Department of Political Science

International Relations

From Authoritarianism to Uncertainty:

The Tulip Revolution and the Struggle for Democracy in Kyrgyzstan

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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates Kyrgyzstan's Tulip Revolution of 2005, an important moment in the country's post-Soviet era and part of a larger series of Color Revolutions that transformed political trends throughout Eastern Europe and Central Asia. The research looks at how a society afflicted by generations of external dominance, deep regional differences, and frail institutions mobilized to overthrow President Askar Akayev mostly through nonviolent methods. Using historical perspective and comparative methodology, the study connects the Tulip Revolution to long-term trends of unstable politics and authoritarian traditions, while also setting it within broader theoretical discussions on nonviolence's doctrine.

Relying on Gene Sharp's theory, the thesis views nonviolent resistance as a strategic tool for eroding authoritarian legitimacy, increasing participation, and restricting the regime's ability to repress. In Kyrgyzstan, public mobilization was supported by election complaints, economic frustration, and opposition leaders who skillfully utilized the symbols of Color Revolutions. The nonviolent character of the protests limited the regime's coercive choices, contributing to the fast decline of Akayev's leadership. At the same time, the analysis highlights the limitations of this outcome: while the revolution triumphed in the removal of a leader, it did not eliminate longstanding patronage associations, fix regional imbalances, or solidify democratic structures.

The study also examines the Tulip Revolution comparing it to Georgia's Rose Revolution and Ukraine's Orange Revolution, emphasizing both comparable characteristics, such as electoral demonstrations, youth movements, and civil society activism, and Kyrgyzstan's particular weaknesses as a smaller and more fractured Central Asian nation.

Finally, the thesis argues that the Tulip Revolution demonstrates both the transformative ability and inherent vulnerability of nonviolent mobilization in fragile nations. It demonstrates that nonviolent protest can result in quick political shifts and prevent civil violence, but it also shows how, in the absence of institutional reform, these achievements risk becoming useless. By integrating historical analysis with theoretical ideas from nonviolence and democratization research, this work helps to understand the patterns of regime change in post-Soviet societies, as well as the uncertain destiny of politics in Kyrgyzstan.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The Tulip Revolution of 2005 in Kyrgyzstan is a key topic in the research of post-Soviet transitions. The Tulip Revolution is frequently viewed as a component of the bigger wave of 'Colour Revolutions' that spread over the post-Soviet area in the beginning of the 20th century, including Georgia's Rose Revolution in 2003 and Ukraine's Orange Revolution in 2004. With Kyrgyzstan's persistent instability, significant regional disputes, and financial fragility, the country saw an outbreak of citizen rebellion that was capable of deposing its current leader using little violence.

This thesis seeks to investigate why and exactly how this result was achievable. It examines the function of nonviolent mobilisation in determining the revolution's dynamics, techniques, and achievements. While Kyrgyzstan has previously seen episodes of political rebellion, the events of 2005 represented an important change in civil society and political opposition's ability to mobilize over ingrained power rather than resorting to widespread violence. The nonviolent nature of the Tulip Revolution, while not absolute, as fights, looting, and random violence took place, remained a defining aspect (Radnitz, 2006, pp. 132-146). It established the circumstances for a quick regime change while preventing the catastrophic cycles of armed conflict that plagued other post-Soviet transitions such as Tajikistan in the 1990s (Akbarzadeh, 1996, pp. 1105-1129).

The idea of nonviolent protest is important to this research. Building on Gene Sharp's essential research, nonviolent action is viewed as an effective form of resistance rather than a moral or humanitarian option (Sharp, 2011, pp. 11-30). Sharp outlined hundreds of peaceful protest strategies, ranging from rallies and strikes to civil disobedience, all aimed at undermining a regime's legitimacy and shifting the balance of power. Later studies have demonstrated that nonviolent movements are often more successful than violent ones in attaining political change, owing to their ability to increase participation, lower mobilization obstacles, and undermine governmental justifications for repression. This thesis views nonviolence as a strategic factor capable of altering the balance among state and society, rather than as a simply normative attitude. By linking Sharp's ideas to more contemporary comparative studies, the analysis places the Kyrgyz example within a larger body of literature on the success and drawbacks of nonviolent movements. This theoretical framework provides an image by which the Tulip Revolution is understood in subsequent chapters.

The Tulip Revolution falls inside this theoretical paradigm because the lack of organized violence permitted regular people to participate, strengthened the legitimacy of the resistance, and weakened the regime's support base. At the same time, the Kyrgyz situation demonstrates the limitations of nonviolence. While it was successful in eliminating Askar Akayev, it did not result in solidified democracy. These prompts thought on the relationship between nonviolent mobilization and long-term change in institutions, which is a significant focus of this thesis.

The nonviolent nature of the Tulip Revolution can only be comprehended within the framework of Kyrgyzstan's historical events. The country's political growth was affected by centuries of external influence and internal division. Kyrgyzstan has rarely had solid, independent governance, from its inclusion into nomadic governments to Russian imperial invasion and eventual admission into the Soviet Union. Russian imperial practices of land confiscation and Russification deepened socioeconomic differences, while the Soviet regime industrialized the economy while suppressing independent political growth. As a result, Kyrgyzstan achieved independence in 1991 having fragile institutions, uncertain government structures, and a divided political culture. This historical heritage is critical for comprehending why the Tulip Revolution occurred as it did. On the one hand, the state's weakness enabled opposition groups and grassroots groups to challenge power. On the other hand, the lack of solidified democratic traditions hampered the revolution's ability to establish long-term political reform (Aslam, 2011, pp. 241-260). The decision to dedicate significant space to Kyrgyzstan's history derives from the belief that the 2005 revolution could not be properly analyzed without considering long-term patterns of dominance, fragmentation, and instability of this country throughout its history. Chapters 2 and 3 rebuild these periods in detail, demonstrating how previous experiences with foreign rule and Soviet roots affected the frameworks that existed when the Tulip Revolution occurred.

It has been long highlighted Kyrgyzstan's vulnerability as a state. Weak institutions, widespread patronage networks, and deep regional divides (particularly between the north and south) created both instability and opportunity. These flaws proved doubly damaging to Askar Akayev, who ascended to power as a reformist bureaucrat in the late Soviet period. They enabled him to maintain power via personal connections and clientelism while also making his regime subject to rapid shifts in public opinion and popular mobilization. The Tulip Revolution was thus more than just a reaction to electoral misconduct in 2005, but the result of deeper systemic flaws in Kyrgyz government (Moldaliev, 2013, pp. 256-270).

A further crucial factor that must be emphasized is the local and international environment where the Tulip Revolution occurred. Kyrgyzstan's revolution was not an isolated event; it was part of a larger cycle of post-Soviet revolutions that both motivated and restricted it. The Rose Revolution in Georgia and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine previously proved the power of mass mobilization to overthrow illegitimate elections and established elites. These events resonated throughout the area, providing both symbolic patterns and practical techniques for Kyrgyz activists. Civil society organizations in Bishkek and other towns witnessed the use of youth initiatives, advertisements, and electoral surveillance in Georgia and Ukraine, and adapted some of these techniques to their own setting (Beissinger, 2007, pp. 259-276). The comparative viewpoint is also significant in this thesis, especially in chapter 5. By studying the similarities and distinctions with Georgia's Rose Revolution and Ukraine's Orange Revolution, we are able to place Kyrgyzstan within a larger regional trend while

underlining its unique trajectory. This enables the research to highlight not only the shared characteristics of color changes, such as nonviolent demonstrations, contested presidential elections, and civil community mobilization, but also the unique problems confronting a smaller and more divided Central Asian nation.

Yet, Kyrgyzstan's circumstances were unique. Whereas Georgia and Ukraine profited from bigger institutions, more active civil societies, and long-term Western support, Kyrgyzstan began its revolution with limited assets, weak civic groups, and severe socioeconomic divisions. This made the Kyrgyz revolution less predictable, fractured and prone to descending into chaos. Thus, the Tulip Revolution should be viewed not merely as a reflection of regional trends, but also as a unique adaptation of peaceful protest to the peculiar vulnerabilities of a small Central Asian nation.

Legitimacy and symbolism play equally important roles in developing the cause. Nonviolent demonstration does more than only prevent violence; it also establishes an effective message of legitimacy. In Kyrgyzstan, protestors avoided systematic violence, allowing them to depict their battle as a moral clash between an increasingly repressive and corrupt leadership and ordinary individuals demanding justice and transparency. The use of flowers as a representation, the so-called "tulip", was not coincidental, but rather resonated with themes of regeneration and fragility, mirroring the "rose" and "orange" movements that came before it. By using the vocabulary of colour revolutions, Kyrgyz activists included their struggle in a transnational rhetoric of democratic awakening, increasing their exposure abroad and strengthening their reputation (Cummings & Ryabkov, 2008, pp. 259-276). At the same time, the metaphorical framework had limitations. Many rural Kyrgyz who organized in southern provinces like Osh and Jalal-Abad saw the revolution as a response to local issues such as poverty, unemployment, and regional inequity. The Tulip Revolution highlighted the intersection of many goals: urban activists' commitment to democratic reforms and the agricultural population's acute anger with enduring corruption within state indifference. The nonviolent method provided a uniting framework, allowing disparate groups with opposing goals to work together under one banner.

Another issue to consider is the regime's reaction. In many revolts, ruling elites' decisions to repress or accommodate determine the course of events. When confronted with massive, generally nonviolent demonstrations, Akayev's authority found itself limited. Excessive repression of peaceful protestors would have undermined his power locally as well as globally, even though allowing the protests risked him to lose his authority. This political dilemma was exacerbated by the movement's nonviolent character. Police officers were reluctant to use deadly weapons against unarmed individuals, especially when the resistance included recognized local leaders and elders from the community. The government's hesitation caused protests to erupt, forcing Akayev to leave rather than face a violent response with unknown repercussions (Bakina, 2020, pp. 372-379).

The Tulip Revolution occurred in a setting in which the state had major difficulty in reacting to large-scale, mostly nonviolent demonstrations. While the movement did not use mass violence, its peaceful nature limited the possibilities available to Akayev's government, contributing to a relatively quick regime change. Aside from immediate results, nonviolent mobilization managed to prevent a civil war in a society plagued by regional differences, economic instability, and weak institutions. As domestic variables drove the revolution, external actors such as Western governments and international organizations assisted in creating expectations for free and fair elections and civic participation. These reasons highlight how the Tulip Revolution must be seen not simply as a national political rebellion, but as part of a broader process of challenged state-building and civic engagement in post-Soviet Central Asia (Wilkinson, 2016, pp. 133-155).

Nonetheless, the nonviolent character of the uprising led to its inconsistency. Since the system fell apart fast and without a significant institutional breach, most of the core power structures survived. Patronage associations, regional disputes, and weak structures survived Akayev's collapse, only to resurface in the years since. This paradox, having succeeded in eliminating a leader but failing to alter the system of government, is one of the Tulip Revolution's core questions and the focus of this argument.

Finally, research into the Tulip Revolution raises larger questions about the connection among protest, violence, and democratization. The Kyrgyz story indicates that nonviolent activism can depose a powerful leader, but it also warns against "romanticizing" such results. Nonviolent revolutions run the potential of becoming ephemeral disturbances rather than long-term transformations unless concurrent initiatives to build institutions, reduce corruption, and address regional concerns are undertaken. As a result, the Tulip Revolution serves as both an inspiration, demonstrating the strength of nonviolent collective action, and a cautionary tale about the vulnerability of democratic victories in weak nations. The Tulip Revolution has sparked significant academic debate, not just for its domestic relevance, but also for what it indicates about the mechanics of regime change in fragile governments. Scholars of democracy, social movements, and international affairs scholars utilized Kyrgyzstan as a case study to evaluate ideas of contested politics, post-Soviet change, and the role of social movements in authoritarian environments.

In regard to these circumstances, this work is led by three major research topics: What historical and structural causes contributed to Kyrgyzstan's political instability and rebellion? How did nonviolent activism affect the path of the Tulip Revolution? How does the Kyrgyz instance relate to the overall structure of Color Revolutions within the post-Soviet space? These questions are addressed using an empirical historical approach that combines theoretical knowledge with case examination. To answer these problems, the study relies on both historic knowledge and theoretical developments from the discipline of nonviolent conflict literature, particularly Gene Sharp's research. The work looks at

Kyrgyzstan's history, from its earliest roots in khanates to times of Mongol and Russian imperial dominance, and finally into the Soviet era. Particular emphasis is placed on the evolution of the political structures and social processes that formed the post-independence period. This historical viewpoint gives the required information to assess the Tulip Revolution of 2005 and its repercussions, following the consequences for Kyrgyzstan up to the present.

