

The ‘Colorful’ Revolution of Kyrgyzstan: Democratic Transition or Global Competition?

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This paper aims to analyze the reasons behind the recent revolution of Kyrgyzstan. I will argue that explaining the revolution through just the rhetoric of “democracy and freedom” needs to be reassessed, as comparing with its geo-cultural environment; Kyrgyzstan had been the most democratic of Central Asian republics. Thus, the paper argues that global competition between US and China-Russia should seriously be taken under consideration as a landmark reason behind the Kyrgyz revolution.

The “Rose Revolution” in Georgia and the “Orange Revolution” in Ukraine followed by yet another “colorful” revolution in Kyrgyzstan in the March of 2005. A group of opposition who were dissatisfied with the result of the Parliamentary Election taken place on February 27th and March 13th of 2005 upraised against incumbent regime of Askar Akayev. Accusing the incumbent regime with the felony and asking for more democracy and freedom, the opposition took over Akayev from the power and closed the last stage of the colorful revolution of Kyrgyzstan on March 24-25, 2005. Common characteristics of all these colorful revolutionist were that they all used rhetoric of “democracy and freedom,” and that they were all pro-western especially pro-American.

It seems that it has become a tradition in the West to call such revolutions with the colorful names. This tradition may trace back to Samuel Huntington’s famous “third wave democracy” which was started with “Carnation Revolution” of Portugal in 1974. As Western politicians and academicians have often used such “colorful” names for post-communist and post-Soviet cases since then, they must have regarded these revolutions as the extension of what Huntington has called the “third wave”.

Although the colorful revolution of Kyrgyzstan had a lot in common with those of Georgia and Ukraine, it was in some extent more colorful than the others. First, while the Western media has immediately found sole names for Georgian and Ukrainian revolutions, “orange” and “rose” respectively, they have yet to decide on several “colorful” names for the Kyrgyz revolution. It was first named “tulip,” then, “yellow,” and finally “lemon” revolution. With regard to the number of the leaders leading the revolution, Kyrgyz revolution was again more “colorful.” While Mikhail Saakashvili in Georgia and Viktor Yushenko in Ukraine were the sole leaders in their respective republics, the number of leaders in the Kyrgyz revolution was at least four: Former Prime Minister Kurmanbek Bakiev, Former Minister of Foreign Affairs Roza Otunbayeva, former National Security Advisor Feliks Kulov, and former MP Azimbek Beknazarov.

Despite the fact that all the names leading the revolution have been to various degrees affiliated with the incumbent regime, it is surprising to reflect them as the champions of democracy and human rights and also to explain the revolution with the rhetoric of freedom and democracy. In a global perspective, it is true to say that the Kyrgyz democracy under Akayev’s leadership had lots of inadequacies. Comparing with the other post-Soviet cases in other regions, democratic transition in Kyrgyzstan had been under the average, let alone its consolidation.

Nevertheless, each country needs to be evaluated within its geo-cultural context. Thus, it will be a fair perspective to evaluate Kyrgyzstan within its geo-cultural environment, that is, within the Central Asian context. Doing so, it can be said without doubt that despite some deficiencies, Kyrgyzstan had the most exceptional record in terms of democratic norms, freedoms and human rights, comparing with the other Central Asian states. Similarly, its leader Askar Akayev had been the most liberal and moderate of all Central Asian leaders. This is certainly so at least for the period up to the late 1990s.

Moreover, it is true that Kyrgyzstan has also joined the trend of Central Asian authoritarian regimes in the last several years and disregarded principals of human rights and democratic norms. Nevertheless, it should be taken into consideration that these deficiencies have never reached to the degree of the other Central Asian regimes. Just the latest developments alone such as the facts that there were opposition groups, that they could participate in the

election and that they could protest in the streets, are all somehow signs of democracy in Kyrgyzstan.

