

[Mathijs Pelkmans](#)

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Mathijs Pelkmans

## **On transition and revolution in Kyrgyzstan**

### **Summary**

This essay reviews the revolutionary situations that recently emerged in the post-Soviet world, focusing on the ‘Tulip Revolution’ in Kyrgyzstan. Observers were quick to explain this revolution in terms of democratic resistance to authoritarianism. This view is particularly problematic given that Kyrgyzstan was among the ‘fast reformers’ in the region and made its name as an ‘island of democracy’. Instead of assuming that problems started when the country digressed from the ideals of liberal democracy, this essay argues that democratic reform and market-led development generated both the space and motivations for revolutionary action. Democratic reforms created the possibility of political dissent, while neoliberal policies resulted in economic decline and social dislocations in which a temporary coalition between rural poor and dissenting political leaders was born.

**Key words:** Kyrgyzstan, revolution, transition, postsocialism, neoliberalism

### **Introduction**

March 2005 saw the third revolution in the former Soviet Union within eighteen months. After the Rose Revolution in Georgia and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, the Tulip Revolution rocked Kyrgyzstan. The world witnessed a swift and somewhat unexpected departure of President Akaev, who had ruled the country since 1990. On March 24, a group of up to 10,000 protestors gathered on the central square in Kyrgyzstan’s capital Bishkek to demonstrate against flawed election results and to demand resignation of Mr. Akaev. Not long after the demonstrations started – while organizers were still preoccupied with logistics and politicians held speeches – the

gathered crowd was attacked by a group of pro-government provocateurs. In the ensuing chaos several hundred demonstrators, all young males, immediately reacted. They managed to chase off the provocateurs and continued in the direction of the 'White House', as the government's headquarters was generally called. After skirmishes between riot police and demonstrators, the police fled. Without further difficulties the demonstrators occupied the White House. One of the main opposition leaders, Kurmanbek Bakiev, who arrived late at the site, reportedly exclaimed: "We did not expect this at all. It was not part of the plan" (*The Times of Central Asia*, April 4, 2005). The sudden breakdown of state structures set the stage for two chaotic days in the capital, in which property of former power holders was looted and aggression extended to other sources of wealth as well. However, by the second day the new leaders managed to restore order and life resumed more or less its normal pace.

For a few days, Kyrgyzstan had made headlines in the world press. The images of violence, burning police-stations, ravaged stores, and Rambo-like demonstrators captured the world's imagination. However, the swiftness of the events in Bishkek did not leave time for the drama to unfold as it did in Tbilisi or Kiev. One newly appointed government official said: "On March 24 we showed the world that there was no state: we overthrew it in 40 minutes" (quoted in ICG 2005: 9). Given the relative ease with which president Akaev was ousted, it is no surprise that many people wondered if the events in Kyrgyzstan should be called a revolution at all.<sup>1</sup> Such doubts were reinforced by continuities between the pre- and post-revolution regimes. In fact, the new leadership was largely composed of officials who had fallen out of favor with the previous regime, but did not have a broad program for change. In the months after the revolution there were few changes in policy, geopolitical orientation, or style of government.<sup>2</sup> However, whether the power shifts in Kyrgyzstan should be characterized as a 'premature revolution' which caught the new leaders by surprise, or as a 'stolen revolution' which only replaced some politicians, it is undeniable that popular discontent, massive uprising, and rebellion played a crucial role in the events leading up to the final ousting of Akaev.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the Kyrgyz revolution was as much of a

popular uprising as the previous revolutions in the former Soviet Union, albeit one whose outcome was already decided by the time action shifted from the provinces to the capital.

Most observers have stuck to a fairly simple and straightforward scheme to explain the events in Kyrgyzstan. In short, it is assumed that the causes were authoritarian rule, poverty, and corruption; that the trigger was election fraud; and that the goal was (restoration of) democracy. Though these explanations are not completely unfounded, when examined closer they prove highly problematic. They cannot explain the power dynamics involved, nor do they adequately cover the background against which this particular revolution should be seen. In fact, these characterizations are part of the conundrum of ‘liberal democratic’ teleology – the very thing that needs to be critically analyzed to understand what happened.

