Institutionalized Instability: Factors Leading to the April 2010 Uprising in Kyrgyzstan

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Introduction

The door slammed shut, Nurbek rushed downstairs and out into the darkness as gunfire rang out one block away. He had just received a phone call that his father, Melis, had joined the protestors in front of the Government House (“White House”) to oust President Kurmanbek Bakiyev from office. He wanted to find his father and take him home, but my friends and I debated with him whether it was safe for him to go or not. What if his father had already left and Nurbek was caught in the crossfire? Nurbek could not sit and wait; he went to Ala-Too Square, where the fighting between demonstrators and police had been raging since the early afternoon. After what seemed an eternity, he returned with his father, who was bleeding and covered in dirt. Visibly shaken, Melis told us that he had joined the demonstration when he heard that people were being killed. He thought that it was his duty to help. When he got there he joined a throng of people, but the clang of sniper fire sent everyone running. In the melee, Melis fell and scrapped his hand on the ground. The young man in front of him, however, had been shot in the head. He said that he had seen at least three corpses lying in the Square before leaving with his son.

The next morning, my friends and I went out to see the aftermath of the violence. Shocked residents stood in awe of the destruction. Many stared at bullet holes in the marble of buildings around the square. There was a growing collection of flowers on the ground in front of a small memorial to those that had died in the struggle to change power. Small circles of stones and flowers around blood stains marked the places where some had fallen. The remnants of burnt out cars and trucks which had been used to ram the gates of the White House were strewn all over the street. Graffiti on nearby walls called, “Bakiyev ketsin!” (“Bakiyev, leave!”) People were moving freely in and out of President’s Office and there was a fire in one part of the building. A bed sheet on the White House gate read, “Dirty Jews and those like Maksim have no place in Kyrgyzstan.”

Groups of people were shouting and moving through the crowd, trying to mobilize supporters for various causes.

A new political era had begun in the Kyrgyz Republic. It was the second time that change had come through protests. The so-called “Tulip Revolution” in March 2005 was the culmination of

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1 This was written in Russian, “Gryaznym yevreya i takim kak Maksim net mesta v Kyrgyzstane”. This referred to Eugene Gourevitch, a U.S. citizen of Russian Jewish heritage, who was a close business partner of Maksim Bakiyev, the President’s son.

2 I say so-called here because as many people told me, initial hopes to reform the government and stamp out family politics was simply seen as a lie after Bakiyev followed the same path. Indeed, many local friends referred to the change as a “coup” (in Russian, “perevorot”).
opposition action and growing frustration with then President Askar Akayev. During this uprising, however, public anger quickly resulted in a desperate attempt to overthrow the government. Mass media, mobile phones, and social networking websites helped spread information that alerted people to the events on 6-7 April 2010, and mobilized thousands to come out in protest.\(^3\) Widespread dissatisfaction with the government and alleged corruption scandals were not the only reasons for the mass protest. Complex issues involving recent social and economic challenges, unpopular government policies, international criticism, and widespread poverty were all motivating factors supporting the rapid overthrow of power. This article examines some of the issues that fostered discontent in preceding years and offers suggestions on areas that require more attention to strengthen stability. I have been living in Kyrgyzstan since 2007 and many of my experiences are drawn from this period. In addition, I have been working for development organizations, which provided me a deeper insight into the country’s challenges and underlying factors of instability. The conclusions I draw in this article are my own and do not reflect the position of any of the organizations I worked for or others in the country.

I describe the situation in Kyrgyzstan as “institutionalized instability” – where political, economic, and social insecurities are systemic, and the government is unable or does not respond effectively to fundamental problems. I refer to this as “institutionalized” for several reasons. First, the problems that affect the country are chronic. The prolonged duration of issues such as an underdeveloped agricultural sector, a crumbling energy sector, and declining health standards are symptoms of a system that has long been in decline. Second, many of the current government policies and social conditions present barriers to further development. For example, after independence, the division of land into small parcels which prevented effective irrigation or crop rotation only contributed to dwindling agricultural production. Third, corruption is pervasive, strangling development initiatives and undermines improvements throughout the country. These interrelated features of instability are endemic, not a temporary challenge, of many aspects of life.

A substantial comparative study could be made of institutionalized instability in other countries, but this is beyond the scope of this article. In the sections that follow, I focus some of the main obstacles that have increased hardships over the past three years and have contributed to widespread discontent in Kyrgyzstan. In general, corruption, poor governance, and widespread poverty are among the most destabilizing factors. These are overlapping and erode the citizen’s confidence in government actions.

For example, the government and international organizations have long pointed to the need to generate revenues and modernize equipment in the energy sector. The energy deficit and ensuing problems created as a result of the extremely cold winter of 2007-2008 revealed a sector that was not just in trouble, but on the brink of collapse. Measures were implemented late, but save the country’s main hydroelectric reservoir from reaching bottom. Yet, questions surfaced as to how a multi-year storage facility could be so quickly depleted. Speculation and facts began to emerge that the country had exported more energy than needed. In order to allow the reservoir to refill, lengthy blackouts were implemented throughout the country. The aging energy equipment, however, could not handle the frequent load-shedding and there were increased accidents and breakages. The government eased the tariff regime in place to compensate for the increased difficulties and lack of service, but later implemented a new high tariff plan. Ostensibly, this was to generate revenues for the sector to carry out much needed maintenance and modernization work, but many considered it to be part of plan to enrich the presidential family and its close associates which had purchased part or assumed control of strategic energy objects. The result was demonstrations and protests which unravelled on the streets of Bishkek in bloody chaos.

There are other complex problems and challenges, particularly within the last three years, such as drought and an extremely cold winter, which have caused further hardships. These are not endemic nor do they occur with regular frequency. Yet, the knock-on effects from the harsh climatic effects – reduced food and energy availability – revealed that corruption and chronic underfunding had withered the ability of government and people to withstand and respond to such shocks. These events indicated that there were persistent challenges that also contributed to the overall conditions of instability.

\(^3\) For more on the difference between the 2005 and 2010 uprisings, see Temirkulov (2010).
This article begins by examining the events preceding 6-8 April and the rapid descent into violence which led President Bakiyev to flee to Belarus. This is based on my experiences during this time, eye-witness accounts, and news reports. Second, I return to 2005, to examine the political situation immediately following the “Tulip Revolution”, and discuss how political changes strengthened Bakiyev’s rule, limiting the role of the opposition. This uprising was meant to mark the new beginning for politics and to limit corruption. Instead, it was the start of another leadership which quickly seized authority and took hold of many lucrative government sectors and businesses. Third, I examine the various challenges to food, energy and economic security that created new challenges throughout the country. Fourth, I examine poorly designed government policies, allegations of corruption and disintegrating relations with Russia which outraged much of the population. Finally, I provide general comments the instability in Kyrgyzstan and areas for further consideration.

