

**THE KYRGYZ TULIP REVOLUTION:
A SOCIAL MOVEMENT THEORY PERSPECTIVE**

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I critique the existing approaches to “color revolutions” and offer a look at the events from the perspective of the social movement theory. Applying this theory to clan-dominated Kyrgyz politics, I argue that the primary cause of the protest was the break up of the “clan pacts” achieved in the early 1990s. Utilizing social movement theory metaphors and process tracing method, I also explain the process of mass mobilization and demand framing, as well as the evolvement of several localized protests into a region- and nation-wide revolt against President Akayev.

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INTRODUCTION

The warm spring morning of March 24 in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan was a very special day. The air was filled with the spirit of contention. Two groups of protesters gathered at opposite sides of the city and started marching towards the center – the Ala Too square in front of the White House. By the afternoon there were as many as several thousand people on the square demanding that President Akayev resign and fair elections be held. At some point, a group of toughs in white caps appeared to provoke the crowd by beating up the front row. The enraged masses chased them past the defense line of soldiers and somehow switched the focus to the fence and gates of the White House. Climbing over the metal bars, a vanguard of protesters managed to break through into the premises of the White House and then into the building. Some forty minutes later everything was over – the much-hated president left the building and the country, and his regime crumbled like a house of cards.¹

The events of March 24, 2005 have been branded a “color revolution,” another case of electoral revolutions that have permeated the post-soviet Eurasia since Serbia’s Bulldozer Revolution in 2000. The typical story of a color revolution looked like this. There is a country with a potential for democracy, but a soft authoritarian regime, guised under the façade democracy. An unpopular autocrat, afraid of fair competition with a strong and unified opposition, steals the crucial elections. The vibrant civil society and independent media disseminate the news and the frame of discontent; broad masses, mostly students and educated professionals, mobilize in a pro-democratic capital to protest and demand justice. Armed forces stay neutral and an autocrat, wary of his defeat, steps down.

¹ I eyewitnessed the events of March 23-24 in Bishkek; this is a personal account.

However, the comparative political scientists, who analyzed electoral revolutions, and outlined these basic features, admit that a number of very important ones were not observed in the Kyrgyz case.² Given that proponents of such models are not assertive on whether the above conditions are sufficient or merely necessary, both or neither, we need to decide on one of the following: either the variables are wrong or the case is different. Instead of an analytical framework applicable to a wide array of cases, what latest scholarship offers are descriptions of commonalities with a very narrow scope of application.

I argue that the Kyrgyz “Tulip Revolution” is different from the other three cases and, therefore, has to be looked at separately. Unlike the other color revolutions, the Kyrgyz one was driven by a different dynamic: actors, mobilization patterns, frames and interests were all very peculiar. For example, there was no influential youth group able to mobilize broad masses, across the regional, age and professional spectrum; unlike Ukraine, Georgia and Serbia, Kyrgyzstan also lacked a pro-democratic capital city - the cradle of the revolution. Unlike its European counterparts with large urban populations, easily mobilized by successful social movements, pre-revolutionary Kyrgyzstan is a primarily rural country and the mobilization of rural population contradicts the findings of earlier scholars and offers a theoretical puzzle. The more important difference of the Kyrgyz Revolution implication-wise is that it, unlike its European counterparts, did not lead to a more democratic polity. On the contrary, Kyrgyzstan is widely perceived to have become much more authoritarian, though not stable.

A better account of the Kyrgyz revolution, which is beginning to gain legitimacy among the educated locals, is a story of a society, whose politics and economics is dominated by clans; a

² Since the accuracy of applying the term “revolution”, as opposed to, say, “coup d’etat” is out of the reach and interest of this paper, I apply the term generously to mean “a contentious collective action with mass mobilization”. Many, especially post-Soviet intellectuals, former adherents of Marxism, argue that what happened in CIS were not revolutions in the classic (Marxist, or at least in “social revolution”) sense. They are especially harsh when it comes to Kyrgyzstan, where positive changes were very few.

story of shrinking economic resources and exclusion of important partners of the “ruling coalition” of clans. To put it briefly, the Revolution was caused by the breakup of the agreement reached by rival clans on the distribution of resources. But this “macro-level” explanation does not shed light on how the disgruntled clans managed to mobilize thousands for the event that rid the country of a dictator (unfair broker of the clan pact). To paint a fuller picture of the revolution and go beyond the confusion of necessary, sufficient, precipitant, and what not conditions, I utilize the social movement framework to account for mass mobilization (meso-level) and to trace how grievances and exclusion of key elites were transmitted to the non-elite masses (micro-level).

The social movement framework, however, has two shortcomings: it is explicitly Eurocentric in general and would be problematic in Kyrgyzstan in particular because no social movement played an active part in the Kyrgyz Revolution. Knowing that mobilizing the masses is usually seen as only in the capabilities of widely-supported social movements or political parties (both played very little role in the Kyrgyz Revolution) and observing ten thousand people on the square I wonder how that was possible. To clarify the micro- and meso-level issues like this, I employ the metaphors and concepts of social movement theory to mainly region- and tribe-based Kyrgyz clans. The central idea of this thesis is that the Kyrgyz Revolution was caused by President Akayev’s actions which broke the existing balance of powers between clans. The clan dynamic explains mass mobilization in the rural areas and evolution of protesters’ demands. The triggers of the Revolution were electoral protests in several small villages, which evolved into a full-scale revolution as other actors realized opportunities to act and potential to succeed.

This is a thesis based on a single case study. Therefore, any references to similar cases are utilized for the purposes of anecdotal demonstration and can not be viewed as substantiated comparative analysis statements. I use *process tracing* to analyze the development of the Kyrgyz

Revolution, a great method in the absence of reliable facts and statistical data. Process tracing is based on the examination of multiple types of evidence on a single inference.

³ Rather than being a separate method in itself it is supplementary to the case study method to make the causal chains more explicit and verifiable⁴.

According to Gerring, “process tracing is convincing insofar as the multiple links in a causal chain can be formalized, that is, diagrammed in an explicit way...and insofar as each micro-mechanism can be proven.”⁵ My attempt at a convincing narrative follows this advice: the “making” of the Tulip Revolution is traced through several causal chains⁶, each stage thickly described by juxtaposing various facts.

Due to the fact that neither participant observation nor extensive interviewing is possible at the moment, I will mainly rely on secondary sources. Those include International Crisis Group’s report on Kyrgyzstan, Alexander Knyazev’s story of the events, Scott Radnitz’s analysis of the Revolution, and an almanac of news stories from major news channels, as well as a number of thick descriptive reports from Russian-speaking locals. Being an eyewitness of the last stage of the Revolution in Bishkek, I base some of my observations on direct experience.

The thesis consists of two parts. In the literature review, I will first describe the existing approaches to revolutions in general and color revolutions in particular, and show their shortcomings when applied to Kyrgyzstan. Then, I will summarize the literature that sees the Kyrgyz Revolution as a break-up of the clan pacts. After this I lay out the social movement framework, which helps to see how the contentious collective action, like the Kyrgyz Tulip Revolution is possible by looking at how injustice and individual discontent is translated into

³ John Gerring, “Internal Validity: Process Tracing,” *Case Study Research: Principles and Practices* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 173.

⁴ Gerring, p. 184.

⁵ Gerring, p. 181.

⁶ For a schematic representation of the my argument about the division of elites and pact break-up please refer to Figure A in the Appendices.

mass mobilization. Finally, I focus on clans/localism/regionalism and describe their internal dynamic with the metaphors and concepts of the social movement theory.

In the case study chapter, I will offer an analytic narrative of the events of March through a theoretical framework that combines insights of revolutionary theory, social movement approach and the scholarship on Central Asia. It is divided into two parts, first discussing how the breakup of the clan pact led to the Revolution, and second illustrating how mobilization mechanisms and demands evolved throughout the cycle of protest. The conclusion points out limitations of research and offers a number of more general implications for contentious action and development of democracy in clan-dominated societies.

LITERATURE REVIEW: FROM CLASSICAL REVOLUTIONARY THEORY TO THE COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF ‘COLOR REVOLUTIONS’

The aim of this chapter is to review the relevant theoretical literature on revolutions in general and electoral revolutions in particular, and show their limitations in explaining the Kyrgyz case. A framework of the social movement theory is proposed instead, combined with the insights of the clan theory for a better understanding of the Kyrgyz politics.

The classical revolutionary theory

The twentieth century was the golden age of theory of revolutions, having many case studies to draw upon. Jack Goldstone elegantly presents the intellectual heritage of the non-Marxist revolutionary theory in terms of three generations.⁷ I will discuss the developments in the scholarship on revolutions along the lines of Goldstone’s grouping. The first generation was represented by such scholars as Gustave LeBon, George S. Petee and Cane Brinton. According to Goldstone, this generation lacked a strong theoretical approach and mainly invented ad hoc explanations of revolutions.⁸ Le Bon, for example is credited with the “mob psychology” explanation of the French revolution, which is very hard to falsify.

The second generation was represented, among others, by Ted Gurr, Chalmers Johnson, James Davies, Charles Tilly and Samuel Huntington. Davies and Gurr were representatives of the psychological approach to revolutions, Johnson – the structural functionalist systems approach, while Tilly and Huntington – the political science approach. “Psychologists” explained

⁷ Jack A. Goldstone, “Theories of Revolution: The Third Generation,” *World Politics* 32, no. 3 (April 1980): 425-53. He then added the fourth generation in Jack Goldstone, “Towards a Fourth Generation of Revolutionary Theory,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 4, (2001):139-87. It is necessary to note that generations are presented not in chronological order, but rather in the order of evolution of the revolutionary theory.

⁸ Goldstone, p. 427.

revolutions in terms of cognitive psychology and frustration-aggression theories popular at the time. Masses would revolt when very frustrated with the “political-economic milieu” of the time.

“Structural functionalists”, following Talcott Parsons, approached societies as systems and viewed revolutions as a result of a disequilibrium between the system and its environment, or among different parts of the system. One of them, Johnson, developed a theory of systemic disequilibrium between values and structures, according to which a revolution was most likely when structural changes led to the value system of individuals being disoriented. “Political scientists” viewed revolutions as an outcome of competition among various political actors for resources and the failure to mediate conflict by regular political procedures. Tilly, for example, distinguished between revolutionary situations and revolutionary outcomes and argued that the emergence of multiple points of sovereignty was the point of emergence of a revolutionary situation. The framework I employ owes the greatest intellectual debt to the political science school of the second generation.

The criticism of the second generation centered on the vagueness of its predictions and unfalsifiability of its hypotheses. Given the very broad array of conditions identified as increasing the likelihood of revolutions (war, modernization, technological or value changes, new interest groups, etc.) any change could potentially be a cause of a revolution. Moreover, the second generation was criticized for assuming that actions of elites can prevent revolutions, an assumption that contradicts empirical evidence. The predictions of the political science school in particular were criticized for failing to distinguish between the instances of civil unrest and classical revolutions.

