

## Kyrgyzstan: A Hollow Regime Collapses

### I. OVERVIEW

A swift, violent rebellion swept into the Kyrgyz capital Bishkek in early April 2010, sparked by anger at painful utility price increases and the corruption that was the defining characteristic of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev's rule. In less than two days the president had fled. Some 85 people were killed and the centre of the capital was looted. The thirteen-member provisional government now faces a daunting series of challenges. Bakiyev leaves behind a bankrupt state hollowed out by corruption and crime. Economic failure and collapsing infrastructure have generated deep public resentment. If the provisional government moves fast to assert its power, the risks of major long-term violence are containable: there are no signs of extensive support for Bakiyev or of a North-South split. The speed with which the Bakiyev administration collapsed is a salutary reminder of the risks of overemphasising Western security concerns in framing policy towards the region.

So far the provisional government's performance has not been promising. Its members have largely failed to present themselves as a cohesive or coherent administration, or to be transparent about their activities at a time of great anxiety and uncertainty. They have displayed a lack of common ideology or strategy, and show signs of internal discord. Unless they quickly address these problems, they risk a rapid erosion of their authority.

Though their declared aim is to stabilise the country in preparation for parliamentary and presidential elections six months from now, the provisional government has to do much more. They must prepare people for the multiple crises – in the energy sector, for example – that could flare up at any time due to the neglect and pillaging of the country's infrastructure. They have to take urgent measures to ensure that organised crime or the narcotics trade do not again infiltrate political life. They need to begin talking to devout Muslims – an increasingly alienated part of society who seem to have been largely bystanders in the April 2010 revolt. They will also need to convince donors that they can absorb aid. This is no small task, given the top-down corruption of the system of government they have inherited. They will, finally, have to move rapidly to reassure the public that they are willing and able to work for the country's good, not just their own enrichment.

This briefing explains and analyses the events of the past five years, in an effort to provide context and background to the uprising. Bakiyev came to power in the so-called Tulip Revolution of March 2005, which ousted President Askar Akayev, whom opposition leaders accused of nepotism, corruption and growing authoritarianism. Once in office, Bakiyev quickly abandoned most semblances of democracy, creating a narrow-based political structure run by his own family and for their profit. A combination of ruthlessness and incompetence led to the regime's downfall. Almost exactly five years after his victory, Bakiyev was charged with the same abuses as Akayev had been, by many of the same people with whom he had staged the 2005 "revolution".

Despite the much-discussed theory that Moscow instigated or stage-managed the uprising, the evidence at this point does not support this view. For its part, the U.S., in its concern to maintain the Manas air base as a major hub for the war in Afghanistan, was unwilling to counter the Bakiyev regime's increasingly abusive behaviour.

The fundamental lessons that can be drawn from the events of April 2010 are clear. First, the authoritarian model of government has not worked in Kyrgyzstan, and is unlikely in the long run to work in the rest of Central Asia. Its superficial stability is attractive to Western leaders who are looking for a safe environment to pursue commercial or security interests, such as the current effort to prosecute the war in Afghanistan. But the deep-seated and invisible instabilities of authoritarian regimes remove all predictability. A well-defended government, seemingly without a coherent challenge from its political opponents and apathetic populace, can be swept away in a day. By blocking all social safety valves – the media, public dissent, political discourse and the right to legal redress – the Bakiyev regime created a semblance of calm. But it was unable to control the underground currents of anger at the regime's rapacity. The closure of all other channels of change made a violent response just about the only option for an angry population.

Second, the causes of the uprising – state theft and repression, a total lack of interest by rulers in their people – are common to all of Kyrgyzstan's neighbours. The collapse of the Bakiyev regime is a case study of the risks facing authoritarianism in Central Asia. What happened in Kyrgyzstan in terms of corruption and repression is already taking place in several other countries. What hap-

pened in Bishkek in April 2010 could happen in most of its neighbours. It could indeed be much worse.

Central Asia's leaders will probably ignore this warning, but at their peril. The international community needs, in its interest and that of long-term stability, to change its approach of public silence leavened by the discreet word in the ear of the autocrat. It can start by conducting its relations with undemocratic regimes in an explicit, open way, where issues of social justice and development are given parity with the more classic concerns of security or trade – or at least expressed sufficiently in word and deed that the people know their conditions are part of the bilateral equation. Authoritarian and unresponsive regimes are not only embarrassing allies, but unreliable ones. A sudden push to try to create democracy in a few years from zero is too ambitious. Speaking truth to regional powers would be a good start.

## II. THE RISE OF A ONE-FAMILY STATE

The history of the Bakiyev regime<sup>1</sup> is one of a quest to reshape a free-wheeling system of state corruption<sup>2</sup> and authoritarianism in a way that maximised political control and financial gain. As President Bakiyev settled into office in 2005, his political system became increasingly synonymous not only with him, but with his family, and especially his younger son, Maxim, described by an adviser to the presidential administration as a “pathologically” acquisitive young man who “dreams of wealth and power”.<sup>3</sup>

### A. EARLY DAYS

The street demonstrations that swept President Askar Akayev<sup>4</sup> from office in late March 2005 were quickly and

inaccurately named the Tulip Revolution – a reflection of the effort by Western politicians and journalists to discern a wave of liberal democratic revolutions from angry protests in Ukraine, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan. In Bishkek, power passed to a loose and friable coalition of strong-minded individuals and their mostly small political parties.<sup>5</sup> Many of its members re-emerged in April 2010, to lead the final protests that overthrew their erstwhile ally.

In 2005 the victorious coalition quickly splintered and Kurmanbek Bakiyev emerged as the key figure.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps the least charismatic of that year's “revolutionaries”, Bakiyev demonstrated a quiet tenacity, increasingly coupled as the years went on with ruthlessness. His first years were chaotic, as his former allies challenged him on the streets of the capital and in late 2006 came close to overthrowing him. Defusing the protests by putting down the demonstrations and co-opting some of their leaders, he consolidated his position. The media was increasingly limited and harassed, and the regime quickly developed a reputation for corruption.

The president's sons and brothers took over many of the business interests of the Akayev family. One developed a reputation for “raiding” promising companies.<sup>7</sup> U.S. and Western officials, meanwhile, strongly suspected that top members of the new elite, mostly connected to the police or security structures, were playing a major role in protecting narcotics shipments that passed through Kyrgyzstan on their way from Afghanistan to markets in Europe, Russia and China. One of the president's brothers, Marat,<sup>8</sup> reportedly supervised the judicial system, both in terms of the appointment of judges and the outcome of court cases.

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were identical to those made against Bakiyev in 2010 – nepotism, corruption, growing authoritarianism.

<sup>5</sup> For further information on this period, see in particular Crisis Group Report, *Kyrgyzstan: After the Revolution*, op. cit.

<sup>6</sup> Some stayed on in high positions, or moved between government and opposition. For example, Almaz Atambayev – a leader of the 2005 “revolution”, opposition presidential candidate in 2009, and senior member of the 2010 provisional government – was at varying times both a minister and prime minister under President Bakiyev.

<sup>7</sup> Raid in this context means forcing owners to sell their business at below value prices, or face investigation by the tax police or other law enforcement agencies. While many businessmen in Kyrgyzstan's poorly regulated economy probably had broken the law, even those who had not were vulnerable to pressure. The law enforcement agencies were under the tight control of the family. Janysh Bakiyev, the president's brother, was reputedly the overseer of the “power bloc” – law enforcement, defence and security.

<sup>8</sup> Not to be confused with President Bakiyev's son of the same name.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information see Crisis Group Asia Report N°97, *Kyrgyzstan: After the Revolution*, 4 May 2005; Asia Report N°109, *Kyrgyzstan: A Faltering State*, 16 December 2005; Asia Briefing N°55, *Kyrgyzstan on the Edge*, 9 November 2006; Asia Briefing N°79, *Kyrgyzstan: A Deceptive Calm*, 14 August 2008. For a detailed examination of specific problems, see Asia Report N°118, *Kyrgyzstan's Prison System Nightmare*, 16 August 2006; Asia Report N°150, *Kyrgyzstan: The Challenge of Judicial Reform*, 10 April 2008; and Asia Report N°176, *Women and Radicalism in Kyrgyzstan*, 3 September 2009.

<sup>2</sup> State corruption in this instance is taken to mean a system where the main levers of state power are controlled by individuals or a group whose main intent is to extract personal gain from public finances.

<sup>3</sup> Crisis Group interview, Bishkek, July 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Askar Akayev led Kyrgyzstan from the end of the Soviet Union until his March 2005 overthrow by Bakiyev and his allies. The accusations levelled against Akayev by the rebels of 2005

## B. THE POWER VERTICAL

By the second half of 2007 the president, almost certainly under the influence of his younger son Maxim, took the first important step in the direction of a one-party state. Parliamentary elections were called for the end of 2007. A new presidential party, Ak Zhol, was created, consciously based on the quasi-ruling party in Russia, Yedinaya Rossiya (United Russia). The president's main election strategists, notably Maxim, emphasised it was the end of an era. The post-election government would be a tight spiral of power, with a subservient parliament and a small ruling elite, inspired by Vladimir Putin's model of the "power vertical".