Then, the fair question should be why the opposition movements did appear in relatively moderate Kyrgyzstan, not in more authoritarian Uzbekistan or Turkmenistan. The fair answer to this question would show that the “colorful” revolution in Kyrgyzstan was not just about the undemocratic environment in Kyrgyzstan, and thus the revolution should be contributed to some other grounds. Indeed, the most reasonable argument would be the competitions among the global actors and of course their conjectural expectations from the regions pave way to the revolution. In other terms, the Kyrgyz revolution should be evaluated through the lens of George W. Bush’s political stand and regional expectation which have been shaped after the 9/11. The unique expectation of Bush administration from the Central Asia and the Middle East during this period is to find devoted regimes and leaders who would be in line with American politics, rather than democracy and freedoms. In this regard, the US planning to control Russia as well as China in Eurasia, must have given great importance to Kyrgyzstan which, albeit lacking natural resources, has great geopolitical location for the purpose of controlling Russia and China.

In this juncture, it will be helpful to discuss briefly the nature of democracy in Central Asian geo-cultural environment. Indeed, I have evaluated this matter in detail elsewhere,¹ but to summarize the situation of democracy in post-communist Central Asia, there are two different patterns: one represented by Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, which has appropriately been called “soft authoritarianism”, and one represented by Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, which has been termed “hard authoritarianism”. In the “hard authoritarian” Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, political control is firm. Almost no opposition group is allowed to participate in politics, the political leaders opposing the authoritarian regimes are either persecuted or had to continue their activities in exile, and Islam and Islamic-oriented opposition groups are likewise severely constrained. In short, the opposition in these two countries has been almost completely eliminated. Furthermore, the media are strictly controlled by the state and there are many other serious violations of democratic principles including freedom of expression, freedom of belief, freedom of organization, and even freedom of life.

In the “soft authoritarian” Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, the democratic situation is rather moderate. Opposition groups, albeit weak and ineffective, are not constrained strictly, although

they are to some extent marginalized. Freedom of expression is relatively widespread compared with the other two extreme cases; the media here enjoy some degree of freedom. Nevertheless, all four of these countries of Central Asia share some common practices that defy democratic principles. Super-presidentialism is the case in all four of these republics. All four presidents have undermined or dissolved their parliaments. Social, political and economic spheres in all four countries are dominated by the former communists, who are not really eager to further the democratic development.

Nevertheless, comparing with its geo-cultural environment, especially with Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan under Akayev's administration had a special position and had been the most moderate of all Central Asian regimes in terms of democracy and human rights. Indeed, both western academicians and policy makers had been in the same opinion up to the late 1990's. During Clinton era, Kyrgyzstan had been politically and economically supported by American administration in search of creating such a country that would be taken as a landmark example of democracy in the region. Kyrgyzstan, under the supervision of President Askar Akayev, has established for itself a reputation for political and economic liberalization. Looking at positive developments by the mid-1990s in Kyrgyzstan, some Western commentators have portrayed the country as the "island of democracy",² while the US Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott has identified Kyrgyzstan President Askar Akayev as "the Thomas Jefferson of Kyrgyzstan".³

The latest developments in Kyrgyzstan have proved that W. Bush's Administration has clearly changed this positive approach toward Akayev's Kyrgyzstan. Why? It should first be indicated that as seen on the following map, Kyrgyzstan's geo-political situation means a lot to the US *neo-con* administration. Kyrgyzstan with its five million populations is a mountainous state and located in a corridor toasted between Russia and China. Indeed it does not have rich natural resources. However, its geopolitics, which is in modern world as important as natural resources, puts Kyrgyzstan in an attractive position for the US. Especially, Kyrgyzstan's geographically being a neighbor to China and very close to Russia and Afghanistan must have meant a lot to Washington.



CENTRAL ASIA AND THE CAUCASUS

<http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/asia.html>

It will be a reasonable argument to say that the American administration had closed the eyes to Akayev’s regime just because, Kyrgyzstan had not sincerely supported Bush administration’s regional politics and general expectations after the 9/11 incident. It should be remembered that while Uzbekistan has politically and logistically supported the US in its war against Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan had either remained silently or acted slowly toward Washington’s requests. For example, Kyrgyzstan had been unwilling to let the US to use its bases in Kyrgyzstan. The fact that Kyrgyzstan under Akayev administration has been a founding and active member of Shanghai Cooperation Organization must have been regarded by the American *neo-con* administration as an alienating attitude of Akayev toward Washington.

