

March and after: what has changed? What has stayed the same?

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This article recalls the major events that have taken place since 24 March 2005. It examines Bakiev's new government formed in December 2007, analyses the changes in criminal world dynamics, explains problems in the hydro-energy sector, and concludes with a section on civil society groups. The article demonstrates how corruption, crime and politics are interlinked in the country and how, on the other hand, local civil society groups have proved to be considerably more stable compared to political parties.

Keywords: Bakiev; civil society; criminal groups; hydro-energy; revolution; NGOs

Introduction

Three years after the Tulip Revolution, Kyrgyzstan is a country facing a severe hydro-energy crisis and double-digit inflation; a pro-regime party dominates the parliament, while business structures are plagued by corruption. Although 24 March, the day of the Tulip Revolution, is an official public holiday, it is mostly the government that still celebrates it. For the majority of the Kyrgyz public, the day is rather a mockery of their hopes to end endemic corruption in the state with the ousting of the former president, Askar Akaev. The incumbent president, Kurmanbek Bakiev, is infamous for his even greater involvement in corruption and for seating his relatives and associates into key political and business positions. Elected in June 2005 on a wave of anti-corruption rhetoric, Bakiev turned out to be an incubator of the previous regime's mistakes. Worse still, he plunged the country into a deep hydro-energy crisis by failing both to manage water resources adequately and to prevent corruption in the energy sector. Organized crime is booming and there is more evidence of collaboration between state and criminal structures. Any changes since the Tulip Revolution appear to be largely negative and unwanted.

However, despite these shadowy developments, compared to neighbouring states, Kyrgyzstan still remains a country with a solid culture of free expression in mass media, growing civil society activism, and a myriad of brave NGO leaders able to take a critical look at the ruling regime's actions. The Tulip Revolution, in which several prominent NGO leaders participated, empowered local civil society, becoming an example of sizeable change in the political life brought about by the masses. Local NGOs learned ways of spreading their messages to the masses through media and public protests. In particular, the November 2006 protests set a precedent for a constitution with an elaborate system of checks and balances. Civil society groups, together with MPs, staged a six-day protest and were able to broker a compromise with the government and opposition on constitutional reform. Although that version of the constitution was soon abolished, it nevertheless proved to be an important element in local NGOs' ability to frame political issues, co-operate with political forces, and engage the masses. Because it became habitual for the local public to organize in mass protests, the government was cautious to announce shortages

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of hydro power in late 2008, making sure that the information campaign is implemented gradually, and hopes for the improvement of hydro-power supplies are outlined.

To show these important changes in the behaviour of the Kyrgyz government and public, this article recalls the major events that have taken place since 24 March 2005 (Table 1). It will examine Bakiev's new government formed in December 2007, analyse the changes in criminal world dynamics, explain problems in the hydro-energy sector, and conclude with a section on civil society groups. The two questions this contribution seeks to answer perplex many in Kyrgyzstan: what has changed since the removal of Akaev? And what has remained the same? It will complement existing research on the events in Kyrgyzstan since March 2005 by showing how, on the one hand, corruption, crime and politics are interlinked in the country and how, on the other, local civil society groups have proved to be considerably more stable

Table 1. Timeline of major events since 24 March 2005.

24–25 March 2005	Crowds seize government headquarters in Bishkek. President Askar Akaev reported to have fled the country with his family in an unknown direction. Opposition declared Kurmanbek Bakiev as interim president.
13 May 2005	After weeks of tensions, Bakiev and Feliks Kulov enter into a tandem agreement signifying unity between Kyrgyzstan's north and south.
17 June 2005	Businessman Urmat Baryktasov, allegedly supported by the former regime, draws crowds in front of government headquarters to remove Bakiev; the protest is quickly dispersed.
10 June 2005	Presidential elections win Bakiev almost 90% support.
June–November 2005	Three MPs with alleged ties to the criminal world killed in Bishkek.
September 2005– September 2006	Bakiev loses most of his political supporters who helped him to gain power in March 2005, including Roza Otunbayev, Azimbek Beknazarov, Omurbek Tekebayev, Almazbek Atambayev, etc.
10 May 2006	A reputed mafia kingpin, Rysbek Akmatbayev, killed in Bishkek; his death changes the dynamics of state-crime relations.
6 September 2006	Bakiev supporters allegedly plot intrigue against Opposition MP Omurbek Tekebayev.
2–8 November 2006	Opposition protests achieve the endorsement of new constitution to increase parliament's role.
30 December 2006	Parliament changes the constitution, returning powers to the president.
January 2007	Parliament denies Kulov the position of prime minister. Bakiev chooses unknown, Azim Isabekov, to lead the government.
11–19 April 2007	Kulov organizes a United Front protest in central Bishkek, pressuring Bakiev to step down. Government brings a violent end to the opposition rallies. Short of victory, Kulov leaves the political stage.
September–October 2007	Bakiev introduces his version of the constitution and begins forming the Ak Zhol political bloc, preparing for snap parliamentary elections.
21 October 2007	New constitution endorsed through rigged referendum, increasing Bakiev's powers; the parliament is dissolved within 24 hours after the referendum results
16 December 2007	Snap parliamentary elections held with Ak Zhol majority in the 75-member parliament.
June 2008	Bakiev appoints his brother Zhanysh to lead the SNB security service.
May–August 2008	Government calls citizens to save energy as water in Toktogul reservoir reaches a critical low level; power outage widespread in Bishkek and throughout the country against the background of high inflation of food prices.
24 August 2008	A plane crash nearby Manas airport kills 65 passengers and hints at endemic corruption in the government.
September 2008	Bakiev and Chudinov announce a rapidly unfolding crisis in hydro-energy and natural gas.

