

You Say You Want a Revolution?

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Jalalabat, a sleepy provincial capital perched near the rim of the Ferghana Valley in southern Kyrgyzstan, was roiled by violent protests in early March 2005 when angry crowds numbering in the tens of thousands took over government buildings in an act of defiance against the autocratic, northerner-controlled regime of Askar Akaev. The shockwaves from this unlikely epicenter of revolution reached the capital Bishkek in late March and contributed to the rapid implosion of Akaev's government.

In late June, only a few months later, the scene was quite different when—in advance of the country's July presidential elections—a large, peaceful crowd gathered in Jalalabat's central soccer stadium on a summer evening to hear a free "get-out-the-vote" rock concert, one of a series held throughout the country and organized by the national youth movement Kel Kel (or "Renaissance"). The concert had a line-up of prominent Kyrgyz pop artists who offered energetic performances (featuring a Kyrgyz version of the Backstreet Boys and Spice Girls) complete with synchronized dances in revealing outfits. Such a show was rather at odds with the stereotypical image of the conservative Islamic Ferghana Valley region but indicative of the political energy that civil society groups have mobilized in the wake of the country's Tulip Revolution.

This energy is the most important—and potentially long-lasting—outcome of March's political drama. Not surprisingly, the March events did not magically transform Kyrgyzstan's electoral system. The presidential election, originally planned for October, was pushed forward to July after the revolution created uncertainty about who was leading the government. In the end, this election, too, had its share of technical problems. A botched and corrupt attempt to issue new passports (the primary ID on election day) and problems with the country's voter lists made this election very difficult to administer in strict accordance with international standards. Complicating matters further was the tolerated tradition of vote buying, and some voters were given money, food or even alcohol to vote for particular candidates.

In political terms, the election was almost predetermined when one of the leaders of the March 24th revolt, Kurmanbek Bakiev, forged a deal with his strongest rival, Feliks Kulov, to run on a joint ticket after Bakiev assumed the office of President in the wake of the uprising. In some ways, the election was a referendum on Bakiev. Even though the presidential election may not have been everything the protesters in Jalalabat or Bishkek would have hoped, it was an important step in reestablishing a national consensus about Kyrgyzstan's legitimate government and diminishing the possibility of civil

war.

However, it is the energy of civil society groups and the new openness brought to Kyrgyz politics by the events of March 24th that has the potential to produce real political change. In the forefront of this trend is Kel Kel, a group formed in January 2005 as a nonpartisan organization dedicated to electoral transparency. As the target audience for their efforts, they chose the 100,000 or so Kyrgyz college students studying in Bishkek, many of whom would vote in the constituency in which Akaev's daughter was running for parliament. Because they spoke out against the pressure put on university students to vote for Bermet Akaeva, Kel Kel was persecuted by the previous regime.

After the revolt, Kel Kel has advocated the participation of all interested people in the political process, foremost among them young people. To get their target audience involved, they have organized a series of concerts to "rock the vote" and encourage voter participation among the younger generation. Kel Kel's concerts took place in a new electoral environment. Whereas in previous elections the Central Election Commission attempted to control voter education initiatives (despite having no legal mandate), now it made no efforts to do so. As a result, there was a flowering of grassroots civil society initiatives designed to inform and motivate the electorate, and voter education has begun to reconnect people with their voting rights and the issues at stake in elections. Kyrgyz civil society groups, international donor and implementing organizations, as well as the Kyrgyz media itself all cooperated in electronic and print outreach efforts to encourage voter turnout and participation.

IFES was fortunate to be able to work closely with several of these initiatives. A group of the strongest local NGOs formed a partnership called "For Clean Elections" that used IFES-developed anti-vote buying material to reach over 500,000 voters. The UNDP used similar information in its one million-strong leaflet drive. IFES also assisted Kel Kel with its concerts and used the opportunity to deliver voter education materials to attendees at each event.

The highlight of the "rock the vote" concert series was a massive gathering in Bishkek's main Ala Too square in early July. Like Jalalabat, Bishkek had been at the center of events that helped topple the Akaev regime. In the lead up to the presidential election, the square had seen massive pro- and anti-government demonstrations, including a brief attempt at a counter-revolution by what appear to have been supporters of the previous regime. The concert began amidst a tense atmosphere as large numbers of police circled the square and stage. However, the tension soon dissipated as both police and youth began to enjoy the event. The star attraction was none other than Ukrainian pop diva Ruslana, a Eurovision-song contest winner viewed in many former Soviet states as a counter culture figure. She sings about political involvement and the need for openness, and her songs were heard by many who advocated the recent political changes in Ukraine. In

Bishkek, the crowd flew Ukrainian flags less as expressions of revolutionary fervor and more of due deference to Ruslana's celebrity. The long lines of policemen, clearly enjoying the evening, insulated the gyrating Ruslana from the crowd's enthusiasm, and it seemed the mistrust that had built up between Kyrgyz law enforcement and the public during the revolution was softened as young concert goers and police units alike took time to enjoy the music (and read voter education leaflets).

These concerts are important means to help open the door for greater youth participation in Kyrgyzstan. In the past, youth have been one of the more passive voting groups. When they have voted, it has often been due to intense pressure from college administrators and teachers to cast their vote for a particular candidate. But the Kyrgyz presidential election of 2005 showed that Kyrgyzstan's youth can be involved in the political process if groups such as Kel Kel can continue to build on their early successes.

More generally, space has now been opened up in Kyrgyzstan for civil society groups to conduct more projects that allow citizens to learn about their civic rights through genuine voter education. The country still has many political trials ahead; the next few months are likely to see constitutional changes, local government elections and possibly even new parliamentary elections. It is important for Kyrgyzstan's citizens to build on the fragile foundation provided by the sole post-authoritarian election held in any of the five Central Asian republics. One key to their success will be to draw traditionally marginalized groups, such as young voters, in to the political process. If this can be done, future governments can make use of their resulting electoral mandate—strengthened by vigorous participation of all social groups—to forge genuine political legitimacy, something notably missing in the previous regime.