Protests and Looting: 6-8 April 2010

The initial cracks in President Bakiyev’s control of the country began in February 2010. In Naryn, people protested against high energy prices that had been imposed from the beginning of the year. Naryn oblast is a high mountain environment, and winter lasts for over half the year. The province is also one of the poorest regions in the country. The costs for heating and electricity for this period would have been extremely high and unaffordable to many families living in Naryn city and other towns in the region. In addition, social benefits predominantly went to those in the south, leaving many poor in Naryn without sufficient support.

The initial demonstrations continued and more were planned. On 17 March, the anniversary of the Aksy shootings in 2002, leaders from the main opposition parties convened a national kurultai (a Kyrgyz term for “assembly”) in Bishkek, the capital. The assembly resulted with the adoption of a resolution. Among the points adopted that day were demands to remove Bakiyev’s family from power, a return of privatized state companies and a decrease in energy tariffs. The demands, however, went unmet.

Despite these street demonstrations, on 23-24 March, the anniversary of the “Tulip Revolution,” President Bakiyev held a Kurultai of Harmony (Yntymak kurultai in Kyrgyz, Kurultai soglasitiya in Russian) in Bishkek. Bakiyev (2010) noted in his opening speech that in many parts of the world there was an idea of “consultative democracy” (kengeshme demokratiya in Kyrgyz, soveshchatel’naya demokratiya in Russian), which was a focus “on the inclusion of various social groups in the process of developing state policies and their realization.” He then stated that this type of democracy was already encompassed in the tradition of the kurultai. Many people I spoke to understood this not as a social forum for discussing ideas, but an attempt to create a rubber-stamp body, such as the kurultai that Bakiyev convened, to pass state policies. This was a concerning note, which had many people wondering if Bakiyev would rewrite the constitution again to concentrate even more power under the Presidential Administration.

On 6 April, opposition leaders planned to hold a demonstration in Talas city. Ata-Meken (“Fatherland”) Party Vice President Bolot Sherniyazov was arrested in the morning by national security forces. Supporters immediately began protesting in front of the provincial administration building. Talas oblast’ Governor Beishenbek Bolotbekov came out to speak with the protestors and attempted to calm the situation, but the protestors stormed the administration building and took the

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4 In this section I include information that I had gathered during my work at the United Nations. While I focus on UN activities during this period, this paper is not a review of other international organizations’ or government activities. There was much work conducted during this time by all national stakeholders and this paper does not focus on the breadth and scale of this work.

5 Oblast’ is a Russian term meaning an administrative division of the country, similar to a province.

6 See information provided in the “Joint Economic Assessment”, prepared by international financial institutions ahead of the 27 July 2010 donor meeting on the reconstruction of southern Kyrgyzstan following the June events (ADB, IMF, WB 2010, 78).

7 During protests against the imprisonment of local parliamentary deputy Azimbek Beknazarov, police shot at the protestors, killing six. This sparked a widespread movement against the Akayev regime, leading to his ouster three years later. This event is still recalled and is sometimes used as a rally call for members of the opposition. See Gullette (2010) for more background on this event and the political action that followed it.
governor hostage. By the early afternoon, the protestors had named Koisun Kurmanaliev as the new governor of Talas oblast’ and then made an attempt to take control of the local internal affairs administration building. Interior Minister Modomusa Kongantiyev flew to Talas in an attempt to restore order. He was also taken captive and savagely beaten. The struggle stretched into the night, but the protestors eventually managed to take control of the local internal affairs administration building. In the evening, news services were prevented from reporting and Internet access in Bishkek was severely limited, most likely in an attempt to prevent the news from spreading.

By the following morning, several opposition leaders had been arrested and put into the holding cells of the National Security headquarters in an attempt to undermine the scheduled demonstration in Bishkek. The previous day’s protest in Talas and the arrest of the opposition leaders only galvanized the protestors. Outside the Media Forum building and the offices of the Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan in the eastern part of Bishkek, protestors gathered from early morning. Representatives from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and American and German embassies were present at the beginning, but left after a short while. Later, a government official came and told the protestors that the meeting was illegal as it had not been granted permission by the Mayor’s Office and was not held in a designated place for demonstrations. Those that did not leave would be arrested. The police moved in, arrested some protestors, and dispersed the crowd.

Information about the arrests spread quickly through social networks and the Internet, and more people joined the site of the demonstration. The police used tear gas and rubber bullets to repel the growing crowd, but the crowd outnumbered the police quickly overcame them. The crowd forced the police into a building where they were beaten and had their riot shields and weapons taken from them. The protestors moved toward the city center; with their growing numbers they quickly overpowered a group of Special Forces soldiers along the way. The crowd took two armoured personnel carriers and more weapons, including AK-47s and grenade launchers.

I had passed the White House just as the first protestors flooded into Ala-Too Square. Riot police were deployed to guard the White House from within the gates and more police moved towards Ala-Too Square from the Old Square, one block away in front of Parliament. The crowd attempted to break down the gates. Some protestors attempted to negotiate with the police, but the two sides clashed, with the police spraying rubber bullets into the crowd. Snipers were deployed onto the roof of the White House and shot protestors as they attempted to break into the compound.

More fighting occurred in nearby areas. An intense gun battle broke out at the National Security headquarters to free the opposition leaders. Once past the gates and the guards, protestors set fire to parts of the building. Others attacked the Parliament building, where the opposition leaders eventually gathered and discussed the formation of a new interim government and appointing people to administrative posts. Fighting continued throughout the day and eventually stopped in the evening. There was looting and small gun battles throughout the night. Eight-six people were killed that day or died later from their wounds; over 1,600 people had been injured in the fighting.

On 8 April, the centre was filled with people who had come to see the aftermath of the destruction. People began forming voluntary people’s militia groups (yktyyarduu eldik koshundar in Kyrgyz, dobrovol’nye narodnye družiny in Russian) to make up for the lack of an organized police force. During the night militia members stood guard in front of shops and properties to minimize the damage caused during a second night of looting. Despite these attempts, over 80 properties were damaged by looters. Many of these were Narodnyi convenience stores, which were believed to belong to Maksim Bakiyev. The General Prosecutor’s Office was also destroyed – twice – to make sure that no incriminating files were left behind.

