
Kyrgyzstan

Popular demonstrations swept through Kyrgyzstan in March 2005, leading to the ouster and resignation of President Askar Akaev. Echoing the “rose” and “orange” revolutions that brought regime change in Georgia and Ukraine, the country-wide protests and disintegration of the Akaev government dramatically altered the political landscape in Kyrgyzstan.

Following deeply flawed parliamentary elections in February and March 2005, people took to the streets. Outraged by the corruption and repression that characterized the parliamentary vote—including attacks on independent media and the perceived unfair advantage given to candidates who were relatives of the president—protestors in southern Kyrgyzstan and later in the capital took over administrative buildings and defiantly expressed their dissatisfaction with the status quo. A variety of grievances merged into a single demand: the resignation of President Askar Akaev.

Violent clashes between police and protestors flared over several days, and eyewitnesses reported the presence in the crowd of government saboteurs who attacked protestors and police alike, causing chaos and panic. Dozens of people were reportedly injured and government and private property was damaged. However, police dropped their weapons and refused to use violence to suppress the protestors who arrived at the Kyrgyzstan White House on March 24, 2005. The demonstrators forced their way in and took over the seat of government. One of the leaders during the weeks of protest, long-time politician Kurmanbek Bakiev, was named the new president. President Akaev fled the country and later formally resigned his post.

Political prisoner Feliks Kulov was released by protestors on March 24, 2005. On April 6, the Supreme Court overturned his conviction on charges of abuse of power; a second conviction, for embezzlement, was quashed on April 11. Kulov withdrew as a candidate for the July presidential election and President Bakiev, whose leadership was confirmed in that election, later appointed him Prime Minister.

Promises of Reform

In the immediate aftermath of the revolution, the people of Kyrgyzstan had high hopes that the Bakiev government would put a stop to the corruption and repression that had undermined the Akaev administration.

As of this writing, promises of reform made during the early days of the Bakiev administration had not materialized. While Bakiev twice in 2005 announced his support for the abolition of the death penalty in

Kyrgyzstan and called for constitutional amendments, no such legislation had been introduced as of late November.

One of the main reforms urged by civil society activists is the creation of a new constitution that would restore freedoms stripped during the Akaev era and would settle important issues regarding the structure of the government, such as whether Kyrgyzstan should be a presidential or parliamentary republic. The Constitutional Committee, set up to draft a new constitution, initially received praise for including civil society representatives in addition to government officials among its members. However, observers later criticized the body as ineffective and marred by infighting and noted that President Bakiev had increased the number of government representatives vis-a-vis representatives of civil society.

Continuing reports of police abuse in 2005, including torture of adult and children detainees, further undermined people's confidence in the government's promises of reform.

In a positive development, local rights groups and media watchdogs reported increased freedom of the media following the change in government.

Human Rights Defenders

During the final months of the Akaev government, as the country geared up for parliamentary elections, human rights defenders suffered intense persecution.

Tursunbek Akun, a prominent human rights defender and leader of the NGO Human Rights Movement of Kyrgyzstan, was kidnapped on November 16, 2004. He was held for fifteen days by men he believed to be associated with police and national security services. Akun was discovered on December 1 at a Bishkek hospital where doctors found he was suffering from "deep psychological trauma." A private doctor later diagnosed him with a brain concussion.

Kyrgyz government officials denied that Akun was the victim of kidnapping or forced disappearance and failed to investigate the possible role of law enforcement agents in the crime. The spokesman for the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the deputy chairman of the National Security Service publicly accused Akun of staging his own disappearance for self-promotion and to discredit law enforcement bodies. Akun claimed that he had been held by members of the security forces in the basement of an unknown house, where his kidnappers allegedly demanded that he stop collecting signatures in support of Akaev's resignation. Prior to his abduction, Akun had been actively advocating for the early resignation of President Akaev. As of September 2005, no one had been held accountable for the kidnapping and police had halted their investigation.

