The governmental overthrow in Kyrgyzstan marks the culmination of growing dissent against authoritarian practices and economic difficulties under the regime of Bakiyev, who came to power in a 2005 color revolution and quickly began to adopt the polices and practices of his exiled predecessor in a more extreme mode. Family connections, open corruption, misuse of governmental resources and a fake democracy that copied the Russian model exasperated Kyrgyz who had brought Bakiyev in on a reform platform. Tension has been simmering in Bishkek for the last few months, and a March national council or kurultai which was meant to celebrate the successes of the regime instead turned into an open critical discussion of its failures.

The immediate cause of the outbreaks was an increase in heating and other prices, but the base economic pressures have been building since before Bakiyev took over, as Kyrgyzstan’s early promise as the “Switzerland of Asia” disintegrated in the face of economic realities and political improprieties in the years after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Russia promised a 2 billion dollar-plus aid package in early 2009 to keep Bakiyev afloat, and he oblingly announced the U.S. base at Manas would leave the same day. His subsequent deal with the U.S. to let NATO stay infuriated the Russians, who stopped the second $1.7 tranche of the loan in February and who raised tariffs on gas and oil 30 percent April 1, thus bringing on the current crisis.

Adding to the pressure has been severe and constant Russian media criticism of Bakiyev, who was likened in the government-controlled Russia media to Turkmenistan’s late un lamented leader, Turkmenbasi. As payback, Russian journalists in Kyrgyzstan have been physically attacked. One prominent Russian journalist was dropped to his death from a six-story apartment house while on a visit to neighboring Almaty. Russians accuse Bakiyev of having come to power with U.S. assistance, and use Kyrgyzstan and the other color revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine as examples of U.S. misbehavior in their conversations with other Central Asian countries. It doesn’t help that fuel for the base at Manas has been supplied by a firm owned by Bakiyev’s son-in-law, just as fuel for the U.S.- built electrical generator in Kabul is supplied by a brother of Afghanistan’s Vice-President Fahim.

Moreover, Kyrgyzstan also agreed for the U.S. to build a training center in western Kyrgyzstan, near the city of Osh where President Bakiyev and his family took refuge on April 7. The Russians were annoyed at the placement of the U.S. training center in the region where they opened a base last year under the auspices of the post-Soviet Collective Security treaty. At the time, the U.S. made no objection a second Russian base in Kyrgyzstan. The Russians had earlier set up a base near the NATO installation at Manas. Russian irritation with the Kyrgyz took the forms of trying to renege on the aid deal, and a 2009 cipher attack that paralyzed Kyrgyzstan’s servers for two days, including those that served the U.S. bases and the media barrage.
The death toll as of April 7 in Kyrgyzstan ranges from 40-100, dependant on the source, but the opposition says it has taken control of the Presidential palace and offices, the Prime Minister has resigned and former Foreign Minister Roza Otunbayeva, who was thrown out by Bakiyev after helping him take over, has become temporary head of government.

Bakiyev’s power base is Osh, and Kyrgyzstan’s political and military weakness as well as its very difficult terrain and pathetic road network mean that he may be able to hold on there indefinitely. To get to Osh from Bishkek by the main two-lane road, one has to go over two mountain ranges – one of mountain ranges, one of them over 4000 meters high, and cross the border into Uzbekistan and back. Bakiyev could remain safely ensconced there until it becomes clear he cannot return to power in Bishkek. Given Russia’s hostility, however, that may happen soon.

An end to the Bakiyev regime would not necessarily signal the end of Kyrgyzstan’s problems any more than the previous revolution did. The Russian assistance was not designed to solve Kyrgyzstan’s problems but to postpone resolving them for Russia’s political advantage. Everyone has a lot less money to use for adventurous projects these days, so a new Kyrgyz
government may find that there is less reward funding available. In addition, the ongoing U.S. presence in-country means that any new regime will still have to deal with pressures from two sides. It will be a long time before Kyrgyzstan can settle down.