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Kyrgyzstan

Popular insurrection opens new page of history

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Braving the bullets of the forces of repression, thousands of demonstrators seized the “White House”, seat of the central authorities and the presidency on April 7, Bichkek, in Kyrgyzstan.

The demonstrators, first gathering to protest against the arrest of oppositionists, were attacked by the forces of repression and replied immediately with stones, charging the police squads who had fired on them, disarming them and overcoming the trucks and armoured vehicles of the police, taking over the television, freeing political prisoners, seizing several administrative buildings and finally the seat of the presidency and the villa of president Kurmanbek Bakiyev, forcing the latter to flee. The popular insurrection overthrew the regime, at the price of at least 83 dead and more than 1,500 wounded in the capital alone.

An unstable regime

Contrary to the neighbouring post-Soviet republics, where the Kremlin had set up a renovated central bureaucratic apparatus, strengthened and prepared for capitalist restoration during the 1980s, the bureaucracy of Kyrgyzstan made the leap into the capitalist system on the basis of division. The real privileges of the bureaucrats did not allow them to constitute a private capital. It was thus state functions, ensuring the control of the mechanisms of privatisation and state finances, which constituted the privileged path to a rapid primitive accumulation of capital, in particular in a country at a low level of industrialisation and without a great number of enterprise directors, the first candidates to their private appropriation. The history of independent Kyrgyzstan (since August 31, 1991) is that of struggles inside the new bureaucratic elite, largely originating from the layers who headed the state in 1990. Struggles by wage earners, the big losers in the private appropriation of public goods, broke out on a cyclical basis to disturb the game.

From June to August 1990 popular confrontations in Och and Uzgen, provoked by increased unemployment (22.8% of the local population) and a housing shortage, transformed into an ethnic conflict between Kazakhs and Uzbeks, repressed by an intervention by the Soviet army, opened the road to a Democratic Movement of Kyrgyzstan, formed by intellectuals and intermediary bureaucrats. This opposition demanded the overthrow of Absamet Masaliyev, an old member of the Political Bureau of the CPSU, president of the Supreme Soviet of the Republic. In October 1990 the Supreme Soviet proved incapable of choosing the president of the Republic – a new post created in the context of the reforms of the regime – between the candidates originating from the traditional nomenklatura, Masaliev and the first Kyrgyz minister, Apas Jumagulov.

It was an “outside” candidate, Askar Akayev, a member of the party but not the highest nomenklatura, president of the Kyrgyz Academy of Sciences, considered initially as a liberal, who was chosen. Elected president of the independent Kyrgyzstan during an uncontested election in December 1991, he set up his administration by drawing on his intellectual friends, thus destabilising the traditional bureaucratic elites.

Rapidly a part of the liberal intellectuals became disenchanted while Akayev oriented the regime towards an authoritarian presidentialism. Favourable to privatisation, he granted to himself and his cronies special privileges through Parliament, of which he had ensured himself the control. Ideologically disoriented and divided, the “democratic” opposition was not capable of affirming itself. In 1992 the biggest opposition party, Erk (Liberty), split into two, Erkin (conservative) and Ata-Meken (Homeland, which joined the Socialist International), while the old bureaucratic elite reconstituted the Communist Party. The budget resources fell following privatisations, the possibilities of private accumulation for the members of the elite were reduced and political tensions sharpened. In

the middle of the 1990s social discontent began to grow, as the pauperisation of the population increased [1].

