



Uprising in Kyrgyzstan

Anders Åslund says the overthrow of President Bakiyev was led by pro-democracy forces that will likely continue reforms and maintain ties with Washington.

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Steve Weisman: Kyrgyzstan has erupted in violence and a change in regime is in the offing. This is Steve Weisman at the Peterson Institute for International Economics with Anders Åslund, senior fellow here at the Institute and very knowledgeable about Kyrgyzstan. Thanks for joining me, Anders.

Anders Åslund: My pleasure.

Steve Weisman: What caused this latest uprising?

Anders Åslund: Basically, President [Kurmanbek] Bakiyev came in accidentally in reaction against his predecessor five years ago. The complaint then was that the regime was corrupt and that it was nepotistic. But President Askar Akayev [overthrown in 2005], whom I advised on economic matters from time to time for seven years, was a smart, intelligent person. Bakiyev was trying to do the same bad things that Akayev's family did, but he didn't do the good things. So Bakiyev stands out as a weak, corrupt, and nepotistic president who didn't really represent anything, and therefore it's not surprising that this happened. If anything is surprising, it is that he managed to stay on for five years.

Steve Weisman: Were there economic factors that led to this uprising?

Anders Åslund: Not really. Kyrgyzstan has not done badly. As many countries there, it's striving, being on the outskirts of China. China's economy is quickly developing into this direction. You can say that there are three things: it's in favor of democracy, it's against corruption, and it's against nepotism.

Steve Weisman: You mean this revolution is?

Anders Åslund: Yeah.

Steve Weisman: What sort of civil society infrastructure is there in Kyrgyzstan that can enable the country to function even at a time of political turmoil?

Anders Åslund: Kyrgyzstan is very different from the surrounding countries because it really has a strong, open civil society. Under President Akayev, who was there from 1990 until 2005, Kyrgyzstan was very open. There were some repressive elements. This was not quite a democracy but it was a very mild authoritarianism, and Bakiyev has been too weak to stop this.

Steve Weisman: Is the corruption going up to the presidential entourage or is this spread throughout the whole system?

Anders Åslund: Generally, this region is pervasively corrupt. And the president himself is accused of corruption, as are his two sons.

Steve Weisman: Is it likely that they'll flee the country? Or will they survive to come back and serve as opposition?

Anders Åslund: My guess is that they will flee the country. Former President Akayev now lives in Moscow since he was ousted and his family is there as well. I guess we will see that happening now again.

Steve Weisman: Speaking of Moscow, tell me about the Russian interests first and then the American interests in the situation?

Anders Åslund: Kyrgyzstan has very friendly relations with Russia. Bakiyev has had closer relations with Russia than Akayev had, but basically, the relations had always been good. Russia has one major air base just outside of Bishkek and other military installations. Gazprom is undertaking hundreds of millions of dollar investment programs seeking gas, and there are a lot of Russian companies there.

Steve Weisman: Are there a lot of natural resources there?

Anders Åslund: The main thing in Kyrgyzstan is gold and electricity. But there is some gas; there is coal, possibly oil also.

Steve Weisman: Coming to the United States, there was difficult negotiation a couple of years ago that ended up with the United States able to use military facilities in Kyrgyzstan to help with the war in Afghanistan. Is that in jeopardy?

Anders Åslund: I don't think so, because this is very much on a pecuniary basis. The United States pays a substantial amount to hold the airbase in Manas, which is just outside of Bishkek. And I think that the United States, regardless of the regime in Kyrgyzstan, will be happy to provide that money.

Steve Weisman: And the Russians don't object?

Anders Åslund: They do object but the Kyrgyz leaders, whoever they are, will think that this is money that they need. Kyrgyzstan is quite a poor country, while it's also quite an open and nice place.

Steve Weisman: What is the Islamic quotient there? Is there any Islamic radicalism as there are in some of the other 'stans?

Anders Åslund: Hardly at all. There's minimal Islamic radicalism in the south. Kyrgyzstan is divided by a mountain chain into two approximately equally large parts: the north and the south. The north is not at all strongly Muslim. You have a lot of Russian population still there. In the south, Islam is much stronger and not the least among the Uzbek minority, but it's sizeable. You have some fundamentalist and extremist tendencies, but by and large, Islam in Kyrgyzstan is quite modern and not radical.

Steve Weisman: So you don't see any of this instability spreading to other parts of the region?

Anders Åslund: I think that the main thing might be that Kyrgyzstan once again stands out as a pluralist or perhaps even a democratic example, and the question now is if this revolution will succeed, to bring about a more liberal regime than happened in 2005. The new leaders are the same leaders who were the Democrats in 2005 and lost out to Bakiyev.

Steve Weisman: Anders, thank you very much.

Anders Åslund: Thank you.

