

Report

Tulips of Kyrgyz Revolutions Tough



Karina Fayzullina*

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The 2005 and 2010 revolutions in Kyrgyzstan were not enough to produce representative -government and equal state-society relations. In the beginning of June 2013, mass protests in Kyrgyzstan paralysed the work of one of the largest companies in the country: Centerra Gold Inc. The Canada-based gold mining giant is operating in Kumtor, Issyk Kul Province (north of Kyrgyzstan), providing the Central Asian country's economy with foreign investment. The protestors seized control over the regional Jalal-Abad Administration (south of the country), blocked the roads in Issyk Kul region and several times cut off power supply to the industrial zone. They demanded immediate denunciation of 'unfair' agreement with Canadian investors and nationalisation of the business, as well as fair distribution of the income and expanding of social benefits for the country's population. In response, the government imposed a state of emergency. The unrest lasted for about a week and gradually faded away. So what has pushed Kyrgyzstan to break its own revolutionary record? To answer this question, the article examines the history of revolts in Kyrgyzstan.

People of Kyrgyzstan are very proud of their unique political history through their struggle for democratic statehood.

'Kyrgyz revolutions became a phenomenon for world public...Less than a year after [2010 revolution], mass protest actions of peaceful civilians began in North Africa and

Middle East. Our April revolution was highly appraised and became a sample for them'(1).

This is a message, which the transitional president Roza Otunbaeva was trying to convey during commemoration of the first year of the 2010 Kyrgyz revolution. Whether the statement was her own or the speech-writers', it had an element of uncommon creativity mixed with sense of humour. Historically, Kyrgyz people have often preferred and acted to topple their governments rather than elect them. Indeed, it seems Middle Eastern ousted rulers have recently met the same destiny of two Kyrgyz presidents. Askar Akaev was ousted in 2005 and fled to Russia. In 2010 Kurmanbek Bakiev followed him and escaped from the country to find asylum in Belarus.

The Blueprint for Change

The blueprint for coercive change of governments remains unalterable. Reshaping of political landscape is mainly defined by clan confrontation between North and South in attempts to terminate overwhelming family control over the political and economic spheres. Tribalism, taking a form of a watershed between southern and northern regions, has always been there. In 1985 representative of southern elites Absamat Masaliev replaced a northerner Turdakun Usubaliev. In 1990 the North took its revenge and under the slogans of Perestroika put forward a scholar, Askar Akaev, who had gained an image of a liberal reformist. Note that the words 'elites', 'leaders' or 'authorities' are used just nominally in this article.

Akaev was able to hold on until 2005 and became a victim of a popularly sought-after trend of that time, coined 'colour revolutions'. This phenomenon of peaceful demonstrations of middle classes and well-off people affected power transition in Georgia and Ukraine too. Two decades after acquisition of independence, the leaders who initially gained their posts due to the tide of the anti-Soviet sentiments, were proven incapable of the people's trust. Democratic reconstruction favoured the development of neither politico-social institutions nor a competitive and diversified economy. Simultaneously, democracy promotion by the US neocons was at the time gaining momentum. The outburst of public indignation at the beginning of 2000's was by nature 'lawful', serving as counterpoise to riots, which aimed to demolish existing power institutions completely. However, in the aftermath analysts tended to agree that the cloak of colour revolution in Kyrgyzstan was nothing but a superficial imitation. It was acknowledged that disorder and massive burglaries and plunders in Bishkek in 2005 were purely apolitical, committed by thugs from impoverished strata(2). Small enterprises and local business of all sorts suffered greatly or sometimes were destroyed, owing to the confusion of security agents and their disorganisation. Down-town Bishkek

and stores across the state were looted; and property was seized(3). The historical North-South divide was thus packed in shiny wrapping of 'Tulip Revolution'(4). The revolution had changed several names produced by various groupings – Lemon, Pink, Silk, Daffodil – before the final designation settled in media(5).