The first question is relevant because the Tulip Revolution could not be viewed as a single occurrence, but rather as a combination of long-term forces that compromised Kyrgyz territorial stability. The research links present mobilization to deeper historical trends by emphasizing the importance of international control, Soviet legacy, and enduring regional divisions. The second question focuses on the impact of nonviolent action. The lack of militant groups was one of the most key factors determining the revolution's processes. Studying how nonviolent measures increased participation, impacted the regime's thinking, and changed its position of legitimacy is critical to understanding the nature and limits of the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan. The final question places Kyrgyzstan into a larger comparative context. While the Tulip Revolution shared similarities with the Rose Revolution in Georgia and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, it also exhibited characteristics unique to Kyrgyzstan's poor institutions and divided population. Exploring both similarities and divergences helps us appreciate what the Kyrgyz instance adds to the existing scholarship on colour revolutions and, more generally, governance in post-Soviet countries.

These issues illustrate the thesis's double goal: to offer a historical based understanding of the Tulip Revolution while also engaging with theoretical discussions on nonviolent and regime change. The Kyrgyz situation is thus examined not only as a national example of demonstration and change, but also as an important case to examine how fragile governments, when challenged with civic action, may encounter both the potential and the limits of nonviolent revolt, showing how popular movements may overthrow stable power structures without sliding into civil war, while also demonstrating that without strong structures that promote equal governance, these movement's successes are delicate, controversial and subject to collapse.

CHAPTER 2: HISTORY OF KYRGYZSTAN

2.1: Roots of Kyrgyzstan’s history

Kyrgyzstan is a country in Central Asia, bordered by China to the east, Kazakhstan to the north, Uzbekistan to the west, and Tajikistan to the South. Kyrgyzstan's strategic location made it a significant stop along the Silk Road, promoting commercial and cultural connections between China, Persia, and the wider Islamic world. Due to its strategic location, the region has been contested by empires and nations, leading to multiple conflicts, tensions, and wars. The historical dispute for Kyrgyzstan's soil impacted its political growth. This legacy of external influence and internal conflict shaped the political instability that culminated in the Tulip Revolution. (Megoran, 2017, pp. 77-80).

Before taking into analysis the complex phenomenon of the Tulip Revolution and its consequences, it is necessary to dwell on the history of the Kyrgyz population, to understand the reasons behind the outbreak of that revolution. The eruption of the Tulip Revolution, as will be later analysed, was a consequence of years of oppression during the Soviet Union. But, before that, Kyrgyzstan experienced many and different dominations in its past, making it almost impossible to establish a well-coordinated structure of power and a stable government. These successive cycles of external control put the Kyrgyz people in a state of chronic political instability, with little autonomy and control over their own fate. Understanding these historical dominances is therefore essential as they constitute a major component in comprehending the final explosion of the Tulip Revolution.

Since its earliest history, Kyrgyzstan fell under the rule of several dynasties and empires, each leaving their stamp on the region. The periodic shifts in sovereignty from steppe khanates to greater imperial powers created political instability and authority fragmentation, limiting the creation of long-term centralized rule. The Kyrgyz history began in the Yenisei River region of present-day southern Siberia. The succession of different governments in Central Asia shaped, from its earliest years, its political background. By the sixth century, Kyrgyzstan became subjects of the Göktürk Khaganate, the first major Turkic empire, which put together multiple nomadic tribes under centralized control. Kyrgyzstan’s region had very restricted competences and autonomy under this regime and under the following Uyghur dominance. In the latter, the limited sovereignty and autonomy of the Kyrgyz population led to the overthrow of the Uyghur Khaganate. Thanks to this successful reprisal, Kyrgyzstan managed to gain a semi-autonomous status, even if for a brief period, claiming its sovereignty over territories in part of Mongolia and southern Siberia (Golden, 1992, pp. 140-170).

Kyrgyzstan traditionally was a nomadic population keen on agriculture and pastoralism; its lack of political structure and bureaucratic organization made it easy for the Karakhanid Khanate to conquer the Kyrgyz possessions. This phase was especially important as, under the Karakhanid Khanate the Islamic religion spread across the country, slowly becoming the predominant belief of the country. Most importantly, the Kyrgyz regions developed important commercial trade routes along the Silk Road with other Islamic populations. The Karakhanid Khanate left an important heritage to Kyrgyzstan, but without leaving political stability and organization, and the same can be said for the two following reigns which controlled the Kyrgyz territories, the Khitans and the Naimans (Bosworth, 1998, pp. 119–144).

This brief historical excursus demonstrates how the constant succession of foreign dominations throughout Kyrgyzstan's history created a pattern of political instability: it rarely had long periods of independent and centralized authority, from the early authority over steppe empires like the Göktürks and Uyghurs to the Islamic influence of the Karakhanids and later the conquests of the Mongols.

The Mongols, under Genghis Khan, conquered Central Asia defeating the Karakhanids, consequently marking the incorporation of Kyrgyz lands to the rule of Genghis Khan's Mongol Empire. At first, Kyrgyzstan was under the direct regime of the Mongol Emperor, and initially they submitted themselves passively to Genghis Khan diktat; in a second phase, the Kyrgyz decided to rebel against the oppressor, even if it was a powerful one, as Genghis Khan. Therefore, in 1217, they revolted after rejecting a Mongol order for military support and Genghis Khan ordered Jochi, his eldest son and prominent Mongol military leader, to suppress the insurrection. After a long winter conflict, the insurgency was subjugated, and the Kyrgyz were reintegrated into the Empire (May, 2016, pp. 382-399).

The Mongol Empire, led by Genghis Khan and his successors, not only changed Central Asia's political scene, but also left a lasting cultural, social, and economic imprint in Kyrgyzstan. It caused major changes, such as the introduction of Mongol administration structures, military conscription, and taxation. The Mongol era reshaped the old Kyrgyz societal system, weakening local elites, and placing a new order built around the authority of the Mongol khans. The Mongol Empire's significant commercial network, especially across the Silk Road, had a major effect on Kyrgyzstan. This connection boosted economic exchanges, introduced innovative technologies, and facilitated cultural engagements with far-away countries ranging from China to the Middle East and Europe. Despite the harsh regime and its high payments, the Mongol era saw increasing communication and exchange in Kyrgyzstan. However, the Mongol dominance led to the deterioration of some parts of Kyrgyz's society identity, including the loss of the written language. The Kyrgyz were mostly pastoral nomads, and during Mongol administration, they were frequently ignored in comparison to more urbanized sections of the Empire (May, 2016, pp. 150-155).

After the death of Genghis Khan, the Mongol Empire had significant troubles to replace such a charismatic figure; this led to a considerable fragmentation of the Mongol Empire into different and various Khanates and Kyrgyzstan fell under the control of Tamerlane. During this phase, the Kyrgyz remained nomadic but were influenced by Persian-Turkic cultural aspects brought during this time, in a stage which can overall be considered peaceful and calm. (May, 2016, pp. 150–155).

The Mongol control of Kyrgyzstan must be remembered as a time of changes and reforms and, overall, as a very important phase inside the history of this country. Nevertheless, The Mongol conquest of Kyrgyzstan continued a historical pattern of external rule and decentralized government, marking the region's instability.

2.2: Annexation to the Russian Empire

When the Russian Empire, moved by strategic and economic interests, decided to move over to Central Asia in 1850s, it was initially a positive step for the Kyrgyz, who were living in difficult conditions under the Kokand Khanate, a Khanate which took over the control of Kyrgyz regions after the Mongols. Between 1864 and 1867, the Imperial Russian Army conquered key towns in the region, especially Pishpek (which is equivalent to modern-day Bishkek) and Tokmak. The region of modern-day Kyrgyzstan became part of the Russian Empire and was absorbed into the government of Russian Turkestan (Morrison, 2020, pp. 168–215).

During the Great Game, the Russia and the British empires conducted a strategic war to obtain supremacy over Central Asian territories. During the Great Game, the Russian and British Empires competed for control of Central Asian territory by strategic and diplomatic means. This strategic competition, which lasted most of the nineteenth century, was defined by espionage, military expeditions, and political manipulation, as both empires attempted to increase their power and prevent the other from obtaining control over this important area (Fromkin, 1979).

When the conflict concluded in 1907, the lands of Kyrgyzstan were not explicitly mentioned in the final Anglo-Russian convention, which only discussed matters of division of territories for what concerned Persia, Afghanistan, and Tibet. Britain had little control in parts of Kyrgyzstan, which then lost confirming the complete subjugation of Kyrgyzstan to the Russian Empire (Fromkin, 1979, pp. 950). However, it is important to mention this strategic war between the Russian and the British empires as the pact enabled Russia to strengthen its grip on Kyrgyz territories without fear of British interference, resulting in closer absorption into the Russian territory. This allowed the Tsar to increase policies of Russification and colonization all over the rest of the Central Asian countries, without fearing British intervention. Under the Russian Turkestan, Kyrgyzstan was divided into two

administrative regions: the Semirechye Oblast, in the northern part of Kyrgyzstan, which included Pishpek, while the Fergana Oblast, located into the southern part of Kyrgyzstan, included the cities of Osh and Jalal-Abad. The nomad and local forms of administration, around which rotated the history of Kyrgyzstan until that moment, perished. Instead, the Russian Empire established a centralized administrative structure, which replaced traditional Kyrgyz tribe authorities with Russian-appointed officials (Morrison, 2020, pp. 168-215).

When Kyrgyzstan was fully incorporated into the Russian Empire in 1876, it adopted its rules, habits, and the political structure of the Russian government; consequently, major changes took place in the Kyrgyz society during that time. In the field of law there have been the most significant changes: the Russian legal code became the foundation for judicial processes, replacing the previous Kyrgyz structure, which was based on customary law (adat) and Islamic law (sharia). The tribal and local legal system of Kyrgyzstan, lately implemented by Sharia law after several years of Muslim's administration, was replaced by the Russian's colonial legal system. The colonial rulers established a dual legal system, built upon a "volost court" (local court) for minor civil disputes between Indigenous communities, which allowed a restricted interpretation of customary law, and imperial courts for criminal cases and disagreements involving Russian people or the state. However, even if the Russian Empire drafted those legal rules for colonies, the state always supervised and checked the processes and oversaw every audience (Morrison, 2020, pp. 374-408).

Economically, the Russian Empire implemented substantial and far-reaching changes. The Empire's colonial economic philosophy was designed for resource exploitation and development of agriculture; it introduced a private ownership land policy which deeply conflicted with the Kyrgyz custom of cooperative land use based on seasonal nomadic patterns. This program was called "Land Regulation," and it displaced many Kyrgyz pastoralists, especially in the fertile valleys of Semirechye, damaging the traditional nomadic-pastoral economy of Kyrgyzstan. The revenues were scarce, and furthermore, thanks to the tributary system introduced by the Russian Empire, Kyrgyzstan regions belonging to the Tsar fell under great poverty. Moreover, Russian authorities implemented rules that favoured Slavic settlers, primarily Russians and Ukrainians ones, who were given fertile lands in the Chuy and Issyk-Kul districts. Thousands of Kyrgyz were forced out from their traditional pastoral activities, resulting in economic hardship and discontent. By the early twentieth century, over 300,000 Slavic settlers had come in the area, dramatically altering the demographic profile. Furthermore, local leaders, as Pulhan Datkha, lost their power as the Russian administration reorganized the region, assigning its competences to Tsarists officials (Campbell, 2019, pp. 159-176).

Kyrgyzstan's economy was never a well-developed framework based on liberalism and free market; yet, thanks to a well consolidated system, the country had a good living condition and a decent standard of life. When the Russian Empire took over its territories, it completely changed the way of

living of the country: politically, economically, legally, and not only. This created a clear division between Russophone and non-Russophone colonies under the Russian Empire. The former had better living conditions and economic opportunities, while Central Asian territories, like Kyrgyzstan, suffered systemic prejudice and economic marginalization. The Stolypin reform, which took the name of the Prime Minister Pyotr Stolypin, highlighted even more the discrimination towards the non-Russophone colonies. The reform was meant to modernize the archaic and old agriculture system of the Empire, creating a class of independent farmers. What really happened was that the Stolypin reform created a mass migration process that caused an immense migration of Russian and Ukrainian farmers into Kyrgyz territories, drastically affecting the region's demographic composition. Numerous Kyrgyz pastors lost their jobs, exacerbating tensions without a feasible way of comeback between the native Kyrgyz population and the Russian settlers and, therefore, with the Tsar. The intensification of the land dispute, which already was a major source of problems in Central Asia, became unsustainable after the Stolypin Reform, highlighting without even trying to hide the differences of treatment between Russophone colonies and the others. These increasing tensions and gaps would come to a peak during World War I, causing widespread instability throughout Central Asia (Kappeler, 2001, pp. 273-280).

