

KYRGYZSTAN: THE ROSA REVOLUTION

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On 24 March, on the eve of the fifth anniversary of the tulip revolution which brought him to power, President Kurmanbek Bakiyev said before the *Kurultai Soglasia*¹ - the 'Congress of the Consensus' – which he had himself convened, that '*Kyrgyzstan was not made for a democratic political system resting on an electoral process and individual human rights.*'² Without the slightest ambiguity, the statements of President Bakiyev confirmed what the whole world knew since his accession to power, namely, the low regard in which he holds the ideas of democracy and human rights. In the belief that institutions built on the model of liberal democracy are unsuitable, he announced his intention to replace them by informal institutions based on the '*secular traditions of the Kyrgyz nation*' covered by the vague and ill-defined term of '*deliberative democracy.*'

History did not allow analysts and observers of Kyrgyz political life sufficient time to determine whether this idea of '*deliberative democracy*' should be considered a genuine political desire or was just an idea tossed into the air by a government wishing to hear the attitude of its population on this subject.³ Two weeks later a revolution, the second in five years, set alight the streets of Bishkek and other main cities of the country. Despite at least 84 deaths and more than 1,500 wounded, an enraged crowd quickly took control of all official buildings, and the overpowered government collapsed. On the morning of the 8th, President Kurmanbek Bakiyev hastily abandoned his besieged presidential palace and, for a time, took refuge in his bastion in the South of the country, in the province of Jalal-Abad where he originally came from.

Immediately afterwards, a '*government of the people*' headed by former Minister of Foreign Affairs Rosa Otunbayeva, announced it had taken control of the situation and of the country. On the afternoon of the 8th, Prime Minister Daniyar Usenov resigned and the interim

¹ A kurultai is a traditional assembly of the elites, a council of 'wise men' which deals with the problems of Kyrgyz society. Historically speaking, the kurultai was one of the traditions of Turkestan, the former name of the region of Central Asia conquered in the 6th century AD by the Kok Turks (the Blue Turks). Turkestan was divided into Western Turkestan, covering the territory of the five present day Central Asian republics, and Eastern Turkestan, corresponding today to the Chinese province of Xinjiang.

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http://www.rferl.org/content/Kyrgyz_PoohPoohs_WesternStyle_Democracy/1992380.html

³ <http://ipp.kg/en/analysis/politics/811/>

government was immediately recognised by Russia, which is by far the most important partner of Kyrgyzstan.

The speed with which events developed, the nearly miraculous emergence of a government of the people '*on a turnkey basis and ready to serve*,' recognition granted by Russia even before President Bakiyev had officially resigned, the initial openly pro-Russian statements of the interim government : all of this suggests that this revolution was not as spontaneous as one might think. We note, in addition, the deafening silence of the American administration, whose failure to react immediately shows to what degree it had been bypassed by events.

Lacking the name of a flower or colour, this '*lightning bolt*' revolution sounds the death knell of the colour revolutions. Just two months ago, Ukrainian voters peacefully buried their orange revolution. The bloody end of the Bakiyev regime draws attention to a Central Asian country which may not have the immense energy resources of its rich neighbours but nonetheless occupies an unusual position. A local joke describes this situation perfectly: '*the Kyrgyz are accustomed to take their breakfast with the Chinese, to have lunch with the Russians and to dine with the Americans!*'⁴ Thanks to the overthrow of power which just took place, the '*revolution of Rosa*' will surely have serious consequences for the regional geostrategic balance and the *Grand Game* of international competition for the formidable energy resources of Central Asia.

1. Portrait of a revolutionary backslider

a) A Soviet and Kyrgyz career

Born in 1960 in Och, in the South of Kyrgyzstan, there was nothing to predispose Rosa Otunbayeva to participate in two successive revolutions. She began her career in the Communist Party and within Soviet diplomacy. She then headed the USSR delegation to UNESCO before joining the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Moscow.

Following the collapse of the USSR and the proclamation of independence of Kyrgyzstan, she returned to her native country, where she was named first Minister of Foreign Affairs, then Deputy Prime Minister in Charge of Social Affairs, then Ambassador to Washington, then once again Minister of Foreign Affairs, followed by the ambassadorship to the United Kingdom. Next she joined the United Nations Organisation, where she worked on peace missions. In 2003, she was sent to Georgia as the special envoy of the Secretary General and while there she was a firsthand witness to the Rose Revolution that brought Mikheil Saakashvili to power.

