

Preparing the ground for a presidential election in Kyrgyzstan[©]

Dimitrij Rupel, Ljubljana, 5 April 2005

The events which rocked Kyrgyzstan last week have subsided. Having recently visited Bishkek, I can say that security has been restored. However, I remain worried that the situation in the country could still significantly deteriorate. The looted stores stand as a reminder of why Kyrgyzstan was not Ukraine or Georgia, and why we're still ways off from having stability

Since the installment of the new government in Bishkek, the challenges confronting the country are obviously different. Bottom line there is no going back to the old. It is impossible at this point to reverse the seeds of a people's revolution. At the same time, my feeling is that we can't go far forward either, given the situation presently emerging in Kyrgyzstan.

The nation is split along political as well as economic lines. Security forces seem to be attached to their local "bosses," while Kyrgyz military and police remain desperately underfunded.

It is impossible to speak of a secure Kyrgyzstan until the Central Asian Republic moves from the interim period to a post-election period; it is impossible to discuss lasting security without massive economic development; finally, stability will be fragile as long as security forces and mandates remain in the hands of local chieftains. The national priorities of the next government must be an economic recovery plan, a creation of a functioning security force operational on the state level, and the development of a competitive, plural and stable political environment.

The country is also faced with a more urgent and immediate problem – that is political competition, and what looks to be a somewhat tense relationship, between Felix Kulov and Kurmanbek Bakiyev. The solidarity bond of the revolution is already crumbling, and the two revolutionaries separated. Kulov walked out of Bakiyev's government, and has decided to openly challenge Bakiyev for the post of the president of Kyrgyzstan at the June 26 election. He confirmed his candidacy over the weekend.

According to estimates, Kulov is the most popular figure in the country. A political prisoner and Kyrgyz security architect, he is a blend of a Mandela and Putin. This could prove to be the winning combination in June. Mr. Kulov also enjoys a fair amount of business support. There is however, one problem: Kulov is technically still serving a jail sentence, and Bakiyev is the one who can acquit him.

Obviously Bakiyev has no incentive to turn this key if Kulov's candidacy is so widely supported. It should not come as a surprise that Bakiyev is postponing making any

decision on acquittal in an effort to buy time at Kulov's expense. Namely, Mr. Kulov cannot declare his presidential candidacy until acquitted.

Given the election is in less than three months time, we're talking about a small window of opportunity for all those intending to run. In order to have a free and fair election, the preparations for candidacy must begin. The longer nominees like Mr. Kulov are held back due to political obstructionism, the smaller are their chances of attaining adequate funding and securing support, and the more tense the whole atmosphere will be.

Kulov obviously understands the game being played, and he may decide to take his cause to the streets in order to add people legitimacy to his political maneuvering. There is nothing steadfast in this situation. Kulov's taking to the streets will further destabilize the country, possibly pushing it over the brink.

Third party mediation between Kulov and Bakiyev is necessary as the level of trust between the two is low – I would even say non-existent. At the same time, I think it is positive that Mr. Akayev decided to resign. His decision should help in restoring political stability in the country.

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) will continue to do its part. I plan to dispatch my personal representative and a negotiating team to Kyrgyzstan to mediate between Kulov and Bakiyev. We absolutely need an agreement between these two political players if the interim period is to be a stable one. At the same time, I hope to increase the engagement of the EU, the US, and Russia. I hope to link the EU (in Bishkek, the EU is represented by Germany), US and Russian ambassadors, and their efforts in Kyrgyzstan, with my negotiating team.

I am convinced that a stable interim period is a precondition to progress in Kyrgyzstan. The OSCE can lead, but strong support from key member states will be utmost necessary in the weeks ahead.

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