

# Kyrgyzstan's Unfinished Revolution

*Alisher Khamidov\**

Many view Kyrgyzstan's newly adopted constitution as a triumph of democratic forces. But a closer scrutiny reveals that informal localism and kinship ties have played a decisive role in the opposition's ability to pressure the President to consent to constitutional changes. The growing role of kinship and localism networks has both positive and negative consequences for Kyrgyzstan.

A sustained protest in Bishkek's Ala-Too Square, lasting from November 2-9, 2006 has compelled the Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiyev to accept constitutional changes that transferred some of his powers to the parliament. Under the new constitution, the president loses the power to select members of the government. A political party that holds the most seats in parliament has the right to appoint the prime-minister and cabinet members. In addition, the new basic law transfers responsibility for oversight of the National Security Service from the president to the prime-minister. The parliament has obtained powers to appoint regional judges as well.

The constitution also mandates an expansion of parliament to 90 members from the current 75. Half of the MPs will be elected by proportional representation from party lists, and the rest from single-mandate constituencies. The expansion is due to take effect when the mandates of the sitting MPs expire in 2010.

Opposition leaders hailed the adoption of the new constitution as a triumph of democratic forces. But a careful scrutiny of early November developments reveals that there were more than just democratic slogans and motives that inspired the opposition's supporters.<sup>1</sup>

A number of factors explain the Kyrgyz opposition's success. First, the Kyrgyz opposition benefited from the weakness of the central

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\* Alisher Khamidov is PhD Candidate at the School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), Johns Hopkins University, United States.

<sup>1</sup> Interviews with some supporters of opposition forces revealed that they did not really know what they were protesting for. People who knew had a vague idea about concrete opposition demands.

government and its security apparatus.<sup>2</sup> Second, the opposition was far more well-organized and funded than was the case during the Tulip Revolution of 2005. "For Reforms!," a coalition of opposition forces, was established as a structure with clearly delineated tasks and coordination mechanisms. One remarkable example of its organized character is the pup-tents, traditional Kyrgyz yurts, and portable toilets set up on the Ala-Too square. Opposition supporters were also far more well-disciplined than in previous cases, a fact that prevented looting, destruction of property and severe clashes.

Third, the opposition has put forward clearly-formulated and feasible objectives and employed an effective media strategy. But most importantly, the opposition has managed to build pressure on Bakiyev by mobilizing and sustaining protests involving several thousand supporters for several consecutive days. The pressure on Bakiyev mounted each day. At the peak of protests, the opposition managed to mobilize more than 10 000 people.

The participants in the protests represented all generations and most social groups. To be sure, there were genuine supporters of democracy among crowds at Ala-Too square. But the majority of protesters were tied to influential leaders of the opposition through influential kinship or localism ties. Most protesters gathered on the Ala Too square to support "their man" in Bishkek.

As a result, the opposition crowds represented various regions of Kyrgyzstan. For example, Almazbek Atambaev, a rich industrialist, brought in his supporters from Alamedin region of Chui province. Residents of Aksy region came to support Azimbek Beknazarov, their representative in Bishkek. Omurbek Tekebaev, former speaker of Kyrgyz parliament, brought in his supporters from his hometown Bazarkorgon and Jalal-Abad. Melis Eshimkanov, an MP and owner of the oppositionist newspaper "Agym" brought in his supporters from Naryn province.

The opposition's success was also due to generous financial backing that came from such figures as Almazbek Atambaev, Omurbek Babanov, Temir Sariev, wealthy industrialists and affluent businessmen who have mobilized supporters from their home towns in the North, employees of their vast holdings, their relatives and friends.

These mobilization strategies sharply contrasted with the chaotic and poorly coordinated measures adopted by Bakiyev and his supporters to counter the opposition. Several hundred Bakiyev supporters staged anti-opposition protests in Bishkek. But the thousands of supporters of the "For Reforms" coalition vastly outnumbered them.

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<sup>2</sup> The weakness was demonstrated on November 3-4 when several police officers charged with the defense of the Kyrgyz government's building switched sides and joined the opposition forces.

In an early November effort to cut support for the oppositionist forces, the Bakiyev administration attempted to bloc the main-highway between North and South on a lousy pretext of planned repair works. But it was too late, the opposition supporters came from all over Kyrgyzstan and not only from the South.