After her return to Kyrgyzstan in 2004, Rosa Otunbayeva broke with President Askar Akayev and created her own party, *Ata-Jurt (The Fatherland)*. She joined forces with the Opposition movement. In 2005, she tried unsuccessfully to run for office in the legislative elections. Her candidacy was set aside by the authorities on the grounds that she had not been resident in the country long enough in the past few years. Curiously, the daughter of President Akayev was a candidate in the same district as the one where she had intended to present her candidacy.

Her party became one of the driving forces of the Tulip Revolution and she participated in March 2005 in the overthrow of President Askar Akayev, who took refuge in Russia. The new President-elect, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, named her as Minister of Foreign Affairs for the fourth time. But her nomination was not approved by parliament and little by little she became an active opponent of the Bakiyev regime, which she reproached for its despotic excesses, its nepotism, its corruption and its widespread practice of electoral fraud.

⁴ <http://www.russiaprofile.org/page.php?pageid=International&articleid=a1270751961>

Her nomination to head the provisional Kyrgyz government gives it international visibility and should reassure the main international actors.

b) True reformer or Russian marionette?

Experts are divided on this question. Scott Horton, defender of human rights and the man who runs the blog *No Comment* on the website of *Harper's Magazine*, says 'it is clear that Rosa Otunbayeva, who has just emerged as the new boss, is an example of a leader of the Tulip Revolution who has ever since then rigorously devoted herself to the defence of democratic values which she believes in. She has subjected the setbacks and errors of her colleagues to lively criticism, and she has endured the tribulations of being put away in the closet. Her credibility and her integrity are her best advantages.'⁵

A different opinion is held by Oleg Panfilov, a Tajik journalist and specialist in freedom of the press who openly expresses the distrust she inspires in him. He writes that she 'has constantly sought, both in the Tulip Revolution and during the Revolution of 2010, to obtain the backing of Moscow, thereby enabling the Russians to strengthen their influence in the region.'⁶ Drawing attention to her past as an important member of the Soviet nomenklatura, he casts doubt on her abilities as reformer.

In itself, having a past as Communist apparatchik does not seem to constitute a crippling obstacle to becoming a leader today. There are many examples which show that most of the revolutions of 1989 were launched by Communist elites and not by the dissidents or political Opposition. Even today within the latest countries to have joined the European Union and been integrated into NATO, former apparatchiks occupy important political posts. Dalia Grybauskaitė, the present Lithuanian President, was formerly a professor in the Higher School of the Communist Party; and Andrus Ansip, the Estonian Prime Minister, is a former high official of the Communist Party Central Committee.

The only thing one can say today about Rosa Otunbayeva is that she constitutes the best possible compromise. Her past as diplomat within the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs is a reassuring factor for Moscow. She also calms American diplomats, given her former professional work within the United Nations and her stated attachment to the values of human rights.

c) A delicate mission

Like her predecessors, Rosa Otunbayeva will not be able to avoid the balancing act between ubiquitous *friendship with Russia* evidenced by military bases and Russian economic interests in Kyrgyzstan and *friendship with America* symbolised by the very profitable military base at Manas – bringing in 180 million a year – as well as by the very recent proposal to create a centre for anti-terrorist training of Kyrgyz forces.⁷ She must also take into account the aspirations of a population wishing to open up to the world, not to mention *friendship of China*, situated just nearby and jealously keeping watch on its borders.

Kyrgyzstan is the 'Near Abroad' to Russia and China and a strategic issue for the United States. In a word, the country shows all the characteristics of 'the countries with limited sovereignty and responsibility' with which Moscow is trying to surround itself according to the doctrine of the Medvedev / Putin tandem. The new Kyrgyz rulers cannot be indifferent to Russia's various kinds of success in Georgia and Ukraine: invasion for the first and the

⁵ <http://www.harpers.org/archive/2010/04/hbc-90006855>

⁶ <http://olegpanfilov2.livejournal.com/1677220.html>

⁷ Cf. <http://www.esisc.org/documents/pdf/fr/asia-centrale-entre-mythes-et-realites-letat-de-la-menace-islamiste-463.pdf>

support of a President who is friendly in the second. The mission of Rosa Otunbayeva has to be delicate.

