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# **A Culture of Protests: The Government Overthrow in the Kyrgyz Republic in 2010**

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## **Abstract**

This paper analyzes the process and dynamics of the protests in the Kyrgyz Republic that led to the April 7, 2010 overthrow of the government of President Kurmanbek Bakiev. The paper argues that the government overthrow was not a sudden event; rather it was a continuation of a long succession of protests and violence that had been occurring for years. The Kyrgyz Republic has an endemic problem of solving all political and social problems through street protests and violence. The long-term trend is worrisome, as street protests are likely to continue into the future unless the government and the opposition find a way to address legitimate grievances through democratic institutions. This paper examines the history of Kyrgyz protests by comparing the protests in 2002, the government overthrow in 2005, and the events immediately prior to the 2010 collapse of the government. It suggests that the framework for the protests was similar in all three cases and that government attacks on local political entrepreneurs motivated the public to respond. The ineffective use of government force that followed incensed, but did not overwhelm, the protesters.

## Introduction

On April 7, 2010, angry mobs carrying guns filled the central square in Bishkek, Kyrgyz Republic, and after only a few hours of conflict between the armed protesters and security personnel in front of the White House, President Kurmanbek Bakiev fled his office. Almost exactly five years prior, on March 24, 2005, after ten weeks of protests across the country, President Askar Akayev fled the country when crowds of unarmed protesters stormed the White House. Unlike 2010, in 2005, no one was killed in the protests.

These two government overthrows were not isolated events. This paper argues that they were the most violent and most severe in a long succession of protests that have occurred periodically for months and years at a time. In other words, the Kyrgyz Republic has adopted a culture of protest. Demonstrations and protests are the first response for any disgruntled political figure, angry citizen, opposition leader, or nongovernmental organization. With no apparent progress toward a more genuinely democratic, peaceful way of resolving political disputes, the default will continue to be to solve all political and social problems through street protests.

This paper examines the political protests in 2002, 2005, and 2010 to identify key attributes of the process and the outcome of the political events. The sudden collapse of the Kyrgyz government in 2005 and 2010 surprised Western policy makers, government officials, and academics. Traditional theories of protest behavior, as well as democracy promotion policy, provide poor explanations for the political overthrow and sudden violence in the Kyrgyz Republic. The role of international democracy funding, Western government influence, and local civil society were minor and relatively unimportant in determining the final outcome in either event.

There are some important similarities between the 2005 and 2010 protests. Neither of the protest movements was about democracy promotion, external or internal NGO support, or freedom of the media. Both overthrows were initiated by local political entrepreneurs motivated by financial and personal incentives who took advantage of public discontent and incorporated it into their own agendas. Both were exacerbated by a weak central government unwilling or inept at using deadly force, and the public perception that the central government made individuals' lives worse.

This paper focuses on the two most important factors common in all three (2002, 2005, and 2010) political protests: 1) a popular leader(s) attacked by the government and 2) an overreaction by security forces. Two other issues—economic grievances and the limited role of the international community—were also of minor importance in 2010.

The findings of this paper help to explain the dynamics of succession in an unstable region. By understanding the causes, conditions, and process of the protests in the Kyrgyz Republic, this paper hopes to provide insight into the fundamental societal dynamics that can lead to political overthrow. The stability of the Kyrgyz Republic's neighboring regimes—Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan—differs, as does their ability to withstand mass protest movements; however, it is unclear to what degree these states may also have hollow internal political structures that could collapse if faced with a sudden and unexpected mass movement. The collapse of any of these states would have a greater impact than the recent Kyrgyz turmoil on regional and international security.

The Kyrgyz Republic is a useful case to examine, as it is both an example of an extremely reactive protest dynamic and it is similar to regional states in the important role played by political entrepreneurs. Over the last several years, small protests in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan have supported local political entrepreneurs who have been attacked by their respective national governments. In these countries, the culture of protest is not yet endemic and the national governments have been willing to use sufficient force to quell any small protests. However, local political entrepreneurs in these countries are well aware of the events in the Kyrgyz Republic in 2002, 2005, and 2010, and many are waiting for the right opportunity to push back against the power structures in their own countries.

## Data

This paper is based on three primary sources. The first is an extensive event database at Georgetown University that has records of all significant political actions and violent events that took place anywhere in the Kyrgyz Republic from January 1, 2010 to October 31, 2010, as recorded by electronic news sources. This database, while lacking some nuances, provides a key reference point to show the pattern of localized protests leading to both the April and June 2010 events.<sup>1</sup>

The second source is first-hand field interviews. The author conducted several months of extensive field interviews immediately after the spring 2005 events. Less extensive interviews were also carried out across the country in the summer and fall of 2010, and brief research trips in 2007 and 2008 contributed to the data. Interviews were conducted with NGO leaders, opposition leaders, members of government, international observers, and local citizens to identify details about the events as well as general attitudes and beliefs toward the government and protest events. These were not systematic or randomized interviews; rather, they were in-depth discussions with a small sample of individuals that were not statistically representative.

The third source is a survey from the International Republican Institute (IRI). From May 11 to May 25, 2010, the IRI carried out its annual survey in the Kyrgyz Republic on perceptions and attitudes toward standard of living, the government, security, democracy, etc. IRI, in partnership with Baltic Surveys and The Gallup Organization, and funded by USAID, have regularly surveyed this population since 2005. I obtained a paper copy with summary results from 2010 and some comparison results from 2009 and 2005.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kyrgyzstan Event Database, Georgetown University, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Kyrgyzstan National Opinion Poll, May 2010, International Republican Institute, Baltic Surveys Ltd., The Gallup Organization, Agency SIAR-Bishkek and the United States Agency for International Development.

**Table 1: Key Events**

1990	June	Kyrgyz Uzbek ethnic violence (171 killed)
1990	Oct	President Askar Akyev elected
2002	March	Ak Sai protests (5 killed)
2005	March	President Akyev overthrown
2010	April	President Bakiev overthrown (85 killed)
2010	June	Kyrgyz-Uzbek ethnic violence (490 killed)

### **Ak Sai, March 2002**

While the Kyrgyz Republic has a long history of local protests and ethnic violence, the 2002 political protests were the first time political protests led to violence that directly impacted the national government. The 2002 events were a rallying point for both the 2005 and the 2010 protests.<sup>3</sup>

A key issue from early 2000 to 2002 was the privatization of agricultural land. In March 2002, five people were killed and as many as 62 wounded when police fired on a crowd protesting outside the southern city of Kerben, Kyrgyz Republic.<sup>4</sup> The crowd had gathered to protest the imprisonment of a popular local politician, Azimbek Beknazarov. A parliamentarian from the southern region of Jalal-Abad, he had previously been a regional prosecutor and was accused of improper conduct. Political analysts and opposition leaders believed that the real reason for his arrest was his outspoken criticism of President Askar Akyev and of several land deals that Akyev had concluded with China. Almost immediately upon his arrest, crowds formed in the town of Kara-Suu in the Jalal-Abad region to protest. Several hundred supporters went on a hunger strike to demand his release. A few days after his trial started, the crowd in Kara-Suu took eight regional government officials hostage and seized the local government building.<sup>5</sup>

As the trial concluded, thousands of demonstrators gathered, blocking roads and marching toward the courthouse.<sup>6</sup> Police intervened to stop the gathering and fired into the crowd, killing 5 people and wounding many more.<sup>7</sup> Kurmanbek Bakiev, one of the leaders of the March 2005 protests and a future president, was prime minister at the time of the Ak-Sai shootings. Later in 2002, he “accused people of ‘provoking mass disorder’ in the village of Kerben in the province of Jalal-Abad. He said law-enforcement officials were forced to fire in self-defense when the protest turned violent.”<sup>8</sup>

<sup>3</sup> The 1990 violence was primarily ethnic in nature and did not start with political protests.