It is important to note that in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan – despite the rhetoric – it was *not* the spirit of democracy poised against dictatorial regimes. Rather, these countries were relatively open societies (certainly in comparison to their neighbors) in which ‘democracy’ was too important to be dismissed by those in power (cf. Silitski 2005). Rather than focusing on the imperfections of democratic reform in these countries, attention should be paid to the fact that democratization was accompanied by neoliberal reform agendas which resulted in staggering poverty and inequality. Similar to Fairbanks’ assessment of Georgia, it was about people “mired in the morass of a democratic ‘transition’ that [was] going nowhere” (2004: 124). As such, the revolutions point to the particular conjuncture of democratic ideals and failed transition, of open markets and asymmetric effects of market-driven development. In short, instead of assuming that the Kyrgyz revolution was triggered by the *appeal* of democracy, I argue that in many respects it was instilled by *disillusion* with democratization.

This argument also bears out in the particularities of the Kyrgyz revolution as compared to the revolutions of preceding years. In Georgia and Ukraine a united opposition could claim to have actually won elections – robbed off their victory by corrupt incumbents. Moreover, they were able to do so because of the active involvement of a vibrant non-governmental sector and

because of extensive backing (openly or secretly) by Western countries. Although rigged elections also played a role in Kyrgyzstan, there was no unified opposition – anti-Akaev politicians were internally divided and could not make a reasonable claim to have won elections. Furthermore, abstract ideals or geopolitical visions hardly played a role. Opposition politicians did not promise new directions for Kyrgyzstan, but only better leadership. But perhaps the biggest difference concerned the ways in which the revolutions were grounded in society. While the events in Georgia and Ukraine largely unfolded in the respective capitals, the events in Kyrgyzstan had their roots in the provinces. Moreover, the urban ‘middle class’ was largely absent in the demonstrations, while students joined the protests only during the final days in Bishkek. Even then, it was mostly young rural men who took the lead in overtaking the White House.

In Kyrgyzstan, ‘transition’ produced ‘revolution’. In order to understand this process, I analyze how Western projects of democratization and marketization traveled to Kyrgyzstan, why they were embraced by the country’s elite, and how they shaped the contemporary economic, social, and political situation. As such my argument resonates with the title of Kalb’s recent article “From flows to violence” (2005), which draws attention to the destabilizing effects of market-driven globalization. It is imperative to look not only at the impact of global capitalism on local contexts, but also to challenge the concepts that are so often used in describing the post-Soviet world. As Burawoy argued: “As socialism retreats into the past, the danger is that we will become ever more enthralled with a single model – an ideal typification of liberal capitalism – against which to compare reality, inevitably making of the post-Soviet world a black hole” (1999: 309). Instead of blindly accepting ideal typifications, then, it is more useful to discuss how ‘actually existing democracy’ worked in Kyrgyzstan, and to accept that democracy – especially when encased in neoliberal policies – is as problematic a form of political regime as any other.

### **From transition to revolution**

In the 1990s, Kyrgyzstan was frequently praised for its speed in reforming its political and economic structures, gaining status as ‘the Switzerland of Central Asia’ and as ‘island of democracy’. It is important to note that democracy and capitalism were not just rhetoric. The Kyrgyz government implemented concrete policies that closely followed the advice and demands of international institutions such as the IMF and the Worldbank. The almost eager adoption of neoliberal economic reforms by the Akaev government in the early 1990s should be seen against the background of the particular economic situation of the country. Lacking raw materials or easy access to foreign markets, the government became convinced that development could only be achieved with foreign aid and investment. The plan that president Akaev and others designed (or accepted) was to attract investors by radically liberalizing the economic and political sphere. Kyrgyzstan opted for a shock therapy-type of transition strategy. During the first five years of its independence, Akaev’s administration deregulated the economy, liberalized prices, started a massive privatization program and introduced the “legislative framework for stable functioning of the newly liberalised economy” (Abazov 1999: 243). In a few words, Kyrgyzstan was “doing everything right, according to Western standards” (Connory 2000: 4).

