

A Second Chance in Kyrgyzstan?

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The angry demonstrators on the streets of Bishkek, and elsewhere in Kyrgyzstan, this week were pushed too far by the corrupt and greedy thugs who had run the country since 2005. By raising the fees for utilities, cell phones and the like the government of President Kurambek Bakiev sought to squeeze even more money out of the largely impoverished people of Kyrgyzstan, but the people showed that they had a breaking point. The upheaval was somewhat violent, and is not yet over, but it could have been a lot worse if the security forces had been loyal to the defeated Bakiev regime and been more willing to defend him.

Bakiev came to power almost exactly five years ago in a similar semi-violent set of street demonstrations that, largely because the demonstrations were precipitated by a fraudulent election and occurred shortly after similar but nonviolent transitions in Georgia and Ukraine, was viewed a Color Revolution and, like the Rose and Orange Revolution, was named after a plant and called the Tulip Revolution.

It is not clear how events will conclude in Kyrgyzstan. The interim government is currently led by Roza Otunbayeva, a longtime Kyrgyz diplomat and politician who, like most of the other leaders of these demonstrations, is also a disillusioned Tulip Revolutionary. Otunbayeva may seek to place Kyrgyzstan on a path to democracy beginning with new elections sometime in the next few months; the new leadership may move towards a stronger but equally undemocratic regime; the new leaders may simply replace Bakiev and his family as the new top thugs in town; or any number of other outcomes could occur too.

Regardless of how events play out in Kyrgyzstan, it is now clear that U.S. policy there in recent years has been misguided. The U.S. allowed itself to be manipulated into supporting a government that was not only corrupt and undemocratic but also weak and incompetent because of the strong need to have access to the Manas Air Force Base which is only a few miles from Bishkek. It is worth noting that the U.S. had to provide Bakiev thugocracy a contract worth roughly \$180 million, in the form of loans, grants and contracts, all of which was looted by the ruling clique, in exchange for access to the base.

The Manas Air Force Base plays a key role in transporting troops and materials to support the U.S. led effort in Afghanistan, so the U.S. was forced to accede to the demands of the Bakiev regime in exchange for access to the base. The U.S. largely overlooked the ample shortcomings of this key Central Asian regime because of the base. The failure of the U.S. to speak out against the increasingly authoritarian Kyrgyz government was not lost on the beleaguered opposition-the same beleaguered opposition which is currently running the country.

For the U.S. one key question will be whether or not the new government will allow continued use of the Manas Air Force Base. The initial indications are that the interim government will allow this access. In this regard the U.S. may have gotten lucky, because U.S. support for Bakiev could have made the opposition, which is now in power, more hostile to the U.S. Nonetheless, continued base access will almost certainly require new contracts either in the form of genuine assistance or money with which the new leaders can line their pockets, as Bakiev and his cronies lined theirs.

A less myopic question on which American policy makers would also do well to focus is how to build relationships with regimes that have valuable resources, or strategic locations, but are neither free nor stable. The biggest analytical flaw in the U.S. approach to Kyrgyzstan was not the willingness to support an undemocratic regime. This is sometimes necessary in a complex and often dangerous world. The real flaw with American thinking was a willingness to overlook the obvious signs of instability in the old Kyrgyz regime, almost taking the lack of democracy as some kind of evidence of government ability or state strength. While realists are fond of reminding us that democratic regimes are often unstable, Kyrgyzstan is just further proof of the rather obvious point that undemocratic regimes are often unstable too.