<sup>4</sup> Jones, "Land Privatization and Conflict: Is Kyrgyzstan a Model?," 259.

<sup>5</sup> RFE/RL, February 19, 2002

<sup>6</sup> RFE/RL, March 18, 2002

<sup>7</sup> The actual process of the shooting will never be completely understood, but it is clear that the police fired on an unarmed crowd.

<sup>8</sup> RFE/RL, March 18, 2002

The outcome of these events for the public was an indictment of the security services and an increase in distrust of the police. The outcome for the police was a fear of using force on a crowd. In 2005 interviews, many security force members referenced the events in 2002 as strongly influencing their lack of interest in engaging protesting crowds. The immediate outcome of the shooting was that Beknazarov was released from prison under the condition that he would try to stop the protests.

The tactics of the March 2002 protests, the blocking of roads, the seizing of government buildings, the taking of hostages, the large-scale local protests, etc., were all reused in March 2005 and April 2010. In the language of scholar Sidney Tarrow, these had become part of the “repertoire of contention.”<sup>9</sup> The March 2002 events established boundaries for what protests could accomplish and how the mechanisms of protest should be implemented. A key lesson was that a crowd of popular protesters could collapse a government. Weeks after the shooting, the prime minister and the government were forced to resign. This was the first time that a government in the former Soviet Union had been forced to resign because of popular protests. Interviewees in both 2005 and 2010 referenced the events in Ak-Sai. These events cumulatively served as an important emotional and practical reference point for future protesters. As one local reporter commented, “Aksai was not financed. It started in the fields and was only about ideology.”<sup>10</sup> They also set the pattern that is found in the 2005 and 2010 protests: 1) popular leader(s) were attacked by the government and 2) an overreaction by security forces led to a collapse of the government.

### **Bishkek, March 2005**

This section provides an overview of the 2005 events that set the context for 2010.<sup>11</sup> Similar to the Ak-Sai protests, in 2005, the government alienated local political leaders, and the central government increased physical pressure on protesters and opposition leaders through the ineffective deployment of security forces. The government’s political repression was the most important factor in the protest’s increased intensity and in the collapse of the Akayev government. In essence, the government miscalculated the protesters’ relative strength and their ability to respond to repression.

As early as mid-January 2005, months ahead of the March parliamentary elections, protests started in Bishkek. By February, protests had started up in isolated communities throughout the Kyrgyz Republic. The earliest protests began independently, without contact between protesters or regions.

In response, the government acted mostly forcefully against the various political entrepreneurs running for parliamentary positions. On January 7, a regional court ruled that five former diplomats could not run for office, because they had failed to live continuously in the country for the mandated five years prior to running.<sup>12</sup> One of the diplomats, Roza Otunbaeva, was the

<sup>9</sup>Tarrow, *Power in Movement : Social Movements and Contentious Politics*, 20.

<sup>10</sup> Interviewee #24. Interviewed by Author. Kyrgyz Republic, 2005.

<sup>11</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the 2005 events see Kevin D Jones, *The Dynamics of Civil Protests: A Case Study of Protests in the Kyrgyz Republic*, Doctoral Dissertation, University of Maryland, May 2007.

<sup>12</sup> OSCE, “The Kyrgyz Republic: Election Observation Mission Final Report”, 10.

former ambassador to the United Kingdom and the United States, and a leading candidate for the presidential elections that fall. Supporters of Otunbaeva protested this exclusion in the capital from January 8 until January 31.

In mid-February, several other popular local politicians were excluded from running because of minor infractions of the election code. On February 19, about a week prior to the elections, crowds in the eastern town of Kochkor blocked roads to protest their local candidate's exclusion. A few days later, in the far eastern town of Kara Kol, a crowd of about 750 protesters picketed a local district court, and another 300 blocked an important transit road to the eastern region. At the same time, in the far-western town of Talas, a former Akayev supporter and government official was also prevented from running, and more than 1,300 of his supporters protested at a district court.

In one of the largest protests, more than 3,000 supporters of two excluded local candidates blocked the road to the poorest region in the country, Naryn. On February 23, the former prime minister, Bakiev, visited and spoke with these protesters—the first link between protesters and national opposition leaders.<sup>13</sup> The following Wednesday, before the elections, protesters continued to block key roads, and in the late afternoon in the eastern city of Balykchy, protesters for the first time seized a local administrative building.

As an indication that the protesters were primarily interested in supporting their local candidates, protesters in the town of Typ dispersed after a local court reinstated their candidate. The next day, February 24, the Supreme Court upheld the cancellation of five popular candidates, prompting an immediate increase in local protests, including among supporters of A. Japarov, who had seized a government district building in Kochkor.<sup>14</sup>

Throughout the first and second rounds of parliamentary elections, local supporters took to the streets to support their local leaders. For example, immediately after the election results were announced, 600 supporters of A. Tolonov blocked roads and key north-south traffic in the town of Kara Suu in Osh oblast; three thousand supporters of T. Alimov protested in the streets in Aravan, Osh; 10,000 supporters of Dooronbek Sadyrbaev marched on the mayor's office in Nooken, Jalal-Abad; and finally a few hundred people gathered in Bishkek, "waving yellow and pink banners."<sup>15</sup> In general, the largest protests were in the south because more candidates lost their seats through the election process in the south.

On Monday, March 14, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) criticized the second round of the elections for almost the same reasons as it criticized the first. Protesters in the south and in the west immediately responded with large-scale protests. One thousand supporters of A. Madumarov took over the local government office in the southern town of Uzgen, and in a village to the south of Osh, supporters of M. Sultanov blocked the

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<sup>13</sup> EurasiaDigest, 2-28, Akipress

<sup>14</sup> EurasiaDigest, 2-28, GazteaKG, AKIpress EurasiaDigest, 2-24, 10:06, RFE/RL EurasiaDigest, 2-28, Kabar

<sup>15</sup> EurasiaDigest, 3-07, 9:33EST, Burke AFP, 03-01, 2:05GMT  
EurasiaDigest, 3-07, 9:33EST, BurkeAFP, 03-01, 2:05GMT  
EurasiaDigest, 3-07, 9:33EST, Burke  
AFP, 03-03, 10:25GMT, AFP, 2-28, 1:12PM GMT, Coleman

roads.<sup>16,17</sup> In Talas, 2,000 supporters of R. Dzheenbekov gathered at the Oblast Administration, and another 3,000 blocked the road between Talas and Taraz, Kazakhstan.<sup>18</sup> After protesting for several hours in front of the Oblast Administration building, the protesters broke past police barricades and seized the central government building.<sup>19</sup> They held both the governor of Talas and the head of Bakay-Ata district administration as hostages.<sup>20</sup> Protesters now controlled the Jalal-Abad and the Talas governor's offices.

On March 15, in Jalal-Abad, the opposition organized a "Kurultai," an ancient gathering dating back to the selection of Khans and Emirs with the purpose of electing a ruler. The gathering and the leader it selected had no legal authority, but the selection process served as powerful reminders of ancient customs. Reports differed, but somewhere from about 5,000 to 15,000 protesters and representatives from throughout the region gathered at the March 15 Kurultai.<sup>21</sup> The selection process was shown to be orderly and well-managed. The main opposition leaders appeared and spoke, and Kurmanbek Bakiev was selected as the representative leader of the people.<sup>22</sup>

After the Kurultai, the protests' motivation shifted from supporting local political entrepreneurs to demonstrating in response to steadily increasing government repression. Believing that stronger force was necessary to retake control of the regional government offices, on the morning of March 20, at approximately 5:30 am, Ministry of the Interior Special Forces stormed the government buildings in Osh and Jalal-Abad and physically removed all of the protesters.<sup>23</sup>

According to protester interviews, "each of the men had a police stick. They didn't differentiate [between] ladies or men, they beat up everybody, pulled their hair. We tried to prevent them from beating up youngsters, but we got beaten severely."<sup>24</sup> As the protesters were taken away in two Kamaz trucks, younger protesters jumped off the back of the trucks fearing that they were to be shot.

