

Kyrgyzstan's Tulip Revolution

INTERVIEW WITH ROZA OTUNBAYEVA

In Russia and the West, the scholarly and journalistic communities have been reluctant to accord the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan the same status as the earlier revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine. Commentators point to the absence in Kyrgyzstan of a single leader who could personify the opposition, such as a Saakashvili or a Yushchenko. They also argue that popular protests in Kyrgyzstan were less disciplined and organized than those in Georgia and Ukraine. Yet, in most respects, the overthrow of the regime in Bishkek closely followed the pattern established in Tbilisi and Kiev. In all three countries, a deeply flawed election represented the final act of delegitimization of an entrenched ruling elite; the incumbent president refused to employ the full force of state power against the demonstrators and society itself was sufficiently self-confident to demand leaders who would fight corruption and respond to the economic and symbolic interests of the population. As Acting Foreign Minister Otunbayeva argues in this interview, the Tulip Revolution has every right to take its place alongside the Rose and Orange revolutions in what some have called the fourth wave of democratization.

The majority view may be correct, however, in its assertion that the challenges facing Kyrgyzstan are even greater than those confronting Ukraine and Georgia. First, the regional divisions that separate the ethnic Kyrgyz into northern and southern factions are more potent than the sectionalism that divides the ethnic Ukrainians and ethnic Georgians. It was not inevitable that the longstanding cultural differences between the more Russified north and the more traditional south would acquire a political coloration. That resulted in large measure from President Akaev's neglect of the south for more than a decade, which led some to note that Kyrgyzstan had abandoned Communism for Keminism (Kemin being Akaev's native region in the north). It was no surprise, then, that the Tulip Revolution had its origins in the discontented south. It was also no surprise that the two most prominent leaders of the opposition—Kurmanbek Bakiev of the south

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and Felix Kulov of the north—decided not to compete against each other for the winner-take-all presidential race. Instead, they reached an electoral pact in which Kulov agreed to support Bakiev for the presidency in exchange for the post of prime minister.

The second hurdle facing Kyrgyzstan flows directly from the powersharing arrangement between the new president, Bakiev, and his prime minister, Kulov. In Kyrgyzstan, as in most countries with semipresidential regimes, the president traditionally assumes direct responsibility for the power ministries and issues of national security, while the prime minister concentrates on economic affairs. However, in the current Kyrgyz leadership, the president has the expertise and experience in economic policy, whereas the prime minister has a background as a *silovik*. The issue here is not so much a lack of professional qualifications but rather the network of allies that the president and prime minister will have in each other's sectors of the bureaucracy. Taken together with the desire of Bakiev to replace northern incumbents in the country's administrative and political elite with new faces from the south, this awkward reversal of the traditional backgrounds of president and prime minister has already produced a period of intense struggle over the responsibilities and spoils of office. Given the popularity of Kulov in the north, it will almost certainly be more difficult for Bakiev to remove his prime minister from office than it was for Yushchenko to remove Timoshenko in Ukraine.

Finally, Kyrgyzstan's geography is especially unfavorable for democratic development. Like Georgia, another small country with unstable or undemocratic neighbors, Kyrgyzstan is vulnerable to the pressures of the more powerful states in its region. Whereas Georgia has to be concerned about Russian interference in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, or Ajaria, Kyrgyzstan must worry about the economic and political pressure applied by Uzbekistan as well as the spread of radical Islam. The recent uprisings in the Uzbek part of the Ferghana Valley, during which thousands of Uzbek citizens sought refuge in neighboring Kyrgyzstan, have soured relations between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Because Uzbekistan has formidable means at its disposal to destabilize Kyrgyzstan, whether through the withholding of natural gas or the incitement of ethnic Uzbeks in southern Kyrgyzstan, the Kyrgyz government recognizes that an aggressive campaign for democratization and openness may invite a reaction from its more authoritarian neighbor.

Geography also plays a role in separating Kyrgyzstan from sources of democratic support and engagement. Kyrgyzstan's location in central Asia pushes it to the periphery of the European agenda. Neither the European media nor European institutions accord Kyrgyzstan the same level of attention or assistance that is granted to Georgia and Ukraine, which lie at or near the borders of the European Union. Although the presence of American troops in Kyrgyzstan has raised the country's profile slightly in the United States, it remains an unknown part of Asia to most Americans. With no diaspora in the West, few friends in high places, and little hope of joining key Western institutions as a full member, Kyrgyzstan has very limited access to international resources in its democratization struggle.

Although Kyrgyzstan experienced a breakthrough similar to those occurring in Georgia and Ukraine, it will likely find it more difficult to consolidate its democratic gains. To chart a new and more democratic path, the country's leadership must reach a consensus about the way forward on matters of policy and patronage. At the risk of understatement, such a consensus has not been evident in the first months of the Bakiev presidency. With the recent assassinations of parliamentary deputies and the uprisings in the country's prisons, the very ability of the state to keep powerful criminals in check is now in doubt.