The tragedy was, however, that although these policies were internationally applauded, attracted numerous economic advisors, and resulted in the highest per capita ‘transition aid’ in the region, they did not attract major investors nor result in sustainable economic growth. As Spoor (1995) has rightfully noticed, market reform implied the dismantling of the socialist economy, but was not accompanied by a factual restructuring of the economy. In the course of a few years the entire infrastructure deteriorated, while energy distribution became problematic. New laws were not only poorly designed, but often unknown to those who had to implement them. International experts had predicted ‘transitional’ difficulties, but it turned out that when the pace of change slowed down, production levels of industry and agriculture remained ‘stable’ on levels far below those of the Soviet period.<sup>4</sup> These difficulties had profound effects on everyday life. Throughout

the 1990s the percentage of people living below the poverty line increased, while unemployment and underemployment became rampant.

Somewhat paradoxically, although the state became less able to fulfil the tasks it was expected to deliver, political contacts became perhaps even more salient in economic activities. Indeed, the market turned out to be less a self-regulating system than a field of contention in which power relations favoured those well-placed in the administrative system and largely excluded those in an unfavourable position. The focus on deregulation without sufficient institution building and state involvement, combined with a poorly operating judicial apparatus, created a perfect climate for those in power to take hold of former state property and to monopolize parts of the economy. At the local level this translated into a reorganization of lines of dependency. While for many ordinary people the state [*gosudarstvo*] became little more than a nuisance, personal relations with those in power became ever more crucial for one's survival (see also Kuehnast and Dudwick 2004). Whether it concerned rights to land-use, loans for farming, unemployment or disability allowances, virtually all economic assets were accessible only through political intermediaries.

Although such dependency was often resented, the importance of personal networks in political and economic life meant that any hope for change was also projected on individuals. Parliamentary deputies, who cultivated their regional affiliation, played an important role in this respect. For ordinary citizens, especially in rural areas, there was a lot at stake in electing a deputy, as they were considered key figures in directing substantial economic and political capital to particular regions, towns, and clans. For the candidates, many of whom were businessmen, it was extremely profitable to be chosen as a parliamentary deputy. These positions created possibilities for political leverage on the economic scene and granted them political immunity which they used to protect their businesses. As will be shown below, these patterns of regional power consolidation were unwittingly intensified by an innovation in the parliamentary system.

But what does this mean for the ideology of transition that continued to dominate the rhetoric of the Kyrgyz government? Without aiming to provide an exhaustive analysis of changing perceptions, it is worthwhile to indicate shifts in the meaning of involved terms. For some time, the appeal of democracy and capitalism was precisely located in the fact that these were not described in technical terms, but wrapped in images of an abundant and ‘modern’ future. With the negative effects of economic and political reforms becoming ever more blatant, the terms democracy, capitalism, and market economy unavoidably lost part of their currency. During my first extended stay in Kyrgyzstan in 1995 numerous people complained about how democracy had ruined their lives. Nostalgic feelings for the ‘good old days’ of the Soviet Union dominated the popular mood. Nevertheless, at that time there was still hope that things would turn out for the better and that transition would only be a temporary phenomenon eventually resulting in a situation akin to the wealthy countries of the West. A recurring assumption, particularly among young people, was that capitalism had simply not reached them yet. This disconnection of prevailing realities from ideas about capitalism allowed for continued expectation that eventually the transition would be completed.<sup>5</sup>

Not altogether surprisingly, such hopes for a better future had faded when I spent two more years in Kyrgyzstan, in 1998-99 and in 2003-04. At that time, few if any people had confidence that the Akaev government would bring positive change. It did not seem, however, that people were craving for ‘more democracy’. Indeed, Akaev had been the champion of democracy throughout the 1990s, yet democratization had not improved everyday life. Moreover, representatives of the ‘transition industry’, both local and international NGOs were often seen as catering to the interests of the rich and had little currency among the larger population (Boehm 1999). Instead, many of my Kyrgyz acquaintances seemed more enticed by authoritarian and decisive leaders. In the late 1990s, people in Southern Kyrgyzstan would often point at the president Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan as a model of strong leadership which protected its population from the most disruptive effects of capitalism (this was before the excesses of



Karimov's regime became undeniably clear).<sup>6</sup> By 2004 the most popular political figure for my acquaintances was Vladimir Putin, who was commended for his decisiveness, his actions against corrupt magnates, and for having successfully instilled new pride in his nation. Thus, when Akaev was criticized it was usually not because of his authoritarian character, but rather the opposite, because he was too weak of a president. People often pointed out that although they saw Akaev as an inherently good person, his softness had allowed others to misuse their position and ravage the state. In fact, such criticisms inadvertently reinforced the myth of Akaev as a modest scientist – a politician by default – who wanted nothing more than to guide the country in the right direction.