compared to political parties. The stability in civil society activities has thus proved to be among the most important developments after the revolution.

Timeline: 24 March 2005–September 2008

Three years ago, both local and international observers regarded the ousting of Akaev on 24 March as Kyrgyzstan's step towards democratization. However, today Kyrgyzstan's course towards democracy is often assessed as having been disrupted by President Kurmanbek Bakiev's corrupt regime. Even Bakiev himself avoids defining 24 March 2005 as the Tulip Revolution, rather referring to it as the 'March 2005 events'. Disappointment in Bakiev already became apparent in the first few months of his leadership. During his first year in power, Bakiev failed to clean up the Augean stables of Akaev's corruption, despite promises made before the 'revolution' and after acquiring power. Bakiev was able to gain quick, yet short-lived popularity among the masses, even though he was largely unknown before the removal of Akaev. However, within weeks after winning presidential power in June 2005, Bakiev began to quickly lose the support of his colleagues who had risen with him against Akaev's regime. At times then Prime Minister Feliks Kulov enjoyed stronger support than Bakiev. Unlike Bakiev, who was largely unknown prior to March 2005, Kulov had already earned popularity among the masses for his stern opposition of Akaev's regime.

Bakiev was appointed as president by the Peoples' Movement of Kyrgyzstan (PMK), which comprised former Foreign Minister Roza Otunbayeva, NGO leader Edil Baisalov, leader of Social Democratic Party Almazbek Atambayev, opposition MPs Azimbek Beknazarov and Omurbek Tekebayev, and many other prominent opposition leaders. PMK, in turn, was a short-lived union of opposition leaders that was able to consolidate local protests across the country and bring them together in Bishkek on 24 March. As Akaev fled the country and a power vacuum appeared for a short time, PMK nominated Bakiev as interim president. Among the reasons for choosing Bakiev was an informal pact between opposition forces to nominate a representative from southern Kyrgyzstan who would balance power sharing among northern and southern political elites. Since 1961, Soviet Kyrgyzstan was led solely by representatives of the north, and Absamat Massaliyev, First Secretary of the Kyrgyz SSR between 1985–1991, was the only southern leader in decades.

By the end of 2005, Bakiev had become infamous for his deep involvement in corruption and plotting intrigues against his opponents. He sought to centralize political and economic power in the country by removing unwanted figures and putting his associates in their place. In January 2007, almost two years after the 'revolution', Bakiev broke ties with Kulov, who then occupied the position of prime minister and enjoyed a high popular approval rating. The Bakiev–Kulov breakup was symbolic of the worsening confrontation between the north and south of the country. However, Bakiev, a native of south Kyrgyzstan, often intentionally played up the ongoing competition between the two parts of the country, seeking to enhance public approval of his hold on power. Instead of Kulov, Bakiev appointed previously unknown Azim Isabekov. However, two months later Bakiev's opposition insisted on appointing Almazbek Atambayev, leader of the Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan.

After being removed from the government, Kulov formed his own opposition bloc, United Front that aimed to topple Bakiev. In April 2007 he organized a protest in central Bishkek, threatening that it would be the largest political campaign since the revolution. However, Kulov's aggressive endeavours were only partially supported by another major opposition bloc, For Reforms, that insisted on constitutional reform and not another change of regime. Kulov's protests were violently dispersed after a few days by the police, and signified a major loss for the politician. Following this fiasco, Kulov left the political stage altogether.