As Acting Foreign Minister Roza Isakovna Otunbayeva recognizes in this interview, cooperation in politics depends not only on social capital but also on the ability to forge institutions, such as parties, which mobilize leaders and followers behind common tasks. If political elites in Kyrgyzstan do not heed her plea for the development of vibrant, democratic parties, there is little assurance that Kyrgyzstan will avoid another slide toward authoritarianism.

Roza Isakovna Otunbayeva has been a leader of the foreign policy community in Kyrgyzstan since the country gained its independence in 1991, having served as foreign minister and as ambassador to the United States and to Great Britain. After working for two years as a United Nations envoy for the conflict in Georgia, she returned to Kyrgyzstan in the summer of 2004 and became the coleader of a political movement, *Ata-Jurt* (Fatherland). Prevented from standing for parliamentary elections in February 2005, she helped to direct the popular protests against the Akaev regime in early 2005—protests that led to the March Revolution. In the wake of this revolution, she assumed the post of acting foreign minister, although in a surprising defeat for both the president and the prime minister, the parliament by a slim majority refused to confirm Otunbayeva as foreign minister at the end of September. Instead of resubmitting her name for confirmation, Otunbayeva has decided to contest a seat in the forthcoming parliamentary elections. These elections will replace the discredited assembly elected in February 2005. Acting Foreign Minister Otunbayeva gave this interview with *Demokratizatsiya* issue coeditor Eugene Huskey in New York on September 17, 2005, at the end of the United Nations World Summit.

***Demokratizatsiya*:** Commentators use varied, and occasionally contradictory, terms to describe what happened in Kyrgyzstan in March 2005: a revolution, a coup, a change of clans, a popular uprising. In your view, how should we understand the March events?

Otunbayeva: I can state categorically that it was a popular revolution. However people choose to interpret this event six months, a year, or five years from now, history will show that it was, at its core, a popular protest and uprising. Those of us in the opposition tried to lead this uprising, but we were often left in its wake. We didn't appreciate the degree of anger of the population, and the people passed us by. They decided to act, and we only appeared on the scene later.

For example, when they seized the buildings of local administrations [*akimiat*], that wasn't a decision of our movement, or a party, or the opposition at large. Absolutely not. That was done by the people out of a feeling of frustration over the

injustice, the lies, and the hypocrisy of the authorities. The population decided that it was no longer going to serve the persons who sat in local government buildings—officials whom we'd elected but who were misrepresenting the interests of the people and deciding our fate so unjustly. We [the opposition leaders] only arrived at the buildings later, after the fact.

The people themselves organized all the protest gatherings during the parliamentary elections. If a policeman or soldier stood nearby, the population would engage them in conversation and say, "You are our children. Just try to move against us." Women among the protesters would say, "We gave birth to you, we raised you."

Now some time has passed and there is a measure of disappointment. . . . If before it was clear who was guilty, this feeling has now faded. The revolutionary demands and expectations of the people cannot be implemented quickly. People want visible and immediate changes, but that is difficult to do. There is an accumulating frustration. Whether one was for or against the revolution, people now ask, "Did we really have a revolution? Was there a popular uprising?"

I think in this sense there is disagreement over what the phenomenon of March 24 signifies. Nevertheless, in its essence, this was a popular uprising. The people were the authors of the revolution. No one can claim that someone unleashed, inspired, or financed the revolution, or that it came from elsewhere. There was nothing of the sort. It was instead the spirit, pressure, ideas, and aspirations of the people themselves, indeed of its humblest representatives.

People remain uneasy even now. They see where the problems are today, and they have formed revolutionary committees everywhere, especially in the south, that monitor the situation to this day. They want to ensure that the goals of the revolution are achieved, so that all corrupt officials, all those who used power against the people or enriched themselves dishonestly, or distributed land dishonestly, leave the political stage, and that those who arrive as their replacements are capable of, and do, govern differently. This gives us the possibility of maintaining the ideals of the revolution, the flag of revolution.

This is the view from inside the country, but there is also an external perception. The entire world and especially the democratic countries of the West were thrilled with events in Georgia and Ukraine, saying "Something really happened there." But in your country, they say, it's not clear what occurred, especially on the first and second days of the revolution, when the Akaev regime organized pogroms and looting. Was there really a revolution in Kyrgyzstan? Unfortunately, we are guilty of an inability to finish everything we had started. We have not yet been able to bring to justice all those who came out against the people during the popular uprising. There were victims, and this was a specific feature of our revolution.

. . . We are a distinct people, with a distinct temperament and public face, but at the same time, our revolution should not be regarded as inferior to those that occurred in Georgia and Ukraine. We should not be overly modest, and think that something happened in Kyrgyzstan, but we're not quite sure what it was. This kind of thinking must be rejected. Perhaps because we lack the prominent podium or profile of a Georgia or Ukraine, or the intense dialogue that they take part in, we

can't make this known as readily to the entire world. Perhaps in some sense there are countries that want to keep under wraps the fact that a revolution took place in Kyrgyzstan lest it, God forbid, happen in their country.

