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REGIME SECURITY VERSUS
HUMAN SECURITY: THE
CASE OF AN UPRISING IN
KYRGYZSTAN, 2010

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KEY POINTS

- Regime security was strengthened under Kurmanbek Bakiev's governance where state politics was eventually replaced by family politics. Paradoxically, the more the state was trying to secure its regime, the more the level of human security (i.e. public socio-economic and political security) declined. The contradiction between regime security and human security formed a prerequisite for the clash between the public and the ruling elite. However, such condition alone proved insufficient to trigger mass protests in the streets.
- The ruling elite became a victim of its own weaknesses prior to and during the uprising. Rivalries between family members of the ruling elite, a fragmented security apparatus, the reluctance of the military to protect the ruling regime in times of social unrest, and the political criticism launched by Russia towards Bakiev's handling of the American airbase, Manas prior to the uprising decreased the regime's chances to stay in power.
- The trigger to push people to social mobilization was of crucial importance. It was the death of individuals – those representing ordinary people suffering from social deprivation – that catapulted mobilization into open attack. The arrest of opposition leaders certainly mobilized selected groups to protest, yet the point of no return was crossed once several individuals were shot in front of the «White House».
- The mobilizers were stimulating the public to join the protests but they did not plan the event itself or shape its unfolding sequence. No individual nor group of individuals was able to control the course of events. As much as the movement actors were part of a distinct opposition the mobilization itself showed rather bottom-up dynamics.

INTRODUCTION

Kyrgyzstan had mass protests in 2010 which turned into a revolt and resulted in the ousting of the government. Prior to these events the people in Kyrgyzstan had experienced political and socio-economic problems that had led to growing public frustration. This research argues that public resentment resulted from the conflict-ridden combination of political manipulation/political coercion, on the one hand, and poor governance/political violence, on the other hand. It, furthermore, served as one major condition for the uprising to take place. To shed light on this condition this brief elaborates on the political crisis in Kyrgyzstan within the framework of the opposition of regime security to human security.

In regard to conceptual clarity, first, regime security in Kyrgyzstan is associated with the ruling elite's security while human security is about the political, economic and social securities of individuals. Further, regime security is considered as an ability of the ruling elite to secure its power through suppression and political manipulation whereas human security is a condition where citizens are secure from poor governance and political violence. Regime security is typical to weak states where regime is "limited to a certain group of people in power"¹ that rule a country by the principle "L'État, c'est moi" ("I am the state" - as Louis XIV, the King of France, declared back in the 17th century). Hereby, the state institutions are subject to political manipulation of the governing elite which has "a monopoly on the instruments of violence within the country."² In other words, the regime thus positions itself as the 'legitimate' state leaving no alternative to the centralization of power and its security.

In Kyrgyzstan, challenges to regime security and human security eventually created a dynamic that developed into a

1 Kemel Toktomushev, "Regime Security and Kyrgyz Foreign Policy" (PhD thesis, University of Exeter, 2014), 65.

2 Ibid.

driving force behind the revolt. In the following discussion the assessment of the political and socio-economic situation before the uprising serves as an indicator of the level of both human security and regime security. The conflict between these two security domains highlights the tension between pro-ruling-elite and anti-ruling-elite actors involved in the uprising. It also reveals the tools that the former used to suppress and the latter applied to mobilize people prior to and during the events.

In contemporary times popular outbreaks tend to be sudden and chaotic more often than not. This depends on a condition and factors that eventually lead to sparking an uprising. This brief focuses on analysis of regime security and human security in Kyrgyzstan and how the conflict between the two prepared a ground for the revolt in April 2010. Second, we look at the uprising itself which includes: challenges to the ruling elite that could weaken the regime prior to and during the event, triggers of the event and the role of actors who contributed to the event. This section is followed by the conclusion and recommendations.

REGIME SECURITY

Political Manipulation by the Ruling Elite

Particularly in the first two and a half years of the Bakiev regime political manipulation was still necessary to secure the interests of the regime, to show that its rule is based on “the principle of common interest,” that is, to provide for some kind of legitimacy.³ For this, Bakiev employed the usual toolkit: manipulating elections, constant constitutional changes and the co-option of officials.