One middle-aged woman stated, "I personally thought that I will die, but when we came to Suzak and they told us to write explanatory letter I started thinking that I will live further. They scared us so much that I thought I will be killed. And then they drove us home, they thought that now we are scared and will not do anything."<sup>25</sup> This woman returned to the square later in the day, and rejoined the growing protest. News of the attack on women and children spread quickly, as did untrue rumors that up to as many as ten protesters had been killed.

The government's harsh reaction sparked the opposition and galvanized support from throughout the region. More than 10,000 protesters marched on the government building in Jalal-Abad that same afternoon. About 2,000 were armed with sticks and stones and used a bus to break down the police building. They burned the Interior Services building and the prosecutor's office. More

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<sup>16</sup> AFP, 03-14, 5:30PM, GMT

<sup>17</sup> EurasiaDigest, 3-15, 10:12EST

<sup>18</sup> Interfax, 03-14, 1556 GMT

<sup>19</sup> AKIpress 03-14, 15:30GMT

<sup>20</sup> Interfax, 03-15, 7:01GMT

<sup>21</sup> According to video footage reviewed by the author the number appears to be much closer to 5,000.

<sup>22</sup> AFP, 03-15, 11:45GMT

<sup>23</sup> ITAR-TASS, 03-20

<sup>24</sup> Interviewee #51. Interviewed by Author. Kyrgyz Republic, 2005.

<sup>25</sup> Interviewee #51. Interviewed by Author. Kyrgyz Republic, 2005.

than 700 protesters moved into the Governor's building, hanging banners out the window demanding Akayev's resignation.<sup>26</sup> This was one of the earliest public demands that Akayev leave office.

Two days later, on the afternoon of March 23, a group of NGOs held a rally in Bishkek with the goal of providing information about events in the south of the country. The gathering included students from Bergi, Kel-Kel, and the American University.<sup>27</sup> Most of the speakers were civil society leaders who had not been involved in the protests until that point. The meeting was eventually broken up by drunks sent into the crowd as *agent provocateurs* and police, who arrested the civil society leaders.<sup>28</sup>

The opposition agreed to stage demonstrations in three places in Bishkek the following day: near Osh Bazaar (the Nazeraliev center), Koch Jor, and behind the Jorgo Kenesh. The idea was to have separate protests so that it would be difficult for the police to break them up.<sup>29</sup> According to organizational leaders, they expected to spend more than a week, possibly up to ten days, in the square. They planned to set up yurts, to have cooking locations, and to have water brought in. They did not anticipate that it would all be over in a few hours.<sup>30</sup>

By 10 am on March 24, the crowd in front of the Nazeraliev center was growing. Traders from the nearby Osh bazaar called out to each other to go to the protest, and nearly the entire bazaar shut down, similar to what had happened in Jalal-Abad. The crowd contained many different groups, each with placards representing their region and political leader. The event was well organized enough that the groups had time to arrive, organize, and make placards. There were representatives from all over the country—Naryn, Koch Kor, Jalal-Abad, Talas, Osh, etc. The crowd listened to speeches before starting to walk the few miles to the White House. The crowd grew in size as it went through the streets. People were reported to be getting off buses, leaving from the sidewalk, and coming out of shops to join in the street march. All of the known opposition leaders had gathered at the front and led the march.

Very few members of the crowd had any idea of what was going to happen or what the plan was once they reached the White House. The loudest chants were for Akayev to leave, but few believed that it would actually happen. The leaders urged the crowd to be prepared to stay on for many days and reminded the people that, "We've come to get a change in government." They expected a long peaceful demonstration that could lead to an orderly transfer of power.<sup>31</sup>

As they walked down the main boulevard, blocking all four lanes of traffic, toward the White House and the central square, the peaceful march proceeded unimpeded. Both photographs and eyewitness reports detail the extent of the crowd—it stretched for miles down the road. Finally, the group moved past the White House and gathered in front of the new liberty statue.

After a few speeches that were given from the side of the park between the White House and the crowd, young men started running toward the crowd with shields, wearing helmets and blue

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<sup>26</sup> AFP, 3-20, 5:08GMT

<sup>27</sup> Interviewee #40. Interviewed by Author. Kyrgyz Republic, 2005.

<sup>28</sup> Interviewee #21. Interviewed by Author. Kyrgyz Republic, 2005.

<sup>29</sup> Interviewee #18. Interviewed by Author. Kyrgyz Republic, 2005.

<sup>30</sup> Interviewee #01. Interviewed by Author. Kyrgyz Republic, 2005.

<sup>31</sup> Interviewee #54. Interviewed by Author. Kyrgyz Republic, 2005.

ribbons, and throwing stones at the protesters. At first, the crowd dispersed, moving toward the edges of the square. Opposition leaders called out to the members of the crowd to restrain themselves and to seek shelter on the other side of the square, but the “crowd was not able to restrain themselves very long.”<sup>32</sup> The young men in the protest crowd were not going to have a small group of men throw stones at them; they picked up the stones thrown at them and started to throw them back. People ran away toward the buildings for safety, but when the crowd saw that they had all of the stones, they took them and started to throw them back.<sup>33</sup> A participant stated, “None of the people would have gone to the White House if rocks had not been thrown.”<sup>34</sup>

A small group of police, many of them on horses, came down the main avenue (Chui Prospect) and pushed the crowd back. But the crowd surged back toward the police, who quickly scattered and ran to the gates; some of the police were caught and beaten by the crowd. One young protester seized a police horse and galloped around waving a flag and encouraging the protesters. By then, some of the protesters had pushed up against the gates of the White House. Between the first and second backlash, a crowd of about a 100 young men arrived from Osh wearing yellow ribbons. They were sportsman trained in the south and served as an important catalyst in responding to the police.<sup>35</sup> They marched to the gates of the White House, broke down or climbed over the fence surrounding it, and broke into the building.

No one remained to defend the building. Akayev had left the White House about a half hour before it was stormed. A few of his senior government officials remained in the building and were beaten. According to a Moscow radio interview with Akayev, the last order that he gave was that force should not be used to prevent the taking of the White House.<sup>36</sup>

From hours of interviews, it is clear that the protesters, even the “sportsman” who arrived from the south, did not intend to overthrow the government through a violent clash. The Akayev government minimally repressed the crowd, which angered but did not subdue it.

### **Bishkek, April 2010<sup>37</sup>**

In the spring and summer of 2007, street protests resumed, with former government officials calling for President Bakiev’s resignation. In late fall 2007, Bakiev forced through parliament a revised constitution that gave increased powers to the president and led to the dissolution of the government and parliamentary elections on December 16, 2007. With little surprise, Bakiev’s

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<sup>32</sup> Interviewee #54. Interviewed by Author. Kyrgyz Republic, 2005.

<sup>33</sup> Interviewee #18. Interviewed by Author. Kyrgyz Republic, 2005.

<sup>34</sup> Interviewee #18. Interviewed by Author. Kyrgyz Republic, 2005.

<sup>35</sup> Interviewee #54. Interviewed by Author. Kyrgyz Republic, 2005.

<sup>36</sup> Ekho Moskvyy (Moscow). March 29, 2005 1318 GMT, in Russian.

<sup>37</sup> Since they have not been previously examined, the analysis of the April 2010 protests receives a much lengthier treatment.

party, Ak Zhol, won 71 out of 90 seats in parliament.<sup>38</sup> According to the OSCE, the elections “failed to meet a number of OSCE commitments.”<sup>39</sup>

Leaders of the Ata Meken party called for the resignation of the president and held small-scale protests and demonstrations in the spring of 2008. The opposition was unorganized and did not have a unified approach. Some opposition leaders were in parliament, including the current president, Rosa Otunbayeva, a representative of the Social Democratic Party. The only issue they agreed on was getting rid of President Bakiev, but they had no unified platform or agenda.

