Kyrgyzstan: Turning Over a New Leaf

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With the departure of now former President Bakiyev for Kazakhstan and points beyond after resignation by fax, followed by the first arrests of Bakiyev’s cronies, Krygyzstan’s new temporary government is settling in to power. Bakiyev’s departure relieves a situation that Russian President Medvedev claimed could have turned into another Afghanistan, beset by civil war. A scramble for government positions is apparently going on in Bishkek as anti-Bakiyev politicians come out of the woodwork. Indications are that the new government structures will be designed to prevent a third occurrence of government-by-family, with a weak executive. It remains to be seen if that will actually happen.

One winner from Kyrgyzstan’s changeover is Russia, which has been pushing against Bakiyev since he double-crossed it last year by failing to close the U.S. base at Manas after Russia promised a $2 billion plus aid package. Russia has been fomenting against Bakiyev in the press, stalling on the aid program and allegedly hacking Kyrgyzstan’s computers at different times in the last year and a half. Reciprocally, Russian media was blocked by the Kyrgyz and Russian reporters physically attacked, including the defenestration of one noted reporter from a building in Almaty. Russian officials and media are now clucking contentedly over the deposition of the corrupt Bakiyev regime. Interim head Roza Otunbayeva spoke twice to Putin in the days after the revolution and the Russians immediately came up with some tens of millions of dollars in walk around money for the new government.

Impoverished Kyrgyzstan is always amenable to money talk. After months of bargaining last year, the U.S. increased its rent at Manas, changed the official name to transit facility and kept it in business. Kyrgyz allege that the U.S. interest in the base overshadowed all other aspects of their relationship with the Bakiyev government. Roza Otunbayeva has said that the Manas contract will automatically be extended, but the irritation with the U.S. for failing to push Bakiyev in the right direction all along was palpable in an interview which appeared in the Washington Post April 16. She noted that U.S. officials are now (belatedly) looking into the fuel contracts for Manas, allegedly in the hands of Bakiyev’s son.

Washington knows it has work to do. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has been on the phone pledging support to Roza Otunbayeva, and Washington sent out Assistant Secretary of state David Blake to Bishkek to try to further smooth things with the Kyrgyz. Washington claims difficulties in dealing with the previous government and hopes to turn over a new leaf, as the saying goes, with Kyrgyzstan. So do the Kyrgyz, as they make their third attempt at setting up a functional democracy.