8 Opposition leaders detained included Almazbek Atambayev (head of the Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan – SDPK), Omurbek Tekebayev (head of the Ata-Meken Party), Isa Omurkulov (SDPK), Temir Sariyev (head of the Akshumkar Party) and others (Nichol 2010, 3).
Conditioning Political Instability

The rapid decline into violence shocked many people, but the factors behind the instability had remained since the previous uprising in 2005. Then President Askar Akayev was ousted due to increasing authoritarian tendencies. His open support to two of his children in the 2005 parliamentary elections, in which they both won seats, helped opposition parties to rally supporters demanding his resignation. The opposition formed an alternative government in the south, gaining the support of local government officials and police. The movement moved to Bishkek, where on 24 March, protestors managed to oust Akayev, who fled to Russia. During this time there was a strong backing from the population and political elite (Gullette 2010, Radnitz 2006). In comparison, the uprising in 2010 was rapid and chaotic. There were no consolidated political force in place to manage the process and there was no opportunity for dialogue.

In 2005, the People’s Movement of Kyrgyzstan (Народное движение Кыргызстана), a coalition of opposition leaders, was the driving force behind the mass protests. The movement quickly fell apart once Akayev fled. Bakiyev, one of the movement’s main leaders, emerged as interim president and won an election in May to formalize his position. Many people were hopeful that Bakiyev would bring an end to family politics and corruption. In July, he said, “When I was prime minister I sometimes had to work with unprofessional ministers who were appointed because they were someone’s relative or friend…[That] seriously damages the economy and it’s a brake on development” (MacWilliam 2005). An investigation into the Akayev’s business deals and abuse of power was extensive and gave the impression that the country’s leadership might make a fresh start.

Under Bakiyev, however, such hopes quickly dissolved. The constitutional reform process was one such example of continuing authoritarian tendencies. Immediately after the 2005 uprising, Bakiyev formed a commission to review the country’s constitution. Throughout the Akayev era, the constitution was frequently changed. After the first constitution was introduced in May 1993, referendums were held in 1994, 1996 and 1998, each bringing a revised constitution with greater power given to the executive branch. Opposition leaders stated further changes in 2003 limited the effectiveness of political parties and increased the president’s power.

The work of the constitutional commission under Bakiyev was slow. In April and May 2006, there were demonstrations with people camping out in Ala-Too Square, demanding speedier reforms. A draft constitution was prepared in November 2006, which was passed by Parliament. This was regarded as a victory for opposition groups as the new constitution included measures to limit the president’s power. A month later, pro-presidential supporters pushed for amendments, which reinstated many of the powers that had been limited in the November constitution. These were adopted and the constitution was finally signed into law in January 2007. As a result, Feliks Kulov, an opposition leader who had been working in tandem with Bakiyev since 2005, resigned along with the entire cabinet of ministers. They felt that they had lost the battle against Parliament which allowed greater power to the president. In September 2007, however, the Constitutional Court invalidated the November and December 2006 amendments, as they had not been passed by national referendum. The country reverted to the 2003 constitution, which questioned the legality of many changes in the country since that time. Bakiyev hastily announced a national referendum for October 2007, which saw a revised version of the constitution adopted. The main changes to this were that presidential powers had been increased and the structure of parliament changed so that candidates could now only be voted in through party lists, with parliamentary elections held in December. Despite many irregularities (OSCE/ODIHR 2008), the president’s party Ak Jol (“Bright Path”) won a strong majority in parliament and kept out many opposition leaders. This represented a similar style of command as reflected in Vladimir Putin’s notion of the “power vertical” (International Crisis Group 2010).

Compound Disaster

These mounting political challenges undermined efforts to create a significant change in government. Dialogue diminished between the presidential administration and opposition figures.
While this political impasse took hold and increased tensions, there were other challenges, particularly to food and energy security, that caused further instability. A series of external shocks wore down the government’s ability to respond to changes and people’s coping mechanisms and people’s patience with government inaction also diminished. The United Nations later defined these emerging challenges as a “compound disaster”, a slow onset disaster which had the potential to worsen quickly across many sectors affecting many lives.

In November 2008, the United Nations in the Kyrgyz Republic took measures to assist some of the most vulnerable groups in the country (roughly 800,000 people) by launching the country’s first Flash Appeal (2008), a one-off humanitarian appeal for external funding to meet urgent, live-saving needs. The previous year’s drought and harsh winter had exceeded many people’s coping strategies, and there was a concern by government and international donors that another cold winter would create a much worse situation. While only a few of the emergency interventions were funded, they did not resolve the chronic nature of these problems.

Food Insecurity

Global food insecurity from 2006 to 2007 signalled the beginning of greater challenges in Kyrgyzstan. The International Monetary Fund (IMF 2008a, 8) noted that at the same time as a spike in global oil prices “unfavourable weather conditions in a number of countries led to a bad wheat harvest in 2007 for the second consecutive year and a sharp bidding-up of wheat prices, with spillovers into other crops through substitution effects. Furthermore, the recent rise in oil prices has boosted production costs of food commodities.” By June 2008, food prices had begun to peak. The IMF (2008b, 4) noted, nonetheless, that food prices were “still 44 percent above end-2006 levels”.

Although agriculture is the largest sector in Kyrgyzstan, the country is a net food importer. Demand for some stable food items, such as flour, often exceeds local production.9 From January to October 2007, the cost of individual food items rose quickly. For example, based on information from the National Statistical Committee (NSC), the cost of bread, flour (first sort) and vegetable oil rose by half. Dairy products rose by a quarter. This trend continued until June 2008. By then, prices for wheat flour (first sort) and vegetable had gone up by 110 per cent.

Already by the end of 2007, the high prices had already begun to have an effect on consumption habits around the country. Data from the National Statistical Committee (NSC 2008, 31, 34) indicated that the population, especially children, were not consuming their minimal daily nutritional requirements. From 2006 to 2007 there was a decrease in the amount of proteins consumed daily. Further, poor hygiene and inadequate nutrition contributed to increased rates of stunting and underweight observed among the severely food insecure. The rise in food prices caused some severely food insecure families to forego the use of health services (WFP 2008, 27).

By September 2007, small protests took place around Kyrgyzstan against the high prices. On 16 September, a small group of sellers in Jalalabat city’s central marketplace held a small demonstration against food prices. The following day, a small group of people in Kyzyl-Kiya, Batken oblast’, accused local government of losing control of market prices. On 18 September, another demonstration took place in the central square of Naryn city, organized by the “Birimidik” association. Demonstrators drafted five requests to be taken to President Bakiyev. Among them were requests to reduce the electricity tariff by half and to raise salaries and pensions by half to compensate for the high food prices (AKIpress 2007).

