

Kyrgyzstan: Democracy Under Pressure

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By Ahmed Rashid

As the US army leaves the region and its autocratic neighbours flex their muscles, should Kyrgyzstan fear for its future? And where can it turn to for help.

While village life in Kyrgyzstan may not have changed much, Bishkek, the capital, has become a thriving city. When I travelled to Kyrgyzstan during the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991, the capital city had a handful of private shops, nowhere to eat and terrible hotels. Today Bishkek is thriving, with a flourishing street and cultural life. After two revolutions, massive street protests and an unsteady political process, Kyrgyzstan is now the only multi-party parliamentary democracy in Central Asia. But it is a democracy under pressure.

Tucked between China and the massive land mass of Central Asia, tiny Kyrgyzstan is at risk of obliteration by the shift of powers in the region. As the US withdraws from Afghanistan, China and Russia are realigning themselves. This July sees the [closure of Manas](#) - the massive US air base outside Bishkek from which 1,500 US soldiers have flown in or out daily over the past decade, en route to Afghanistan. Whether American influence will last in the region after that has become the country's hottest talking point.

Russia has gone on the offensive, insisting that Central Asia falls in line and that Kyrgyzstan signs the [Eurasian Economic Community Customs Union](#), which aims to undercut Nato and the European Union. If it refuses, Moscow will certainly pile on the pressure by calling in its billions of dollars of loans to Kyrgyzstan or throwing out the one million Kyrgyz working in Russia. Meanwhile China is consolidating its grip on the region's vast oil, gas and mineral resources. The nation's trade with Central Asia has soared from \$1bn in 2002 to \$36bn in 2012 and Chinese workers, farmers and contractors have poured in.

Twenty-two years after gaining independence, the [former Soviet states of Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan](#) remain at daggers drawn. There is still no co-operation over shared issues such as water, energy and roads or the resolution of border disputes. Many continue under destructive dictatorial rule, with leaders such as Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan and Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan now trying to ensure the succession of their children.

The 5.4 million Kyrgyz have shown unusual courage in maintaining their political freedoms and refusing to put up with corrupt presidents. In April 2005, the "Tulip revolution" led to the overthrow of the mega-rich President Askar Akayev, who had been in power since 1990. Kurmanbek Bakiyev, the next elected president, was ousted in April 2010 after 85 people were killed and 1,000 wounded in Bishkek's central square by snipers shooting from the roof of the presidency. To outsiders, the country looks like the epitome of instability but, in fact, the seeds of a better political and economic system are being sown.

A key personality behind both movements is a short, energetic woman in black-rimmed glasses. At first sight Roza Otunbayeva, 63, looks like a genial grandmother, but she is probably the toughest - and best-loved - politician in the country. During a day out with her recently, I watched women on the street stop and stare at her, before planting big kisses on her cheeks and letting her hug their children. Crowds formed quickly around her, making her sole bodyguard nervous.

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Formerly a professor, Otunbayeva was summoned to work in the Soviet foreign ministry from 1989-91, before twice becoming foreign minister of the newly independent Kyrgyzstan. She opened the Kyrgyz embassy in London, where I first got to know her, and was the first Kyrgyz ambassador to Washington. She soon joined the opposition, blaming Akayev for authoritarianism, corruption and incompetence. "Authoritarian regimes still dominated the post-Soviet space and the presidential system produced family-run enterprises, not democracy, so we had to change the system," she told me.

Otunbayeva put her faith in Bakiyev but quickly concluded that he was even more corrupt than his predecessor. Again, she joined the protesters in Bishkek's main square. "The events in Ukraine are a painful, carbon-copy reminder of the events of 2010 in the square," she said sadly. She was chosen to become interim president and the first woman to head a Central Asian state.

Otunbayeva pushed through her political agenda in less than two years, despite facing large-scale ethnic riots between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in the southern city of Osh. She rewrote the constitution, organised a referendum in June 2010 on changing the system and constitution from presidential to parliamentary, and held parliamentary and then presidential elections - all by November 2011.

Such a rapid timetable of political reforms had never been carried out in Central Asia. "In those critical days, nobody helped us from the US or the west," she says with disappointment. "They showed indifference and even apathy towards us, I suppose because we have no oil or gas - or we are too small to matter."

