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## PERSPECTIVE

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# The Double-Headed Tulip: Kyrgyzstan's Revolution

By Fabian Adami

In August 2004, the *International Crisis Group* published a report concerning the Parliamentary elections scheduled for February 2005 in Kyrgyzstan. The document predicted that if President Askar Akaev attempted to "retain power, directly or indirectly, in fraudulent elections, serious unrest" would be likely. (1) The ICG further argued that Akaev would try to ensure that "loyal candidates" gained a majority of seats in the polls. (2) These predictions proved to be remarkably prescient, as the election campaign would be marked not only by nepotism, but also media harassment and the exclusion of several important opposition candidates.

Barely two weeks before the election—in a move clearly designed to minimize the time for protest--both of President Akaev's children were nominated to stand in the ballot. Of the two, Akaev's daughter Bermet seemed the more likely candidate for succession, given her prior political experience. Akaeva had previously worked both as a United Nations employee and as a political consultant in Kyrgyzstan. In 2003, she co-founded *Alga Kyrgyzstan*, a pro-Presidential party. (3) Akaeva's candidacy revealed the true meaning behind Akaev's statement at Harvard in the fall of 2004 that "we do democracy the Kyrgyz way," and gave the lie to the statement that "I am for the people choosing the next president." (4)

Besides setting up a Kazakh style succession, Akaeva's candidacy was the tool for the exclusion from the election of a strong anti-Presidential opposition candidate, former Foreign Minister—and leader of *Ata-Jurt* Roza Otunbayeva. Otunbayeva's registration was accepted and then revoked within a matter of hours, with the excuse that she failed to meet Kyrgyz residential requirements as a result of her recent service as Deputy UN

Special Envoy to Georgia. (5) Otunbayeva's exclusion was suspicious because the district in which she was to run was taken over by Akaeva.

Otunbayeva's exclusion was merely the most high-profile of many. There were anti-exclusion protests around the country, most notably in Jalal-Abad, Naryn and Issyk-Kul, where protestors blocked a major highway for five days, demanding the reinstatement of former Prime Minister Arslanbek Maliev. (6)

On February 8th, a Bishkek based newspaper, *Moya Stolitsa Novosti* (which was receiving funds from Freedom House) published an article alleging illegitimate business dealings on the part of President Akaev and his family. President Akaev's response to the article was to threaten litigation, and to accuse the outlet of "systematic information terror." (7) When the newspaper refused to print a retraction, the building housing its presses was suffered a 48 hour blackout, described by Freedom House as an attempt at "censorship." (8) When the blackout became public knowledge, protests (lasting 2 days) occurred in Bishkek, demanding an end to media harassment.

The harassment of 'regime opponents' and the media described above must be understood in a wider regional context. The Kyrgyz government's actions were the result of an ever-increasing paranoia brought about by fear that the Orange and Rose revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia would spread across the Caucasus into Central Asia. Comments made prior to the elections by Prime Minister Nikolai Tanayev and President Akaev support this conclusion. In an interview with *Moscow Nezavisimaya gazeta* in late January, Akaev alleged that Otunbayeva and her party had been, and continued to be recipients of funds from the United States. (9) Tanayev meanwhile, issued a direct warning to the OSCE that meddling or "interference" in the election by any foreign observer mission would not be tolerated. (10)

Voting in the Parliamentary elections began in the morning of 27th February. Preliminary turnout figures announced by the Kyrgyz Central Election Commission indicated that more than 50% of the country's eligible voters had cast their ballot for candidates competing for 75 seats. Results were inconclusive, with only 30 seats being decided.

This meant that a run-off, scheduled for 13th March would be necessary. (11) It was no surprise that the OSCE noted that the election had been marred by "low level of voter confidence," "bribing of voters," and the "widespread withdrawal of candidates from the election." (12) Despite these irregularities, the country was quiet in the days following the ballot, with the exception of a small protest in Bishkek, led by Otunbayeva.