After the peak prices in mid 2008, International Monetary Fund and Food and Agricultural Organization statistical data indicated that global food prices had begun to decline. Yet, in Kyrgyzstan, prices remained high. It was not until early 2009 that some food prices noted a marked decline, but not at the same pace as global food prices. Indeed, the high costs suggested other factors were to blame. For example, there was concern that middlemen were artificially keeping prices high to benefit

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9 Kyrgyzstan consumes over a million tons of wheat per years, but in 2008 only harvested around 840,000 tons. This was a relatively good harvest given the poor climatic conditions; but it was roughly 85 per cent of the average harvest from 2002 to 2007. For an official statement on the 2008 wheat harvest, see Kutuyeva (2008). For more on the average harvest size, see the Food and Agriculture Organization Global Information and Early Warning System (FAO/GIEWS 2008).
from the added cost. Whatever the reason, the additional and extended burden to households’ monthly expenditures was a significant concern.

**Extreme Weather Conditions**

The effects of the global food crisis were made worse by an extremely cold winter in Kyrgyzstan, creating further instability throughout the country. The 2007-2008 winter in Central Asia was the worst for 44 years. Information from the State Agency for Hydrometeorology noted that the high temperatures in 2007 and 2008. This indicated that there was likely to be some stress on crops, particularly those without access to irrigation.

Precipitation data also indicated a worrisome trend. Some cumulative precipitation readings for 2008 showed that some areas, particularly eastern Kyrgyzstan, received around 25 per cent (and in some cases 200 per cent) more precipitation than the previous year. According to data from the Hydrometeorology Agency, however, almost all areas of the country received less precipitation. From January to June 2008, Kyrgyzstan received 24.5 per cent less precipitation than the analogous period in 2007. In particular, Issyk-Köl oblast’ received 27.5 per cent less precipitation than the same period the previous year. Chui Valley and parts of the Fergana Valley received 39 per cent and 21 per cent less precipitation respectively for the analogous period.

**Agricultural Challenges**

The climatic challenges created further difficulties for the agricultural sector, further weakening people’s abilities to respond to the challenges. Agriculture is the largest industry in the country, employing roughly 40 per cent of the population. Only seven per cent of the land is arable, however, small farming plots, irrigation problems, and low fertilizer use do not allow for high crop yields that can sustain many families beyond the subsistence level.

These issues were exacerbated in the summer of 2008. There was an increase in fertilizer prices. Since 2007, the price of phosphate fertilizers had quadrupled (Vidal 2008). In the past, many farmers had not used fertilizers or could not afford it. In addition, there was an invasion of Moroccan locusts (*Dociostaurus maroccanus*), which devastated crops in southern and north-eastern parts of Kyrgyzstan (Pannier 2008).

Although the 2008 harvest was lower than previous years, it was not a disaster. Nonetheless, Kyrgyzstan still needed to import wheat. Based on harvest yield predictions, in early April the government announced plans to purchase 265,000 tons of wheat from Kazakhstan. Days later on 15 April, Kazakhstan, usually a strong regional exporter, suspended grain exports in order to ensure a sufficient supply to meet domestic demand. This increased fears of price inflation throughout the region (Lillis 2008). President Kurmanbek Bakiyev flew to Astana for talks with Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev. On 18 April, he returned to Bishkek, having secured a deal to import 50,000 tons of grain to be kept in state reserves. A further 300,000 tons of grain would be supplied from neighboring countries (24.kg 2008; Pannier 2008).

Bakiyev had ensured the import of grain and promised to fill state reserves, but the coming winter still looked bleak for many families. A World Food Programme (WFP 2008) Food Security Assessment indicated that one in five households were severely food insecure. Another report conducted by the United States Agency for International Development and the International Center for Soil Fertility and Agricultural Development (USAID and IFDC 2008) indicated that people were unable to gather sufficient fodder for their livestock. A rapid assessment of livestock farmers involved in the Kyrgyz Agro-Input Enterprise Development Project (KAED), a USAID-supported project, stated that many farmers felt the animal feed situation was worse than previous years. Two out of five

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11 Information based on precipitation data from Bishkek, Jangy-Jer, Kara-Balta, and Tokmok in Chui oblast’.

12 Information based on precipitation data from Kara-Suu, Özgün, and Nookat in Osh oblast’.

13 Small projects have demonstrated the positive effects of the proper use of fertilizers. The USAID sponsored Kyrgyz-Agro Input Enterprise Development Project (KAED 2008) noted that participating farmers had doubled yields in comparison with national averages.

14 For Bakiyev’s official announcement see 24.kg (2008).
livestock farmers said that they did not have enough animal feed to meet basic requirements for the winter period and a majority of farmers noted that feed prices were expensive and prohibited purchasing them in markets. Many farmers were faced with a situation where they were forced to sell their animals in market in order to earn money to purchase animal feed. The drought, resulting high market prices and diminished domestic and international market demand for meat also drove down the price of animals at markets. Thus, some farmers were forced to consume some of the livestock as they could not get good market prices.

**Energy Deficit**

Not only had the severe climatic conditions affected food availability, it had also created an energy deficit throughout the country. The increased energy need through the 2007-2008 winter had significantly reduced water levels at the Toktogul Reservoir. This is the largest reservoir on the Naryn River, feeding the Toktogul Hydroelectric Power Station and four smaller hydroelectric stations (collectively known as the Toktogul Cascade), which provides around 93 percent of the country’s electricity. Based on information received from the Ministry of Industry, Energy and Fuel Resources, and the Central Asia Regional Water Information Base Project, UNDP estimated that the Toktogul Reservoir was roughly 40 per cent below average water volume level for much of 2008. Data on river flow and reservoir volume indicated that low levels may have been due to a cyclical pattern. Nonetheless, the extremely low reservoir volume indicates the climate was not the only reasons for the significantly low water levels. There were concerns that the low water levels reflected graft in the energy sector. During summers, Kyrgyzstan regularly sells electricity to neighboring countries, in particular Kazakhstan. There were rumors and reports that significantly more electricity than usual had been sold to Kazakhstan (International Crisis Group 2010, 3). Indeed, Joellyn Murphy, an energy expert, noted that in 2007, Kyrgyzstan exported 70 per cent more than the energy-importing countries’ demand of 1.4 billion kilowatt hours, nearly depleting Toktogul Reservoir (AKIpress 2010).

Apart from the added demand on the system, in general, the energy sector continued to suffer from a number of significant problems. In the *Central Asia Regional Risk Assessment*, UNDP (2009, 53) outlined challenges to the energy sector as “problematic management and a lack of transparency, high systemic losses and quasi-fiscal deficits, tariffs that are below cost recovery rates, high reliance on imported fossil fuels, and a decapitalized energy infrastructure”. In 2008, the chronic nature of these problems indicated the extent to which the energy sector was in need to widespread reform. Here, I briefly examine three main issues: changing generation trends, the dilapidated infrastructure and high commercial losses (or theft).