The old practice of allowing the opposition a small number of seats in parliament in return for moderating their protests against electoral fraud would be abandoned. The opposition was in its "death throes", Maxim remarked.<sup>9</sup> At the last minute, according to Maxim and prominent Ak Zhol parliamentarian Zainidin Kurmanov, later speaker of parliament, the decision was taken to allow other parties a modest representation in parliament, thus avoiding allegations that Kyrgyzstan was a one-party state.<sup>10</sup>

The Social Democratic Party and the Communist Party were chosen, in the firm belief, Kurmanov later said, that they would not "get underfoot". The Communist Party continues to be largely a bystander in Kyrgyz politics, reflecting post-Soviet nostalgia and indignation at the country's plight. Far from dying, however, the Social Democratic Party has emerged as an important player in the current provisional government.

Structural changes within the legislature and executive were easier to effect than in the economy. Privatisations ran up against a slow-moving and incompetent bureaucracy, a presidential health crisis, infighting within the ruling family, and two grim, cold winters.<sup>11</sup> A compliant cabinet was in place, however, run by Igor Chudinov, a former energy sector executive. His job, one official remarked, was essentially that of caretaker.<sup>12</sup> An ambassador who watched him in action during a leisurely visit to the countryside remarked that he seemed to have a lot of

time on his hands.<sup>13</sup> Out of sight of the public and the press, Maxim was reportedly increasing his influence.

## C. CORRUPTION ACQUIRES A FACE

"They are in a hurry", said a consultant to the regime in mid-2008. "They want to get very rich as fast as possible. Especially Maxim".<sup>14</sup> It was this haste for a quick windfall that brought the regime down.

During the winter of 2007-8, the coldest in years, heating and electricity systems came under serious strain. Energy infrastructure had not been repaired or upgraded to keep up with demand that grew fast after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Fifteen years of tariffs so low they did not cover production costs, coupled with what energy specialists describe as unconstrained theft and fraud, were taking their toll.<sup>15</sup> By the next winter, the system had hit a crisis point with twelve-hour power cuts most days. Rumours spread that the crisis was man-made: the Bakiyev family was selling energy badly needed at home to their neighbours.

In the summer of 2007 Kyrgyzstan quietly sold more energy to its neighbours than required by existing contracts – an additional 1 billion kilowatt hours (kWh) of electricity in all.<sup>16</sup> The official recorded price of the sale was 1.3 cents per kWh even though the market price in the region was 4.5 cents per kWh. Energy specialists and some officials are convinced that the electricity was in fact sold at the market price, and powerful members of the regime pocketed the difference. Government spokesmen denied talk of excess energy sales but it is hard to imagine that this happened without the Bakiyev family's knowledge. Although the sale may not have been illegal, the misreporting of the price almost certainly was. The impact of the sale was not felt until the winter of 2008-9, when it became clear that the level of the Toktogul reservoir, the main source of electrical power for the country, was so low that extensive cuts were necessary to make it through to the spring.

## D. IMPUNITY

Medet Sadyrkulov, the chief of the presidential administration, was one of the principal creators of Ak Zhol and was Maxim's right hand. Officials said the two met daily

<sup>9</sup> Crisis Group conversation, Maxim Bakiyev, December 2007.

<sup>10</sup> The president's strategists said at the time there had been a lively debate over the desirability of a purely one-party state. A compromise was reached where the two smaller parties would be allowed "for show" and more dynamic parties, like Omurbek Tekebayev's Ata Meken and several others, would be excluded. Crisis Group interviews, November 2007.

<sup>11</sup> For further details see Crisis Group Briefing, *Kyrgyzstan: A Deceptive Calm*, op. cit.

<sup>12</sup> Crisis Group interview, January 2008.

<sup>13</sup> Crisis Group interview, Western official, 16 December 2009.

<sup>14</sup> Crisis Group interview, government official, Bishkek, July 2008.

<sup>15</sup> Crisis Group interview, April 2010.

<sup>16</sup> The buyers have not been publicly stated, but most or all the energy probably went to Kazakhstan.

to manage affairs of state.<sup>17</sup> This relationship broke down, however, in late 2008 under circumstances which have not yet been clarified. Sadyrkulov was reportedly squeezed out of office in a particularly humiliating way.

At the beginning of 2009 he started planning his own political party. By some accounts he was planning to work with the opposition in the next round of presidential elections, expected for late 2009.<sup>18</sup> By other accounts he would run as an independent candidate, hoping to emerge as a powerbroker. Either way, he was defecting from the Bakiyev power structure. A talented political operative, he was privy to the regime's strategy and thinking, including their plans for the presidential polls.

On his way back from a meeting in Almaty, Kazakhstan, on 13 March 2009, his Lexus SUV was officially said to have crashed into a smaller, older vehicle. Sadyrkulov's car was totally destroyed by fire; the driver of the other vehicle was unhurt.<sup>19</sup> The death caused an unusual uproar within the political establishment. Even members of the Ak Zhol faction in parliament were sceptical of the official explanation. One, Galina Kulikova, claimed that Sadyrkulov had been under surveillance shortly before his death and announced she had the car numbers of those watching him. "They are interesting numbers from interesting services", she declared.<sup>20</sup> The claims of surveillance and demands for an investigation were ignored by the authorities, and the case gradually faded. Sadyrkulov's death gen-

erated little comment from Western diplomatic missions in Kyrgyzstan, and was largely ignored by Western media.

Sadyrkulov's death is only one of a number of brutal attacks, unexplained deaths or murders that have not been fully investigated, but are thought to be the work of the Kyrgyz security services or other arms of the Bakiyev regime. Ten days before Sadyrkulov's death, Syrgak Abdyldayev, a journalist and commentator with opposition links and an astute analyst of the political scene, had been savagely attacked. Both arms were shattered with blunt objects, perhaps hammers. A leg was fractured and he was left with numerous stab wounds in the lower back and buttocks. On his release from hospital he said that twice after the attack he had been approached by members of state security. They enquired whether he had "understood the message". He fled the country.<sup>21</sup> The limited response by the international community to the attacks, in particular to the death of Sadyrkulov, drove home to the opposition that they were vulnerable and on their own.<sup>22</sup>

Another target of state intimidation, former Bakiyev era foreign minister and later opposition leader Alikbek Jekshenkulov, was held for almost six months in 2009 in the investigative prison of the state security committee (SNB). Charged with murder, he was initially pressured by SNB interrogators to declare his support for Bakiyev in the coming elections. Later he was exposed to high pitched noises piped into his bare but constantly lit cell. He recalled that he could often hear the sound of beatings being administered in the adjoining room. He says he was told by the head of the prison that all decisions on his case, even minor ones, were made personally by the president's elder son, Marat. The murder charge later unravelled. Later asked to define what role Marat and his uncle Janysh, the commander of the presidential guard, played in the Bakiyev family organisation, Jekshenkulov answered: "the killers".<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>After Bakiyev's overthrow, Kazakh political consultants claimed that Sadyrkulov had brought them to Kyrgyzstan in 2007 to re-design the political system. "ЕСЛИ БЫ НЕ КАЗАХИ, БАКИЕВ СЛЕТЕЛ БЫ ЕЩЁ ТРИ ГОДА НАЗАД" ["If not for the Kazakhs, Bakiyev would have been out three years ago"], Dialog internet news site, 9 April 2010, [www.dialog.kz/site.php?lan=ru&id=81&pub=1970](http://www.dialog.kz/site.php?lan=ru&id=81&pub=1970).

<sup>18</sup>Crisis Group interviews, politicians and political analysts, Bishkek, May-June 2009; two opposition leaders, 20 November 2009.

<sup>19</sup>"В Киргизии нашли виновного в гибели соратника президента" ["In Kirgizia the person guilty in the death of the of a comrade in arms of the president has been found"], Lenta.ru, 16 March 2009, [www.lenta.ru/news/2009/03/16/charge/](http://www.lenta.ru/news/2009/03/16/charge/). Shortly after Bakiyev's overthrow, the man accused of causing the purported car accident, Omurbek Osmonov, was found stabbed to death in his prison colony. "Бывшие власти Киргизии замечают следы" ["The former Kyrgyz authorities clean up their tracks"], *Kommersant*, 26 April 2010, <http://kommersant.ru/doc.aspx?DocsID=1360839>. *Kommersant* says Osmonov disappeared from the prison colony on 12 April.

<sup>20</sup>"Галина Куликова: Требую обеспечить безопасность семьи экс-руководителя администрации президента Кыргызстана" ["Galina Kulikova: I demand that the security of ex-head of the presidential administration of Kyrgyzstan be guaranteed"], 24.kg news site, 17 March 2009, [www.24.kg/parliament/2009/03/17/109343.htm](http://www.24.kg/parliament/2009/03/17/109343.htm).

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<sup>21</sup>Crisis Group interviews, Syrgak Abdyldayev, April 2009.