2. A programmed revolution?

a) Russian activism and attentiveness

Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin was the international leader who was quickest to lend his support to the provisional Kyrgyz government. Openly criticising President Bakiyev, he immediately recognised the legitimacy of the new government team even before the blood of demonstrators who had been killed or wounded dried or the outgoing President had announced his resignation. He was also the first leader to offer technical and financial assistance from Russia to prevent the spread of the violence to the rest of the country. The next day he spoke with Roza Otunbayeva. He reconfirmed to her his total support, and as we heard from Mirsulzhan Namazaliev, director of the Central Asian Institute of Free Trade and editor of the internet portal *New Eurasia*, he presented himself as guarantor of Russian 'loyalty' as regards information. In other words, he assured his interlocutor 'of positive coverage of the events in Bishkek by the Russian media.'⁸

Such attentiveness appears suspect, to say the least. And doubts grow still further when, according to some sources,⁹ we learn that a select panel of political opponents was discretely received by the Russian Prime Minister in the weeks preceding and that there was a visible presence of FSB members (the security service of the Russian Federation, a secret service coming down from the Soviet KGB) during the events in Bishkek. We also know that on the morning of 8 April a reinforcement of 150 Russian parachutists was brought to the Kant air base, which is at the permanent disposal of Russian troops and is located twenty kilometres to the East of Bishkek.

Ever since 2009, the Russian authorities were relatively irritated by the attitude of the Kyrgyz President, who had obtained a loan of 2 billion dollars, to which was added a gift of 150 million to stabilise the economy of his country and to build a hydroelectric dam. Each protagonist of this financial arrangement has publicly denied it, though numerous experts have nonetheless advanced the hypothesis that this arrangement was made conditional on the departure of American troops stationed at the Manas air base. One year later, the American troops are still there and the amount of rent they are paying has tripled in the meantime. The Russians have had serious doubts over whether the funds they allocated would be used properly and, according to David Gullette, an anthropologist and development consultant based in Bishkek since 1997, they '*certainly lost patience.*'¹⁰

b) The strategic advantage of Kyrgyzstan

Lacking strategic energy resources which have made the fortune of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan presents hardly any economic interest. Yet it occupies an exceptional geographic position within Central Asia with its nearly 3 million square kilometres of territory, a theatre in the past for all the great invasions which punctuated and shaped the history of the European continent. Apart from steppe which extends as far as one can see, there is the chain of Tien Shan mountains, with summits mostly above 7,000 metres, and the Pamirs, the pivotal range which separates Central Asia from China and Southern Asia. Nestled in these mountains, the Ferghana Falley, refuge for the majority of Central Asian peoples due to the fertility of its agricultural land and the protection which it offers them, is the strategic heart of Central Asia.

⁸ <http://www.russiaprofile.org/page.php?pageid=International&articleid=a1270751961>

⁹ « *Kyrgyzstan and the Russian resurgence* », STRATFOR Global Intelligence, 13 April 2010.

¹⁰ Ibid.

In order to prevent the possible emergence of this valley as a veritable centre of regional power whose control could pose serious problems, the Soviet authorities divided the valley between Uzbekistan, which owns the central plain, Tajikistan, in the West, which controls the only easy access, and Kyrgyzstan, which was given the heights which encircle it. Though Kyrgyzstan does not derive any economic benefit from this valley, it dominates it and entirely controls it by virtue of the old tactical principle which tells us that *'whoever commands the heights, commands the lowlands.'*

Thus, by controlling Kyrgyzstan you control the valley and, consequently, you dominate the heart of Central Asia. Bishkek is just 120 kilometres from the economic capital of Kazakhstan, Almaty. By dominating the Tarim basin, Kyrgyzstan is able to survey Chinese movements in the turbulent and rebellious province of Xinjiang. A Kyrgyzstan capable of applying pressure on China, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan constitutes a crucial advantage in the Russian strategy of dominating Central Asia.

c) Russian reconquest?

American military operations in Afghanistan and in Iraq, focused on the Islamic world, have had the result of diverting Washington from its strategy of containing Russia. Realising that these military commitments cannot last forever, Moscow has no doubt seized an extraordinary opportunity to accelerate and strengthen its efforts at countering US influence in the former Soviet sphere country by country.

Since the beginning of 2010, the Russian authorities have recorded a certain number of major successes. In January, an agreement over a customs union has linked together Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus. Also in January, a government characterised as pro-Russian came to power in Ukraine. And now we find that a government with strongly pronounced orientation towards Russia has taken power in Kyrgyzstan. Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan constitute especially important stages for Moscow because these two countries allow it to feel safe, from the historic core of Russia dating back beyond the thousand years of the Russian nation right up to the steppes of Central Asia.