The myth of Akaev as a modest and good-willing leader was shattered in the run up to the elections. Although few people seem to have believed allegations that Akaev was planning to change the constitution in order to extend his presidency, it became blatantly clear that he was putting great effort to get a large majority of supporters in parliament (see also Mikosz 2005). Moreover, these pro-government candidates for parliament did not only include associates, but also as many as seven of Akaev's direct relatives (including his son and daughter). Government support for these candidates all but proved that Akaev was consolidating influence of the presidential family on the national political scene. Moreover, these practices transpired while opposition newspapers published images of some of the family's spacious residences along with a list of companies that allegedly belonged to, or were controlled by, the Akaev family. Outrage about these practices played an important role in the unrest – numerous reports noted that protesters were driven by a sense that Akaev and his family had 'gone too far'.<sup>7</sup> The modest scientist was unveiled as a shrewd businessman, one who vigorously tried to protect his illegally constructed economic, and political, empire.

It may be clear that dissatisfaction with the state of affairs was adamant, and that people had become increasingly disillusioned with the rhetoric of transition and democracy. However, these structural conditions do not explain the occurrence, the shape, or the outcome of political

turmoil in Kyrgyzstan. Frustration itself does not explain revolutions. As Aya argues, “there is no direct passage from anger to action, save through tautology” (1979: 67). In fact, there was no reason to expect that people would massively support opposition leaders and that widespread dissatisfaction would translate into collective action. For example, only a week before Akaev’s departure an observer wrote: “We are witnessing the weakness of the Kyrgyz opposition, which is regionalism. Pickets and demonstrations are held mainly in the south and only in constituencies where opposition were running”.<sup>8</sup> Ironically it was this regionalism, itself reinforced by neoliberal reforms, which set the stage for the revolution. An analysis of the political pattern and tactical logic which unfolded in early 2005 may provide further insight in the specific ways in which anger was channelled. Moreover, this analysis will reveal why self-proclaimed promoters of democracy largely stood aside and why a temporary alliance emerged between the rural poor and some well-known political figures.

### **Political Turmoil**

Ever since the Rose Revolution in Georgia, President Akaev had been highly aware of his vulnerable position. In a number of speeches he warned for the disruptive effects that similar events would have in Kyrgyzstan and he tried to discredit the revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine by insisting that these were foreign-inspired and foreign-funded coups.<sup>9</sup> This view seems to have been his major anchor in attempting to avoid a similar scenario in Kyrgyzstan. Besides intensified control of NGO activity, the government facilitated the creation of quasi-NGOs whose main function was to negate criticism by local and international non-governmental organizations.<sup>10</sup> Likewise, the number of corruption charges against opposition figures (a common way of dealing with potentially threatening leaders) increased. It may be that the limited role NGOs played in the initial stages of the Kyrgyz revolution indicates the effectiveness of Akaev’s policies. More likely however is that even without repressive measures they would not have played a significant role, because they lacked credibility and popular support in the regions where the revolution started. In

hindsight, it seems that the government actions were in part misfired, and then backfired during the parliamentary elections.

At the outset of the revolution the opposition was divided and political parties were weak and fragmented. Moreover, reports from early 2005 suggest that opposition leaders were not planning a revolution. Their stated concern was to retain a modest representation in parliament and to prepare for the more crucial presidential elections later in the year.<sup>11</sup> However, the regime's reinforced attempts to curtail opposition groups led to an unexpected convergence of local grievances and opposition goals. The crucial element in this process was that the elections implemented the outcome of a referendum held two years earlier: the bicameral system was replaced with a new unicameral parliament of seventy-five deputies, while party-list voting and proportional representation were replaced with a single member constituency voting system. These changes meant that the total number of deputies was reduced by thirty and that political parties were left with no other constitutional right than to nominate candidates. The changes were probably intended to limit the organizational strength of oppositional factions, but the reduced number of available seats left many regional elite figures running against each other and guaranteed that political struggles intensified at the local level.