<sup>22</sup>In the most recent such incident another journalist with opposition links, Gennady Pavlyuk, died late in 2009 after being thrown from the fifth floor of a hotel in Almaty, Kazakhstan. Unusually, Kazakh media have cited what they say are assertions by Kazakh investigators who claim that the Kyrgyz security service was involved in the murder. "К убийству известного киргизского журналиста Геннадия Павлюка причастны сотрудники контрразведки Кыргызстана" ["Kyrgyz counter-intelligence officers are involved in the murder of the well-known Kyrgyz journalist Gennady Pavlyuk"], Commercial Television Channel of Kazakhstan, 29 December 2009, [www.ktk.kz/art/?id=6869](http://www.ktk.kz/art/?id=6869). Foreign embassies, including the U.S. embassy, and governments expressed concern over the murder.

<sup>23</sup>Crisis Group interview, Bishkek, 15 April 2009.

### III. PLAYING BOTH SIDES

By mid-2008 the Kyrgyz government was in desperate need of money. The unpublicised sale of energy the previous winter had come back to haunt them. The country was facing a massive energy crisis, as Bakiyev finally admitted in July, and the situation was made even worse by food shortages. (The government blamed the water problem on a drought.) Power cuts started. Ministers were sent to Turkmenistan and Russia to appeal for help. Bakiyev himself went to Moscow to appeal for aid but was rebuffed. Russian officials say he was reminded of the restrictions placed on Russian investment in Kyrgyzstan and the endless haggling over the one industrial plant that Russia was keen to acquire: the Dastan torpedo plant, which produces weapons for the Russian Navy.<sup>24</sup> Late in 2008, as Kyrgyz desperation grew, the president seems to have offered to end the U.S. presence at the Manas air base in return for money.

#### A. A VITAL IRRITANT

Since its creation in the wake of 9/11, the Manas air base, located at the country's main international airport just outside Bishkek, has become increasingly important to the Afghanistan war effort. The base is a major hub for the transit of troops and materiel. By March 2010 it was handling up to 50,000 troops en route to or from Afghanistan each month<sup>25</sup> and refuelling the fighter aircraft that patrol Afghan airspace 24 hours a day. The base dominated U.S. thinking on Kyrgyzstan to the detriment of any other issue.

While many Russian foreign policy specialists believe that Moscow has a vital security interest in U.S. success – or at least lack of failure – in Afghanistan and are willing to see Manas keep functioning, the Russian leadership, particularly Prime Minister Putin, views it as another example of unwelcome U.S. interference in an area of

special interest to Russia. Kyrgyz officials said that Putin frequently complained to Bakiyev about the base. For instance, during the 2007 Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit in Bishkek, an official recalled that Putin asked Bakiyev using the familiar form of the verb used for friends or subordinates, “Why do you need the Americans here, teaching you democracy?” If money was needed, Putin reportedly added, Moscow could help.<sup>26</sup>

At the beginning of 2009, as its financial crisis worsened, Kyrgyzstan suddenly secured a substantial aid package from Moscow. It would receive \$150 million in grants, \$300 million in loans and \$1.7 billion in credits for the construction of the massive Kambarata-1 hydro-electric project. Russia also agreed to write off Kyrgyzstan's remaining debt in return for 48 per cent of the Dastan plant. The deal was announced at the end of January 2009. Manas was not explicitly mentioned, but Russian media noted that the Kremlin expected a quid pro quo in the form of action on the base.<sup>27</sup>

On 3 February, Bakiyev flew to Moscow to sign the agreement. While there he announced that his government had decided a few days earlier to close the base at Manas.<sup>28</sup> On 4 February the Kyrgyz government announced that the United States would be given 180 days to vacate the base. The countdown would start once parliament attended to the legal aspects of cancelling the base treaty. The Kyrgyz, however, showed no sense of urgency about passing the relevant laws. A week later the well-informed Russian newspaper *Kommersant* reported that the base would not be formally closed until March, despite the assurances it would do so immediately.<sup>29</sup>

#### B. DEAL TIME

President Bakiyev may not have planned all along to deceive his Russian colleagues. It is certain, however, that Bishkek began to negotiate with the U.S. as soon as the agreement with Moscow was signed. Eight days after the agreement – and on the day after the Russian media began to ask about the delay in closing the base – Maxim said his father was ready to wait until the last minute to

<sup>24</sup> An article in the Russian newspaper *Vremya Novostey* asserted that the bulk of Dastan shares were held by “a private person exceedingly close to the President of Kirgizia's family”. The sourcing of the information indicated a background briefing which are usually conducted by government officials. “Оловянный подтекст Президент Киргизии неожиданно приехал в Москву” [“A tin subtext: the president of Kirgizia has unexpectedly come to Moscow”], *Vremya Novostey*, 17 July 2008, [www.vremya.ru/2008/127/5/208527.html](http://www.vremya.ru/2008/127/5/208527.html). The report also noted unhappiness with the difficulties Russian businesses had in getting a foothold in Kyrgyzstan's mining and banking sectors.

<sup>25</sup> “LRS breaks 2 of their own records”, [www.manas.afcent.af.mil/news/story.asp?id=123198258](http://www.manas.afcent.af.mil/news/story.asp?id=123198258). LRS refers to the 376th Expeditionary Logistics Readiness Squadron, based at Manas.

<sup>26</sup> Crisis Group interview, consultant to presidential administration, Bishkek, February 2008.

<sup>27</sup> “Киргизии простят долги с доплатой” [“Kirgizia's debts will be forgiven along with an extra payment”] *Kommersant*, 30 January 2009, <http://kommersant.ru/doc.aspx?DocsID=1110204&ThemesID=252>.

<sup>28</sup> “Киргизия закрывает американскую базу в стране” [“Kirgizia closes the American base in their country”], *Kommersant*, 3 February 2009, <http://kommersant.ru/doc.aspx?DocsID=1110204&ThemesID=252>.

<sup>29</sup> The parliament officially renounced the treaty on 19 February 2009.

receive a good offer from Washington. The base issue was, he stressed, purely financial. He seemed to be confident an offer would be forthcoming, as he was already thinking aloud about Russian retaliation. They would try to restrict the flow of migrant workers, an important source of remittances for the Kyrgyz economy. They would launch an anti-regime propaganda campaign in the media. "But they cannot put as much pressure on us as they could, for example, on Rakhmon [Emomali Rakhmon, president of Tajikistan]. We don't loot the budget".<sup>30</sup>

An official who worked with Maxim subsequently remarked that the Russians never formally linked the financial package with Manas's closure. They would therefore have difficulty asking for the money back if the U.S. lease were renewed. As weeks passed without an offer from Washington, the younger Bakiyev became impatient, but never raised the possibility of pushing ahead with the closure. The \$450 million in Russian budget support and loans arrived in late March. In July 2009, the U.S. signed a new lease for Manas. The Kyrgyz did not return the Russian money. Shortly before the overthrow of the Bakiyev regime in April 2010, they were still complaining that Russia had failed to open the credit line promised for Kambarata-1.

### C. MISREADING THE KYRGYZ LEADERSHIP

In their dealings with Central Asia, Russian leaders often seem to forget that twenty years have passed since the region was part of the Soviet Union. The leaders of all five countries are steeped in Russian culture and Soviet thinking. All speak Russian, some are more comfortable in that language than their national tongue.<sup>31</sup> But this does not mean they are pro-Russian. Since independence Central Asia leaders have developed their own interests and priorities. These quite often do not coincide with the views of Vladimir Putin or other Russian leaders. The Bakiyev regime illustrated this precisely.

Maxim actively disliked Russia's attitude towards his country and limited Russian businesses' access to Kyrgyzstan. He complained about Russia's "give-me" mentality – "they always want something for nothing".<sup>32</sup> He had no love for Putin, and was not averse to expressing this. He frequently criticised the Russian leader as both

irresolute and a short-term thinker.<sup>33</sup> Other Central Asian leaders have expressed similar views about the Russian leadership; Uzbekistan's Islam Karimov is known to have commented caustically to visitors about Putin. Russia is often an ally of last resort, not a desired friend.

There was another subtext to the base story. Throughout the negotiations, Kyrgyz officials stressed that they wanted something else from Washington. Bakiyev had been largely ignored by the international community. Kyrgyz officials wanted him to be given more recognition on the world stage. They wanted more official visitors. They wanted a conference on Afghanistan. It seemed also to be a way of building up the Bakiyev name in general, as well as the standing of the president himself. The intent was clear: the Kyrgyz leadership was thinking about the future. And like most of their Central Asian counterparts, they were considering having the president being succeeded by a family member.<sup>34</sup>

## IV. HIGH WATER, HUBRIS, MELTDOWN

### A. SECOND TERM

The Russian grant and loans helped Kyrgyzstan get through the worst of the crisis and prepare for presidential elections. These were set for July 2009, considerably earlier than anticipated. Although no explanation was given, it could have been due to fears about the president's health.<sup>35</sup> Or it may have been because the regime wanted to move as quickly as possible onto their next phase of state-building. Maxim was appointed his father's official campaign manager; the first time he had emerged from behind the scenes.

The government claimed a resounding victory – a 79 per cent turnout and over 76 per cent support for the presi-

<sup>30</sup> Crisis Group interview, Maxim Bakiyev, 11 February 2009.

