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**Research Report**

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# Kyrgyzstan under New Leadership

## Path to a Better Future?

Beate Eschment\*

By mid-September 2005 disquieting reports were coming one after another out of Kyrgyzstan: the dismissal of the federal prosecutor who had vigorously gone after the widespread corruption; the murder of an MP; an emergency session of the parliament. These events contradict earlier expectations that calm would return to the country after Kurmanbek Bakiyev had been elected for president on 10 July with a surprisingly high 89 percent of the popular vote and had been inaugurated on 14 August 2005 with much fanfare. Germany and Western Europe badly need allies in the strife-ridden region around Kyrgyzstan. And Kyrgyzstan is the only state in the region in which relative political liberty exists and where Islamic fundamentalism, at least up to the moment, does not have significant influence.

The new president Bakiyev has years-long experience in political leadership and his election was internationally recognized. Together with his new prime minister, Feliks Kulov, he appeared to possess the best qualifications to push through sorely needed political and economic reforms. But a closer analysis of the initial situation and of Bakiyev's first steps shows that the country's problems are difficult to solve and that the new president's parameters for political action are as limited as his actual commitment to make those reforms.

The change in the leadership in Kyrgyzstan is often designated the "Tulip Revolution" by the Kyrgyz public and international observers. Despite glaring anomalies, the toppling of Askar Akayev was considered one in a series of "color revolutions" in the

post-Soviet territory, namely the peaceful regime changes in Georgia ("Rose Revolution" in 2003) and in the Ukraine ("Orange Revolution" in 2004). However, in the meantime, it is becoming more and more evident that these comparisons do not fit and that the regime change in the Bishkek can neither be interpreted as a revolution nor as a victory for democracy—rather, it is a symptom of fragile statehood.

### Symptoms of Fragile Statehood

In the first half of the 1990s Bakiyev's predecessor Akayev still was still considered a democrat, but then he methodically expanded his powers and governed in an increasingly authoritarian style. Among his central Asian colleagues he nevertheless

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appeared to be the most moderate of the presidential autocrats. However, evidence suggests that his moderation was due less to his political opinions than to the lack of political instruments to back a more autocratic course. *De jure*, the president had concentrated more and more political power in his own hands through constitutional changes, but in doing so he had ultimately weakened the state as a whole by marginalizing other state institutions. Also, his actual power did not reach as far as he would have liked. In consequence, individual bureaucrats and, above all, the governors of the provinces withdrew further and further from the orbit of the central government's control. These bureaucrats and governors carved out their own spheres which were marked by the abuse of power, patronage, and corruption. Criminal structures, exploited the weakness of the state and, in particular, of the security forces in order to accumulate ever greater influence on politics and to practically buy themselves into the state.

Parallel to the constitutional power, the economic power and the wealth of the presidential family and other close associates in leadership grew. In contrast, over the course of the 1990s, the country, which had already in the Soviet period been the second poorest republic in the union, fell into a serious economic crisis. Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan suffered from high foreign debt, impoverishment of the population and further socio-economic problems. The Kyrgyz economy demonstrated such massive structural shortcomings that a rapid improvement could not be expected even after a regime change. Although the macroeconomic situation has improved in recent years, this was not palpable for most of the population. While the population was faced with declining pensions, unpaid wages and unemployment, an elite made up of politicians, nouveau rich entrepreneurs and criminals cavalierly displayed their wealth.

Corruption is considered the most potent impediment development. It cor-

rodes popular trust in the state's authority and seriously damages the economy. In Transparency International's "corruption index" Kyrgyzstan is ranked 122 out of 145 countries. Within the country, different figures about the dimensions of the problem circulate. In early 2005 Bakiyev claimed that two-thirds of the state's tax revenues had ended up in the Akayev family's coffers. According to other sources, one fifth of the annual state budget is sapped through corruption. Thus, the state was additionally weakened by its limited solvency and was even less able to provide basic social services. The infrastructure deteriorated markedly, the education and health systems stood on the brink of collapse. Crime spread. Yet, private paramilitary actors have not been able to gain a permanent foothold.