In November that year For Reforms organized a demonstration to bring in changes to the constitution that had been ignored by Bakiev's government since the Tulip Revolution. After almost a week-long protest, For Reforms finally managed to broker a compromise between the parliament and President Kurmanbek Bakiev, to endorse a new constitution that would considerably empower the legislative branch and strip the president of key prerogatives. Despite earlier outbreaks of violence between the opposition and government-hired crowds at Bishkek's central square, the almost week-long confrontation between Bakiev and the opposition was yet another manifestation of Kyrgyzstan's move towards a democratic state with high rates of civic engagement.

Importantly, protests by Kulov and For Reforms showed that the government and individual politicians had learned ways of countering mass demonstrations. For example, in the November 2006 demonstrations, the government mobilized hundreds of public employees, including law-enforcement representatives, against opposition forces. As most Kyrgyz experts agree, the government-hired mobs intended to provoke the opposition into starting a fight. Before the United Front's April 2007 demonstration, the opposition sought to warn the public that pro-government political forces might hire criminal leaders to provoke fights among opposition demonstrators, as well as to stir looting throughout Bishkek.

However, the political situation became even murkier when Bakiev announced a constitutional reform in September 2007 that allowed him to gain virtually unlimited powers and entirely alienate the opposition. Bakiev gave one month's notice for the public to become acquainted with his constitutional project before a referendum was held. On 22 October, the constitution was passed with 76% support, and was viewed by many local and international observers as having been largely falsified. However, within a few hours after the referendum, Bakiev dissolved the parliament and set 16 December as a date for snap parliamentary elections. Simultaneously, Bakiev quickly formed his own political bloc, Ak Zhol, that embraced virtually all employees of the public sector. The new constitution allowed him to appoint the government and control the parliament.

Bakiev's opposition has adopted a rather passive position since its defeat in the December 2007 elections. Although opposition parties underwent rapid development in the three months prior to the vote, most of them remained silent about the government's widespread falsifications during the elections. Bakiev adopted a somewhat careful strategy to neutralize the opposition who lost in the December 2007 elections. A number of opposition leaders were given positions in regional governments or higher diplomatic ranks. For example, Omurbek Suvanaliyev, former interior minister and an active supporter of Kulov, was made governor of Naryn *oblast*. Several reshuffles then followed in the Foreign Service branch of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. However, Bakiev's loyal advisors remained in the government. Among them were influential politicians such as Usen Sydykov and Daniyar Usenov.

Bakiev's government

In the 16 December parliamentary elections, Ak Zhol gained the majority of seats. The party became a dominant political faction in the parliament and infamous for being replete with unprofessional people with uncertain political views. As one political observer in Bishkek commented, despite a better representation of women, ethnic minorities, and young politicians: 'The parliament is full of "dead souls" willing to follow the regime.'¹ The new Kyrgyz government, formed following the elections, consisted mostly of old faces who had survived the numerous reshuffling efforts of Akaev and the change of presidents in March 2005. Bakiev surrounded himself with loyal political supporters primarily interested in the continuity of the current political regime and their public offices. He also reshuffled

security structures, appointing his brother Zhanysh to lead the SNB security service. The pro-regime bloc Ak Zhol's majority in the parliament, and the president's family and business connections in the security agencies, allowed him to control all cadre decisions in the government and parliament. This political clique was potentially interested in having Bakiev re-elected in 2010, preventing Bakiev from transforming state power peacefully and predictably.

The president's choice of Igor Chudinov – a former businessman, director of KyrgyzGaz, and minister of energy – as prime minister came as a surprise for many. The energy sector in Kyrgyzstan was known for its endemic corruption, and Chudinov was often regarded as part of a chain of corrupt management. Furthermore, Saparbek Balkibekov, former chair of Elektricheskiye stansii, replaced Chudinov in his ministerial position. Under Balkibekov, Elektricheskiye stansii, Kyrgyzstan's major producer and retailer of hydropower, was infamous for having embezzled up to \$40 million a year.² Former Bishkek mayor Arstanbek Nogoyev was appointed minister of agriculture. Nogoyev was Bakiev's loyal political follower, notorious for carrying out all of the president's orders during his mayoral tenure. He was often ridiculed for his policies of cleaning the streets and tearing down buildings after the president had expressed his displeasure with the city's appearance. The new minister of education, Ishengul Bolzhurova, had been a loyal friend of former president Akaev and his family, but she reoriented her support towards Bakiev's regime in a matter of days. A number of other ministers, including those for justice and foreign affairs, had proved their lasting loyalty to Bakiev before the parliamentary elections and retained their posts.