People's revolution by itself was not easily predictable in 2005. In spite of his last term's accomplishment, Akaev was not trying to remain in power. However, following the 2005 parliamentary elections, an overwhelming majority in Jogorku Keneshe (Kyrgyz Parliament) was gained by pro-Akaev members, slightly interleaved by MPs of 'neutral' stance. Among those who entered parliament were a son and a daughter of Akaev(6). As a result, anti-president insurgency was stirred up by the southern clans, which included Osh, Jalal-Abad and partly Uzbek communities. Political techniques of colour revolutions were utilised. The key concept for mobilising the masses was patriotism and national sovereignty, directed against the puppet governments of the neighbouring big brothers. The actions of civil disobedience were preceded by formation of the respective youth organisation, which made up the so-called 'revolutionary field parties'. At the same time professional PR technologies were used for stimulating the process. Another feature, emerging as a result of the antagonism between elites and opposition, is restraint of the military and policing branch of government(7).

Governing institutions in Kyrgyzstan were seized by the opposition forcefully and new representatives were nominated to substitute the old establishment. The new president Kurmanbek Bakiev enjoyed great support and encouragement. He was elected in 2005, which marked the beginning of institutional change and the fight against despotism and dynastic politics.

However, ample evidence in all the three states, which went through colour revolutions, demonstrated no change in socio-political landscape to say the least(8). Today they just begin to recover from the revolutionary outcomes, but are still far from being politically stable. Partly, this explains, why Kyrgyzstan has become the last stronghold of the phenomenon of colour revolutions in the post-Soviet space. On the other hand, allowing for the growing mess in global affairs, Western leaders revised their policy towards Central Asian regimes. In this vein, availing himself of the opportunity timed to the Fifth anniversary of the revolution, Kurmanbek Bakiev averred at the Kurultay (common Turkic name of a congress) of Concord of Kyrgyz People literally the following:

'Elections more and more resemble the marathon of the wealthiest. Electoral process is awaited by many to obtain freeloader and fast buck... It leads to the devaluation of

electoral system...In my view consultative democracy is the most suitable to the present-day actuality of Kyrgyzstan'(9).

It was suggested by Bakiev to relinquish certain 'symbolic' power institutions to create instead a consultative council subservient to the president. Among the proposed governing body's leaders Bakiev's son, Maxim, was promptly suggested. The attempt to 'bury' elections did not pass unnoticed. In fact, the attempt backfired, resulting in dismantling, this time, Bakiev's regime.

The Revolutions of 2005 and 2010

The pattern of the 2005 and 2010 revolutions is very similar. Rehearsed scenario of plundering was repeated fully in 2010. Bishkek and other cities were cleaned out entirely, people's private property was seized – everything that was badly screwed on. Distinctively, however, the 2010 revolution was mired in ethnic confrontation. In the beginning of 20th century the lands of newly-founded by Bolshevik republics were parcelled out carelessly, neglecting ethnically delimited habitats of local people. Administrative boundaries, separating Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan in Fergana Valley, were relative and could be crossed without hindrance while the republics were the part of one state. Cultural and economic space of the precincts of Fergana was divided, after the states had gained independence, creating severe problems for trans-border social and economic communication. Kyrgyz part of the valley is today populated by ethnic Uzbeks and Kyrgyz people, the former traditionally suffer more from underrepresentation in government institutions. Amid the 2010 revolution, interethnic conflict took place between Uzbek and Kyrgyz populations in southern Osh and Jalal-Abad areas. The massacre of Uzbek population took 500 to 2000 lives, and a hundred-thousand were forced to flee(10).

The carnage of June 2010 coincided curiously enough with a high-profile summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, taking place in neighbouring Tashkent. Transition president of the Kyrgyz took this opportunity to appeal for aid from member states of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). After all, isn't it designated for the purposes of regional security? Russian president Dmitry Medvedev, whose fabulous pragmatism will forever remain in the annals of history, refused to resort to CSTO, claiming that the organisation's forces are only intended to repulse a foreign attack: 'All the problems of Kyrgyzstan are rooted inside. They are rooted in the weakness of the previous government and its unwillingness to deal with the hardships of people. I expect that the existing problems will be resolved by Kyrgyz authorities'(11).

Regional leaders, including unchallenged presidents of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, agreed jointly that the Kyrgyz revolution was a domestic problem of the latter and did not require international participation. However, this did not prevent Russians from sending to the military base in Kant a military brigade to strengthen its facilities and partly evacuate personnel, if need be(12). Medvedev's Russia tried to prove with all its might that it in no way desired to interfere in the affairs of sovereign states.. Later Russians tried to vindicate this passive non-participation. Secretary General of the organisation Nikolay Bordyuzha noted during his visit to Bishkek that

'Kyrgyzstan was successful in settling the conflict of 2010 in the South...A decision was taken, that committing of peacekeeping troops is unreasonable. It was later clear that the decision was right. We rendered consultative assistance to the law-enforcement agencies of Kyrgyzstan, allowing them to solve the conflict themselves'(13).