Since it became a Soviet republic, Kyrgyzstan has been divided into two parts: a more strongly russified and industrial north (Issyk-Kul, Naryn, Chui) with the capital Bishkek and the poorer, agrarian, traditional south (Och, Jalalabad, Batken) with a large Uzbek population. During the 13 years of Akayev's rule, this division was exacerbated to the extent that many inhabitants now perceive it as the major danger to Kyrgyzstan's statehood. One underlying reason for this division is that still today clan and family membership are the foundation for personal, political and economic decisions. The dividing line runs chiefly between different segments of the Kyrgyz "titular nation." Tensions between nationalities do not play an essential role, nor do fundamentalist strains of Islam, which in Kyrgyzstan (still!) do not pose the main problem.

In contrast to other countries of Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan's population appears, at first glance, to be politically active. For years now there has been a steady flow of reports about demonstrations and hunger strikes. But these usually revolve around individual persons—like those candidates denied participation in elections or defeated candidates—not political programs

or goals. Protests signify the expression of traditional personal, familial and local loyalties.

The unexpected success of the regime's overthrow, which took place on 24 March 2005 with the quick storming of the White House in Bishkek, set a dangerous new precedent. Many now tend to take the law into their own hands. This is the result of their experience that their votes do not count in elections and that the civil service and institutions of justice are not effective. They have stormed courts, administration buildings and factories in order to force decisions that are in their interests. Around Bishkek and Osh there were wild land-grabs by migrants who no longer wanted to wait for the legal allocation of building land. In the Fergana Valley, fighting broke out over appointments Bakiyev had made. In mid-June a would-be presidential candidate, Urmatbek Baryktbasov, who had been excluded from the elections with due legal process had his supporters storm the White House. Today people tend to talk scornfully about a new "national sport" that is obviously highly dangerous for the internal stability of the country and expresses popular distrust in the state as well as increasing impatience.

Thus, the starting position for the new Kyrgyz leadership is extraordinarily precarious: its main goal, the political and economic stabilization of a weak state, can only be accomplished in the long-term, and the patience of the population is extremely limited. The fact that Bakiyev is legitimized by a democratic election may be of major importance for his international profile, but for the majority of the Kyrgyz population his southern origin and a quick improvement in their standard of living carries more weight.

### **Bakiyev and Kulov: Reform-oriented Actors?**

Like Akayev, does Bakiyev, who is five years younger, does not have a nomenclature background dating from the Soviet period.

Bakiyev's political career (born 1949) began under the aegis of Akayev, when he became governor of his home region, Jalalabad. A few years later he became prime minister (2000–2002.) After the militia opened fire and killed demonstrators in May 2002 Bakiyev left the government and, in a pattern typical for Central Asian oppositionists, became the leader of the opposition alliance NDK in 2004. It is generally considered that the obvious rigging of the presidential elections in February 2005 to the disadvantage of Bakiyev was one of the factors that sparked the unrest which led to the overthrow of Akayev and Bakiyev's assumption of office. At this point Bakiyev himself—like the entire opposition—was hardly prepared for coming to power.

As a representative of the country's south, Bakiyev had little personnel to back him up in the capital city. In Bishkek the elite of the "northern clans" dominates. The leadership team that Bakiyev put together for the transition period soon disappointed expectations for a new beginning. The team featured so few young people that one commentator felt reminded of a session of the Central Committee of the former Soviet communist party. At first, the main concern was to shut out Akayev supporters and, in the next step, to win the upcoming presidential election. For this purpose, Bakiyev had to unite the numerically small and divided opposition. His smartest strategic move was to integrate Feliks Kulov into his campaign team as well as into the new government.

Like Bakiyev, Feliks Kulov (born 1948) was a close associate of Akayev and a member of the government until his falling out with the president in 1999 and his turning to the opposition. Kulov, who is from the north and a former KGB general, had as interior minister played an important role in the Kyrgyz Soviet republic's attaining of independence in 1991. Under Akayev he continued his political career. Multiple times Kulov resigned from political office in protest against grievances: at the end of 1993 he resigned from

## Map Kyrgyzstan and the surrounding states



Source: <<http://www.trescherverlag.de/Reisen/pages/Kirgistan-Karte.html>>.

his position as deputy president to protest government corruption. In April 1999 he accused Akayev, in an open letter, of undemocratic behaviour and violation of the law and resigned from the office of mayor of Bishkek. He also served as governor of the Chui province and as chief of the Kyrgyz security forces.

