

Comparative Features of ‘coloured revolutions’ in Georgia and Kyrgyzstan

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Introduction

This presentation compares and contrasts the regime changes in Georgia (2003) and Kyrgyzstan (2005) that resulted in the overthrow of Presidents Shevardnadze and Akaev and are often considered to be part of a common ‘colour revolution’ phenomenon sweeping the post-Soviet space. My research seeks to shed light on the actors and factors that contributed to the rise of successful anti-regime opposition movements and the relationship between political and NGO forces before, during and after the political crisis that dislodged the ruling regime. I will inspect the varying capacities of the Georgian and Kyrgyzstani protest movements and identify the factors that influenced the timing and nature of their anti-regime efforts. I will look at how the protest movements managed to operate in a hostile political environment, and inspect the ways in which they attempted to develop a counter political culture that challenged the regime and managed to entice major personalities to ally themselves with oppositional protest efforts. Other topics for scrutiny will be how these movements advertised and disseminated their message, methods employed to involve and motivate citizens, and the extent that historical, regional, and geographical considerations helped or hindered their struggle. The presentation will also provide interrogate the role of external forces in the colour revolution phenomenon. Since the organization and resources required to prosecute a successful colour revolution have been formidable, and opposition funds are often meagre, questions have been raised regarding the extent of foreign support for opposition forces. Finally, I will investigate why the regime-changes did not produce similar results and why the paths of Georgia and Kyrgyzstan have diverged since their “colour revolutions” and also address the question of whether what occurred in both states were “revolutions” brought about by strong oppositions or simply the collapse of rotten state institutions, which could not survive even minor frontal assaults. The paper is based on both primary sources and interviews conducted in both Georgia and Kyrgyzstan and relevant since 2002 and relevant secondary sources.

Five main aspects to be borne in mind when comparing the two regime-changes

1. Nature of State
2. Character of government
3. Character of opposition
4. Civil Society
5. External Influences
6. People

Main similarities:

1. Both Shevardnadze and Akaev were on the way out.
2. The elections that led to their downfalls were parliamentary not presidential
3. Both were suspected of trying to devise exit strategies that would guarantee their interests.
4. Most of the opposition leaders were former acolytes of the president.
5. Both Shevardnadze and Akaev were reluctant to use force on protesters
6. Security forces ambivalent
7. Independent media
8. Youth groups
9. Western-funded NGOs
10. US involvement (pol/economy/military)
11. Symbols of colour revolution
12. Elite defections
13. Legal opposition with parliamentary representation
14. Some opposition unity
15. Recent tradition of protest
16. Mass mobilization
17. Absence of energy-rich economy

Elections as a catalyst:

1. Limited time frame can encourage people to believe effort now will be effective.
2. If they care about confronting the regime, the cost of inaction at this time is higher than is normally the case.
3. Elections draw international attention increasing chance of success
4. This in turn decreases likelihood of military being used to suppress (decreasing perceived costs).

5. Easier for opposition to unite: if they do unite for the purpose of exposing fraud, a clear message can be given to the people of aims and strategy.

6. Elections occur at regular predictable intervals, allowing opportunity to prepare.

7. Fighting electoral fraud opens possibility of changing the regime, other protests are generally reformist in nature and possible outcome.

(See Bunce and Wolchik, Joshua Tucker (2007))

But parliamentary elections?

- Multitude of weak political parties

- Parties failed to function as intermediary institution linking state and society

- Personality based and devoid of any ideological underpinning

- Predominance of “independents” in Kyrgyzstan

Main dissimilarities:

1. Regional element decisive in Kyrgyzstan

2. Georgia was the original, Kyrgyzstan a copy

3. Those who hoped for colour revolution in Kyrgyzstan were not those who ousted president

4. Those who ousted president in Kyrgyzstan were not those who assumed power

5. Differences in background/ personality of Bakiev and Saakashvili

6. Differences between supporters of Bakiev and Saakashvili

7. “Opposition Unity” overstated in both countries

8. Centrality of Saakashvili in Georgia case, no similar dominant figure in Kyrgyzstan

9. Youth movements: differences in lifespan, impact, role, size and geographical distribution

10. Media crucial in Georgian case, not in Kyrgyzstan

11. Role of NGOs greater in Georgia

12. Differing roles of Russia and US

13. Allure of Europe – factor in Georgia, not in Kyrgyzstan

Some conclusions

Georgia and Kyrgyzstan shared many structural conditions – an unpopular president on the verge of stepping down, electoral irregularities, a reasonably strong civil society complemented by opposition parties, some independent media outlets, and Western assistance. But while the Tulip revolution may have had many of the ingredients of those in Georgia and Ukraine it was half-baked. People rushed to action without having the conceptual ground paved; the result was minimal institutional change and rapid popular disillusionment. Insufficient time had been available to build a mass democratic movement and the accusation sometimes levied against the Rose and Orange Revolutions, that what resulted merely was a circulation of elites,¹ carries more weight in the case of Kyrgyzstan. Cognisant of pressure from powerful neighbours like Russia, China, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan and the lukewarm support of distant democratic regimes, the post-Akaev government in Bishkek did little to move Kyrgyzstan towards liberal democratic values. Though the key beneficiaries of the Tulip Revolution may have been found wanting, there is reason to believe that civic activism is on the rise as witnessed by the activities of the umbrella movement “For Reform” and the large demonstrations throughout 2006 and 2007 to implement key democratic reforms indicate that the departure of Akaev has not put most of the basic issues facing the Kyrgyz people to rest.²

Opposition unity has been overstated. In Georgia, complete national unity was momentarily achieved *after* the resignation of Shevardnadze rather than before. Saakashvili received 96% of the vote in the presidential elections of January 2004 though as subsequent events were to demonstrate this overwhelming mandate was rather fragile. Kyrgyzstan lacked a strong and united opposition. By the time of the Tulip Revolution many opposition leaders had united on paper but the parties they maintained were small and little united them save a common will to power and desire to see the back of Akaev. It would soon become evident that Kyrgyzstan’s opposition had leap-frogged to power despite a lack of preparation and having been denied some of the structural advantages enjoyed by their counterparts in Georgia and Ukraine. In the short-term, Western organisations basked in what seemed like another democratic success story and in July 2005, Kurmenbek Bakiev was elected president with 89% of the vote and promptly appointed Felix Kulov as prime minister in what was trumpeted as a north-south unity dream team. This partnership of convenience unravelled rather quickly and many of Bakiev’s erstwhile allies of the Tulip Revolution elections are today among his staunchest critics.

Notwithstanding the unmistakable funding from abroad, foreign actors played a remarkably quiescent role during the Rose Revolution. Despite disliking Shevardnadze, Russia preferred an old familiar adversary to a new unpredictable one while the United States had learned to live with disappointment and never considered supporting Shevardnadze’s premature departure. During November 2003, both Russia and the US offered mediation not meddling and both states were surprised at the route events took.

¹ See for example Henry E. Hale, ‘Democracy and Revolution in the Postcommunist World: From Chasing Events to Building Theory’, (32 pp.) Working Paper no.24, Program on New Approaches to Russian Security, (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, April 2005) and Theodor Tudoroiu, Rose, Orange, and Tulip: The failed Post-Soviet Revolutions. In: Communist and Post-Communist Studies, Volume 40, Issue 3, September 2007, pp. 315-34.

² International Crisis Group, Kyrgyzstan On the Edge. In: ICG, Osh/Brussels, 9 November 2006.

The opposition, while not entirely united, had reached a critical mass sufficient to discredit the elections and provide a focus for a disenfranchised electorate.³ A critical element to the success of the Rose Revolution was popular mobilization, which added so much weight to opposition demands and credibility. But, as has been pointed out elsewhere, revolutionaries rarely make revolutions, governments do.⁴

³ It is often forgotten that the opposition Labour and New Right parties decided not to collaborate with the protests and attended the aborted inaugural meeting of the disputed parliament.

⁴ See Stephen F. Jones reference to Lewis Namier's 'Vanquished Supremacies' (Hamish Hamilton, London, 1958) in 'Reflection on the Rose Revolution: A Tale of Two Rallies', Harvard International Review, 16 March 2008.