The third generation included such scholars as Theda Skocpol, S.N. Eisenstadt and Kay Ellen Trimberger. Goldstone claims that the intellectual foundation of these scholars rests within

Barrington Moore's "Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy."⁹ The third generation picked up on the weakest points of the second generation. First of all, they recognized that the State is not merely an arena for the resolution of pluralist conflicts, but an autonomous entity itself, its program and structure varying across countries. Second, they recognized that elites and peasants were not a monolithic class. Scholars of the third generation started to pay greater attention to the structure and composition of the two classes. Third, the behavior of the armed forces appeared as an important variable in the analyses. Fourth, the international influence was given a legitimate role in explaining revolutions: Skocpol, for example, identified international pressure on weakening states as a catalyst of Russian, Chinese and French revolutions.

Goldstone, being from the fourth generation, is acutely aware of the shortcomings of the preceding generation. He formulated the following five criticisms of the third generation, which are not to be read as a comprehensive list of them, rather as the most controversial aspects.¹⁰ First, there is no consensus between the third generation scholars on the definition of a "true" revolution. It is not entirely clear which events can be classified as revolutions and which would not be included. In this respect, the works of Tilly and Huntington fare better: both authors have elaborated typologies of contentious action. Amman proposed to reserve revolutions for successful events only. Eckstein went further, coining the term "internal war" and attempting to elaborate a broad-range theory able to cover the majority of the phenomena.

Second criticism of the third generation is a limited range of application. Skocpol, for example, limits her analysis only to "social revolutions," while Trimberger is preoccupied with top-down revolutions. However, I would disagree with this criticism on the grounds that one has

⁹ Goldstone, "Theories of Revolution," p. 434.

¹⁰ Goldstone, "Theories of Revolution," pp. 450-3.

to show that application of the third generation's insights to a broader array of cases is impossible for this criticism to make sense.

Third, peasant structure analyses have yielded ambiguous results. While Paige sees landless peasants as the locomotive of revolutionary action, Skocpol contends that it is not landholding that matters but the structure of a peasant community in general. Again, this criticism makes sense only regarding Goldstone's grouping of scholars into generations; disagreement among scholars on theoretical issues, would not anyhow suggest a weakness in the analysis.

Fourth, the third generation failed to account for commonalities in revolutions and fifth, they ignore or underestimate demographic data of the revolutionary periods. One answer to the last criticism would be that one has to prove that such a neglect leads to flawed analysis and faulty results and demonstrate how their inclusion would improve the analysis, which Goldstone does not even suggest. Moreover, a theory of revolutions, looking for the most parsimonious ways of explaining social science phenomena would stress some factors at the expense of the others. Thus, the scholarship of the third generation can strongly withstand criticisms of Goldstone.

Another line of attack comes from the so-called "fourth generation" of scholars, including Selbin, Foran, Sewell and Goldstone himself. This generation, while recognizing the importance of structural factors, has called for admittance of agency and culture into the repertoire of explanations of revolutionary action. Sewell suggested incorporating ideology into the structural framework of Skocpol,¹¹ while Selbin called for "bringing the agency back in."¹²

¹¹ William H. Sewell, „Ideologies and Social Revolutions: Reflections on the French Case,” in Theda Skocpol, ed., *Social Revolutions in the Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 169-198.

¹² Eric Selbin, „Revolution and the Real World: Bringing Agency Back In,” in John Foran ed., *Theorizing Revolutions* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 123-136.

The insights of the four generation of scholarship on revolutions have a somewhat limited utility for the students of modern electoral revolutions. First, electoral or color revolutions are not revolution in the strict sense – violence is not part of the story and they all take place in pseudo-democracies. Second, the class structure’s importance is somewhat limited for post-Soviet countries, since policies of the Communist party have greatly undermined, if not eliminated, the salience of class as an identity and a proxy for interest groups. Third, what is needed for contemporary analysis of electoral revolutions is the analysis of more detail and less scope and generality. Works of revolutionary theorists of 20th century tried to generalize on a broad set of events from great social revolutions to anti-colonial modern revolutions, while the cases I deal with are very similar, and not enough time has passed since they took place for a “bird’s eye” level of analysis.

The scholarship on color revolutions

The electoral revolutions of the 21st century at least intuitively seem to be quite different from the preceding cases of political and social revolutions. Among the important characteristics of modern revolutions are the (virtual) absence of violence, attempts to overthrow the ancient regime through legal mechanisms, namely elections, and a post-Cold War international situation. Perhaps due to these differences, very few authors analyze color revolutions through classical frameworks of Skocpol, Moore, Goodwin or Huntington.

What most of the contemporaries do is to analyze the events in comparative perspective and generate “shopping lists” of commonalities, which are treated sometimes as causes, sometimes as facilitators, sometimes as necessary, sometimes as sufficient factors of revolutions. What is missing in such literature seems to be the analytical foresight and abstractness (read greater explanatory power) of the previous generations.

Lincoln Mitchell of the National Democratic Institute tells the story of the 2003 Rose Revolution in Georgia through the contours that would become painfully familiar later. A post-Soviet country with a pseudo-democratic regime, prominent opposition (which unites at some point before the revolution) and free media, advised and co-sponsored by international NGOs, stands at the threshold of crucially important elections. The elections are rigged; united opposition stages a protest, joined by the masses. The incumbents condemn demonstrators and the mob, mobilize their own supporters and might attempt at dispersing the crowd using the police, but, given the refusal of the police and the Army to intervene, finally give in to the demands¹³ that would later lead to important changes for the government, political regime, foreign relations and potential for democracy. Andrew Wilson gives a similar account of the Ukrainian Orange Revolution.¹⁴

Michael McFaul wrote one of the earliest comparative analyses of the four color revolutions. According to him, all revolutions shared four similarities. First, fraudulent elections were a trigger in all cases. Second, unlike other revolutions, where aims of contenders were fundamentally new and radical, the color revolutions fought for conditions already formally provided for. Third, before the revolution, dual sovereignty was observed in all four countries, with contenders and incumbents claiming authority over the country. Fourth, no violence was used as a principal resource by either side.¹⁵

The author put the following on the list of “conditions necessary for a democratic breakthrough”: a semi-autocratic regime with an unpopular incumbent pitted against a strong and well organized opposition with the ability to create the perception of falsified elections that

¹³ Lincoln Mitchell, “Georgia’s Rose Revolution,” *Current History* (October 2004): 342-348.

¹⁴ Andrew Wilson, *Ukraine’s Orange Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

¹⁵ Michael McFaul, “Conclusion: The Orange Revolution in a Comparative Perspective,” in Anders Aslund and Michael McFaul, *Revolution in Orange: The Origins of Ukraine’s Democratic Breakthrough* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2006): 165-195.

independent media will amplify, facilitating opposition's (capability of) mobilizing "tens of thousands" to protest the vote, and the division between the military, intelligence and police forces¹⁶ (*siloviki*), which prevents the use of force against the masses. However, the Kyrgyz Tulip Revolution took place without a number of those "necessary" conditions, which begs the question to what extent those conditions are "necessary."

Joshua Tucker also based his analysis of the four color revolutions around fraudulent elections.¹⁷ Unlike McFaul, however, he concentrated only on one aspect and went on to ask why fraudulent elections are a powerful explanatory variable in the electoral revolution. His argument is that electoral fraud solves collective actions problems by altering individuals' calculus regarding the costs and benefits of mobilization. In ordinary times, people with grievances against the state do not mobilize: protest in a non-democratic polity bears high potential costs and little benefits. Rigged elections, however, provide a focal point for staging grievances, a limited-time institutional opening to stage them, and make a contentious action less costly (there are many people demonstrating now) and more beneficial (likelihood of important positive changes increases). Tucker's analysis is limited to the mobilization aspect of the revolution, leaving out, for example, the structure of opportunities. But the author acknowledges this limited scope of the explanation himself.¹⁸

Mark Beissinger makes a very interesting argument regarding "minimum conditions." His most important insight is that revolutions are modular phenomena – the most important "ingredients" are based on previous successful examples. The social science challenge regarding them is that those cases are not independent of each other, which leads him to a conclusion that

¹⁶ Michael McFaul, "Conclusion: The Orange Revolution in a Comparative Perspective"

¹⁷ Joshua Tucker, "Enough! Electoral Fraud, Collective Action Problems, and Post-Communist Colored Revolutions" *Perspectives on Politics* 5, no. 3 (September 2007):535-551.

¹⁸ Ibid.

“the power of example” can compensate for the lack of some of the institutional and structural facilitators. The influence of example, however, has two tipping points – one at which the probability of success grows exponentially and one at which it falls abruptly. Structural and institutional influences follow the reverse cycle – falling and rising afterwards. Playing around Kaplan-Meier estimates, which is a very strange way to proceed,¹⁹ he apparently arbitrarily determines that downward tipping point for the power of example was the Kyrgyz Tulip Revolution of 2005. Fluctuations in the influence of example are accounted for by elite defection and elite learning models. In the former, demoralized and confused elites divide and partially defect to insurgents. In the latter, which characterizes later revolutionary attempts, elites have studied the mistakes of fellow autocrats and have taken preemptive measures, such as cracking down on opposition, creating pro regime youth movements, curbing international organizations and free media etc. The reaction of defection/learning seems to be connected with the temporal distance to the previous example because Beissinger differentiates early and late risers.

Even though the model is problematic even at the theoretical level, its weaknesses are seen outright when applied, for example, to the events of the spring of 2008 in Armenia. Structure- and institution-wise Armenia should have been the next revolutionary country, because it had the most number of variables that Beissinger identified as important for a revolution: past use of electoral fraud, favorable political opportunity structure, opposition in legislature, recent tradition of large scale protest, weakened ties between the regime and *siloviki*, international

¹⁹ Kaplan-Meier estimates are a statistical methodology, originally designed to trace survival rate of cancer patients (“Survival Curves: Accrual and The Kaplan-Meier Estimate,” *Cancer Guide: Statistics*, available at http://www.cancerguide.org/scurve_km.html). It’s potential advantage for Beissinger could have been the ability of methodology to work with “small samples.” However, I detected two problems with applying this method to revolutions: cancer-caused deaths are not modular phenomena, while revolutions are – this makes K-M approach also problematic for calculating probabilities for important variables. Second problem is that even though K-M methodology is well-suited for small samples, four successful color revolutions hardly make any “sample.”

NGOs and absence of energy exporting sector. However, no color revolution was observed in Armenia in the spring of 2008.

Conspiracy theories – American “soft” involvement

Russian and Kyrgyz scholars promote a very different understanding of the Tulip Revolution. Due to Russian media’s “documentary” campaigns, such accounts are an easy sell among the general public in Central Asian states. Although no such account has been published by a scholar in an international peer-reviewed journal, several documentaries, magazine and newspaper articles and books are of interest.

A Bishkek-based historian Alexander Knyazev has dubbed the events of March 2005 *gosudarstvennyi perevorot* (a coup d’etat), which he defines as “a forced seizure of state power by a conspiracy or open armed rebellion.”²⁰ His arguments against calling the events a revolution are based on the understanding of the concept that is shared among many of his generation – that of a ‘social revolution’, which occurred in Tsarist Russia in 1917. The possibility of a ‘political revolution’, whereby no significant social changes take place, is not addressed. However, terming the events a coup d’etat, while partially stemming from the inability or unwillingness of the current government to initiate deep structural reforms, grossly underplays the scope and importance of mass involvement in the events. After all, March 24 was the biggest mass mobilization day in Kyrgyz history, with 10 to 40 thousand²¹ alone on the main square in the capital that day, while many more mobilized in other cities.