A few months after the elections the new government descended into underhand deals. Bakiev reportedly used the Interior Ministry to ensure quiet compliance of all public figures. In one scandal in January 2008, a high-ranking government official received a gift package containing a human finger and an ear (taken from a dead homeless person) as a warning that his cadre politics contradicted those of Bakiev's close family members represented in the government. Following this incident, Interior Minister Bolotbek Nogoibayev was sacked and replaced by Moldomusa Kongontiyev, whose older brother Kamabarly was the president's special representative in the parliament. Both Kongontiyev brothers were removed in November 2006 for allegations of corruption after a week-long protest by the opposition. Bakiev's elder relatives in the security structures allegedly participated in the intrigue.

Bakiev was able to form a new government, consisting of unpopular ministers, with ease. Compared to Akaev, Bakiev's government seems to have far greater internal consolidation within Ak Zhol and exhibits loyalty to the president. While Akaev preferred to have the parliament filled with political actors with wealthy backgrounds, Bakiev's Ak Zhol party was represented in the parliament mostly by politicians with weaker financial bases. While the parliament elected in 2005 during Akaev's reign was able to quickly change its loyalty to the new president, given its members' financial independence, Bakiev's parliament is more dependent on the regime and appears to be interested in its continuity. Because the December 2007 parliamentary elections were conducted on the basis of a party-list system, parliamentarians relied more on the party as opposed to supporters at the local precinct level.

By 2007, Bakiev's regime largely suffered from a similar predicament to the regime led by Akaev. Informal competition over sources of corruption was evolving among members of Bakiev's family and political allies. This competition could potentially weaken the loyalty of political and business actors to the regime, and strengthen the opposition. Furthermore, Kyrgyz security structures were embroiled in an alleged smuggling incident. In December 2007, Uzbek border guards detected train cargo containing radioactive cesium-137 travelling from Kyrgyzstan to Iran. The cargo was loaded in Kyrgyzstan and crossed three state borders – the Kazakh–Kyrgyz border twice and the Kyrgyz–Uzbek border once – before being

caught in Uzbekistan. Kyrgyz security officials remained largely silent about the incident because the train compartment with the deadly cargo belonged to a government agency. The entire intrigue suggested that deals such as this are brokered at top political levels, and security agencies at times are unaware of them.

Kyrgyz mass media often referred to the president's younger brother, Zhanysh Bakiev, with a background in military structures, as a grey eminence in the president's intimidation of political opponents. Zhanysh was allegedly involved in intrigues around the planting of heroin on the opposition leader and former speaker of parliament, Omurbek Tekebayev. He was arrested in September 2006 in Warsaw airport with heroin in his luggage, but set free as Polish authorities concluded it had been planted on him. A Kyrgyz parliamentary commission watched security camera footage from Bishkek airport and discovered evidence, such as a letter from the airport security head saying he had been ordered by Zhanysh to plant the heroin. Zhanysh later left the position of deputy head of the secret police, while maintaining his innocence. There were also reports that Bakiev's older brother Akhmat Bakiev, a Chair of the Jalal-Abad City Council, was allegedly controlling organized crime and drug trafficking in southern Kyrgyzstan. Although Akhmat represents the Jalal-Abad council, he is an informal governor of the entire *oblast*.³ Bakiev's son, Maksim, is notorious for controlling all major businesses in the country.

In the international arena, Kyrgyz officials became more unpredictable for Western partners, often failing to fulfill their commitments to international agreements. Furthermore, the constitutional referendum in October 2007 and the parliamentary elections of December 2007, as well as the banning of public demonstrations in central Bishkek, showed the Kyrgyz government's disregard of its commitments before the OSCE. Bakiev's loyal parliament, strong supporters in the government, and informal control over major economic resources allowed him to largely disregard Western principles.

Changes in the criminal world

The change of regime in March 2005 also brought about changes in the criminal world, adjusting state-crime relations. Before the Tulip Revolution, some political and criminal leaders interacted whenever their interests met and often conflicted over ownership of businesses. However, the chaotic division of political and economic powers among members of the new government led by Bakiev, on the one hand, and leaders of organized criminal groups on the other, cost the lives of three parliamentarians and a number of criminal leaders. Yet, the most substantial change in state-crime relations occurred following the death of notorious criminal kingpin Rysbek Akmatbayev in May 2006. According to Suvanaliyev, Kyrgyz security structures were mobilized to prevent the emergence of any criminal who would threaten political circles to the extent that Rysbek once had. Suvanaliyev recounted that Rysbek was able to intimidate even the most high-ranking security officials, and more than 100 men under his control constantly threatened the lives of regular policemen. Several contract killings before and after the March 2005 Tulip Revolution were thought to have been masterminded by Rysbek's people. Such influence was possible only through maintaining the strong support of political officials.

