



Color Evolution: NGOs and Oligarchs Unite for Change in Kyrgyzstan

Chris Doten

Tear gas swirled and flash-bang grenades flew under Lenin's statue in the Old Square of Bishkek November 7, 2006. Rival groups in Kyrgyzstan's capital demonstrating for and against President Kurmanbek Bakiev almost came to blows as riot-suited police battalions struggled to separate them. Two days later, at 1:30 AM on November 9, opposition members of the *Jorgorku Kenesh*, Kyrgyzstan's parliament, pronounced themselves a Constituent Assembly and promulgated a new constitution. The following morning nearly all deputies joined in passing it.¹ Bowing to the pressure of the protests the next afternoon, Bakiev endorsed the document, signing away substantial parts of his own powers while declaring, "Deputies of our parliament have shown wisdom in the adoption of the new edition of the Constitution."² Kyrgyzstan had become the first predominantly parliamentary government in Central Asia.³ Although the reforms were partially reversed in January 2007, the significance of the change lies in the effective alliance that drove it forward and its implications for other countries, as well as political liberalization for Kyrgyzstan.

The series of "color revolutions" that have toppled autocrats in Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan itself back in March 2005 have a new variant in the November 2006 successes in Bishkek. This article examines how this new model differs from mass protest movements of the past and how it provides a blueprint for methods and strategies that

Chris Doten, Fletcher MALD 2007, is focusing on China, International Law, and Central Asia. His forthcoming Master's thesis is on the (il)legality of Russian repression of NGOs under their treaty obligations. He is the former Editor-in-Chief of the Fletcher Ledger.

international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and political and business opposition leaders may be able to use to challenge illiberal governments around the world.

The term "color evolution" is useful to describe the November 2006 Kyrgyz power shift as the events, while short of a revolution, were clearly the successors of the color movements in inspiration and goals—with an effective new twist for democratizing forces. In the absence of nationwide unrest, protest-driven pressure from an alliance between Kyrgyz civil society and the support networks of wealthy businessmen and politicians resulted in constitutional change to liberalize an authoritarian government. This union of western and eastern forms of social capital is only likely to occur in a nation like Kyrgyzstan without the wealth of oil or gas reserves.

Government transformation in countries without developed democratic institutions has historically required revolutionary protest movements based on massive social discontent. Triggers have been things such as a devastated economy, egregious corruption, or excessive abuse of power by the government. In the color revolutions of Georgia, Ukraine, and previously in 2005 in Kyrgyzstan the perception of rigged elections provided the trigger.

Leading up to November 2006, Kyrgyzstan did not experience deteriorating social conditions or political chicanery that might have acted as a proximate trigger. According to Thomas Wood, Trinity College professor and former IFES staff expert on Kyrgyzstan, the economy was adequate by local standards, and government incompetence and corruption was no worse than normal. Despite the absence of these causal

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conditions, civil society with its organizing ability and wide networks, worked together with politically and financially independent, anti-establishment elites to gather and keep thousands of active supporters fed, motivated, and disciplined for days of protests which were able to rock the foundations of an autocratic presidency and reshape the country. (Please see map from the CIA World Factbook⁴)

Advocates for change working within the context of illiberal regimes can alter society only to the extent that they are able to overcome the central government's ability to maintain the status quo. Authoritarian governments possess a variety of coercive tools including co-opting potential opposition, suppressing civic organizations, or brutally crushing protest. However, when an alliance between opposition leaders and civil society organizations can marshal more support than the government, it can achieve dramatic results, as in the case of Kyrgyzstan.

While the prevailing economic conditions of a country in the throes of change may not matter as the November 2006 protests in Kyrgyzstan suggest, the underlying nature of the economy does. But Kyrgyzstan has no oil. In other countries flush with petrodollars, a rentier state that primarily makes its money from mineral exports to foreigners, is able to repress both civil society actors and independent elites. Oil wealth flowing through the country can be used to perpetuate an authoritarian government by buying off opposition and co-opting them into the system.⁵ A full treasury and adequate social programs for health care, education and social security cut off the other potential leg of opposition: the administration is not beholden to NGO donors to satisfy the basic needs of its citizens.

KYRGYZSTAN 101

Kyrgyzstan is a nation of supernatural beauty. Bisected by the towering heights of the Tien Shan (Celestial Mountains), this is a traditionally nomadic land where families still summer in *yurts* in upland pastures, milking horses for the fragrant fermented national drink *kymmys*. The vast majority of the population is rural, tending flocks or farming plots of land, and fragmented by the mountainous geography. Soviet industrialization was largely limited to environmentally destructive gold and uranium mining. With cotton, wool, and meat as the top three exports,⁶ Kyrgyz society is far from urbanized.