<sup>31</sup> Kurmanbek and his brothers were educated in the Soviet Union. The president married a Russian woman, and at least one of his sons is not fluent in Kyrgyz. While an Islamic revival is underway in some parts of the country, he remained staunchly secular in lifestyle and outlook.

<sup>32</sup> Crisis Group interview, Maxim Bakiyev, August 2008.

<sup>33</sup> The attitude of other family members to Russia is not known. If they disagreed, they were unsuccessful in modifying official policy.

<sup>34</sup> To a modest degree, Bishkek was added to the international dignitary circuit after the lease was signed. Probably the last visitor was General David Petraeus, less a month before the regime's overthrow. In February 2010 Richard Holbrooke spent several hours in Kyrgyzstan, some of it with the president.

<sup>35</sup> A lengthy health problem in 2008, his absence from the public eye and reports in diplomatic circles of undeclared visits to Germany all fuelled speculation about Bakiyev's health. No evidence of serious problems emerged. Occasionally his behaviour perplexed foreign diplomats. In mid 2009, when General David Petraeus visited Kyrgyzstan, the president failed to return from his summer residence to meet him. Surprised diplomats later said they suspected he was unaware of the visit. Communication to Crisis Group, early 2010.

dent.<sup>36</sup> The elections were strongly criticised by OSCE observers but were given a more upbeat assessment by Russia and the more hardline former Soviet states.<sup>37</sup> The last days of the campaign also saw the first indications of how the new presidential term would affect Maxim. On the eve of the polls, as a confident Maxim fielded phone calls from election aides, a senior aide confided that he had “grown” in political stature and maturity in the past few months. Paradoxically, the official added that he was a new type of Kyrgyz politician. “He does not find jobs for all his relatives as soon as he acquires power”.<sup>38</sup>

## B. NARROWING THE APEX OF POWER

The elections were followed by a burst of structural changes the regime called a Consultative Democracy – a euphemism for even less democracy and more direct presidential rule. The core of the changes was the tight subordination of all key areas – security, defence, foreign affairs and finance – in the hands of a very small group of people under the president.

Nearly all the changes strengthened the personal hold of the Bakiyev family over the most important and profitable elements of state power. Quite often Maxim seemed to be the main beneficiary, though his uncle Janysh also saw his position strengthened. In late October 2009, Maxim was appointed to head the new Central Agency for Development, Investment and Innovation. Its Russian acronym was Tsarii (ЦАРИИ), which to Russian speakers sounded suspiciously close to “Tsar”. The state’s major financial agencies reported directly to him. Around this time, according to a very well-connected observer of the political scene, the president indicated to his closest associates that he wanted his younger son to succeed him as president.<sup>39</sup> In a new internal phone book for the presidential offices, Maxim was listed just under the president.<sup>40</sup>

The new structures took the consolidation of power and finances to an even higher level. Some relatively profitable or liquid state assets were placed in the hands of a private company, MGN Asset Management. In September 2009 it had won the tender to manage the government’s Development Fund.<sup>41</sup> By the end of 2009, the company was playing a significant management role in a number of state companies in the energy and telecommunications sector. The company was headed by a U.S. citizen, Eugene Gourevitch, who denied any relationship with the Bakiyev family, and in particular with Maxim, although he expressed fulsome admiration for him on his website and elsewhere.<sup>42</sup>

Western diplomats were scathing about the decision to transfer state funds to MGN, and suspected that Gourevitch was working closely with Maxim. One senior diplomat characterised the move as “dirty”.<sup>43</sup> In late January 2010 the major donors had their first meeting with the head of TSARII. Maxim was expected to speak for half an hour and explain the work of his agency. He spoke for about five minutes. Some participants were disturbed by what one called the subtext of the meeting with TSARII officials, that the new body was keen to control all major financial inflows, possibly including aid.<sup>44</sup>

Also in late 2009, President Bakiyev announced enigmatic changes in the constitution. The most discussed laid down new procedures for the appointment of an acting president in the event of the president’s incapacity. Previously this role was to have been assumed by the speaker of parliament. This was no longer appropriate, presidential officials explained, as the speaker’s position was elected. In the future the decision was to be made by a small

<sup>36</sup> OSCE/ODIHR observer mission final report, 22 October 2009, [www.osce.org/documents/odihhr/2009/10/40901\\_en.pdf](http://www.osce.org/documents/odihhr/2009/10/40901_en.pdf).

<sup>37</sup> The OSCE noted that “Election day was marred by many problems and irregularities, including ballot box stuffing, inaccuracies in the voter lists, and multiple voting”. Press release, 24 July 2009, [www.osce.org/item/39014.html](http://www.osce.org/item/39014.html). Russian President Dmitry Medvedev congratulated Bakiyev on his re-election: “The results of the elections that have just taken place testify to the high level of trust placed in you by the people of Kirgizia”. [“Итоги состоявшихся выборов свидетельствуют о высоком уровне доверия, оказанного Вам народом Киргизии.”] Available at [www.bakiev.kg/node/1105](http://www.bakiev.kg/node/1105).

<sup>38</sup> Crisis Group conversation, senior member of the Presidential Secretariat, June 2009.

<sup>39</sup> Crisis Group interview, media executive, Bishkek, February 2010.

<sup>40</sup> Crisis Group was shown the phone directory in early 2010.

<sup>41</sup> See the press release at [www.pr-inside.com/mgn-asset-management-will-start-managing-r1492063.htm](http://www.pr-inside.com/mgn-asset-management-will-start-managing-r1492063.htm). It notes that the fund was created in 2007 to promote “effective corporate management of the country’s financial assets”. Press reports say that among the state funds it managed was the \$300-million Russian loan. MGN also reportedly acted as a consultant in the privatisation of Severelektro and Kyrgyztelekom (see below). Azattyk.kg website, 10 March 2010, [www.azattyk.org/content/Kyrgyzstan\\_Gurevitch\\_Bakiev/1979279.html](http://www.azattyk.org/content/Kyrgyzstan_Gurevitch_Bakiev/1979279.html).

<sup>42</sup> Asked on his blog to comment on Maxim Bakiyev, Gourevitch answered: “I am in no way prepared to comment on the skills of a man whose business I know nothing about ... I can only say one thing: to build a serious business and a decent fortune in just a few years requires nothing other than ambition, energy, talent, brains and a drop of good luck. ... As far as I know, Mr Bakiyev has a superb education and an extraordinary intellect. With such an arsenal it would be strange if he was not successful in his work”. Blog post (in Russian), <http://emfin.livejournal.com/>, 25 August 2009.

<sup>43</sup> Crisis Group interview, Bishkek, February 2010.

<sup>44</sup> Crisis Group interview, Western participants at the meeting. The meeting took place on 21 January 2010.

group, the presidential council, convened explicitly for the purpose. The unexpected urgency increased speculation that the way was being cleared for Maxim. As one press report put it, it was possible that the amendment was “connected to the intention to create dynastic rule”.<sup>45</sup> The most likely scenario would be that the president stood down on health grounds, allowing his son, as acting president, full control of the levers of state to ensure his election as the next president.

There were also significant changes in the security structures. The National Guard, Kyrgyzstan’s elite military force, was disbanded in December 2009. It had undertaken counter-insurgency and counter-narcotics operations, and its special forces units had been trained by what the media called their U.S. “colleagues”, presumably U.S. Special Forces.<sup>46</sup> In February 2010 it became known that the former National Guard had been merged with Janysh’s state security service to form a new and significantly larger presidential guard known as Arstan or “The Lion”.<sup>47</sup> The changes were not for show: regime officials had never hidden their belief that President Askar Akayev had fallen in 2005 because he did not use force to disperse the crowds who attacked government offices. They also made clear their determination not to repeat Akayev’s mistake.

In a less noticed change, the Drug Control Agency was abolished and drug interdiction, in theory, was handed over to the interior ministry. An informed Western source noted that the agency’s disbandment has followed some serious drug seizures. “They were getting too close [to the ruling elite]”, he said.<sup>48</sup>

### C. PRIVATISATION AND OVER-REACH

What quickly turned out to be the most disastrous changes seemed at the time quite ordinary. One of the most profitable parts of the energy distribution system, Severelektro,

which serves Bishkek and the more prosperous parts of northern Kyrgyzstan, was privatised in early February 2010. The selling price was a steal: \$3 million dollars for a company that had been valued by the government less than two years earlier at \$137 million. Officials explained the low price by the amount of debt it had on its books. In fact, parliament had written off a good part of energy providers’ debts at the very end of 2009. The new owner would also reap a considerable windfall from dramatically higher electricity prices. These, along with heating and water costs, had at least doubled from the beginning of 2010 and were due to increase again by mid-year.