Knyazev is convinced that an outside co-conspirator was the US, who were acting through a network of democracy promotion INGOs and friendly local NGOs, as well as through

²⁰ Aleksandr Knyazev, *Gosudarstvennyi perevorot 24 marta 2005 goda v Kirgizii* [*The coup d’etat of March 24, 2005 in Kirgizia*] (Bishkek: Obschestvennyi fond Aleksandra Knyazeva, 2007), p. 10.

²¹ I came across different estimates of the crowd size on the square on the day of the Revolution. Some estimates went as far as 40 000, a number that contradicts my naked eye estimates of the crowd that day. Beissinger gives 10 000 in “Modular Political Action.”

their Embassy. Like many such accounts, his is based on a detailed description of the activities of democracy promotion NGOs that were working on party development, media freedom, civic education, electoral reform, educational advancement and so on. A direct link between the American government and the Tulip Revolution was, of course, not evident. The only direct evidence of America's hand in the events is a copy of a report of Ambassador Steven Young to the State Department,²² which, according to strong evidence and commonsense logic, is a fake document.

Out of a number of interesting documentaries one is "Revolution.com: Conquest of the East," produced by a French director Marc Berdugo.²³ The movie team were traveling extensively throughout the post-Soviet space and the USA, talking to young oppositionists and their sponsors in Washington, as well as to American and post-Soviet politicians. The underlying argument is the same – America supplied money for the color revolutions. The basis for such an argument is what people like Sen. McCain, Kyrgyz oppositionist Baisalov and other young Kyrgyz longing for attention and popularity told them. The bias in Baisalov's words, for example, is obvious: his role in mobilizing southern masses was minimal and even in his native Bishkek he was not able to put up a significant civil force. Training independent observers and creating civic education programs can hardly be categorized as revolutionary activity, especially in light of what shape the revolution took in Kyrgyzstan. As John Heathershaw put it, "[a] discourse of "democratic revolution" masks and sustains a largely marginalized NGO sector and

²² Knyazev, p. 27.

²³ *Revolution.Com. Etats Unis: a la conquete de l'est* [Revolution.Com. United States : conquest of the East], CAPA and Canal+ by Marc Berdugo, available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7f1xPseHjNI>

raises the profile of certain individuals, but has had little or no structural impact on Kyrgyz politics.”²⁴

Nevertheless, some of the arguments make sense. For example, John McCain mentions in an interview not only that “teaching people about democracy” can hardly be categorized as an attempt at coup d’etat but also that there is a thin line between promoting democracy and overthrowing dictators. It is that aspect that the makers of the documentary focus on. Another is implicit skepticism evident in an interview with Bruce Jackson, director of a Project on Transitional Democracies: you will not expect much of a democratic humanism from a former US intelligence officer, who has been employed by an arms-maker Lockheed’s intelligence department and whose father was one of the founders of the CIA.²⁵ However, even if the argument about American involvement’s key role in color revolutions holds in Ukraine and Georgia, Kyrgyzstan is a case apart and the strength of such an argument diminishes there, as will be seen from the case study.

Newspaper articles are no better. They usually conclude that there was an American hand in the Revolution from such facts that, for example, opposition representatives from Kyrgyzstan went to Washington to meet with a number of American officials.²⁶ A *Komsomolskaya Pravda* correspondent Sapozhnikova drew parallels between Gene Sharp’s handbook on peaceful protest and color revolution scenarios in the four post-Soviet republics²⁷ and apparently this parallel and the American money publicly transferred to various foundations is the only basis for the “outside influence” argument. The internal making of dissent is completely discarded. To give journalists

²⁴ John Heathershaw, “The Tulip Fades: ‘Revolution’ and repercussions in Kyrgyzstan,” *Perspective* XVII, no. 2 (March-April 2007), available at <http://www.bu.edu/iscip/vol17/heathershaw.html>

²⁵ *Revolution.Com*

²⁶ Mehman Gafarly, “Gosdep SShA initsiiruet ‘smenu vlasti’ v Kirgizii i Kazahstane” [The US State Department is initiating “change of power” in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan], *Novyie Izvestiya*, March 11, 2003.

²⁷ Galina Sapozhnikova, “Kak delayutsya ‘tsvetnye revoliutsii’” [“How are ‘color revolutions’ made”], *Komsomolskaya Pravda* online, July 3, 2007 available at <http://www.kp.ru/daily/23927/69443/>

credit, some of the commentators mention that countries where a color revolution took place were countries with deep political and economic problems,²⁸ but domestic issues never come to the front view. However, the public nature of such meetings is often not mentioned explicitly, which gives a subtle tone of conspiracy to such news.

To get the issue straight, very few people argue that the American political establishment did not influence and the color revolutions. It is not also very convincing to argue that Ukrainian, Georgian and Serbian color revolutions were not in the geopolitical interests of the United States. What is debated is the primacy of external factors over internal factors and proponents of the view criticized here assume that it is in American might to incite and accomplish an overthrow of government in any of the post-Soviet states. Graeme Herd argues that color revolutions in CIS are not to be explained by conspiracies, because first, coordination of too many actors is needed for such a conspiracy to be successful; second, American secret services are portrayed as much stronger and informed than they actually are, despite their very serious miscalculations in the past; and third, there is no overarching policy towards the region and the American interests are not always reflected in domestic events: sometimes the US would support a leader who will be overthrown.²⁹

Social movement theory approach

Even though occasionally using their metaphors and concepts, comparative analysts of color revolutions have rarely cited social movement theorists. Social movement theory is a broad theoretical framework that can also be utilized for explaining revolutions. The analytical core of

²⁸ For example, see the Director of Russian Institute for Democracy and Co-operation Natalya Narochitskaya's interview with Al Gurnov, *Russia Today: Spotlight*, May 11, 2008 available at <http://youtube.com/watch?v=tmk94ydz5wI>

²⁹ Graeme P. Herd, "Colorful Revolutions and the CIS: Manufactured versus Managed Democracy?" *Problems of Postcommunism* 52, no. 2 (March/April 2005): 3-18.

the framework summarized by Tarrow deals with the following questions: under what circumstances is contention most likely to occur and be sustained, what form does such actions take and how can variation be explained, how are injustice and grievances translated into an urge for action and finally, how the contentious action and movements sustaining it is organized.³⁰

The answer to the first issue – circumstances facilitating or constraining contention lies within the *opportunities-constraints model* that the author has developed. Borrowing from Eisenstadt's work on the cycles of protest in American cities, Tarrow argues that it is not socio-economic conditions or the leadership that determines the timing of contentious action, but the change in the opportunity structure. Opportunities are defined as “consistent, but not necessarily formal or permanent- dimensions of the political environment that provide incentives for collective action by affecting people's expectations for success or failure.”³¹ The change could stem from opening access for participation to new actors, political realignments and resulting instability, split within the ruling elite and appearance of influential allies for the common people, as well as the decline in the state's capacity to repress dissent.³² Moreover, the opportunity structure widens as dissent goes on, since early risers identify the weakness of authorities, inspire others to act, transferring their repertoire and framing, and gain the support and collaboration of later risers.³³

Grievances or issues people did not have a problem with are translated into calls for action by the process of *framing* – identification of the problem, offer of a solution, location of proper cleavages and formation of a cognitive map of the situation. Some classical theorists viewed alienated, “anomied” individuals with a confused value system to be most likely to

³⁰ Sydney Tarrow, *Power in Movement* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

³¹ Tarrow, p. 19.

³² Tarrow, p. 19.

³³ Tarrow, p. 24.

protest. However, the later scholarship demonstrated that recruitment of the individuals into social movements and mobilization of the masses for collective actions is done along the pre-existing networks of interaction. Therefore, social networks of core participants play an important role in mobilizing people for a contentious action. This is especially important for semi-authoritarian countries like Kyrgyzstan, where media freedom exists, but is not guaranteed – most of the information, frames and calls for action are disseminated among acquaintances by word of mouth.

People mobilized through networks by appropriate framing do not just gather and engage in violent activities. There is a broad array of dissent options available to them – this Tarrow calls *repertoire* of collective action. For example, Parisians in 1848 built barricades, while anti-American protesters usually burn the American flag. It is framing and repertoire, combined with a neighbor or relative's urge that motivate people to get out and protest in the name of justice.

A very special contribution of Tarrow is the concept of a *cycle of protest*. Instead of seeing a nation-wide contentious action as a wide-scale sporadic process, whereby all contenders mobilize (almost) at the same time, Tarrow claims that big contentious events are usually started by small localized events, and then transform into wider circles of contention because contentious action is *modular*; that is experience, framing techniques, mobilization mechanisms and repertoires are transferred to later coming contenders. The cycle also widens as rising activists signal potential allies in the elites that jumping into the bandwagon and joining the cause of protesters might bring in bounties to elites, when such an action is successful.³⁴ While this concept seems to be obvious, its reflection in the scholarly literature has been slow: most of the analyses of revolutions and contentious action in general viewed protest events as sporadic, nationwide processes with equal scope of action at the beginning and the end of the process.

³⁴ Tarrow, 141-161.

In an influential 2001 book, Tarrow, and the other two leading figures in social movement scholarship, Doug McAdam and Charles Tilly, criticize the existing scholarship on contentious action (including their own contributions) for its inability to overcome the static modeling and futile attempts to design generalized models for artificially divided episodes of contentious action (nationalism, revolutionary theory, democratization etc.).³⁵ In an attempt to come up with an explanatory framework that could bridge the existing schisms in those three subgroups of contentious action, they propose a dynamic approach to studying collective contentious action. They achieve the promised dynamism and wideness of scope by avoiding single general models and trying instead to concentrate on mechanisms and processes evident once a researcher divides big episodes of contention into smaller parts. For example, in the case of Nicaraguan revolution of 1979, they subdivide this event into three episodes to better see the interaction of challengers, incumbents and agents and identify three general mechanisms that led to the fall of Somosa: infringement on elite interests, suddenly imposed grievances and decertification³⁶.

The central argument of social movement theory, as summarized by Tarrow is that contentious politics emerges with changing balance of opportunities and constraints, when contenders strategically utilize prepared repertoires and frames to mobilize people through pre-identified cleavage points and create new opportunities, widening the circle of contention.³⁷

Social movement approach has seldom been applied outside the Western world. A groundbreaking contribution and one of the first steps towards doing so is a volume by Quintan Wiktorowicz that attempts to bridge the gap between Islamic studies and social movement theory by applying the latter to the study of Islamic activism in the Middle East in the second half of the

³⁵ Doug McAdam, Sindney Tarrow and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

³⁶ McAdam et al., pp. 196-206.

³⁷ Tarrow, p. 19.

20th century.³⁸ The result is a refreshing look at the causes, dynamics and characteristics of Islamic activism, from women's study circles to violence by the Algerian Front of Islamic Liberation.

A student of Central Asian politics has to modify the social movement framework for it to make sense in the conditions where social movements either virtually do not exist or are of secondary importance. This intuition is supported by Collins' claim that "focus on formal institutions is inadequate."³⁹ What follows is a brief introduction on the scholarship on Central Asian transition through which we can make sense of the key actors and underlying processes.