In the early 2000 parliamentary elections he suffered a setback as an independent candidate because the Akayev administration fixed the ballot against him. This sparked anti-Akayev protests. Kulov was then removed from the playing field altogether by the Akayev administration when it had him sentenced to a long prison term. Kulov was freed on the day of Akayev's overthrow, 24 March 2005. His rapid success as provisory vice-prime minister in stopping the rampant plundering and unrest in Bishkek clearly indicates his considerable influence in the security forces, which was obviously effective even after years behind bars.

In the middle of May, Bakiyev and Kulov forged an electoral alliance that was in both their interests: through the alliance Bakiyev strove to win votes from the north, where Kulov was popular, and promised Kulov in the event of victory the office of prime minister. Pay day came: in the election Bakiyev received between 66–88

percent of the vote in the north. As pledged, the newly elected president named his partner as prime minister. But when the nomination in parliament took longer than the time-limit stipulated by the constitution, rumours started to spread about Bakiyev's fraudulent intentions. But Kulov was, on 1 September, finally elected into office by the parliament with 55 of a total 66 votes. If his nomination had been turned down, new demonstrations and unrest would surely have followed. This parliamentary event constituted an important step toward the stabilization of the country.

A long-term cooperation between the two politicians is considered to be a fundamental precondition for the stable development of Kyrgyzstan. Only in this constellation, observers say, can both parts of the country feel themselves properly represented. Kulov's popularity would give the leadership a kind of "trust bonus." The very different competencies of the two politicians could complement one another. Nevertheless, there is grave doubt about the tandem leadership functioning smoothly in the long-term. The personal relationship of the two politicians appears to be rather poor. More and more principle political differences are coming to the surface. Also, the pact forged before the regime change, which provided for Bakiyev being in charge

of foreign and domestic politics as president and Kulov being responsible for economics as prime minister, contains plenty of fodder for conflict. The prognosis for the duo is therefore rather bleak.

What role can the parliament play in the reform process? Its legitimacy is, as before, contested. The fraudulent results of its election were ultimately what prompted Akayev's fall. Nevertheless, the new parliament has, upon the decision of the central election commission, been able to take up its work. Demands for new elections still circulate today. But new elections would endanger internal stability because angry members of parliament would, in the now familiar pattern, send their supporters onto the streets again. They invested a lot of money to be elected and now they expect a lucrative return from their mandates. The parliament is, at any rate, strongly dominated by rich business people, so much so that people speak of the "parliament of the purses." Some representatives, including the recently murdered Bayaman Erkinbaev, are said to have contacts to the criminal milieu. Clearly, many are thus dependent on their immunity as parliamentarians. From such a parliament one can not expect a credible reform course. This much the members of parliament have already proven with the constitution-required ratification of the new government at the end of September, when in a secret vote they accepted only 10 out of 16 of the proposed ministers—refusing ratification to those who were western- and reform-oriented, among them Roza Otunbaeva. In consequence, there are no other reformers in the highest leadership positions besides Kulov.

### First Steps of Reform?

More democracy, decentralization, the overcoming of the north-south division, the fight against corruption, economic recovery, more social services—these were Bakiyev's promises in his presidential election campaign. The first measures,

taken during the transition period, were ad hoc measures in the spirit of the election campaign. However, since the president's inauguration further plans have been announced that reveal differences in accent between Bakiyev and Kulov: Bakiyev promises primarily state-provided social services while Kulov wants to support individual initiative.

In the direct aftermath of Akayev's overthrow, a parliamentary committee was formed, comprising 114 representatives from political parties, NGOs, the parliament and the government. This committee should formulate proposals for constitutional reform, but its work suffers from the lack of engagement of its members and from principal disagreements, for example, on the question of whether Kyrgyzstan should have a parliamentary or a presidential system. Since neither the president nor the members of parliament in the committee have an interest in constitutional reform and since pressure from the population on this question is not to be expected, besides Kulov only few individual opposition figures, journalists, and western legal advisers and organizations will lobby for these kinds of decisive reforms.