A leading energy specialist conceded that tariff increases were needed. But, the specialist said, these increases were “illegitimate”: they almost certainly would go into the new owner’s personal bank account, not the energy system.<sup>49</sup> The new owner was a small company called Chakan. Roza Otunbayeva, the head of the provisional government, alleged that Chakan is owned by a close associate of Maxim Bakiyev, Alexei Shirshov.<sup>50</sup> Shirshov has also been identified publicly as chairman of the board of Dastan, the company that Russia has tried so hard, and thus far unsuccessfully, to acquire.<sup>51</sup>

Severelektro’s privatisation was followed by Kyrgyztelekom, one of the country’s largest phone companies. Once again the new owner was given a windfall. Shortly before the auction, mobile phone companies suddenly announced a new levy for each successful phone connection. The amount was small, but the overall return to company owners from the country’s estimated 4 million users would be substantial. Among Kyrgyztelekom’s buyers, according to press reports, was an MGN executive.<sup>52</sup>

The decision to privatise an electricity company, at the height of winter just after draconian prices increases, was politically inept. The gut-level belief that Maxim Bakiyev had in essence sold the companies to himself at knock-down prices had an explosive effect. The telephone charges reinforced perceptions that the government was trying to milk them for everything they could. Public patience snapped. People finally emerged from apathy and passive

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<sup>45</sup> “Президент запаса” [“Reserve President”], 24.kg news site, 19 January 2010, [www.24.kg/oficial/71162-soobshhaet-press-sluzhba-prezidenta-kr-naznachen.html](http://www.24.kg/oficial/71162-soobshhaet-press-sluzhba-prezidenta-kr-naznachen.html). The same article also noted that Maxim’s nomination to head TSARII was being widely viewed “not just in the opposition as nothing less than preparing him to assume power”.

<sup>46</sup> “Спецназ Национальной гвардии Кыргызстана завершил ежегодные плановые занятия с коллегами из США” [“The Special Forces of the National Guard of Kyrgyzstan has completed their annual exercises with colleagues from the USA”], 24.kg news site, 27 September 2007, [www.24.kg/community/11752-2006/12/21/15001.html](http://www.24.kg/community/11752-2006/12/21/15001.html).

<sup>47</sup> “Kyrgyz president’s brother creates elite military unit”, RFE/RL, 12 February 2010. Details of the strength of military units are hard to obtain in Kyrgyzstan. The National Guard was variously put at 1,000 to 2,000 in press accounts.

<sup>48</sup> Crisis Group interview, February 2010.

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<sup>49</sup> Crisis Group interview, 8 April 2010.

<sup>50</sup> “Роза Отунбаева: «Я реалист»” [“Roza Otunbayeva: I am a realist”], Gundogar, 10 March 2010, [www.gundogar.org/?0243049158000000000000011000000S](http://www.gundogar.org/?0243049158000000000000011000000S).

<sup>51</sup> “Вопрос вхождения российской стороны в ТНК «Дастан» в Кыргызстане будет решен до конца 2008 года” [“The question of the Russian side coming into Dastan will be resolved by the end of 2008”], 24.kg news site, 19 June 2008, [www.24.kg/community/37129-2008/06/19/87907.html](http://www.24.kg/community/37129-2008/06/19/87907.html).

<sup>52</sup> See among others “скандал Наша ндрагета” [“Scandal Our ‘Ndragheta’”], *Moskovskiy Komsomolets* (Kyrgyzstan edition), 17 March 2010, [www.mk.kg/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=2843](http://www.mk.kg/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2843).



criticism. The first demonstration took place later in February in Kyrgyzstan's coldest town, Naryn, where local people say the winter lasts seven months. The turnout, reportedly, was 1,500. This was probably close to the sum total of all people who had protested nationwide the previous year.

#### D. MGN AND THE MAFIA

On 10 March the news broke in Kyrgyzstan that an Italian judge had indicted MGN's Gourevitch for his part in a plot, which was "said to have siphoned an astonishing US\$2.7 billion from the wholesale telephone divisions of Telecom Italia SpA and Fastweb SpA between 2003 and 2006".<sup>53</sup> The judge also referred to mafia connections as well as the laundering of proceeds from drug sales. Gourevitch denied everything, resigned and faded out of the picture. The Development Fund tried clumsily to claim that it had never used MGN's services, despite awarding them a contract the previous September. Their disclaimer looked even more inept in light of a story by the Aki-Press news wire the previous month about the Fund's report of a successful fourth quarter of 2009. Among those named in the report, and cited by the press service, was Gourevitch. He was identified as the Fund's financial consultant.<sup>54</sup>

News sites that covered the affair were quickly blocked. These included Azattyk, the Kyrgyz arm of the U.S.-funded Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, the unflinchingly pro-Russian *Bely Parus*, and the independent ferghan.ru website. In days to come, most local radios carrying Azattyk programs cancelled their contracts. Some owners explained they had been ordered to do so by the presidential secretariat. Maxim, who had been unusually public and vocal in the press, dropped out of sight.<sup>55</sup> Demonstrations spread, Russian state media launched a withering attack on the Bakiyev administration, and the regime imploded.

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<sup>53</sup> "US citizen a key player in alleged Italian telecom fraud", Reuters, 7 March 2010.

<sup>54</sup> The story was based largely on statements by the Fund's press service. The report is taken from the news section of the MGN website, now no longer accessible. It cites the original Aki-Press story as <http://kg.akipress.org/news:16756>, 3 February 2010, available on subscription.

<sup>55</sup> Maxim's first appearance in the media after over a month's absence came, in name at least, on 9 April, when the new government announced it had filed unspecified criminal charges against Maxim, his brother Marat and his uncle Janysh. The provisional government cancelled the privatisations of Sever-elektro, Kyrgyztelekom and another electricity provider on 15 April.

#### E. THE END OF A REGIME

The demonstrations that started in February in Naryn kept going. Protesters set deadlines for their demands to be met, and escalated them when they expired. A demand for Maxim to be expelled from Kyrgyzstan joined calls to reduce energy prices. Finally came the call for Bakiyev to go. Government negotiations failed, and unrest spread. If most protests in recent years had been both small and usually in Bishkek, the radicalisation took place this time in the provinces. On 6 April a crowd seized the governor's office in Talas and declared a "People's Government". Interior Minister Modomusa Kongantiyev was sent to restore order, a sign of the government's growing concern. He was taken hostage by the demonstrators and according to some versions, savagely beaten – part as a warning to other senior regime figures, part as way of demonstrating their determination.<sup>56</sup>

An attempt to decapitate the demonstrations by detaining most of the opposition leaders in the state security headquarters seems to have backfired. The crowds who converged on the wide squares in the centre of the capital were largely self-led, or at best under the improvised control of junior opposition leaders. Many had been called to the city by the opposition parties – as the leaders of the uprising vied with each other to claim that they had deployed the most supporters. A human rights activist and politician had her own contingent of several hundred in the city by 7 April. Many, however, spontaneously joined in. And a disturbingly large number were, as events soon showed, also there for the looting. The thousands of people who converged on the presidential offices notably lacked banners, slogans or megaphones and were more likely to be equipped with sticks or staves, and later on shields and weapons taken from the police. They were male, mostly young and resembled a loose fighting force.

Many people were motivated by pent-up anger. "We have no future under this government", one told Crisis Group. "They are crawling into the pockets of every family in this country". Said another, "we don't have enough to pay the utilities, and we don't have enough to feed our children and relatives".<sup>57</sup> The looting was not always spontaneous. The prosecutor general's office was torched, criminal files destroyed or taken away. Late on the evening of 7 April, the president and his relatives slipped out of the presidential building through a tunnel, according to diplomats. They drove to the airport, abandoning their limousines, and flew to the southern city of Osh. From there they drove to their home base of Jalalabad, some 90 min-

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<sup>56</sup> Crisis Group interview, political expert, Bishkek, 12 April 2010.

<sup>57</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Bishkek, 6-7 April 2010.

utes away. Bakiyev left Kyrgyzstan on 15 April, staying briefly in Kazakhstan before moving to Belarus.

Workers in key government offices – state property, energy and others – reported in the anxious days that followed Bakiyev’s flight that groups of men, sometimes armed, went to specific buildings in some government offices, taking away computers and disks. Optimists hoped that these were representatives of the new government, assembling evidence; pessimists assumed these were people from the old regime, removing it.

## F. A LESS THAN UNITED FAMILY

While drawn together by their allegiance to Kurmanbek Bakiyev and their desire for great wealth, the family did not always see eye to eye on the details. Maxim clearly had near-total influence over his father in matters of political strategy and finances. The exact nature of the relationship is hard to gauge, as witnesses tend to offer either an excessively glowing picture of the wise president and his brilliant young disciple or unverifiable impressions of a confused, alcohol-dependent president brow-beaten by his thrusting son.

Maxim infuriated some of his uncles. One businessman seeking in 2008 to invest in the southern part of the country, the Bakiyev family’s home base, thought it wise to meet several of the president’s brothers first. The businessman raised the Maxim problem; the uncles were sympathetic and reassuring. Maxim was indeed a little out of control, they said, but in the south they could ensure their nephew would cause no problems. It seemed in fact that some of the president’s brothers preferred a traditional approach to politics, one that revolved around levying tribute on officials, businessmen and other wealthy power-brokers. They may well have been happy to lead the life of the traditional feudal seigneur. Maxim on the other hand harboured the ambition of becoming an oligarch as rich as if not richer than Russia’s Oleg Deripaska or Roman Abramovich. Towards the end of the regime there were faint but persistent indications that family members, most likely Janysh and Maxim’s brother Marat, were trying to rein in some of his business activities.<sup>58</sup>

Maxim made no effort to hide his dislike and disdain for Janysh, but towards the end there were hints that he also viewed the commander of the presidential security as a political rival. There were frequent reports that Janysh, a much more affable and outgoing person than his nephew,

had not abandoned his hopes of being Kyrgyzstan’s next president.