2.3: Fall of the Russian empire and Central Asian Revolt

Tensions in Central Asia, caused by the Tsar's unequal treatment of non-Russophone colonies, reached their peak in 1916 during World War I. Central Asia was unaffected by this conflict in this early stage; yet, after two years of war, the Russian Empire began to suffer many losses and victims during the conflict, and it started to suffer from a scarcity of resources in terms of labour-forces (Chokobaeva, Drieu, & Morrison, 2019, pp. 159-160).

Consequently, a parliamentary declaration passed for the recruitment of 400 000 Central Asians for non-combat tasks, such as labourers in military supply lines. Unlike their Russian compatriots, who had long been forced into military service, Central Asians were previously exempt. In this way, the Russian Empire forced its colonies in Central Asia to be an active part in the conflict, violating a previous agreement which stated that they would have not been called in support of the Russian Army. Therefore, in many different areas, the citizens asked local officials and elders to negotiate with the Tsar. The Tsar Nicholas's decision to violate the agreement of exemption caused an immense revolt from the Asian colonies of the Russian Empire, in a rebellion which will be known as the "Central Asian Revolt" (Chokobaeva, Drieu, & Morrison, 2019, pp. 159-160).

The Central Asian Revolt was an anti-Russian campaign in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, parts of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Kyrgyzstan occupies a key role in this campaign as the revolt, started in June 1916, had its epicentre in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. It is important to remember that Indigenous tribes of Central Asia had never taken part into a proper military service program and were taken by surprise by the Tsarist decree, which added to the already existing tensions existing in Central Asia (Kappeler, 2001, pp. 273-275).

The first phase of the conflict concentrated in the Ferghana Valley, in the cities of Andijan and Namangan. Here people protested violently against the Tsarist decree, and the Russian militias suppressed the revolts in blood. In June 1916, the revolt expanded to the southeastern regions of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan: this was one of the most seriously damaged regions due to extensive Russian and Ukrainian settlement, which had displaced the local Kyrgyz and Kazakh inhabitants. In Andijan, Russian troops shot on protesters, causing immediate reaction, and increasing the already anti-Russian sentiment in Central Asia. The news of the deaths caused by the Tsarists troops quickly spread in the other regions, extending the riots all over the Asian colonies. The biggest resistance was encountered by the Russian troops in Semirechye, where Russian invaders had stolen enormous areas of territory from the Kyrgyz and Kazakh tribes. So, when the Russian officials arrived near Semirechye, they faced huge protests and resistance and, when even local leaders refused to cooperate with the Russian authorities, the violences escalated (Campbell, 2019, pp. 159-176).

In August, a second phase of the conflict began, as the central Asian rebel forces increased coordination in the war field, adopting more sophisticated guerrilla strategies. The rebels showed an ability to adapt in a status of resilience to a war they surely were not prepared for. The rebels had significantly less preparation and less advanced weapons, but they used to their advantage the knowledge of the surface and the territory in which they were fighting (Campbell, 2019, pp. 159-162).

As the Russian Empire's burden from World War I grew, Tsar Nicholas II decided to use Cossack legions to defeat the Central Asian separatists. Despite being ethnically Russian, the Cossacks lived in lands neighbouring Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, giving them an easily accessible army for the Empire's counterinsurgency operations. Like the Central Asians, also the Cossacks were known for their wild nature and their brutal manners; when they saw that the local populations refused to accept the Tsarist decree to back up the Russian Empire in the World War, they did not remain on the sideline. The aggressions were returned as the Cossacks conducted reprisals, ruthlessly massacring people who were accused of helping the insurgents: Thousands of men, women, and children were killed by the Cossacks as a punishment for attacks against Russian authority. After a phase where the rebels were able to fight back, the Cossacks, equipped with modern and advanced artillery, began to take the lead in the conflict. The hardest challenge for the Cossacks has been in Turgai, where the

leader of the rebellion Imanov has been able to assembly an army of 50 000 people between Kyrgyz and Kazakhs, complicating the plans for the Cossacks (Sokol, 2016, pp. 98-99).

By October 1916, the opposition of the Central Asian populations, in particular Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, and Turkic minorities, after months of struggle and rebellion, ended. The Russian-Cossacks troops had much more advanced artillery and were more skilled and organized combatants, with more experience. The loss, after just a couple of months of resistance, from June to October 1916, caused a very delicate phenomenon, known as the “Urkun”, (Sokol, 2016, pp. 120-122).

2.4: The Urkun

When the violences during the civil war escalated and the Russian-Cossacks troops started to make use of cannons and bombs, the local population was forced to escape from their houses to find places where their lives would have not been at risk. Places like Semirechye were becoming unsustainable lo live in, so their inhabitants, the vast majority of whom were Kyrgyz, decided to leave their native lands and move to China, hoping to find refuge in the distant and mountainous Tianshan region, in the province of Xinjiang, the closest to Kyrgyzstan. However, this journey revealed itself to be not as easy as it seemed. The travel between modern day Kyrgyzstan and the closest region of Xinjiang in China was an extreme one as it involved the passage in the steep but also in the high-altitude crossings in the Tien Shan mountains, by foot and with limited or no supplies. The escape was chaotic, with thousands of men, women, and children abandoning their homes in terror, carrying anything they could. While they fled, they had to avoid not only the ruthlessness of Russian-Cossacks militias, but also the difficult natural conditions of the mountains (Abdykulova, 2020, pp. 26-29).

One of the most known routes was through the Sanchy Pass, a dangerous mountain passage where hundreds died from exhaustion, exposure to sunlight, and famine. Those who made it to higher altitudes found themselves in an empty and hostile landscape with limited food and extreme cold; many of them froze to death in the harsh circumstances of the Tien Shan, while others died from thirst and starvation. Furthermore, Armed Cossack forces and Russian soldiers blocked escape routes, attacking and killing entire families. According to reports from that time, entire convoys of fugitive Kyrgyz were shot down or slaughtered with bayonets. (Keller, 2019, p. 122).

The Urkun was just one of the signs of the decline of the Russian Empire, which was not capable of holding together all its colonial territories in Central Asia. This rising instability culminated in the Russian Revolution of 1917, which further undermined imperial control and created a power gap that would define Kyrgyzstan's destiny. By 1917, Russia was in a state of crisis due to war, financial

collapse, and internal opposition. The empire's inability to control its Asian colonies was one of the factors that sparked the revolution (Abdykulova, 2020, pp. 26-29).

2.5: What future for Kyrgyzstan? The fall of the Russian Empire

The fall of the Russian Empire in 1917 represents a turning point in the history of Kyrgyzstan. The Russian Empire was dealing with economic crisis, difficulties to control its territories (including Kyrgyzstan) and losses in the First World War. The October Revolution of 1917 abolished the Tsarist dynasty, leading to the fall of Russian control in Central Asia. Nevertheless, Kyrgyzstan was not granted immediate independence. Instead, the October Revolution generated a power vacuum in which several factions (Bolsheviks, local elites, and remnants of the White Army) fought for the authority (Medvedev, 1979, pp. 93-95).

This event had a significant impact also for the future of Kyrgyzstan: the Bolsheviks in fact promised self-determination for non-Russian regions, including the Central Asian territories. This was an opportunity for Kyrgyzstan to obtain a de facto independence, which the Central Asian country never experienced in all its history. Following the October Revolution, Lenin and the Bolsheviks represented themselves as liberators of Russia's oppressed nations. In November 1917, they created the Declaration of the Rights of the Peoples of Russia, which included the right to self-determination, including secession from Russia, equality of all nations and ethnic groupings, and the end of imperialist persecution of non-Russians (Martin, 2001, pp. 13-20).

Despite Bolshevik promises of autonomy, Kyrgyzstan continued to be dependent on Russian authority, albeit within a new ideological structure. In 1924, the Soviet dictatorship established the Kara-Kyrgyz Autonomous Oblast, which would eventually become the Kirghiz Soviet Socialist Republic in 1936. This officialised Kyrgyzstan's absorption into the Soviet Union, bringing with it central planning, collectivization, and the elimination of local democratic autonomy. During the Soviet era, Moscow kept tight control over political leadership, while Kyrgyz elites were absorbed into the Communist Party hierarchy rather than allowed to build a truly autonomous government. The Soviet regime suppressed opposition, encouraged Russification, and exercised tight control over information and public opinion. It also built infrastructure, developed education and healthcare systems, and cultivated a contemporary Kyrgyz national identity (Martin, 2001, pp. 13-20).

The fall of the Russian Empire in 1917 is a watershed moment in Kyrgyzstan's existence. The Russian Empire had to deal with an economic crisis, challenges in administering its territory (including Kyrgyzstan), and losses from World War I. The Tsarist dynasty was overthrown in the October Revolution of 1917, resulting in the breakdown of Russian imperial power over Central Asia.

Nonetheless, Kyrgyzstan did not gain independence right away. Instead, the uprising caused a power vacuum in which numerous factions, including the Bolsheviks, local elites, Mensheviks, and remnants of the White Army, battled for dominance (Medvedev, 1979, pp. 93-95).

At the community level, the Menshevik movement was neither deeply rooted or well-organized among the Kyrgyz people, who stayed primarily agricultural, nomadic, and detached from the political philosophies flowing in major Russian cities. Communist doctrine spread more broadly throughout Central Asia after the Bolshevik victory, largely through Russian-speaking revolutionaries and Red Army formations. Backing for the revolution originated primarily from metropolitan areas and Russian newcomers in the region, while many of the native Kyrgyz population was doubtful or hostile to Bolshevik ideology, frequently siding with traditional elites or Islamic networks (Keller, 2001, pp. 78-81).

During the Russian Civil War (1918-1921), Kyrgyzstan and the surrounding Ferghana Valley had been disputed areas. The region saw violent resistance to Bolshevik rule, especially from the Basmachi movement, a loose combination of anti-Soviet insurgents, tribal chiefs, Islamic clerics, and former Tsarist officers. Although the Basmachi were not always loyal to the White Army, they did share a strong antipathy to Soviet control. As a result, Kyrgyzstan might be regarded as a hub of counter-revolutionary activities throughout the civil war, particularly in its early stages. Over time, however, the Red Army recovered control via military battles and political compromises, absorbing the territory into the developing Soviet nation (Keller, 2001, pp.78-81; Khalid, 2015, pp. 116-121).

To justify their rule, the Bolsheviks offered self-determination to non-Russian areas, especially Central Asian lands. This provided Kyrgyzstan with the chance to achieve de facto independence, something the area had never done before. In November 1917, the Bolshevik Party produced the Declaration of the Rights of the Peoples of Russia, which included the right to self-determination (including secession), equality among all countries and ethnic groupings, and a stop to imperialist persecution of non-Russians (Martin, 2001, pp.13-20). Yet, these promises were mostly superficial and only temporary.

Kyrgyzstan remained dependent on Russian authority, but with a new doctrinal framework. In 1924, the Soviet dictatorship established the Kara-Kyrgyz Autonomous Oblast, which later became the Kirghiz Soviet Socialist Republic in 1936. This formalized Kyrgyzstan's integration into the Soviet Union, bringing with it central planning, collectivization, and the abolition of regional democratic sovereignty. Throughout the Soviet era, Moscow kept tight control over political leadership, while Kyrgyz elites were co-opted into the Communist Party hierarchy rather than given the opportunity to form a fully independent government. The Soviet regime suppressed resistance, promoted Russification, and maintained strict control over the media and the general population.

Simultaneously, it invested in infrastructure, education, and healthcare, helping to build a contemporary Kyrgyz national identity under Soviet supervision (Martin, 2001, pp.13-20; Khalid, 2015, pp.133-137).

In conclusion, the fall of the Russian Empire and the advent of the Bolshevik regime marked a new chapter in Kyrgyzstan's history, one that promised autonomy but eventually resulted in a new kind of centralized power. While Soviet authority contributed to important developments such as modernization efforts and the establishment of a Kyrgyz national identity, it also reinforced Moscow's dominance and prevented genuine self-government. Kyrgyzstan's metamorphosis into a Soviet Socialist Republic was not indicative of independence but rather marked its absorption into a tightly governed imperial framework “veiled” as a new ideological identity. These dynamics of control and development, of promises and contradictions would continue to impact Kyrgyzstan's path throughout the Soviet period, affecting the political, social, and economic foundations addressed in the next chapter.