First, during the Soviet period, Central Asian republics were not energy independent; they were joined together in one electricity network. In the summer, Kyrgyzstan would generate greater amounts of electricity, which would be exported mainly to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. In addition, water stored throughout the winter months would be released and provide irrigation water to downstream countries. For Uzbekistan this was vital as their cotton monoculture requires a lot of water. In return, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan would provide sufficient annual energy and fuel exports to Kyrgyzstan in winter. Based on statistics from 1991 to the present, there was a clear indication that Kyrgyzstan slowly changed from high summer and low winter generation trends to the opposite as well as greater reliance on hydroelectric generation. Disagreements between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan about water use, particularly during summer months, were a result of this changing electricity generation pattern. High winter use meant decreased outflow in the spring and summer months. As the Naryn River is largely glacially fed, it meant that strong spring and summer melt would replenish reservoir volumes to provide for the following winter, but would not be available for downstream countries. This generation pattern change was an underlying issue when increased demand in 2007-2008 nearly depleted the Toktogul Reservoir.

Second, much of the energy equipment is 30-40 years old and is in need of constant repair. In August 2008, the Ministry of Energy asked for $60 million to conduct maintenance and repair work,

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15 The Toktogul Reservoir is a multi-year storage with hydro-electric generating capacity. It has an effective storage capacity of 14 billion cubic metres (bcm). It has a dead storage level of 5.5 bcm. “Dead storage level” is the point at which there is insufficient water in the reservoir to allow the turbines work.
and purchase fuel reserves (such as gas, coal and mazut – a fuel oil) for the coming winter. In particular, the Bishkek Thermal Power Station (TPS) is in constant need of maintenance to keep it functioning. It is almost 50 years old and operates at a third of its intended capacity. Attempts to privatize it did not work, as it was evident that investors would need to conduct extensive renovations. In November 2008, the World Bank gave $11 million to carry out urgent repairs to the energy sector, especially Bishkek TPS.16

Third, energy losses remain a significant problem. In a USAID (2008) report, it was estimated that Kyrgyzstan’s electricity distribution companies lose between 31 and 44 per cent of electricity, as a result of people not paying for electricity. While payment collection methods have been made to reduce this, losses are still high. For example, in August 2010, Energy Minister Osmenbek Artykbayev stated that losses for the first half of the year were nearly 27 per cent of generated energy.17

In April 2008, the government passed two decrees to respond to the crisis in the energy sector. The first decree focused on outlined measures to address the energy deficit.18 The second decree “outlined short-term measures for food and energy security, and social, money and credit, and budget and tax policies. The decree also outlined some medium-term measures, mainly focusing on the financial and energy sectors” (UNDP 2009: 45).19 Altogether, 64 measures were introduced to address the energy deficit and other emerging challenges before and following the 2008-2009 winter.

One response to the crisis, which was initiated before the decrees came into effect but subsequently became a part of the plan, was that the government was forced to introduce rolling blackouts throughout the country. The first of these began in March through to mid June 2008 and were re-instated again in from August 2008 to April 2009. Scheduled blackouts were to be for eight hours every night, perhaps longer in rural areas. Some areas, however, reported that blackouts lasted for up to 16 hours per day. This also resulted in the extension of school holidays from 25 December 2008 to 1 March 2009, shutting down schools that use electricity for heating (some 1,117 out of 2,111 schools in total) and to install coal-heating systems (UNDP 2009: 45). Children were expected to make up their missed classes during the following summer. This was despite the fact that the schools had been recommended to switch over to electricity for heating two to three years earlier.

Inflation and Dwindling Safety Nets

Food and energy price increases were driving forces behind high consumer price inflation rates in 2008. Growing remittances during this period, however, helped to mitigate some of the problems. Yet, for 2008, consumer price index rose by 24.7 per cent. According to information from the National Statistical Committee, food prices were high, but also energy prices had increased by over 30 per cent. At the same time the Kyrgyz som began to depreciate against the U.S. dollar. There were further slippages in the balance of payments. Trade levels for both 2007 and 2008 indicated that Kyrgyzstan paid nearly 200 per cent more for imports than it generated through exports. In addition, initial shocks to the financial sector in other parts of region had a belated effect in Kyrgyzstan. The IMF (2008c, 4) noted that “Global and regional economic growth continues to fall in the wake of the international financial crisis. Spillovers from banking sector difficulties in Kazakhstan have resulted in a sharp slowdown in credit expansion in the Kyrgyz Republic”.

There was growth in some sectors. The NSC stated that from January to June 2008, the average nominal monthly wage was 5,067 som ($140),20 nearly a 28 per cent increase over the

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16 On 12 October 2008, the World Bank and representatives from Kyrgyzstan signed an agreement to give $5 million as an advance to provide immediate assistance to the energy sector. The remaining financial assistance will be decided on in late November. Official announcement provided by World Bank in Kyrgyzstan.
17 For more on his statement, see Zpress.kg (2010).
19 Kyrgyz Government Decree No. 415, “On the results of the socio-economic development of the Kyrgyz Republic during the first half of 2008 and measures for the stabilization of the macroeconomic situation and maintaining the rate of economic growth” (passed 31 July 2008).
20 The average exchange rate for January to June 2008 was $1 = 36.2474. Data taken from the National Bank of the Kyrgyz Republic.
previous year. In addition, old age pensions increased by nearly 30 per cent. Overall poverty levels continued to decline, but still nearly a third of the country lived in poverty. What was unclear was how people were going to cope not just with higher food prices, but increases in energy tariffs, particularly those people living in cities with access to natural gas.

In order to offset the impact of growing food prices on vulnerable groups, the government utilized the Unified Monthly Benefit (UMB), as the main safety net and poverty reduction tool in the Kyrgyz Republic. The program, initiated by presidential decree in January 1995, provides cash transfers to poor families with children with targeting determined both by means-testing categorical criteria and the calculation of unit benefits.

Though the system is effective at targeting the poor, with 75 per cent of recipients in the poorest 40 per cent of the population, it is important to note that at that time funding constraints limited its reach to only 25 per cent of the poorest in the country (UNDP 2009: 67). In addition, the General Minimum Level of Consumption – a means-tested threshold calculated as a share of the extreme poverty line – to be attained using the UMB is fixed by the available budget, and not by the actual cost of consumption basket, and is well below the poverty line (World Bank 2008: 5). In response, the World Bank and European Commission did provide additional support to provide more cash benefits to needy families.