But the calm was short-lived. On 4th March, a crowd numbering some 3000 people converged on Jalal-Abad's main square to protest government corruption, to voice support for Jusupbek Bakiev—brother of Kurmanbek Bakiev (leader of the People's Movement of Kyrgyzstan), who had been excluded from the ballot, and to call for Akaev's resignation. (13) The demonstration soon escalated into a riot, with the crowd occupying Provincial Administration Buildings and calling for Akaev's immediate resignation. Spurred on by events in Jalal-Abad, similar protests emerged in Osh, Aravan and Naryn. (14) At this point it should be noted that the crowds in Kyrgyzstan constituted a mob, rather than (as had been the case in Tblisi and Kiev) a politically led and organized movement.

Immediately following the second round of voting (which gave the government 50 of 75 seats) the protests intensified further, as 10,000 people armed with fire-bombs and sticks stormed police headquarters in Jalal-Abad. Later the same day, OMON troops attempted to clear the building, but only succeeded in dispersing the crowd into other areas of the city, including the airport and suburbs. An interesting development was revealed in that the troops had been issued only with *blank* rather than live fire rounds, accounting for the almost negligible casualties. (15)

The failure of OMON troops to restore order resulted in the dispatch of Prime Minister Tanayev to Jalal-Abad as Akaev's negotiator on 22nd March, as well as the public announcement by Akaev that 'disputed' election results would be reviewed. He categorically refused, however, to resign. (16) Akaev's statements—anchored by the fact that the protests were confined to the South—probably amounted to an attempt to buy time to consolidate his position.

Untouched by major protests thus far, rioting erupted in Bishkek on the morning of March 24th. A mob converged on the Presidential compound, storming the White House and the government-run television station Kyrgyz-TV, from where the announcement was made that the government had collapsed. Presidential guards apparently either melted away, or put up no resistance. (17) President Akaev fled to Moscow, where he currently remains. Eyewitness accounts (notably from RFE/RL reporters in Bishkek) (18) make clear that the Bishkek protests were not organized and did not possess leadership. Instead, they were spontaneous expressions of anger at the regime, characterized by pitched street battles between pro and anti-Presidential crowds, looting and general "lawlessness and chaos." (19) Looting reportedly became so extreme that people from the countryside were streaming into the capital to participate.

Events as described above and in other reports raise serious questions: why were OMON troops carrying only blank rounds in Jalal-Abad? Why did Security Forces either disappear or refuse to fire on the mob at the government compound and Presidential residence when it was clear that the buildings—and thus the regime—were being targeted? The answer may lie in the persona of Feliks Kulov.

Feliks Kulov's background and connections are essential to understanding the current climate and political situation in Kyrgyzstan. Born in 1948, Feliks Sharshenbayevich Kulov entered the Soviet Interior Ministry in 1967, reaching the position of Deputy Interior Minister in 1987. (20) In 1990, he was appointed Interior Minister of Kyrgyzstan, and in the following year, after the Soviet collapse, he was given the vice-Presidency. (21) In 1997, Kulov was appointed Minister of National Security, a post which gave him control over the National Security Service, Kyrgyzstan's successor to the KGB. It was in this period, that Kulov's loyalty first came under scrutiny, when surveillance equipment allocated by Kulov to a 'Special Task Force' disappeared inexplicably. (22) Having been demoted to Mayor of Bishkek by Akaev, Kulov resigned in 1999, and created his own political party, *Ar-Namys* (Dignity).

After failing to win a seat in 2000's Parliamentary elections, Kulov announced his intent to run against Akaev in upcoming Presidential elections. This direct challenge to Akaev's authority resulted in Kulov's arrest on 22 March 2000. Charged with fraud, embezzlement and abuse of authority while Minister of National Security, Kulov was convicted by a Bishkek court, and sentenced to a seven-year prison term. (23)

News reports on the rioting in Bishkek on 24th March indicate that Kulov was released from prison by the mob. (24) Although no mention is made of the Security Services' role in his release, it seems impossible that it could have occurred without their collusion. Moreover, it is entirely feasible that OMON troops and Presidential guards failed to stop the rioting because they realized the popular scope of the demonstrations, and because Kulov commanded their loyalty from within his cell. This conjecture is supported by events immediately following the storming of the White House.