This chapter offers a historical overview of Kyrgyzstan as a starting point for understanding the premises which led to the Tulip Revolution. A significant thread running through this journey is the succession of varied types of governance, each with its own philosophy of rule and degree of authority. Kyrgyzstan's governmental power shifted repeatedly, from Genghis Khan's loose and often indirect governance to the Russian Empire's more organized and assimilationist policy. These transitions frequently involved rapid shifts in legislation, governance structures, and levels of local autonomy, which prevented the development of a consistent and defined administrative system. The Russian Empire's agricultural reforms, particularly those involving land redistribution and the settlement of Slavic farmers, increased the Kyrgyz population's economic and social isolation. The consequent tensions and dislocations, together with other events of violence and instability as the Urkun and subsequent civil wars, weakened political unity. These layers of instability, created by centuries of fragmented and frequently externally imposed government, have left Kyrgyzstan with a fragile state structure, unable to secure long-term stability.

This historical path, which included Russian imperial control, revolutionary instability, and Soviet state creation, had a major impact on Kyrgyzstan's political, social, and institutional environment. Even following the Soviet Union's demise, the legacy of centralized authority, limited political plurality, and externally mandated administration patterns remained with the newly created state. Furthermore, the marginalization of local agency, the suppression of opposition, and the incorporation of national elites into larger totalitarian structures all lead to a weak political culture incapable of accommodating authentic democratic development

CHAPTER 3: FROM THE SOVIET UNION TO THE INDIPENDENCE

3.1 Soviet Kyrgyzstan

From Mongol rule to Russian imperialism and Soviet control, foreign nations hegemony over Kyrgyzstan's territory has been one of the country's most enduring problems throughout its history. In addition to undermining the continuity of local governance, these successive eras of external dominance also prevented the development of a stable, independent, and self-governing political elite. This complicated Kyrgyzstan 's post-independence political transition by delaying the establishment of democratic institutions and truly competitive electoral procedures.

I am going to examine this chapter to comprehend the significant and enduring influence that the Soviet era of dominance over Kyrgyzstan had on the nation's historical development. The Kyrgyz Republic's political, economic, bureaucratic, and legal roots were all revolutionized during the Soviet era, which was more than just a liminal period of transition between earlier, brief periods of foreign rule and its ultimate gain of independence. Over seven decades, the Soviet government methodically changed the way people thought by enforcing a centralized, totalitarian model that valued collectivism over individual and cultural individualism. These regional customs and diversities were progressively repressed in favour of a uniform Soviet identity. President Askar Akayev attempted to rectify this legacy and advance a more pluralistic and distinctively national form of government when the country gained independence in 1991.

When the Russian Empire fell, a new phase began also for Kyrgyzstan. A new phase where autonomy was still a challenge and independence were merely a mirage, but with a discontinuity from the past. The authoritarianism which took place under the Soviet Union cannot be compared to the tribal khagans or even with Genghis Khan; yet the dynamics of political subordination and instability persisted, even if under distinct aspects. The Soviet Union reorganized the territory of Kyrgyzstan, modernizing its antique economy and promoting the literacy of the territory. These modifications were planned and implemented under a system of central leadership from Moscow, without resolving the chronic political instability of Kyrgyzstan. Throughout the Soviet era, a new type of hierarchical governance replaced previous imperial structures, recreating patterns of dependency and minimal local power (Khalid 2007, pp. 50-83).

Like most of Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan entered a period of instability after the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution and the fall of the Russian Empire. The Tsarist regime was overthrown by the Bolshevik Revolution in October 1917, which also brought along a new political and ideological framework. The creation of a proletarian state based on the ideas of centralized planning, conflict between classes, and

the final elimination of national and ethnic divisions in favour of socialist unity was at the heart of the Bolsheviks vision. The first years after the revolution were characterized more by anarchy and violence than by well-organized government (Carrère d'Encausse, 1989, pp.37).

Throughout the early 1920s, Soviet control over the periphery, especially Central Asia and what is now Kyrgyzstan, was precarious. Armed revolutionary groups began to make resistance to local Soviet authorities. In the regions of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, the local population was sceptical of Bolshevik intentions since they were still recovering from the 1916 Urkun uprising and the upheavals of Tsarist rule. In this regard, the Basmachi movement, an anti-Soviet armed insurgency that swept across most of Central Asia in the 1920s, was born out of popular discontent. The Basmachi were a varied and poorly organized movement composed of former tribal leaders, Islamic scholars, ex-soldiers, and peasants rather than a single political organization. Their goals ranged from religious and nationalist aspirations to opposition against compulsory conscription. Other factions focused on safeguarding local autonomy and opposing the quick and frequently violent Sovietization of the area, while others advocated pan-Islamic or pan-Turkic principles. The Basmachi movement is important to be mentioned as it represents the discontent around the Soviet presence in Central Asia. This highly diverse population included both Islamic groups and Russophone settlers from numerous Soviet territories in the Turkestan region. Although the majority of the rebels were Muslim, the insurrection gained support from parts of Turkestan controlled by the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic, which did not hesitate to join the rebellion against Moscow. The Basmachi revolt ended with an implacable Soviet response. Mass arrests, village burnings, and killings were some of the repressive tactics used by Red Army units supported by the Cheka, the Soviet secret police (Sahadeo, 2017, pp.123-124).

By the end of the 1920s, the insurgency had been progressively put down, but at a significant social cost. An atmosphere of distrust between the local populace and the new Soviet authority was strengthened by the brutality and displacement of entire populations in southern Kyrgyzstan (Sahadeo, 2017, pp.123-124).

By the late 1920s, the Basmachi rebellion had been put down, and Soviet leaders moved quickly to expand their influence throughout Central Asia. This consolidation in Kyrgyzstan marked the escalation of official repression and ideological control rather than the start of political stability. The late 1920s and early 1930s saw the adoption of strong methods intended to destroy residual traditional structures and ensure ideological conformity as part of a larger effort to eliminate perceived threats to the Bolshevik dictatorship. A series of arrests, deportations, and executions were used to target members of the former aristocracy, tribal chiefs, and religious leaders (Martin, 2001, pp.153-154).

Kyrgyz political and intellectual elites were eliminated during the repressive campaigns of the late 1920s and early 1930s, leaving an institutional vacuum that allowed the Soviet state to completely

establish its control over the area. In this way, the Communist Party imposed a new administrative and ideological framework, establishing the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic in 1936. The formal foundation of the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic in 1936 was the result of the Communist Party's efforts to impose a new administrative and ideological framework throughout the region. This shift was the result of a top-down reorganization that aligned with Stalin's larger goal of a rigid federal structure. The Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic was simply an extension of Moscow's authority in Central Asia. The Soviet Union's ethno-territorial model was institutionalized in the Stalin Constitution of 1936, which formalized the transition from autonomous republic to complete union republic. Though mainly theoretical, the republic was given a few constitutional rights, such as the right to a national language, republican institutions, and nominal sovereignty. Despite these small concessions, the Soviet Union was now controlling everything in Kyrgyzstan: politics, law, education, economy, everything was in the hands of Stalin, which managed to successfully eradicate norms, traditions and customs present in the Kyrgyzstan's society, making room for communist rules which, according to his plan should have been applied to all the Soviet Union's territorial possessions (Roy, 2000, pp.62-64). The federal structure of the Soviet Union gave a first appearance of a less centralized model, compared to the Russian Empire. It was merely a smokescreen for a communist regime which established rules equal for all its populations, from Moscow to Bishkek.

The Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic had nominal autonomy according to Soviet laws. Nevertheless, the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic was never permitted to establish independent political or institutional capabilities, despite its apparent autonomy. With the creation of the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic, the region was given a territory defined by borders and laws which permitted local authorities to legislate on some specific, residual, issues. This degree of autonomy was still far away from a de facto autonomy, as Moscow was the ultimate decision-maker of everything related with the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic. The republic continued to be economically peripheral, providing the core Soviet economy with raw goods like cotton, wool, and minerals. The capital and northern areas saw most of the investment, which exacerbated the economic and infrastructural gap between the north and south. Rather than being democratized, local institutions were bureaucratized, and their purpose became coordination rather than representation. Only cultural expressions that corresponded to Soviet ideological ideals were permitted. Within a communist context, traditional Kyrgyz customs, particularly those associated with Islam or clan-based identity, were suppressed or reinterpreted. Folklore, literature, and visual arts were all promoted but carefully chosen to fit with Soviet narratives of ethnic harmony, class conflict, and progress (Roy, 2000, pp.62-64).

The legal structure of Kyrgyz leadership saw a substantial change with the establishment and growth of the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic, which brought with it extensive economic reforms, new administrative frameworks, and enlarged social services. However, the fundamental issue that has

long influenced Kyrgyz political life, the lack of stable, independent, and locally based governance, remained unresolved under this mask of modernization and institutional growth. Consequently, the institutions established during Soviet domination were not established in a pluralistic or participative political environment, neither they intended to operate independently, leaving Kyrgyzstan to its chronic problem of political instability (Luong, 2002, p.9).

3.2: Soviet Modernization and Dependency

The Soviet government implemented significant modernization programs in the decades after the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic was founded with the goal of changing the socioeconomic structure of the republic and bringing it closer to the Soviet Union's program. These programs included social changes in the areas of gender equality, healthcare, and education, as well as industrialization, urbanization, and infrastructure development. The central control of Stalin prevented Kyrgyzstan to develop a free state with its ancestral traditions, but it helped the region to develop better functioning structures under many significant points of view; the establishment of more efficient administrative structures, the expansion of healthcare and educational systems, and the introduction of extensive industrial and infrastructure projects were all made possible by Stalin's centralized control, even though it also suppressed Kyrgyzstan's traditional institutions and prevented the rise of autonomous governance. Consequently, rather than resolving the region's chronic political and institutional weakness, Kyrgyzstan's modernization remained structurally dependent and externally directed by the Soviet Union (Huskey, 1995).

In the 1940s, Kyrgyzstan was a fully integrated Soviet republic after a period of political consolidation characterized by repression, resistance, and progressive institutional transformation. To reflect the region's connection with Soviet philosophy, the capital was renamed Frunze in honour of Mikhail Frunze, the chief of the Bolshevik army. Decisions taken by Soviet authorities, who had authority over political governance, economic planning, cultural expression, and social structure, subsequently influenced Kyrgyz citizens' lives in all significant ways. Kyrgyzstan, like other Central Asian republics, was tasked to help in the war effort and, later, Soviet reconstruction, making the years of World War II and the early post-war years an important turning point in Soviet policy (Huskey, 1995).

The war marked a period of further assimilation of the Soviet heritage into the territory of Kyrgyzstan, making the political stability and independence of this region even more utopic. Tens of thousands of Kyrgyz citizens were recruited into the Red Army, while the home front saw massive resource exploitation and the entry of deported ethnic minorities such as Chechens, Koreans, and Crimean

Tatars, changing the republic's demographic landscape. The relocation of thousands of emigrants, including factories, engineers, and intellectuals, sped up the industrialization and urbanization of important cities including Frunze. Russification also accelerated at this time, with Kyrgyz being further restricted to informal and rural areas and Russian emerging as the language of higher education, research, and government (Martin, 2001, pp.387).

Party structures, trade unions, youth groups like the Komsomol, and professional unions that permeated every sphere of society were used to rigorously govern social life at this time. Islam was either pushed under the radar or appropriated by state-run organizations like the Spiritual Board for Muslims of Central Asia. There was little space for religious beliefs in the Soviet Union, where Stalin spread all over the country the cult of secularism and atheism (Khalid, 2007, pp.78).

Although Kyrgyzstan saw apparent infrastructure development because of Soviet modernization, including industries, railroads, and urban housing, the tactics used were frequently out of rhythm with local economic and social realities, which strengthened long-term dependency rather than independence. Instead of promoting a diverse or self-sufficient economy, industrialization was mostly extractive in nature, concentrating on mining, cotton monoculture, and hydropower projects that fulfilled Union's demands. For instance, the agrarian south remained underdeveloped as a result of investments being concentrated in northern areas like Frunze. Numerous sectors were "islands" of development, dependent on staff and equipment imported from Russia or Ukraine, constructed without integration into local supply networks, and susceptible to inefficiencies in central planning. Furthermore, these initiatives frequently disregarded ecological and cultural settings; for example, forced settlement of nomadic communities undermined traditional livelihoods, and cotton irrigation systems harmed land for agriculture. These outside interests also influenced the workforce: ethnic Kyrgyz were highly concentrated in low-skilled agricultural jobs, while Slavs held most of the skilled labour and management posts. Instead of fostering local initiative, Soviet modernization solidified a top-down development paradigm in which Kyrgyzstan served as a subordinate labour and raw material supplier to a broader imperial economy. After independence, this reliance would become even more evident when an unexpected breakdown of central planning left the republic with industrial infrastructure it was unable to maintain or redirect (Luong, 2002).