Global Economic Crisis and Remittances

External assistance through the Flash Appeal provided some assistance to Kyrgyzstan. The relatively mild winter also lessened hardships, yet, the volume of Toktogul Reservoir was very low and approaching the “dead level”. In 2009, the UN developed a medium-term response to the energy, food and economic insecurities, entitled the One UN Programme (2009). The UN described the situation as a “compound disaster”. The term was defined as a slow-onset disaster, which weakened the country’s ability to respond to increasing problems, but had not yet resulted in significant morbidity or mortality rates. Unlike in an emergency situation, such as an earthquake or flood, the factors characterizing a compound disaster are chronic in nature, and are exacerbated by increasing external challenges. Many of the issues that triggered the Flash Appeal remained a significant threat, but were not an urgent problem. It was nonetheless felt by some members of the international community that further action was needed to avert any sudden deterioration in the situation.

The additional concern that the One UN Programme addressed was the emerging economic difficulties of the global economic crisis. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Aid Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development, and the European Commission (OSCE, ACTED and EC 2009) conducted a study into the effects of the global economic crisis on citizens of Kyrgyzstan labor migration to Russia. The report indicated that not only had people lost their jobs because of the crisis, but Russia had tightened its migration legislation, making it more difficult for people to come. The closure of the Cherkizovski Market in Moscow in June 2009 was seen as a particularly bad sign as many people, including Kyrgyz citizens, many of whom worked in retail there.

Since 2001, remittances have increasingly become a larger part of families’ income in Kyrgyzstan. Data from the National Bank indicated that there was just over a 21.5 per cent reduction in remittances for 2009 from the previous year. In some families with children, both the mother and father had gone abroad to work, leaving the children with their grandparents. The remittances were essential to add to small pensions of roughly $40 per month.

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21 In 2010, the European Commission added 40 som ($0.91) to the UMB as compensation for food price increases. The average exchange rate for the week beginning 26 December 2010 was $1 = 44.0917. Data taken from the National Bank of the Kyrgyz Republic.

22 The term was originally applied in 2008 to describe the situation in Tajikistan (Kelly 2009). Like Kyrgyzstan, it had suffered drought followed by a harsh winter. People were unable to cope with the additional challenges that this brought. Many sectors and services were affected, in particular agriculture. For example, there were increased food needs by people and to feed their livestock.

23 It should be noted that remittance flows are calculated based on money sent through money transfer companies in Kyrgyzstan. These are: Allyur, Anelik, Blizko, Bystraya pochta, Contact, Lider, Migom, MoneyGram, Sibkontakt, Unistream, Western Union, Zolotaya Korona, and other money transfer systems and transfers through the Kyrgyz Postal Service. It does not take into account cash or other purchased goods sent back to recipients in Kyrgyzstan.
A concern held among some representatives of international organizations was that there could be a sudden flood of migrants back to Kyrgyzstan. Official statistics do not clearly indicate how many Kyrgyz citizens are abroad, because not everyone registers their migration status. Unofficial numbers and estimations suggested by politicians suggested that up to 500,000 people were working abroad in Kazakhstan and Russia (OSCE, ACTED and EC 2009: 25). With a total population of around 5.3 million people, a return of a majority of migrant labourers would have signalled a serious problem for the government and families whose main source of money were remittances. How would the country deal with a rise in unemployment? Would this destabilize the political situation? How would families cope with the loss of income? Would this exacerbate an already precarious food availability situation?

Another USAID-supported report indicated that many returning migrants had problems finding employment in Kyrgyzstan, a contributing factor that had prompted their departure in the first place (USAID, PACT, EFCA, et al. 2009). This report also indicated that few labor migrants surveyed had saved money sent home. Thus, difficulty finding employment and few savings upon returning furthered concerns about the challenges returning labor migrants would create for Kyrgyzstan.

The loss of revenue to the state through the reduction in remittances was made up for through external support. At the beginning of 2009, the IMF requested the enactment of an 18-month financial arrangement under the Exogenous Shocks Facility. The Facility would provide around $100 million to Kyrgyzstan during this period (IMF 2008c). In addition, Russia agreed to provide the republic with a $2.1 billion aid package. As part of this agreement, Kyrgyzstan would receive $150 million in grants, $300 million loan, and $1.7 billion in credit towards the construction of the Kambarata-1 hydroelectric plant. In addition, Russia agreed to write off Kyrgyzstan’s remaining debt in return for a 48 per cent stake in the Dastan torpedo factory. Both deals were announced at the beginning of the year and provided greater assurance for macroeconomic stability.

**Poor Policies and Corruption**

Many of the challenges identified in 2008 were still present at the beginning of 2009. Food prices had begun to drop, but at the end of the winter, the water levels in Toktogul Reservoir were even lower than the previous year. According to the Ministry of Energy, limits imposed on energy consumption were being met, with Bishkek often the exception. The problem was not only about allowing the water levels to replenish, but also to generate more income through a revised tariff policy. Raghuveer Sharma, Team Leader of World Bank Group’s Central Asia Energy Program, noted that until 2008, electricity rates had not changed for the previous five years. During that time gas prices went up ten times, and the price of coal also increased. In his view, an acceptable electricity tariff should be around $0.04-$0.05 per kilowatt hour (Karimov 2008).

Household electricity prices were well below this. From 1 July 2008, the government planned to implement an annual price increase for the next five years. The first increase would be 12.9 per cent, from 62 to 70 tyiyn ($0.016 to $0.018) (UNDP 2009, 47). In the following years, there would be roughly a 20 per cent increase. Prices were not raised in April 2009 as planned in order to compensate for the second year of imposed rolling blackouts, high food prices and the impact of the global financial crisis on the country. The government did not set an alternative date for the increase.

In November, however, the government announced a dramatic price increase from 1 January 2010. In the first tariff increase, heating and electricity prices would more than double, while hot water fees would triple, with further increases six months later. Energy Minister Il’yas Davydov stated that the tariff increases were essential or the country’s energy sector would continue to endure a crisis (Fergana.ru 2009).

On top of the difficulties that people had endured over the previous three years, people could not afford or tolerate such a drastic price increase. Many poor families, particularly in urban areas, were faced with a situation where they would have to choose which utilities they would use. Living in central Bishkek, I had witnessed how older people sometimes lived in near darkness because they were unable to pay for electricity bills out of their pensions. Although pensions had been increased in

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24 See the Kyrgyz Government Decree No. 164 “Medium term tariff policy on electricity for 2008-2012” (23 April 2008).
25 There are 100 tyiyn to 1 som.
July 2008 to meet tariff increases, it did not take into account inflation. Moreover, gas prices had risen by 140 per cent over the past two years. The tariff increases proposed for 2010 far exceeded many families’ household budgets.