But our people clearly and unequivocally state that this was a popular uprising against corruption. This was a powerful cleansing of the entire political system of Kyrgyzstan. We are now experiencing a new drama in Ukraine, what some consider a deterioration of the Ukrainian revolution, but I believe that we all have a right to expect some twists and turns. In the end these should serve the good of our revolutions. . . .

Let's hope that on this foundation new political forces develop and mature, especially in Kyrgyzstan, where there are not strong parties even now. Having caught our breath from the major changes of March of this year, we are not giving sufficient attention to the development of parties. We are in desperate need of party development, and an alarm is now sounding that summons us to this task.

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Demokratizatsiya: A Russian scholar wrote recently that Kyrgyzstan's current foreign policy differs little from that of the Akaev period. Is this perspective correct?

Otunbayeva: Yes and no. Because Kyrgyzstan has existed for just fourteen years as an independent country, it is only beginning to construct its own foreign policy. We are only now getting our feet underneath us, and understanding that we are living in a new reality. We are only gradually, therefore, creating a foreign policy system.

[In terms of our relations with the outside world, they first concern] our neighbors and the most active participants in world affairs, such as the United States and, in the region, Russia and China. In accordance with the agenda of the G8, Japan is now launching an initiative to cooperate with Central Asia. As the world economy improves, we see that many countries distant from us that have had their own traditional areas of interest, such as Spain with regard to Latin America, are exhibiting more and more interest in us. I met today with the Spanish deputy minister of foreign affairs who said that Spain is now completing a program for Asia, in which Kyrgyzstan has a place.

So it seems to me that we are creating our own system of foreign policy, and inasmuch as the foreign policy of any country has a very conservative character, one would hardly expect to have any dramatic changes within fourteen years. No matter the country, foreign policy doesn't change direction that sharply, and in Kyrgyzstan, after the March 24 revolution, we did not reorient ourselves toward some other part of the world. We remain a Eurasian power. We

retain good relations with all of our neighbors, and our system of security is grounded in our region, but at the same time I would like to say that there has been a certain fine-tuning in our foreign policy.

. . . It goes without saying that on such basic matters as our relations within our region, we are strengthening cooperation with all our neighbors, [starting with] Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and China. China is a great power, whose might and potential we understand well. The level of our trade with China is now significant, with a turnover of \$600 million a year, and I think the prospects are good for an increase in this figure. There is great potential for cultural and education exchange with China, and China serves as an important source of economic investment and grants for us. Along with Russia and other Central Asian countries, we are members with China of the Shanghai Cooperation Agreement. This is the core of our relations.

From the standpoint of security matters, we are signatories of the Treaty on Collective Security (ODKB) and members of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and we think that these organizations, plus the Organization for Central Asian Cooperation (OTsAS), are key for us. But at the same time, we must give greater attention to our relations with Europe. We've never had systematic relations with Europe, and at the present time our work with leading European countries, such as Germany, Britain, France, and a number of Scandinavian countries remains uncoordinated. We have a partnership agreement with the European Union and since 1992 we have been members of OSCE. We would like now to cooperate with the Council of Europe and put our relations on a more systematic footing with NATO's Partnership for Peace program. . . .

Our relations with the Middle East have not, to this point, been as stable or intensive as those with Asia and America. . . . We will bring together the necessary resources and capabilities so that we can more clearly define our cooperation with this region.

Relations between East and West occur in part on our territory, and Kyrgyzstan has supported dialogue between the OSCE and the Islamic Conference and between the Islamic and non-Islamic worlds. All this helps us to be a transmission belt between West and East.

I think that the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries in some respects serve as a role model for us, and we learn much from them. Among our greatest challenges at the moment is the fight against corruption and poverty, two problems that are intimately linked. We think that in the cleansing of politics and the restoration of the economic health of society, we have much to learn from the successful, dynamic countries of Southeast Asia.

Demokratizatsiya: To what extent did the March events in Kyrgyzstan and the conflicts in the Fergana Valley in May complicate relations between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan?

Otunbayeva: With Uzbekistan, our relations have traditionally been characterized by warmth and good-neighborliness. We are linked by an agreement of

permanent friendship with them, and the cultural similarities of our peoples have always served as a basis for our close relations. We have more than seven hundred thousand ethnic Uzbeks living in Kyrgyzstan, and there are more than three hundred thousand ethnic Kyrgyz living in Uzbekistan.

Immediately after the March revolution, I made a working visit to Uzbekistan, where talks took place in a warm and unusually friendly atmosphere. We had a very open dialogue on issues that had not been resolved for some years. There hasn't been a bilateral meeting like this with Uzbekistan for a long time.

Unfortunately the events in Andizhan on May 13–14, which brought to our territory Uzbek citizens seeking refuge, have complicated our relationship. These persons came to us in great need, and, in accordance with our international obligations, we gave them refuge. For two and a half months they were on our territory, and then our leadership decided to send them to a third country. That decision clearly didn't correspond to the interests of Uzbekistan, and therefore today we speak of course about a certain complication of relations between our countries. But we hope that in spite of all the difficulties that may have followed from such a decision, and despite the cooling of our relations, we will be able to find common ground.