3.3: Ethnic Stratification and Regional Disparities in Soviet Kyrgyzstan

Kazakhs and Kyrgyz were not granted the same rights and political status as Slavic groups like Russians and Ukrainians within the Soviet Union's multiethnic structure. The mass migration of Russians, Ukrainians, and other Slavic groups into Kyrgyzstan, particularly between the 1940s and the

1970s, was one of the most remarkable events of the period of the Soviet Union in the country's history. These changes in the population were not coincidental; rather, they were part of a larger Soviet plan to provide administrative workers, skilled labour, and ideologically dependable militants to distant republics. Therefore, the objective was both political and economic: to create a Slavic administrative class and develop industry in the Central Asian periphery while guaranteeing firm loyalty to Moscow. By the early 1970s, ethnic Russians made up about 21% of Kyrgyzstan's population, with the remaining percentage being made up of Ukrainians and other European ethnic groups (Fierman, 1991, pp.80-85).

The social and political structure of Kyrgyzstan was significantly and permanently affected by these demographic changes. A de facto ethnic hierarchy was established because of the introduction of a large Slavic population, which was concentrated in metropolitan areas like Frunze and the northern Chüy Valley. A person's involvement within the party-state apparatus was strongly related to their access to housing, healthcare, educational prospects, and administrative jobs, all of which were held by Russians and Ukrainians. A populist political language focused on exclusion, marginalization, and promises of redistribution emerged because of the continued ethnic and regional inequalities in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan. Many southern political actors used populist rhetoric, describing the north as an incorrupt and disengaged elite that unfairly controlled political power and state resources, because there were no institutional channels existing for expressing grievances or promoting participation. In addition to being economically frustrated, the southern Kyrgyz saw themselves as the guardians of traditional identity, culture, and religion, values that had been marginalized by the Russified elite headquartered in Bishkek (Radnitz, 2010).

By the 1970s, the Kyrgyz SSR had experienced significant institutional and demographic imbalances because of Soviet policies. In the 1970 census, Kyrgyz people made up only 40.8% of the republic's population, while there were 13% Uzbeks and 30% Russians (Radnitz, 2010). By 1989, these numbers had changed, although Russians still made up over one-fifth of the population. Importantly, the northern Chüy Valley and the capital Frunze were home to an imbalance of ethnic Russians and other Slavic communities, who controlled higher education, industrial jobs, and the party bureaucracy. Ethnic Kyrgyz, on the other hand, were marginalized in rural areas and underrepresented in urban institutions, especially in the southern parts of Osh and Jalal-Abad. Language policy developed this division by making Russian the de facto language of higher education and government, while Kyrgyz remained restricted to informal or rural spheres. These measures established a social structure that would become explosive in the post-Soviet era, where access to privilege was linked to ethnic identification (Radnitz, 2010).

Soviet language policy in Kyrgyzstan had a deeper ideological purpose than just being an administrative tool as it served to manage national identity. As part of the larger "affirmative action

empire" strategy, the Soviet government systematically favoured Russian in politics, science, and higher education while encouraging the growth of national languages, including Kyrgyz, in symbolic and cultural contexts like poetry, folklore, and elementary education. By promoting ethnic languages for cultural expression while preserving Russian for political purposes, this two-pronged approach made sure that Soviet residents remained politically integrated but ethnically clearly apparent (Radnitz, 2010).

3.4: De-Stalinization of Kyrgyzstan

The growing unhappiness in the Soviet Republic of Kyrgyzstan was highly due to the policies applied by the leader of the Soviet Union, Joseph Stalin. His political program aimed at having a country where all the republics not only depended, under every aspect, on the central power coming from Moscow, but those republics should have applied the precept of the Communist society wanted by Stalin. For Kyrgyzstan, this meant the abolishment of its religious beliefs, its administrative structure, and its laws. All of this, to be later usurped by Slavic settlers, which would have stolen resources and jobs from the inhabitants of the Soviet Republic of Kyrgyzstan. The semi-independent structure given to Kyrgyzstan was simply a smokescreen for Stalin to apply his policies and his program. When he died in 1953, it was a turning point for the entire world but, most importantly for the Soviet Republics. The key focus was whether the next leadership will preserve the authoritarian tactics and ideological rigidity that marked Stalin's regime (Siegelbaum, Sokolov, 2008, pp.110-115).

In Kyrgyzstan, the goal of the Stalinist purpose was to facilitate the transition to socialism to eradicate what was seen as "backward" Islamic and nomadic life. By forcing pastoralist tribes into sedentary agricultural life, collectivization campaigns, which started in earnest in the early 1930s, upended centuries of social customs and contributed to starvation, animal decimation, and nomadic migration. Former tribal leaders, writers, imams, educators, and even party loyalists were put in jail or killed. They were replaced by a new generation of Kyrgyz Soviet bureaucrats who were ideologically skilled, loyal to Moscow, and schooled in an authoritarian political system that valued obedience over creativity (Khalid, 2007, pp.75).

This period left behind a republic marked by institutional emulation (Soviet in form, authoritarian in function), rural poverty, regional inequality, conditions that also prohibited most Kyrgyz citizens from meaningful participation in state affairs. These exclusions, forged in Stalinist violence, would not only survive the fall of the Soviet Union, but would also become central fractures in the 2005 Tulip Revolution, when demands for justice and participation came into contact with a post-Soviet elite

whose political culture remained deeply rooted in Stalinist control methods (Siegelbaum, Sokolov, 2008, pp.110-115).

Under Nikita Khrushchev's leadership, Kyrgyzstan, a Soviet constituent republic, underwent a period of cautious reform and relative liberalization after Stalin's death in 1953. Nevertheless, this shift was contradictory and eventually superficial in terms of political autonomy and local empowerment. Under Nikita Khrushchev, who aimed to disassociate the Soviet Union from Stalin's practices and enact what became known as the "Thaw," a number of reforms were introduced during the post-Stalinist era. This resulted in a short cultural renaissance for Kyrgyzstan, with a resurgence of publications written in the Kyrgyz language, an increasing focus on national folklore and epic traditions such as the Manas, and a little rise in the number of ethnic Kyrgyz in local party formations. Beneath this apparent exhibition of national pride, however, republican sovereignty was limited, and political power remained concentrated in Moscow. In this regard, the government promotion of the Manas epic, a fundamental oral heritage of the Kyrgyz people, is one of the most representative instances of cultural revival during Khrushchev's Defrost. Long considered an archive of collective memory, cultural values, and national identity, the Manas is a massive epic poem that describes the bravery and courage of a legendary Kyrgyz warrior and his descendants. Since the epic's themes of resistance, spiritual guidance, and tribal togetherness were viewed as irreconcilable with Soviet values, Stalin opposed both public performances and academic study of the Manas. The Soviet government, however, took a more nuanced stance during the Khrushchev era, selectively reintroducing such national traditions under the pretext of "socialist in form, national in content" as opposed to simply banning them (Shlapentokh, 2014, pp.120-125).

Important positions in the Kyrgyz Communist Party were still frequently occupied by Russian or Russified elites, and policies were determined in accordance with the main objectives of the Soviet Union, which included ideological conformity, industrial growth, and agricultural collectivization. Frunze (which came back to the original, and actual, name of Bishkek) became an emblem of Soviet modernity, but the rural south, where the majority of ethnic Kyrgyz lived and where Soviet investment was limited, was still marginalized and massive regional disparities were hidden by this urban prosperity. As often in Kyrgyzstan, a glimmer of freedom and plurality gives false hopes for a future free by oppression and institutional rigidity (Cummings, 2012, pp.95-96).

The Soviet Union's shift toward political conservatism and bureaucratic stability during the Brezhnev era, from 1964 to 1982, established a highly institutionalized system of informal governance that would prove to be resilient. A local political class emerged in Kyrgyzstan that served as a faithful intermediary for Moscow and the citizens, receiving social benefits and Soviet economic initiatives while upholding authoritarian rule through clientelist networks. These leaders functioned under a

system of "dual accountability," wherein their official support for the Communist Party was combined with unofficial favouritism, regional patronage, and rent-seeking (Collins, 2006, pp. 139-146).

By the 1970s and 1980s, the Kyrgyz SSR had turned into an excellent example of "stability without development," with local issues being managed rather than solved, innovation stalling, and corruption proliferating. In terms of politics, society, and the economy, the division between the north (near Bishkek) and the south (around Osh and Jalal-Abad) grew wider. Southern Kyrgyz populations were more agriculturally dependent, more conservative, and more religious, which rendered them more prone to future mobilization when the regime fell and more subject to the Soviet state's uneven development methods (Collins, 2006, pp.139-146).

Overall, the decades after Stalin's death did not radically change Soviet Kyrgyzstan's centralized, authoritarian, and elite-driven system of government; instead, they modified it to fit new, less oppressive systems that were just as efficient at preserving Moscow's hegemony and constraining local autonomy. A political elite that was good at managing the Soviet system but becoming increasingly distant from the demands and problems of common Kyrgyz inhabitants. This had been consolidated by the superficial cultural liberalization under Khrushchev and the bureaucratic stagnation under Brezhnev. These patronage-based, regionally disparate, and doubtful governed power structures from the Soviet era persisted after the fall of the USSR and were just modified in the institutions of the newly independent Kyrgyz Republic. The fragility of Kyrgyzstan's post-independence democratic experiment cannot be comprehended without considering the authoritarian DNA that was carried over from its Soviet inheritance, rather than a clean break with the past. Therefore, the seeds of the Tulip Revolution were planted in the slow, systematic distortions of governance that defined the post-Stalinist Soviet era rather than in the chaos of the 1990s. Kyrgyzstan's transition to independence in the late 1980s was impeded by institutions and views that were not conducive to a democratic transition. This created the conditions for further tensions as the conflicts between the people's demand for accountability and authoritarian continuity became increasingly unsustainable (Cummings, 2012, pp.95-100).

3.5: Akayev and the Perestroika

For many former Soviet republics, the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked an unprecedented shift, but Kyrgyzstan's political and social structure was not completely altered. Instead, many systems from the Soviet era were left in place and only marginally altered in accordance with the new reality of independence. Kyrgyzstan started suffering from instability in the 1980s because of Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms of glasnost (political openness) and perestroika (economic restructuring).

Unexpected outcomes resulted from these reforms, which were intended to modernize and democratize the Soviet system. They revealed long-standing societal conflicts that had been hidden under Soviet rule, widespread nepotism in local institutions, and the profound inefficiencies of the planned economy in Kyrgyzstan (Liu, 2012, pp.64).

In 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika and glasnost reforms significantly altered the social and political conditions of the Kyrgyz SSR, setting the stage for the final independence of the country. Perestroika, which means "restructuring" in Russian, was one of Mikhail Gorbachev's key reform measures after taking over the Soviet Union in 1985. Perestroika was initially intended as a response to the Soviet economy's deep stagnation and the growing inefficiencies of central planning, with the goal of decentralizing economic decision-making, introducing elements of market logic, and increasing productivity across all sectors. However, its scope rapidly grew beyond economics, resulting in a broader reform agenda with substantial political and social repercussions. Perestroika, along with Glasnost ("openness"), aimed to liberalize the public sphere, remove censorship, and allow for a limited recovery of civil society by openly criticizing party and government institutions. Perestroika had a substantial and sometimes unexpected effect on Central Asian countries, which Moscow had previously seen as politically peripheral and culturally subordinate. On the one hand, it was marketed as a means of modernizing and fully integrating these republics into a reformed Soviet Union; on the other, it revived long-suppressed nationalist, ethnic, and social grievances. Perestroika sparked a political awakening among the Kyrgyz SSR's intellectuals, writers, students, and reform-minded Communist Party members, who began to doubt Moscow's power and the legitimacy of the Soviet system. It also provided an opportunity for those like Askar Akayev, a physicist and obscure scholar, to gain recognition. In Kyrgyzstan, what started as a cautious reform process grew into a complete ride toward sovereignty and national identity, culminating in the republic's proclamation of independence in August 1991 (Hardt, 1987, pp.3-5).