As it is well known, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is an intergovernmental organization which was founded just before 9/11 incident on June 14, 2001 by leaders of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, the People's Republic of China, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Except for Uzbekistan, the other countries had been members of the Shanghai Five; after the withdrawal of Uzbekistan not to alienate the US in 2001, the members renamed the organization. Although the official goals of this organization were stated mostly security-related

issues, such as border conflicts, avoiding military conflicts, anti-terrorism, and countering militant Islam, most observers believe that one of the original purposes of the SCO was to serve as a counterbalance to the United States and in particular to avoid conflicts that would allow the United States to intervene in areas near both Russia and China. Many observers also believe that the organization was formed as a direct response to the threat of missile defense systems by the United States, after the United States began promoting a "missile defense" system.

Taking all these developments into consideration it should not be surprised that Uzbekistan, as a result of its support to the US, had become a new partner to Washington, despite Uzbekistan's being the most authoritarian of all Central Asian states. It should be kept in mind that Uzbekistan had withdrawn from SCO not to alienate Bush administration and given a reasonable amount of logistic help to the US in its war against Afghanistan. It is also not surprised what happened in Kyrgyzstan under the leadership of Akayev, who had not been sincere in his attitudes toward Washington's expectations. The restrained reaction by Russia and supportive reaction by the US immediately after the Kyrgyz revolution may be taken as the landmark evidence in Washington's detest attitude toward Akayev's regime and also evidence supporting the US meddling in Kyrgyz revolution.

Indeed, there is more evidence dated before and after the Kyrgyz revolution showing the US political and financial support behind the Kyrgyz revolution. The rhetoric by W. Bush in his second inauguration speech that when the oppressed people upraised for their rights the US would be with them, gives the initial clues for the US interference to other countries affairs. The comment on the Kyrgyz evolution by *The Wall Street Journal*, well-known for its intimacy to American administration is important as showing the American role in Kyrgyz Revolution: "Kyrgyzstan has taken its place in the march toward democracy and freedom under Bush's leadership."⁴

Some other evidence showing Washington's meddling in Kyrgyz affairs was also documented in a February 25 article in *the Wall Street Journal*. According to the report, Washington's support for the Kyrgyz opposition has been largely channeled through pro-Western nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). One of the major NGOs working with the Kyrgyz opposition is the Coalition for Democracy and Civil Society (CDCS). The CDCS is reported to receive the vast amount of its funding from the National Democratic Institute in Washington,

which is financed by the US government.⁵ In his statement to *The Wall Street Journal*, the head of CDCS, Edil Baisalov, who had served as an election observer in the disputed presidential contest in Ukraine just before returning to Kyrgyzstan, describes his time in Ukraine as “a very formative experience,” adding “I saw what the results of our work could be.”⁶

Another Kyrgyz NGO reportedly playing a role in the Revolution is the Civil Society Against Corruption (CSAC). The CSAC has seemingly received funding from the National Endowment for Democracy, a US-government organization with extensive ties to the AFL-CIO trade union bureaucracy that is well known for its efforts to topple governments deemed unfriendly to Washington.⁷ Just before the Kyrgyz revolution, the head of CSAC, Tolekan Ismailova, translated into Kyrgyz a pamphlet on the “revolutionary” methods used to bring down governments in Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine. This pamphlet was printed on a press in Kyrgyzstan owned by the US State Department’s Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor.⁸

The same publishing house put out several publications critical of Akayev. This includes the chief paper of the opposition, the newspaper *MSN*. It is reported that when Kyrgyz authorities cut off the electricity at the publishing house just before the first round of parliamentary voting on February 27, the US Embassy in Bishkek had two generators delivered to the facility.⁹ The activities of this facility are directed by an American, Mike Stone, and the printing operations are allegedly received a blend of funds from George Soros’ Open Society Institute (OSI).¹⁰ The OSI is well-known with its role in financing opposition activities in the “colorful” revolutions.