It should be clear that the elections were neither free nor fair, and that the outcomes were highly manipulated. But then, this had been the case in previous elections as well. In fact, OSCE observers indicated that the elections were more competitive than previous ones. With over four hundred contenders for seventy-five seats it was not only the 'opposition' which felt victimized, but many independent and even pro-Akaev contenders as well. In this situation the usual deals between government and potential or actual candidates did not work.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, because of international pressure to adopt certain changes in the election process, manipulations partly shifted from invisible arrangements to conspicuous vote-rigging and other malpractices. In a situation in which public interest in politics was tightly linked to everyday (local or regional) concerns, this proved highly volatile. These 'competitive' elections then, proved the trigger by

which massive unrest was born. The resulting revolutionary situation can be divided in three phases: emergence of pockets of resistance; organization of discontent; violent confrontation and government collapse.

Initially, the emergence of pockets of resistance resembled what had become a familiar pattern on the Kyrgyz political scene since the late 1990s. Before the first election round on February 27, protests focused on the exclusion and delisting of individual candidates. After the first round, demonstrations were held to try and reverse the election results. Many of these protests were organized by (relatives of) unfortunate candidates. They often received wider local support because of the very concrete things that were (seen to be) at stake – for example new schools, water irrigation systems, or new roads. In principle these were all things that the national government was supposed to take care off, but it was widely acknowledged that only a good deputy would be able to channel the money in the right direction. At the time, there was no sign of a unified move against the regime. Rather, “those opposition members who won their elections and got elected told their supporters to stop their protests”.<sup>13</sup> The unrest thus appeared to be common commotion over election results. The government response was to ignore where possible and to give in where necessary, thereby aiming to prevent that a unified protest movement would emerge. However, several peculiarities indicated that the unrest was different from previous protests. First, the protests were far more numerous than in previous elections. Second, they occurred not only in the South where anti-Akaev sentiments were strongest, but also in the North where the regime had wider support. Third, several protests were led by candidates who were considered pro-Akaev – as such indicating a growing fragmentation of the regime itself.

The second and crucial phase started in the southern provincial capital Jalal-Abad – a town of roughly one hundred thousand inhabitants – where events took a more serious character. On March 4, over three hundred people led by Jusupbek Bakiev (brother of the later interim president) who had lost his constituency, seized control over the provincial administration building (*akimiat*). The move was well-prepared, judging from the fact that most demonstrators

were dressed in pink, held banners, and were quick to demand resignation of Akaev. During the following days, the number of protesters rose to several thousands. The visual images of these events suggest that the vast majority of demonstrators were poor and from a rural background.<sup>14</sup> A relatively large number of them were women and elderly men. Residents of the town hastened to distinguish themselves from these ‘rural masses’. One observer quoted townspeople as saying “these are not part of us, they are not from the city, but the poor from the villages” (Hoskins 2005). Though some NGO activists tried to mobilize the ‘core’ population of the city as well, they were largely unsuccessful. For example, the Kyrgyz student organization *KelKel* sent representatives to mobilize students in Jalal-abad, but reported on March 10 that in spite of their efforts the students remained largely passive, apparently intimidated by university authorities.<sup>15</sup>

Over the following week well-known opposition figures began to play a more active role in the continuing stand-off in Jalal-Abad. It remains guesswork as to why they took a more radical stance. It is possible that the initial success had emboldened them, but it is equally likely that the devastating final results of the elections, which gave only six seats to opposition candidates, provoked them to take the risk. One observer suggested that “the opposition realized its defeat and therefore decided to stake everything and put out radical demands”.<sup>16</sup> For example, it was believed that Kurmanbek Bakiev, who lost his constituency, would be arrested as soon as the new parliament was inaugurated, that is, when he would lose his political immunity. From Jalal-Abad the uprising spread to several other cities in the South, including Osh, the second-largest city of Kyrgyzstan. It was by this time that a parallel structure started to appear. In both cities ‘people’s governors’ were chosen, which directly challenged the regime’s control over the country. A *kurultai* or general assembly was organized in Jalal-Abad, during which people voiced their concerns. Interestingly, these concerns seemed directed more at economic problems than at electoral fraud. One report listed the issues raised at the *kurultai*, which included “wrong privatization, not working industries, salary and pension problems, increase of corruption, no order in the country, ineffective use of investment and violations of rules during the elections”.<sup>17</sup>

By March 18, three out of seven provincial government buildings were controlled by anti-Akaev forces, while another five district government buildings also fell in the hands of protesters.