In their systematic undermining of American advances in the former Soviet empire, the Russian authorities have tested a whole variety of tools, including political pressure, social instability, energy blackmail and military intervention and they all turned out to be extremely effective. From among all of these tools, it was certainly energy blackmail which showed itself to be the best performing. By cutting off supplies to Ukraine and Lithuania, and as a result cutting supplies to Europe, Moscow imposed a double penalty on countries which were under fire of European reactions. The use of military force in Georgia turned out to be a success. Abkhazia and South Ossetia proclaimed their independence and passed under the more or less direct control of Moscow, depriving Tbilisi of nearly a third of its territory. Political pressure won out over the hesitancy of Kazakhstan and Belarus, which accepted the customs union proposed by Moscow. Now, with Kyrgyzstan the Russian authorities have shown their determination to put an end to the American interlude in Central Asia. They have also demonstrated their ability to foment and guide a revolution from afar in a similar manner to the way in which the Western powers were strongly involved in unleashing and directing the colour revolutions.

Russian strategy towards the *'reconquered'* countries has been tailor-made, taking into account their differences in order to keep them in their pocket or at least to direct them towards a policy which is much more pragmatic as regards relations with Russia. Having clearly expanded its security space both towards the West and towards the East, Russia emerges strengthened. It can even allow itself to await with a certain serenity the moment when the Obama Administration, disengaged from its Afghan and Iraqi contingencies, will once again turn its attention to Central Asia and Eurasia.

3. The bell sounds for the colour or theme revolutions

The second Kyrgyz revolution, the convulsive lurching of Georgia and the political switch in Ukraine show that the colour or theme revolutions – the Tulip Revolution in Bishkek, the Rose Revolution in Tbilisi and the Orange Revolution in Kiev – have withered on their own. A flame has died out and the way is opened to more violent upheavals. According to Boris Kagarlitsky of the Moscow-based Institute of Globalisation and Social Movements, *‘the collapse of the colour revolutions does not signify a step backwards – as some may hope – but rather the beginning of a new and much more dramatic episode for the post-Soviet states.’*¹¹

No one knows what will emerge from this. Bishkek today has nothing in common with St Petersburg of 1917, but the situation of the provisional government of Rosa Otunbayeva reminds one of the sad situation of the revolutionary government in the capital of the Russian Empire. However, one thing is sure. Whoever the future Kyrgyz rulers may be, the country will not experience either rest or stability so long as the social contradictions which objectively divide its population remain unresolved. And that observation seems applicable not only in Kyrgyzstan but also in all the former Russian satellites in Soviet space.

a) The distorting prism of the revolutions of colour

These colour revolutions have one thing in common: they are the result of mass discontent being used by one party of the governing elite against another part of this elite. The principal figures of the Opposition came from the camp of the party in power and had strong support in the business sector. This means they were in no way tempted to make real changes in the social order. Their *‘talents’* as revolutionaries were limited to casting doubt on the rules which governed the political process of the age. To oppose the administrative machine of the powers that be, they had recourse to the popular masses whom they called out into the streets of Kiev, Tbilisi and Bishkek.

The secret of the success of the colour revolutions was not the ability of the Opposition to mobilise en masse. Rather it was their ability to control the crowds, to manipulate them and, above all, to demobilise them. If they had not succeeded with this delicate manoeuvre, there can be no doubt that the situation would have completely escaped their control and the colour revolutions would have quickly turned into genuine revolutions.

b) Some bad responses to real problems

The common problem faced by all the rulers coming from the colour revolutions is that they were unable to resolve the social problems which gave rise to the revolt that brought them to power. Very quickly they appeared to be hardly more competent or less corrupt than their predecessors. Faced with growing popular discontent, these new governments had as their only recourse the temptation of nationalism. This is just going from bad to worse, because nationalism has never been of any use in consolidating a society and resolving its problems. The Georgian authorities went so far as to embark on a dramatic military adventure which was unsuccessful. Ukraine experienced relative success but at the price of general apathy and demoralisation. As regards Kyrgyzstan, recent events have just underscored the failure and rejection of the Bakiyev regime.