Clans and clan politics in Kyrgyzstan

Under the USSR, Kyrgyzstan was a net financial beneficiary of centralized redistribution. It was one of the bigger producers of cattle in the Union, and in the 55 years of existence as a Soviet Socialist Republic was ruled, among others, by representatives from two regions – Turdakun Usubaliev from the northern region of Naryn and Absamat Masaliev from the southern region of Osh, both - ardent promoters of clan politics. Formally, the salient actors in Kyrgyz politics were the Communist Party of Kyrgyzstan and the state bodies, both at central and regional levels. Before forced sedentarization by the Soviets, the Kyrgyz were divided into numerous tribes grouped around three confederations – left and right "wings" and the so-called "ichkilik" group. Tribal affiliation reinforced by patronage networks, was evident in the language, financial activities, lifestyle and migration patterns of the Kyrgyz even in the 1990s.⁴⁰

³⁸ Quintan Wiktorowicz, *Islamic Activism: Social Movement Theory Approach* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004).

³⁹ Kathleen Collins, "The Political Role of Clans in Central Asia," *Comparative Politics* 35, no. 2 (January 2003): 173.

⁴⁰ Kathleen Collins, *Clan Politics and Regime Transition in Central Asia* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 213-222.

Even though a comprehensive account of sedentarization and identity formation under the Soviet rule can not be given here, one thing is worth noting: Soviet administration policies contributed to preserving (maybe even strengthening) primordial affiliations under the formal institutions of Soviet governance.⁴¹ The politics of post-communist transformation has also been permeated by clans.

The commonsense and a simplified depiction of political process in industrial democracies is this. There are elites and masses. The elites rule by the mandate of the people. The legitimizing mechanism is the vote people cast in free and fair elections. A complicated set of governing institutions function in a complex framework to ensure that the pattern of distribution is the one supported by the majority of the population. Political loyalties are along party lines and so is political mobilization in the electoral process. The salient political cleavages are religious, ideological, rural-urban, class and so on.

The same political cleavages are evident in the membership in various social movements. It is for these reasons that Charles Tilly, in his account of mobilization networks, utilizes Harrison White's concept of *catnets*. Catnet is a concept which combines a category of people (e.g., Mormons, lawyers, single mothers) and their interaction and communication networks.⁴² This is a picture of the political process in a *modern* society.

The Central Asian societies are dubbed *semi-modern*.⁴³ Consequently, the political process looks different and the central concept in understanding the semi-modern post-soviet authoritarianisms is the concept of a *clan*. A clan is defined by Kathleen Collins, a scholar who first applied clan theory to Central Asia, as "an informal institution in which actual or notional

⁴¹ Kathleen Collins, *Clan Politics*.

⁴² Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution*, pp. 62-4.

⁴³ Kathleen Collins, "The Political Role of Clans in Central Asia," *Comparative Politics* 35, no. 2 (January 2003): 171.

kinship based on blood or marriage forms the central bond among members.”⁴⁴ According to different estimates, a typical clan consists of 2000-10000 people.⁴⁵ A clan has two primary functions that are of special importance to the study of politics in general and of contentious action in particular: it is an *identity grouping* and a *distributive network*.⁴⁶ It is an identity grouping because for a common Kyrgyz his clan identity supersedes national or ethnic identity as well as those identities that emerge as a result of the above mentioned cleavages (rural-urban, religious-atheist etc.). It is a distributive mechanism because clan is a primary institution to which individuals look for financial and logistical assistance. Clans are to be thanked for stability during the impoverishing transition period after the Soviet breakup - they provided resources for poor rural members,⁴⁷ but they are also a conflict-prone entity – shutting up of access to several important clans caused the revolution of 2005. Those two functions promote clan as the institution that enjoys the “primary” loyalty of the Kyrgyz.

Members of the clan engage in rational and mutually beneficial exchange. Leaders of the clan provide members with needed resources and patronage, and care for their basic needs and lifetime promotion, since the leaders’ prestige and power is a product of the standing of their clans. Conversely, members of clans owe their primary loyalty to the clan leaders and support them by human resources when called upon to do so. This rational relationship is reinforced by normative considerations, promoted by the traditional Kyrgyz communitarian values. Under the Soviet Union, clan leaders were typically heads of big collective farms or regional heads of administration and party bosses.⁴⁸ Nowadays, clan leaders are businessmen, high level bureaucrats, parliament deputies etc. The parliament’s clan nature leads to quite a few unpleasant

⁴⁴ Kathleen Collins, “Clans, pacts, and politics in Central Asia,” *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 3 (July 2002): 137-52.

⁴⁵ Interview with a classmate, Guljigit Ermatov, May 22, 2008.

⁴⁶ Collins, *Clan Politics*, pp. 24-33.

⁴⁷ Collins, “The Political Role of Clans,” p. 186; Kathleen Kuehnast and Nora Dudwick, “Better a hundred friends than a hundred rubles?” *World Bank Working Paper* 39 (2004).

⁴⁸ Kathleen Collins, “The Political Role of Clans,” p. 174.

consequences. A parliamentary seat becomes connected with a candidate's ability and need to provide spoils for his network to ensure re-election.⁴⁹ On the other hand, losing a deputy seat for a clan leader would mean loss of a prestigious and profitable position and imminent hardship in providing for the needs of his clansmen, and a decline of the prestige and power of a clan itself. This insight will become very important in the discussion of the parliamentary fraud of 2005.

Clans are to be distinguished from ordinary patron-client networks: the patronage ties in the former are reinforced by shared identity of the patron and his clients.⁵⁰ They are also to be distinguished from regional and tribal affiliations, as well as mafia groups.⁵¹ They are different from regional and tribal affiliations because clan geography does not coincide with regional or tribal geography. Clans are also differentiated from mafia by the nature of their activity, which is mostly within the letter of the law. This particular usage of the term clan is also different from a usage that is now in vogue – clans referring to a closed small clique around a personality – e.g., Yeltsin's clan, because the latter is much limited in membership and is not spread horizontally, as are Central Asian clans.

Reviewing the literature one gets a feeling that in the eyes of Western scholars clans indeed played a very important role in Soviet and post-Soviet politics of Kyrgyzstan; as Collins put it, “clan dynamics also better explain why and how conflict occurs.”⁵² I surmise that they are very important actors in the explanation of the Tulip Revolution of 2005. Clans are very akin to social movements: they forge common identities by default, which makes it very easy for clan leaders to mobilize their clansmen to protect interests and prestige of the clan through reinforcing the power and prestige of its leader.

⁴⁹ Regine A. Spector, “The Transformation of Askar Akayev, President of Kyrgyzstan,” *Berkeley Program in Soviet and Post Soviet Studies Working Paper Series*, p. 22, available at <http://repositories.cdlib.org/iseees/bps/2004> .

⁵⁰ Collins, *Clan Politics*, pp. 36-38.

⁵¹ Collins, *Clan Politics*, pp. 38-42.

⁵² Collins, “The Political Role of Clans,” p. 171.

The clan framework, however, is not without faults. First of all, defining a clan is a harder task than is seemingly assumed by Collins. While the above given definition correctly captures the ambivalence of identities and networks in real life, it is so broad that almost any kind of connection is captured by it. To put it other way, while the definition is certainly correct, it is very hard to operationalize

Second, there are many facts that are out of the clan politics logic in the strictest sense. One good example is what happened to one of the leaders of the revolution Adahan Madumarov in May 2008 – he had to resign from the position of the speaker of the parliament due to disagreements with another southern revolutionary, President Bakiev, and his odious adviser, a prominent northern clan leader, Medet Sadyrkulov.⁵³

Third, it is not clear to what extent clan affiliation is an equally strong identity at mass and elite levels. Collins convincingly argues that clan identity is strong among the common people.⁵⁴ However, her claim that “where clans are...powerful social actors, they will play a role in the elite-level politics of transition, negotiation, and conflict”⁵⁵ is not supported by anecdotal evidence. A telling example is the so-called “matreshka incident,” when opposition deputy Omurbek Tekebayev was caught trafficking drugs to Poland. The incident, according to widespread and somewhat grounded rumors was orchestrated by Janysh Bakiev, brother of the current President and deputy director of the National Security Service at that time for Tekebayev’s vocal criticism of the government. It is worth noting, however, that all three

⁵³ Ferghana.Ru, “Politicheskoe Bankrotstvo Spikera Parlamenta Mojet Izmenit’ Rassklad Sil v Klanovoy Bor’be” [Political Bankruptcy of the Speaker of the Parliament Might Change the Balance of Power in the Struggle of Clans], May 29, 2008, available at:

<http://www.ferghana.ru/article.php?id=5724&PHPSESSID=fbef98968deff34daffa60e9dc69a1c8>.

⁵⁴ Collins, “The Political Role of Clans,” pp. 175-9.

⁵⁵ Collins, “The Political Role of Clans,” p. 172.

politicians come from the same region – Jalalabad, and all three were pivotal figures in the Revolution.⁵⁶

There are different, if not competing, approaches to understanding politics in Kyrgyzstan.⁵⁷ Pauline Jones Luong published a very important piece, in which she analyzed the process of designing electoral institutions through the game-theoretic lens.⁵⁸ Identifying central administration and regional elites as the two actors, she models their interaction by the transitional bargaining game and based on that explains the length of negotiations and the outcome – electoral law in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.⁵⁹ Jones Luong identified regional elites as heads of regional administrations and local party bosses, and central administration – as the President and corresponding ministers. The electoral law designed after one or several rounds of interaction of actors was seen as a compromise between the regional and central administrations. This way, it is not clans, but regional elites and central government who are depicted as crucial actors. To illustrate the difference between two approaches more clearly, in the clan network the then President Akayev would be viewed as a representative of the Sarybagysh tribal clan of the northern region, while in Jones Luong's bargaining model he was the head of an autonomous (from clans) central administration.

The importance of clans is also questioned in Scott Radnitz's narrative of mass mobilization during the Aksy events⁶⁰ in Kyrgyzstan. He instead proposes localist networks as

⁵⁶ An interview with a classmate, Guljigit Ermatov, who was a UNDP project officer in Batken oblast of Kyrgyzstan, May 18, 2008.

⁵⁷ There is confusion regarding clans, reinforced by Collin's changing definition of the entity. In a 2003 article in *Comparative Politics*, it is evident that clans coincide with village (local) identities in Kyrgyzstan (see esp. p. 185), which then makes it compatible with Radnitz's story of mobilizing mechanisms.

⁵⁸ Pauline Jones Luong, *Institutional Change and Political Continuity in Post-Soviet Central Asia: Power, Perceptions, and Pacts* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ The so-called Aksy events occurred in March, 2002. Following ceding of some land to China as a consequence of a Kyrgyz-Chinese border agreement, the opposition headed by a deputy Azimbek Beknazarov held on to the issue and fiercely criticized the Akayev administration. Beknazarov was arrested on politically-motivated charges, an

salient identity-forming and mass-mobilizing institutions. The Beknazarov network was reported to be consisting of his extended family, friends and his local villagers, while tribal and regional cleavages played a minimal role in the contention. Having made rough estimates of the numbers mobilized from each of the 12 villages, Radnitz found that the majority of the mobilized came from Beknazarov's home village and the neighboring two villages⁶¹. His story is in line with findings of Kuenhast and Dudwick, who have looked into the networks of rural poor in Kyrgyzstan and found localist networks and patron-client relationships between the "poor" and "non-poor" members of formerly equalized extended families.⁶²

As we see, clan is a controversial, highly fluid and very ambiguous entity which can potentially overlap with local, tribal, regional identities and/or be a combination of them. However, the (local, regional, tribal) "clan" argument, though weak and raw, has been more successful in explaining phenomena, from interethnic peace and design of electoral laws to contentious mobilization, than alternative explanations – arguments based on ethnic or religious identities, or formal party/government-opposition cleavages.