Although the majority of these were in South Kyrgyzstan, it included two in the North as well.<sup>18</sup>

During the two weeks following the occupation of the *akimiat* in Jalal-Abad the government appeared unable or unwilling to challenge the protesters. It chose simply to plod ahead with the (second round of) elections, meanwhile trying to vilify the opposition. Throughout Kyrgyzstan counter demonstrations were organized, intending to prove people's loyalty to the regime. In Jalal-Abad, one such demonstration consisted of teachers, doctors, nurses, and other people on the state's payroll (*gosbiudzhet*). However, the participants appeared to be lukewarm about their role. After having been filmed by the state television, and challenged by anti-Akaev protesters, they quickly disbanded.<sup>19</sup> Newspaper articles and televised speeches further accused the opposition of inciting civil war and linked them to religious radicalism and extremism (*Vechernyi Bishkek* 22 March 2005). The clumsiness of these efforts highlighted that the government was losing its grip, and was not able to effectively counter the course of events.

The final stage started on March 20, when government troops forcefully overtook the *akimiats* in Jalal-Abad and Osh. This happened while the local police "stood on the street outside and did not arrest anyone".<sup>20</sup> The action came too late. The violent attack provoked mass participation in the demonstrations, with up to ten thousand participants, after which protesters retook the government buildings in Jalal-Abad and Osh and occupied the airports to prevent further transfer of government forces. Moreover, this was also the time when new actors appeared on the scene, like the rich businessman Erkinbaev, who assisted the protesters in Osh by sending in his well-trained militia. In fact, when protest finally took off in Bishkek everything had already been decided. On March 23 Akaev made a last attempt to counter the tide, by appointing the 'hardliner' Dushebaev as interior minister. It may have been Akaev's last misjudgment, because Dushebaev proved unwilling to take the blame for a violent confrontation he would most likely have lost. In the morning of March 24 he appeared among the crowd of protesters and indicated

that he would not use lethal force against them. After having made this speech, he told a journalist that his loyalties were with the people, and moreover, was seen conversing with the leader of the opposition, Kurmanbek Bakiev.<sup>21</sup> It thus appears that by the time the demonstrations started on the central square in Bishkek, the regime had been deserted by most of its allies. Some people in Kyrgyzstan complained that the revolution went too fast. University students, for example, had hoped to turn the ousting of Akaev into a yellow revolution of lemons. However, they were not given time to popularize their idea. Instead it became the Tulip Revolution, no matter how meaningless the name in view of its chaotic immediate aftermath and its disappointing results. Although, as all Kyrgyz (and Dutch) people know: tulips are quick to bloom, but they wither equally fast.

### **Revolution without revelation**

This essay argued that the intensification of poverty in the name of liberal democracy in combination with the specifics of regionalism in Kyrgyzstan resulted in a temporary alliance between people at the lower end of society and politicians driving on regional authority. As to the ultimate effects of the revolution there is less certainty. Eric Wolf wrote almost forty years ago, “in the struggle of revolution, peasant anarchism and elite Marxism easily coincide. They only part company when the revolution is won and the task of reordering society begins in earnest” (2001 [1967]: 240). Perhaps a distinctive ideological framework (not necessarily Marxism) would have allowed for the alliance to last a little longer. But in absence of common goals, everyday politics resumed and neither rhetoric nor practices set these apart from the Akaev era. Even the disputed results of the parliamentary elections were accepted by the new government. And while the looting of stores was quickly brought under control, several observers argued that the real looting had only started, that is, the looting of the state’s resources. Within two months after the power shift dissatisfaction became rampant, leading to new (but unsuccessful) demonstrations in which thousands of people participated.

For the moment it is unclear if revolution is the method by which (halted) democratization is infused with new energy, or if it is the prelude to further instability, thereby intensifying the call for authoritarian leadership. In any case, the events have signaled *both* messages to neighboring countries. While it inspired opposition groups in several post-Soviet republics to challenge their regimes, it also prompted autocrats to further curb dissenting views. Happenings across the border in Andijan, Uzbekistan, showed this paradox in bloody detail. Less than two months after Akaev's removal, citizens of Andijan rose to demonstrate against the excesses of the dictatorial regime. President Karimov, however, did not wait for protests to obtain wider clout. Instead the military ruthlessly crushed the demonstration. Over five hundred people were killed, as a sad reminder of the (current) limits of revolution in the former Soviet world.