Akayev did however succeed in getting re-elected in 2000 although the elections were rigged. In March 2002 he ordered firing on demonstrators who protested at Jalal-Abad against the arrest of a parliamentarian, while in May the police brutally dispersed a similar demonstration in Bichkek. A popular movement demanding his resignation, broader than the traditional political opposition, began to develop. His term expiring in 2005, Akayev began to prepare a dynastic succession, ensuring the election to Parliament of his son Aidar and daughter Bermet. But he had overestimated his strength. One week after the parliamentary elections, on March 18, 2005, massive demonstrations broke out in Jalal-Abad, Och, Toktogul, Pulgon and finally Bichkek, the capital. The people occupied administrative premises and arrested regional leaders. The opposition unified around Rosa Otounbayeva, a former minister, and Karmanbek Bakiyev, former Prime Minister. On March 24 the oppositionists took control of the seat of government and the television, and president Akayev fled. The police force dispersed or went over to the opposition. The prime minister resigned and the March elections were annulled, while Kurmanbek Bakiyev was named Prime Minister and interim president, then elected president in July 2005. The "revolution of the tulips" during which the opposition benefited from Western material aid, had won the day.

Bakiyev rapidly followed the road of his predecessor, discarding those who had brought him to power, tightening his regime around a clientelist base in the south of the country (the region of Jalal-Abad and Och), practicing nepotism and corruption. He took control of the media and began to intimidate opponents: after 2007, a number of them were attacked by persons unknown while others were found dead in mysterious circumstances. In July 2009, Bakiyev rigged the presidential election, declaring himself winner with 78% of the vote, whereas the true result, discovered after his downfall in the office of his brother, head of national security, placed him in third position and gave 52% of the vote to the social democrat Almazbek Atambaev. After this election he tightened the regime still more around his cronies, naming his son, Maksim, as head of the Central Agency for Development, Investment and Innovation, which controlled the finances of the country. His brother, Zhanybek, already directed the Security Services. The regime privatised all the sectors of the economy. The years of drought, added to the pillage by the presidential team of the resources of this poor country [2] and harshly hit by the rise in price of raw materials, rendered living conditions unacceptable: daily electricity cuts, lack of running water, increase in food prices. In January the regime imposed a big increase in the price of services and announced a second wave of increased for July. Bakiyev had previously sold the energy companies at a very low price to companies controlled by his friends.

Path to insurrection

The rise in social tension was perceptible from the arrival of the bills in January: "Whereas they spent 20-30% of their wages to pay them, now they would spend around 80 % to pay for services" said a Bichkek analyst in early February [3]. On February 24 several hundred people demonstrated against the energy price rises in Naryn, at the centre of the country. The regional authorities promised to allow them to submit their demands. On March 10 several thousand again demonstrated in Naryn, now demanding the dismissal of the president's son. On March 17 the oppositionists protested massively in Bichkek. On March 31 the regime had the court in Bichkek ban an over-independent newspaper, Forum, following the publication of the verses of a Kyrgyz poet: the terms "In a period of crisis each son of the homeland should turn into lightning" were considered as an "incitation to the organisation of a coup d'État".

In March, in an attempt to mobilise his troops, Bakiyev began to set up "kurultai", meetings of notables inspired by Kyrgyz tradition. But the idea was taken up by the opposition parties and the social movements, who also organised "kurultai", much bigger and which became embryos of civic self-organisation. The reaction of the regime was to forbid these "illegal assemblies" and multiply arrests, but the effect was to boost the popular mobilisations.

On April 6 in the city of Talas, following the arrest of Bolotbek Scherniyazov, director of the party Ata-Meken

(Homeland), who had prepared a national meeting of self-organised “kurultai”, planned for April 7, several thousand demonstrators confronted the police, seized the building of the regional administration, constructed barricades defended with Molotov cocktails, occupied the airport and blocked the runways. The insurgents in Talas also installed a “governor of the people”.

Leaflets were addressed to the forces of repression: “Today the government uses you for its own goals. It imposes on you actions contrary to the law, it makes you attack opposition activists and the people who protest. Decide yourselves. We have confidence in your intelligence and your dignity. Think of your parents, brothers and sisters, your neighbours and friends, who must bear humiliation to live. Don't forget that your children and your grandchildren grow up and want to be proud of their parents. The authorities remind you of your oath and your obligations to preserve the order. But the holy oath is a symbol of loyalty towards the homeland and not towards the Bakiyev family. You have taken the oath to preserve law and order, to be in the service of the people! We hope that you will respect this oath. A day will come when the reigning family will disappear and the time will come when everyone has to take responsibility. Down with Bakiyev! Enough of his familial law! Power should belong to the people!”