The government continued to lose support throughout 2008, during which there were targeted beatings and killings of journalists, the imprisonment of a former minister, and the suspicious death of a former government official. The Bakiev government was not necessarily directly responsible for these events, but it permitted an environment where individuals and sometimes other countries could act with impunity. The lawlessness gave the country the sense that it was ricocheting out of control.

In addition to the political dynamics, economic and physical hardships played a role in the 2010 protests. In November of 2008, severe power shortages affected the country, with the worst impact felt in Naryn and Osh. The 2009 winter was also extremely harsh. Combined with the power shortages, the weather exposed many people to freezing conditions.

In January 2009, the Kyrgyz government received \$150 million in grants, \$300 million in loans, and \$1.7 billion in business credits from Russia.<sup>40</sup> On February 3, President Bakiev went to Moscow to meet with the Russian president and prime minister. The next day, Bakiev demanded that the United States leave the Manas airbase, north of Bishkek, in 180 days.<sup>41</sup> While both parties denied any quid pro quo, the sequence of events sent a clear message: Bakiev would look toward Russia as its protector and banker, and he didn’t need U.S. support. These events would set the stage for Russia’s actions in early 2010.

In July 2009, the United States and the Kyrgyz Republic reached a new base agreement, with U.S. annual payments increasing from \$17.4 million to \$60 million, in addition to other payments and financial support.<sup>42</sup> Whether Russia had demanded that the Kyrgyz Republic kick out the United States or not, the public message of this later move was that Bakiev would negotiate with whomever he wanted and play the United States and Russia against each other.

In July 2009, Bakiev won a generally uncontested presidential election for another five-year term. According to the OSCE preliminary report:

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<sup>38</sup> “Kyrgyz opposition to hold mass protests against election results”, RIA Novosti, 20/12/2007 9:34. <http://en.rian.ru/world/20071220/93310989.html>

<sup>39</sup> Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions, Bishkek, 17 December 2007. OSCE Election Observation Mission: The Kyrgyz Republic — Pre-term Parliamentary Elections, 16 December 2007 [http://www.osce.org/documents/odihr/2007/12/28916\\_en.pdf](http://www.osce.org/documents/odihr/2007/12/28916_en.pdf)

<sup>40</sup> “Russia transferred \$300M concessional loan to Kyrgyzstan”, 24kg News Agency, March 30, 2009 accessed at <http://eng.24.kg/politic/2009/04/30/7910.html>.

<sup>41</sup> David Trilling and Deirdre Tynan, “Kyrgyzstan: President Bakiyev Wants to Close US Military Base Outside Bishkek” February 2, 2009 accessed at <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insightb/articles/eav020309b.shtml>.

<sup>42</sup> Michael Schwartz and Clifford J. Levy, “In Reversal, Kyrgyzstan Won’t Close A U.S. Base”, *New York Times*, June 23, 2009, accessed at <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/24/world/asia/24base.html>.

[T]he 23 July presidential election failed to meet key OSCE commitments for democratic elections, including the commitment to maintain a clear separation between party and state. Election day was marred by many problems and irregularities, including evidence of ballot box stuffing, inaccuracies in the voter lists and some evidence of multiple voting.<sup>43</sup>

Unlike in 2005, when parliamentary elections led to countrywide protests, the suspect 2009 elections led to few major protests or events. The authorities quickly stopped the few that occurred in the regions. This turn of events reinforces the argument that Kyrgyz protests are less about the national government, and more about local political leaders. When local leaders are challenged, then local citizens will protest.

Indeed, local protests began in early 2010, weeks and months before the March national protests that finally overthrew Bakiev. Two main factors sparked these protests—economic grievances and the arrest of a local political entrepreneur:

A wave of demonstrations is spreading across Kyrgyzstan as the population expresses its anger over recent utility price hikes and the privatization of key state assets. On March 17, 3,000 people rallied outside the Social Democratic Party's headquarters in the outskirts of Bishkek, urging the government to reverse the increase in prices for hot water and electricity introduced January 1.<sup>44</sup>

In both 2005 and in 2010, the population believed that the national government was corrupt and run by the president's family. As local populations struggled economically, the crowds were incensed by the exorbitant wealth of the president's family. In 2005, a popular newspaper printed a listing of Akayev's "private financial investments." In 2010, a Russian paper published a similar list of the financial interests that were controlled directly by President Bakiev's family.

In addition, the population blamed the state for the electricity tariff increases and felt they had a justified grievance. In late November 2009, the government announced a significant increase in electricity tariffs, tariffs that directly impacted almost every citizen. As a regional commentator wrote in early February, "Heating costs are rising by 400 percent; electricity by 170 percent. The price of hot water—a fee calculated according to the size of a resident's dwelling—more than doubled at the start of the year."<sup>45</sup>

The electricity tariffs became one of the most important issues across a wide range of citizens. In the May 2010 IRI survey, respondents said "increased tariffs for electricity" were the second biggest (21%) mistake of the Bakiev government (see Figure 1). When asked, "What was the most important achievement of the interim government?" 32 percent listed "Reducing tariffs on electricity"; the second most common response (at 8 percent) was "Attempts to stabilize situation in the country."<sup>46</sup>

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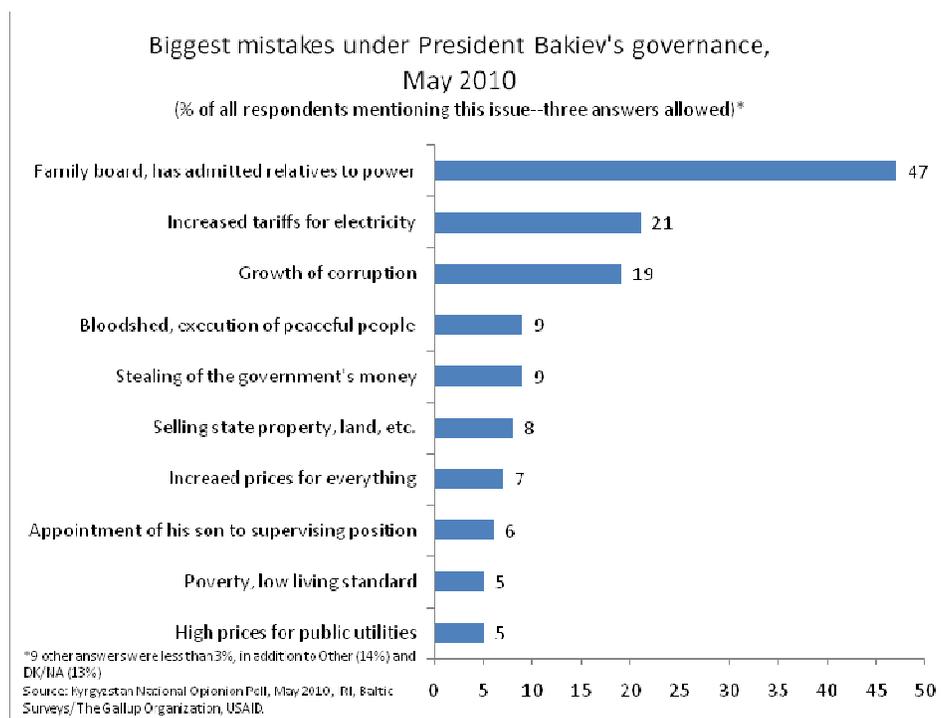
<sup>43</sup> OSCE Election Observation Mission: Kyrgyz Republic—Presidential Elections, 23 July 2009, "Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions", accessed at <http://www.osce.org/node/38266>.

