

Anatomy of a Civic Uprising

Kyrgyzstan's Tulip Revolution

Akayev had always seemed the most liberal of Central Asian leaders, but when his government's carefully constructed façade of citizen involvement unraveled and uncovered his strongman tactics, it meant his political end.

by David Mikosz

The events of March 24, 2005, pushed Kyrgyzstan onto the world stage for a few brief days. Comparisons with the recent “civic revolutions” in former Soviet Republics like Ukraine and Georgia were inevitable but facile. Like all real political change, the Kyrgyz revolution was very much rooted in the details of Kyrgyz political life in the period since independence. It was not, as many observers have suggested, simply rooted in the discontent caused by poverty. While Kyrgyzstan is, indeed, a very poor country, the World Bank reports that its level of poverty is decreasing (it fell 10.9 percentage points between 1999 and 2002) and that, generally speaking, the poorest of the poor (i.e., those living in rural areas) have benefited. Instead, a key factor in the so-called “Tulip Revolution” was the cynical attempts by the former government to exploit civil society for its own benefit.

Hoisted on his own petard

Elected as Kyrgyzstan’s first president in 1991, Askar Akayev initially appeared to be the most liberal of CIS leaders, and he allowed multiparty elections to continue. However, in the late 1990s, he began to limit—though not end—political and economic liberties. An accomplished politician (a fact too rarely noted), he thought that he could manage civil society without destroying it. But he was wrong.

Akayev’s techniques were most often used to dilute or limit the messages of civil society (and thereby flummox the opposition) through GONGOs (government-organized nongovernmental organizations) and control of the media. Using these tools, the Akayev regime confused the public by creating an artificial dichotomy: when the opposition criticized the government, “others” were ready to stand up and support it.

One Akayev GONGO was the Association of Non-commercial and Nongovernmental Organizations (or “the Association”). While authentic NGOs (like the Coalition for Democracy and Civil Society, or “the Coalition”) criticized the government, the Association condemned Kyrgyz NGOs’ use of foreign funds, even as it accepted money from the World Bank. In the 2003 referendum in which Akayev successfully increased his presidential powers, the Association played a vocal role and even “monitored” the election. Not surprisingly, the Coalition was critical of the conduct of the election, while the Association defended it. The Association provided Akayev a useful front though which to legitimize his political actions (for example, it sponsored a petition drive asking him to run again).

Akayev also silenced opposition media through purchase, regulation or outright harassment. Some media outlets were bought by Akayev supporters, while Kyrgyzstan’s only independent publisher suffered mysterious power outages. Radio Free Europe lost frequencies from its Kyrgyz language version, and independent radio and television stations leasing government equipment first abruptly lost and then regained their licenses.

The government also used its position as an employer to compel state employees to demonstrate their support for the administration. For example, state employees (like teachers) had to attend pro-government demonstrations in order to receive their salaries. In 2003, my wife saw one of her primary school teachers in tears in the main Bishkek square “voluntarily” handing out leaflets in support of the President’s referendum. This compulsion was also present during the pro-government demonstration on March 22: teachers were told they would receive a salary only if they showed up. This sort of coercion was almost habitual, and the regime little realized that such public support was built only on a foundation of sand.

So what went wrong? How could this accomplished politician—who had managed to confuse and outmaneuver the opposition for several elections—fail so completely in March 2005?

The house Akayev built

First, the public was deeply shocked at the disclosure by an



In Bishkek on March 24, the police await the protesters.

opposition journal of pictures of a large house said to be for the president along with a clever poem listing all businesses supposedly owned by his family. A necessary fiction for many in Kyrgyzstan was that Akayev was a modest scientist (perhaps maneuvered by his smart family) who wanted nothing more than to guide the country in the right direction. The publication of photos of his palace exposed Akayev's personal wealth, and Akayev himself seemed truly thrown by the intensity of the public's disgust and anger.

A run-off election

Second, the government did all it could to promote the success of Akayev's daughter in her campaign for a parliamentary seat in Bishkek's University district, even eliminating strong competitors using administrative means and deploying university rectors to campaign for her. An exit poll conducted during the election (Kyrgyzstan's first) predicted that Akayev's daughter would win the election with more than 55% of the vote. However, the actual count put her votes in the low 40th percentile and set the stage for a run-off. This news spread quickly and students in the district realized that they could vote for whomever they wished as long as they told the pollster they voted for the government candidate. Thus, they did not have to be part of Akayev's civil society myth.

This reality became clearer in one university, where rather than demanding or threatening them, the rector apparently beseeched and cajoled the students to vote the "right" way. More and more students began to see that they really could vote as they wished. In the end, students played a key role in the March demonstrations.

The second round of elections in the University district was riddled with imperfections. Many people complained about fraud, such as people filming the casting of ballots and people cheating outright. In short, anti-opposition forces were obliged to turn to brute force to win rather than relying on their facade of civil society promotion.

March 24th

The detailed history of the events of March 24th remains for future writers. Too many questions are still unresolved. But a rough chronology of the events that day can demonstrate how the kinds of missteps described above prepared the way for Akayev's departure.



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A Kyrgyz man holds one of the brightly colored cloths of the opposition.

The demonstrators began their rally on the outskirts of Bishkek. They included people who had seen the candidates of their choice disqualified from the election, people who had purchased the opposition's newspapers or people who were tired of government pressure. The group peacefully marched down the main street, Chui Avenue, past the Kyrgyz White House to the main square.

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The Kyrgyz White House was ringed by hundreds of riot police, but they peacefully let the demonstrators march by. Once inside the square, the demonstrators were confronted by government thugs who attempted to provoke a fight. (These strongmen were a revealing mutation of the GONGO idea mentioned above: rather than pretending to be civil society advocates, for the first time, the regime was using thugs—a sign they felt they were losing control.) Initially successful, the pro-government thugs were driven off by the numerically superior crowd. But this confrontation changed the mood of the crowd. They were angry, and they wanted to show their displeasure at the seat of power. Turning back, they walked the short distance to the Kyrgyz White House and began to demonstrate.

In front of the Kyrgyz White House, the demonstrators and the security forces engaged in a dialogue and seemed to reach a compromise. However, a sudden cavalry charge of some 50 horsemen dispersed the crowd. It appears that Akayev chose this moment to flee the presidential residence in an armored truck. Surprised and afraid, the crowd poured back into the square, but moments later, realizing their strength, turned around and began to stone the horses and riders.

The transition begins

Despite Akayev's initial democratic promise and many political gifts, this then was his political end. Unlike President Karimov in Uzbekistan, he had not relied on a powerful army or security services; unlike his President Nazarbayev in Kazakhstan, he did not have the support of numerous oligarchs who benefited from a growing economy; and unlike President Rakhmonov in Tajikistan, he couldn't vilify his opposition as Islamic extremists. In the weeks following March 24, 2005, it was clear that whatever would come next, this was the end of the Akayev era for Kyrgyzstan. **ET**

Editors' Note: Kyrgyzstan's parliament voted to hold presidential elections on July 10, 2005.

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