A rapprochement between north and south would be important for the state. Since the foundation of the Kyrgyz Soviet republic, Bakiyev is only the second representative of the south in a leadership position in Kyrgyzstan (the first was Absamat Masaliev who 1985–1990 led the Kyrgyz communist party apparatus). Productive cooperation with Kulov as a representative of the north would be an important advantage. There is the widespread perception in Kyrgyzstan that a politician of a region primarily supports his native region and, correspondingly, less so the interests of the entire state. The north-south division can ultimately only be redressed by overcoming this perception and by levelling the standard of living in both parts of the country. However, moves in this direction are not in sight at the moment.

As the north was egregiously overrepresented in the government under Akayev, it was expected that Bakiyev would favour politicians from the south. Until his election, southerners tended to be promoted without attracting much attention; since then practically all important positions have been staffed with southerners. It is decisive that conspicuously often these southerners are members of Bakiyev's family. So, for example, one of the new president's brothers is ambassador to Germany.

Bakiyev thus pursues less a course of structural promotion of the south than one of political patronage. He builds a basis for his power, reinforcing reservations of the north against himself and against the "southerners" in general.

In some regions of the south provincial governors have become quasi-independent actors. Bakiyev took a fundamental step toward the reestablishment of control over these regions when he announced that by 2007 the provinces as such would be abolished. Thus the affected governors would not only lose their offices but also their domains of power.

### **The Significance of Anti-corruption Measures**

The anti-corruption measures in particular will be watched by the population with great interest. The degree of trust in the new government hinges, next to the improvement of the economy, above all on success in this sphere. Immediately after the march uprising, a special commission was established to investigate the financial circumstances of the Akayev family. The "family" had apparently not only accumulated its wealth through corruption and the gray economy but also by blackmailing successful firms. The commission has come up with new information but it has not initiated effective legal proceedings because those accused of tax evasion, embezzlement and fraud either enjoy immunity or reside now abroad, for the most part in Russia.

Generally, there have been no decisive measures or successes in the campaign against the systematic corruption on all levels. The 100-day program that was taken up in April in order to re-establish stability and the rule of law and that was directed above all against corruption had to be extended because of its lack of results. In the provinces the program is believed to have failed. Ministries and regional authorities are accused of blocking investigations into corruption cases. On 19 September the federal prosecutor Azimbek Beknazarov and his deputy were fired dismissed, presumably because of their overly zealous activism in the anti-corruption campaign. At the moment, however, it is unclear whether this case, and similarly in other dismissal cases, signifies a legitimate personnel decision or patronage and political power struggles.

In contrast to Bakiyev, who lacks credibility in the campaign against corruption, Kulov counts as "clean". He, too, announced immediately after his election that an anti-corruption campaign would be the chief priority of his government. However, paltry results in the fight against corruption are not unique to this new leadership. An anti-corruption campaign started by Akayev in 2003 was just as unsuccessful, as were similar measures in the Ukraine and Georgia after their "colour revolutions". The only way to achieve results in this area in the long-term, apart from harshly punishing offenders, is through change in the relevant legislation, increase of wages and changes in the public perception of the rule of law. This might include, for example, training courses but also the establishment of complaint offices, the nomination of ombudsmen focusing on corruption with appellate powers who would also address the selling of offices, abuses of power, etc. Alongside their control functions, they would also give the population a possibility to articulate complaints and dissatisfaction in a regular fashion.

## The Economy and the Foreign Policy

Many of Bakiyev's election promises can only become reality when more money flows into the state's accounts. While Bakiyev could proudly point to the fact that during his transitional government the flow of tax revenue actually increased, that will not be enough as long as thoroughgoing economic recovery remains elusive. The promises he made for more social services require substantially higher social expenditures on behalf of the state. For this purpose, Bakiyev wants to further increase the country's foreign debt. Akayev's overthrow did not spell a spontaneous economic turnaround. Foreign direct investment appears to have increased in the first half of 2005 in comparison to 2004, even though economic growth, 7% in 2004, is expected to decrease in 2005.

