Kyrgyzstan: Democratization in Crisis

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Samuel P. Huntington\(^1\) termed the process of democratization engulfing Europe and Latin American countries in the 1970’s and the Communist regimes of Eastern Europe in the late 1980’s as the Third Wave of democratization, after the First wave of 1828-1926 in Europe and the Second wave of 1943-62 in the developing world. Taking a cue from him, authors like Archie Brown\(^2\) termed the process of transition of East European states from the Communist rule as a fourth wave. Although none of them included the post-Soviet countries in their analyses, yet all of them are undergoing this process, under whatever wave we may call it. And the recent Kyrgyz crisis is the newest addition to the chain of events that started with the Orange Revolution in Georgia (2003), followed by the Rose Revolution in Ukraine (2004) and the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan (2005).

Kyrgyzstan’s experiments with democratization is unique in Central Asia—it got the title of ‘the island of Democracy’ in the early 1990’s with the development of multiple political parties and a relatively free press. The Constitution was changed a number of times- in 1996, 2003, 2006, 2007 and again in June 2010. The reason might be to accommodate the interests of the ruling coterie or might be, in a very limited sense, to adjust to popular expectations. Kyrgyzstan is also the only Central Asian country to experience two revolutions within a short span- in March 2005 and April 2010. The last one may be called a reverse Colour Revolution as it toppled Kurmanbek Bakiyev- the leader of the 2005 Colour Revolution and who replaced Askar Akayev- by a popular uprising. But the Tulip Revolution leadership failed to meet demands of democratization and of economic restructuring. Widespread corruption by the Presidential family, the use of organized crime gangs for short-term gains by the ruling elite (just as it was in the Akayev era), nepotism, promotion of regional interests (while under Akayev, Northerners got favoured, Bakiyev regime was dominated by Southerners) and lack of socio-economic development (some 40% of the population lives below poverty line, unemployment stands at 18%) — all of these factors were enough for popular discontent. To make matters worse, taxes were raised and price of electricity was doubled in late 2009 and again in January 2010. The April Revolution was followed by bloody ethnic (Kyrgyz-Uzbek)

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clashes, putting into question the making of arbitrary inter-state borders by the Soviet authorities as well as the contemporary ethnic composition and regional ethnic distribution of Kyrgyzstan.

Regional responses were varied but cautious as the inter-related issues of governmental corruption, wide-spread poverty, popular revolt against the government, ethnic clashes, large-scale inter-state migration etc. caused a situation in Kyrgyzstan that threatens to be equally dangerous for the ruling elites of every state in the Central Asian region. Uzbekistan continued to maintain that the crisis is ‘an internal affair’ of Kyrgyzstan and balanced its policies of securing Uzbek-Kyrgyz border with handling the problem of migration of ethnic Uzbek refugees (about 1,00,000 according to some estimates) from South Kyrgyzstan to its territory. OSCE, under the present chairmanship of Kazakhstan, resolved to send only police forces to South Kyrgyzstan - a very measured step in view of the fact that the Organization has a long history of peacekeeping experiences in Eastern Europe. It is also notable that Kanat Saudabayev, the OSCE Chairperson, chose not to put into practice his cherished ‘Four-T Model’ of conflict resolution- development of Trust, Traditions, Transparency and Tolerance- in the Kyrgyz case. The Kyrgyz crisis initiated a debate in Tajikistan3 as whether it is also heading towards a similar experience with higher levels of poverty and lower levels of popular representation.

As various theories were marketed about the Western sponsorship of the 2005 Revolution, the issue of not-so-explicit involvement of Russia in the ouster of Bakiyev (as he played the game of acquiring economic benefits and political leverage from both the U.S. and Russia for long through his policy of allowance or non-allowance to use the Manas airbase) is doing the rounds this time. But Russia chose to act sensibly, taking into account its own capacity to respond as well as the ground situation there. Even after repeated appeals by the interim President Roza Otunbayeva to send troops, Russia refrained from intervention as it didn’t get a UN mandate for peacekeeping (unlike in the case of Georgia), and as it didn’t want to get into the quagmire where ethnic tensions between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan might ruin Russia’s relations with either or both the states. The decision to send such non-military supplies like helicopters and trucks by the CSTO (in which Russia is the rotating President) also showed restraint as its newly-established Rapid Reaction Force was not yet equipped to tackle peace-keeping missions and as other partners of the Organization were not too keen to interfere in the internal affairs of another member.

The on-going crisis in Kyrgyzstan is a pointed evidence to the challenges of transition that the post-Soviet states have been facing all along; it is not only about holding of free and fair elections, it is also about the true representation of the interests of all the clans, political groups and regions of the states; it is also about governance by not a coterie but by an administration, free from corruption and nepotism; and it is also about restructuring of the economy according to the rules and norms of market economy and distribution of the fruits of economic success even to the lowest strata of the population.

The situation in Kyrgyzstan is complex and offers not so bright a future scenario. But, we may quote what Andrei Shleifer-Daniel Treisman commented for Russia’s experiences with economic reforms, in the context of the transition process in all these states: It is like ‘embarking on a journey through mountains without a map….. To understand their (the mountaineers’) chances of success, it is not enough to consider their will power, their integrity, and the climbing kits or cash international friends have supplied. One also has to consider the shape of the mountain’.4

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