

Kyrgyzstan and the Cost of Not Supporting Democracy

Lincoln A. Mitchell

April 12, 2010

During the Bush administration, as democracy assistance evolved from being a relatively uncontroversial U.S. policy with bipartisan support to a controversial policy associated with the neoconservative agenda, academics, journalists and others hastened to identify the political costs of doing democracy work. Critics of democracy assistance argued that encouraging elections too quickly in war torn countries could [exacerbate ethnic tensions and ensure greater instability](#). Others argued that more democracy would [bring anti-American leaders to power, particularly in Muslim countries](#), while still others argued that for poor unstable countries, stability, security and economic development should all be higher priorities than democracy.

While many of these arguments tended to be based upon straw man understandings of democracy or a conflation of democracy assistance with elections which belied the broader policy, the basic arguments are important and cannot be easily dismissed. To deny that there is a political cost to doing democracy work and a political risk associated with that work would be foolish. However, it would be equally foolish to deny that there is a political cost and risk associated with not doing democracy work.

This has been made very clear by recent events in Kyrgyzstan which have not so much caught the U.S. by surprise, but caught the U.S. without a lot of options. Bakiev's Kyrgyzstan was one of the few places in the world where the U.S., under both Bush and Obama, applied a textbook Cold War approach. The Bakiev regime was supported despite its authoritarian excesses because Kyrgyzstan was a valuable ally due to the Manas Air Force Base which, for a handsome fee, the regime allowed the U.S. to use to transport materials and troops to Afghanistan. Bakiev had come to power in a Color Revolution, but the U.S. did not even try, after the first few years, to justify support for Kyrgyzstan on its flimsy democratic credentials. Everybody, including the Kyrgyz opposition, understood why the U.S. supported the regime.

The decision by the U.S. to effectively end meaningful efforts to support Kyrgyz democracy sometime in 2006-2007, is coming back to haunt the U.S. today. Through its Kyrgyzstan policy, the U.S. put itself in the awkward and predictably unsustainable position of supporting an authoritarian regime in one country as part of an effort to cultivate democracy in Afghanistan, which is only a few hundred miles from Afghanistan.

The anger in the streets of Bishkek during the last few weeks was aimed primarily at the Bakiev regime, but much of it may, indirectly have been aimed at the U.S. as well. Opposition leaders, including interim President Roza Otunbayeva, had spent a great deal of time trying to persuade the west, and most importantly the U.S., of the need to support democracy and help create space for political opposition in Kyrgyzstan. These appeals

went unheeded by a U.S. policy in Kyrgyzstan which had become myopically focused on Manas.

Now the regime in Kyrgyzstan has changed again. It is not at all clear whether this will move the country closer to democracy or if five years from now angry demonstrators will throw these new leaders out of office. It is clear, however, that the failure of the U.S. to confront Bakiev's authoritarian nature has not won them any additional influence among the new Kyrgyz leadership-in whose hands, it is not much of an exaggeration, may now be the future of the entire U.S. war effort in Afghanistan.