The steep tariff rise was one problem, but people were outraged at the privatization and sale of strategic energy objects to groups that had close links to the presidential family. In November 2009, the government privatized Severelektro, an electricity distribution company that serves parts of northern Kyrgyzstan – including Chui and Talas Provinces, and Bishkek city – and announced it was receiving tenders. The winning bid of $3 million came from Chakan GES, which outbid Kazakh and Russian competitors.26 Severelektro, however, had been valued at $137 million the previous year (Daly 2010, Pozdnyakova 2010). The opposition regarded the privatization and sale as illegal and benefiting the Bakiyev family, through their close association with Chakan GES owner Aleksei Shirshov. Omurbek Tekebayev, former speaker of parliament and leader of the Ata-Meken Party, stated that “The Bakiyev family, in the person of Maksim Bakiyev, had practically become the owners. He managed many such raider seizures. Aleksei Shirshov is one of the project executors in the energy sector, but the owner is practically the owner is Maksim Bakiyev” (Pozdnyakova 2010).27 Many people also argued that the electricity tariff increase would thus directly benefit the presidential family and their close associates.

Around the same time, the government privatized Kyrgyztelekom, one of the largest telephone companies. Before the sale of the telecommunications company, mobile phone companies announced that there would be a surcharge for every mobile phone call made. The cost would not be much, but would provide a major source of revenue for the new owners of Kyrgyztelekom (International Crisis Group 2010, 8). One of the buyers of the company was an MGN Asset Management executive, most likely Eugene Gourevitch, who was a close associate of Maksim Bakiyev. MGN was also appointed to manage the Development Fund, which had received the $300 million Russian loan. Despite the official services the company was to provide in managing the money, many understood that a private company was now in control of the country’s wealth. Many felt that their fears had been confirmed when in March 2010 an Italian judge accused Gourevitch of embezzling $2.7 billion from telecommunications companies and was sought for arrest (ibid.: 9).

**Rule by Fear**

The Bakiyev family was widely accused of corruption, but there were also widespread rumors that members of the presidential family had been directly or indirectly involved in organizing attacks on opposition leaders and journalists. Several incidents in 2009 heightened fears among opposition leaders of targeted attacks, causing some to flee the country. In early March, Syrgak Abdylldayev, a journalist with extensive links throughout the opposition parties, was beaten, stabbed, and left for dead (Bukasheyeva 2009). Abdylldayev was a long-time political observer with close contacts in the opposition. After his release from hospital, however, he fled the country.

The death of one of Bakiyev’s former close associates a few days after the attack on Abdylldayev shocked the opposition. On 13 March, Medet Sadyrkulov, former Chief of the Presidential Administration and creators of the president’s Ak Jol party, was found dead along with his driver after his car had been involved in an automobile accident outside of Bishkek. Sadyrkulov was returning from Almaty on the night of the accident, in which his Lexus SUV was completely destroyed. The driver of the other car, Omurbek Osmonov, walked away apparently unharmed. Sadyrkulov’s relationship with the Bakiyev broke down and had been in talks with the opposition (International Crisis Group 2010, 4). At that time, there were some suggestions that Sadyrkulov planned to create a new opposition movement. After his death, there was widespread speculation that he had been murdered by the Bakiyev family.28

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26 Chakan GES had also acquired 80 per cent of Vostokelektro earlier in the year (Daly 2010).
27 Here, raid means “forcing owners to sell their business at below value prices, or face investigation by the tax police or other law enforcement agencies” (International Crisis Group 2010: 2, n 7).
28 After Bakiyev’s ouster, Osmonov was found stabbed to death in his prison colony. This added to suggestions that Sadyrkulov had been murdered and the accident was an attempt to cover it up.
There were other attacks and murders as well. Another journalist, Gennady Pavlyuk, was also found dead, having apparently jumped from a hotel room in Almaty, Kazakhstan (Najibullah 2009). Yet, the circumstances surrounding his death remained unclear. Later, Kazakh media outlets had suggested that Kyrgyz security forces had been involved in his death (Lillis 2010). These and other attacks created serious concern among opposition members and journalist for their safety. The Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan noted in late December that there have been at least 60 attacks on journalists since 2006 (Najibullah 2009).

**Relations with Russia**

During this time, relations with Russia started to deteriorate. Russia media outlets started a campaign against President Bakiyev. On 24 March, *Vremya Novostei* newspaper called Bakiyev “Chinggis Khan”, highlighting his move towards “advisory democracy”. The same day, Gazeta.ru website called him Kyrgyzbashi, another reference to an authoritarian leader, this time the deceased Turkmen President Saparmurat Niyazov (also known as Turkmenbashi). The following day, *Izvestiya* and *Kommersant* newspapers reported that Bakiyev was trying to pass the presidency on to his son, Maksim. *Izvestiya* renamed the *kurultai* as “Operation Successor”. Other news sources, such as Regnum news agency blamed Bakiyev for creating bad ties with Russia (Trilling 2010).

The bad press was in part a reaction to a growing, outspoken opposition to the Kyrgyz president outside Kyrgyzstan. The money that had been given to Kyrgyzstan – in the way of grants, a loan, credit, and debt forgiveness – had not been used as had intended. Although Russia’s $300 million loan had gone into the Development Fund, which was under Maksim’s control (together with MGN’s management), this concerned senior political figures in Moscow. Prime Minister Vladimir Putin had also allegedly expressed concerns about Bakiyev’s style of family business and the money that had been earmarked for the energy sector (Avdeyevna 2009).

There was another issue at stake. Although never officially mentioned, many regional experts and local figures believed that the Russian money was linked with Moscow’s desire to force the closure of the American air force base at the Manas Transit Center, outside of Bishkek. When the aid package was announced at the beginning of 2009, Bakiyev immediately announced the closure of the American base. Just before it was due to close, however, he allowed the Americans to continue using the base. Instead, he negotiated a substantial increase in the US lease payment, securing $180 million from the American government to continue using the base.

On 6 April 2010, Russia announced that it was imposing a 100 per cent export tax on all oil-based products to Kyrgyzstan as part of a new Customs Union between Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia. Kyrgyzstan used to be party to an agreement whereby it received oil-based products with tax breaks. On the day this was announced, panic buying of petrol caused prices to jump.

All of these events and challenges over the past several years had worn down tolerance for a regime that was seen as corrupt, dangerous, and was unable to lead the country. One taxi driver summed up his attitude about the uprising, while providing a succinct assessment of widespread feelings. “We were not afraid anymore,” he said. He had spent time in jail for his participation in previous demonstrations. The current situation, however, had surpassed the patience of many. Anger overcame fear; action turned to violence. Bakiyev’s last, vain attempt to stay in power by using live rounds on the protesters only strengthened their hatred towards him and the desire to oust him from office.