Aziza Abdurasulova, head of the human rights NGO Kylym Shamy (Candle of the Century), was active in the search for Akun while he was missing. On November 26, 2004, a person who identified himself as a police officer tried to force her into his car, claiming she had a stolen cell phone and that she had to be

taken to the police station. Her phone had in fact been given to her by the Bishkek office of the U.S.-based organization Freedom House. Abdurasulova fled from the officer. She later received calls on her cell phone from senior police officers asking to meet with her. At a press conference, the spokesman for the Ministry of Internal Affairs accused her of trying to draw public and political attention to herself with allegations that police officers had attempted to abduct her.

With a new government in place, the long-exiled head of the Kyrgyz Committee for Human Rights (KCHR), Ramazan Dyrlydaev, was able to return to the country. The KCHR continued to face serious obstacles to its operations, however. During the Akaev government, the KCHR had been stripped of its registration and an alternate group was granted registration under the same name; it is illegal in Kyrgyzstan for two groups with the same name to be registered. As of this writing, the genuine KCHR had not been re-registered.

Key International Actors

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) criticized the former Akaev government for failing to ensure that the February and March 2005 rounds of parliamentary elections complied with international standards. In its report on the July elections that followed President Akaev's ouster, the OSCE noted that the "election marked tangible progress by the Kyrgyz Republic towards meeting OSCE commitments, as well as other international standards for democratic elections."

Following a meeting with then-Foreign Minister Roza Otunbaeva in September, European Commissioner for External Relations Benita Ferrero-Waldner stressed the "unique window of opportunity for the Kyrgyz government to show its political commitment to fully embrace democratic values, develop economic and social policies, which will benefit the Kyrgyz population, and tackle corruption."

With relations already at a low point after Uzbek president Islam Karimov condemned the March "revolution," tensions between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan escalated further when hundreds of Uzbeks sought refuge in Kyrgyzstan following the May 13 massacre of largely unarmed protesters by security forces in the Uzbek city of Andijan. Uzbek authorities pressured the Kyrgyz government to return Uzbek asylum seekers and obtained the handover of four men on June 9. Under strong international pressure, the government of Kyrgyzstan vowed not to return any more of the refugees.

On July 29, 2005, the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees airlifted 439 Uzbeks from Kyrgyzstan to Romania. One month later, the government of Uzbekistan cancelled its contracts to supply natural gas to Kyrgyzstan. Uzbek authorities went on to implicate Kyrgyzstan in what they claimed was an Islamic insurgency in Andijan. The state prosecutor's office charged that the "rebels" had trained in southern Kyrgyzstan. The Kyrgyz authorities denied these allegations.

Kyrgyz-Russian cooperation grew closer in 2005 after Kyrgyz authorities allowed Russia to double the number of its troops at the Kant airbase.

Relations between Kyrgyzstan and the U.S. government deteriorated in the final months of the Akaev administration. The U.S. Ambassador to Kyrgyzstan, Stephen M. Young, strongly criticized the government for not allowing free and fair parliamentary elections. During the March unrest in southern Kyrgyzstan, the U.S. government called for dialogue and expressed hope that political changes in Kyrgyzstan would be non-violent. The United States engaged with the newly-installed Bakiev government on issues ranging from the use of the Manas airbase near Bishkek to the Uzbek refugee issue. In April 2005, a group of visiting senators pledged to support the country's political transition. During the fiscal year 2004 (October 1, 2003 through September 30, 2004), U.S. foreign assistance to Kyrgyzstan was U.S.\$50.8 million. U.S. expenditures to Kyrgyzstan were expected to increase in 2005.

At a summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) held in Astana in July 2005, Kyrgyzstan joined Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Russia, China, and Tajikistan in signing a declaration on strengthening cooperation in the "fight against terrorism, separatism and extremism." Despite an official SCO statement urging the U.S. to set a date for withdrawal from military bases in Central Asian countries, President Bakiev assured U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld that the U.S. could use the base in Kyrgyzstan for as long as necessary. At the present time, there are more than nine hundred U.S. troops stationed at Manas airbase.