As mentioned, an important distinction between Kyrgyzstan and its neighbors is that the

nation lacks oil or natural gas reserves. Sitting in the bottom quarter of the world's economies,⁷ the government is incapable of providing the social services required by its people. In 2004, Kyrgyzstan received \$258 million in official development aid,⁸ in comparison to its 2005 national budget expenditures of approximately \$530 million.⁹ Civil society and NGOs provide the bulk of services funded by these grants.

The president is generally popular, though numbers vary by region, and the Kyrgyz have a generally optimistic attitude about the future.¹⁰ Political awareness among the Kyrgyz populace is low; in this predominantly agrarian society, many are unaware of who their leaders are. Structurally, the president controls almost all the levers of power; the prime minister and parliament are quite weak. However, because of the general penury of the government described above, it is difficult for the administration to keep a tight grip on society. Power is centralized, but not strong. Furthermore, the fact that the previous government was toppled by mass protests has made clear to all the administration's vulnerability to demonstrations.

There is a fundamental power struggle between the offices of prime minister and president, as lines of responsibility are tangled and overlapping structures have led to institutional conflict. To the extent that the *Jorgorku Kenesh* is able to concentrate power away from the President, each Member of Parliament (MP) gains additional power to pursue his own interests—whether those are aimed at the greater good or private business.

The weakness of the government necessitates an openness to foreign assistance, creating the space for large international NGOs to operate such as Counterpart International, Freedom House, Internews, Transparency International, and the US-government funded National Democratic Institute and International Republican Institute.¹¹ The Kyrgyz people's needs in education, public health, economic growth, and political development have created a dramatic demand for civil society-delivered services. In 2005, USAID estimated that 2,200 NGOs were active

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in the country, almost all dependent on foreign funding.¹² This provides the civil society sector with a wide, popular base, organizational skills, and the ability to mobilize forces both inside and outside of Kyrgyzstan. The Bakiev government has attempted to reduce the threat posed by civil society organizations; Human Rights Watch documented 2006 as a year in which the Kyrgyz government put increasing pressure on NGOs.¹³

Wealthy Kyrgyz elites, the other partner in the reform duo, are typically self-made businessmen, albeit frequently of a corrupt or even criminal nature.¹⁴ With limited resources, the cash-strapped government finds it difficult to co-opt those businessmen who possess private fortunes. Parliament is mostly comprised of such wealthy entrepreneurs;¹⁵ immunity from prosecution and the ability to benefit their financial interests from their parliamentary seats provides them further independence from the president. There are a significant number who are generally opposed to the administration, though there are not formal parties and no official parliamentary opposition, as such. These deputies and civil society organizers came together under the banner of the For Reforms movement, a political alliance with various motivations but one goal: enacting constitutional reforms to weaken the power of the presidency.

Increasingly assertive behavior by Bakiev may have prodded parliamentarians and business elites to throw in their support with the For Reforms movement. Both groups had pragmatic reasons for weakening the presidency and uniting with NGO activists in their planned demonstrations. Many were becoming concerned by the fact that the President seemed to be walking in his predecessor's nepotistic shoes. His family and friends were doing suspiciously well in their business endeavors, and this posed a threat to the financial interests of many MPs. Leader of the Fatherland Party, Rosa Otunbaev, lamented this turn of events: "Today the family business of the president is blooming in the country. The kids of high officials are involved into "earning" money under the patronage of their parents. Our president appoints his relatives to the highest position."¹⁶

Bakiev's opponents in business and parliament were under increasing pressure, giving them incentive to act against him sooner rather than later. In one case that is reminiscent of the Keystone Kops and telling for the lengths to which the government would go to quash opposition, a leader of For Reforms was found by Polish customs officials with a Russian

nested doll in his luggage—filled with heroin. Edil Baisalov, another organizer of the For Reforms movement, held Kyrgyz secret services responsible, saying, "This provocation is to discredit not only the leader of the opposition but the whole of the opposition in the eyes of the international community and before the people of Kyrgyzstan."¹⁷