Oppositional success in constitution making in November 2006 was thwarted when Bakiev’s entourage secured the parliament’s revision of its newly won prerogatives in late December the same year.⁴ Finally, in October 2007, Bakiev introduced a new constitution and formed his party-of-power, Ak Jol, the candidates of which won 75 seats in the following rigged elections in December 2007.⁵ Referenda, elections and political debates had turned into “political shows”⁶ and had paved the path to “super-presidentialism.”⁷ Overall, in a very short period of time, the political system was remade into a centralized bureaucratic machine with informality and extortions becoming dominant means to political ends.

The opposition and several top political figures were

- 3 Anna Matveeva, “Legitimizing Central Asian Authoritarianism: Political Manipulation and Symbolic Power,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 61, no. 7 (2009): 1097; Alexander Wolters, “Die Politik der Peripherie. Protest und Öffentlichkeit in der Republik Kyrgyzstan,” transcript, 2015.
- 4 Erica Marat, “March and After: What Has Changed? What Has Stayed the Same?” in *Domestic and International Perspectives on Kyrgyzstan’s Tulip Revolution: Motives, Mobilization and Meanings*, ed. Sally N. Cummings, (Milton Park: Routledge, 2010), 8.; Wolters, op. cit., 269-271.
- 5 International Crisis Group, “Kyrgyzstan: A Deceptive Calm” (Asia Briefing N°79, Bishkek/Brussels, 2008), 2.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 6.
- 7 Christof Stefes and Genniver Shehring, “Regression of Democracy?” in *Wilted Roses and Tulips: The Regression of Democratic Rule in Kyrgyzstan and Georgia*, ed. Gero Erdmann and Marianne Kneuer, (Dordrecht: Springer Science+Business Media, 2011), 241.

sidelined as a result of this regime evolution. The post “Tulip-Revolutions” prime ministers Felix Kulov, Azim Isabekov and Almazbek Atambaev fell all victim or served to various power machinations.⁸ More importantly, political parties of the opposition, like Ata-Meken or Ak-Shumkar, did not succeed in renewing public support and failed at the ballots in December 2007, leaving them marginalized and without further influence in political decision making. In the end, the lack of unity within the opposition and readiness of many of its members to change sides for a good offer made the ruling regime stronger. The new parliament served the purposes of the Bakiev regime, fully turning into a rubber stamp chamber in the following months.⁹

Coercive Capacity of the Ruling Elite

In five years of his rule, Bakiev had developed a strong coercive apparatus, applying formal (security and judicial) and informal (organized crime) power mechanisms to strengthen his rule. Facing a loss of popularity due to his reluctance “to bring in any substantial changes in the public sector,”¹⁰ the state security institutions became an effective tool to “quiet opposition forces.”¹¹ Bakiev gradually replaced influential security and military officials with his “cronies” to guarantee the loyalty of the apparatus.¹² Constitutional reforms, initiated in summer 2007, let him “appoint and dismiss judges and court chairpersons,” diminishing judicial independence.¹³ The organized crime groups were important in sustaining an environment of violence and fear by means of racketeering and even murder. The president’s brother,

8 Ibid.

9 Alexander Wolters, “Auf der Suche nach der Tulpenrevolution. Kirgistan im Herbst 2008,” *Zentralasien-Analysen* 11, (2008): 2-6, accessed August 7, 2015, <http://www.bischkek.diplo.de/contentblob/2125726/Daten/304090/ZentralasienAnalysen11.pdf>.

10 Erica Marat, *The Tulip Revolution: Kyrgyzstan One Year After* (Washington: The Jamestown Foundation, 2006), <http://www.jamestown.org/uploads/media/Jamestown-TulipRevolution.pdf>.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 International Crisis Group, “Kyrgyzstan: The Challenge of Judicial Reform” (Asia Report N°150, Bishkek/Brussels, 2008), 19.