The apathy, indifference and cynicism which became widespread among the populations of Ukraine, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan are neither more nor less than indicators of the immense gap separating the present ruling classes from the rest of the nation. This is a gap which, in the case of Kyrgyzstan, expressed itself in a sudden explosion of very violent social anger. The

¹¹ www.stoletie.ru/politika/v_predchuvstvii_bunta_2010-04-13.htm

question is to know against whom this anger will be directed. The Kyrgyz Opposition now in power can, without any doubt, direct the popular anger against the deposed President and make him bear full responsibility for the political, social and economic problems. But that is a dangerous game. On the one hand, they can find themselves confronting a population determined not to let anyone steal its victory and, in that case, the situation could spin out of control. On the other hand, an unexpected leader could suddenly emerge and succeed in fundamentally changing the whole political and social system of Kyrgyzstan. Such a '*Kyrgyz Lenin or Trotsky*' has not yet appeared, but the same was true of Russia in 1917.

4. Conclusion

The latest joke making the rounds of Bishkek over the past two weeks is about a Frenchman, a Russian and a Kyrgyz aboard a ship which is sinking. All three of them manage to reach a desert island without mishap. The Frenchman builds himself a villa and plants a grapevine. The Russian builds himself a dacha and clears a patch of land for his vegetable garden. As for the Kyrgyz, he immediately organises a demonstration to chase Robinson Crusoe from the island.¹² It is still too early to predict what path Kyrgyzstan will take. We hope that it will not fall in line with this joke. The path of stabilisation is narrow, difficult and full of pitfalls which can easily lead to the impasse where we find the ever smaller circle of failed states. The provisional authorities will have to demonstrate their ability to govern a country which for the second time in less than five years has experienced a turbulent transition.

Among the items on their huge list of priorities which include the disturbing socio-economic situation is the problem of their legitimacy and the problem of reform of institutions which has been announced. According to the constitution still in force, the interim presidency should be entrusted to the president of parliament who convokes a new election. In case the president of parliament is unavailable, it is the Prime Minister who takes over the interim powers. However, Zainiddin Kurmanov, the president of parliament, was abroad when the events broke out and is not very inclined to reappear in Bishkek. And Daniyar Usenov, the Prime Minister, resigned on 8 April and also is not available. Today Kyrgyzstan has no legislation which can legitimise the provisional government and its institutional system has broken down in general. Accordingly, in legal terms we may characterise it as a failed state.

Thus it comes as no surprise that among the first provisions announced by the provisional government is institutional reform. The main objective is to avoid allowing the future President to repeat the abuses and institutionalised embezzlement of Kurmanbek Bakiyev. As Mirsulzhan Namazaliev says, '*one of the principal errors of the revolution of 2005 was not reforming the constitution prior to the election of Kurmanbek Bakiyev. This time a system of control over the executive power should be put in place – even to establish a parliamentary regime – before proceeding with the election of a new President.*'¹³

As for the choice of the future President, it appears clearly that two candidates are already emerging from the pack. Rosa Otunbayeva, the transitional Prime Minister, and Omurbek Tekebayev, Deputy Prime Minister and leader of the Socialist Party, *Ata-Meken*. Each has serious advantages to put forward. A woman at the head of a conservative and, what is more, patriarchal society in a dictatorial regional environment would be an astonishing and innovative new development which would surely attract the international community. Honest and incorruptible, she is a sensible and charismatic progressive. She also has an additional advantage which should not be discounted: considering the bad memories left behind by Akayev and Bakiyev with their annoying tendency to nepotism – she has a narrow family circle.

¹² <http://enews.ferghana.ru/article.php?id=2622>

¹³ <http://www.russiaprofile.org/page.php?pageid=International&articleid=a1270751961>

Standing against her is the veteran of Kyrgyz politics, Omurbek Tekebayev. Often presented as the real winner of the presidential election of 2000, at the end of which manipulation of the results allowed Askar Akayev to steal his victory, he is certainly one of the most charismatic leaders of the Opposition and the best and most eminent specialist on the codes and laws of Kyrgyzstan. As honest and incorruptible as his Prime Minister, Tekebayev seems to possess a greater aura amidst the lower classes. He speaks Kyrgyz much better than Russian, whereas Rosa Otunbayeva feels more at ease with the language of Chekhov and even with the language of Shakespeare.

Whatever the case, overturning two governments in less than five years is not, properly speaking, the kind of political change to take or give as an example. Just because a revolution has chased out a corrupt government does not provide a guaranty of arriving at a stable regime and smooth political transitions. The tulips of the revolution of 2005 have withered and been long forgotten. Let us hope that this *'faltering'* of history does not lead to the same result. If Kyrgyzstan proves capable of overcoming its problems and silencing its demons, the revolution of Rosa could then serve as an example for other peoples under the yoke of authoritarian governments. If, however, this is a new setback, then one may fear there will be many in Central Asia who prefer the stability of authoritarianism to democratic chaos.

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