The analytical framework for the case

Grievances, a variable that scholars like Gurr, Johnson and Davies emphasized, while necessary, can not be a sufficient factor in the explanation of revolutions. Many Central Asian peoples seem to be unhappy with their governments and all of them live in conditions far worse

action that caused up to several thousands to mobilize in his home region. On the way to a court hearing several demonstrators were shot and a dozen wounded as the police used force to stop the crowd.

⁶¹ In Collins' 2003 article in *Comparative Politics*, it is evident that clans coincide with village (local) identities in Kyrgyzstan (see esp. p. 185), which then makes it compatible with Radnitz's story of mobilizing mechanisms, despite the latter's criticism of clan framework.

⁶² Kathleen Kuehnast and Nora Dudwick, "Better a hundred friends than a hundred rubles?" *World Bank Working Paper* 39 (2004).

than they deem decent. A more convincing argument will have to answer why contention took place in Kyrgyzstan, and not in Tajikistan or Turkmenistan.

Narratives based on several “shopping list” variables, like the one proposed by McFaul, while successful in the explanation of Serbian, Georgian and Ukrainian color revolutions, fails to account for many “anomalies” of the Kyrgyz case, due to a very strict definition of color revolutions and lower level of abstractness of explanations. For example, it would have a hard time explaining mobilization in the absence of a widely supported mass student organization, like “Pora” or “Otpor,” or would assign undue importance to their Kyrgyz counterparts “KelKel” and “Birge,” which is hardly convincing. To give another example, they will fail in explaining the deterioration of the quality of governance after the Tulip Revolution, be it a more authoritarian constitution, disrespect for property rights, media freedoms and so on.

The “foreign intrusion” accounts fail to explain the fact that American-sponsored NGOs were present throughout the Soviet space, but failed to ignite revolutions in Armenia, Azerbaijan or Belarus, the opposition in the last being among the biggest recipients of American democracy-promotion finance. Such accounts also falter when we recollect that Moscow was the first foreign destination of newly empowered Kyrgyz revolutionaries and that no significant foreign policy changes occurred after the revolution in Kyrgyzstan, unlike in Georgia and Ukraine. Lastly, such accounts do not explain Moscow’s apathy towards ousting of Akayev and their willingness to work with the new government after the Revolution.

I propose the following narrative of the Kyrgyz Tulip Revolution. First, opportunities for it were created by division within the (domestic) elites. In this particular case it was the breakup of the clan pact, which, according to Collins, maintained stability in the early days of post-independence Kyrgyzstan when power was fragmented, future uncertain and living conditions, at

first sight, intolerable.⁶³ Second, the moving force of the revolution was not a nationwide mass social movement, but disillusioned clans loosely grouped into an umbrella organization. Third, the absence of a cohesive frame of discontent (confused naming of the Revolution – Tulip vs Yellow, confused colors and slogans and virtual absence of a unifying slogan, unlike all other cases) might be explained by the fact that framing was localized due to a local nature of clan identity: in the early days of a Revolution the feeling of discontent centered around favorite candidates losing elections in their home constituencies. Fourth, the mass mobilization with virtual absence of a vanguard political party, nationwide leader or a youth movement can be explained by mobilization through clan networks – southerners, the first people to rise, mobilized around their local elderly who in turn mobilized around regional and national leaders. The given framework would be utilized to present an analytic narrative of the troubled 2005 spring in Kyrgyzstan.

⁶³ Collins, “Clans, Pacts, and Politics,” pp. 137-152.

CASE STUDY: OPPORTUNITIES, MOBILIZATION AND THE FRAMING OF DISCONTENT IN FEBRUARY-MARCH 2005

Following the rational choice and resource mobilization traditions, and proceeding along the thinking of Tarrow, who states that “people engage in contentious politics when patterns of political opportunities and constraints change,”⁶⁴ I see the Tulip Revolution as caused not by worsening economic and social conditions, but as a result of the change in the structure of opportunities and constraints faced by main actors. While socio-economic conditions provide a background against which violence escalates, I view them as necessary but not sufficient. The following is a short review of such conditions.

Contributing factors

First, Kyrgyzstan has been the most liberal regime in the region, often called “an island of democracy” by the State Department.⁶⁵ Very poor and agricultural, this country always has to compromise with the international community. This fact, coupled with the leadership by the former Leningrad-trained physicist Akayev, led to the highest level of political and economic liberalization. The country quickly became a member of the UN, signed a number of important human rights conventions; it was the first CIS country to be admitted to WTO and the first Central Asian country to acquire its own currency.

Second, following this openness and the clan nature of politics in Kyrgyzstan, a visible and vocal opposition emerged to President Akayev. Starting with former Communist *apparatchik* Turdakun Usabaliev, who contested the first presidential elections, a number of prominent

⁶⁴ Sydney Tarrow, *Power in Movement*, 2nd edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 19.

⁶⁵ John Anderson, *Kyrgyzstan: Central Asia's Island of Democracy?* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1999), pp. 4-21.

figures joined the opposition, including the former Prime Ministers Felix Kulov and Kurmanbek Bakiyev, parliament members (Azimbek Beknazarov, Omurbek Tekebayev, Jypar Jeksheev) and a number of former diplomats (e.g., Roza Otunbayeva). The “Ar Namys” opposition party is among the strongest and oldest parties in modern Kyrgyz politics.⁶⁶

Opposition to Akayev’s reign also came from a number of NGOs, the most visible of which is the Coalition for Democracy and Human Rights, headed by Edil Baisalov – an umbrella organization coordinating efforts of dozens of small regional NGOs. Another voice was “Citizens Against Corruption,” a local NGO headed by Tolekan Ismailova. These two organizations identified abuses of the regime, monitored elections, learned and disseminated opposition tactics, organized roundtables and trainings in the regions. Inspired by “Kmara” and “Pora”, two youth movements, “Birge” and “KelKel” emerged claiming from several dozens to several hundred members. In addition to the local NGOs, two American “institutes” – National Democratic and International Republican and one foundation – International Foundation for Electoral Systems, were working to reform the party and electoral systems and implementing civic education projects. Although their role in mobilizing the masses seems to be limited, they provided a discursive space to raise grievances and discuss problems.⁶⁷ Both of those mutually related factors have been cited in the literature and are connected with toleration of opposition to the regime.

In the context of strong opposition and clan politics, fraudulent elections will solve the problem of collective action. In ordinary times, people, when having grievances against the state, would normally not raise their voice, given the small probability of success, large potential costs and little personal gain. Stolen elections solved the problem of collective action in all electoral

⁶⁶ Personal observations and conversations with a classmate, Guljigit Ermatov, March 2008.

⁶⁷ Matthew Fuhrmann, “A Tale of Two Social Capitals: Explaining Revolutionary Collective Action in Kyrgyzstan” *Problems of Post Communism* 53 (November/December 2006).

revolutions.⁶⁸ In Kyrgyzstan, stolen elections also meant that the clan pact was violated once again. The mobilization of formal opposition after rigged elections was thus amplified by the power of clan politics, with clan leaders who lost their districts mobilizing members of their clans for a collective action.

Finally, insurgents were never countered by the repressive machine of the state. On the one hand, it was weaker than in some of the neighboring countries, with corruption and under-financing plaguing the power ministries. On the other, President Akayev most probably did not order the troops to fire at people,⁶⁹ due to a number of circumstances, the most salient being his realization that repression would not change the flow of events.

Aspect 1: Division of elites against the backdrop of a clan society

Against the background of the contributing factors specified above, the most important cause of the Revolution in Kyrgyzstan through the perspective of the social movement theory is the unbridgeable division between the elite and President Akayev and his supporters in 2005, mainly due to his attempts to undermine the clan pact he had allegedly accepted earlier. “Clan pact” is a concept developed by Collins to explain stability in Central Asian states after independence when all the scholarship was predicting conflict.⁷⁰ The subject of the pact was the balance of power between the most important clans, evident in the distribution of opportunities and parts of the national economic pie.⁷¹ This section aims at demonstrating how the division between elites bridged by the clan pact before, became very wide on the eve of 2005.

⁶⁸ Joshua Tucker, “Enough! Electoral Fraud, Collective Action Problems, and the “2nd Wave” of Post-Communist Democratic Revolutions,” *Perspectives on Politics* 5, no. 3 (2007): 537-553.

⁶⁹ Scott Radnitz in personal correspondence, March 8, 2008.

⁷⁰ Kathleen Collins, “Clans, pacts, and Politics in Central Asia,” *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 3 (2003): 137-152.

⁷¹ Ibid.

Collins recognizes that clan nature of Kyrgyz politics also makes it conflict prone. Ironically enough, after several hundred pages of excellent scholarship on clans, she finishes her book with an epilogue that labels the events of March 2005 as the “people’s power” revolution, failing to see that Kyrgyzstan’s revolution went along the same dynamic she tried to conceptualize in the main part of her book.

The “clan pact breakup” view also resonates in the analysis of a Kazakh analyst Sultan Akimbekov. He writes that southern clans, more organized along clan lines than somewhat more modernized and centralized northerners, perceiving their exclusion from the economic pie mobilized their members, inciting northern Talas clan to rise as well.⁷²

Alexander Knyazev who, as mentioned before, is an advocate of the “external influence” version, has, nevertheless, agreed that the “breakup of the clan pact” version is reflective of the real situation. Calling it a “bit of a simplistic theme,” he nevertheless states that “in essence, it is true.”⁷³ Even though no official or written sources exist even on the existence of such a pact, the patterns of personnel appointment and of electoral victories can give us an insight into the balanced distribution of profitable and prestigious positions within the Kyrgyz governance structure.

The Kyrgyz have always been very sensitive about preserving the territory of their present nation-state.⁷⁴ For example, Megoran reports that the opposition actively manipulated border dispute resolutions, to show how the Akayev administration gave up parts of the holy Kyrgyz land to the gluttonous Uzbek and Chinese.⁷⁵ Therefore, quite a resonant public outrage with

⁷² Sultan Akimbekov, “Kirgizskaya mozaika: kachestvenno novyi uroven’ klanovogo protivostoyaniya” [Kyrgyz mosaic: qualitatively new level of clan confrontation] *Kontinent* 7, no. 134 (April 2005).

⁷³ Correspondence of a classmate, Guljigit Ermatov, with Alexander Knyazev, May 2008.

⁷⁴ Alisher Ilkhamov, “Organized Opposition and Civil Unrest,” *Eurasianet.Org*,

<http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/rights/articles/eav121602.shtml>

⁷⁵ Nick Megoran, “The critical geopolitics of Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Ferghana Valley boundary dispute, 1999-2000,” *Political Geography* 23, Issue 6 (August 2004).