In other intimidating developments, one MP was detained at Bishkek's airport allegedly carrying \$100,000 in illegal and undeclared currency but claimed to have had one-tenth of that.¹⁸ Photographs of another MP frolicking with a young girl in a sauna and a For Reforms letter purportedly asking for money from former President Akayev (now *persona non grata* in Kyrgyzstan) have received wide play on state-owned media.¹⁹ Observers say that NGO leaders and parliamentarians have maintained a lower profile lately as a result.²⁰ Splits, perhaps encouraged by the government, have developed in the For Reforms block since the November events.²¹

DEMOCRATIZATION THEORY

In *The Third Wave*, Samuel Huntington describes the massive advance of democracy after Portugal's democratic coup in 1977.²² He sees one of the primary drivers for this progression as the demonstration effect: the idea that people are inspired by the actions of those elsewhere. The color revolutions, most notably in Ukraine and Georgia, have indisputably had a dramatic demonstration effect in Kyrgyzstan, as the November protests looked to them as a model. A Russian journalist described a meeting with a leader of Kyrgyzstan's movement, For Reforms, in a *yurt* in Bishkek's Ala Too Square:

There Rosa Otunbaeva sat at a computer. She had been [the] Kyrgyz Interior Minister several times, including for the first half year of Bakiev's rule. There was a large, colorful book on the Orange Revolution in one corner. "I brought that," Otunbaeva said cheerfully, "A Ukrainian minister gave it to me."²³

According to Robert Putnam, a critical element in the health of a democratic society is social capital. The strength of NGOs and elites lies in their ability to mobilize that asset.²⁴ As

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Hannah Arendt observed, such groups are able to band together against the atomization of society and stand against the power of the state.²⁵ Kyrgyzstan's deep-seated clan and regional affiliations are often dismissed as pre-modern obstacles to democratization as they serve as conduits for patronage and government corruption.²⁶ However, these, too, are networks of social capital; one must be careful to avoid a blinkered approach that projects Western standards on foreign systems.

For business tycoons and political leaders, this social capital can be put to use. Elites and their supporters are in a symbiotic relationship; those who are successful provide perks to their followers, and a large and effective base can then in turn be mobilized. It was these direct ties of loyalty to leaders that brought their network of backers to the November protests more than any passion for abstract ideas of democracy or constitutional reform. One journalist, asking questions about motivations of the protestors on the scene, reported:

I asked one of the women-protesters from Naryn district why she was unhappy about the Constitution and which changes should be implemented. ... The reply was: "We don't know and don't bother us with that."²⁷

Putnam discusses the important difference between "bonding" social capital, which links people who share an attribute such as religion, ethnicity, or ideology, and "bridging" capital, which connects disparate groups.²⁸ The brilliance of the For Reforms mobilization and protest strategy is its synthesis of types: the NGO alliance provided bridges between the bonded regional patronage networks of businessmen and parliamentary deputies, unifying them under the collective For Reforms banner.

YOU SAY YOU WANT A REVOLUTION...

Outside experts weighing the revolutionary prospects in Kyrgyzstan would have raised skeptical eyebrows; as discussed above, the scent of popular unrest was not in the air. How

the leaders of For Reforms were able to drive through a new form of government under these conditions makes a fascinating tale.

Inspiration for the protests can be found in March 2005. The open plaza of Ala-Too Square echoed with the same sounds as it would a year and a half later, in November 2006: mass protests mobilized thousands for rallies demonstrating against increasing authoritarianism, economic decay, and chicanery in the February 2005 parliamentary elections, in which it was alleged that a number of legitimate candidates had been removed from the ballot for spurious reasons. A seat in the legislature was seen as a means to bolster one's economic interests and guarantee immunity from prosecution, and most who ran were successful local businessmen.

As protests crested, thousands swarmed the fences of the executive building. President Askar Akayev thought it best to find other lodging and signed his resignation letter from Moscow. The 2005 protests differ from

the pattern of other color revolutions in that demonstrations were not primarily driven by civil society groups, as in Ukraine or Georgia, but by elite support networks.²⁹ Spontaneous demonstrations began in various parts of the country, gathered force and eventually moved to Bishkek. NGOs were caught flat-footed by the actions and took only minor roles in the overthrow of President Akayev.

Despite the controversy over the February 2005 parliamentary elections, the winning members of Kyrgyzstan's *Jorgorku Kenesh* will remain in office until their term expires in 2010. Bakiev came to office after legitimate elections in the summer of 2005,³⁰ promising to root out corruption and push through constitutional reforms to liberalize the government, open the media, and strengthen parliament. The constitutional reforms never transpired, and his promises returned to haunt him as the November 2006 protesters clamored for their implementation.³¹

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Since the overthrow of Akayev in March 2005, NGOs had been pressuring Bakiev to follow through on his promises of constitutional reform. An initial round of protest in May 2006 led by Edil Baisalov of the organization Coalition of NGOs gathered crowds of up to 20,000.³² Protesters had lost patience with the administration's corruption and reform foot-dragging and gave November 2006 as a deadline for action.