It was obvious that Akmatbaev had ties to the ruling regime from Bakiev's public meeting with Rysbek at the central square in Bishkek. Furthermore, a number of political leaders frequently spoke in support of Rysbek, who shortly before his death won a seat in parliament after being acquitted of a triple homicide and numerous other charges. Many political leaders, businessmen and representatives of law-enforcement agencies welcomed Rysbek's death because they had been intimidated by him on a number of occasions; but his death also

caused panic. Without a nation-wide criminal leader, some were afraid that the criminal world would lose central control and small criminal bands would act independently. Rysbek's death left the position of 'leading criminal' vacant, with rivalry among criminal groups over who would be his successor. Rumours that 33-year-old Kamchy Kolbayev would be the likeliest candidate to occupy the place of a nation-wide criminal leader spread across Kyrgyzstan days after Rysbek's death.

Already by the end of 2006, it was clear that Kamchy had become an influential authority both in the criminal underworld and in political and business circles. 'Anyone launching a business should divide his income in three: one part for himself, one for the official authorities and one for Kamchy', an entrepreneur in Bishkek said.⁴ Kamchy sends his people, usually martial arts sportsmen, to private offices and demands payments to the criminal world using techniques ranging from verbal diplomacy to direct physical intimidation. Two years after the death of Rysbek, Kolbayev was 'crowned' the new 'thief-in-law' in Moscow by Russian criminal leaders.⁵ Kolbayev, like Akmatbayev before him, has considerable influence over politics and business in the country, as well as power over law-enforcement agencies. Kamchy's so-called 'coronation' in Moscow proves that transnational criminal connections are strong, and criminal leaders in Kyrgyzstan are supported by their Russian counterparts.

The 'coronation' of Kamchy was met with anger among law-enforcement circles. As one young policeman from Bishkek complained: 'We had been trying to catch him [Kamchy] before his coronation, but it was all in vain. He built up a great deal of authority.'⁶ Even though Kamchy and a dozen of his followers were arrested by the police at a Bishkek cafe on 29 April, they were released within hours. Occasionally, police forces strip Kamchy and his followers of weapons and armaments. However, after Kamchy's rise, law-enforcement agencies in Kyrgyzstan once again found themselves powerless in preventing, investigating and persecuting contract killings, racketeering and kidnappings for political and business interests. High-ranking officials facilitated the emergence of a new criminal leader and, as argued by one Kyrgyz policeman: 'The government needs a criminal leader to further control the police.'⁷ However, as one representative of the Interior Ministry's Criminal Investigation Division argues, Kyrgyz law-enforcement structures were able to establish an upper hand over the criminal world. Although unable to imprison Kamchy's followers, the police were able to constantly intimidate the criminal network.⁸

With the government consisting of wealthy and often corrupt officials, much of the significant crime in the country is concentrated in the government as well. The new government formed in December 2007 promoted the most influential political and business figures into top positions. This self-assurance of the elite rested on both political power and control of the main sectors of the Kyrgyz economy: hydroelectric sites, customs controls and the banking system. All three sectors are interlinked, often being interwoven with illegal activities such as extortion of businesses, smuggling of drugs and weapons, and intimidation of political opponents. The profit made in the energy sector is processed through the local banking system controlled by individual public figures. President Bakiev maintains influential allies controlling the parliament and security structures, including customs controls.

Under Bakiev, the criminal world became more centralized, while more high-ranking officials are reported to be involved in criminal activities. This is as an important difference to Akaev's regime, during which criminal leaders, although sharing some links with state officials, were mostly from the non-state domain. Approximately 10–12 high-ranking officials in the president's administration and ministerial cabinet determine the country's entire economic policy and political climate. Meanwhile, unlike before, non-state organized criminal groups and their leaders are no longer able to significantly influence the political domain, thus marking a sizeable shift in state-crime relations in the country.

The Hydro-energy crisis

Reports that Kyrgyzstan's hydro-energy sector was experiencing deep crisis have been circulating since the early 2000s. Several local newspapers dared to speak about large-scale corruption in the energy sector that benefits only the few among ruling elites, but causes the destruction of the sector at large. Yet, emerging public discussion about the malfunction of the country's most vital economic sector seemed to produce little effect on the ruling regime, which preferred to insulate itself from any domestic and international pressures. Instead, the management of the water and hydro-energy systems in Kyrgyzstan, as well as in the neighbouring states, remained rigorously elitist and decision makers often sought to secure immediate benefits rather than develop long-term strategies for water resource management. A small group of government officials formulated regulations based on their personal understanding of how water and hydro-energy should be taxed, what investments are needed, and what portion of the state budget should be spent to develop this sector. The insular elitist structure of water and hydro-energy management excluded parliament and pertinent government structures from the decision-making process, which was also highly inaccessible for the public. The main victims of such short-sighted policies are the citizens of Kyrgyzstan. In spring 2008, Bishkek residents had already experienced regular rolling blackouts – hitherto a fairly rare trend in Kyrgyzstan.

