

# The Revolution in Kyrgyzstan: A Social Studies Educator's Eyewitness Account

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This is a story about the unfolding of the recent revolution in Kyrgyzstan told by an insider who was an unlikely "captive" of the events in the capital, Bishkek. Over a seven-day period this past March, protest demonstrations paralyzed the country, military and police protection evaporated, the government collapsed, the president fled, and lawlessness prevailed in the capital city.

Now that I have separated myself physically from the still continuing phases of the revolution, I can begin to reflect on my adventure and consider how I might use what my colleagues and I learned with my students.

I was one of two Kent State University professors selected to participate in a Partners in Education (PiE) program sponsored by the American Councils for International Education to visit Kyrgyzstan for two weeks. My colleague, Vernon Sykes, is an assistant professor of political science also from Kent State and a former state legislator with considerable experience. As part of a civic education program, seven Kyrgyz Republic secondary teachers and university faculty members visited Kent State for a month during the fall semester, 2004. We were selected to make a two-week reciprocal visit to schools and universities as guests of the teachers who had visited the USA, giving speeches on civic education, and learning about Kyrgyz culture. What follows is a journal summary of our experiences.

*March 20 (Sunday).* I met Vernon at the Akron-Canton Airport and we flew to Washington, D.C., for orientation meetings to be held at the American Councils for International Education office. Our many questions were answered, including if it was safe to make the visit, which it was at the time.

*March 21 (Monday).* Among the various topics of discussion at the orientation was the different definitions of democracy. It was emphasized that the U.S. has its own form and that there are other versions. The definition I thought was particularly appropriate for further discussion of democracy with teachers in Kyrgyzstan was: resolving problems and disagreements peacefully and legally without violence. We also learned much about the social culture, which was essential since we were to live with host families.

Formerly part of the Soviet Union, Kyrgyzstan is a beautifully mountainous but poor, largely agricultural country bordered by

China to the east and south, Tajikistan to the south, Uzbekistan to the west and Kazakhstan in the north. The majority of its inhabitants are Muslim. The president at the time we planned our visit was Askar Akayev, who had ruled since 1990.

We were informed that demonstrations, riots, and killings had closed down Osh (which I was scheduled to visit) and Jalah-Abad, both of which were located to the south of Bishkek. Protesters were demanding Akayev's resignation over allegedly fraudulent parliamentary elections. Four policemen were killed and demonstrators had taken over government buildings. Newspapers were making a connection with the mass protests that brought about the revolutions and "Western leaders" to power in Georgia and Ukraine. We found out a little later that demonstrators had taken over the airport in Osh and placed large rocks on the runway. The staff of the American Councils for International Education in Bishkek said that there were no problems or demonstrations at the moment. Our assignment was changed to only Bishkek. We were told that we would be pulled out at the hint of any trouble. We left for Kyrgyzstan on an evening flight.

*March 23 (Wednesday).* We arrived in Bishkek very early in the morning after spending most of Tuesday in transit, changing planes in Paris and Istanbul. After a few hours of sound sleep, we were taken to the American Councils' office downtown. A staff member briefed us on the latest: both Osh and Jalah-Abad were under control of the demonstrators and the police had pulled out. Essentially, the demonstrators had taken over 50 percent of the country. We learned that there had been one small demonstration in Bishkek the previous day but it was quickly broken up. We were again assured that if the situation became dangerous we would be pulled out.

We then met our home stay hosts and were driven to their residences. My host was a young couple full of life and energy. Diana was a third year foreign language student, while Dima had his own car service garage business. Their 11th floor apartment was about two miles from the center of Bishkek. After settling in I watched BBC World News, which showed footage of the demonstration in Bishkek and the police breaking it up. My guess was that there were a couple of hundred demonstrators participating.

*March 24 (Thursday morning).* I went to the American



Kyrgyz opposition protestors shout anti-government slogans during a rally in Bishek, March 24, 2005. Opposition protestors forced their way into the main government building, demanding the resignation of veteran President Askar Akayev.

Councils' office, met a group of university students who all spoke English and did a walking tour of Bishkek. While we were walking, many people were milling around in small and large groups. The students told us these people were preparing for a demonstration. The tour included an in-depth visit, with translation, to the M.V. Frunze Museum. Frunze was a major player in the Russian civil war and "Frunze" was the name of Bishkek before 1991. While in the museum lobby, we noticed the demonstrators walking toward the center of the city. It occurred to me that we had spent an hour touring through Bishkek's past and that now we were seeing the beginnings of a demonstration in the present, but not knowing what the future will bring in terms of change. A lot of questions crossed my mind—could this demonstration have the same de-stabilizing effect it had in Osh? What if it turned violent? Could foreigners be targeted?

*(Thursday afternoon).* While at lunch one of the students called the American Councils' office and was told to bring us back there immediately. At the office we met two Riverside, N.C., high school teachers, who had been leading a group of nine of their students to Bishkek as part of another exchange program, also under the auspices of American Councils. They had been there for about a week. We were briefed on the unfolding events and told to

expect a demonstration of about 5,000 protesters and that schools, businesses, stores, banks, and the universities would soon close. A staff member expressed concern about the demonstrators' attitudes toward foreigners because they could become easy targets in these situations. Rumors seemed to be driving the news. Planning contingencies were being made, including contact with the U.S. Embassy and checking flights out of Bishkek. Apparently there were between 200 and 300 Americans in Bishkek and many might be interested in flying out at the same time, which obviously would be a major problem if the situation rapidly deteriorated.