Zhanysh Bakiev, increasingly controlled both intelligence and organized crime to remove political opponents.¹⁴ The state-crime nexus eventually became a constituting feature of the regime with a newly centralized state control over all possible criminal activities.¹⁵

HUMAN SECURITY

The Socio-Economic Challenges

a. Corruption

Since the independence of the Kyrgyz Republic, corruption has become one of the most acute problems within state and society. President Bakiev's early promise to combat corruption changed to the opposite when his reforms "were seen as attempts to 'institutionalise his private ambitions to expand his family's grip on governance resources.'" ¹⁶ The state fell prey to systemic cronyism and clientalism.¹⁷ Kyrgyzstan's corruption TI perception index ranking moved down from 122 to 162. The state turned into "an investment market" with systemic corruption.¹⁸

b. Unemployment

Bad governance together with the global economic crisis in 2008 made the situation in the labor market of Kyrgyzstan much more challenging. The labor market situation had

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- 14 Erica Marat, "Kyrgyzstan: New Junta in Formation," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 7, no. 55 (2010), last modified March 22, 2010, http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=36183&no_cache=1#.U-TQQPmSwW4.
 - 15 Saltanat Berdikееva, "Organized Crime in Central Asia: A Threat Assessment," *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly* 7, no. 2 (2009): 96.
 - 16 Maira Martini, "Overview of Corruption and Anti-corruption in Kyrgyzstan" (Transparency International, Bergen, 2013), 1.
 - 17 Ibid.
 - 18 Johan Engvall, "The State as Investment Market: An Analytical Framework for Interpreting Politics and Bureaucracy in Kyrgyzstan" (PhD Dissertation, Uppsala University, 2011), 64.

worsened by 2009¹⁹ with the average monthly salary stagnating at around USD 150.²⁰ Unemployment was very high among youth and in rural areas where the majority of the population lived. Although according to World Bank data and the National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic only 8.4% of total labor force was unemployed in 2009, the real figure for unemployment was considered to be much higher.²¹ Additionally, “tens of thousands of ‘guest workers’ in Russia ha[d] lost their jobs and been compelled to return home”²² due to the economic crisis that had hit the Russian Federation. As a result, unemployment “skyrocketed”²³ by 2010 increasing public grievances and dissatisfaction with the regime.

c. Living Conditions

The high level of corruption and unemployment was followed by a low level of GDP growth and the introduction of high prices for food in 2007, water, gas, electricity, and heating in winter 2009/2010. All these challenges were called a “compound disaster” by the United Nations.²⁴ According to World Bank data, the GDP per capita growth rate decreased in 2009 (USD 871.22) compared to 2008 (USD 966.39). More than a quarter of the population was still living below the poverty line (31.70%, 2009), while ever increasing prices on food had led to a number of local protests as early as

19 Roman Mogilevsky and Anara Omorova, “Assessing Development Strategies to Achieve the MDGs in the Kyrgyz Republic” (Country Study Report, DPAD/ UN-DESA, Bishkek, 2011), 10.

20 Ibid.

21 Saltanat Liebert and Medet Tiulegenov, “Public Administration in Kyrgyzstan” in *Public Administration in Post-Communist Countries: Former Soviet Union, Central and Eastern Europe, and Mongolia*, ed. Saltanat Liebert, Stephen Condrey and Dmitry Goncharov, (Boca Raton: CRC Press, 2013), https://books.google.kg/books?id=igENDnGuiioC&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false.

22 Fred Weir, “Protests Topple Kyrgyz Government, Roza Otunbayeva Takes Charge,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, accessed August 12, 2014, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-South-Central/2010/0408/Protests-topple-Kyrgyz-government-Roza-Otunbayeva-takes-charge>.

23 Ibid.

24 David Gullette, “Institutionalized Instability: Factors Leading to the April 2010 Uprising in Kyrgyzstan,” *Eurasian Review* 3 (2010): 94.

2007 but were ignored. The cold winter of 2007-8 affected food prices, but also the ruling regime's corruption of the energy sector added to the energy deficit that resulted from the cold weather.²⁵ The prices for electricity and heating "doubled," for hot water "tripled" and for gas increased by 140% following the announcement of high tariffs in November 2009.²⁶

The Political Challenge: Political Violence

Having control over the security institutions and organized crime groups, Bakiev suppressed opponents and critics of his regime, including journalists. During five years of Bakiev's 'kingship,' three journalists and six MPs were murdered.²⁷ Mafiosi could enter politics by buying positions in the governing bodies. Political competition among criminals and among politicians, sometimes between the two, created an atmosphere of violence in the country. Most notably, political and public circles were shocked following the assassination of Medet Sadyrkulov in 2009, former head of the presidential administration. He "was found dead along with his driver after his car had been involved in an automobile accident outside of Bishkek."²⁸ Also, a number of journalists were "harassed, beaten, and had threats made against their families."²⁹ Critical writers and reporters had to flee the country to save their lives.³⁰ NGO and media independence ratings were getting worse.³¹ Journalists were intimidated by the contract killings, while businessmen were forcefully intimidated into sharing profits with 'the family.' In sum, since 2006 there had been "at least 60 attacks on

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid., 99-100.