If it is too early to make conclusive remarks about the outcome of the Kyrgyz revolution, it is ever more necessary to reflect on 'transition'. As indicated above, the immediate post-Soviet period had seen much exuberance about the presumed transition of successor states. During the 1990s this triumphant narrative broke down into national tales that diverged from the hoped-for storyline. Still, for a relatively long time Kyrgyz leaders kept the dream alive and throughout the 1990s the country continued to be seen as the shining example in a worrisome region. But, if fifteen years of 'transition to democracy' produced a 'revolution to democracy', what can we expect to follow from this revolution? Perhaps a *second* transition? Sadly enough, the term has already reappeared – in describing the aftermath of the revolution as “the transition begins” (Mikosz 2005). Overall, Western reactions to the Tulip Revolution were highly reminiscent of the rhetoric employed fifteen years previously – political change was seen, once again, as a victory of democracy, as an indicator of the ultimate appeal and strength of liberal democracy. The official EU statement, for example, held that now “Kyrgyzstan has an opportunity to set a positive example to the Central Asian region by holding free and fair elections and by promoting democratization, rule of law and human rights” (*The Times of Central Asia*, June 4, 2005). Similarly, and predictably, president Bush cited the Tulip Revolution as an example which



showed that “We are seeing the rise of a new generation whose hearts burn for freedom – and they will have it”.<sup>22</sup> Since local and Western politicians alike have pressing reasons to keep the dream alive, one can even conceive of an accelerated succession of virtual transitions to ever ‘realer’ forms of democracy, perhaps ever further removed from everyday realities.

Instead of getting lost in the myriad of dreamlike images about a teleological trajectory into the future (or of accepting transition as a permanent state of being), it may be worthwhile to say that the first fifteen years of Kyrgyz independence represented ‘actually existing democracy’, and acknowledge that this *was* what capitalist reforms looked like in a particular post-Soviet context. After fifteen years of democracy talk and disruptive economic reforms, many ordinary people had already made that conclusion. For them Akaev had become the face of democracy – first associated with hope, and then with disillusion. Put differently, insisting that the revolution marks the beginning of a transition to ‘real’ democracy will, to put it mildly, not find much currency as long as the rhetoric is not accompanied by real and palpable changes in people’s everyday lives. Still, comparisons with the immediate post-Soviet period can be useful. As Goldstone wrote: “The main problem facing the new postsocialist regimes was not spreading the revolution but rather building new national institutions that could cope with the emergent private, criminal, and bureaucratic entrepreneurs rushing to fill the vacuum of power” (2001: 144). Unfortunately, that task still remains to be addressed, and the rhetoric of liberal democracy will do little to solve the problems.

In the meantime, Akaev has started to popularize his own version of the power shift in Kyrgyzstan. A few weeks after his ouster of power, Akaev gave speeches in which he stressed that democracy has a future in Central Asia, but that it should be reached through ‘organic growth’ rather than be exported from abroad.<sup>23</sup> The irony is that Akaev was the post-Soviet president who had accepted such exports most eagerly, and who was able to profit personally from the messy liberalizations of political and economic life. It would take a psychologist to speculate whether Akaev really sees himself as a democrat, but his insistence on presenting

himself as such makes me want to conclude with a reference to Gorbachev, another former president who gave speeches about a revolution which ousted him from power. For many years, Gorbachev continued to be a desired speaker in Europe and the US, perhaps because the collapse of the Soviet Union symbolized a victory of liberal democracy. But whereas Gorbachev was lauded for having opened up the Soviet Union, it is unlikely that Akaev will receive similar kinds of praise. Audiences in the West are more likely to interpret Akaev's self-portrayal as a belated attempt at (self) deception. Still, Akaev has his own audience – no longer among the defenders and promoters of liberal democracy, but among leaders who are far more authoritarian than he ever was. They will probably not listen to his ideas about democracy, but take account of how Akaev's relative tolerance of opposition voices – and his hesitation to use lethal force – resulted in a revolutionary situation that caused his own demise.