It is also worth noting that the leaders of anti-Akayev coalition are mostly pro-western figures. One of these pro-western leaders is Roza Otunbaeva, who has extensive personal and political ties with the West in general and with the US in particular. Otunbayeva served as Kyrgyz ambassador to the US and Canada from 1991 to 1994, and she served as Kyrgyz ambassador to the United Kingdom in 1997. She worked as deputy special representative of the UN Secretary General on the Georgian-Abkhazian border conflict from 2002 until September 2004. During her appointment in Tbilisi, she witnessed the “Rose Revolution” of Georgia. As Andrea Peters indicates, she consistently describes events in that country as a model for change in Kyrgyzstan.¹¹

After all, it would be a really optimistic approach to argue that the United States would truthfully and sincerely contribute to the transition of the post-Soviet states to liberal democratic

systems. First, since the incident on September 11, the United States has been passing through a perplexing era with regard to its own democracy. Certain policies and actions of the George W. Bush administration have led to misgivings about the US government's eagerness to push for democracy in other parts of the world. These include this administration's policies on national security and violations of democracy and human rights, particularly anti-democratic measures taken against Arab and Muslim minorities in the US. While the US has these domestic problems with upholding liberal democratic principles, it is important to consider whether US efforts to push for democracy in other parts of the world, and in Central Asia particularly, are really worth anything. If not, we may be well justified in perceiving the so-called 'freedom and democracy' simply as rhetoric.

Indeed, post-September 11 developments have highlighted how the United States government is not keen to encourage democracy and human rights in the post-Soviet regimes of Central Asia. In the post-September 11 era, the George W. Bush administration has pursued some unprecedented policies that it claims are in the interests of US national security. This administration has not hesitated to collaborate closely with the Central Asian authoritarian regimes during these times, particularly with Uzbekistan. US Assistant Secretary of State Lorne Craner justified this stance, claiming that the "global struggle against terror" requires the US administration to work "in close cooperation with an array of governments, some of which have, by our own accounts, poor human rights records and with whom we have not had close relations in the past".¹² Clearly this "array of governments" included the Central Asian regimes.

One can only conclude that close cooperation by the US administration with the current regimes of Central Asia contributes to legitimizing and consolidating authoritarianism, rather than legitimizing and consolidating democracy and human rights. It should also be kept in mind that promoting truly democratic regimes in the region does not indeed fit to the national interest of the US.

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Notes

¹ For a detailed analysis of democracy in Central Asia, see Yilmaz Bingol, "Nationalism and Democracy in Post-Communist Central Asia", *Asian Ethnicity*, vol. 5, no. 1, February 2004, pp. 43-60.

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- ² See, for example, John Anderson, 'Island of Democracy? The Politics of Independence', in John Anderson (ed.), *Kyrgyzstan: Central Asia's Island of Democracy?* (Harwood Academic Publishers, Amsterdam, 1999), pp. 23–63.
- ³ Strobe Talbott, 'Promoting Democracy and Prosperity in Central Asia', *US Department of State Dispatch*, vol. 5, no. 19 (9 May 1994), pp. 280–2.
- ⁴ Qouted from, Ümit Enginsoy, "Kırgızistan Dersleri", *NTV Haber*, 28 Mart 2005, <http://www.ntv.com.tr/news/315774.asp#BODY>.
- ⁵ See, for example, Andrea Peters, "US Money and Personnel Behind Kyrgyzstan's 'Tulip Revolution'" World Socialist Web Site, 28 Mart 2005. www.wsws.org
- ⁶ Peters, *ibid.*
- ⁷ Peters, *ibid.*
- ⁸ Peters, *ibid.*
- ⁹ Peters, *ibid.*
- ¹⁰ Peters, *ibid.*
- ¹¹ Peters, *ibid.*
- ¹² 'US Continues to Promote Human Rights, Democracy in Central Asia, June 27, 2002', State Department's Lorne Craner at June 27 Senate Hearing, 27 June 2002. http://www.usembassy.it/file2002_06/alia/a2062702.htm

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