

An Unexpectedly Short and Easy Revolution

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*Elnura Osmonalieva writes about a historic and unbelievable day in Bishkek. Her vivid and lively account of what has happened in Kyrgyzstan on March 24th is supplemented by her extensive and exclusive **photo-documentary**. (http://www.thinking-east.net/site/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=90)*

At 10:00 a.m. on 24th March 2005, opposition forces gathered about 10,000 people to protest the falsified parliamentary election results and demand the resignation of President Askar Akaev in front of Nazaraliev's Medical Clinic in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. Most of them arrived from the southern parts of the country the night before, driving for more than 12 hours to get to the capital. They came from Jalalabad, Osh, Batken, and some from Talas (in the north). Boys as young as nine and ten years old came along to "ouster Akaev," said Azim of Batken, one of the many young protesters. The crowd cheered and chanted "Akaev out, Akaev out" as a number of leading oppositionists addressed them from the roof of the clinic, calling for continued demonstrations until President Akaev steps down. A word came around 11:15 a.m. that the government had sent a battalion of special forces to restrain protesters. The decision to block the roads leading to the clinic followed, and demonstrators first responded by situating themselves on Chui Avenue and Fuchick St. Plans soon changed, however, and leaders of the protest ordered everybody to march in the direction of the main city square, Ala-Too, instead.

Thousands of protesters moved in the direction of the square, marching peacefully and calling upon onlookers who stood amazed on the streets or those who peered out their windows to join them. Some joined; some waved and cheered, but most stayed out of it. The demonstrators looked impressive as they walked, smiling, cheering, confident, carrying tulips and pink and yellow arm and headbands. Their banners read: "Get Akaev's regime out!" and "Doctor, we are with you," showing their support of Professor Nazaraliev, who is famous for his unique drug rehabilitation technique as well as his harsh and bold criticism of President Akaev.

The main leaders of the Kyrgyz People's Unity front, Kurmanbek Bakiev, Roza Otunbaeva, and Ishengul Boljurova lead the march, walking hand in hand, without the slightest idea that in a few hours they would be celebrating victory.

As they passed the White House (House of Government, where the President, and, until February 2005, the Central Election Committee (!) resided), they saw hundreds of special force fighters in their proper gear cordoning off the building. The demonstrators passed by the main square, which was adjacent to the White House. When they reached the square, they gathered in front of the Erkindik (Freedom) Statue that stands in front of the History Museum and opposition leaders began their address. They emphasized that this was to be a peaceful protest, aimed at getting the government to finally start negotiations. Crowds cheered and could sense this was not just another demonstration; something big was going to happen.

Soon, on the side of the square that is closest to the White House, fights broke out between the protesters and other men, identified as members from the pro-government Alga party and "sportsmen and criminals hired by the Akaev regime". Protestors believed the men wore dark blue armbands and white caps, "so the police and special forces could identify them and not attack." The men threw sticks and stones at protesters and carried wooden shields for their own protection. Some protesters, who were expecting a military attack rather than an assault by civilians, began to run eastwards for refuge. However, others shouted, "Don't run or they will get us out of the square," and the protesters turned back, encircling some of the attackers. A few were beaten up by the pro-

testers and, when questioned, confessed they were each paid 500 soms to participate in the attack.

The angry protesters started tearing tiles up from the square and breaking them into smaller pieces for their own protection and to use as weapons of attack. Some had been injured, and banners were ripped to make bandages. When asked if this attack influenced their resolution, protesters said, "No." One protester said: "We thought we'd be killed when they got here, this is nothing. We came with our people's blessing, having promised that we will either die or return with victory. We will stand till the end. They can shoot us, we are not afraid." The crowd grew larger as a few more thousand protesters arrived on the scene. They had come from a rally in Ahunbaeva-Almaatinskaya, where they were protesting under the leadership of Almazbek Atambaev, President Akaev's opponent at the 2005 election and a prominent opposition figure. They were met with cheers and applause.

The pro-government men re-attacked, but, this time, were met with strong resistance. The men were quickly forced back and the protestors moved forward towards the White House. This action was not supported by protest leaders. Rather, they ordered "Don't hit anybody, don't hit anybody."

At first, special forces around the White House gate had to shield themselves from the stones that protestors threw at them. But, they soon moved on the crowd, driving everybody back to the square. Again, the protesters stopped running and threw more stones at the military. They were able to push them back to the gate. After more fighting, the special forces retreated to the back of the White House and military men on horseback came out unexpectedly, sending protesters into a panic. Some ran over a hundred meters before leaders were able to order them to rally back and stand against the horsemen. One protester got hold of a horse and rode it before the cheering crowd - a very symbolic ride for the Kyrgyz, who are traditionally a nomadic people. The soldier whose horse had been stolen was protected from angry protesters by a representative from the Campaign of Peaceful Resistance, KelKel, who led him aside.