On November 2, new red tents mushroomed in Ala Too Square overnight as For Reforms set up tidy lines of shelters purchased by wealthy businessmen allied with the movement.³³ Well-organized groups moved in, largely nonpolitical supporters drawn from the networks of businessmen and politicians, and the rallies began. The government reacted quickly, taking opposition news web sites³⁴ off line and broadcast stations³⁵ off the air.

Looking beyond Kyrgyzstan's border to other authoritarian governments in the region, the November protests provide yet another reminder that mass action remains a formidable threat to entrenched rulers

The atmosphere turned ominous as protests continued for five more days. While President Bakiev mounted counter-protests packed with government employees³⁶ in the Old Square a few blocks away, pro-presidential rallies also "spontaneously" emerged in other regions of Kyrgyzstan.³⁷ As government rhetoric escalated to accusations

of an attempted coup by MPs,³⁸ the protesters in Ala Too square demanded not only the passage of their revised constitution, but the resignation of Bakiev and Prime Minister Felix Kulov as well.³⁹

When For Reforms members went to Old Square to recruit pro-government protesters to their side, a scuffle broke out between the rival groups of demonstrators, ending with the national police militia lobbing tear gas and stun grenades.⁴⁰ As the situation teetered on the brink of anarchy, some excited protesters started to climb the fence around the President's executive building and charge the gates, but were called back by opposition leaders.⁴¹

On November 7, parliament began voting on the For Reforms draft of the Constitution. As the massive protests gathered steam and government officials began to worry about violent overthrow, momentum in the city

swung towards the opposition. Supporters in parliament attempted to push through a revised version of the Constitution. Debate ran late into the night. With protestors maintaining their noisy vigil outside, a majority of the MPs accepted the new document. However, pro-presidential deputies had evaporated from the chamber, breaking the requisite quorum and leaving the situation stalemated.⁴²

Stymied For Reforms-affiliated MPs took the unprecedented step November 9 of declaring themselves a Constituent Assembly—with no quorum requirements—and proceeded to adopt the new Constitution.⁴³ Opposition MPs returning to the chambers later that morning added their votes to pass the bill, perhaps daunted by the protests outside or in acknowledgement of a *fait accompli*.

Despite denouncing the Constituent Assembly as having been created through an illegitimate seizure of power, Bakiev bowed to the demonstrators' pressure and signed the new document in a formal ceremony. At the event, he stated: "A new edition of the Constitution—it is a result of Kyrgyz people's wisdom. Signing of the Constitution—it is a concord between different political forces of the country."⁴⁴ Pro-presidential speaker of parliament, Marat Sultanov, grumpily stated that the document gave even more power to the *Jorgorku Kenesh* than the original version pushed by For Reforms.⁴⁵ After boisterous celebrations in the square,⁴⁶ For Reforms activists broke down their new tents and headed home; all in Bishkek were relieved that the instability had not plunged the country into total chaos.

CONSEQUENCES AND CONCLUSIONS

The November 2006 protest moved Kyrgyzstan a step further toward democratic consolidation. The new constitution (even with the January 15 revisions) contains two critical reforms that will significantly impact the balance of power between the President and parliament over the long term.

First, strong parties will be encouraged by the fact that 50 percent of parliament will be elected from party lists, and a party with a majority in the legislature has the right to choose a prime minister. Second, the

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President can no longer dissolve parliament at will.⁴⁷ Only if a prime minister is nominated and rejected three times, or if parliament decides by a vote of no confidence to bring down the government, will there be new elections.

Looking beyond Kyrgyzstan's border to other authoritarian governments in the region, the November protests provide yet another reminder that mass action remains a formidable threat to entrenched rulers. Yet, the dictatorial stranglehold on civil society in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan makes the chance of a NGO-led movement along the lines of For Reforms unlikely, though Turkmen society may open up somewhat after Saparmurat Niyazov's recent death. Kazakhstan appears to be more carefully managing this balance, providing oil-driven growth in combination with some civil liberties to keep organized opposition quiescent. The leadership in Tajikistan is more likely to feel threatened by events in Kyrgyzstan, as they similarly lack oil funds and are dependent on services provided by NGOs. However, Tajikistan's President Rahmonov remains genuinely popular in his country and is seen as a strong and reasonably honest politician; a populace divided by seven years of bloody civil war is also reticent to engage in destabilizing protest activism.