27 Pete Baumgartner, "A Year After The Revolution, Kyrgyzstan Has Much To Celebrate," RFERL, April 7, 2011, accessed August 12, 2014, http://www.rferl.org/content/commentary_year_after_revolution_kyrgyzstan_has_much_to_celebrate/3549880.html.

28 Gullette, loc. cit.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 "Nations in Transit 2009: Kyrgyzstan," Freedom House, accessed August 7, 2014, http://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2009/kyrgyzstan#.U-920_mSwW4.

journalists,³² and Maxim Bakiev, the infamous president's younger son, had established his business empire by driving competitors out of the Kyrgyz economy.³³

THE UPRISING

Not many expected the uprising to start given the brutal and despotic nature of the rule exercised by the leader's family. High level of regime security and low level of human security had been and continue to be typical in many countries in the world, including Kyrgyzstan. Therefore, we assume that the contradicting dynamics between regime security and human security only created a condition that led to the revolt. This condition was accompanied by several factors that eventually resulted in the uprising: a) the weak spots of the ruling regime, b) a trigger, and c) movement actors.

a) The Weak Spots of the Regime

Although Bakiev's regime was considered strong and stable before the uprising, it developed weak spots. Three main ones were the 'hidden' conflict within the family, the lack of consolidation among the security forces and damaging political games with the Kremlin.

When power was divided between Bakiev's family members, "the parliament reflect[ed] the splits ... between the faction led by one of the president's brother, Zhanysh, and the president's younger son, Maxim Bakiev."³⁴ While Maxim was controlling the economic and business environments of the country, Zhanysh had his hand on the security forces, including the criminal world.³⁵ The rivalry between Maxim and Zhanysh in all probability undermined the unity and

32 Gullette, op. cit., 101.

33 "US Embassy Cables: Prince Andrew Rails Against France, the SFO and the Guardian," The Guardian, last modified November 29, 2010, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/175722>.

34 International Crisis Group, op. cit., 6.

35 Ibid., 8.

capacities of the regime. In addition, Zhanysh Bakiev failed to win complete obedience from the military in comparison to the obedience he exacted from the police and the intelligence service. When the uprising erupted, the police shot into the angry masses, yet could not withstand the attack, while the military did not intervene.³⁶

The tense relations with Russia in 2009 must be regarded as a further sign of weakness that contributed to the failure of the regime. In 2009 Bakiev promised Moscow to close the U.S. airbase at the Manas airport in Bishkek in return for a Russian loan worth USD 2 billion. At the same time, Bakiev was bargaining with the US government and Washington increased the payment from USD 17 million to USD 60 million. Finally, Bakiev did not keep his promise to Russia and renamed the airbase into a transit center.³⁷ Bakiev overestimated his power and wrongly considered the possible consequence of his double-standard politics towards Moscow. Although there is no proof of the direct interference of Russia in Bakiev's affairs and of backing the uprising, it is generally assumed that "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 Bakiev regime."³⁸ The Kremlin did not condemn the mass riots and violent shift of power. Instead, "the day after Bakiyev fled Bishkek, Vladimir Putin phoned the new head of the interim government, Roza Otunbayeva, [and they] discussed humanitarian aid."³⁹ This was considered "as a valuable gesture of recognition" of the new government even if the legitimate president was still present in the country.⁴⁰

36 Erica Marat, "Kyrgyzstan's Fragmented Police and Armed Forces," *The Journal of Power Institutions in Post-Soviet Societies* 11 (2010), accessed August 7, 2014, <http://pipss.revues.org/3803#tocfrom1n1>.

37 Joshua Kicera, "'Bakiyev Can Be Bought': U.S. Embassy Tied Rent for Kyrgyz Air Base To President's Reelection," *Eurasianet.org*, last modified January 5, 2012, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/64797>.

38 International Crisis Group, "Kyrgyzstan: A Hollow Regime Collapses," (Asia Briefing N°102, Bishkek/Brussels, 2010), 12.