With the exception of stated intentions, little has happened in the way of reform and spurring the economy. Investment conditions and labour laws for private entrepreneurs are supposed to be improved, the state's involvement in the economy reduced, taxation laws simplified and tax collection improved. The new leadership has invited foreign firms to exploit Kyrgyzstan's gold reserves. Akayev tried to rescue Kyrgyzstan's state budget by the same means. In terms of the creation of new jobs, the settling of land issues and the fight against poverty, no really new steps have been undertaken.

The Kyrgyz public pays little attention to the country's difficult geopolitical situation with American and Russian troops are stationed on its territory and with, in addition, a very uncomfortable and much stronger neighbour, Uzbekistan. Bakiyev, like Akayev before him, obviously tends to a more pro-Russian course while Kulov and with him a number of the other transitional ministers spoke out for renewing the terms for the stationing of American troops. At present, it is not yet possible to tell which position will prevail. Nevertheless, the contradictory positions of Bakiyev and Kulov, which have unnerved both

superpowers, have ultimately had positive implications for Kyrgyzstan. The country now receives attention and financial help from both sides: the American secretary of defence promised significant financial aid during his visit in July, and in when Bakiyev made his first trip abroad as president he received promises in Moscow of Russian investment, military aid and debt relief.

The development of the conflict-ridden relationship with Uzbekistan has an important domestic component. As a result of the tensions, a reduced supply of natural gas and the closing of borders in the Fergana Valley are not unlikely. Both could be socially and economically destabilizing: many people in this part of central Asia make their livelihoods from cross-border trade. Kyrgyzstan's economy is highly dependent on energy imports. It is thus especially noteworthy that the Kyrgyz government has so far withstood Uzbekistan's pressure and has not handed over the Usbeks (with the exception of four persons) who had fled from Andijan after the brutal repression of the May uprising.

## Outlook

In the light of the enormous difficulties inherent in stabilizing a politically and economically weak state, no rapid improvement in the situation in Kyrgyzstan can be foreseen. In addition, there are already doubts about whether the new president actually wants changes. One increasingly gets the impression that his predecessor Akayev is his role model. Also, even though the regime change in Bishkek is not comparable to the political transitions in Georgia and the Ukraine in terms of the politicization and democratic consciousness of the leading actors, there are striking similarities in all three cases. As until recently in the Ukraine, there is a conflict-stricken ruling twosome in Kyrgyzstan with differing domestic and foreign-policy orientations. As in both of the other CIS republics, the population of Kyrgyzstan has



had dashed hopes linked to the overthrow of the former president.

Nevertheless, Kyrgyzstan offers German and European policymakers a starting point in the region. It is a region in which political instability is either a present reality (like in Afghanistan) or is a real possibility (like in Uzbekistan). Also, these are bizarre, authoritarian regimes (above all in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan), whose human rights violations are even deplored by the American government and that follow increasingly unpredictable foreign-policy courses. In contrast, the political climate in Kyrgyzstan can be considered relatively liberal, and there is still a certain openness toward the West. But this can change quickly. What can the West do in order to prevent deterioration?

For one, the political events in the country should be watched very carefully—by the OSCE, the diplomatic missions in the country but also the local media. Secondly, the West should offer targeted financial aid. Economic support in the form of loans, debt relief, etc., must, however, be linked to clearly formulated conditions and benchmarks. In order to prevent aid being thrown away into a corrupt system or having it actually support endemic corruption, the expenditure of developmental aid should be overseen through strict monitoring processes.

Only when the disappointed elite and the wider public recognize that the international community takes the situation in Kyrgyzstan seriously and criticizes rather than supports the corrupt state system can the widespread feeling of hopelessness be overcome. In turn, it is important to mobilize the representatives of the elite to become politically active again and to remain so. Also, it is important to dissuade the population from further non-legal extra-parliamentary activism or uprisings.

Not only the Kyrgyz people, but also Western politicians must be patient: neither a flourishing economy nor a western-style democracy can be expected in Kyrgyzstan in this generation.

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