<sup>44</sup> Business News Europe, March 19, 2010, [http://businessnewseurope.eu/story2014/Unrest\\_spreads\\_across\\_Kyrgyzstan](http://businessnewseurope.eu/story2014/Unrest_spreads_across_Kyrgyzstan)

<sup>45</sup> Liat Asman, "Kyrgyzstan: Utility Price Hike Squeezes Citizens", Eurasianet, February 7, 2010.

<sup>46</sup> IRI survey, p28.

Figure 1: Biggest Mistakes Made Under Bakiev's Governance



At the same time that the government announced the increase in electricity tariffs, the winter brought with it record-breaking cold weather and severe power outages. This further incensed the general populace, which saw a decrease in service and an increase in cost. While the tariff increase was implemented nationally, the impact differed by region. For instance, in the Naryn region, where the impact was the most severe, locals protested against both the national issue and local governance structures.

Similar to events in 2002 and 2005, an attack on a popular local political entrepreneur precipitated the protests. In early January, the Bakiyev government arrested and imprisoned Ismail Isakov, a popular politician and a former minister of defense, for corruption and other charges. In response, his supporters in the south launched daily, small-scale protests and hunger strikes. By early April, these protests had grown, and Isakov had come to be seen by a wider group as a symbol of the opposition. He was freed on April 7 by the protesters who overthrew the government, and the interim administration reinstated him to his position as minister of defense.

News articles describing events during a seven-day period from January 8 to 14 show how the electricity tariff increases and support for local political entrepreneurs had melded together by January 11, see Table 2.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Kyrgyzstan Event Data Set, Georgetown University, 2010.

Table 2: Key Events January 2010

1/8/2010	Residents of Naryn Petition Against Utility Rate Hike
1/8/2010	Multiple Apartment Buildings in Jalalabat Cut Off From Heat, Electricity
1/11/2010	Military Court Sentenced Ismail Isakov to Eight Years Imprisonment
1/11/2010	<b>Supporters of Isakov, Detractors of Higher Energy Tariffs Join for Protest in Gulcha</b>
1/12/2010	OND Political Party Announces Hunger Strike to Protest Incarcerations of Opposition Members
1/13/2010	In Bishkek 8 Start Hunger Strike To Protest Imprisonment of Former Defense Minister Ismail Isakov
1/13/2010	In Sopu-Korgon 100 Demonstrate against imprisonment of Isakov
1/14/2010	United Populist Movement Says Governor Ordered Police to Break Up Isakov Supporter's Hunger Strike in Sopu-Korgon
1/14/2010	Kyrgyzstani Press Publishes Prediction that Poverty and Homelessness Will Increase as Result of Increased Energy Tariffs

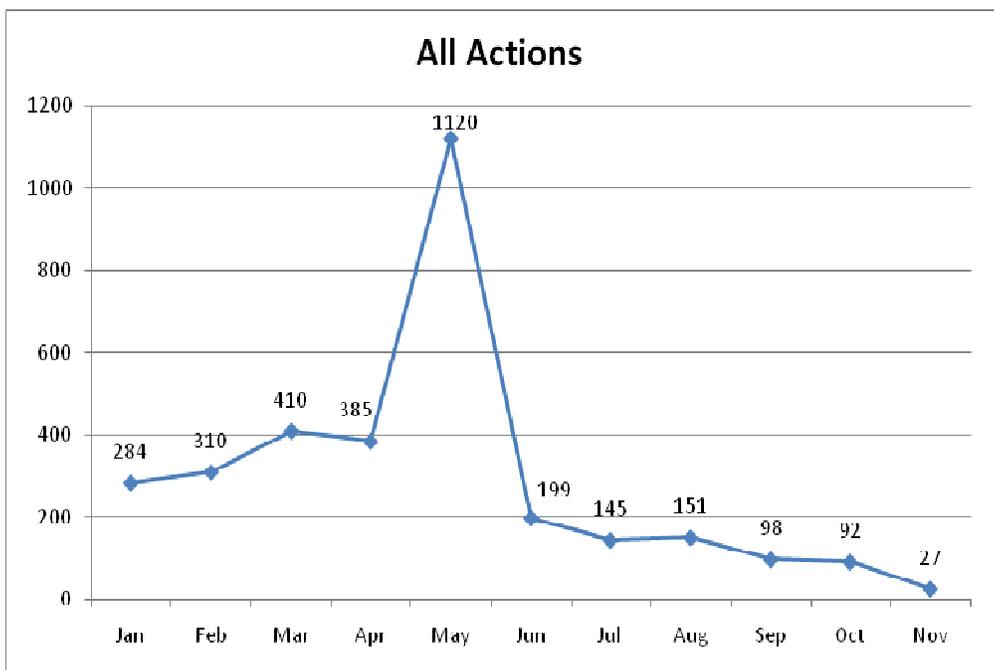
In the first three months of 2010, local populations held 81 demonstrations throughout the country, see Figure 3. In March, the opposition, some of whom were elected deputies in the parliament, organized a “People’s Kurultai” to call for changes in the constitution, tariffs, and privatization, and for the exoneration of political figures, among other issues.

Similar to the 2005 Kurultai, where the opposition selected K. Bakiev as its leader, the 2010 opposition Kurultai established an executive committee and selected deputy Rosa Otunbayeva as its head. Otunbayeva was expected to deliver the opposition’s long list of unrealistic tasks and demands to the government, asking for them all to be met within a week.<sup>48</sup> The exact number of opposition supporters that attended the Kurultai is unclear, but it was in the range of several thousand.

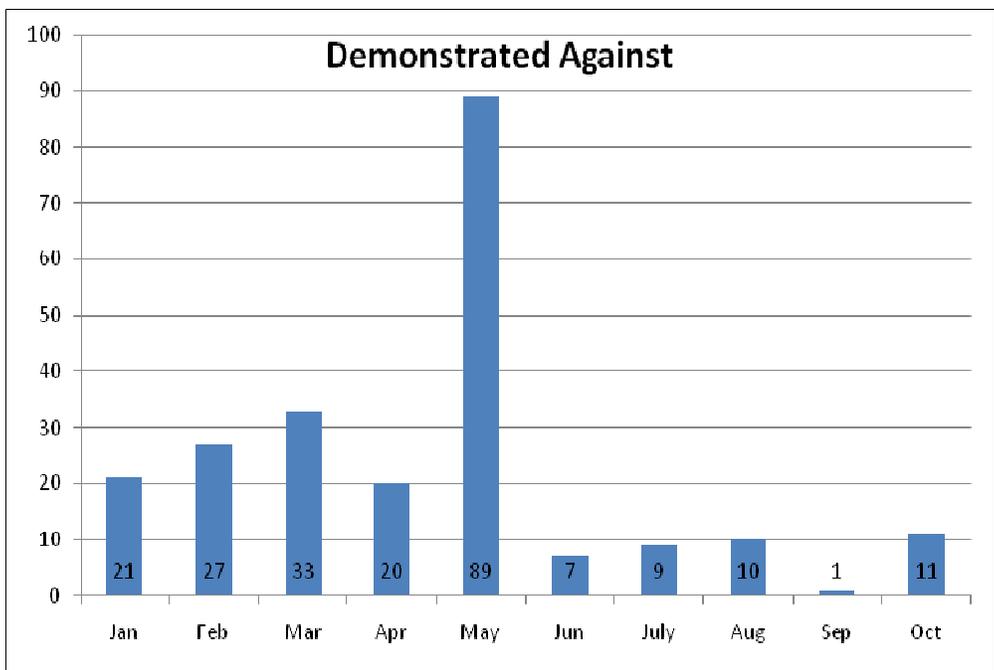
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<sup>48</sup> <http://for.kg/ru/news/111972/>

Figure 2: All Actions (Jan-Mar)



Insert Figure 3: Demonstrated Against Actions



In a nod to previous protests, on March 15, 2010, two days before the Kurultai, Otunbayeva called for a march to commemorate the victims of the 2002 Ak-Sai protest shootings. The protest proceeded on March 17, the eighth anniversary of the Ak-Sai events, and was specifically designed to rally support for the opposition.<sup>49</sup>

On April 6, about 500 civilians led by opposition party Ata-Meken leader Shernyazov seized the provincial administration building in Talas Oblast and appointed Shernyazov as the people's governor. In retaliation, police stormed the building and temporarily gained control of it before more than a thousand protesters retook control. The government's interior minister, who arrived to attempt to negotiate with the protesters, was kidnapped and severely beaten.

