

# Back on Track?

## Kyrgyz Authoritarianism after the Tulip Revolution

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*Shairbek Juraev*

*American University of Central Asia, Bishkek*

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The year 2010 marks the fifth anniversary of Kyrgyzstan's Tulip Revolution. The events of March 2005 fostered hopes that Kyrgyzstan was on a fast track to democracy. Five years later, most observers of Kyrgyz politics consider that Kyrgyzstan's post-Tulip Revolution regime has created a repressive authoritarian system in which the prospects for political liberalism further wane every day. For some, this represents a U-turn in the trajectory of Kyrgyz political development. Others argue that Kyrgyzstan has recently gotten back on track after a short deviation. This memo argues that political developments in Kyrgyzstan are being driven at least partially by three factors: the weakness of political ideals, the persisting importance of blood relations in Kyrgyz politics, and the unfortunate dynamics of international politics in Central Asia.

### **A Five-Year Trajectory of Kyrgyz Politics**

The Tulip Revolution heightened hopes for the consolidation of democracy in Kyrgyzstan. The March 2005 events continued the chain of color revolutions that began in Georgia in 2003 and Ukraine in 2004. For some observers of Kyrgyz politics, the ouster of former president Askar Akayev appeared to be a "return" to democratization. As analyst Ariel Cohen has suggested, unrest would not have been inevitable without Akayev's backsliding into authoritarianism in the mid-1990s.

The events in the immediate aftermath of the Tulip Revolution led to great optimism. Within hours after Akayev's hasty departure to Russia, one could feel how the regime's arms had fallen off, with mass looting in police-free Bishkek just one extreme example. The Kyrgyz national television station, traditionally a mouthpiece for the regime, turned into an open platform willing to broadcast just about anyone who had anything to say. Public protest actions began taking place daily, with demands

ranging from calls for constitutional reform to the replacement of a local hospital chief in the most remote villages in the country. The July 2005 presidential election, which Kurmanbek Bakiyev convincingly won, received the warmest feedback from Western observers of all previous elections held in independent Kyrgyzstan.

The “post-revolutionary” political honeymoon did not last long, however. Feliks Kulov, who once challenged Akayev in 2000, was released by a crowd the day Akayev fled the country and almost immediately entered into a discreet competition with Bakiyev. The “gentlemen’s agreement” brokered between these two political heavyweights resulted in a tandem of President Bakiyev and Prime Minister Kulov, which nearly paralyzed the daily operations of the executive branch. New opposition groups also began to grow inside parliament, consisting of opposition leaders who for whatever reason did not join the Tulip Revolution, such as Omurbek Tekebayev and Kubatbek Baibolov, and several other former allies of Bakiyev who became sidelined at various points after the revolution, including Azimbek Beknazarov, Roza Otunbayeva, Almazbek Atambayev, Melis Eshimkanov, and others.

The contestation phase culminated in November 2006 when Bakiyev, under heavy pressure from opposition-minded members of parliament, was literally forced to sign a new version of Kyrgyzstan’s constitution considerably limiting the president’s powers. This was the first major event demonstrating Bakiyev’s weakness, unusual for a president in Central Asia, but it was also the last.

A month later, the entire process began moving in the opposite direction, referred to by observers as the phase of Bakiyev’s consolidation of power. In December, Bakiyev explicitly suggested that parliament adopt new changes to the Kyrgyz constitution or submit to dissolution. Strikingly, most parliament members, including some opposition leaders, opted to vote for a new constitution that reversed some of the major achievements of the November draft.

This trend continued into 2007. Bakiyev dismissed Kulov early that year. An April protest action of Kulov’s United Front ended in a spectacular show of force by the police, who dispersed the crowd in a matter of minutes, while opposition leaders demonstrated a lack of unity and resolve in organizing the protest action and responding to the police. This put an end to public demonstrations of support for the opposition for a long period and undermined the country’s hopes of establishing a liberal democracy. In turn, Bakiyev took proactive measures to consolidate his own support base. In the fall of 2007, a new constitution passed smoothly in a national referendum. This was followed by new parliamentary elections which ensured firm control over the legislature by Bakiyev’s Ak Jol party.