The general situation in Kyrgyzstan is that the people are poor and have little, but Bishkek has a growing middle class and an upper class including many of Akayev's family and cronies. There was a major difference from the orange revolution that took place in Ukraine in that there was no apparent opposition leader here. This was not good because the result could be chaos. While we were watching the demonstration on CNN and unsuccessfully trying to make email contact with our families in the U.S., we were told that we needed to leave the city center for our residences since being so close to the center of the city, which was about one-half mile away, had become dangerous. The demonstration was in full force, with police attempting to stop the protestors from getting to

the government house where Akayev was located. This building was locally referred to as the “white house.” Dima drove Vernon, Diana, and me back to their apartment.

At Diana and Dima’s we continued watching CNN and BBC to keep up with the rapidly changing political situation. We were watching the unfolding of a revolution! Protection of the white house by police and military dissolved from the onslaught of the demonstrators, Akayev fled out the back door but nobody knew to where, and the demonstrators stormed the building and took control practically without a fight. We decided that we might be in danger even this far from the city center. Vernon tried to phone the embassy using his cell phone but he couldn’t get through. The American Councils’ office called to say that the situation had deteriorated and to stay behind locked doors. There was also a rumor that Akayev was seeking asylum at the U.S. military base, located outside Bishkek, which could be very dangerous for us as Americans. The revolution was on but no one was in control, and we were starting to feel threatened. While all of this was sinking in, I happened to look out my host residence’s front window to the ground below. I saw the apartment complex’s playground where mothers were watching their children playing and laborers were patching a small swimming pool nearby. Everyone there seemed oblivious to what was happening around them. All of this seemed surreal to me. The news was reporting that the opposition was in the process of forcing various government ministers to submit their written resignations. It was strange watching images on CNN of the teenage demonstrators who had taken over the white house sitting in Akayev’s office chair. The news further reported that Russian troops would not intervene, which was a concern since it also had a base outside Bishkek.

Vernon and I decided that we wanted to email our families to let them know where we are and that we were okay for the moment. With Dima’s help we drove to an internet café and successfully sent messages. Afterwards we dropped off Vernon at his home stay residence. When we returned, I returned a phone call from the American Councils’ office, and was told that my safety could no longer be guaranteed and that plans were being made for our evacuation from the country—to where, they didn’t know, but I needed to pack since we were leaving tonight, probably by plane.

*(Thursday evening).* After dinner Diana, Dima, and I talked about the impact of the revolution and their future. We exchanged some gifts and traded addresses. They encouraged me to return to see their beautiful country and finish the cultural tour.

Around 10:30 p.m., the three of us started our drive to the American Councils’ office in the city center. Dima picked up Vernon at his residence and we worked our way through town. Along the way we could see broken storefront windows and looters carrying items that they had stolen—television sets, clothes, etc. We arrived at the American Councils’ office and found a confused situation. The North Carolina students and teachers were there with their home stay families trying to say their goodbyes. Tears were being shed because the students had developed strong friendships with their host families. The staff was trying to keep the noise down and lights low so as not to attract the attention of the gangs

and looters roaming the streets. There was no police or military control. The staff directed the vans around to the rear of the office building, organized and loaded the luggage into one van, and all 13 of us, along with a couple of staff members, got into the other van. We heard reports that fires had been started and mob drunkenness was evident. While the students and host families were told that we were going to the airport to fly out, Vernon and I were told in private that the airport was closed to incoming and outgoing flights. We were going to have to stay in Bishkek until something else could be arranged. Plans were made for us to stay at a hotel near the U.S. Embassy, which was also near where U.S. Marines were stationed. As we drove through the city we could see many looters carrying boxes, electronic equipment, furniture, and anything else they could get their hands on. We noticed more stores with broken windows. Traffic was minimal, and fortunately, the marauding people paid little attention to our vans. We made it to the Pinara Hotel safely, checked in, and went to our rooms, still a little nervous about the possibilities of what might still happen.

*March 25 (Friday morning).* I awoke to a shining sun, feeling relatively safe. While in a good mood, I decided to wear a pink-colored shirt that I had brought because news commentators had noticed some demonstrators the previous day wearing pink ribbons; they referred to the coup as the “Pink Revolution.” Another called it the “Tulip Revolution.” The news reported that Akayev might have escaped to Russia and parliament was encouraging the appointment of an interim president and prime minister. But the scariest news was that there was still no law and order. Akayev and his family were the obvious symbols of all that was wrong in this society and I couldn’t help recalling the comment made that revolution is for people who have nothing to lose. We were told at our first briefing by the American Councils that the average salary of the Kyrgyz people was \$330 per year, and this had not changed over the past decade. Teachers made \$20 per month (when they were paid).