### **Acknowledgments**

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### **Notes**

1. For example, *The New York Times* (April 3, 2005) concluded that it turned out “to be a plain, old coup”.
2. An early complaint about interim president Bakiev was that he used similar nepotistic methods as Akaev did, tending to appoint relatives and friends to crucial posts in the administration.
3. Without aiming to defend the term ‘revolution’ I hold that the events in Kyrgyzstan can be characterized as a ‘revolutionary situation’ in which efforts to transform political institutions were accompanied by mass mobilization and non-institutionalized action (Goldstone 2001: 142). I agree with Aya that instead of defining revolutions by intentions or outcomes, analysis benefits more from focusing on the power dynamics in an “open-ended situation of violent struggle wherein one set of contenders attempts to (...) displace another from state power” (1979: 40).

4. Mogilevsky and Hasanov (2004: 226-30) show a steep drop of GDP between 1991 and 1994 and a slow recovery up to 2000, at which time GDP was still only 69 percent of the 1990 level.
5. I described these attitudes in more detail in my unpublished (1996) MA-thesis, which was based on five months of fieldwork in Karakol, Kyrgyzstan.
6. See also Liu (2003: 7), who argues that in the late 1990s Uzbeks living in Kyrgyzstan saw Islam Karimov as a paternalistic, 'khan-like' leader who would lead his nation to prosperity.
7. RFE/RL (Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty), April 12, 2005, "Kyrgyzstan: the failure of managed democracy", by Daniel Kimmage. <http://www.rferl.org>, accessed June 10, 2005.
8. RFE/RL, March 13, 2005, "Central Asia Report – Kyrgyzstan's fragmented opposition ponders next move after election defeat", by Gulnoza Saidazimova. <http://www.rferl.org/>, accessed June 10, 2005.
9. Akaev first expressed this view in the Russian newspaper *Rossiiskaia Gazeta* (June 8, 2004) and repeated his views in several televised speeches. RFE/RL, January 5, 2005, "Kyrgyzstan: Fragmented opposition up against entrenched interests", by Gulnoza Saidazimova. <http://www.rferl.org/>, accessed June 15, 2005.
10. RFE/RL, April 12, 2005, op cit note 7; ICG 2005: 5. However, this is not to suggest a simplistic dichotomy between quasi-NGOs and 'real' NGOs. As Boehm (1999) and Liu (2003) demonstrated, in Kyrgyzstan the majority of local NGOs were created by, and subservient to, donor agendas.
11. News agency AKI-press quoted eight opposition leaders as saying that they did not favor a repetition of the events in Ukraine because of the potential destabilizing effects (RFE/RL, January 5, 2005, op cit note 9).
12. The ICG (2004) reported that opposition leaders often depended on the Akaev government, with which they made implicit deals over parliamentary representation.
13. RFE/RL, March 13, 2005, op cit note 8.
14. Having lived in Jalal-Abad for more than a year, I feel comfortable saying that the vests, hats, and shoes of the participants indicated a rural background.
15. From a student report posted at KG Election Blog, March 10, 2005. [http://kg.civiblog.org/blog\\_archives/](http://kg.civiblog.org/blog_archives/), accessed May 12, 2005.
16. RFE/RL, March 13, 2005, op cit note 8.
17. Website of The Kyrgyz Committee of Human Rights. <http://www.kchr.org>, accessed June 13, 2005.

18. These two government buildings in the North included the provincial *akimiat* of Talas, and the district *akimiat* of Kochkor in Naryn province.
19. These events were described in the Kyrgyz newspaper *Res Publica*, March 8, 2005.
20. RFE/RL, March 20, 2005, “Kyrgyzstan: police battle with protesters in southern cities”, by R. Synovitz. <http://www.rferl.org/>, accessed June 10, 2005.
21. RFE/RL, April 4, 2005, “Kyrgyzstan: reporter’s notebook – witness to the uprising”, by Jean-Christophe Peuch. <http://www.rferl.org/>, accessed June 6, 2005.
22. U.S. Department of State, May 18, 2005, “Bush pledges U.S. support for young democracies”. <http://usinfo.state.gov/eur/Archive/2005/May/19-215609.html>, accessed June 10, 2005.
23. For an example see the interview with Akaev in *Rossiiskaia Gazeta*, March 30, 2005, under the title “My last order – don’t shoot!”

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