Then Otunbayeva did something even more remarkable by Central Asian standards: she stepped down. Other regimes in the region thought she had gone crazy and initially felt threatened by the transfer of power. "Now they are intrigued and they watch us very carefully to see how successful this experiment with democracy is going to be," says Asiya Sasykbaeva, the deputy speaker of parliament and possibly the second most influential woman in the country. More women hold office in Kyrgyzstan than anywhere else in Central Asia and now head three government ministries, the national bank and the prosecutor-general's office.

Some western diplomats and locals still think the country is bordering on chaos. A staggering 29 parties ran for parliament in the 2010 elections and there were 80 candidates for president. Two coalition governments have collapsed in the past three years. "It's part of being a young democracy and all the problems associated with that - it's a learning experience," says Kanybek Imanaliev, the chairman of the parliamentary committee on foreign affairs, in his chambers in the newly renovated parliament building.

Kyrgyzstan's small population counts 80 different nationalities including Koreans, Germans, Uighurs, Uzbeks, Han Chinese and Turks. When I first visited the country in 1986 - the last days of the Soviet empire - 21 per cent of the population were Russian, settled there by the tsar. Today they account for only about 6.6 per cent. The Soviets used to call Kyrgyzstan its "dairy queen" because it provided them with all their milk and butter. The Kyrgyz call their land *altyn beshik* - the "golden cradle" - because of the view from the peaks of the mountain ranges that cover 93 per cent of the country. The country's folk hero is the ancient and legendary Manas, after whom the air base is named, who is said to have defended Kyrgyz nomads against Chinese interlopers on his winged horse.

Kyrgyz culture draws on a fascinating mix of nomadism, Zoroastrianism, Shamanism and Mongol, Islamic and Soviet traditions. During our day together, Otunbayeva took me to the national museum of arts, which was holding an exhibition of work by Bolot Djumakanov, a Soviet-trained artist. Djumakanov, who paints in every conceivable style from the Soviet realism tradition to modern expressionism, was not ashamed to tell Otunbayeva that he did not like her system. "We were much better under the Soviets - life was good then," he said. "Now we are living in the market and nothing is free."

Later, we walked to the opera house built by Stalin to bring Russian classical culture to the provinces. Dancers from all over Central Asia and Russia have joined together to raise money for the revival of the ballet school in Bishkek, as the state can no longer subsidise ballet. "The young now prefer disco clubs and bars - but in the past we produced some of the best classical dancers in the world and we can do it again," said Sasykbaeva.

The highlight of my day with Otunbayeva was attending Kyrgyz Fashion Week. It was the first night and some of the 30 designers based in Bishkek were showing. Otunbayeva was treated like a pop star by the models, who were more than 6ft tall, with beautiful, elongated Mongol faces. Uzbek designers showed conservative styles from the Fergana Valley, the Russians a hip-hop, high-street style of short skirts and tops, while the Kyrgyz displayed modern nomadic styles using silk from Fergana and felt from nomads' sheep.

Kyrgyz origins lie in a warrior culture. The clans came from Siberia and migrated south into Central Asia. In 1207, outside Bishkek, the Mongol chief Temudjin defeated his rival in battle and was acclaimed as Genghis Khan, leader of all the Mongols, of which the Kyrgyz were a part. With an army of horsemen known as the Golden Horde, he went on to conquer the then known world.

The Russians have brought untold misery to the Kyrgyz, who have suffered more than any other Central Asian people. The tsar handed over millions of acres of their prime land to settlers in the 1850s. Then, in 1916, "The Tsar ordered a forced conscription of all nomads to enlist in the Tsarist army to fight in world war one for Russia," historian Tynchtykbek Chorotegin told me. "The nomads resisted and were massacred by the Cossacks. Famine followed and tens of thousands of Kyrgyz fled to China. More than a quarter of the Kyrgyz population was massacred - 1916 was the bloodiest period in our history." This is why the Kyrgyz remain bitterly suspicious of recent Russian actions in [Ukraine](#).

The Kyrgyz also know that Russia has the deck stacked against them. "Geopolitically, the closing of Manas marks the end of Kyrgyzstan's 'multivector' era and consolidates Russia as the country's dominant security patron," says Professor Alexander Cooley, a US expert on Central Asia based at Barnard College. Yet Kyrgyzstan is trying to delay signing the customs union, which has become a make-or-break issue for the current president, Almazbek Atambayev. He chose his words carefully when we talked at his dacha, built under the sweeping vista of snowy mountains and flowering white blossom trees.