A staff member of the American Councils stopped by the hotel to give us an update. The center of the city had been completely looted. The stores that were looted first were those that Akayev and his son owned. There had been fires and some loss of life with many damaged businesses and stores. Everything was still closed including the schools and universities. There was some good news. The airport had opened and the American Councils’ office was working on getting us airline tickets, but we probably would not be able to fly out until Saturday evening.

*(Friday afternoon).* A young embassy representative whose sweater had the insignia “American Embassy Bishkek-Kyrgyz Republic” briefed us on the situation. He said things were starting to stabilize. Later we heard that the old guard had led the opposition and justified the revolt on the grounds of the corruption and cronyism of Akayev and his family. Parliament appointed Kurmanbek Bakiyev, an economist and former prime minister of Kyrgyzstan, as the interim president.

*(Friday evening).* Vernon and I had dinner with some of the American Councils’ staff. We talked about corruption and how it was so endemic to Kyrgyz society, and how it would be very difficult to change what had become a cultural habit. The people

were so used to bribery as a means for governmental officials, store owners, teachers, etc. to make money since everyone is so poor. We agreed that eliminating corruption would be a major way for the people to begin to have faith in their new government but that it would be very hard to do. In addition, it would be necessary to increase salaries of public officials so they would not have to resort to bribery. Eliminating corruption could be the basis for making the other economic and social changes that are needed.

Around 10:00 p.m., an American Councils staff member told us there was a rumor that looters were targeting the hotel tonight and that it could be attacked. Apparently this news came from one of the families who resided nearby. This area was fairly exclusive, since it is about a mile from the presidential residence, and it was reasoned that it would be a likely target for looters looking for other sources of “riches.” In particular, our hotel was a luxury hotel, with a swimming pool and rooms at \$90 per night, which made it likely to be perceived as a symbol of privilege in a country with an average salary of \$300 per year.

We saw military transport trucks and police cars traveling on the road toward the presidential residence, and our initial thought was that soldiers were being dropped off to protect the residence (though not our hotel!). This was evidence that the rumors that our neighborhood would be attacked by looters might be true. After considerable discussion with our North Carolina teacher colleagues, we decided that the best decision was to stay in our rooms, protect ourselves, and hope for the best. Vernon and I returned to our room and discussed how to barricade the door. I knew I was going to have a sleepless night.

*March 26 (Saturday morning).* Fortunately, we had an uneventful night. There was no attack on the hotel by looters and we were still safe. CNN reported an “uneasy calm” had settled over Bishkek. The police were starting to protect businesses and shops. Even volunteer groups were starting to form to protect neighborhoods. The signs were encouraging. I asked if it would be safe to take a cab ride through downtown to see the destruction first-hand in order to get a realistic perspective. Instead, we were offered a personal tour by car.

### Teaching about Revolution

Some issue-based questions about the revolution in Kyrgyzstan are:

- ▶ What other coups/revolutions in the near and distant past followed a similar pattern of upheaval and change? How did these revolutions unfold? What are the characteristics of those that were different and more violent?
- ▶ To what extent were the demonstrating people justified in their violent behavior, including extensive and destructive looting during the various phases of the coup/revolution?
- ▶ What predictions can be made about the future of other former Soviet republics? What evidence supports these predictions?

*(Saturday afternoon).* While I was surprised to see so much in the way of broken storefront windows and debris on the ground, I was equally surprised to see that Bishkek was starting to return to some semblance of normalcy with cars on the road and people walking the streets. There were many shops already boarded up. Most of the newer stores had been looted completely—electronic and jewelry stores were favorite targets. A large Turkish shopping mall was also completely vandalized.

We drove along some of the major streets where the demonstrations had taken place, including the parliament building and the white house, where Akayev had his offices. It had not been damaged as much as I expected, although we could not see inside. Only a half dozen windows had been broken where we had seen demonstrators on television throwing out files to the people below. We then drove 2 to 3 miles away from the center through an outlying community to see another, more residential and representative, view of Bishkek. This was an area of metal shacks without gas and electricity or indoor plumbing. The streets were muddy and pockmarked with deep ruts filled with rainwater.

*(Saturday evening).* We returned to the hotel, had dinner, finished packing, and met the vans for transport to the airport. Although we were there almost four hours early, we didn’t mind because we felt a little safer knowing we were in a more secure location and that we were about to fly back to the USA.

*March 27 (Sunday).* We flew out on time without a hitch. We arrived in New York via Istanbul and then made it to Washington, D.C. Over dinner with staff members, we shared our adventure. Apparently, there had been considerable communication between both the D.C. and Bishkek offices and also with our wives. It was reassuring that the offices of the American Councils had done all they could in this unforeseeable and threatening situation.

As I look back on my experience, I realize it was a fantastic, once-in-a-lifetime adventure for a social studies professor! Although we accomplished very little in terms of our original civic education and culturally-oriented program objectives, we did come away with an education about what oppressed people living under a corrupt government can and will do to be free. This is, has been, and must always be the message for the ages. It definitely will be interesting to follow the news to see if other countries will follow in this domino game of former Soviet republics falling to democratic revolutions. 🌐

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