With the outside area of the gate left unguarded, protesters

gathered round the gate and tried persuading the inside soldiers to switch sides and not hit against their own people. The negotiations continued while some protesters managed to break open the locks on the gates. White House staff were out on the side porch watching in their suits, hands in trousers, calm and confident. Those who peered through windows looked more excited and entertained than scared.

Soon, the bravest protesters came inside the gate and approached the soldiers with their arms raised, though it did not look like the soldiers were armed. General Chotbaev, who was responsible for guarding off the White House, said that he did not want there to be any bloodshed and asked the protesters who got inside the gate to leave. He said it "was his job" and "there was nothing he could do." The protesters asked the general to order his soldiers to leave the grounds or join the protest. He refused and left, saying there could be no further discussion about that.

A few stones came flying on the soldiers even while protesters cried not to hit the soldiers. Some angry youth threw one and nearly struck comrades of the protest, who were trying to talk the soldiers into a peaceful resolution.

As protesters saw that the soldiers looked calm and not extremely hostile, more and more crossed the gate and entered. The soldiers retreated slowly. Very soon there was a large crowd on the steps of the White House cheering and celebrating victory. Stones came breaking windows and people were pounding on the front doors that were locked from the inside. Soon the doors opened and the cheering crowd ran into the building. Inside, they broke windows, chandeliers and ripped down curtains. Some stood on the staircase in the entrance hall, cheering, hugging one another, and taking pictures. There was a large water pipe lying on the floor and some water - it appeared like the military planned to use water hose against the protesters.

As people went round the building, the soldiers and General Chotbaev left, taking their injured, arms and boxes with them. General Chotbaev said: "I decided to vacate the building for the sake of security of both sides".

There were several hundred people walking around the building, some stealing what they wanted, despite other protesters' attempts to stop them from looting. Soon, security units were established on each floor and at every exit to prevent people from stealing.

Excited journalists looked for the President's office. When they found it, there was human rights activist, Tursunbek Akun, in the President's chair. He declared he was the first one to enter the room and was there to protect it. Kurmanbek Bakiev arrived at the President's office in an hour and appealed to all to retain order. He congratulated people with their victory and said "This is people's property and nobody has the right to take anything. Please have patience, retain order. We must save the White House and this room for our future leadership."

Later, Bakiev appeared before the cheering crowds in front of the White House, but could not speak to them for lack of a microphone. He told a smaller group of supporters as he left the White House that Felix Kulov, a political prisoner jailed on allegations of misuse of power while serving as Minister of Interior, was released and would arrive soon. Then he quickly left for the National Security Service (former KGB), where he had a meeting behind closed doors. A voice behind the doors ordered somebody to convene a meeting of all members of the Supreme Court. Following that, he had a meeting with all staff remaining in the building where he introduced himself as Chairman of the Coordinating Council of the Kyrgyz People's Unity Front who was given the responsibility to take care of things now. He said that he "did not plan to come to power this way", and that he was "a man of peace and law", but since it happened, the main task was to retain order. He appealed to officers with requests to help re-establish order and prevent people from tearing buildings down. "Nobody is fired and all of you keep your posts until decided by the Coordinating Council otherwise."

The same night, the former Parliament convened with some members of the new Parliament with demands to nullify the results of the February 2005 Parliamentary Elections, which were recognized as undemocratic by numerous election monitoring organizations. In the meantime crowds that many local people

recognized as residents of Bishkek were looting malls and smaller shops, stealing everything from yogurt to furniture. Most protesters came from the rural areas, where it's known to have harsh discipline. Therefore, it is unlikely that many of them participated in the looting. After the White House seizure, hundreds of young Bishkek residents came to the square and it is likely that they took advantage of the situation and robbed the shops.

Kyrgyz State Television appealed to everybody through the night to prevent looting and keep order; some opposition figures appeared talking about the new future for Kyrgyzstan and the need to elect a good President. Nurlan Motuev, member of the Coordinating Council, said that he would ensure the Akaev family got proper punishment for the stealing.

President Akaev's whereabouts could not be identified with rumours, saying he was on the Russian military base in town of Kant near Bishkek, or in Kazakhstan. People were very surprised that the government gave up so quickly, State Secretary Osmonakun Ibraimov resigning even before the White House was seized.

The unexpected revolution has created a chaos that hopefully will be soon resolved. This morning, military and police, now under the leadership of newly-released Felix Kulov, came out to Bishkek streets to restore order.

The Constitutional Court recognized the February 2005 Parliamentary Election results as illegitimate. New elections are expected to be held soon. Everyone is waiting to see how events will unfold in the future and what the face of the new Kyrgyz leadership will look like. While victory may have been fast and easy, the most difficult challenges are still ahead. People fear disputes may arise among opposition leaders, since the movement was known for its lack of unity and agreement.

See all pictures related to this article [here](#).

(http://www.thinking-east.net/site/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=90)

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