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Driving Change

by Michael Rosenthal and Ben Barry

THIS MONTH, in the last days of President Askar Akayev's rule in Kyrgyzstan, a police officer pulled over our car of election observers in a blatant attempt at extortion. The officer, like many of his colleagues in other post-Soviet states, flagged us down on foot, because the police force was too poor to afford patrol cars. Our local driver confidently refused to pay, saying that he had broken no rules and that the foreigners in the car could attest to that. The officer sheepishly replied, "So you're saying it's useless" to keep pressing for money? The driver smiled back, wished him a good day and we drove off.

The subsequent fall of Mr. Akayev's corrupt but weak government, which had made such a promising start after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, offers important lessons for governments around the world.

The first is that people power is contagious, inspiring masses from Eastern Europe to the Middle East to Central Asia. Groups that were previously thought too politically passive for democracy, particularly in the former Soviet Union and in the Muslim world, are now proving that people everywhere want the right to determine their own government and will hold that government accountable for its performance.

The second lesson is that frustration with corruption and poor governance is the only common denominator of these uprisings. This revolution in Kyrgyzstan had very little to do with geopolitics or even national identity and everything to do with the desire for more economic opportunity and a more responsive government. Third, the United States has again played a crucial role in creating the conditions necessary for people to demand a better government, even if it did not want this extraconstitutional regime change. From the sweeping rhetoric of President Bush's second inaugural address to the U.S. taxpayer dollars that went to support Kyrgyz civil society and the measured public statements of U.S. Ambassador Stephen Young, the recent events in Kyrgyzstan were influenced by American words and deeds.

The catalyst for the revolution in Kyrgyzstan, as with the other two revolutions in former Soviet states that have occurred in the past 16 months, was falsification of national elections. The parliamentary elections we observed in Kyrgyzstan were tainted by widespread cheating before and during the elections in favor of government candidates, including two Akayev children. We witnessed vote-buying, voter intimidation and rigged ballot counts. All this was too much for citizens who had seen the family and friends of the president consolidate their grip on power and wealth in the poor country in recent years.

The violent protests that followed, unfortunately, differed from peaceful revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine. The protesters had no charismatic leader to unite them, nor any platform of policy changes. All they had was a common desire for the Akayev regime to go. As the new government takes shape, the differences between the former opposition leaders likely will make efforts to pacify the country and prepare it for new elections more difficult.

Regardless, the raw display of political activism that deposed the Kyrgyz government should serve notice to future leaders there to keep the people's interests in mind. It should also be a warning to other corrupt and repressive governments in the region.

Opposition groups in countries such as Belarus have already taken to the streets by the thousands to demand new and better governance. Russia, which gambled and lost in Ukraine by supporting the corrupt old leadership, seems to be learning not to defend other authoritarian states so resolutely. Russian leaders initially reacted by blaming election monitors for the unrest in Kyrgyzstan, but quickly adopted a more subtle and constructive attitude toward the new government there.

The U.S. government cannot rest on its laurels at this point, either. It can take some credit for this new wave of democratization around the world, though the lion's share must go to the brave citizens who go to the polls and to the streets if necessary.

President Bush argued in his second inaugural that "freedom, by its nature, must be chosen and defended by citizens, and sustained by the rule of law and the protection of minorities." The United States must now stay vigilant to ensure that the new Kyrgyz government protects the freedoms and rights of its citizens. If it does, Kyrgyzstan can become a model for the region and further the cause of more-responsive governance in the former Soviet Union.

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