**Conclusion**

Since the previous uprising in 2005, several of the main destabilizing factors – poor governance, corruption and the effects of poverty – remained among the largest obstacles. Further challenges that arose from global food shortages and severe climatic events exacerbated chronic issues in the agricultural and energy sectors. Although not all of these events were constant, they nonetheless exposed much larger issues of underdevelopment over the past twenty years. This has contributed to a kind of instability that I have termed “institutionalized”, due to its long-lasting nature.
which has become more a characteristic of the social and economic stagnation than a temporary challenge as a result of insufficient measures adopted by government to improve these issues or, in some cases, corrupt practices that prevents further development.

This is not an indictment of development interventions or general government action. A number of reasons have prevented greater improvements. This discussion is beyond the scope of this article. The argument here is, however, that some challenges were present well before the April 2010 uprisings and more recent developments only served to expose deeper problems. Underfunding and poor management were characteristic of the agricultural and energy sectors. The government constantly sought external funding to provide much needed assistance. The extreme weather conditions made these gaps all the more apparent. What was more difficult to gauge, but equally important, was the frustration that built up over time. Dissatisfaction with the government is a common gripe, but patience ended quickly on 6-7 April. People had endured enough and had lost all trust in a government whose president, family and close associates had accumulated power and wealth at the expense of the citizens and the development of the country. Thus, the events that unfolded on 6-7 April were the result of a number of long-lasting challenges and obstacles in the country.

There are several lessons to be learned from the problems that the country suffered during this period. First, the situation offers an opportunity to reflect on strategic goals. Second, opposition parties need to find an outlet to debate policy decisions and engage the public. Third, blatant corruption is not only politically and socially dangerous; it creates obstacles to development activities. Finally, violence cannot be a mode of political action.

In 2009, the Kyrgyz government revised the Country Development Strategy (2009-2011), providing a comprehensive discussion of challenges and priority goals in each sector. For example, there is greater analysis of issues facing the sector and general goals to be achieved. Yet, there are no guidelines to move towards solutions. The new government has an opportunity to set out the road map for recovery. The June 2010 violence and widespread destruction in Osh and Jalalabat oblasts has created new priorities. Nonetheless, the government must revise priorities that seek to address challenges in each sector with a countrywide approach. While immediate humanitarian aid to southern Kyrgyzstan was urgently needed and pledges from donors towards the reconstruction and reconciliation efforts were necessary, other parts of the country continued to experience everyday challenges that will not long be tolerated. Chronic problems in each sector must become the new focus of a broad approach by government towards the country’s development. For example, the interim government repealed the energy tariff policy enacted at the beginning of year, but the problems to the sector remain. The new government will need to create a more comprehensive plan, including an improvement in overall sector security, a reasonable tariff policy which meets people’s ability to pay, and a reduction in losses. Such a map should become a priority for each sector.

As a part of this process, opposition parties need to address policies, not personalities. A party-list system of parliamentary politics was introduced in 2007. This was an attempt to reduce the influence of individuals and their views in parliament and party policies. Nonetheless, parties rallied around a few public figures. While parties established programmes, these were not well understood by people on the street. Widespread voting fraud saw the president’s party, Ak Jol (Bright Path), take a majority of the seats in parliament. This was seen as another step towards concentrating power around the president. The focus on public figures, however, leads to criticisms of those figures, not of policy stances. A lack of well-defined policies and goals limits people’s ability to engage in politics.

An important step to outlining policies is a zero tolerance approach to corruption. In the past such statements have been empty promises. The new government must lead by example. This will not be a smooth process as it will be difficult overcome the current style of politics and separate private (including business) interests from political goals. Yet, a transparent system of government is essential to improve the populations support and confidence in elected officials. Accountability must be upheld and punishments enforced at all levels for corruption. For example, Otunbayeva signed a decree on the Fuel and Energy Sector Transparency Initiative, outlining the new structures to oversee transparent management of the energy sector. Such policies need to be pursued and the laws that are

29 For more on the elections, see the OSCE/ODIHR (2008) report on the pre-term parliamentary election findings.
30 Decree No. 49 of the President of the Kyrgyz Republic “On the Fuel and Energy Sector Transparency Initiative of the Kyrgyz Republic”, 20 July 2010.
in place need to be made to work. Political stability will improve through creating a transparent 

system of government with accountability and enforcing punishments at all levels. 

Immediately following the April 2010 uprisings, the interim government was unable to 

demonstrate its authority. It suffered a massive setback as secretly recorded conversations were leaked 

onto the Internet, alleging senior members of the interim government to be engaged in corrupt 

practices. Then interim President Roza Otunbayeva was too weak to make a stand, but with the 

passing of the constitutional referendum on 27 June and her position made official, she now must use 

the powers available to her to enforce transparent and accountable practices. 

Ensuring greater confidence in government and encouraging open dialogue with opposition 
groups will help to limit mounting frustrations and outbreaks of violence. Yet, this can only be done if, 
as Madeleine Reeves (2010) notes, the rule of law – “and trust in the impartiality of that law” – is 
recognized and upheld. This is all the more necessary following the June violence in southern 

Kyrgyzstan. Frustrations begin with government processes that do not follow the laws they pass or 
change policy radically and without consultation, as with the energy tariff policy. Protests ensue if 
there is no avenue for opposition groups to voice their complaints and feel as though their ideas make 
an impact. The government cannot allow violence to become a viable political modality. A re-
examination of the factors that led the country to this situation and the steps taken from that point are 
required to regain the people’s trust in the government. 

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**ABSTRACT**

This article examines some of the factors that led to the April 2010 uprisings in the Kyrgyz Republic. Based on first-hand accounts and personal experience in the development sphere in the preceding years, the author describes the underlying instability that broke down people’s tolerance, where violence increasingly became the only alternative when seeking change. After a discussion of the events of 6-8 April, the article returns to 2005 to look at the concentration of power around the president and the marginalization of the opposition. Following this, the author provides a detailed examination of the worsening development situation the country. A global food shortage, drought and severe winter in 2007-2008 caused increased food and energy insecurity in Kyrgyzstan. The effects of this and the ensuing global economic crisis are examined in relation to the increased burdens this placed on households. The article then discusses the unpopular government policies and corruption. An unpopular energy tariff policy introduced at the beginning of 2010, created further financial problems, and was felt by many people to benefit the president’s family. Perceived corruption outraged many people, but this was marked also tinged with fear, as a number of high-profile journalist and opposition figures were attacked or killed since Bakiyev took office. Dialogue appeared to have been stifled by a president maintaining his position by force. External criticism only made matters worse. Concerns voiced by senior Russian political figures are analyzed as another factor in the loss of tolerance for the president and his family. As a conclusion, the author makes recommendations for the newly elected parliament and officials to address in order to reduce instability and restore confidence and trust in the government.

**KEY WORDS**: Kyrgyzstan, uprising, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, development challenges, corruption, food insecurity, energy, remittances, Russia