On April 7 the demonstrations spread in the capital, Bichkek, and overthrew the regime of Bakiyev. The forces of repression opened fire but were overcome by the people. The parties of the opposition set up a Central Executive Committee of the “Popular Kurultai of Kyrgyzstan” which in its first resolution announced: “So as to guarantee public safety and respect for the law, to prevent pillage and ensure the return to public life, the Central Executive Committee of the Popular Kurultai has decided to form a popular militia, to appoint Madylbekov Turat commander of the city of Bichkek, to submit all the bodies of protection of order and all military personnel to the commander of Bichkek, to transfer all the resources of Internal Affairs to the commander of the city of Bichkek” Detachments of 40-50 popular militia members, originating from groups of insurgent youth, patrolled the city.

The appeals addressed to the police and soldiers had an effect when it appeared that the latter could choose between two powers, that of Bakiyev, which was collapsing, and that of the insurgents which began to build itself. Little by little the majority of state employees chose the popular camp.

The Bakiyev regime fell. Bakiyev himself fled to the south of the country, where he organised meetings in his support in his home village and in Jalal-Abad, but with little success. Journalists who were there say that only a third of the people gathered (between several hundred and several thousand) applauded him, the others preferring to hedge their bets. In Jalal-Abad most people deserted the streets when he arrived, for fear of confrontation or out of hostility. In Och, shots disturbed a meeting of several thousand people organised by Bakiyev, forcing him to flee. Some members of parliament for his party, Ak-Zhol, who held 75 out of 90 seats in Parliament, demanded his resignation. The president also tried to obtain a military intervention by UN troops or the Kazakh or Uzbek armies, without success. He tried to negotiate the conditions of his resignation and finally, on April 16, he left the country with the help of the authorities in Kazakhstan.

Provisional government

In the name of the “Popular Kurtulai”, Rosa Otounbayeva took the head of a provisional government, announcing a new Constitution, the return to parliamentarianism, a new electoral code and elections within six months. Noting that Bakiyev had emptied the state coffers by transferring the funds to private banks, the provisional government took control of the six private banks and closed the bureaux de change to try to prevent capital flight. There is also talk of renationalising the assets privatised by Bakiyev and the enterprises in strategic branches. Rosa Otounbayeva has admitted that the new regime has only found 22 million dollars in the state coffers, but has promised to lower rates for communal services.

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The provisional government was set up by three political parties – the Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan, the Socialist Party Ata-Meken, the Ak-Choumkar Party – grouped inside the United Popular Movement, as well as by several non-governmental, trade union and independent associative organisations. However from its constitution those who had taken the “White House” have made known their discontent, demanding a third of governmental seats, which they have not obtained.

The main ministers in the provisional government are not unknown. All have already occupied ministerial or parliamentary posts or have been top civil servants. Rosa Otounbayeva had been a Soviet diplomat, then Prime Minister and Foreign Minister under Akayev and Bakiyev and ambassador of these two presidents. Currently leader of the SDPK, she has a reputation as incorruptible and does not seem to be involved in the factional struggles of the opposition, which was enough to place her at the head of the provisional government. Her first deputy, in charge of the economy, Almazbek Atambayev, director of the SDPK, was a minister under Bakiyev in 2005-2006, then oppositionist, then prime minister in 2007, then his adversary at the presidential election of 2009. General Ismail Isakov, the new head of the army and police, was minister of Defence and head of the Security Council under Bakiyev, who had him sentenced to eight years in prison in January 2010 after he had joined the opposition in October 2009. Temir Sariyev, in charge of finances, was the presidential candidate of the Ak-Choumkar Party in 2009. Justice minister Azimbek Beknazarov has been prosecutor general. The charismatic leader of the Socialist Party Ata Meken, responsible for constitutional reform, Omurbek Tekebaev, led the opposition to the Akayev regime, was candidate for president in 1995 and 2000, then president of the Parliament in 2005, then supported Bakiyev then broke with him in 2006. Finally Abdygany Erkebaev, founder and first president of the SDPK, was president of the Parliament, then leader of the opposition shadow cabinet formed in 2008.