After creating a loyal parliament and government in 2008, Bakiev moved on with his plans to privatize the country's major economic sectors, including hydro-energy sites, KyrgyzGaz, and Kyrgyz Telecom. Indeed, all of these sectors and enterprises require serious investment. However, any investor has to have long-term interests in the country and be able to manoeuvre in the regional market. There was a risk that these sectors of the economy could become completely bankrupt should an investor interested mostly in fast revenue be selected, who was unwilling to invest in management and the repair of outdated infrastructure. However, privatization processes were carried out without public or parliamentary scrutiny, hinting at the fact that large state enterprises would constitute an informal division of ownership or control within the ruling elite. Since deals with foreign investors were masterminded by a select few top officials, it remained highly likely that the primary beneficiaries would be these same officials, not the national economy.

Throughout 2008 the Kyrgyz government was prompted to seek strategies to balance public spending earmarked for the emerging hydro-energy sites and allocate water for irrigation and consumer use, while also designing tax and payment systems to raise funds to invest in future projects. In the process, the Kyrgyz government introduced new taxes and fees to sustain the work of the hydro-energy sector, but these new levies lacked transparency and further encouraged corruption. For example, the governments introduced new, complicated taxes without explaining their rationale to the public. New fees on hydro-energy capacity further clouded public understanding of the taxation system. Given the technical nature of the hydro-energy sector, local NGOs and journalists are unable to trace or comment on decisions taken by the government. Frequently, local non-government experts are left out of the public debate. The Kyrgyz government's refusal to join the Heavily Indebted Poor Country Initiative proposed by the World Bank in 2006 was partly an effort to prevent international donors from intervening in the established corruption pyramids within the hydro-energy sector. Furthermore, earlier this year the Kyrgyz parliament voted for the privatization of new hydro-energy sites, including the two strategic sites on the Naryn River – 1900 MW Kambarata-1 and 240 MW Kambarata-2 hydro-energy stations.

Amid the ruling elites' intrigues in the hydro-energy sector, the water level in the Toktogul reservoir, Kyrgyzstan's major hydro-energy site, reached a critically low level due to poor management during the low water period. By the end of August 2008, the water volume at

the Toktogul reservoir was only 9.5 billion cubic metres, 4.3 billion cubic metres lower than in 2007.⁹ In an attempt to ration hydro-energy consumption, the Kyrgyz government imposed strict limitations on public and private enterprises. Apart from institutions under the Ministry of Defence, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Interior, and major transportation branches, all other enterprises were to have limited electricity provision. Most entertainment centres in Bishkek consuming high volumes of electricity, such as saunas and restaurants, were also prohibited from operating at full capacity.

By early August 2008, the government had already switched into one-phase connection three-phase capacitors in almost 8000 private homes and electric boilers in private enterprises. Beginning in the early autumn of 2008, electricity was shut off for up to eight hours a day in Bishkek, Chui, and Talas *oblasts*. According to Severoelectro, a hydro-energy distribution company, such rationing allowed the saving of 4 million kWh per day and over 130 million kWh each winter month. As a substitute to electric heating, the government recommended citizens to stock up on coal for the winter. The poorest villagers were recommended to collect cow dung to be used as fuel if coal was inaccessible to them. Naturally, prices for coal increased sharply and organized crime networks evolved around the distribution of coal in rural areas.

With these preparations in place, the Kyrgyz government tried to escape the same devastating experience of the winter of 2007–2008 in Tajikistan, when only limited alternative means of heating were available to the local population. However, these preparations could potentially be only a short-term solution for Bakiev in avoiding public unrest. Even in the early 1990s – the most devastating period in Kyrgyzstan's economy – no such hydro-energy crises occurred. Continuous electricity outage and increased food prices are arming the opposition with greater public support to intimidate Bakiev and his government. Given the Kyrgyz public's tendency of protesting against the government and president since 2005, the mobilization of protests has become even more likely towards late 2008. Although the government launched a wide information campaign to promote moderate use of hydro power in the upcoming cold period, the local public have remained suspicious about the government's real intentions. Rumours in the local media speculated that the government was secretly selling water and hydro-energy to neighbouring states amid water shortages. Worse still, pundits predicted sharp increases of food prices towards the year's end caused by shortages of electricity. In the first six months of 2008 inflation for some food products already reached 30%.