Just hours after the government's collapse, Kyrgyzstan's outgoing Parliament met in emergency session to appoint an interim leadership. After several hours of deliberation and voting, former Prime Minister Kurmanbek Bakiev was appointed interim President *and* Prime Minister, Roza Otunbayeva was appointed interim Foreign Minister, and Feliks Kulov was appointed to lead the country's *entire* law enforcement and security apparatus. Following his appointment Kulov, together with Bakiev, made a televised appearance to appeal for calm. Kulov unequivocally stated that any person or group who attempted to "destabilize the situation, to stir up trouble," would be prosecuted and punished "to the greatest extent of Kyrgyz law." (25) A curfew was introduced on 25th March, and the same day, a large police and presence—supported by "local volunteers" was once again visible on the streets. Within days, the capital was quiet once more. Kulov's appointment and the subsequent re-appearance of the police and security forces speak volumes about his position and authority in the country, and help explain events surrounding the Presidential Elections held later in the summer.

Within days of the creation of the interim government, Kurmanbek Bakiev, leader of the People's Movement of Kyrgyzstan, announced his candidacy for Presidential Elections.

At the time of his release, Feliks Kulov refused to commit himself, announcing that he would wait until the Supreme Court ruled on the legality of his convictions. The hearings in Kulov's case began on 7th April, and, within a week, he was cleared of all charges. In the days immediately following the Supreme Court's judgements, Kulov and Bakiev met several times. According to reports which emerged from their discussions, the two men held discussions in which Bakiev offered to create a unified ticket, naming Kulov Prime Minister in the event of an electoral victory.<sup>(25)</sup> Kulov rejected this proposal. On April 25th, he announced his own candidacy, stating that he and Bakiev had agreed to free and fair elections.

Although a legitimate two-horse race was encouraging from a purely 'democratic' perspective, in the Kyrgyz context, it was concerning for two reasons: Kyrgyzstan is an ethnically—and geographically divided country. Kyrgyzstan's southern regions, particularly the cities of Osh and Jalal-Abad are home to a vocal Uzbek minority, numbering approximately 13.8% of the population. The region has witnessed ethnic riots in the past, most notably in 1990. Bakiev's power base is located in the Southern regions, while Kulov draws his support from the Northern part of the country—especially Bishkek and environs. As such, a Kulov-Bakiev race created the specter of national division—as well as the possibility—given Kulov's background—of Security Service interference in the polls.

The possibility of ethnic tension affecting the Kyrgyz Republic was made starkly realistic by events in mid-May in neighboring Uzbekistan. Uzbek Interior Ministry and Army forces brutally repressed peaceful demonstrations in the town of Andijan on May 13th, killing at least 500 people. On the evening of 14th May, 546 people succeeded in escaping the sealed town, crossing the Kyrgyz border into Jalal-Abad on the morning of the 15th.

On the evening of May 13th, the same day as the massacre, Kulov announced his withdrawal from the Presidential race. According to a statement released the following day, he had now agreed to the original terms offered by Bakiev. In the event that his

running-mate won the election, Kulov would be appointed Prime Minister. The agreement also provided that some Presidential powers (such as the authority to appoint and to dismiss Oblast heads and ministers) would be transferred to Kulov.

It is important to note that the massacre in Uzbekistan and the subsequent arrival of refugees in Kyrgyzstan played a role in Kulov's decision. His statement noted the "fragility of peace" in Central Asia, and stated that the aim of cooperation was to "ensure that the interests of the whole of Kyrgyzstan are represented in the national leadership...it's our job to prevent a situation where one group of the population believes it has won, and the other thinks it has lost." (26) This statement makes it clear that Bakiev and Kulov came to terms *at least in part* to reassure the Uzbek minority, and to prevent the spread of unrest across borders. Finally, it seems clear that Bakiev's concessions to Kulov vis a vis increased powers constituted a bow to the latter's control over the Kyrgyz security forces.

Candidate registration for the election ended on July 7th. In total, seven candidates accumulated the required 50,000 signatures. Bakiev's competitors were: Zhusupbek Sharipov (formerly Governor of Jalal-Abad), Tursunbay Bakir-ulu (former Ombudsman), Keneshbek Dushebayev (former Interior Minister), Akbaraly Aitikeev, Jypar Jeksheev, and a lone female candidate, Toktayym Umetalieva. (27) When the vote-count had been completed, Bakiev was shown to have won a comprehensive victory. The CEC claimed that voter-turnout had reached a record high with some 74.6% of the country's eligible population going to the polls. Bakiev apparently obtained 88.9% of the vote, with the second-placed candidate, Bakir-ulu, receiving just under 4%. (28) It is clear that Kulov's withdrawal, and his backing of Bakiev, was at least partially responsible for the latter's huge majority.