Ironically however, the last image of the regime – described by opposition leaders and likely to become a central part of the rebellion narrative – is of Janysh and Marat leading the defence of the presidency, supervising troops firing on the demonstrators, as Maxim flew to the Washington for consultations with the U.S. government.<sup>59</sup>

## V. THE PROVISIONAL GOVERNMENT

The provisional government emerged from the Central Executive Committee (CEC) of the People’s Kurultay (Assembly), a consultative body of opposition figures formed on 17 March 2010 to coordinate growing anti-government demonstrations. On April 7 the CEC declared that it had taken power into its own hands.<sup>60</sup> It announced it would stay in power for six months, overseeing a new constitution, parliamentary and presidential elections. These are due to be held, probably simultaneously, in October 2010.

The new government contains the leaders of most but not all of Kyrgyzstan’s wide-ranging opposition. Its principal faces have been well-known to the public for years. Many participated, alongside Kurmanbek Bakiyev, in the overthrow of president Askar Akayev in the so-called Tulip Revolution of March 2005, and most then went on to serve in various Bakiyev administrations. Roza Otunbayeva, the provisional government’s chair, was briefly foreign minister after the 2005 revolution, but her candidacy was not confirmed by parliament; her current senior deputy, Almaz Atambayev, was later Bakiyev’s prime minister; her minister of finance, Temir Sariyev, was for some time a prominent parliamentarian. Azimbek Beknazarov, who handles judicial matters for the provisional government, was briefly Bakiyev’s attorney general, and Ismail Isakov, currently defence minister, occupied the same position from 2005-2008. The head of the social bloc for the provisional government, Elmira Ibraimova, broke with the Bakiyev regime in early 2009, when her mentor and political ally Medet Sadyrkulov resigned as head of the presidential administration.

<sup>58</sup> Officials in several government ministries reported that investigators from either the police or the prosecutor’s office were looking into foreign contracts. The contracts in question seemed to be related to Maxim’s activities.

<sup>59</sup> After the overthrow of his father, Maxim’s meetings were cancelled. He reportedly flew to Riga, where he has substantial business interests.

<sup>60</sup> “ЦИК Народного Курултая заявляет, что взяла на себя власть” [“The CEC of the People’s Kurultay announced that it has assumed power”], 7 April 2010, [www.azattyk.org/archive/ky-RussianNews/latest/829/832.html?id=2005603](http://www.azattyk.org/archive/ky-RussianNews/latest/829/832.html?id=2005603).

The first few weeks of the provisional government have been marked by infighting, confusion, a slow response to crises and an inability or unwillingness to establish a clear mechanism for informing the public of its plans and activities.

The interior ministry changed hands four times in four days between 19- 22 April, probably as a result of infighting between government members. Elmira Ibraimova told journalists that she first heard about many personnel changes from the media.<sup>61</sup> Attempts to detain leading members of the old regime, notably the president's brother and former chief bodyguard Janysh, are allegedly being sabotaged by Bakiyev sympathisers inside law enforcement agencies.<sup>62</sup> After a bloody clash with land grabbers on the outskirts of the capital in which five died, Roza Otunbayeva took over 24 hours to issue a statement on the matter.<sup>63</sup>

Much of the confusion seems to stem from personal rivalries. Many opposition leaders have long been on bad terms with their colleagues. This situation has not improved: leading members of the new government have alleged that their counterparts are already using their office for corrupt purposes.<sup>64</sup> Many seem to be concentrating on their coming election campaigns, and seem re-

luctant to allow any one member of the provisional government to emerge as the face of the new dispensation.<sup>65</sup>

The government must soon start talking to its people, particularly those in the remote parts of the country, where there is limited access to news even at the best of times. It cannot assume that its six-month term will pass without major problems, and needs to prepare public opinion for such eventualities as serious breakdowns in the energy system. The poor communication with the population has caused dismay among senior officials in many international organisations and embassies, to whom the government is looking for urgent and substantial assistance.<sup>66</sup> Indications that personal political ambitions dominate the thinking of many members of the provisional government make it imperative that measures be taken to ensure aid goes to the population as a whole, not only supporters of individual government leaders.

## VI. OUTSIDE POWERS

### A. RUSSIA: A HIDDEN HAND?

Immediately after the collapse of the Bakiyev regime, speculation was rife that an external power had provoked its sudden demise. Russia was the favoured candidate for this role. This reflected a firmly held view among the country's elite that foreign powers were the ones who really determined Kyrgyzstan's fate.<sup>67</sup> Given the setbacks and indignities that Moscow had suffered at the hands of the Bakiyev administration, however, there were ample grounds to suspect that Russia's leaders were plotting revenge. Russian behaviour before the rebellion and the

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<sup>61</sup> “Э.Ибраимова признает, что во Временном правительстве «есть проблемы» по четкой кадровой политике” [“E. Ibraimova admits that ‘there are problems’ in the Provisional Government regarding personnel policy”], Aki-press news agency, 22 April 2010, [www.1.kg.akipress.org/news:197701](http://www.1.kg.akipress.org/news:197701).

<sup>62</sup> Жаныша Бакиева укрывают его бывшие коллеги, [“Janysh Bakiyev is being harboured by his former colleagues”], Azattyk, 22 April 2010, [www.azattyk.org/archive/ky-RussianNews/20100422/829/832.html?id=2021374](http://www.azattyk.org/archive/ky-RussianNews/20100422/829/832.html?id=2021374).

<sup>63</sup> “Глава временного правительства Кыргызстана Роза Отунбаева разрешила открывать огонь на поражение в случаях нападения на граждан и их собственность” [“Roza Otunbayeva, head of the provisional government, has authorised the opening of fire in the event of attacks against citizens and their property”], 24.kg news service, 21 April 2010, <http://24.kg/politic/72519-glava-vremennogo-pravitelstva-kyrgyzstana-roza.html>. The statement was issued late at night on 20 April, and carried by most news outlets the next day. Later that same day, reports from the site of the clash noted that accused land grabbers had been released and had returned to the area where they had seized land. “В селе Маевке близ столицы Кыргызстана с утра собралось около 100 захватчиков земель” [“In the village of Mayevka, near Kyrgyzstan's capital, from early morning on, about 100 land-grabbers have assembled”], 24.kg news service, 21 April 2010, <http://24.kg/community/72547-v-sele-maevke-bliz-stolicy-kyrgyzstana-s-utra.html>.

<sup>64</sup> Crisis Group interview, mid-April 2010.

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<sup>65</sup> Senior government officials have seized or attempted to seize leading media outlets. The best account of an attempted seizure – forestalled by the appearance of local human rights groups, representatives of international organisations and a member of the government – mentions that the well-armed raiders were led by a senior officer in state counter-intelligence. The beneficiary was said to have been one of the new government's deputy chairmen. “В ИА «24.kg» ворвался начальник управления контрразведки спецслужб Кыргызстана” [“The head of counter-intelligence of Kyrgyzstan's special services burst into the offices of 24.kg”], 24.kg internet news site, 15 April 2010, [www.24.kg/politic/72130-yedil-bajsalov-vse-kto-planiroval-ataku-na-ia.html](http://www.24.kg/politic/72130-yedil-bajsalov-vse-kto-planiroval-ataku-na-ia.html). The senior member of the government who came to the press agency's rescue has himself been accused of seizing other media outlets.

<sup>66</sup> Crisis Group interviews and consultations, international organisations, special envoys, Western embassies, Bishkek, 18-23 April 2010.

<sup>67</sup> Some opposition leaders for example expressed the belief, sometimes the hope, that the U.S. would overthrow Bakiyev after he announced plans to close Manas in early 2009.

chronology of the events themselves indicate, however, that Moscow's undoubted anger at its treatment by the Bakiyev regime was not accompanied by a consistent plan of action. Russia's actions played a significant but secondary psychological role when, a month into unrest, official Russian media lashed out, repeating the opposition allegations against the Bakiyev regime.

When the Manas lease was renewed, the official Russian response was publicly muted but privately furious.<sup>68</sup> Government officials claimed that the economic package was not connected to closure of the base, and that the decision to extend the U.S. presence was Kyrgyzstan's sovereign right. What they really felt, however, was made clear in a briefing to journalists in Moscow by a senior government official on 8 April 2010, one day after the regime collapsed. "Bakiyev did not fulfil his promises regarding the closure of the U.S. Manas base", the unnamed, "highly placed" official told journalists. "There should be only one military base in Kyrgyzstan – a Russian one".<sup>69</sup>

Given this, one would have expected fast, consistent and vindictive action. There was none. From the very beginning of its campaign to have the Manas base closed, the Russians seemed unsure that the Bakiyev regime would follow through, and had warned Kyrgyz interlocutors of serious consequences if the closure did not happen. These included money laundering investigations directed against Maxim's banks. Despite the threats, there was little in the way of serious investigation or even allegations.