Kyrgyzstan saw unequal outcomes from perestroika, which was designed to modernize the economy through decentralization and market procedures. Instead of promoting expansion, it accelerated economic deterioration in a country already at a disadvantage due to its remote location and dependence on monoculture agriculture. Local companies were left without direction or assistance due to the decline of central economic planning, and rural communities, which were already struggling with insufficient facilities and environmental degradation, saw an increase in poverty and instability. Glasnost also promoted more transparency in discussing social and political issues. For the first time, calls for stronger regional representation, worries about ethnic inequality, and attacks of the Communist Party started to spread widely. Civil society organizations and popular political movements emerged because of this opening, challenging the power of party leaders and local elites (Liu, 2012, pp. 61-65).

In this period of chaos, transition, and a slight increase of freedom, in the Soviet Union, whose time was about to set, an important figure for the history of Kyrgyzstan started to emerge. Indeed, during this time of confusion and change, Askar Akayev became an influential figure in politics. Askar Akayevich Akayev was born on November 10, 1944, in the village of Kyzyl-Bayrak, Kemin district, northern Kyrgyzstan, which was then part of the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic. Akayev climbed through the Soviet educational and scientific system, eventually enrolling at the Leningrad Institute of Precision Mechanics and Optics and specializing in optical physics. He then acquired a doctorate and established himself as a respected professor, eventually returning to Kyrgyzstan to teach and conduct research. By the 1980s, he had advanced to the position of vice president and then president of the Kyrgyz Academy of Sciences, establishing himself as an apolitical, reform-minded technocrat. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Akayev was not a member of the embedded Communist Party elite, which ironically positioned him as an appropriate compromise candidate in the political turbulence that surrounded the Soviet Union's final years.

Gorbachev’s plan to modernize the Soviet Union made Akayev’s rise to power easier. In this context, individuals outside the traditional Communist Party hierarchy, particularly intellectuals, scientists, and technocrats, gained new status and authority. Akayev, an admired physicist and scholar, exemplified the professional expertise and reforming mentality that Gorbachev's agenda increasingly valued. As president of the Kyrgyz Academy of Sciences and a corresponding member of the USSR Academy of Sciences, Akayev belonged to the Soviet scientific elite, which played an increasingly key role in the political process in the late 1980s. He became well-known for his pro-reform ideas, which advocated for modernization, innovation, and decentralization of authority, positions that were quite like Gorbachev's own agenda (Huskey, 1997, pp.50-55).

In Kyrgyzstan, Akayev, a physicist with no close connections to the Soviet political establishment, was seen as a reform-minded thinker who shared Gorbachev's views. Many people, particularly those who hoped Kyrgyzstan could modernize peacefully, cheered his surprise ascent to the presidency in 1990. It is impossible to fully understand Askar Akayev's rise and eventual decline without looking at the last years of Soviet domination and the special role that Kyrgyzstan played in Gorbachev's reformist agenda. The Kyrgyz SSR was economically insecure by the late 1980s, yet it was politically marginal within the USSR. With a weak economic basis, a growing populace unhappy with underdevelopment, environmental deterioration, and ethnic discrimination, the republic continued to be dependent on Moscow. Launched in 1985, Gorbachev's perestroika and glasnost initiatives promoted limited political plurality across the Union and started loosening the strict confines of Soviet centralism (Huskey, 1997, pp.50-55).

These reforms triggered an uprising in politics and a reorganization of the elite in Kyrgyzstan. Unprecedented freedom to publish, discuss, and even criticize the party was granted to local scientists,

intellectuals, and reform-minded cadres. Akayev, a member of the Academy of Sciences with no experience in the deeply ingrained party bureaucracy, ascended rapidly in this void. Gorbachev's own preference for educated, technocratic reformers who might modernize Soviet governance from within was reflected in his professional path, which was strongly linked to scientific institutions rather than party loyalty. After being elected as a corresponding member of the USSR Academy of Sciences in 1989, Akayev was elected president of the Kyrgyz SSR in October 1990 despite increasing public discontent and internal factionalism within the Kyrgyz Communist Party (Huskey, 1997, pp.50-55).

On the other hand, when authoritarian structures reduced, ethnic tensions increased, particularly during the 1990 Osh riots, which revealed the Soviet leadership's incapacity to control pluralism at the republican level. Traditional Kyrgyz party elites were also marginalized as a result of the central authority's decline, which made room for more recent reformist leaders. Like many other republics, Kyrgyzstan had no clear plan for government, development, or sovereignty by the time the Soviet Union was formally dissolved in December 1991. In addition to ending a geopolitical empire, the fall of Soviet authority also meant the collapse of the institutional framework that Kyrgyzstan and other republics had relied on for decades (Cummings, 2012, pp.154).

Askar Akayev emerged as a symbol of intellectual modernity and reform, rather than as an experienced apparatchik, in this period of political change and historical instability. His rise signified the start of a highly conflicting post-Soviet experience in Kyrgyzstan as well as the continuation of perestroika's liberal goals (McGlinchey, 2011, pp.38).

3.6: The Osh conflict: a key step towards independence

The Soviet Union was entering its final years by the end of the 1980s, and both the local leaderships in the republics and the central authorities in Moscow were finding it more difficult to manage the consequences of perestroika and glasnost. An era was about to end, and with it, an important piece of history. The fall of the Berlin Wall established the end of an ideological and political model of society, which went beyond politics. The communist paradigm used in the Soviet Union, and, until its collapse, in other regimes such as Yugoslavia, sought to radically transform society by promoting a utopian vision in which political authority dominated over all aspects of daily life. This system valued the common good over the individual, emphasizing conformity and practicality at the price of personal liberty, creativity, and individual expression.

This was the case also for the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic, where all the ancient, traditional, tribal roles of its society were replaced by Soviet rules, which were almost indisputable. With the end of this political idea and the disaggregation of the Soviet Union, a new phase was about to start for

Kyrgyzstan (Kramer, 2003, pp.112-117). The deeply entrenched ethnic, social, and economic divisions that had been repressed for decades under Soviet totalitarianism were unveiled by Gorbachev's reforms. Those reforms included a decreased control in central authorities and the partial empowerment of local concerns. The Osh dispute in June 1990, one of the most serious interethnic conflicts in the late Soviet era, was the clearest example of this phenomenon.

The growing tensions between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks, who both asserted legal and historical claims to land, housing, and administrative authority, culminated in violent clashes in the southern city of Osh. In the Soviet Union, the nations which are today known as Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan were gathered under the same region. A controversial land redistribution decision by local authorities that accepted Kyrgyz claims over Uzbek group farms became the main cause for the dispute. The causes of the violence, however, were far more substantial: the explosion of tensions was fuelled by decades of unequal development between the north and the south, ongoing housing shortages, Uzbek's underrepresentation in local government, and the rise of nationalist ideologies. When the Soviet troops arrived to restore order in Osh, a city between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, hundreds of citizens of both territories had already been murdered and many more had been injured or ordered to leave their homes. Early in June 1990, violence began and continued for several days. Local militias were organized along ethnic groups, homes, businesses, and cultural institutions were robbed or destroyed, and entire neighborhoods were set on fire. There were hundreds of deaths, thousands of injuries, and tens of thousands of displaced people, while exact numbers are yet unknown (Megoran, 2017, pp.143-149).

The Osh conflict wasn't initiated spontaneously; rather, it showed significant structural weaknesses left over from decades of Soviet administration. Soviet policies had long suppressed ethnic expression and political plurality, while also promoting rigorous ethno-territorial classifications and encouraging internal migration, disrupting established demographic balances. Moscow's artificial borders and administrative divisions frequently disregarded historical claims and communal identities, laying the basis for future conflict. Furthermore, the Soviet form of governance prevented independent channels for resolving interethnic conflicts, allowing problems to develop under the surface. Stalin codified ethnic hierarchies and regional imbalances, giving Slavic communities and urban northeastern elites an advantage over southern, less urbanized Kyrgyz and Uzbek communities. These patterns continued throughout the Brezhnev era, resulting in a stratified social structure characterized by unequal access to power, jobs, and housing. When Gorbachev's reforms began to weaken centralized authority and empower local voices, the system lacked credibility, inclusive mechanisms to manage growing disputes. In this framework, the 1990 Osh conflict was not a unique occurrence of violence, but rather the result of decades of Soviet rule that stressed control and uniformity over heterogeneity and participation (Commercio, 2017, pp.769-770).

The Osh conflict became a turning point in Kyrgyzstan's political awakening, as it intensified calls for independence, change, and a new government. The republic saw a meaningful change after the crisis: opposition organizations like Ashar and Erkin Kyrgyzstan gained traction and demanded political pluralism, land reform, and transparency. Kyrgyzstan became the first Soviet republic to elect its president, Akayev, in October 1990. This action was representative of Kyrgyzstan's tentative shifts toward independence as well as the disintegration of the Soviet political system. Most importantly, elite behavior was also changed by the Osh conflict. While some Communist Party officials attempted to use the language of reform to preserve their authority locally, others attempted to place the responsibility on Moscow's poor leadership. In this setting, Askar Akayev, who was elected president in October 1990, appeared as an apparently impartial individual, removed from the long-standing regional and ethnic divisions. His rise to power was partially a reaction to the popular desire for a fresh leadership free from the errors of the past (Megoran, 2017, pp.143-149).

Kyrgyzstan’s path to independence intersects with the issues which the Soviet Union, which was about to collapse, was having with its peripheries. The Soviet Union formally dissolved as a sovereign state in 1991 thanks to a Declaration of the Soviet of the Republics of the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union. This process began in the constituent national republics of Soviet Union which started to an incessant political and legislative conflict between them and the central government of Moscow. Estonia was the very first Soviet Republic to declare the state of sovereignty in 1988 and Georgia followed shortly after Even if the Kremlin was not falling, yet, it was clear that it could not keep its sovereignty on all its peripheries for too long (Strayer, 2016, pp.188-193).

Therefore, during the Soviet Union's final crises, Kyrgyzstan's path to independence developed rapidly, but it was characterized more by political void and institutional improvisation than by a concerted nationalist effort. The Kyrgyz SSR had no experience with political diversity or widespread protest, in contrast to the Baltic nations or Georgia, where national identity had been strongly mobilized against Soviet control. However, the 1990 Osh conflict and the decreasing power of the Communist Party pushed Kyrgyzstan into a phase of rapid political change.

3.7: Independence from Soviet Union

The main thing I want to prove with this thesis on the Tulip Revolution is how it is possible to achieve a political goal, without an excessive use of violence. The Tulip Revolution is a powerful example of how significant political change can be achieved without widespread or organized violence. Unlike many other post-Soviet transitions marked by civil conflict or lengthy turmoil, Kyrgyzstan's route to independence and following political transformations demonstrate the capacity of citizen mobilization

and institutional breakdown to challenge tyranny in a mostly peaceful manner. This theory contends that the Tulip Revolution was not just a reaction to poor governance and public dissatisfaction, but also the culmination of deeper structural transformations that allowed nonviolent forms of protest to gain political traction.

Soviet militants from the State Committee on the State of Emergency (GKChP) attempted a coup in Moscow in August 1991, which was a turning point for the Soviet Union as well as the peripheral republics, including Kyrgyzstan. Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms, especially perestroika and the new Union Treaty that would have decentralized authority, were attempted to be blocked by the coup. Even though the revolution crashed in three days, partly due to widespread demonstrations in Moscow and opposition from Russian President Boris Yeltsin, its political effects were permanent (Strayer, 2016, pp.201-206).

The failed coup produced a clear split from the Soviet centre in Kyrgyzstan. Just ten months after winning the Kyrgyz Supreme Soviet as an alternative candidate, President Askar Akayev publicly denounced the GKChP and joined with the reformist, anti-coup bloc. Although it was a huge political risk, this action helped him establish himself as a reforming leader dedicated to democratic ideals and raised his profile nationally as well as internationally

The USSR's power structures began to collapse in the days after the failed coup. Kyrgyzstan was among the first Soviet republics to declare their independence on August 31, 1991. The Kyrgyz Supreme Soviet instantly accepted the announcement, consequently ending the republic's 70-year membership in the Soviet Union. Even though the proclamation was peaceful, it occurred despite a lack of institutions, unstable economic conditions, and escalating social unrest (particularly after the 1990 Osh riots revealed severe divisions in the republic's multiethnic structure). Akayev took immediate action to solidify his grip on power: he renamed the nation the "Kyrgyz Republic," banned the Communist Party of Kyrgyzstan, which had supported the coup, and presented himself as the creator of a new democratic state. He won more than 95% of the vote in an almost uncontested presidential election in October 1991. Despite this resounding victory, the election served more as a symbolic confirmation of a new national leadership than as a manifestation of widespread democratic participation. Akayev was uniquely qualified to lead Kyrgyzstan through the uncertain transition era because of his scientific background, lack of strong party ties, and reformer persona. However, the state apparatus was still controlled by established elites and local patronage networks, and the institutions that surrounded him were still primarily Soviet in structure (Huskey, 1997, pp.84-90).