39 International Crisis Group, loc. cit.

40 Ibid.

b) Triggers to “Bakiev Ketsin!”

Increasing human insecurity in political and socio-economic domains motivated the opposition parties to “put forward an ultimatum to the authorities... demanding the removal of Bakiev’s family from power, a return of privatized state companies and a decrease in tariffs” on March 17, 2010.⁴¹ Since their demands were neglected by the authorities, the opposition decided to organize a national Kurultai (popular assembly) on April 7, 2010.⁴² Following this announcement, the opposition leaders were arrested on April 6. This motivated their supporters to get mobilized. However, the point of no return for mass mobilization was reached following the shootings of protesters in front of the White House, in the square of Bishkek. 86 people were killed and 1500 injured.⁴³ The death, we conclude, turned the protests into an unstoppable attack on the regime.

c) The Role of ‘Movement Entrepreneurs’: Spontaneous versus Planned

In order to understand who were the main movement entrepreneurs, the political system is explained first. Bakiev attempted “to establish a neopatrimonial regime, while appropriating all significant resources of the country’s scarce economy.”⁴⁴ Kyrgyzstan was turned into a predatory state under an ever more centralizing regime. The ruling elite exploited by means of corruption, eventually reducing its ruling coalition to the family network. As a result, several influential political figures were excluded from power and the wealth distribution network. In response, the excluded joined the opposition forces together with their parties and later played a role in the uprising (e.g. Almazbek Atambaev, Roza Otunbayeva, Azymbek Beknazarov, Temir Sariev, Omurbek Tekebaev, and Felix Kulov). The opposition leaders

41 Azamat Temirkulov, “Kyrgyz ‘Revolutions’ in 2005 and 2010: Comparative Analysis of Mass Mobilization,” *Nationalities Papers* 38, no. 5 (2010): 596.

42 Ibid.

43 Nicolas de Pedro, “Kyrgyzstan After the Elections. Is the Worst Yet to Come?” (Notes Internacionals CIDOB, Barcelona, 2010), 2.

44 Ibid.

played a major role in activating the public. However, they were not coordinating the mobilization and controlling the course of the protests. Instead, they were detained and kept in prisons prior to the social unrest. The crowds of people in the square of Bishkek “were largely self-led.”⁴⁵ The majority of these people were poorly equipped and had sticks and stones, “and later on [had] shields and weapons taken from the police.”⁴⁶ New media and communication technologies served as channels for the escalation of the mobilization.⁴⁷

45 International Crisis Group, *op. cit.*, 9.

46 *Ibid.*

47 Andrea Schmitz and Alexander Wolters, “Political Protest in Central Asia: Potentials and Dynamics.” (SWP Research Paper, Berlin, 2012), 12.

CONCLUSION/ RECOMMENDATIONS

- The presence of the regime security versus human security dynamics followed by the internal conflicts of the ruling elite, the shootings at the civilians and arrest of the key oppositionists made the event possible and formed the pattern for the uprising. Following the uprising, however, the situation is still challenging. If there are some improvements in the political sector and re-emergence of political competition and civil liberties, in social and economic domains, there are still high levels of unemployment, of corruption and a rising inequality. Irrespective of that, the uprising became a tool to express the public will in such an authoritarian country as Kyrgyzstan. Today the narratives of these events still serve as a reminder for the current ruling elite to stay away from the usurpation of power.
- Human security can be improved once the state takes serious measures to decrease rampant corruption and unemployment, especially among young people. Corruption in the political sector prevents all branches of power to enjoy independence and consequently is unable to function in a way to meet the public's needs.
- The ongoing rotation of officials involved in state institutions during Akaev's and Bakiev's reigns contributes to constant 'intra-elite' struggle or competition for power that serves only particular interests and hinders cooperation that would facilitate socio-economic improvement by means of political innovation. This helps to strengthen their position in a political arena but also causes brain and labor drain, public frustration and social deprivation. Associates of the old regimes that used to work in a 'regime security style' are hardly capable to produce innovative solutions necessary for provision of human security. Therefore, old cadres of the old and previous regimes should be replaced by (young)

people without experience of working in a corrupt system and thereby the revolutionary goals of March 2005 and April 2010 finally achieved.

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