Mismanagement of water and hydro-energy resources is felt most acutely in border areas, regions that can quickly descend into confrontation based on ethnic identities and land claims. Sporadic conflicts among local inhabitants about water have occurred at the Kyrgyz–Tajik border since 1960. Given that such severe shortages of water and hydro-energy are occurring for the first time in decades, water management could quickly turn into a trans-border problem between Kyrgyz, Tajik, and Uzbek villagers with broader and deeper implications. Water shortages also impoverish the local population, forcing migration to seek employment abroad, burdening women and children with physically challenging workloads, and relentlessly degrading public health and education.

Although corruption in the hydro-energy sector was already widespread during Akaev's leadership, the sector's management was more professional during periods of low water. However, corruption and poor management during periods of low water in the Toktogul reservoir have resulted in a devastating energy crisis under Bakiev's leadership.

The rise and continuity of civil society

Following the Tulip Revolution and amid continuous political instability in the country, Kyrgyz political leaders habitually accused local non-government organizations of dependence on

foreign financing; some politicians even saw local civil society groups co-operating with foreign donors as an encroachment on national sovereignty. Representatives of the ruling regime often labelled NGO leaders as '*grantoedy*' (grant-eaters), doubting their genuine intentions to promote greater transparency in the government and civic participation. However, despite Kyrgyzstan's deteriorating democratic record and rampant corruption, there is still a level of freedom of speech in the country. The NGO community in Kyrgyzstan remains vibrant and diverse. There are signs of local NGOs moving away from dependency on external financing and consolidating actions across organizations.

Local NGO leaders counter criticism with the argument that government and pro-regime mass media outlets voice their disapproval of NGOs in order to find a scapegoat for the country's persisting political and economic instability since the change of regime. In fact, Emil Shukurov, the leader of an ecological NGO, says that NGOs in Kyrgyzstan have proven to be more stable than the political domain.¹⁰ Early Kyrgyz NGOs were formed just a few months after Kyrgyzstan gained independence. Most of them have grown larger and stronger since then, while the government sector has seen numerous reshuffles and crises. Moreover, compared with political parties, NGOs are far more permanent. Therefore, NGOs enjoy a more positive image than political leaders among the local public. Today, several thousand NGOs are registered in Kyrgyzstan, with hundreds being known to a wider public for their active work. Shukurov further notes that local civil society groups have used credits and grants allocated by the international community much more efficiently than the government. NGOs make public issues that the state is often not capable of solving. For example, a handful of NGOs have been actively working on gender issues, poverty reduction, border delimitation, the population's access to water and sanitation, and environmental protection. Some of these issues later became part of official policy. In some way Kyrgyz NGOs help the government abide by the numerous international conventions signed by Kyrgyzstan during the early years of its independence, among them those on human rights, emigration and poverty.

Furthermore, NGOs in Kyrgyzstan were better able to restore the lost connections among former Soviet states. Most of these links were built with similar organizations that relied on non-governmental sources of finance. A vivid example of such strong networking among NGOs across the post-Soviet space is the Union of Veterans of the War in Afghanistan. These unions bond veterans of the Soviet war in Afghanistan in each post-Soviet state and are highly decentralized. The unions also maintain close contact between themselves and organize regular joint events. Today, few Kyrgyz NGOs are able to formulate their own agenda and seek donors that would match their interests. The local business community is becoming more active in financing NGOs. Civil society's stability in comparison to the state can be explained by its decentralization. Local NGOs are numerous and they compete with each other for sources of external funding. Over the years NGOs have strived to build a credible reputation in order to secure external funding. Prior to controversial parliamentary elections in 2005, several NGOs consolidated into a coalition to become a stronger force on the political scene. Later, as Bakiev began showing greater involvement in corruption, NGOs also became united against the drawbacks of his regime.

Amid this success in the non-governmental sector, there are indeed NGOs that have become private businesses. In such cases, NGOs are formed to receive foreign grants without implementing them further. Ironically, government institutions are partly to blame. Ministries frequently have access to foreign grants to redistribute them further among indigenous NGOs. However, in most examples, only those NGOs with connections in the government are able to receive such grants. As the leader of the Bishkek-based NGO Institute for Regional Studies argues, corruption in the government spreads into the NGO sector too. Ministries' representatives allocate foreign grants to their relatives with fictional NGOs. Another pitfall among Kyrgyz NGOs is the

frequently-held perception that their own work is purely antagonistic toward the government. Few NGOs are able to collaborate with the government in a constructive way, but instead only criticize its activity. One of the few examples of successful co-operation among Kyrgyz NGOs and the government was the publication of the 'Red Book' about endangered plants and animals in Kyrgyzstan. On numerous other occasions NGOs proved to be effective supporters of political and social changes.