Akayev administration should have been witnessed at least on two occasions before the Revolution of 2005: when a group of international terrorists attacked the southern Batken oblast of Kyrgyzstan in 1999, and when Kyrgyz leadership gave up a portion of allegedly Kyrgyz land to the Chinese as part of the border dispute settlement in 2002. However, in both occasions the public “did not give a damn.”⁷⁶

In 2002, the “Movement for resignation of Akayev” was set up,⁷⁷ after the government mishandled the Aksy crisis. Nevertheless, Akayev survived the most serious political crisis of post-independence. This can be explained by two facts: in 2002 the land that was ceded to China was neither inhabited, nor endowed with any natural resources; consequently, no prominent clan leader was personally threatened by ceding this land to China. Beknazarov, who is himself from Aksy, a region very far away from the ceded land, and other opposition leaders clung on to the issue because of personal beliefs or because of calculations that this would make a good case against Akayev, but in no way because of the interests of their clans. Since no clan leader’s immediate interest was threatened, a dedicated nationwide coalition of clan leaders opposing the deal did not emerge. The weak movement waned away very soon.

In 2003 Akayev pressed on with the constitutional reform that would give him even higher a hand over the other branches of the government.⁷⁸ This referendum also cut the size of the parliament, turning it into a unicameral body.⁷⁹ It would seem that this should also have been an appropriate moment for throwing him out, but no wide scale contention took place. This is partially connected with the fact that Akayev put the reform to the public approval, which, direct fraud and number rigging notwithstanding, approved the changes and signaled the opposition that

⁷⁶ Interview with a classmate, Guljigit Ermatov, May 21, 2008.

⁷⁷ Alisher Khamidov, “Kyrgyzstan’s Unrest Linked to Clan Rivalries,” *Eurasia Insight*, May 6, 2002 available at <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav060502.shtml>

⁷⁸ Spector, p. 24.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

Akayev was safe in power until at least 2005's parliamentary elections.⁸⁰ Moreover, the most prominent of clan leaders in the opposition might have reasoned that they would maintain their lucrative seats in the parliament anyways.

Then in 2005, Akayev's aggressive promotion of the members of his network to the parliament causes the biggest public outrage in the history of modern Kyrgyzstan with thousands of otherwise apathetic Kyrgyz mobilizing against him. Clearly, frustration with corruption and economic decline are well grounded explanations for this, but they are impotent in the face of a temporal variable: why 2005 and not 1999 or 2002? Which of the variables affecting (in)stability in the country are of the greatest explanatory power for the Tulip Revolution?

Social movement theory teaches us that timing of a contentious action depends on the structure of opportunities and constraints facing contenders. Given that Kyrgyzstan, like Georgia and Ukraine, never became quite a repressive state except for the use of force against protesters in Aksy in 2002, we would not be very mistaken if we hold constraints (repression) constant. The opportunities, however, did change and the change was a breach in the elite pact that characterized Kyrgyz politics before; the window of opportunity was the parliamentary elections of 2005⁸¹.

One important aspect of the pact was the appointment of regional governors (*akims*). In the early nineties Akayev usually put the people who were already respected and recognized in their regions as governors, even when such candidates did not approve of his economic policies.⁸² In fact, the governors were so powerful that one of them even claimed that the country is ruled not by Akayev but by the governors.⁸³ When the independent governors expressed discontent

⁸⁰ Spector, p. 24.

⁸¹ For a schematic representation of the argument, please see Figure A in Appendices.

⁸² Spector, p. 17.

⁸³ Jones Luong, p. 110.

with the outcomes of his policies, Akayev appeased the more prominent members of the opposition by spoils from state budget and by shares from the international aid flows the country was receiving.⁸⁴ A proto-pact and some power sharing mechanism was in place. In mid-90s Akayev even tried to incorporate the civil society sector into decision-making.⁸⁵ By 2000, however, Akayev's personnel policy shifted towards a "vertical of power" and he turned to a practice of appointing northern politicians to southern governorship positions.⁸⁶ Allegedly, one of the complaints during the Aksy political crisis was Akayev's appointment of cronies to the governorship of Osh.⁸⁷ Here is how Alisher Khamidov describes the situation in 2002, "[President Akayev's] Sarybagysh clan has increasingly extended its control over key economic and political spheres, leaving other clans with dwindling opportunities. Key government positions, especially in the ministries of finance, internal affairs and state security, have been filled by members of Akayev's clan."⁸⁸

In the early years of independence, the President also had to compromise with the independent and eagerly opposing legislative branch. The old parliament, consisting of the "communist guard" was blocking a few of his key attempts at economic liberalization. The parliament was an assembly of notables and underneath this ideological opposition, there might also have been an attempt to show the President that he is not the only boss in the country. But by

⁸⁴ Regine A. Spector, "The Transformation of Askar Akayev, President of Kyrgyzstan," *Berkeley Program in Soviet and Post Soviet Studies Working Paper Series* available at <http://repositories.cdlib.org/isees/bps/2004>

⁸⁵ Spector, p. 13.

⁸⁶ Spector, p. 22.

⁸⁷ Alisher Khamidov, "Kyrgyzstan's Unrest Linked to Clan Rivalries," *Eurasia Insight*, May 6, 2002 available at <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav060502.shtml>

⁸⁸ Khamidov, "Kyrgyzstan's Unrest."

1993, Akayev reached an agreement with the speaker of the Parliament as well,⁸⁹ and the parliament became more cooperative.

Ideological and power struggles notwithstanding, Akayev did not meddle too much with parliamentary elections before. However, right before the elections of 2005, he ambiguously reduced the number of parliamentary seats from 105 to 75, alienating at least 30 prominent figures who were least likely to get a seat in the new parliament.⁹⁰ As if this has not been enough, President Akayev's clique started to aggressively promote members of the immediate family to the legislative.⁹¹ The President's daughter, Bermet, was running in Bishkek, in a district where opposition leader Rosa Otunbayeva was to run before being disqualified on the basis of residence requirements; his son Aydar was running in the family stronghold Kemin, Akayev's hometown. Many more seats were challenged by Akayev's protégés.

In Kyrgyz society, where localism and clanism are primary sources of electoral loyalty, local notables see their seats attached to their standing in their local constituencies, where by the nature of Soviet sedentarization policy, most of the people would either be their relatives, classmates and friends, or simply employees and beneficiaries. Akayev's moves on the eve of the Revolution were undermining that pattern and were seen as grossly "illegitimate" in the eyes of enraged elites.⁹²

⁸⁹ Eugene Huskey, "Kyrgyzstan: The Fate of Political Liberalization," in Karen Dawisha and Bruce Perrot eds., *Conflict, Cleavage and Change in Central Asia and the Caucasus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 257.

⁹⁰ International Crisis Group, "Kyrgyzstan: After the Revolution," p. 1.

⁹¹ President Akayev even fell out with his formal supporters, such as, for example, Ravshan Jeenbekov, who was a chairman of state property committee and a favorite of the Family, but who was blocked from running in a district where the First Lady's sister was running (Crisis Group, "Kyrgyzstan: After the Revolution," p. 4).

⁹² Martha Brill Olcott claims that most of the reports on electoral fraud came from the districts where prominent independents and opposition were running ("Lessons of the Tulip Revolution," Testimony for the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, April 7, 2005 available at <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/olcotttestimony-April7-05.pdf>, p. 3).

In an attempt to coordinate the “conquest of parliament,” Bermet Akayeva created and chaired “Alga, Kyrgyzstan!” party, a motley crew of inexperienced businessmen with shady pasts⁹³ and not-very-notable mid-level bureaucrats loyal to Akayev.⁹⁴ The public perception of “Alga, Kyrgyzstan!” candidates was that of people with very modest intellectual capabilities whom the Akayev family handpicked to form a docile parliament.⁹⁵ Exclusion of two prominent leaders was especially crucial for the mass mobilization – Adakhan Madumarov and Kurmanbek Bakiev.⁹⁶ The latter was particularly popular within the masses and elites alike and it is after his backing of the united opposition that the balance was tipped in favor of the opposition.⁹⁷

What widened the schism was the fact that opposition to Akayev, besides gaining some weight by incorporating prominent individuals who fell out with the Akayev clique, also managed to unite by September 2004, in the wake of the parliamentary elections of 2005.⁹⁸ Even though the unity of the opposition might have been achieved only formally, a common agenda was designed and further actions were to be coordinated in a broad coalition. To sum up, the crucial factor in the emergence of a revolutionary situation was President Akayev’s “losing the backing of key national and regional elites, who were irritated at family control of the economy and rising corruption.”⁹⁹

⁹³ International Crisis Group, “Kyrgyzstan: After the Revolution,” *Asia Report* no. 97, May 4, 2005, p. 1.

⁹⁴ Interview with a classmate, Guljigit Ermatov, May 21, 2008.

⁹⁵ Interview with a classmate, Guljigit Ermatov, May 21, 2008, and Olcott, “Lessons of the Tulip Revolution.”

⁹⁶ Olcott, p. 4.

⁹⁷ Olcott, p. 4.

⁹⁸ International Crisis Group, p. 2.

⁹⁹ International Crisis Group, “Kyrgyzstan: After the Revolution,” Executive Summary.

Aspect 2. Revolutionary Clans: Identities and Networks, Mobilization and the Cycle of Protest¹⁰⁰

Division within the elites create opportunities to act and decrease the probability of a repressive reaction by the state. But opportunities are only half of the story. How do people actually act – what are the mobilizing networks and mechanisms in the Kyrgyz Revolution? Social movement theory's contribution is in identifying and theoretically capturing the mechanisms of mobilization. The scholars of this tradition have shown how existing networks are translated into contentious masses by innovative repertoire and framing. This subsection seeks to demonstrate the process in the context of the Kyrgyz Revolution.

First of all, one has to create a network or utilize an existing one for mobilization purposes. In the Kyrgyz scenario, the contending elites utilized the existing clan networks to mobilize the patronized population to their cause. Clan identity that has permeated many spheres of the Kyrgyz life facilitates the strengthening of networks. As Berdikееva notes, in Kyrgyzstan, where attempts at nation-building have largely failed, clan identity remains a salient feature of political and socio-economic life.¹⁰¹ It has plagued the political process at the elite level and is a part of the everyday self-identification discourse among common people.¹⁰² They are especially salient in voting patterns: the electorate votes along “clan” lines.¹⁰³ In addition to this, clan identity is reinforced by living patterns, and financial and migration habits: more than 90% of respondents in an interview conducted by Collins reported living in the village they were born, utilizing family and clan connections for fundraising; and that there is little migration to

¹⁰⁰ For a limited schematic representation of the cycle of protest in Kyrgyz Revolution, see Figure B in Appendices.

¹⁰¹ Saltanat Berdikееva, “National Identity in Kyrgyzstan: The Case of Clan Politics,” a paper presented at the 11th World Convention of the Association for the Study of Nationalities “Nationalism in an Age of Globalization,” Columbia University, New York, March 23-25, 2006.

¹⁰² Berdikееva, pp. 8-11; Kathleen Collins, “The Logic of Clan Politics: Evidence from the Central Asian Trajectories,” *World Politics* 56, no. 2 (January 2004): 239-249.