"We will join the [Eurasian Economic Community] customs union if it accepts our terms under conditionalities that we ask for," he said. "[But] the union must be purely an economic union - it must preserve our sovereignty, pursue the economic development of our country and our borders should be open." On the Ukraine issue he blamed everyone for the crisis - Russia, the European Union and Ukraine itself - but the Russian annexation of Crimea had clearly upset him.

On May 29, the presidents of Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus finally signed the agreement to create a common economic union but Ukraine refused to join. President Vladimir Putin tried to put a brave face on it, saying the union would be "an attractive centre of economic development", but after recent events in Ukraine, even the other two member states are cautious. Atambayev was present but did not sign or utter a word.

Despite its accession to the World Trade Organisation, Kyrgyzstan has few revenue-generating assets. Kyrgyzstan's GDP per capita is a minuscule \$1,320, in comparison with Kazakhstan, whose oil and gas revenues give it a GDP per capita of \$12,450. It is essentially an economy based on the rents that the Chinese pay for the oil and gas pipelines that cross Kyrgyz territory. The US base provided \$63m in rental fees and injected a further \$200m into the economy - but that will end this year and the US is offering no further support or compensation. Russia pressured Kyrgyzstan to close down the US air base, for which Moscow promised \$1.1bn in military aid and a debt write-off of \$500m. Kyrgyzstan complied but nobody has yet seen any money.

"The Kyrgyz national budget will suffer with the closure of the Manas base because the income was used to pay pensions and state salaries, while the base itself employed hundreds of Kyrgyz," says Cooley. A World Bank-supported plan to export surplus Kyrgyz electricity to Afghanistan and Pakistan depends on improving security in the region. A Canadian-owned gold mine in the mountains gives the state about \$150m a year, but other potential metals and minerals cannot be exploited because of the landlocked nature of the country and transportation issues.

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- Roza Otunbayeva

Instead, the largest source of income for many families are the one million Kyrgyz - nearly one- fifth of the population - who work in Russia, Kazakhstan and the Arabian Gulf. The remittances they send made up 31 per cent of national GDP in 2012, according to the World Bank, and are critical in maintaining living standards.

Meanwhile, the largest economic generators at home are the Dardoi bazaar outside Bishkek and the Karasuu bazaar outside Osh. These bazaars, which run for miles, are a sprawling mass of shops, stalls and warehouses, largely housed in containers, and provide employment to more than 100,000 people. Due to Kyrgyzstan's liberal tax regime, consumer goods from China and Turkey arrive here duty free. Shopkeepers flock from other Central Asian states, the Caucasus and even Russia to stock up at prices that are much lower than those charged in their own countries. The bazaars' closure could spark a severe economic crisis.

This is exactly what will happen if Moscow forces Kyrgyzstan to join its Eurasian customs union, because the bazaars would have to impose duties and taxes set by Moscow. So far Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus remain the only three members of the union. But persuading Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to join has become more urgent as Russia tries to show Ukraine and the west that it can offer real alternatives to the European Union.

President Atambayev was also concerned about security. "We are strengthening our borders, carrying out reforms in the army and helping neighbours defend their borders better," he told me. But with a tiny army of just 15,000 men and a similar number of border guards, Kyrgyzstan is in poor shape to defend itself against possible incursions by the Islamic extremist groups now gathering in Afghanistan, especially the pan-Central Asian Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), which also recruits Kyrgyz youth.

In Osh, officials hint darkly that the IMU has already penetrated the Fergana Valley and set up safe houses. There are reports that it has set up jumping-off bases in northern Afghanistan. Kyrgyz officials are extremely apprehensive of Islamic militancy arriving on their doorstep once the Americans leave Afghanistan.

"Fifty per cent of our problems come from Pakistani militant groups - there is no control over them," says foreign affairs head Imanaliev.

Kyrgyzstan is hoping that China will save it from the Russian bear hug, the possible chaos resulting from the US withdrawal and regime changes in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Beijing, too, would like to preserve Kyrgyzstan's independence, because it offers the gateway for exports to all the states of the former Soviet Union, across which Chinese energy pipelines travel. But when it comes to the west, Kyrgyzstan deserves far more attention and aid than it receives.

If the future of Central Asia is to be determined by greater democracy, freedoms and economic development, then we will have the plucky Kyrgyz to thank for showing the way.

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