To deflect the government's criticism, Kyrgyz NGOs consolidate into joint forums to make their work known to a wider public. The post-March 2005 period has shown that NGO leaders are frequently far more professional than the regime incumbents. They are able to consolidate, hold public debates, and generate innovative ideas. At times, the Kyrgyz state structures are unable to respond to NGOs' claims on an equally professional level. Civil society leaders clearly recognize the role of NGOs in public life. As one leader of an ecological NGO argues: 'We reduce the government's hegemony in political and social life and often prevent destabilization caused by the state.'¹¹

In the midst of civil society's hyper-activism, the state exhibits a limited propensity to enhance its own functioning by delineating powers between its institutions and actors, as well as by curbing corruption. Thus, the state is unable to respond to society's demands besides giving verbal promises. Unlike Bakiev, his predecessor, Akaev, was able to effectively deter his opposition's demands by framing erudite answers, although also often being a populist himself. Bakiev, in contrast, proved unable to address even the mainstream public with any convincing arguments. His ad hoc speeches to the public have turned into a source of mockery for their inconsistency and colloquialism. Thus, while most of Kyrgyzstan's civil groups emerged under Akaev's regime, the unfulfilled promises of the Bakiev regime have fostered their consolidation. Protests in March 2005, and events following the change of regime, resulted in greater consolidation of civil society groups and established greater collaboration between them and political forces.

Conclusions

While the Tulip Revolution has failed to fulfil its promises and meet the hopes of Kyrgyz citizens, nevertheless, it has proved Kyrgyz civil society's longevity and stability. Bakiev replicated Akaev's worst mistakes while discontinuing some of the more positive features of his predecessor. Bakiev changed the constitution to suit himself, and formed a loyal political party; corruption is widespread and threatens to drive the hydro-energy sector into greater chaos. But although Kyrgyzstan has previously seen pro-regime political parties rising and falling with their members constantly changing political loyalties, civil society groups that were formed in the 1990s continue to function today. That is, the change brought by the 'revolution' is lacking positive connotation, while stability of civil society is a reassuring sign. The Kyrgyz public in general has become more politicized, seeking ways of expressing its disagreement with Bakiev's policies. With that, the local public has a greater trust of NGOs compared to political parties. NGOs and their leaders are able to consolidate masses more efficiently and genuinely than the government.

Even though 24 March is an ambiguous day for the Kyrgyz public with mostly unpleasant associations, nevertheless, the day should be celebrated because of the opportunity it provided for civil society groups. In effect, the Tulip Revolution and the events following it were a crash course for Kyrgyz citizens in civic education, their rights to vote, the meaning of the constitutional reform, and the importance of transparent governance. Such education is yet to be gained by the citizens of neighbouring states. With regard to Kyrgyz politicians, in the process of numerous intrigues over access to public offices, they have learned the importance

of relations with the public and mass media outlets. Today, the ruling elites are neither able to suppress all professional journalists nor silence all experienced NGO leaders. While taking decisions, Kyrgyzstan's political leadership must calculate possibilities of public unrest and the rise of opposition against them. Unlike in neighbouring Central Asian states, even the slightest attempts to curb the activity of individual NGO leaders may serve to provoke greater public discontent.

Notes

1. Author's interview with a Kyrgyz NGO expert and elections observer, Bishkek, January 2008.
2. Author's interview with an international expert in hydro power from the World Bank, Bishkek, June 2007.
3. 'Pyat' brat'yev i dvoe synovej prezidenta Kirgizii razdrzhayt politicheskuy oppozitsiy' [Kyrgyz President's Five Brothers and Two Sons Annoy Political Opposition], *Ferghana.ru*, 20 October 2006.
4. Author's interview with a Kyrgyz entrepreneur and owner of a consulting firm, Bishkek, April 2008.
5. *24.kg*, 25 May 2008.
6. Author's interview with a Kyrgyz policeman from Bishkek, Bishkek, April 2008.
7. Author's interview with a Kyrgyz policeman from Bishkek, Bishkek, July 2008.
8. Author's interview with a representative from the Interior Ministry's criminal division, Bishkek, June 2006.
9. *Gazeta.kg*, 25 August 2008.
10. Author's interview with Emil Shukurov, NGO activist and environmental expert, Bishkek, 25 July 2008.
11. Author's interview with an NGO leader and environmental activist, Bishkek, 21 July 2008.