This was all the more surprising as the Kyrgyz attitude to Moscow was considerably more unbending, even provocative, than expected after the U.S. signed the new lease for Manas in early July 2009. Soon after, Russian deputy prime minister Igor Sechin flew to Bishkek. Sechin is known as a forceful, intimidating interlocutor. "When he comes we usually expect instructions or criticism", said one Kyrgyz official.<sup>70</sup> Sechin made it clear that Russia wanted a second base in Kyrgyzstan, apparently to underline its special interest in the region. Senior Kyrgyz officials noted afterwards that the Russians had been "disappointed". This seemed like bluster at the time: it was assumed Moscow would get its base. Russian officials indicated that they wanted the facility to be located in the

country's second city, Osh, where a former Soviet military installation could be refurbished relatively fast and inexpensively.

For the next half year and more, the Kyrgyz side dragged its feet. Eventually, in the weeks leading up to the rebellion, officials indicated that they were considering giving the Russians a site in the Batken region, a strategic but remote part of the south where – as a Kyrgyz newspaper that consistently reflects the Russia viewpoint complained<sup>71</sup> – everything would have to be built from scratch. Bishkek's studied nonchalance towards Russia's demands contrasted sharply with the quiet and apparently swift agreement reached with the U.S. to build a \$5.5-million Anti-Terror Centre, also in Batken.<sup>72</sup> Kyrgyz officials justified the centre on security grounds: concern has been growing steadily since the second half of 2008 about the threat of Islamic insurgency spilling over from Tajikistan.

It was only when indigenous protests developed momentum that the Russia took active steps. On 23 March Russia's First TV Channel launched a jarring attack on the Bakiyev regime, describing it as "enmeshed in family ties and corruption" – echoing the demonstrators' accusations. It was a powerful boost to the protests. It also created the impression, in a political climate attuned to look for external players, that Moscow had decided that Bakiyev was no longer viable.

On 8 April, the day after Bakiyev fled Bishkek, Vladimir Putin phoned the new head of the interim government, Roza Otunbayeva. They discussed humanitarian aid, and the call was seen as a valuable gesture of recognition, albeit informal, of the new Bishkek regime. At that point the interim government's contacts with the international community were hampered by the fact that the president who was viewed as legitimate in terms of international law was still in the country.

Thereafter, however, Moscow's signals became more ambiguous. On 13 April Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov publicly corrected Otunbayeva's deputy, Almaz Atambayev, who had just returned from Moscow on a mission to obtain financial aid. Peskov dismissed assertions that Atambayev had met Putin, stressed Moscow was only looking at humanitarian aid for the time being, suggested

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<sup>68</sup> *Kommersant* quoted a Russian foreign ministry spokesman as saying that the decision to keep the base open was "an exceedingly unpleasant surprise". "Американской авиабазе объявили невълет" ["No flights at the American base"], *Kommersant*, 24 May 2009, <http://kommersant.ru/doc.aspx?DocsID=1192106&ThemesID=252>.

<sup>69</sup> "Мы Бакиева не раз предупреждали" ["We warned Bakiyev more than once"], *Kommersant*, 9 April 2010, <http://kommersant.ru/doc.aspx?DocsID=1351184&ThemesID=252>.

<sup>70</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior government official, Bishkek, 4 February 2010.

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<sup>71</sup> Russian-language and outspokenly pro-Kremlin, *Bely Parus* regularly launched savage broadsides at the Bakiyev regime and Maxim in particular. But the articles on their website ([belyparusk.info](http://belyparusk.info)) rarely registered more than 3,000 hits, even for the most sulphurous criticism.

<sup>72</sup> Crisis Group interview, Bishkek, Western official, February 2010. The new government has indicated privately that it wants the Anti-Terror Centre to move ahead. Crisis Group interviews, Bishkek, Western officials, late April 2010.

the Kyrgyz leader was confusing wishes and reality, and added that Putin did not support any one side on the conflict.<sup>73</sup> A strident warning by Russian President Dmitry Medvedev the next day that Kyrgyzstan was on the edge of civil war and disintegration did not help the new authorities in Bishkek who were appealing for calm.<sup>74</sup>

There is no guarantee that Moscow will feel more comfortable with the coalition of liberal activists who claim to espouse the idea of a multiparty democracy than with the more cautious authoritarian government. On 15 April, the provisional government announced that the lease on the Manas base would automatically be extended for another year. And, while praising Russia for the speed with which it contacted the provisional government, one of its most powerful figures, Omurbek Tekebayev, also mischievously noted that Russian leaders had congratulated Bakiyev on his “free and fair elections”, while U.S. President Barack Obama had not.<sup>75</sup>

## B. U.S. POLICY

U.S. policy in Central Asia since the beginning of the Obama administration can be summarised in one word: Afghanistan.<sup>76</sup> The region is home to the Northern Distri-

bution Network (NDN), a skein of land and air supply routes spread across Central Asia which supplement Pakistan supply lines. In the Pentagon’s thinking, they will take over as the main supply lines if the situation in Pakistan deteriorates. The logical extension of the NDN-centred Central Asia policy appears to have been to keep behind closed doors any criticism of host regimes – all of them authoritarian – that might jeopardise the supply lines. Uzbekistan, the largest, most repressive and closed state in the region embraced it with satisfaction if not enthusiasm in June 2009. The Uzbek foreign ministry statement issued just as the NDN was taking shape praised the “pragmatism of the Obama administration’s foreign policy course regarding the so-called policy of ‘spreading democracy’”. The essence of the new approach to this problem is that any imposition of one’s values on other countries with ‘a totally different history and culture’ [is] counter-productive”.<sup>77</sup>

If the Bush era of spreading democracy and hailing the victory of seriously flawed “revolutionary” leaders like Bakiyev was a failure, actions by Obama administration have tilted too far in the other direction. They created the impression of tunnel vision by the U.S., and acceptance of regional leaders’ agendas, with virtually any criticism delivered in private. Even if visitors from Washington mixed their government visits with a few quiet meetings with opposition leaders, they were rarely publicised. In theory the approach appeared to be one of “hands off”. But ignoring major problems such as political brutality and institutionalised corruption is seen by the populace as condoning them. It also demoted to secondary status other publicly stated U.S. policies, including combating drug trafficking and organised crime, and promoting development – including broad-based economic development – and democratic governance.<sup>78</sup> Whether one agrees with this approach or not, the policy only works as long as the host regime is in power. Washington may be about to discover the downside of this policy.

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<sup>73</sup> “Пресс-секретарь премьер-министра России опроверг заявления Алмазбека Атамбаева о встрече с Владимиром Путиным” [“The Russian Prime Minister’s press secretary denies Almazbek Atambayev’s statements about a meeting with Vladimir Putin”], 24.kg news site, 13 April 2010, [www.24.kg/politic/71792-rossiya-poobeshhala-kyrgyzstanu-okazat-realnyu.html](http://www.24.kg/politic/71792-rossiya-poobeshhala-kyrgyzstanu-okazat-realnyu.html).

<sup>74</sup> “Медведев: Киргизия на пороге гражданской войны, ответственность за это несут власти страны” [“Medvedev: Kirgizia is on the threshold of civil war, the responsibility for this lies with the country’s authorities”], Interfax news service, 14 April 2010, <http://interfax.ru/politics/news.asp?id=132255>. Medvedev once again signalled doubts about the provisional government’s viability when he noted on 20 April, after consultations with Uzbek president Islam Karimov, that “full economic cooperation, I once again stress is possible [with Kyrgyzstan] only if institutions of power are created”. “Заявления для прессы по итогам российско-узбекистанских переговоров” [“Declarations to the press on the results of Russian-Uzbek negotiations”], 20 April 2010, [www.kremlin.ru/transcripts/7509](http://www.kremlin.ru/transcripts/7509).

<sup>75</sup> “Будет коррекция внешнего курса Киргизии” [“There will be a correction in Kyrgyzstan’s external course”], *Gazeta* (online), 9 April 2010, [www.gazeta.ru/politics/2010/04/09\\_a\\_3349405.shtml](http://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2010/04/09_a_3349405.shtml).

<sup>76</sup> The Obama administration formally adopted a new policy toward Central Asia some six months ago that called for a dual-track approach to the region and asserted the importance of democratic governance, civil society, transparency and human rights parallel to security and counter-terrorism issues. Its adoption was never publicised in the region and virtually no one can

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point to its implementation. Crisis Group interviews, high-level U.S. officials, Washington DC, 17 April 2010.

<sup>77</sup> Ташкент позитивно отреагировал на обращение Б.Обамы к мусульманскому миру [“Tashkent reacted positively to B. Obama’s address to the Muslim world”], [www.ca-news.org/news/158551](http://www.ca-news.org/news/158551) 9 June 2009.

