



## Individual Advanced Research Opportunities (IARO) Program

### Research Report

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**Program:** IARO2005-2006  
**Country:** The Kyrgyz Republic  
**Title:** "The Dynamics of Civil Protests: A Case Study of the Kyrgyz Republic."

#### 1. Topic of research

On March 01, 2005, protests started in isolated communities throughout the Kyrgyz Republic two days after parliamentary elections were criticized by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). These protests expanded after a second round of elections were also widely viewed as fraudulent. The protests included some physical destruction such as the storming of government buildings and burning of security services offices. However, they were remarkably non-violent with only one or two deaths reported and limited personal injuries. After 24 days of protests across the country, the President of the Kyrgyz Republic, Askar Akayev, fled the country. The President's abrupt abdication of his position and power during the first large protest in the capital city was sudden and unexpected for protest leaders, the general populace and outside monitors.

The protests in the Kyrgyz Republic followed closely after the events in Georgia and Ukraine and were initially seen as another example of the new wave of democracy in the post-soviet states. Scholars have begun to question this assumption and it is noticeable by its absence in McFaul's recent article on the characteristics of democratic change in Serbia, Georgia, and Ukraine. The initial conditions, the path of the protests,

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and the final result were significantly different in the Kyrgyz Republic from other recent political changes in post-soviet governments.

For the past fifteen years, regional specialists, civil violence experts and macro models have all predicted violent civil conflict in the Kyrgyz Republic and when the protest occurred, it was seen as validation of expert's predictions. However, there are significant anomalies. First, the event did not occur for the predicted causes. Second, the process of the protests was not anticipated in the regional conflict literature. Third, the original goal of the protesters was not the sudden overthrow of the government.

## **2. Relevance and contribution to the field**

Civil conflict and protests are issues that have been studied in depth for centuries. The question of why protests occur is not original. What is original is the opportunity to provide in depth analysis of an anomalous event through the analysis of data on individual's perceptions. Much social science research is conducted at the country or macro level and leads to broad macro theories with little anchor in local dynamics. Alternative research is at the individual or village level and is wholly dependent on individual psychology and small group dynamics. This field research is significant because it examines a singular event from both directions simultaneously. It is also specifically focused on the process and emergent nature of civil conflict.

The events in the Kyrgyz Republic are an important puzzle for both academics and policy makers. Initial results from fieldwork appear to challenge existing theories. It is possible that the Kyrgyz Republic is an extreme outlier in reference to traditional explanations. If it is an outlier, it is important to understand why and how. It is also possible that the existing theories are deficient. If so, this presents an opportunity to expand and increase the field's understanding of the dynamics of protests. If we understand the reasons for the anomalous formation of protests in these communities, it might point us towards a model for understanding the broader questions of emerging conflicts in other countries.

I anticipate three primary scholarly contributions. First, the research will provide a clear identification of the key characteristics of the protests in the Kyrgyz Republic in March 2005, including a mapping of the spatial and temporal patterns. Second, the research will provide a new understanding of the relevance and validity of individual preferences based on survey data. Third, the research will provide new models of protest that can be identified by the policy maker in other countries.

## **3. Approach and research methodology**

The underlying question of this research is why did the non-violent protests occur at that time and that process? Prior to answering this 'why' question, one must determine what actually happened. This is more than simply a methodological issue. What type of

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event occurred makes a difference in understanding why it occurred and how policy makers should respond. The primary method is a case study comparison between cities and counties with conflict and those without. This research uses two methods within the case study, first a statistical analysis of a household survey and, second, field interviews and observations.

During the field research component, I conducted interviews with local families and participants in the March protests as well as representatives of local NGOs, international organizations, government officials, media representatives, and opposition leaders throughout the country. After two months of interviews, I met with and received comments from more than 75 individuals. Some interviews were conducted one-on-one; others with groups of villagers or observers, the majority of all interviews were digitally recorded.

While it was not possible to visit all of the country, the key locations of the capital city and the southern cities were examined in-depth. More than half of the total time was spent in the southern locations.

Location of Field Interviews:

Bishkek and Chui Oblast

Issyk-Kul Oblast

Jalalabad Oblast

Osh Oblast

#### **4. Research findings and preliminary conclusions**

I have reached preliminary conclusions based upon several trips to the Kyrgyz Republic after the March events and the recent IREX funded in-depth research.

a). Lack of leadership

There was no single leader, organizer or coalition that led the March events. There was no national political identity or unity among the opposition leaders other than a desire for Akayev to leave. The protests were against the Akayev family, but not clearly for anything (similar to the option on the ballots of “against all candidates”).

b). Failure of the government

The failures of the Akayev government were a greater contribution to the collapse of the government than the success of the opposition. A significant contributing factor was the failure of the White House and President Akayev’s apparatus to stay engaged with the opposition and the general public. The blatant deregistration of candidates, the falsification of elections, and the degrading statements about the protesters all incited the general public against the government.

A government out of touch with the reality and severity of the situation incited the events on the final days of the government. Without the extreme provocation of representatives of the government and ruling family, the sudden collapse of government probably would not have occurred.

c). Local support for local leaders

The protests were more about support for local political leaders than support for political ideals such as democracy. The first stage of the protests was local citizens who took to the streets upset at the overt disqualifying or blocking of their local politician. While some of the initial protesters were provided with food, transport and even financial support, many of them had legitimate grievances and were encouraged by their local leaders. The local political entrepreneurs built on their supporter's discontent with the national political and economic situation and brought their supporters to the streets.

d). Minimal criminal assistance

There was criminal involvement and support for the protests. However, it did not initiate the protests and primarily provided an enabling role not a deciding role. Its greatest impact appears to have been the support of the protests in Osh and also the funding of transport from the south to Bishkek.

e). Myth of democracy

National opposition leaders, local NGOs, international organizations, foreign diplomats, and the international media used the local protests for their own agendas, primarily to create the myth that the local protests were about democracy and another "colored revolution."

## **5. Future research agendas**

There are two important extensions of this research. One is to examine the situation in the Kyrgyz Republic after March 2005 and the series of local protests that have continued for the past year. It is important to understand if these protests have the same causes as the original protests. Do they follow the same pattern or are they substantially different in both form and substance?

A second research agenda is to compare the events in Georgia and Ukraine as well as the post-election results in Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan. Why did protests in one country lead to a change in government, but did not in the others? What was similar, what was different? What was driving the policy changes?

## **6. Recommendations for the US policy community**

The most important recommendation is to base policy considerations on the reality of what has occurred and not on the belief of what one would like to have occurred. The events in the Kyrgyz Republic were not about democracy. Basing future program decisions should take this important reality into consideration. The events were more

about economic stagnation and corruption. These are the issues that the new government with Western support must address.

A second recommendation is to focus on local grievances that remain unresolved. The fundamental areas of discontent that existed in March 2005 have not been ameliorated in any way by the new administration. If these issues remain unresolved, combined with a perception of government corruption and cronyism, then the potential for more instability remains.