In Bishkek, police arrested opposition political entrepreneurs, including Atambayev, Sariyev, Tekebayev, and Omurkulov, all of whom were released the next day. According to several participants in the protests, these arrests and the government violence directed toward the protesters directly led to the gathering the next day.<sup>50</sup>

Table 3: Key Events, 2010

January	21 demonstrations against the government including hunger strikes and protests in support of jailed former Defense Minister Ismail Isakov
February	27 demonstrations against the government including a February 24 <sup>th</sup> demonstration in Naryn where more than 2000 protest increased electricity tariffs
February	Government starts to block independent news sites
March 17	Opposition holds a Kuralti and selects Rosa Roza Otunbayeva as the leader of the executive council
March 23	Bakiev holds the government sponsored Assembly of Peoples of Kyrgyzstan gathering where regional supporters are critical of his leadership
March 23	Russian channel NTV broadcasts "investigation" into Maxim Bakiyev and family
April 6 <sup>th</sup>	1000+ protesters seize government buildings in Talas
	The government arrests numerous opposition party leaders
April 7 <sup>th</sup>	Regional protests occur in Naryn, Talas, Chui and Issyk-Kul oblasts
	In Bishkek, thousands of protesters storm the center square, 85 protesters are killed; hundreds wounded
	President Bakiyev flees to south
	Rosa Otunbayeva declares that the interim government is in power
April 8	Putin calls interim government
April 10	Clinton calls interim government
April 15	President Bakiyev leaves for Belarus
May 14	President Bakiyev's family house is burned in Jalalabad
May 19	Kadyrjon Batyrov's University is attacked
June 10	Ethnic violence starts in Osh
June 11-16	Ethnic violence continues
June 12	Uzbekistan opens border for refugees

<sup>49</sup> "Участники Народного курултая планируют устроить пеший марш в память погибших в Аксыйских событиях", AKIPress, March 15, 2010 accessed at <http://kg.akipress.org/news:180301>

<sup>50</sup> Interviewee #06. Interviewed by Author. Kyrgyz Republic, August, 2010.

On the morning of April 7, a crowd of about six-hundred demonstrators gathered at the Social Democratic Party office just outside of downtown Bishkek. The police responded to the gathering by deploying armored personnel carriers (APC or BTRs in Russian), and fired tear gas and warning shots to break up the crowd. This only incensed the crowd, which quickly overwhelmed the police officers and seized their weapons. The protesters took control of one of the BTRs and overturned another. From video and photos of the protests, as well as interviews with participants, it appears that some of the protesters arrived at the scene with automatic weapons and others took them from the security services and used them against the government.

The protesters then moved toward the White House. By the time they reached the main square, a few blocks from the White House, the crowd had grown to several thousand. It is difficult to say where these additional protesters came from. From reports and photos, the vast majority of them were male ranging in age from their teens to their mid-50s. According to two eyewitnesses, taxi drivers, shop owners, people on buses, and general citizens all joined in with the group that moved toward the White House.<sup>51</sup> Upon reviewing photos and film of the protests, it appears as though there were also men in the crowd who had military training and knew how to properly use automatic weapons and drive the BTRs. One individual said that he had fought in Afghanistan and had not been in a BTR since, but that when he climbed in one, he remembered how to drive.<sup>52</sup>

The government initially sent a small number of inexperienced riot police trainees into the crowds. Again, based on information gathered from photos and film of the events, the protesters attacked the riot police, often stealing their shields and guns in the process. At the start, the security forces appeared to use rubber bullets against the crowds, but at some point, they started using live ammunition, and the protesters started to return fire with automatic weapons. There were reports of snipers firing on the crowd from on top of the government buildings. Official reports claim that 85 people were killed and hundreds were wounded during the protests.

After only a few hours of fighting, the crowd drove a BTR into the White House gates and broke through into the main compound. The crowd seized the White House and took control of the center square. Later that evening, Otunbayeva met with Prime Minister Daniyar Usenov, and the government officially resigned their posts. On a seized television station, the opposition broadcasted that an interim government had taken power. Otunbayeva said that the interim government would stay in power for six months until new presidential elections could be held.

President Bakiev flew from Bishkek to Jalal-Abad, his home city where he previously enjoyed strong support. He refused to resign and reaffirmed that he was the elected president. For a few days, the situation remained tense, as the interim government had little control over Bishkek, and, similar to 2005, looters damaged shopping centers and small shops.

The Russian government immediately recognized Otunbayeva and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin personally called her to offer support. This put the United States in a difficult situation, since Bakiev, the fairly elected president hadn't resigned, and no other official action had been taken. According to Michael McFaul, special assistant to the president for national security affairs and senior director for Russian affairs, President Medvedev and President Obama talked

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<sup>51</sup> Interviewee #12 & # 08. Interviewed by Author. Kyrgyz Republic, August, 2010.

<sup>52</sup> Interviewee #03. Interviewed by Author. Kyrgyz Republic, August, 2010.

while in Prague on April 8, the day after the events. The two presidents agreed that it was in their interest to cooperate and support the interim government. McFaul also says that in this conversation Russia did not mention the need to close the Manas airbase. McFaul went on to say in a White House Briefing:

The people that are allegedly running Kyrgyzstan—and I'm emphasizing that word because it's not clear exactly who's in charge right now—these are all people we've had contact with for many years. They're not—this is not some anti-American coup. That we know for sure. And this is not a sponsored-by-the-Russians coup.<sup>53</sup>

Over the next few days, President Bakiev tried to rally support both internally and externally. On April 14, Bakiev addressed a crowd of supporters in Osh that turned on him and threw stones and other objects. According on one journalist who observed the event, “This was the final humiliation for Bakiyev, he was so personally shocked by the crowd’s response, he was that out of touch with the mood and sentiment in the country.”<sup>54</sup> The next day, Bakiev flew to Kazakhstan, his plane refueled and eventually landed in Belarus where he was welcomed by President Alexander Lukashenko.

## Analysis

### Political Entrepreneurs

At the end of the 1800s, French sociologist Gustave Le Bon wrote about the leaders of crowds, “In the case of human crowds, the chief is often nothing more than a ringleader or agitator, but as such he plays a considerable part.”<sup>55</sup> In the events in the Kyrgyz Republic these “chiefs” played the key role in promoting the initial protests and giving structure to later protests. In addition to advancing the explicit political goals of the protests, these political entrepreneurs often used the protests to advance their personal, political, and business interests.

The protests in 2002, 2005, and 2010 were encouraged by local political entrepreneurs and lacked both external and internal civil society support. The political entrepreneurs both motivated the protesters and provided resources such as food, lodging (tents and yurts), and transportation. These political entrepreneurs used the initial public discontent about the 2005 elections and the 2010 energy price increases to encourage and support public protests and then incorporated the protests into their own agendas. The local protests increased in intensity because local leaders were able to use broad popular dissatisfaction with both presidents Akayev and Bakiev for their own purposes.

Field interviews indicate that both the 2005 and 2010 protests grew because of a combination of protesters’ personal grievances about their general socio-economic conditions and dissatisfaction with the national government. These grievances had existed for many years, but in each of the

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<sup>53</sup> The White House. Office of the Press Secretary. White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs Holds a White House News Briefing, April 8, 2010.

<sup>54</sup> Interviewee #13. Interviewed by Author. Kyrgyz Republic, September, 2010.