The recent Kyrgyz protests once again highlight the fact that localism networks and kinship ties remain a potent force in politics. Such networks greatly benefited from two key processes.

Among the underlying reasons that explain the success of the Kyrgyz mobilization are the privatization and decentralization processes that have occurred in Kyrgyzstan in the past 10 years. Privatization and decentralization reforms under former President Askar Akaev produced wealthy individuals and local networks that have gained significant autonomy from central authorities. Atambaev, Sariev, Babanov and other influential leaders of the opposition have made fortunes on the chaotic mass privatization processes that occurred in Kyrgyzstan during the 1990s, and have today built vast financial conglomerates. As a result, Atambaev owns several plants in the North. Babanov, in turn, owned NK "Alliance," an oil company, which he reportedly sold to Russian GazProm for US\$100 million in August 2005. Babanov also owns NTS, an independent TV-station that offered extensive coverage for opposition activity.

Many of these entrepreneurs have become disenchanted with the distribution of property triggered by the Tulip Revolution in March 2005. What many of them lamented was the growing role of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev's family on economic and political life in the country.

In an effort to put checks on the growing influence of President Bakiyev's family, these figures have increasingly turned to local grassroots organizations for support. The "For Reforms!" coalition relied on powerful networks of informal leaders of *ail okmotu*, or the local governments in the North and South, which have grown in influence thanks to former President Akaev's decentralization reforms. These individuals played a decisive role in helping the opposition coalition to organize transportation from other regions and arrange food and lodging for protesters.

The success of the early November events in Kyrgyzstan carries powerful lessons for the country's future development. On the positive side, the protests demonstrated that the alliance of influential and autonomous actors who rely on local and kinship networks can put checks and balances on growing authoritarianism. The protests also showed an ability of the opposition alliance to transgress regional divisions. On the negative side, the recent events further promote

“hyperdemocracy,” in which self-interested wealthy actors can rely on mass mobilization to promote their narrow agenda.

Kyrgyzstan’s new constitution has reduced the president’s powers defusing a political crisis, but the new constitution does not resolve the underlying political problems. In the view of Kyrgyz lawyers, the powers assigned to the president and to the parliament are not sufficiently well delineated and this may create tensions. In particular, the new constitution does not clearly state who is to appoint the heads of regional administrations. A number of parliament members are already disputing the recent presidential appointment of a new head of Chui administration saying that the appointment of regional governors falls under the parliament’s jurisdiction. In addition, the new constitution does not provide a legal basis for coalitions among winning parties in the parliament in order to form a government.

Most importantly, it is not clear how the provision of the new constitution will be put into practice. Observers worry that the implementation of the new provisions will soon create serious tensions between the president and parliament. Against this backdrop, some members of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev’s administration are willing to see the current parliament dissolved. They argue that dissolution of the current parliament can help pro-governmental forces to form a political party and dominate the new parliament.

However, on December 4, Bakiyev told parliament members that he objects to the dissolution of the country’s parliament. As he noted, this is “in spite of the fact that several cabinet members are calling for the dismissal of the MPs and their view is shared by the public.”

While this provides assurances to the MPs, Bakiyev is not keeping his earlier promise of not persecuting members of the opposition movement. In the weeks that followed the signing of the new constitution, the Kyrgyz authorities have launched a “witch-hunt” campaign that now threatens the accords signed between the opposition and President. The “For Reforms!” coalition held a press conference recently, where they blamed Bakiyev for renegeing on his earlier promise. They complained that their relatives and some rank-and-file opposition supporters are now being persecuted by the authorities for their support to the opposition movement. For example, pro-presidential forces are collecting signatures to recall Omurbek Tekebaev’s seat in the parliament; the tax police has arrested the wife of one of the opposition’s sponsors on the pretext of tax evasion; the head of NTS, a private TV station owned by Omurbek Babanov, is now being interrogated by the security services; some members of the “For Reforms!” movement are called to the prosecutor’s office for interrogations in connection with the tape recording that allegedly called for the overthrow of the government in early November;

Edil Baisalov, a prominent member of "For Reforms!" was beaten recently and there has been no thorough investigation into this incident.

The cold weather in Bishkek may prevent the opposition movement from gathering the supporters to protest the recent moves by the administration. If the President does not respect the clauses of the accords, in early spring 2007 he will face crowds of opposition protesters on Ala-Too square again. This time, they will demand his resignation.