A new era began in Kyrgyzstan. In a territory which had never had a consolidated status of democracy, a new personality was imposing itself as reformer, which would have given freedom and democracy to its country. Akayev, the first non-Communist leader in Central Asia, was noted for his

support of economic reform, civil rights, and pluralism, at least in words. He accepted the idea that Kyrgyzstan was a democratic "island," and his initial actions appeared to support this claim: international organizations such as the World Bank and IMF were welcomed, opposition parties were made legitimate, and the media was allowed to function with some degree of independence. To integrate Kyrgyzstan into the global economy, Akayev pushed for drastic economic reforms, such as price liberalization and the privatization of state-owned assets. The nation approved a new constitution in 1993 that preserved the multiparty system and human rights provisions while emphasizing a presidential form of administration. In that year, Kyrgyzstan broke financial ties with Russia and asserted its independence by introducing its own currency, the som (Anderson, 1999, pp.133-136).

The medicine taken without the right supervision can bring damage. Akayev's policies, even if admirable for a country that wanted to change shape after years of communist dictatorship, could not be managed by Kyrgyzstan. Weaknesses in structure severely limited Kyrgyzstan's transition despite these liberalizing measures. Early in the 1990s, the nation experienced a dramatic fiscal crisis as trade connections and subsidies from the Soviet era abruptly ended, GDP fell, inflation went up, and unemployment increased. The lack of essential services in many rural areas, particularly in the south, caused poverty rates to rise sharply. Following the Osh war in 1990, social tensions remained high as the state found it difficult to establish control in these areas and mistrust between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks lingered (Anderson, 1999, pp.133-136).

To preserve political stability, Akayev started to consolidate authority at the same time, frequently using presidential decrees to circumvent parliament and depending on unofficial regional networks. Although opposition parties were formally permitted, they were subject to increased administrative pressure, and by the mid-1990s, the media landscape had gradually become more constrained. Because privatization favoured a select group of elites connected to the presidency, corruption also became more apparent. Since privatization benefited a select group of elites connected to the presidency, corruption also became more apparent. Despite maintaining his reputation as a democratic reformer abroad, Akayev's leadership style became more dependent on executive authority, regional favouritism, and personal networks, early warning signs of the political inconsistencies that would lead to the Tulip Revolution. Therefore, even though the newly independent Kyrgyz Republic started out with strong liberal goals, the state's political and economic instability as well as Akayev's developing authoritarian tendencies set the stage for future elite division and public dissatisfaction (Huskey, 1995, pp.27-33).

Akayev's early intentions were clear: political liberalization, market-oriented economic reforms, and a break from the Soviet system's totalitarian heritage. When he took power, he pushed for democratic values like multiparty elections, civil freedoms, and free media. Economically, he prioritized quick

privatization, collaboration with foreign financial institutions, and efforts to integrate Kyrgyzstan into the global market. These early measures established him as a reformist leader in Central Asia, earning Kyrgyzstan the title of "island of democracy" in the area. Over time, his leadership showed the more profound difficulties of establishing democratic governance in an environment characterized by weak institutions, regional divisions, and deeply ingrained informal networks. Yet, his early reformism and rhetorical commitment to democracy marked an unprecedented break from the authoritarian structures of the Soviet Union (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016, pp. 1–2).

As a result, Akayev created a legacy that is both structurally contradictory and symbolic: he represented a new Kyrgyzstan, but it is still increasingly ruled by antiquated logics of exclusion and patronage. The general atmosphere of the early 2000s would be characterized by this conflict between promise and disillusionment, between reform and retreat. The uprising that overthrew his government in 2005 was by no means an exception; rather, it was the political manifestation of widespread complaints and failed democratic expectations. It was the point at which Kyrgyz politics' apparent and actual divide could no longer be maintained; the result would later be known as the Tulip Revolution.

CHAPTER 4: THE TULIP REVOLUTION, A NON-VIOLENT UPRISING

4.1: What are non-violent movements?

This chapter seeks to answer two important concerns that will influence the whole scope of this thesis. Firstly, it examines whether the Tulip Revolution can be correctly described as a peaceful rebellion. Secondly, it looks at the nature and dynamics of nonviolent conflict as a different type of political struggle. Before looking into the particular pattern of Kyrgyzstan to independence and the events of 2005, it is essential to acquire an in-depth knowledge of nonviolent resistance; not merely interpreted as the absence of physical force, but as a strategic and often highly organized mode of collective action capable of challenging entrenched regimes.

Nonviolent conflict is defined as organized rebellion against oppression or injustice that deliberately avoids the use of physical force. Nonviolence is not a passive posture; rather, it is a strategic and purposeful type of struggle that seeks to erode authoritarian regimes' legitimacy and control through active techniques such as protests, strikes, civil disobedience, and non-cooperation. Nonviolent movements use tactics including protests, strikes, civil disobedience, and non-cooperation to bring out political or social change, in contrast to traditional military conflicts or revolutions that depend on pressure through violence. Such activities are frequently based on the idea that political power relies on the trust and compliance of the people, and that unjust systems can be disrupted by withdrawing that consent, even passively. On this matter, a new discipline emerged in the 20th century, studying this kind of conflict. Studies conducted in the last few decades, especially by academics like Chenoweth and Stephan, have shown that nonviolent campaigns are usually more effective and durable than violent ones, especially when they are able to get widespread participation (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011, pp.7-9).

Even when nonviolent conflicts fail their objectives, they frequently leave behind more democratic institutions and better civil societies. Recent studies have shown that nonviolent campaigns are not only more likely to succeed than violent ones, but also typically produce more democratic and long-lasting political outcomes. This is particularly the case of the important empirical work by Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan in Why Civil Resistance Works (2011). According to their examination of more than three hundred uprisings from 1900 to 2006, peaceful movements were more likely to succeed 53% of the time than violent ones, which accomplished only 26%. This notable distinction is primarily since nonviolent campaigns are better able to attract broad participation across social, economic, and ethnic divides. This phenomenon not only puts more pressure on regimes but also encourages a broader awareness of control over the political shift (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011, pp.7-8).

Furthermore, civil society actors' legitimacy and organizational ability are typically maintained through peaceful confrontations. Nonviolent movements are more likely to create inclusive political atmospheres and educational institutions than violent uprisings, which frequently give military factions or charismatic tyrants more authority. These movements frequently leave behind networks, practices, and norms that support democratic accountability, even when the declared goals are only partially met. To put it another way, the legacy of nonviolence goes beyond overthrowing a dictatorship; it also shapes a society's long-term political culture. Other than that, when nonviolent opposition is controlled, it is less likely to result in civil war or widespread persecution. Since authorities are less inclined to use violence against peaceful protesters than against armed rebels, it can undermine their loyalty. In authoritarian or hybrid regimes when state legitimacy is already precarious, this dynamic may be crucial (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011, pp. 9-10).

One of the most remarkable authors on violent conflicts is Gene Sharp. His work has had a significant impact on how activists and academics view unarmed resistance. Sharp criticized the notion that nonviolence is just the absence of violence or a type of moral pacifism in his famous trilogy The Politics of Nonviolent Action (1973). Instead, he described it as a methodical and purposeful political conflict that aims to weaken repressive structures by going for the very foundations of their authority. Political authority, according to Sharp, is supported by pillars such as public obedience, civil cooperation, and economic passivity rather than only coercion or violence. These pillars may gradually erode and eventually fall apart if people collectively refuse to comply, using tactics like protests, boycotts, strikes, or civil disobedience. In this way, nonviolent action transforms into an active resistance strategy that can change the relationships of power without using force (Sharp, 1973, pp.64-72).

Sharp classified the 198 different forms of nonviolent action into three groups: nonviolent intervention, non-cooperation, and nonviolent protest and persuasion. These strategies include aggressive approaches like barricades, sit-ins, and economic shutdowns to more symbolic ones like prayers or petitions. His paradigm gave academics and activists a methodical understanding of how unarmed citizens might still have a political impact despite persecution. Crucially, Sharp underlined that nonviolence can be embraced solely for strategic purposes and is not always based on moral or religious convictions, as Gandhi's tradition suggests. Since nonviolent methods are more likely to work, especially in situations where physical resistance might result in severe repression or delegitimize the cause, many movements, including those without an ideological commitment to pacifism, have utilized them (Sharp, 1973, pp. 64-72).

It is difficult to say that the Tulip Revolution helped Kyrgyzstan to achieve exactly what the people wanted: a democratic country, freed from totalitarianism, corruption, and nepotism. Yet, the Tulip Revolution is a remarkable example of how this discipline, if applied and studied correctly, can be a

very efficient tool for the future of oppressed countries and minorities living in inconvenient situations. The main idea that Gene Sharp and this thesis want to demonstrate is that “non-violence” doctrine shall not be confused as a mere passivity in front of events, as it might be commonly thought. Instead, nonviolence must be interpreted as a strictly strategic way of rebellion, which does not restore in violence and terrorism as many movements do, but it still can be effective in fighting and opposing regimes (Sharp, 1973, pp.64-72)

In the words of Sharp, the Tulip Revolution was an occasion when civic pressure, as opposed to military force, clearly undermined the regime's pillars of power, particularly institutional control and popular compliance. A key idea in Sharp's theory is highlighted by the relative rapidity and lack of violence that marked the president's eventual departure: power can be challenged without resorting to violent conflict when it is viewed as relational and dependent rather than immutable. With the help of this perspective, we may see the revolution as a type of strategic nonviolent conflict that was shaped by elite defection and mass mobilization patterns that closely resemble Sharp's fundamental observations, rather than as a simple story of "spontaneous revolt” (Sharp, 1973, p. 64-72).

This overview of nonviolent campaigns, which will be discussed in the following paragraphs, is essential to comprehending the characteristics of the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan since it emphasizes the tactical decisions, group dynamics, and public incentives that influenced the rebellion. Understanding the reasoning and strategies behind nonviolent action helps us better understand the opposition's tactics, the function of public mobilization, and the peaceful nature that distinguished the revolution against previous types of political uprisings in the area.

4.2: An accidental president

The election of Askar Akayev as president of the Kyrgyz SSR on October 27, 1990, was influenced more by elite impasse than purposeful democratic choice. At that point, the title of president was newly established as part of Gorbachev's reforms, which encouraged republics to experiment with executive authority. The Supreme Soviet (the republic's legal body) held the authority to elect the president via an internal parliamentary vote, and one of the two leading figures in Kyrgyz politics, Absamat Masaliyev, the First Secretary of the Communist Party, or Apas Jumagulov, the Chairman of the Council of Ministers, was expected to win the position. However, the vote exposed deep regional and political splits within the legislature. Masaliyev and Jumagulov were both deeply embedded in the Soviet bureaucracy and represented opposing power blocs: Masaliyev had close relations to Moscow and Communist hardliners, whereas Jumagulov was seen as a more moderate technocrat but remained a member of the old generation. Despite numerous rounds of voting, neither was able to secure a majority, highlighting not only division but also a deeper lack of legitimacy within the Communist

leadership. This standoff left a void; therefore, deputies sought a compromise candidate who could be accepted by all sides.

Akayev was not part of the Communist Party's inner circle and had never held an important political position. His physics education, combined with his experience as a visiting academic in Austria and Russia, gave him a technocratic, apolitical character, making him appear objective, rational, and modern. Importantly, he lacked a strong regional or clan base, making him less worrying to existing elites concerned about the growth of rival patronage networks.
Akayev was viewed as a symbolic president, with the party elite wielding real authority. But everything quickly changed: within a year, the USSR fell, and Akayev found himself at the controls of an independent state, pushed into a role for which he was unprepared (Andersson, 1999, pp.30-35).