<sup>78</sup> Despite ongoing small-scale assistance to community-based NGOs, that aid paled in contrast with the far more visible military assistance that was seen as the core of the relationship. “U.S. Assistance to Kyrgyzstan FY 2009 - FY 2011” (Foreign Operations, Department of Defense and Department of Energy). Document prepared by State Department Office of the Coordinator of Assistance to Europe & Eurasia, 14 April 2010. Also see Table 2, p. 359, at [www.state.gov/documents/organization/137936.pdf](http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/137936.pdf).

So far, the transition government seems willing to maintain Manas, but the unhappiness and deep personal anger at past silence toward the Bakiyev regime's oppression and corruption is evident from comments by Roza Otunbayeva and other members of the transition.<sup>79</sup> For some time to come, the U.S. is likely to have an uncomfortable time in Kyrgyzstan. Much depends on how fast, robust and responsive the U.S. is in assisting the new government in dealing with the multiple challenges it faces as it tries to consolidate a democratic transition. It also is likely that many in the transition leadership do not necessarily see the Russian embrace as an attractive option.

There are two areas where Washington still risks serious political embarrassment: oil contracts to Manas and the training of elite soldiers who ended up in the president's security unit – an assignment where, as we have seen, they were just as likely to kill protesters as insurgents.

A Congressional investigation under the auspices of the House of Representatives Government Oversight Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs is examining a number of issues and contracts related to the NDN.<sup>80</sup> It will focus on fuel contracts to both Bagram airbase in Afghanistan and Manas. The investigation will likely confirm that the U.S. was aware that Maxim Bakiyev was a, or the, principal beneficiary of fuel sales to the base. The current contract is worth \$243 million over one year. Even if giving contracts to the family of an autocrat is not illegal – that is, if it is found that the tenders were properly processed, and no one was doing a favour to the leadership – it is bad politics.

Much more serious would be any finding by a Kyrgyz enquiry that U.S.-trained elite troops had participated in the bloody attempt to quell the 7 April uprising. For the past several years at least, U.S. military trainers, including the Special Forces, have been training their counterparts in Kyrgyzstan – and undoubtedly other states in the region – in counter-terrorism and counter-narcotics interdiction.<sup>81</sup> But the Bakiyev regime did not feel obliged to use them purely for external defence or counter narcotics. Neither would, or perhaps do, countries like Tajikistan or Uzbekistan.

U.S. officials believe that troops who had received military training were present at the presidential offices during the fighting on 7 April. These included special forces units formerly from the National Guard, transferred to the Arstan security force, and members of the Kyrgyz army's Scorpion special forces Battalion.<sup>82</sup> They have said, however, that according to preliminary reports, the U.S.-trained soldiers removed the magazines from their weapons and did not participate. Washington should carefully investigate, and if it transpires that U.S.-trained forces were involved, it needs to be the first to publicise, offer redress and apologies, and outline rules that would prevent this happening elsewhere. In Kyrgyzstan, the U.S. has a narrow window of opportunity to address legitimate grievances about its past embrace of the Bakiyev regime. The U.S. in particular should:

- ❑ Respond immediately to the request for help with parliamentary elections. Organisations already working in Kyrgyzstan, such as the National Democratic Institute (NDI), International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), and International Republican Institute (IRI) can provide assistance.
- ❑ Ensure the work of U.S. financial forensics experts tracking corruption of the previous regime<sup>83</sup> is finished and the results fully publicised.
- ❑ Empower inspectors general to conduct their own independent investigations of Manas base contracts.
- ❑ Support local media and journalists with training, fellowships and expand the activities of Radio Liberty/Radio Free Europe.
- ❑ Launch quick-impact projects in cooperation with the provisional government to provide cash for work on community infrastructure projects.<sup>84</sup>

<sup>79</sup> "My people want to live in freedom", *Washington Post*, 16 April 2010.

<sup>80</sup> Hearing announcement by House Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs on Crisis in Kyrgyzstan, [http://oversight.house.gov/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=4882:hearing-notice-42210-crisis-in-kyrgyzstan-fuel-contractors-and-revolution-along-the-afghan-supply-chain&catid=72:hearings&Itemid=30](http://oversight.house.gov/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=4882:hearing-notice-42210-crisis-in-kyrgyzstan-fuel-contractors-and-revolution-along-the-afghan-supply-chain&catid=72:hearings&Itemid=30).

<sup>81</sup> "Security Assistance Reform: 'Section 1206' Background and Issues for Congress", Nina M. Serafino, Congressional Research Service, 18 February 2010. See Tables I and II.

<sup>82</sup> The U.S. funded a \$9-million barracks for Scorpion. Speaking at the opening of the barracks in late 2009, U.S. Ambassador Tatiana Gfoeller noted that "brand new, modern military equipment – trucks, tactical gear, ambulances, night sights, body armor, and much more – are arriving in Kyrgyzstan daily and being distributed to Kyrgyzstan's armed forces". Special forces compound opening ceremony, 23 October 2009, Tokmok City, Kyrgyz Republic [http://bishkek.usembassy.gov/uploads/images/qNYTPIKdNk7kOdYTGUP6zQ/102309\\_Tokmok\\_Compound\\_Eng.pdf](http://bishkek.usembassy.gov/uploads/images/qNYTPIKdNk7kOdYTGUP6zQ/102309_Tokmok_Compound_Eng.pdf).

<sup>83</sup> Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, Washington DC, 17 April 2009.

<sup>84</sup> This would harness the experience of USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) in post-conflict situations. The OTI assessment team should work with the Organization for Security and Co-operations in Europe (OSCE) and EU in helping the provisional government boost assistance across the country. Crisis Group interviews, Washington DC, 16-19 April 2010.

- Provide seed, fertiliser and diesel for tractors to ensure spring planting takes place despite the current crisis; otherwise there is a risk of further frustration among the rural poor and subsequent instability among the urban poor in six months when food shortages follow.

Future policies towards authoritarian regimes in Central Asia need to be encased in a clear framework, where obligations, undertakings and needs are carefully articulated, but where the U.S. speaks out clearly but politely, in a spirit of dialogue, when a host nation deviates from fundamental values of governance or human rights. This would convey to the population – through support for civil society and outreach to victims of repression – that these issues are part of the U.S. bilateral agenda. All parts of the U.S. government now are aware that helping the democratic transition is crucial to U.S. security needs in keeping Manas open.<sup>85</sup> A dual-track policy that places the basic rights and well-being of the people of Central Asia at least as high as Afghan supply routes would reflect both U.S. values and security interests.

## VII. CONCLUSION

What happened in Kyrgyzstan over the past years is happening in other regional states. What happened in Bishkek in April 2010 can happen in any of them. In some places this seems less likely than others. Uzbekistan, for example, has a large, well-trained and ruthless security force which it deployed with grim efficiency in Andijan in May 2005, when hundreds of demonstrators died. But though a powerful security machine may give the leaders some sense of protection, it does not guarantee against being overthrown. The key is not the number of troops, but at what point they decide they will no longer kill their own people – or, if faced with an armed rebellion, when they decide their leader is not worth dying for.

Western nations need to adjust their policies with this eventuality in mind. The new provisional government in Bishkek is due to be in power for no longer than six months. Its principal objective is to ensure clean elections. This is vital, but there are other issues to address:

- Speak to its people in frank detail about what might happen in Kyrgyzstan in the short and medium term. It should for example explain the risk that its power grid could suffer a major breakdown at any point. It needs to explain how the energy system reached the parlous state it is currently in – and the harsh choices that will be needed to restore it. Leakages of natural gas and other energy sources due to corruption need to be identified and halted.

- Urgently begin a process of dialogue with any Islamist movement that explicitly and publicly renounces violence as a tactic. Legalise any Islamic movements who do so. Stop arresting activists from Hizb ut-Tahrir and other groups if they agree to this. The further alienation of Islamic groups in Kyrgyzstan – where the last secular governments have done massive harm to the ideals of liberal tolerance and ethics – would be the beginning of a tragedy for the country. A dialogue might well begin to lessen the attraction of the armed struggle for the small minority of younger Islamists who are at the moment drawn to it by the perceived lack of alternatives.<sup>86</sup>
- Move rapidly to restore the Drug Control Agency, and take active steps to avoid the infiltration of the body politic by narcotics money. It is no secret that elements of the previous regime benefited from the drug trade. It is also a well known tradition for major drugs figures to look for new collaborators when power changes in a country.
- Encourage a strong and independent mass media and introduce as soon as possible a law banning the seizure of media organisations by political parties, a common phenomenon in the weeks after the overthrow of Bakiyev.
- Begin comprehensive reform of the judiciary and legal system, working towards a truly independent, well-funded and well-trained judiciary; creation of an independent bar association, reforming the prosecutorial system; and taking resolute steps to end torture and ill-treatment during pre-trial investigation.

**Bishkek/Brussels, 27 April 2010**

<sup>85</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Washington DC, 13-17 April 2010.

<sup>86</sup> See Crisis Group Report, *Women and Radicalisation in Kyrgyzstan*, op. cit.; and Crisis Group Asia Briefing N°97, *Central Asia: Islamists in Prison*, 15 December 2009.



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