¹⁰³ Berdikееva, p. 8.

neighboring countries to join their relative majority ethnic groups.¹⁰⁴ Due to increasing labor migration to Russia and Kazakhstan and the proliferation of micro-finance institutions into the region, such patterns might change. Collins, however, responds by reminding that the normative aspect of clan solidarity will still be present.¹⁰⁵

Berdikeeva identifies two local concepts that promote clan solidarity: *adat* and *tuuganchylyk*.¹⁰⁶ The former, literally translated as “tradition” or “custom,” reifies “a strict discipline and social control,” as well as respect of elders.¹⁰⁷ The latter is translated as “blood kinship” and requires relatives to be loyal to each other and provide help when called upon to do so.¹⁰⁸

In Kyrgyzstan, the revolution started in southern villages, consolidated in the southern cities and only came to the capital Bishkek two days before the fall of the ancient regime. The geography of mobilization is a good hint at what actors initiated the revolutionary wave. While mobilization in the previous three color revolutions was predominantly along the networks of capital-based NGOs and through activists and “zealots” with a complex process of frame elaboration and “protest opposition,”¹⁰⁹ the Kyrgyz revolutionary mobilization was initiated mostly by clan leaders¹¹⁰ threatened by electoral defeat and a loss of lucrative positions in the distribution of Kyrgyz economy’s wealth.

How did the people mobilize in predominantly rural southern Kyrgyzstan? Scott Radnitz demonstrates how localism played a key role in mass mobilization during the 2002 political crisis

¹⁰⁴ Kathleen Collins, “The Political Role of Clans in Central Asia,” pp. 177-8.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Berdikeeva, p. 6.

¹⁰⁷ Interestingly “elders” are not only identified by age, but also by social status. High standing men in their late forties are also identified as “elders.” A vivid example is the term “yoshulli” in Khorezm district of neighboring Uzbekistan, which literally means “of a respected age,” but is used in reference to a boss.

¹⁰⁸ Berdikeeva, p. 6.

¹⁰⁹ “Protest opposition” here denotes the fact that not all protesters were mobilized on the side of insurgents, some were mobilized against incumbents.

¹¹⁰ Scott Radnitz, “What Really Happened in Kyrgyzstan?” *Journal of Democracy* 17, no.2 (April 2006): 132-146.

connected with Aksy events.¹¹¹ Having interviewed the village residents who mobilized for the defense of their leader Azimbek Beknazarov, Radnitz finds that networks of relatives and village residents were the mobilizing mechanisms.¹¹² Two related factors urged people to come to the streets even in this historically apathetic region: the need to uphold the reputation of a worthy and loyal member of the clan network, and norms of reciprocity that have always existed in Kyrgyzstan and that have been reinforced by the declining economic conditions in the early years of independence.¹¹³ Indeed, there was a strong moral pressure on people from Beknazarov's village to join when he was in trouble, and many protesters were simply dragged out by their friends and relatives.

However, kinship and localist solidarity is restricted to boundaries of a village. Collins reports that "the clan unit, neatly and tightly organized within the village and on the kolkhoz, holds within its structure the means of disseminating myths of violence, instigating fear, and mobilizing in defense of the social unit".¹¹⁴ How did the protesters coordinate among the several villages that engaged in the protest? According to Radnitz, they set up an informal "grassroots" committee, consisting of Beknazarov's closest friends and one person from each village in the Aksy region. The committee demonstrated astonishing level of organization and rationalization: their meetings were registered and minutes taken, and decisions were spread to the masses through the *juzbashi* – informal leaders responsible for a certain part of the village – a non-paid position usually held by locally respected elders. Those had previous experience mobilizing people for collective action, such as fundraising or collaboration on an NGO project.¹¹⁵ Radnitz

¹¹¹ Scott Radnitz, "Networks, Localism and mobilization in Aksy, Kyrgyzstan," *Central Asian Survey* 24, no. 4 (December 2005): 405-24.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ For the economic role of village networks, see Kuehnast and Dudwick.

¹¹⁴ Kathleen Collins, "The Political Role of Clans in Central Asia," p. 185.

¹¹⁵ Scott Radnitz, "Networks and Mobilization in Aksy, Kyrgyzstan," *Central Asian Survey* 24, no. 4 (December 2005): 405-424, p. 412.

concludes that mobilization mechanisms were strikingly similar during Aksy events and the Tulip Revolution.¹¹⁶ The same can be said about the participants: in both cases the majority were the middle-aged and the elderly.¹¹⁷ The organization was also similar in the two cases: the majority rural participants were divided into small units, hierarchically reporting to the coordinating committee. In both cases, regional differences were overcome by cooperation of leaders within the framework of an ad-hoc institution: in the case of Aksy it was the Committee to Defend Beknazarov, in the case of the Tulip Revolution –People’s Movement of Kyrgyzstan.¹¹⁸ Many similarities notwithstanding, the Revolution was a much wider contentious action.

Initial protests broke out even before the first round in northern Kyrgyzstan, which is surprising, since in the northern provinces opposition to the President was never as strong as in the southern.¹¹⁹ Three parliamentary hopefuls, Aslanbek Maliev, Akyl Japarov and Sadyr Japarov were deregistered, the latter - where First Lady’s sister was running.¹²⁰ Only Sadyr Japarov was able to get through to elections through courts, the cases of others were decided against them. The first round of elections took place on February 27, 2005. OSCE evaluated it as more competitive than previous elections but identified a number of shortcomings¹²¹ that might have affected the results in the southern villages, where local favorites lost out to Akayev’s strongmen.

The losing candidates appealed to courts, but very few succeeded. The second round, held on March 13 in constituencies where no candidate gained the majority, was no freer and fairer. Staging protests and blocking highways were among the few options and candidates used it extensively, even before courts publicized final decisions on election disputes.¹²² Between

¹¹⁶ Scott Radnitz, “Networks,” p. 422.

¹¹⁷ Begimkulova et al.; Scott Radnitz, “Networks,” p. 422.

¹¹⁸ Radnitz, “Networks,” p. 422; International Crisis Group, “Kyrgyzstan: After the Revolution,” p. 2.

¹¹⁹ International Crisis Group, “Kyrgyzstan: After the Revolution,” p. 3

¹²⁰ International Crisis Group, p. 3.

¹²¹ “Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions,” OSCE/ODIHR, February 28, 2005.

¹²² International Crisis Group, p. 5.

February 28, when results of the first round were announced and March 4, several sparks of protest were observed in various villages in the south of the republic. Supporters of losing candidates Jeenbekov and Sadyrbayev, in groups ranging from 400 to 3000, blocked various strategic highways.¹²³ Their grievances were rather bifurcated: protesters were demanding that their favorites return to parliament,¹²⁴ no one was yet talking about Akayev's resignation or the constitutional reform.¹²⁵

As Tarrow claimed, as the protest cycle widens elites join "first movers," realizing they can free-ride on the wave of discontent.¹²⁶ On March 4, demonstrations started in one of the two largest cities in the south – Jalalabad.¹²⁷ They were organized by a coalition of opposition figures – two brothers of Kurmanbek Bakiev, MP Bektur Asanov and human rights activist Topchubek Turgunaliyev. It is noteworthy that one of the brothers, Jusupbek Bakiev, lost elections to pro-Akayev businessman Kadyrzhan Batyrov,¹²⁸ while Asanov lost to the candidate of "Alga, Kyrgyzstan!" party Ergesh Torobayev,¹²⁹ also a wealthy businessman. Jalalabad demonstrators put up different demands – instead of localist and bifurcated grievances, this group wanted the cancellation of the entire elections, and resignation of President Akayev and members of the Central Electoral Commission.¹³⁰

Midday on March 4 about 200 protesters, supported by a thousand on the square, entered the regional administration and staged a relatively peaceful sit-in with the law enforcement

¹²³ International Crisis Group, p. 5.

¹²⁴ Scott Radnitz, "What Really Happened in Kyrgyzstan?" *Journal of Democracy* 17, no.2 (April 2006): 132-146.

¹²⁵ Aizhan Begimkulova et al., "O Revolutsii v Kyrgyzstane" [On the Revolution in Kyrgyzstan], *Vestnik Yevrazii*, no. 3 (2005), available at <http://www.eavest.ru/magasin/artikelen/2005-3.htm>

¹²⁶ Sydney Tarrow, *Power in Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1998), p. 24.

¹²⁷ Please, refer to the map in Appendices for geographic locations.

¹²⁸ Ferghana.Ru, "Vlasti Kirgizii sozdali karmannoe obshchestvo uzbekov" [Kyrgyz officials have created a docile Uzbeks' society], September 6, 2006, available at <http://www.ferghana.ru/article.php?id=4578>

¹²⁹ Central Electoral Commission, *Results of elections of deputies to the Jogorku Kenesh of Kyrgyz Republic*, March 2005 available at www.shailoo.kg

¹³⁰ Begimkulova et al.

bodies restraining from any action.¹³¹ The news of the seizure of the administration building caused many more protesters arrive the next day. More than half of them were from two neighboring districts of Suzak and Bazarkorgon,¹³² strongholds of opposition candidate Kurmanbek Bakiev. According to (a bit exaggerated) estimates of radio “Azattyk,” 3000 people were present on the square in front of the administration building.¹³³

The next few days were spent on organizing the logistics of the sit in. Portable toilets were brought, catering was organized for participants and a lively discussion of acute problems took place. Both the masses and the elites exposed everyday problems and wider socio-political issues, framing the central government as responsible for those.¹³⁴ Demands of the sit-in also attained a national scope – people were against corruption permeating the state institutions, against the ever-worsening economic situation and against the Akayev government in general; the crowd was dedicated to sustaining the protest till the resignation of the President.¹³⁵

On Marcy 13, the second round of elections took place. This round was even more dishonest and unfair, due to increased stakes and few international observers.¹³⁶ Kurmanbek Bakiev and Adahan Madumarov lost their constituencies. Two days later, on March 15, a people’s *kurultai* (convention) summoned in Jalalabad, attended by many opposition candidates and notables unhappy with Akayev. The kurultai reinstated demands that the President resign and elections be re-run, and created “people’s regional administration” parallel to the official one. The interesting thing about the elite present at the convention was that some of them actually won seats and would be expected to prefer certainty and not risk their resources on opposing the current power. However, just as the concept of the cycle of protest predicts, elites outside of the

¹³¹ Crisis Group, p. 6

¹³² Begimkulova et al.

¹³³ Begimkulova et al.

¹³⁴ Begimkulova et al.

¹³⁵ Begimkulova et al.

¹³⁶ International Crisis Group, “Kyrgyzstan: After the Revolution,” p. 6.

immediate contender-incumbent standoff, seize on what they see as opportunities for further advancement and side with the contenders, widening the cycle of contention and the resource base of “first movers.”

Demonstrations in the neighboring city of Osh, the biggest city of the South went along the same scenario. First, supporters of Duishengul Chotonov from the nearby village of Kara Kuldzha arrived to protest in the city on March 14.¹³⁷ The next five days supporters of other losing candidates from nearby villages summoned in Osh for a peaceful meeting on the main square. A number of protests were staged calling for the resignation of Akayev, inspired by the Jalalabad protest’s repertoire. On March 19, demonstrators in Osh also seized the building of the regional administration. On March 21, a similar *kurultai* was held appointing another losing candidate Anvar Artykov as “people’s governor” of Osh. The same band-wagoning behavior was evident in Osh: protesters were supported and led not only by losing candidates, but also local notables who secured a seat in the new parliament, e.g. a local businessman and a gang boss Bayaman Erkinbayev.