<sup>55</sup> Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd, a Study of the Popular Mind*, [12th impression] ed. (London,: T. F. Unwin, 1920).

periods, the jailing or persecution of political entrepreneurs threatened the benefits that individuals had accrued through entrepreneurs' actions.

The protests and events in 2005 were primarily a response to government oppression and actions. In 2005, political entrepreneurs who were attacked politically by the Akayev government responded by mobilizing their communities and supporters. These political entrepreneurs were intrinsically important to their local community: they provided access to the government, access to financial support, and assisted the people in their local communities. In 2005, they were the protest leaders.

The majority of evidence indicates that the initial protests were organized around a single local leader and employed whatever local means, e.g. blocking strategic roads or attacking buildings, that would disrupt government operations the most. As noted earlier, these actions were part of the protester's repertoire and were used successfully in 2000, 2002 and 2005.

In 2005, the political entrepreneurs that spearheaded the protests came from different backgrounds and had little in common other than that they were all politically attacked by the Akayev government. One of the most important figures was Beknazarov, who came from the southern town of Ak Sai. As mentioned previously, Beknazarov played a critical role in the 2002 events. In spite of regular pressure from the White House, he maintained some marginal loyalty to the regime. Over time, though, the government continued to push Beknazarov away. One international observer pointed out that it was the White House that turned Beknazarov into a revolutionary national figure.<sup>56</sup>

In Talas, a province to the west of the capital, the 2005 protests gathered in support of R. Jenbekov, who had formerly been a member of the president's inner circle. The government had prevented him from running in the election because it wanted to make way for a relative of the President's wife to run. He had not been a part of the opposition prior to these events and never played an active role in working with the opposition until the very end of the protests. The White House's actions had the effect of driving him to become part of the opposition and motivating his supporters to eventually seize the government building in Talas.<sup>57</sup> His only stated goal was to have the opportunity to run for office and to be a parliamentarian and he was not closely linked with the main opposition groups, yet he ended up leading one of the largest protests in the country and occupying the second government building after Jalal-Abad.<sup>58</sup>

In 2010, the initial support for jailed former government leader Ismail Isakov was an important catalyst for the protests. The attack on the Jalalabad government building and the arrest of Ata-Meken leader Shernyazov further motivated the protesters.

On April 6, 2010, the evening before the collapse of the government, the Bakiev regime arrested and attacked several popular opposition leaders including Atambayev, Sariyev, Tekebayev, and Omurkulov. These events are similar to the events of March 23, 2005, a day before the overthrow of that government, when opposition leaders were rounded up, beaten, and imprisoned. Many of the protesters who came out into the streets on March 24, 2005 were there

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<sup>56</sup> Interviewee #16. Interviewed by Author. Kyrgyz Republic, 2005.

<sup>57</sup> Interviewee #04. Interviewed by Author. Kyrgyz Republic, 2005.

<sup>58</sup> An interesting question that no one seems to have any answer for is why the Talas government building was not attacked in the early morning of the 20<sup>th</sup>, like the government buildings in Osh and Jalal-Abad.

because of the previous day's events. The response was the same in 2010. Escalated attacks on popular leaders directly led to large crowds of supporters the next day.

Without these the attacks on political entrepreneurs and their role in mobilizing supporters, the 2005 and 2010 government overthrows would probably not have occurred.

### **Increased physical pressure**

In both 2005 and 2010, the Kyrgyz government's use of political repression was the primary cause of the increase in the protests' intensity and the ultimate collapse of the Akayev and Bakiev governments. The government miscalculated the relative strength of the protests and their ability to respond to repression.

Nearly all interviewees identified several key events as examples of the Akayev government's increased physical pressure, pressure that ultimately galvanized the opposition. The use of special forces on the morning of the March 20, 2005, to throw out protesters from the government buildings in Osh and Jalal-Abad was probably the most important action that set in motion the events leading to the overthrow on the 24th. Without this event, and those that followed on March 23 and 24, the groups probably would have reached a stalemate or a negotiated agreement.

The special forces's removal of protesters from the Jalal-Abad government building, prompted a powerful reaction later in the day, when the protesters violently re-took the building. In many ways, this action presaged the taking of the White House a few days later.<sup>59</sup>

As discussed above, on the evening of the 23rd, the government used excessive and aggressive tactics to break up a civil society meeting in Bishkek. If the meeting had passed without incident, protesters would have had virtually no incentive to act aggressively toward the government. Instead, the public hauling away and beating of well-respected civil society leaders—in full view of international diplomatic representatives and the press—completely undercut any lingering international support that may have existed for the Akayev regime.

The final events of the 2005 and 2010 protests, on March 24, 2005 and April 7, 2010, are the clearest example of how repression leads to reactive dynamics. It is reasonable and defensible to assert that neither president would have been chased out of the White House if he had not provoked the crowds gathered in Bishkek. Interviews with participants in both the 2005 and 2010 protests reiterated the point that people on the square said that they never would have attacked the White House if they had not been provoked by the government forces.

In 2005, the White House used sportsmen as agitators to try to provoke the crowd into violence. There are few indications that the 2005 crowd had any violent intentions. The mix of people in the street included a large number of women and high-school aged children who were protesting peacefully; many of the protesters waved flags and carried flowers.

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<sup>59</sup> ITAR-TASS, 03-20

In 2010, the mood was different. There were no youth opposition groups or student groups protesting, and there were no speeches given or tents set up to provide food, as there were in 2005. The 2010 protests were not planned to be peaceful. Those that came to the White House in 2010 were more intent on attacking the government. The force used against the protesters in 2010 was significantly greater and more professional than it had been in 2005. If the same level of force had been used five years earlier, Akayev would have remained in power. The 2010 protesters knew that the government had been overthrown under similar circumstances only five years earlier. While the government resistance was greater in 2010, the protesters were better prepared with shields, sticks, and guns. They came anticipating a fight and ready to overwhelm the guards. However, if they had not been attacked the night before and earlier that morning, it is unlikely that the crowd would have had the motivation or support to attack the White House.

A second key difference in 2010 was the government's decision to use deadly force against the protesters. This enabled the protesters to seize police and security forces' weapons, which only added to the weapons that the protesters had brought to the center square. In 2005, neither security forces nor protesters used automatic weapons. In 2010, the government deployed snipers on nearby roof tops to pick off protesters on the center square.

It is unclear from field research to what extent the 2010 protesters came to the protests with weapons and what percentage of protesters' weapons were seized from the military. This is an important point for future research, as it provides some insight into the degree of preparedness of the protesters. Even if some of the civilians arrived with weapons, they were still in the minority, and their presence did not justify the use of extreme force by the government. The closest historical analogy is the Uzbek government's use of force in Andijon in 2005. In Andijon, some protesters arrived with weapons, but they were a small fraction of the total group. The Uzbek government responded to the protests with overwhelming force to guarantee that the protesters could not respond and overwhelm the security forces.<sup>60</sup>

In both 2005 and in 2010, government leaders severely miscalculated the relative strength and anger of the crowds. In both cases, they used an underwhelming and ineffective amount of force, which only increased the potential for a severe response from the crowd. In 2005, if the crowds had not been attacked, they would not have stormed the gates. In 2010, if the morning protests had not been disrupted by police, the protesters may not have stormed the building. One important difference in the protests was that in 2010, it was more an issue of when protesters would storm government buildings not if. It's clear that the protesters were determined to throw out Bakiev and were looking for an opportunity to do so.

If either Akayev or Bakiev had used overwhelming deadly force against the protesters, he or they could have remained in power. Akayev, to his credit, made a conscious choice to limit the amount of force used against the crowds. In contrast, Bakiev was clearly willing to use deadly force against the crowd, but either the police and military were incompetent or they chose not to completely follow orders. In 2002 and 2005, some police choose to side with the protesters. In 2010, it's unclear how much of the police's reaction was choice and how much was incompetence.

