

Who is next to 'fall' in C

Kyrgyzstan's deposed president had blunt advice from his forced exile in Russia this week. In an interview with Ekho Moskyv radio, Akayev was asked what he would counsel his fellow Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) presidents if they faced popular uprisings that threatened to topple their governments. Akayev's answer: learn from his mistakes; use force. "What lesson did I learn from the March 24 events?" Akayev said. "Our democracy is still weak, and it cannot protect itself. So I would advise my colleagues to protect democratic gains, including with the use of force if needed." It is easy to see how Akayev might draw such a conclusion. If the Georgian, Ukrainian and Kyrgyz popular uprisings have one thing in common, it is that they succeeded in part because massive force was not employed against unarmed demonstrators. But few observers believe violence would have stabilized the situation in any of these countries.

If a leader is confronted with the choice between fleeing and shooting his own people, the situation has already spun out of control. The more interesting question, say analysts, is how Akayev was backed into a corner - and whether his mistakes are being repeated by other leaders in the CIS, making them vulnerable to similar uprisings. Sergei Luzyanin of the Moscow Institute for International Relations says Akayev made several cardinal mistakes that weakened his rule. The first was to violate an unspoken power-sharing agreement between representatives of the country's northern and southern clans. Akayev, a northerner, kept all the patronage posts for his northern allies. "Traditionally, especially at the local government level, even back in the Soviet period, there was a regular alternation be-

tween the northern and southern clans," Luzyanin said. "Under Akayev, this regular exchange was disrupted, and the northern clan - Akayev's clan - controlled the southern regions and the southern clans were dissatisfied. This is why Osh, Jalalabad, Batken blew up - because a feeling of social injustice has accumulated there during the 14 years of Akayev's rule. The unspoken rule [about the alternation between north and south], which had always been observed, was broken."

Akayev went one step further, gradually bringing his extended family into the political process. Such nepotism came at the expense of even his northern political backers, breeding resentment within his own bureaucracy. This turned into his Achilles' heel, says Luzyanin, as civil servants lost any sense of loyalty to the regime. "[The civil servants] all were saying: 'We're against him. But we're biding our time, and as soon as we see the first signal, we will hand over our boss.' Which is exactly what happened," said Luzyanin. "Seventy percent of government bureaucrats - including some very important ones - as soon as it became clear that Akayev's power was set to crumble, immediately switched to the other side, either by directly backing them or at least remaining neutral in relation to the opposition."

Thanks to a faltering economy, aspects of a free press, and the presence of non-governmental organizations, many Kyrgyz were aware of the situation and deeply dissatisfied. Murad Esenov, editor of the Sweden-based "Central Asia and the Caucasus" journal, says the fact that Kyrgyzstan - like Georgia and Ukraine - was relatively more democratic than other CIS countries speeded the demise of the regime. "Many people think the Akayev regime fell very quickly,

but I don't share this opinion," Esenov said. "You need to look at what came before recent events. We know very well that in Kyrgyzstan, non-governmental organizations and a [partially] free media functioned, and they had been criticizing the government's policies very harshly, for a very long time. Since the government wasn't doing a very good job, public opinion against the government had already been formed." The key ingredients to a popular uprising seem to be clear: a corrupt government that cannot distribute favors to enough people to maintain support, perceived economic hardship, and traces of democracy and partial freedom of the press - so that people become aware of the problem.

In the case of Ukraine, the economy was not failing. But analysts say there was no trickle-down effect. Because of corruption, few people sensed any improvement in their economic situation, despite statistics.

Lastly, rigged elections triggered public outcry in all three cases - Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan. If there is one country in the CIS that best matches these criteria, says Esenov, it is arguably Kazakhstan. Like the Kyrgyz president, Kazakhstan's leader, Nursultan Nazarbaev, has concentrated power in his extended family. The Kyrgyz economy is doing well on paper, but few people benefit. And thanks to partial freedom of the press, the Kyrgyz public is informed and opposition movements are growing. "In Kazakhstan, the people do have a certain amount of room to express their opinion," Esenov said. "When people can express their opinions and the government has become mired in corruption, naturally you get a situation, such as the one we saw in Georgia and Ukraine and in Kyrgyzstan."

Luzyanin agrees. But he also

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says Nazarbaev has more at stake than Akayev. That makes a confrontation with the opposition potentially more dangerous. "In Kazakhstan, the opposition is stronger, better organized, and more united," Luzyanin said. "It is also true that the authorities are also more organized, tougher, and more motivated than the Akayev leadership. Akayev was on his way out; he was nearing the end of his term and he was not so motivated.

But it's a different matter for Nazarbaev. It is absolutely clear that an escalation of this political struggle will now shift to Kazakhstan. And it will be more systematic and on a larger scale.

The ultimate results are not clear. We cannot say that the opposition will triumph next year or at the end of this year. But the fact that the political situation will heat up is clear."

Some people have also pointed to Azerbaijan as a possible candidate for unrest, noting upcoming elections in November and previous clashes between the government and opposition. But Esenov believes the economic situation in the country is less dire than in Central Asia, making a revolution scenario less likely. "In Baku, unlike in Georgia or Kyrgyzstan, there is not the same degree of poverty," Esenov said. "There is not the same level of unemployment.

These factors, I believe, make the prospect of a revolution in Baku more distant. I don't think there will be a revolution in Baku, in connection with the elections in November. Although there is dissatisfaction, undeniably, it has not taken over society to an overwhelming degree." Esenov also says that, unlike their Kazakh counterparts, the Azerbaijani authorities have made a significant effort to co-opt the nation's young people and university stu-

dents, to keep them off the streets.

"In Azerbaijan, young people and students have been largely drawn into politics - but on the government's side," he said. "For example, the youth wing of the [ruling] party - Yeni Azerbaijan - has been very active.

The youth wing of the party is active in all institutions of higher learning.

They have meetings with students, hold discussions, even readings of [President Heydar] Aliiev's works. They know that youth are the driving force of any revolution and this pro-government party is doing its utmost to co-opt young people and bring them under their influence. And I have not seen this in Kazakhstan. "If a country's leader is unable to deliver tangible economic benefits to the people and wants to remain in power, is the answer to clamp down on democratic movements? The apparent stability of highly autocratic regimes in Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Belarus would seem to indicate "yes".

Popular dissatisfaction is subjective by nature, so if people are not aware of alternatives, they might continue to passively support a repressive regime. But Luzyanin says this cannot continue over the long term and, as with the former USSR, apparent stability can be illusory. "[These regimes] are more stable. But it does not mean that the system is strong," he said.

"The paradox is that the harsher the regime, and the more it outwardly resembles a fortress, the quicker it can collapse - all at once. History knows many such examples." As Ukraine's Prime Minister Yuliya Tymoshenko noted last week, there will be other revolutions in the CIS. When and where remains the big question. But they will happen, she and other successful revolutionaries believe.

- Courtesy Asia Times