After the string of anti-authoritarian "color revolutions" in Russia's near abroad, President Vladimir Putin has been clear about his opinions on the subject, stating, "NGOs must not be used by some states as an instrument of foreign policy on the territory of other states."⁴⁸ One Russian security analyst saw the possibility of direct intervention to counter the November 2006 protests in Kyrgyzstan, characterizing the For Reforms movement as "a mob scene whose participants don't realize who is controlling them or what they want."⁴⁹ To prevent further unpleasant revolutionary surprises, autocratic governments in Eurasia will doubtless redouble efforts to undermine opposition and strengthen alliances with illiberal partners, through such groups as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.⁵⁰ These support groups for autocrats enable regimes to band together in the face of disapproval from ideologically opposed nations.

Despite the liberalizing impacts of the November rallies, countries that engage in democracy by mass protest can find the tool a double-edged sword, as the slope from

democratic demonstration to mob rule can be slippery. In Kyrgyzstan, protests are a way of life, but their success can easily be imitated to excess. Leaders aware of the potential for mobilization "use their supporters as weapons to intimidate rivals or claim formal power whether it is rightfully theirs or not."⁵¹ The Kyrgyz might welcome the stability of an authoritarian government if the protest situation is perceived to be out of control.

For NGOs beyond Central Asia, the November protests in Kyrgyzstan provide a new model for political change in donor-dependent countries that lack a popular protest movement. As long as the countries' economies and political systems are not buoyed by oil profits, movements may have a chance of growth and survival. By teaming up with elites who are willing to oppose the ruling regime, NGOs can build alliances that unite organizational ability, money, and supporters into formations that have the power to reshape their nations.

EPILOGUE

After weeks of crude threats to dissolve parliament,⁵² on December 30, Bakiev compelled the minimum number of MPs required to adopt constitutional revisions ostensibly aimed at clarifying the rushed November 9 document.⁵³ Not coincidentally, the new version also happened to hand back some of the presidential control forfeited in November. For Reforms-affiliated opposition deputies were heading home for New Year celebrations and did not attempt any further struggles. Protest pressure on the government to counteract the constitutional modifications was impossible without the elaborate organization and infrastructure that had been prepared for the November demonstrations, further demonstrating the non-spontaneous nature of the events and the lack of popular participation.

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On January 15, President Bakiev signed off on the revisions.⁵⁴ This *new* new constitution was not adopted according to the requirements of the November 9 version, and a legal challenge is already underway.⁵⁵ Despite the fact that Bakiev's revisions represent a step backward for parliamentary democracy, the current document

remains the most liberal in the region.

Looking ahead, two paths lie in front of Bakiev.

Outright repression of NGOs and opposition elites is likely to be difficult for reasons of national weakness discussed above, and half measures may anger, but not disarm, the groups. The second option, a cautious *détente*, is a more probable outcome, with Bakiev likely to attempt to maintain the

precarious balance between the parliament and presidency that is currently established. The pragmatic alliance of NGOs and opposition elites has proven successful and could reactivate their partnership for future action. It is unlikely

that Bishkek has seen the last of massed protesters packing Ala Too Square. Next time, given the way in which Bakiev has revised the agreement embodied in the November 9 Constitution, protesters may be unwilling to stop their protests until the President is brought down as well.

Thanks to the banding together of the Kyrgyz Republic's strong civil society sector and independent elite networks opposed to a corrupt and autocratic presidency, democracy has taken another step forward for the Kyrgyz people. As one democracy advocate in Bishkek emphasized, "This constitution is absolutely revolutionary for Central Asia."⁵⁶ With the demonstration effect of Kyrgyzstan's "color evolution," this successful partnership holds the potential to bringing revolutionary change to other authoritarian regimes as well.

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PHOTOS FROM THE NOVEMBER PROTESTS IN ALA TOO SQUARE

Credit: Aisuluu Jumashev

Demonstrators with hallmark red flags and tents throng Ala Too square; in the distance, a statue of Freedom holds aloft the Kyrgyz national symbol.



Protester march en masse past the White House, Kyrgyzstan's executive office building.



Riot-suited militia in front of the state television and radio building.



Map from CIA World Factbook



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