Today Moscow moans, that Bishkek is inconsistent in its regional policy and CSTO membership. But the events of 2010 confirmed Bishkek's opinion that this regional body is a purely talking shop, simply serving Moscow's interests in Central Asia. Another reason for Bishkek to be offended by CSTO is Belorussian president's Alexander Lukashenko refusal to extradite the ex-president and his brother Janysh (Belorussia is a member-state of the organisation as well). Nevertheless, an inexhaustible stream of foreign aid from Moscow and re-equipment of the army by Russian military still holds Bishkek back from giving up membership.

Ethnic cleansing was interwoven artfully into the framework of revolution, but directly had little to do with the change of seats. For, the overthrow of the president was separated from the butchering of Uzbeks a month earlier. Moreover, the battle line in the April events was not drawn between ethnic groups, but rather between supporters of Bakiev and the opposition. It became clear for supporters of Bakiev's family rule, that there would be little room for them in the new government. Uzbek leader, Kadyrjan Batyrov, on the contrary took a side of the revolutionists and needed to be side-lined a little(14). The very flat connotation of the gang-land war of local godfathers was reversed into heroic protection of the integrity of the state ahead of the elections. It was proclaimed that the actions of the street thugs were aimed at 'prevention of separatism and the tearing of the nation apart'. The National Commission, created for investigating the crimes committed during the June events, laid the guilt for the provoking of the conflict upon 'some leaders' of Uzbek community(15). The myth of the defenders allowed the criminals to escape legal prosecution, while southerners, Bakiev's power base, could retain some power and secure a 'slice' of Bishkek's government 'pie'.

Emblematic of Kyrgyz revolutions is the re-division of the shadow economy and spheres of interests between the criminal authorities. Half a year after the events in the South, Roza Otunbaeva was tolling the bell. She emphasised the scale of 'activity of criminal groupings seeking to establish control over profitable sectors of economy and finance currents and trying to promote their people to the government'. She claimed that 'organised crime in Osh and Jalal Abad Provinces had turned into well-adjusted system of criminal communities, formed on ethnic grounds too'(16). Symptomatically, when I asked a friend from Osh working in Russia, what the most prestigious occupation in Kyrgyzstan is, the answer was policeman or a sort of job in law-enforcement agencies, or military. Those people live off the leftovers of the state-criminal business by providing cover and support, their off-hour job is racket. It is a simple construction of governments-business-criminal relations that is revised with each revolution.

In the outcome of 2010 coup Kyrgyzstan changed the polity from presidential republic to parliamentary state to build a system of what Thomas Carothers calls 'feckless pluralism'. A feeble coalition of winners and losers is united against previous authorities, rather than in the name of socio-economic development. The parties are founded on the basis of belonging to a family, an ethnicity or a territory. Practically, those who got power, held posts in the government prior to 2005 and 2010 revolution, and today find themselves either in the mainstream or in the opposition. As a result of the 2011 elections the government coalition of Jogorku Keneshe is represented by four factions, Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan, Ar-Namys, Respublica and Ata Meken. Ata Jurt faction, formed by the officials of the defunct Bakiev's regime, did not obtain any ministerial portfolios in cabinet, despite gaining the highest results in the election (28 out of 120)(17).

After that it won't be hard to guess what lies behind the disruption of work of gold mining enterprise in Issyk Kul Province and rallies in Jalal Abad area. Annual revenues from the project in Kumtor to the budget of Kyrgyzstan make up in average 10% of state's GDP. A third of the shares of the Centerra Gold Inc. is worth \$320 million and owned by the Kyrgyz Joint Stock Kyrgyzaltyn. Gold and silver, extracted from Kumtor, is bought by Kyrgyzaltyn for processing in the factory, belonging to the latter, and further selling(18). The by-products of the mass protests are the loss of investment attractiveness (as if there was much!) and great financial damage. The Canadian partners are still trying to resist, but their objection is not taken into consideration.

