elections into a Ukrainian style route. It is true that they do engage some degree of popular support, particularly from the population in the country's "second" and former capital of Almaty. They have managed to hold large--- upwards of 2000 people---demonstrations, but the police have also easily broken them up, and they have been unable to trigger a series of interrelated public events. President Nazarbayev has a lot of discretionary power, and a lot of real options. He maintains that he is committed to real, albeit gradual political reform, to be accompanied with concrete steps to improve the social and economic conditions of the Kazakh people.

Uzbekistan is trickiest, because President Islam Karimov squandered the honeymoon offered to him by increased western assistance after September 11. Many observers believe that Uzbekistan is becoming "ripe" for political change, but few feel confident that either the country's elite or its population is able to sustain a democratic transformation.

Political discourse in Uzbekistan is slowly growing more relaxed. In private and semi-private settings, ordinary Uzbeks have begun to venture to discuss political themes, to speculate on the health of the president and to ponder what may come in the future. They also have begun grumbling publicly in stores and in markets when they are delayed because all traffic is stopped to allow for a passing official. Less common are formal public protests, but they too are occurring with increasing frequency.

The hand of fate need not endorse the timetable of dictators, and by mid-2002 rumors began spreading about the president's ill-health, and with them came signs of jockeying for position among the putative "godfathers" of Uzbekistan's leading political families. These men had little understanding of how a democratic system operated, and no confidence in it. You cannot manipulate what you do not understand.



The government made some largely symbolic steps to introduce a few of the promised political changes. Karimov supported the gradual transformation of the parliament from a body that provides a rubber-stamp on all decrees and draft laws emanating from the president and his cabinet. However, the absence of formal political institutions to moderate elite competition mean that the period of political transition will be a time of potential instability in Uzbekistan. Excluded political groups seeking to expand their influence are likely to appeal to regional and sub-national groups as they seek ways to expand their potential power bases. For much the same reason, the role of religious opposition groups may well expand as well, particularly, the least radical of them.

Given the hard road Uzbekistan faces, most secular opposition groups, both democratic activists and the largely mute critics of Karimov who consider to serve in his regime, hope that order continues to hold in Kyrgyzstan. But at the same time few have much insight in how to get the Uzbek president to create more public space for civic society institutions.

Tajikistan is also likely to be influenced by events in Kyrgyzstan, but it is hard to decide whether it will serve to increase the chances for democratization in the country, or whether it will exacerbate the countervailing processes of political and social decay.

Tajikistan had parliamentary elections on the same day that the first round of elections were held in Kyrgyzstan, and these were found by the OSCE to fall far short of international norms. The ruling People's Democratic Party got 80 percent of the vote, while the Islamic Renaissance and Communist Parties got only 10 percent of the vote collectively, and they will hold only 6 of 63 parliamentary seats. The four opposition parties--- the Democratic, Communist, Islamic and Social Democratic parties--- have strongly protested the election results, and pressed for a new election. But they have not been able to translate these protests into large popular demonstrations against the government of President Imamali Rakhmonov, largely because the population of Tajikistan is still partially traumatized from their own lengthy (1992-1997) civil war.

Rakhmonov felt confident enough that he pressed for a constitutional referendum in 2003 that changed the term of office of the president to seven years. Like Nazarbayev, Rakhmonov, also comes up for reelection in 2006. The Tajik leader is eligible to serve two additional terms in office. According to current law Rakhmonov would then be forced to retire in 2020, at age 68. The clumsy way the referendum was conducted showed Rakhmonov's relative lack of concern for international opinion. Voters could cast their ballot "yes" or "no" for a group of 56 amendments, and many Russian voters complained that they were handed Tajik language ballots with no translation provided.

The opposition believes that they have a better chance of defeating Rakhmonov in 2006 than in getting the recent parliamentary results overturned. But they may well be discounting continuing Tajik apathy caused by their relief that the long civil war is over. Whatever their discontent many Tajiks will not want to risk starting a new civil war.

If people hold out some prospect for the slow opening of Uzbek society, virtually no one believes that the same will occur in Turkmenistan. While Niyazov talks of holding presidential elections in 2008-2009, no one believes that there will be competitive elections held in Turkmenistan during Niyazov's lifetime. As long as Niyazov is in power there will be no possibility of building or even "planting the seeds" of any democratic society. But one day someone trusted by Niyazov may move against him, not by taking to the street--- Boris Shikhmuradov showed the futility of that approach---but by the more classic and less subtle approach of simply physically eliminating him.

### **What Lessons Can the U.S. Learn From the "Tulip Revolution"**

U.S. policy makers should be very pleased by the developments in Kyrgyzstan, as they do provide strong evidence that sustained support for grass-roots political organizations can prove effective. Some recently organized student groups may have played a pivotal role in mobilizing the final demonstrations in Bishkek that brought down Akayev. But the more than decade old presence of non-governmental independent political groups---human rights groups, independent press and journalists, and political monitors, provided the backbone necessary for their creation. The older groups provided the niche in Kyrgyz public life that made the formation of newer groups possible, as they established the right of Kyrgyz to organize independently of the government.

This sense of "history" or "naturalness" of non-governmental political groups is absent in both Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, and increased U.S. assistance will not succeed in creating it overnight. In neither country can NGO's be expected to either organize or channel public opposition in peaceful ways. In Uzbekistan in particular, where the risk of anomic violence is already palpable, there is reason to fear that secular groups will have only minimal impact on creating what the U.S. would see as desirable political outcomes. And what is going on underneath the surface in Turkmenistan is largely terra incognita, so impenetrable this society has been to outside influences and observers.

As already noted, Tajikistan is more difficult to predict. Civil society groups have penetrated more deeply in that society than in either Turkmenistan or Uzbekistan, but the population has already paid a huge price in the civil war that developed as part of the aftermath of the political mobilization of the early 1990s, and may choose to remain apathetic in the face of both secular and religious groups seeking to make them more active.

Kazakhstan is much more of a conundrum. Civil society institutions have penetrated quite deeply in the society and a vocal opposition (both inside and outside the ruling elite) exists to challenge the power of President Nazarbayev. But it is less clear how much of a priority the U.S. should place on influencing outcomes. Obviously, the U.S. should strongly support the conduct of transparent and competitive elections in Kazakhstan, and offer both government and opposition technical assistance to help make this a reality. But, in sharp contrast to Kyrgyzstan, the Kazakh opposition is much more capable of funding their own activities, and there is no need to potentially discredit them as "the tools of foreign actors" by the U.S. offering much more than seed money and technical assistance.

Moreover, much like the situation in Kyrgyzstan, the introduction of a more democratic government in Kazakhstan is unlikely to produce a regime that is more amenable to U.S. geopolitical interests. Just like in Kyrgyzstan, any successor government is likely to seek to sustain close ties with both Russia and China, as well as maintain the support of the U.S. government.

This does give the U.S. a renewed opportunity for influencing developments in Kyrgyzstan. But if the new government in Bishkek is going to try and obtain increased U.S. economic and security assistance, in order to try and get it through an inevitably difficult transition period, it has to demonstrate its worthiness by conducting elections that are demonstrably more democratic than those organized by the regime that they ousted.