The period since the last parliamentary elections could be called the phase of Bakiyev’s aggressive consolidation of power. In addition to fully controlling parliament through Ak Jol, Bakiyev has begun to strengthen his family’s power base in the country. His son Maksim Bakiyev heads the newly established Central Agency for Development, Investments, and Innovations, an agency with an unclear legal foundation that has become a top public organ in charge of a seemingly unlimited range of issues. The president’s brother, Janybek Bakiyev, heads the State Protection Service, a military entity in charge of guarding all objects of state importance within the country.

Meanwhile, opposition leaders are regularly harassed and persecuted by the state.

The evolution of Kyrgyz politics since 2005 closely resembles similar developments in neighboring Central Asian states. However, some academics and policy analysts still wonder why the Tulip Revolution suppressed, rather than energized, impulses towards democratization. The next sections attempt to shed some light on three variables in Kyrgyz politics which have significantly limited, if not foreclosed, chances for political liberalization in Kyrgyzstan since 2005.

## **The Questionable Relevance of Political Ideals**

A close analysis of the events leading to Akayev's overthrow reveals that ideology played no role in the Tulip Revolution. While outside observers waxed on about a democratic overthrow, one rarely came across a well-argued speech on democracy by the "revolutionaries" themselves. As political scientist Scott Radnitz observed, the majority of protesters in March 2005 "were not young, middle class, educated urbanites clamoring for democracy, but candidates' supporters and migrants from outside of Bishkek." Also important to contemplate is the role of organized crime leaders in mobilizing the most "able" protesters, though this has rarely been publicly discussed.

These examples just highlight the level to which modern political concepts such as democracy, liberalism, or even socialism remain alien to Kyrgyz political culture. Such notions are comfortably used by a handful of intellectuals, while wider politically active groups appear to not have a proper understanding and appreciation of these concepts, even when referring to them.

Telling is the state of political parties in the country. One can find socialist, social democratic, nationalist, liberal, and other kinds of parties. However, neither voting patterns nor the political moves of party leaders seem to correlate with their stated ideologies. The pro-presidential Ak Jol party, which controls nearly 80 percent of parliament, was set up within a month or so before the elections, and a dozen various small parties decided to merge with it within several weeks. Similarly, at least five out of twelve MPs from the Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan (SDPK) joined the party in the weeks prior to the elections, including factional leader Otunbayeva, who moved to the SDPK from the Asaba Party of National Revival. These examples merely confirm political scientist Rafis Abazov's statement that political competition in Kyrgyzstan is "between individuals, not political ideas."

Turning the Tulip Revolution into a real opening for democratic transformation would require a strong commitment to democracy from Kyrgyzstan's political elite and electorate. The consecutive battles over the constitution, however, demonstrate the lack of such a commitment. Today, it has become commonplace for dismissed officials to join the ranks of the opposition (Beknazarov, Otunbayeva, Kulov, Isakov), while some opposition leaders when offered a position choose to diligently serve at the president's request (Eshimkanov, Atambayev, Babanov, Karabekov). In brief, it appears that expectations of democratization were simply misplaced.

## **Blood Ties in Kyrgyz Politics**

While conventional political concepts appear irrelevant and underappreciated, notions of kinship and business relations remain highly relevant in Kyrgyz politics.

Kyrgyz society, like many other Central Asian ones, has been known for its organization along family and clan lines through patrilineal bonds. Kin-based relationships also permeate politics, serving as the basis for political loyalty.

One implication of such family-based organization of politics has been a tendency towards the establishment of family rule. Bakiyev, like Akayev before him, has been accused of “usurping” power for his family, with reference not only to immediate family members but also to members of his clan or region.

