“New Color Revolution in Kyrgyzstan?”
April 8, 2010
Event Summary

Panel Participants

- Dr. Zakir Chotaev, Kyrgyz-Turkish Manas University
- Dr. Erica Marat, Voice of America Russian Service
- Dr. Eric McGlinchey, George Mason University
- Dr. Sean Roberts, The George Washington University

Chaired by Henry Hale, The George Washington University

Overview

Just weeks after the five-year anniversary of Kyrgyzstan’s Tulip Revolution, a new mass uprising has broken out in the country, this time resulting in more bloodshed. Some reports now indicate that President Kurmanbek Bakiyev has been overthrown even though he has not formally resigned from office. Yet, what is actually happening on the ground now? Are we witnessing a country’s implosion into civil war, or a democratically inspired mass rejection of corrupt rule and media closures - or both? How is the civil unrest in Kyrgyzstan being perceived in Central Asia? On April 8th, Dr. Henry Hale of the Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies convened a panel discussion consisting of several leading experts on Kyrgyz politics to discuss these and other questions focusing on the recent developments in Kyrgyzstan.

Dr. Zakir Chotaev of Kyrgyz-Turkish Manas University opened the panel discussion by trying to explain why Kyrgyz citizens throughout much of the country mobilized against the government. Accordingly, although he stated that the riotous events of April 6-7, 2010 had taken the Kyrgyz academic community largely by surprise, Chotaev stressed that a series of public grievances against the Bakiyev administration (ranging from the President’s recent attempts to centralize power in the Executive Branch and clamp down on Kyrgyz media outlets, to the institution of a sudden price hike on utilities and unwillingness to combat corruption in the ruling government) all proved to be key factors in causing Bakiyev’s untimely downfall. With respect to this point, Chotaev argued that since the Bakiyev administration had failed to live up to its promise of transforming Kyrgyzstan in the aftermath of the Tulip Revolution into a liberal democracy, the vast majority of Kyrgyz citizens came to perceive the ruling government as an illegitimate entity.
Dr. Eric McGlinchey of George Mason University expressed skepticism towards the idea that the riotous events which resulted in the overthrow of President Bakiyev amounted to a second Tulip Revolution. McGlinchey noted that no real opposition exists in Kyrgyzstan and that Kyrgyz politics is best conceptualized not as a struggle between a ruling authoritarian government and a democratic opposition but as a small group of ruling Communist era holdovers who compete for power by means of trying to assume control over their country’s most prized economic rents. In this vein, McGlinchey argued that a cyclical process of elite contestation is ultimately responsible for the enduring instability in Kyrgyzstan and show no signs of letting up.

Dr. Erica Marat of Voice of America Russian Service provided audience members with some details concerning events on the ground in Bishkek. According to Marat, although it appeared as if the rioting which took place in Talas, Naryn, Bishkek, and elsewhere was orchestrated by the Kyrgyz opposition, there is little evidence to support the idea that Kyrgyz opposition leaders had organized the mass protests since many of them were being held in detention at the time of the riots. That said, Marat speculated that Kyrgyz opposition leaders had most likely intended to remove Bakiyev from office by carrying out a coup d’état. In addition, Marat opined that the reason why many of the anti-government protests turned violent was because security forces fired upon the crowds. In response, armed demonstrators simply overwhelmed the security forces and seized the opportunity to carry out a regime change.

Dr. Sean Roberts of The George Washington University concluded the panel discussion by discussing what lay in store for Kyrgyzstan in the near future. Roberts went on to say that in a worst-case scenario, Kyrgyzstan would fall victim to a devastating civil war, consisting of remnants of the Bakiyev regime fighting against the newly empowered leaders of the opposition. Fortunately, Roberts predicted that this scenario would most likely not play out because neither Russia nor the United States wishes to see Kyrgyzstan become a failed state. In a best-case scenario, Roberts expressed hope that Kyrgyz elites would eschew fighting in favor of negotiations and try to reach some type of a power-sharing agreement. Again, it is unlikely that this scenario will play out because Bakiyev (though he remains the titular head of state) wields no power. Still, Roberts argued that Kyrgyzstan’s new leaders may prove to be more willing than Bakiyev to implement political and economic reforms and abide by democratic institutions.

**Q and A**

During the Question and Answer segment of the event, attendees were given the chance to ask panel participants a variety of questions on topics that were discussed during the presentation. Below is a list of some of the questions that were asked:

1) In the event of a civil war, will Kyrgyzstan most likely split according to a North-South divide?

2) How have the other ruling governments of Central Asia responded to the unrest in Kyrgyzstan?
3) The events of April 6-7, 2010 are similar to the events which took place in 2005 and 1990. Is this due to an institutional flaw in Kyrgyz politics? How can Kyrgyzstan breakout of this cycle?

4) Will the international community recognize the new Kyrgyz government as a legitimate entity?

5) Should the U.S. government continue to engage in democracy promotion in Kyrgyzstan? Why?

Panel participants expressed doubts concerning the allegedly high level of animosity between the North and South. If civil war erupts, then rival cities may fight one another. As for the response of other ruling governments of Central Asia to the unrest in Kyrgyzstan, panelists noted that although Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have expressed deep concerns about the unrest, Tashkent and Astana view political instability in Bishkek as advantageous. With respect to the issue of whether the international community will recognize the new Kyrgyz government as a legitimate entity, panel participants agreed that it is very difficult at this point to view either Bakiyev or Otunbayeva as legitimate rulers. All panel members agreed that democracy assistance providers need to somehow restructure the incentives of elites for democracy in Kyrgyzstan to take hold.