In its "Preliminary Findings" report, the OSCE's reaction to the election was quite favorable. Specifically, the organization noted that government interference in campaigning had been non-existent; that there had been a free exchange of ideas between the candidates in a series of live televised debates, that freedom of expression

and congregation had been respected, and that the government had taken account of the Uzbek minority by broadcasting the debates with Uzbek dubbing in the South of the country. Most remarkably, given the complicity of this organization in the fraudulent parliamentary elections, the OSCE noted that the Central Election Commission had attempted to show impartiality by moving out of government buildings for the duration of the election period. (29)

Although the election showed a marked improvement over past campaigns, the OSCE's report was not free of criticism. Some irregularities were noted by observers, the most important of which was an inflation of turnout figures, which resulted in Bakiev's remarkably high returns. It should be noted however, that the OSCE believes that Bakiev's margin of victory would have been significant even without inflation. (30)

Since the June 30th election, there have been several noteworthy developments. In conjunction with other members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Kyrgyz government requested 'clarification' from Washington on the closure of the Manas and Ganci airbases near Bishkek. It soon became clear that Bishkek's demand was little more than a bargaining chip. On 25th July, US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld arrived in Kyrgyzstan for talks with the new government. The results of the talks were threefold: first, US forces can remain in Kyrgyzstan until the Afghan situation is 'normalized'; second, Kyrgyzstan will receive a \$200 million interest free-loan, and third, the United States and Kyrgyzstan will renew their cooperation on Defense-technology issues. (31)

Kyrgyzstan's leaders have historically realized that they do not occupy a geo-political position of strength in Central Asia. The country, in contrast to some of its neighbors, does not possess natural resources, and is hampered by its small size. Kyrgyz foreign policy has—at least since 2001—centered on the idea of balance between Russia and the US. To offset the perceived impact of US presence, Kyrgyzstan's government in late September renewed its basing agreement with the Russian Federation. Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov, and Colonel-General Anatoly Mazurkevich (head of International

Cooperation Agreements in the Defense Ministry), noted that Russia viewed the base at Kant as a "long-term project," and that Russia would be donating \$3 million worth of military equipment to Kyrgyzstan immediately. Russia plans to allocate \$4.5 million to new development projects at the airbase from the current budget. (32)

Domestically, the newly elected government's first course of action was to begin a campaign against the country's rampant corruption. Speaking a day after his inauguration, President Bakiev urged officials to maintain "iron discipline" in their jobs, not to neglect their constituents, and to be more accountable. Anyone caught stripping people "of their property shamelessly," or taking bribes would be fired immediately. (33)

Recent events have served to highlight the problem of corruption. On 21st September, Bayaman Erkinbayev, a long-serving and prominent parliamentarian was shot and killed in central Bishkek. Erkinbayev (a Bakiev ally) was also wealthy Southern-based businessman (owning several hotels and the Kurasu market in Osh), who had been the target of assassination attempts by political-business rivals in the past. (34) President Bakiev has claimed that the assassination was only made possible because "law-enforcement agencies and bandits" were working together. This statement would seem to have some basis in fact, since the local Bishkek press has claimed that the Interior Ministry recently 'detained' Erkinbayev's bodyguards on undisclosed charges, a move which left him open to attack. (35)

Bakiev has insisted since the assassination that "we must purge law enforcement agencies everywhere, be it the Security Service, Customs or courts." (36) Many mainstream media outlets in Europe and America have failed to note the details of the Bakiev-Kulov deal, which positioned Kulov as the 'power behind the throne.' It is possible that Bakiev is using the Erkinbayev assassination as the 'trigger' for an attempt to swing the balance of power back from Kulov to himself.

Given the reality of the power-dynamic in Kyrgyzstan, it is unlikely that the Kulov-Bakiev partnership will remain in place for long. Realistically, Bakiev has little chance of winning

a real power struggle. The two questions are for how long Kulov will tolerate his presence—or for how long Bakiev will suffer being number-two, and whether the Kulov-Bakiev struggle will supersede the anti-corruption campaign which was the centerpiece of Bakiev's manifesto.

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