Among those who call for the denunciation of the agreement and nationalisation of the company is predictably the Ata Jurt party, pushed out of the governing coalition, for instance Myktybek Abdyl daev(19). At the same time another Ata Jurt leader, imprisoned

Kamchybek Tashiev, went on hunger strike in solidarity with the people. However, the media of Kyrgyzstan claims that the government officials decided to deal with criminals in order to settle down the crisis, and not with the population. Allegedly, local gangster Maksat Abakirov appeared in the negotiation with vice-premier on behalf of the people(20).

The role of incumbent president Almazbek Atambaev, in the crisis is rather passive. He confined himself to the calls for order, emphasised the importance of law-enforcement authorities to maintain security and refused to break up the demonstrations blocking the Bishkek-Osh highway. His position was shaky: fragile coalitional peace was held up on anti-South sentiments by the northerners. The parliament dissociated itself from the crisis and showed no sane activity to settle down the unrest at all. The deposed Kurmanbek Bakiev, who was silent for the last couple of years, was fast to declare that today's authorities are unable to control the country, and that he [?] was not wrong.

To conclude, neither the two revolutions, nor transition to a parliamentary system has brought any change to the nature of Kyrgyz politics. Despite some of the leaders trying to advertise a delusional idea about Kyrgyz revolution instigating the Arab Spring, the resemblance is very illusive. The ongoing quest for 'social justice' in Kyrgyzstan essentially demonstrates total absence of 'civility' among the population: undisguised marauding and tribal feuding prevails over the straggle for representation. Kyrgyzstan revolutions are torched by clans and gangs wrangling. Their leaders are quick-witted in creating populist slogans for manipulating public opinion and mobilising the masses, while their ultimate and single objective is redistribution of property and business, re-allotting spheres of dominance and financial currents. They neither care for the interests of the civic society and socio-economic advancing, nor for acquisition of stable footing in world affairs. Overall, it is all the never-ending power play between the mainstream and opposition is about. If the current unrest grows into another re-carving of power institution, preconditioned by the same premises as the previous two, it menaces to irreversibly move Kyrgyzstan to the category of fail states.

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(3) Ibid.

(4) Makarin A. V. (2005) 'A Riot With Tint of Orange', Russia in Global Affairs, 20 April, http://www.globalaffairs.ru/number/n_4820 (accessed 2 June 2013).

(5) Singer-Vine J. (2011) 'Garden Party or Uprising?', The Slate, 20 January, http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/explainer/2011/01/garden_party_or_uprising.html (accessed 4 June 2013).

- (6) RIA Novosti (2010) 'Consequences of the 2005 Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan', 7 April, <http://ria.ru/spravka/20100407/218898083.html> (accessed 2 June 2013).
- (7) Sitinova V. (2011) 'Comparative Analysis of the Colour Revolution in the Countries of Post-Soviet Space', Vlast, No. 5, pp. 144-147.
- (8) Georgian president Mikhail Saakashvili's, who won the office in the result of 2003 revolution, tenure in power has been marked by popular unrests in 2007, 2011 and 2013 attempted at his overthrow. Today's Georgia's PM Bidzina Ivanishvili came to power on the wave of anti-Saakashvili sentiments. He claimed that the decision to participate in the election was caused by the 'total monopolisation of the government by the incumbent president', that 'during Saakashvili's rule the unforgivable mistakes have been being made, so that in this position any reasonable politician would leave politics apologising to the people'. See BBC Russia, 'Large Georgian businessman to oppose Saakashvili', http://www.bbc.co.uk/russian/international/2011/10/111007_georgia_ivanishvili.shtml. The Ukrainian ex-president, Victor Yushchenko, came to power in the result of 2004 Orange Revolution, which sparked after the elections of 2004 had been acknowledged illegal. The re-voting was settled by the Supreme Court, however the second ballot showed the victory of the same candidate, Victor Yanukovitch, who was finally ousted by the revolution. Political turmoil of the following years and unceasing clashes of political groupings resulted in the final election of Yanukovitch in 2010, leaving behind Yuliya Timoshenko, see BBC Russia, 'Yanukovitch officially declared winner in the Ukraine', http://www.bbc.co.uk/russian/international/2010/02/100214_ukraine_vote_final.shtml. Joining NATO by Ukraine and Georgia is practically removed from the agenda of both NATO and the aforementioned states.
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* Karina Fayzullina is a Russian researcher specialising in international relations.