Preferring family in politics is tempting, and often very hard to correlate with democratic procedures. As a result, family members usually end up exerting control either in informal ways, such as over business or political appointments, or by holding unelected formal positions.

One of the slogans during the Tulip Revolution was a call against the rule and business of the Akayevs. Bakiyev repeatedly claimed he would act in a different manner. In 2010, however, he turned out to be so bold as to not even bother making a public announcement about the appointment of his son to one of the highest positions in government.

Movement toward a functioning democracy would presuppose both the creation and maintenance of a merit-based appointment system and the holding of free and fair elections. Unfortunately, the persistence of blood relations in Kyrgyzstan undermines the country’s nascent democratic institutions.

Another implication of blood-based politics deals with the disaggregation of political mobilization. Opposition leaders, just like the president, tend to draw their support mostly among relatives and fellow villagers. As public actions in the last two to three years suggest, public mobilization on a national scale is extremely hard to pull off due to the localized nature of support for particular opposition leaders. In this sense, the mass mobilization in March 2005 was to a certain extent a “unique” situation, whereby fraudulent elections in single-member districts served to aggregate the disaggregated “unhappiness” of particular districts.

## **A De-Motivating External Environment**

External support and pressure were important factors pushing former president Akayev to take some decisive steps toward political and economic liberalization in the early 1990s.

The “New World Order” of the early 1990s presupposed the active support of the West for democratizing regimes. Under the guiding hand of external partners, notions such as freedom of the press, political pluralism, and civil society began to take root in Kyrgyzstan. While many fellow former Soviet republics limited themselves to democracy in rhetoric only, Kyrgyzstan went much further with specific actions.

The post-2005 period has featured very weak engagement of the United States with

Kyrgyzstan. As many analysts have argued, U.S. interest in Kyrgyzstan has mainly been limited to the Manas airbase to support military operations in Afghanistan. To the surprise of many, the United States did not express open disapproval of recent elections in Kyrgyzstan, harshly criticized by many international and local observers as neither free nor fair. Many believe that the Pentagon has taken the lead in structuring U.S.-Kyrgyz relations.

This period has also coincided with the rise of Russia's involvement in the region. In turn, the increased activism of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), coupled with the deterioration of relations between Kyrgyzstan and neighboring Uzbekistan, has made Russia an even more important partner for Kyrgyzstan.

The increasing role of Russia and other Eurasian states has had some impact on Kyrgyzstan's domestic dynamics. As many have suggested, President Bakiyev appears to be following very much in the footsteps of Russia and Kazakhstan by creating a pro-presidential party, streamlining and strengthening the so-called executive "vertical," and restricting citizens' rights to assemble and protest against state policies.

Strong external support for democratization is vital for Kyrgyzstan where a domestic political culture precludes rather than permits a law-governed liberalization process. The current waning interest of the United States and the activism of Russia and the SCO in Central Asia do not suggest a favorable international context for sustained democratization.

## Conclusion

The political developments that have taken place in the aftermath of Kyrgyzstan's Tulip Revolution have followed along a path which differs significantly from those of Georgia or Ukraine. After a short period of political turbulence, the ruling regime in Kyrgyzstan managed to suppress political opposition, limit civic freedoms, and even formalize the rule of "the Family."

The momentum which led to the forceful overthrow of an unpopular president in 2005 has failed to lead to further democratization for at least three reasons. First, democracy and related concepts remain alien to Kyrgyz domestic political culture. While many democratic institutions exist in Kyrgyzstan today, these should not be confused with indigenous support for liberal political values. For many in Kyrgyzstan, the Tulip Revolution indicated a change in "ruler" but not a change in the country's development. This has been reinforced by the continued salience of traditional kinship relations in Kyrgyz politics. Last but not least, the external support which Kyrgyz democrats of the early 1990s enjoyed is now gone. U.S. concern over maintaining its military base in Kyrgyzstan and Russia's increasing involvement in Central Asia have effectively killed all possibilities of effectively "aiding" democratization in Kyrgyzstan.

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