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<sup>60</sup> Fiona Hill and Kevin Jones. "Fear of Democracy or Revolution: The Reaction to Andijon." *The Washington Quarterly* 29, no. 3 (2006): 111-25.

Just as the March 2002 events provided a template for the 2005 protesters to seize local government buildings, the 2005 events demonstrated that crowds storming the White House could unseat the government. Interviewees in 2010 mentioned the image of protesters successfully forcing Akayev from office as a key psychological factor in their success, in spite of the much stronger security resistance.

While the counter-factual is impossible to prove, if the 2005 protests had failed to remove Akayev and he left power peacefully after an election, the 2010 crowd of protesters would not have likely had the temerity to believe that it could remove a president from office. In 2005, the Akayev government was so internally weak, that when the protesters bumped up against its façade, to their shock and surprise it fell over. In 2010, the Bakiev government was empirically stronger than the Akayev government had been, but the crowd believed that it could overthrow a government.

### **Additional factors**

In 2010, external factors, in particular the influence of Russia, played a role in the protests that was not seen in 2002 and 2005. There is virtually no evidence that Russia played a direct role in overthrowing the Bakiev regime, but some of its actions immediately prior to April 2010 signaled its disapproval of Bakiev. These may have given a tacit stamp of approval to the protests and signaled an informal willingness to end the Bakiev regime.

Russian Prime Minister Putin announced in early 2010 that Russia would freeze its loans to the Kyrgyz Republic and would not provide the second tranche of funds that had been agreed upon in February 2009. This was seen as a strong rebuke of the Bakiev regime. Russian officials downplayed it publicly, stating that the freeze was meant to give them time to review the use of the funds, but in several interviews, Russian officials said that they felt cheated by Bakiev and that the money had gone solely for personal gain. A U.S. Congressional Research Service report found that Putin specifically told the Kyrgyz prime minister that the funds were stopped for two reasons: the theft of money and the failure to remove the U.S. airbase at Manas.<sup>61</sup>

Moscow's actions resonated with the general Kyrgyz public and confirmed that Moscow was not pleased with the family in the White House. In late fall 2009, the popular Russian online news site, Lenta.ru, ran a brief article about the appointment of Maxim Bakiev, the president's son, to head the committee on investment and referred to him as the "gray cardinal of the Kyrgyz economy."<sup>62</sup> On the 5th anniversary of the 2005 overthrow, the news station NTV ran a highly critical "news investigation" into the actions of Maxim.<sup>63</sup> While the report offered little that was new or shocking to those who followed the internal political situation, it was significant news since it was broadcast by a Russian government-controlled news station and provided some of the strongest public innuendo to date about Maxim's corruption and control of foreign

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<sup>61</sup> Jim Nichols, "The April 2010 Coup in Kyrgyzstan: Context and Implications for U.S. Interests", Congressional Research Service, April 12, 2010.

<sup>62</sup>"Бакиев назначил своего сына главой агентства по инвестициям", accessed at <http://www.lenta.ru/news/2009/10/29/maksim/>

<sup>63</sup>"Руководство Киргизии обвиняется в коррупции и семейственности", <http://chp.ntv.ru/news/12562/>

investments, and his associations with the criminal world. As one local NGO leader said, Moscow provided “the mandate from heaven” that Bakiev could be pushed out.<sup>64</sup>

In the 2010 IRI survey, 96 percent of those surveyed said that the Kyrgyz Republic should give priority to Russia in international relations. The Russian government also received a 92-percent positive opinion rating compared to 43 percent for the U.S. government. In questions evaluating the work of institutions, the media had the highest ratings compared to government, NGOs, and even religious organizations. The U.S. role in the events of 2010 were minor, and the U.S. government’s support for Otunbayeva immediately after Bakiev was forced from office probably did little more than send a signal to other Western countries that this was someone to support. In the Kyrgyz Republic, it made almost no difference. Some U.S. officials claim that the U.S. Manas Air Transit Center was an important factor leading to the government’s overthrow, because of the perception of corruption related to the fuel contracts and the Bakiev regime.<sup>65</sup> While some opposition leaders raised this issue after the March events, in the eyes of the general public, the Bakiev family was corrupt for a long list of reasons that may or may not have included the Transit Center. This U.S. accusation made little difference to the public’s perception of the family, and specifically of Maxim, as corrupt.

## Conclusion

The Kyrgyz Republic has a pattern of protest that has been antithetical to ordered democratic process for the past ten years. It is difficult to identify the causes and effects of the political protests. The history of street protests and the mobilization of local supporters to solve political problems has led to a lack of trust in the official process and has weakened and endangered local government institutions. Yet, it is also possible that the public’s lack of trust and weak institutions make protests the only viable avenue for the public to express its grievances. Either interpretation leads to the conclusion that both local and national governments need to be strengthened to decrease the potential for future violent protests and in order to fulfill basic public demands.

The dynamics of the 2010 protests were almost identical to those from 2002 and 2005: the government attacked popular local leaders, the public protested, security forces overreacted in response, protesters seized government buildings, and the national government collapsed. In all of these protests, the role of political entrepreneurs and their relationship to the general population was the most important factor that led to the protests. All of the initial protests were grounded in local support for local leaders who were being pressured by the government. The central government’s ineffective response and the public’s perception of government corruption or mismanagement justified the protests’ escalation.

The Kyrgyz Republic stands out among all former Soviet states in terms of the relative strength of its political entrepreneurs compared to the weakness of the central government. Other Central Asian countries have a much stronger central government and have so far limited local protests and quickly stopped regional leaders from gaining a national voice. The few public protests in

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<sup>64</sup> Interviewee #9. Interviewed by Author. Kyrgyz Republic, September 2010.

<sup>65</sup> Private correspondence and discussions with U.S. Department of Defense officials.

these other countries have followed distinctly different patterns. Many of them have been either locally based without clear political entrepreneur support (Uzbekistan food riots) or grounded in national-level political opposition (Kazakhstan).

The Kyrgyz pattern of protest is so deeply rooted that the most effective threat used by political entrepreneurs is that they will call out their supporters to protest or demonstrate on a particular issue. This represents a failure of the Kyrgyz democratic process. A functioning democracy depends on a functioning legal process. If leaders can be chosen by mass protests, courts overthrown by the most vocal opponent, and presidents removed by a crowd of a few hundred, democracy does not exist. Until the Kyrgyz Republic can establish institutions through which political entrepreneurs can address legitimate concerns and grievances, street protests will continue to serve as the solution to all political, social, and economic problems.

In its relations with the Kyrgyz Republic, the international community confronts the need to both support local governance and democratic reform and simultaneously support actions, such as street protests, that directly undermine the legitimacy of democratic institutions. This inherent contradiction can only be resolved by supporting the institutional development of courts and a legislative body that can be both responsive to the will of the people, but also stable enough to withstand shifts of public attitudes.

The Kyrgyz government faces the difficult challenge of balancing the use of force to maintain basic order and having that force serve as a catalyst for increased protests. Any use of force even to justifiably maintain public order, can cause the government to lose legitimacy. The only long-term solution to this dynamic is for the Kyrgyz people to use institutions and political processes to resolve grievances. The government also has to commit to supporting the national and local governmental institutions and not overriding local court decisions. As long as neither the public nor the government are willing to use governance institutions, the cycle of political protests will continue with a greater probability for escalating use of force by both protesters and the government.

The primary purpose of this paper was to compare the events of 2005 and 2010 in the Kyrgyz Republic and to show the common theme of local protests in support of local entrepreneurs. The paper's thesis is that the Kyrgyz pattern of protests as a solution for all political problems was the primary factor behind the April 7, 2010 government overthrow. When protests are seen as the only solution to any problem, and when past experience shows that protests can indeed solve problems (e.g. remove a president, change a governor, or remove an ethnic group), then the public will continue to use these "successful" practices, and they will continue to have a debilitating impact.

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