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# OXFORD FORUM

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languages, two days before the elections all teachers told the students to bring their passports the next day. Failing to do so would lead to expulsion. The teachers then collected all the documents, announcing that the students would get them back at the polling station. Here, it was impossible to fold the bulletins properly and people could see who someone had voted for through the glass of the ballot boxes. "They had not even opened the box when they announced who had won the constituency", Farhad explained.

As a result of the voting, the opposition was reduced to a handful of deputies in the Jogorku Kenesh, the Kyrgyz parliament. In many parts of the country, supporters of opposition candidates took to the streets to express their discontent. In the southern cities of Jalalabad and Osh, peaceful demonstrations turned into violent clashes between protesters and police. The crowds seized administrative buildings, tearing down pictures of the president and taking out their anger on local officials. The police and the military were not only largely outnumbered by the demonstrators but also badly equipped and unsure about how to proceed.

On March 21st, I was woken in my room in Osh by repeated cheers from a large crowd in the street. While the protesters had marched past my house in an orderly manner the week before, they now set their eyes on the institutions representing central power – particularly the law-enforcing bodies. The public prosecutor's office was ransacked that morning, as well as the police and security service headquarters – both about 300 metres from my house.

For most of the day, there was an eerie silence in the air as nearly all shops and cafes had been closed. Yet the silence was deceptive. Anarchy had replaced law and order, if only for a short while. The police and the military were no longer in control of the situation, as they had either thrown away their uniforms for fear of being attacked or taken sides with the opposition. Groups of stick-waving young Kyrgyz now seemed to have taken over the reins. Cars without number-plates chased around town at high speed, flashing their headlights.

It was not a day to be spent outside, and some of those who still made their way into the city paid dearly for it. Aziz, an Uzbek friend of mine, told me of nasty scenes near the bazaar where groups of people randomly stopped cars and dragged the owners out before driving off themselves. I made the mistake of trying to get food at a small market nearby, yet it soon became clear that

## Kyrgyzstan's 'Tulip Revolution' differed significantly from its Orange and Velvet counterparts, writes STEFAN KIRMSE

SIXTY YEAR-OLD Nurbek runs a guesthouse in the centre of Bishkek, the capital of the Kyrgyz Republic. For several months I have been a frequent visitor, calling in whenever I pass through the city.

"Do you think that the Ukrainian revolution is likely to repeat itself in Kyrgyzstan?" I asked him one evening back in December. Being an outspoken critic of President Akaev, he seemed eager to answer the question. The problem is, he pointed out, that many people actually support the President. Surely the district of Kemin, the President's homeland, is behind him. Talas province as well – that is where his wife is from. "And Mairam Akaeva is really the one who is running the country", he added. "No, we really have to rely on the South."

He went on to explain that the southerners had not forgotten about Aksy. In March 2002, several demonstrators in this small southern town were shot by the police. Prime Minister Bakiev resigned, yet the President, who had

really been the target of the demonstrators, managed to survive the ensuing political turmoil.

If there is massive fraud during the next election, Nurbek continued, who knows how the South will react? Now they have seen that protest is not in vain. The Ukrainian example has shown it. Four months later, Nurbek's words seem almost prophetic.

In late February, parliamentary elections took place in Kyrgyzstan – a Central Asian republic that used to be part of the Soviet Union. While they compared favourably with elections in other former Soviet states, they fell short of international standards. Some promising opposition candidates were barred from running on dubious technical grounds, and others got themselves elected through vote-buying or intimidation.

The former head of Osh State University, for example, ensured his election by forcing students and staff to cast their votes for him. According to Farhad, a student of foreign

criminals had decided to exploit this period of lawlessness. Prior to being beaten up and robbed that evening, I had been jostled about by people trying to steal my wallet several times. This was no longer the city I knew.

While the atmosphere of tension prevailed for days, the battleground moved elsewhere. As anti-Akaev strongholds, Jalalabad and Osh had quickly been taken by the protesters, who now tried to restore order as best they could. Within days, local authorities in what remained of southern Kyrgyzstan were brought under the opposition's sphere of influence. In most cases, law-enforcement bodies did not put up any resistance. Equipped with no more than two bullets per person, even special forces – brought in to defend the governor of Batken, the last provincial capital in the South – put down their shields and weapons as the crowds moved towards the local administration.

It was now the President's turn to respond but he had few allies willing to fight for him. By March 24th, busloads of young Kyrgyz from the South had arrived in Bishkek, staging a demonstration on the capital's central square and joining forces with local opposition groups. There were only a few hundred southerners, yet they were surrounded by thousands of locals curious to see what was going on. "Of course, few people here were in favour of Akaev", Nurbek explained to me a few days ago, "but city people would not have taken the initiative. We just stood there and watched."

The ensuing clashes between the police and the core of the demonstrators ended with the storming of the government building. Southern-style street law imposed itself on the capital – politicians and policemen became targets for those seeking to vent their anger. Due to the existence of large shopping malls – many of which were owned by Akaev's family – looting became much more rampant than it had been in Jalalabad or Osh. Yet it was the locals rather than the southerners who were responsible for most of the pillaging.

