

Tear gas, not tulips

An uprising in Kyrgyzstan watched throughout Central Asia and beyond.



FIVE years after the “Tulip revolution” which led to the ouster of one president, Kyrgyzstan has seen another flee the capital, another new government set up and more elections promised. How stable the new regime will be, however, is far from clear.

Violent clashes between thousands of anti-government demonstrators and police in the capital, Bishkek, on Wednesday April 7th left at least 65 people dead and about 500 injured. The police used tear gas, smoke grenades and live bullets to dispel rioters in front of the presidential palace in the city centre—to no avail. The crowds stormed the government building and set fire to the prosecutor’s office.

In the afternoon, the president, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, imposed a curfew on Bishkek and three regions in the north and centre of the country. By the evening, though, he had left the capital in an aeroplane and was rumoured to have landed in Osh, his stronghold in the volatile Ferghana valley. His appearance there could raise the spectre of north-south divisions and the continuation of violence.

As the president was fleeing, leaders of the Opposition were negotiating with members of his administration about a transfer of power. After the prime minister, Daniyar Usenov, resigned, his post was taken by Roza Otunbayeva, who will lead an interim government for six months until elections take place. Ms Otunbayeva was a prominent opposition figure during the 2005 revolution and became foreign minister. But, disenchanted with Mr Bakiyev, she later joined the new opposition.

The revolution has thus devoured its children. Yet the uprising itself did not come as a surprise, only perhaps its speed and its bloodiness. Discontent had been simmering since the beginning of the year, after a steep increase in energy prices.

That was painful in itself and made the nepotism of President Bakiyev and the increasing scale of corruption by senior officials—worse than under the previous leadership—much harder to bear. The uprising in Bishkek was triggered by events the day before in the city of Talas, in the north of the country, where unrest has been concentrated (President Bakiyev is from the south and southerners dominated his administration). Several thousand demonstrators stormed the regional government building and took the governor hostage. He was freed by the police, but the demonstrators later retook the building. The protest then swept through the country, reaching Bishkek the next day.

Mr Bakiyev made two decisive mistakes. First, he had almost all the country's opposition leaders arrested by the morning of April 7th, which left the protesting crowds without any sense of direction or moderating influence. The leaders were almost all released later in the day but by then it was too late. Second, he miscalculated by using brutal force to hang on to power, which ultimately made it impossible for him to stay. The police were also clearly outnumbered by protesters.

Mr Bakiyev disappointed many of his supporters by not living up to his promises of democracy and political reform. He failed to curb corruption, mismanaged the economy, placed some of his numerous relatives in important positions and overall, became more authoritarian than the predecessor he helped to oust.

On the eve of the fifth anniversary of the Tulip revolution, on March 23rd, he declared that Western-style democracy, a system based on elections and individual human rights, might not be suitable for Kyrgyzstan (which once styled itself Central Asia's Switzerland, a tolerant, mountainous place). He thought "consultative democracy"—ie, talking to local bigwigs—would be more in line with the country's traditions.

The events in Kyrgyzstan have implications for Russia and America, which both have military bases in the impoverished country. The Americans, who supply troops in Afghanistan from Manas base in the north of the country, just managed to retain rights to it last year. This upset the Russians, who had offered the Kyrgyz \$2 billion in aid, presumably hoping Manas would be closed. The Kremlin's leaders do not seem to have offered Mr Bakiyev asylum in Moscow, as they did to his predecessor. On April 8th, the new prime minister said America can continue to use the Manas airbase.

But the abrupt change in Kyrgyzstan is also being closely watched in the rest of Central Asia. This was the second time that as few as 5,000 demonstrators succeeded in overthrowing an unwanted government in Kyrgyzstan—an example that the no-less authoritarian neighbours fear could be emulated elsewhere. For the Kyrgyz people, though, it is an opportunity to get things right the second time around.

Fonte: The Economist. Disponível em: <www.economist.com>. Acesso em: 9 abr. 2010.