Capture of state buildings in the two largest southern cities compelled authorities to act repressively. At the dawn of March 20, when the majority of protesters were not on the square, an attempt was made by the special services to clear the buildings in both of the cities.¹³⁸ During the scuffles of protesters with the government forces, several people, including the elderly and women, were injured. The rumors spread that the riot police were from Kazakhstan and the fact caused an outrage among the protesters, who now believed that Akayev called outside help against his own people.

¹³⁷ Begimkulova et al.

¹³⁸ Crisis Group, p. 7.

Around the afternoon of the same day the contentious masses in both cities regained their positions: having quickly mobilized in thousands on the square, they re-occupied the building of regional administration, freed some of the protesters arrested earlier and seized control of the city airport to prevent the central government from flying in new troops.

With the failure of government's counter-attack, the cycle of protest widened with a number of other medium-sized towns taken by the opposition. The last stage of the revolution lay ahead, in the capital Bishkek. On March 23, hundreds gathered to protest the results of parliamentary elections. It was a peaceful protest with no particularly revolutionary demands. The protest was ended by the police, tens of protesters being beaten up and arrested. The harsher reaction by the government might be connected with personnel shifts: since the Prosecutor-General and Minister of Internal Affairs were replaced by Akayev a day earlier, the new appointees had to demonstrate their ability to deal with the situation.

On March 24, the opposition, disappointed by the developments of the day before, gathered even more people. Protesters were sent from southern cities in buses. Supporters of disenchanted clan leaders from the nearby towns and villages also arrived in Bishkek early in the morning. The opposition leaders divided into two, and went to opposite sides of the city and arranged to march towards the city center and meet at the Ala Too square near the White House. As the protest moved through the capital, more and more people joined the procession, reaching as many as ten thousand when the two groups re-united in the center of the city.

The protests of March 24 were the biggest gathering of people that Kyrgyzstan knew in its recent history. The demands were clearly formulated at this stage: resignation of Akayev, new elections and the constitutional reform. The opposition was united for the cause and expected a protracted stand-off against the government, something of the Ukrainian *Maydan*. What happened later that day caught everyone, even opposition leaders, in surprise.

In the afternoon a group of athletes appeared dressed in the uniform of the National Olympic Committee¹³⁹ and white caps to disrupt the peaceful demonstrations and beat up protesters. It is unclear whose side “the white caps” were representing; the more plausible version is that they were hired by the incumbents to disrupt the peaceful protests and legitimize the more aggressive reaction of the government. The resulting fight, however, led to very surprising move by the mob: having pushed back the “white caps,” the protesters, now out of control of the opposition leaders, climbed over the fences of the White House and entered the building. Soon the hallways and offices of the White House were filled with youth in tulip bandages, roaming the halls and searching for high-profile incumbents, including President Akayev. But, except for two officials, caught and badly beaten up by the angry crowd, all others have been evacuated.

With the fall of the most high-profile building to the protesters, the era of the most liberal Central Asian dictator was ended. The resignation of Akayev two weeks later and transfer of power from him to Bakiyev, ended the Tulip Revolution, probably the most significant event in the Kyrgyz history and the only case in Central Asia, when an undemocratic leader was replaced by the opposition.

To sum up, the following elements of a contentious action were identified. First, access to politics increased because of general discontent and unquiet due to rigged elections, and with the formation of a kurultai and seizure of power in the southern towns. Second, former alliances shifted and elites (never actually unified in Kyrgyzstan, unlike in the neighboring countries) consolidated around two greater camps of very unequal power: the Akayev clique and the opposition to him. The early risers acquired influential allies; the initial bifurcated framing was

¹³⁹ The Olympic Committee is chaired by President Akayev’s son Aydar Akayev and most likely “white caps” were his people.

widened now to demands of Akayev's resignation and constitutional reform.¹⁴⁰ Mobilization also evolved: instead of a few dozen relatives of losing election favorites, now came hundreds, mobilized through clan and kinship lines and the embryonic civil society, such as sports clubs and human rights organizations.

¹⁴⁰ Crisis Group, p. 6.

CONCLUSION

In this thesis I have applied the insights and metaphors of the social movement theory to the events that shook Kyrgyzstan in March 2005. Putting the concept of clan in the center of analysis, I have shown how divisions within elites have opened opportunities for contentious action and how clan leaders have utilized the existing patronage networks to mobilize people in otherwise apolitical rural Kyrgyzstan. This peculiar mode of mobilization went hand in hand with the two-stage framing of contention. In the beginning, the demands of the contenders were localized and bifurcated, while later, with the cycle of protest widening and incorporating elites not directly affected by fraudulent elections, the demands took a national form. The initial demands in villages for the re-run of elections evolved into calls in regional capitals and Bishkek for the resignation of President Akayev and a constitutional reform, as well as for a fight against corruption.

The research has a number of very significant limitations. Due to the logistical constraints, I relied primarily on secondary data and my own observations of parts of the conflict. A deeper account would have to incorporate a large number of interviews to offer a thick and less biased description of events. Moreover, the concept of clan that I worked with is a very problematic one. As has been argued in the literature review, attempts at conceptualizing clan networks have stumbled upon the problems connected with the fluidity of clan identity, as well as multiple levels of relationships in a clan: kinship, patron-client, neighborhood, etc. One possible way to clarify this fluidity and capture it conceptually will be the development of “network maps” of clans, where all important personalities would be identified as nodes and relationships between them would be categorized along one or more categories, such as common tribe, village,

graduating class and employer. Such an attempt is clearly outside of the capabilities of the present paper.

Coming to the wider implications of my findings, it is one of the few attempts to apply the undoubtedly valuable insights of social movement theory to clan-dominated Kyrgyz society. It is also a fresh look at clans, which have previously been looked at only as a stabilizing force: this contribution addresses empirically the clan potential for conflict, an aspect leading scholars have only hinted at. In addition to providing a more convincing narrative of a single case, this contribution shows how a collective contentious action is possible in a predominantly rural society without an overarching nationwide movement and what implications such contention bears for democratization.

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APPENDICES

Figure A. Schematic representation of the breakup of the clan pact

CLAN PACT	UNDERMINING THE PACT	PACT BREAKUP
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Regional appointments •Strong parliament 	<div> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Authoritarian overtures after 1994 •Centralization attempts •Family business invasions •Corruption and uncertainty </div> <div>BUT notables still able to get elected to parliament</div>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Crucial elections against the background of corruption and poverty, dissatisfaction of business elites and regional leaders •A number of notable and popular deputies lose their seats to the incumbent power's candidates •Several elites disqualified from contesting •First protests erupt
1991-ca.1994	1994-2000-2005	FEBRUARY-MARCH 2005

Figure B. Cycles of protest.

Initially localized electoral protests with specific demands (smallest circles), driven by closest supporters of a losing candidate (candidate hometown and name inside the circle) evolve into region-wide gatherings in bigger towns (bigger dashed circles) with more nation-wide demands and a number of regional notables jumping into the bandwagon of discontent. Finally, the widest protest took place in Bishkek, with the biggest number of contenders, most universal and best articulated demands and a broad coalition of clan leaders, youth and non-governmental organizations and the democratic opposition (biggest dashed circle).

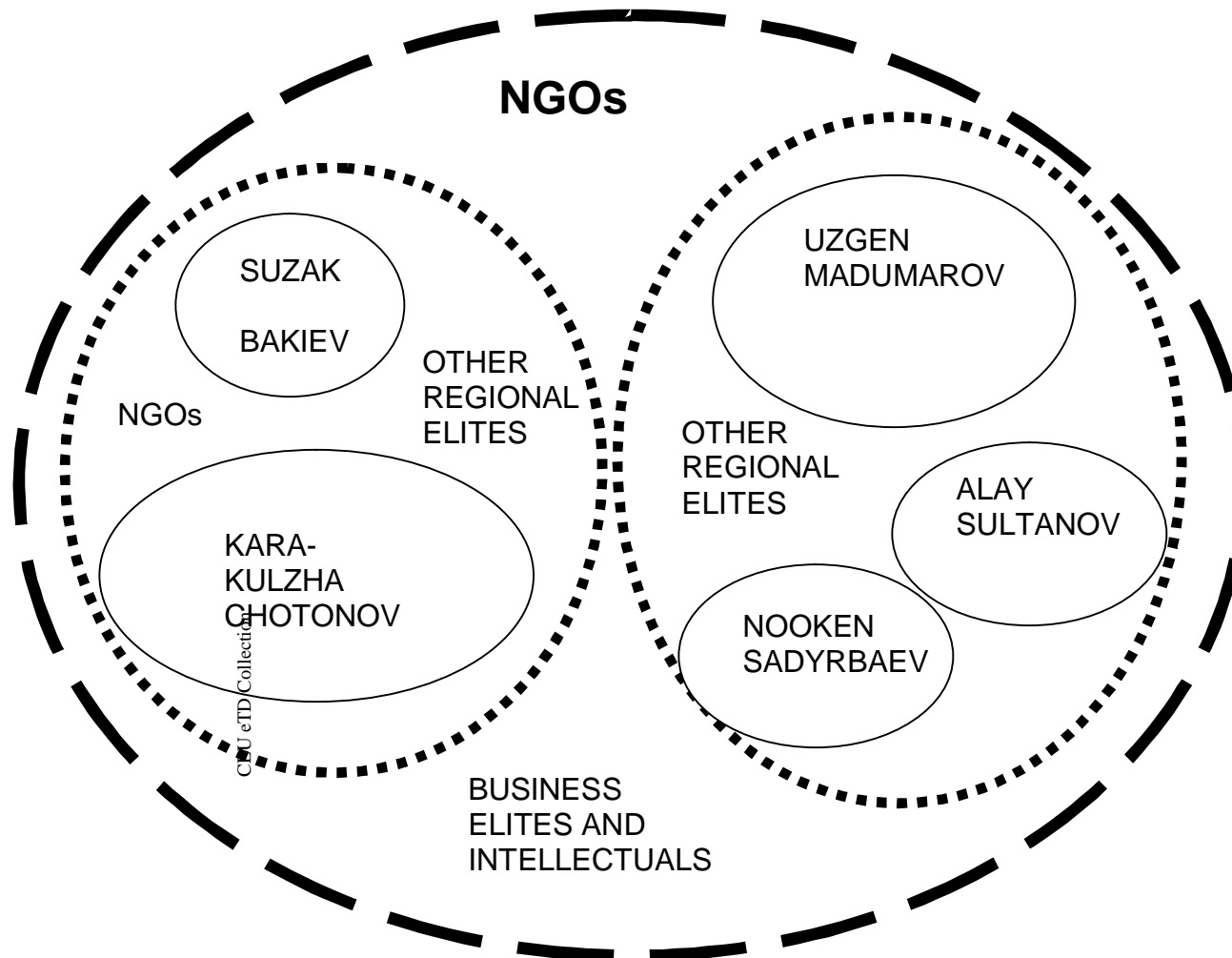


Figure C. Map of Kyrgyzstan. Source: GlobalSecurity.Org