Having no resources at his disposal to counter the opposition's seizure of power, President Akaev fled the country. Former Prime Minister Bakiev – a southerner from the province of Jalalabad – became the country's interim leader. While critics still point to his involvement in the Aksy incident, Bakiev has earned respect as an opposition figure.

The overthrow of Akaev's regime was initiated and implemented predominantly by people from the south of Kyrgyzstan. To understand this, one has to take into account how divided the country is.

Northerners often speak Russian among themselves. Many have adopted European culture, know very little about Islam or the traditional ways of the Kyrgyz. In the western and southern provinces, on the contrary, Kyrgyz language and culture are respected to a much greater extent. The Ferghana Valley, in which both Jalalabad and Osh are located, is also a stronghold of Islamic values. The importance of these cultural concerns was highlighted by the fact that the leaders of the

southern uprising usually answered in Kyrgyz when interviewed on local TV by Russian-speaking journalists.

Maksat and Mirlan, two young Kyrgyz from Osh, explained to me back in November that Kyrgyzstan was a bit like Korea: the southerners hate the northerners and vice-versa. "Kyrgyzstan: our common home" – Mirlan recited Akaev's famous motto, and they both burst out laughing. It has always remained an artificial motto – a laudable yet unsuccessful attempt to create a common identity.

Ethnic discontent played only a minor role in the recent events. Uzbeks, accounting for large parts of the population in many southern areas, merely stood out for their small numbers during the demonstrations. The majority of the protesters were young Kyrgyz men from mountain areas – parts of the country in which young people neither see a future for themselves nor the helping

## The police and military were no longer in control of the situation

hand of the state. Few townspeople took part in the revolutionary action.

The main grievance among southerners is not economic hardship but the feeling of being abandoned. Under Akaev, by and large the country was run by people from the north. Moreover, the capital thrived with money being pumped into infrastructure and business projects while resources rarely found their way down into the Ferghana Valley. This development was facilitated by the importance of clans in Kyrgyz society – help is readily extended to one's relatives and protégées; whoever is outside these networks has little to expect.

Revolutionary action cannot be properly explained by focusing on grievances alone. It is equally important to see the successful mobilisation of resources on the part of the opposition. The demonstrators were neither disorganised nor unfunded. Food, drink and shelter were provided for thousands of villagers, many of whom stayed in the southern cities for weeks. Uniform dress, banners and flags – as well as transport costs – had to be covered. There was much speculation among the people of Osh about how much the mountain lads had been paid to take part in the demonstrations.

While opposition activists lacked in a common leadership, they still managed to focus on the lowest common denominator: getting rid of Akaev. There may not have been a united national front but opposition leaders successfully mobilised their respective followers. Here, they differed greatly from the 'powers that be'. In many parts of central and northern Kyrgyzstan, people did not actively endorse the overthrow of the President and preferred stability to chaos. However, whereas the opposition's followers were ready to

defend their interests by force, the supporters of stability had no intention of doing so.

The aforementioned issues and resources did not just come into being in February 2005. So why did people suddenly decide that enough was enough?

Most importantly, the recent elections were an indication that Akaev's possible retirement in October 2005 would not entail any major redistribution of power. The President had repeatedly promised not to seek an extension of his presidency beyond the current term of office. However, the results of the parliamentary vote demonstrated that the ruling family was not prepared to let the opposition become a serious challenge. There was no need for the anti-Akaev forces to wait until October. The cards had already been laid on the table.

After the revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine one finds it hard not to think of the events in Kyrgyzstan as an effort to end

dictatorship and steer a pro-Western and more democratic course. Yet there are a few things that distort this picture, and give reason to worry.

The Kyrgyz revolution was hardly a national outcry for democracy. This may have been the sincere objective of some of its leaders, yet it was not what the majority of their foot soldiers were after. The pace was set by those previously excluded from power and prosperity.

This does not bode well for the future of the Kyrgyz Republic. A result was achieved through confrontation, not negotiation – something problematic in several respects. First, it means political exclusion continues. Last week a young woman from Bishkek was already complaining to me that all key positions have been filled with southerners.

Second, the events have set a dangerous precedent. Now that people have realised political conflicts can be decided on the street, it is likely that those who feel excluded will adopt the approach again. Presidential elections have been announced for June 26th. Who knows what will happen when some of the groups do not get their way?

The fragmentation of the opposition exacerbates this further. Now that Akaev is gone, fissures will emerge. Only one of the leaders can take power, and it will require very skilful manoeuvring on the part of Bakiev to ensure everyone gets a share of the spoils. It is too early to tell if Kyrgyzstan has moved towards genuine democracy. So far, it is merely embracing uncertainty.

*Stefan Kirmse is a PhD student at SOAS, London, studying post-Soviet society in southern Kyrgyzstan. He has been based in the city of Osh since August 2004. All names have been changed to protect anonymity*