As in any popular insurrection, when the workers do not have their own representation and political project it is the groups constituted – in Kyrgyzstan today the political parties formed by the elites previously carved out of power – who take the initiative. In the north of the country at least they now enjoy popular support, but not a blank cheque. Thus a report from Al Jazeera recently showed the homeless of Bichkek dividing up land in order to build houses. “The land doesn’t belong to them, this has no validity” said a member of the militias of the provisional government who arrived at the scene. But he did nothing to remove the stones which had been put in place to mark out the land. Conflicts also broke out when Otounbayeva let it be understood that she was ready to let Bakiyev leave if he formally resigned the presidency. Demands to judge him for his crimes immediately appeared and finally the provisional government announced that it would not negotiate with the criminal and the latter would be arrested and judged as soon as possible.

The vice-president of the Ata-Meken party, Rayshan Jeenbekov, has said: “If we resolve the socio-economic problems in one or two months, then this government will stabilise and can last perhaps longer. But if we do not resolve these problems, if we are not capable of punishing all the guilty of the authoritarian regime of Bakiyev, then we will face a big question.” [\[4\]](#)

The parties who took the head of the insurrection and formed the provisional government had a democratic project – parliamentarianism, the reject of autocracy and so on – but no programme of social transformation which would improve the lives of the great majority of the population, nor even an imagination allowing an orientation in this direction. The balance of failure of the USSR renders this imagination difficult. The forms of self-organisation which began to emerge in March – the popular kurtulai – rapidly turned towards insurrectional combat, their most active members took up arms, but discussions on a social project did not develop. To feed, clothe and house themselves, people were left to their own devices, forms of collective action in this area were slow to appear. The low level of industrialisation of the country does not lead naturally to self-organisation in the workplaces.

Finally, Kyrgyzstan represents a strategic base in central Asia. The existence on its territory of Russian and US military bases witnesses to the fact, as does the latent conflict between the two powers. These bases were not at the centre of the preoccupations of the insurgents. The Russian and US governments, surprised by the popular

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explosion, aspire above all to re-establish social peace in Kyrgyzstan. To do this they are ready to provide financial aid to the provisional government. But this aid is not given solely to secure their bases, it will be conditional on the ability of the new regime to control the population and preserve the social model whose bankruptcy since 1991 needs no further demonstration.

The Kyrgyz popular insurrection is a magnificent example of what the oppressed are capable of in overthrowing an autocracy. It has broken down one of the doors blocking social transformation. It has rendered more fragile private ownership of the means of production by putting pressure on the most significant swindlers at the moment – the Bakiyev family. It is both enormous and insufficient. In order for the revolution to grow into a social transformation, an emancipatory popular revolution, the people must construct their own forms of self-organisation, find a programme and equip themselves with a strategy.

A new page of history has opened in Kyrgyzstan. The rest remains to be written!

[1] See Glenn E. Curtis, *Kyrgyzstan, A Country Study*, in Lydia M. Buyers (ed.), *Central Asia in Focus: Political and Economic Issues*, Nova Publishers, New York 2003

[2] According to the IMF income per head in Kyrgyzstan was 2,227 dollars (around 1,640 euros) in 2009, placing it in 138th position of the 181 countries included

[3] Mars Sarlev, quoted by Liat Asman, *Kyrgyzstan: Utility price hike squeezes citizens*, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insightb/articles/eav020810.shtml>

[4] Interview Radio Free Europe - Radio Liberty, April 9, 2010:
http://www.rferl.org/content/Interview_Kyrgyz_Opposition_Leader_Says_Criminal_Authoritarian_Regime_Ousted/2007941.html