In a region ruled over by former Communist authorities eager to reclaim themselves as nationalist strongmen, Akayev's ascent was regarded as a sign of liberal rebirth. International observers and local reformists alike portrayed Akayev as a democratic modernizer. His scientific background, combined with his fluent Russian and cosmopolitan worldview, attracted similarities to Mikhail Gorbachev. In his early statements, Akayev promised to establish political plurality, protect human rights, and promote the market economy. By 1993, a new constitution had been ratified, formalizing a multi-party parliamentary republic with regular elections and civil liberties. The international community, particularly the United States, the OSCE, and several Western NGOs, celebrated Kyrgyzstan as a model for democratic transition in Central Asia (Andersson, 1999, pp.30-35).

At first, Kyrgyzstan gained attention for its progressive course, in contrast to the frequently violent or authoritarian programs followed by other newly independent post-Soviet governments. After being suddenly elected president in 1990, Askar Akayev, a physicist with no clear connections to the top leadership of the Communist Party during the last years of the Soviet Union, became the face of the new country. He received recognition both at home and internationally for his peaceful rise and his genuine dedication to democratic reform. By supporting political pluralism, facilitating the development of civil society, and adopting comparatively liberal economic reforms meant to establish a market-based economy, Akayev disassociated himself from the oppressive legacy of the Soviet era. Despite the promising initial premises, the privatization process turned into an instrument for increasing the financial status of the elite rather than a means of achieving general prosperity. Regional conflicts grew as Kyrgyzstan's post-Soviet transition worsened a long-standing geographical disparity between the north and south. Southern regions, especially Osh and Jalal-Abad, which have a history of more conservative, agrarian, and clan-based social structures, have been systematically sidelined in terms of state investment, infrastructural development, and political representation. Conversely, the northern areas, particularly Bishkek and the Chui Valley, reaped disproportionate benefits from foreign funding, privatisation attempts, and political appointments, becoming the

epicentres of both economic development and elite political structures. This uneven development reinforced ideas of isolation among southern populations, laying the framework for future discontent and activism (Isaeva & Shigaeva, 2017, pp. 210-212).

The idea of Kyrgyzstan as an 'island of democracy' in Central Asia was modelled by external argumentation, diplomatic actions, and conditional aid programs with the goal of fostering the rule of law. Western governments, international organizations, and financial institutions had an interest in emphasizing a democratic success story in a post-Soviet area dominated by repression and tyranny. Kyrgyzstan's peaceful independence, literate populace, and open society make it ideal for this role. Foreign help flooded into the country in the form of technical assistance, civil society support, and macroeconomic stability packages. The United States Peace Corps arrived in vast numbers, while non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as the Soros Foundation, IREX, and Freedom House launched big initiatives. Elections, however imperfect, were held on a regular basis and frequently got excellent feedback despite obvious anomalies (McGlinchey, 2011, pp. 44-45).

To comprehend how Akayev went from promoting liberty, pluralism, and a free market to becoming more authoritarian, one must analyse the difficulties that come with switching between an authoritarian to a democratic government. Political self-determination was made possible by independence, but it also brought with it a sudden disappearance of guaranteed commercial links, centralized Soviet assistance, and the shield of Moscow's planning apparatus. The Soviet state's long-standing social security systems collapsed, productivity fell rapidly, and unemployment increased because of the command economy's breakdown. Wages went unpaid, inflation skyrocketed, and the standard of public services including healthcare and education quickly declined. There were entire populations that were more vulnerable and disenfranchised, especially those living in rural areas in the southern parts of the country (Isaeva & Shigaeva, 2017, pp. 210-212).

Nevertheless, it is critical to acknowledge that the financial suffering, organizational disintegration, and social disorientation experienced in Kyrgyzstan in the early 1990s were not isolated incidents. Similar events played out across the former Soviet Union, most notably in Russia, where the breakdown of central planning resulted in parallel patterns of unemployment, inflation, and the deterioration of government services. By putting Kyrgyzstan's post-independence crises within this larger post-Soviet environment, it is obvious that the difficulties encountered by Akayev's administration were part of a regional trend rather than particularly national faults. This comparative perspective provides conceptual depth to the Kyrgyz instance by emphasizing how institutional legacy and shared systemic shocks impacted the development of new states emerging from the Soviet collapse (Yanowitch, 2017, pp. 16-22).

4.3: Authoritarian drift and Grievances

While Askar Akayev first presented himself as a liberal leader dedicated to plurality, transparency, and market reform, his presidency progressively devolved into a personalized and increasingly authoritarian regime. This shift was not the consequence of a violent coup or mass repression, but rather of a deterioration of democratic principles achieved through constitutional manipulation, media control, and the rise of informal patronage networks. The shift was subtle, frequently rationalized in terms of national stability, modernization, and the necessity for strong leadership. However, by the early 2000s, the Kyrgyz political system had lost most of its early democratic essence while maintaining its outward appearance (Cummings, 2002, pp.125).

One of the most evident indicators of authoritarian drift was the systematic redesign of the state's institutional architecture in favour of the presidency. In 1994, Akayev advocated for a public referendum to dissolve the existing Supreme Soviet and establish a new bicameral legislature. The explanation centred on effectiveness and the necessity for an effective government to accomplish critical changes to the economy. In effect, this enabled Akayev to create a more obedient parliament, diminishing legislative independence and enhancing the executive's power to govern unilaterally. This tendency accelerated in 1996, when another referendum gave the president the authority to issue lawful decrees and strengthened his control over appointments, including those to the court (Huskey, 1997, pp. 254).

While referenda were used to promote these reforms as lawful and democratic, they were frequently rushed, with little debate, and accompanied by numerous claims of corruption. A last, crucial amendment was passed in 2003, further cementing power in the hands of the president and allowing Akayev to establish his personal authority with little opposition from other parts of government. By the early 2000s, the Jogorku Kenesh, which had been envisioned as a pluralistic legislature, had become increasingly obsolete. It lacked both autonomy and popular legitimacy, as electoral manipulation and presidential pressure guaranteed the selection of loyalists. This constitutional engineering enabled Akayev to establish a legal authoritarian system in which the forms of democracy, elections, a parliament, and a constitution, were preserved but the core of democracy had been taken away (Cummings, 2002, pp. 129-130).

The media were a valuable tool for Akayev’s shift into tyranny. Along with institutional centralized governance, Akayev sought to suppress independent voices in the media and civil society. Kyrgyzstan received widespread attention in the early 1990s for its liberal press, particularly in comparison to Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, who have strictly controlled systems. Independent publications, such as Asaba, Res Publica, and Moya Stolitsa, have developed as key outlets for opposition figures and civil activists. However, this openness proved to be temporary. Since the late 1990s, the government has used indirect means of repression to suppress opponents, such as copyright lawsuits, tax inspections, and denial of printing access. State-affiliated corporations frequently bought out or

intimidated independent media outlets, while regulatory bodies put more stress on journalistic staff. Journalists who reported on corruption or nepotism, particularly involving Akayev's family, were hounded, prosecuted, or financially afflicted. Civil society organizations, while numerous and frequently financed by overseas contributors, faced growing challenges. Although Kyrgyz NGOs were not openly outlawed, the government constructed an intricate network of bureaucratic barriers, demanding registration, financial reporting, and, in some cases, collaboration with security agents. The most frequently targeted organizations were those dealing with politically sensitive themes, such as electoral transparency, corruption, or human rights. The state thus established a controlled pluralism in which official civil rights coexisted with informal repression and coercion (McGlinchey, 2011, pp. 46–47).

One of the most visible signs of Kyrgyzstan's authoritarian trend under Akayev was the increasing manipulation of the electoral process, which eventually converted elections from democratic instruments into mechanisms of elite control. While early presidential and parliamentary elections in the 1990s were initially welcomed by international observers as promising signs of democratization, by the turn of the century, they had become progressively managed affairs, intended less to reflect the will of the people than to legitimize Akayev's rule and minimize opposition (Andersson, 1999, pp.37-38). In this sense, the 2000's parliamentary and presidential elections in Kyrgyzstan marked a turning point in the institutionalization of Akayev's nonviolent authoritarian administration. While portrayed as a democratic exercise, these elections were actively managed, exposing how far the electoral process had been sacrificed to the protection of presidential power. The primary control mechanism was not raw force, but rather a combination of legal engineering, selective repression, and state fund manipulation, all of which contributed to the illusion of democratic procedure. Felix Kulov, a former vice president and popular opposition leader, was one of the most notable examples.

Kulov was a professional security official, and politician known as a powerful politician from Kyrgyzstan's northern area, specifically Chüy oblast, where he enjoyed widespread popularity. Kulov served in several positions in the Soviet Ministry of Internal Affairs and the KGB before becoming Minister of the Interior in independent Kyrgyzstan. He additionally worked as Akayev's Vice President from 1992 to 1993, before leaving due to differences over corruption and reform. Kulov eventually became the mayor of Bishkek and the head of the National Security Service, where he earned an image of being a strict, law-and-order governor. However, by the late 1990s, he had established himself as a reformer and anti-corruption figure, becoming more sceptical of Akayev's consolidation of authority. Kulov launched the Ar-Namys (Dignity) party in 1999, and it swiftly established itself as one of the country's most powerful opposition parties. His popularity, administrative expertise, and reputation among urban voters made him a viable presidential candidate. Shortly after announcing his intention to run for parliament, he was imprisoned on corruption accusations that were perceived as politically motivated. Despite being first absolved Kulov was

re-arrested on new accusations and convicted again in a closed trial; his legal intimidation intended to destroy an electoral rival and to terrify others (Fueller, 2005, pp. 10-25).

Akayev not only used targeted repression but also changed electoral legislation to disrepute the opposition. The administration imposed new residency restrictions and allegiance oaths for candidates, excluding a number of independents and opposition leaders, frequently on arbitrary or selective reasons (Huskey, 1997, pp. 253- 254). The Central Electoral Commission, while officially independent, effectively served as an arm of the presidency, dismissing appeals and rubber-stamping pro-government judgments. Meanwhile, state-controlled media silenced opposing viewpoints, portraying Akayev as a guarantor of stability while characterizing critics as "extremists" or foreign agents. Opposition publications, including Res Publica, endured administrative persecution, tax inspections, and accusations of defamation in the lead-up to the elections. International observers from the OSCE and the CIS Election Monitoring Mission highlighted serious anomalies, including double voting, ballot stuffing, and the blocking of opposition campaign events, though the latter minimized criticism due to regional sympathies and Russia's support for Akayev (Abdikaev, 2000, pp. 5-17).

Nonetheless, Akayev continued to present himself to the international community as a moderate reformer, and Western powers like the US and the OSCE were cautious in their condemnation. The United States, for example, prioritized regional stability and collaboration in security and anti-terrorism measures, especially following 2001, retaining strong diplomatic connections with Akayev's leadership and even creating a military facility at Manas Airport (Radnitz, 2005, pp.151). Yet, for the Kyrgyz voters, the elections exposed the growing chasm between the official rhetoric of democracy and the daily reality of marginalization. Thus, the 2000’s elections did more than just show a decline in democracy; they established a system of managed electoral authoritarianism, in which political pluralism was tolerated only within the regime's set parameters. These events played a significant role in fostering the long-term discontent that would emerge in 2005, confirming that Kyrgyzstan's seeming stability was maintained not by public legitimacy, but by the nonviolent suppression of democratic competition (Abdikaev, 2000, pp. 5-17).

In Akayev’s authoritarian shift, a pivotal role was played by the gradual neo patrimonial consolidation of power, which weakened out official institutions and replaced them with personalistic, kin-based, and clientelist governing structures. While Kyrgyzstan maintained the appearance of a presidential republic with democratic procedures Akayev increasingly dominated through a network of loyal elites, many of whom were linked to him by personal loyalty, regional loyalty, or familial connections. The integration grew stronger in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when Akayev began openly pushing his own family members to significant governmental and economic positions. His daughter, Bermet Akayeva, was elected to parliament, and his son, Aidar Akayev, was quickly promoted to high-level

posts inside state enterprises and financial institutions, which were interpreted as laying the framework for a familial inheritance. Such practices damaged public trust and institutional legitimacy as governmental jobs were increasingly seen as patrimonial resources, allocated primarily on loyalty and relatives rather than merit (Collins, 2006, pp.150-152).

The logic of neopatrimonialism also meant that the state apparatus became inextricably linked with the president's personal power. Bureaucratic institutions, courts, and security services did not act as independent, rule-bound bodies, but rather as presidential instruments for suppressing criticism, protecting friends, and distributing patronage. This was especially clear in how the state selectively enforced laws against political opponents like Felix Kulov while ignoring corruption within government officials. Akayev's administration defined opportunistic governance, in which regime-linked elites monopolized assets and agreements, transforming the economy into a rent-extracting system (Kubicek, 2011, pp.718-733).

Neopatrimonialism consolidation also had important regional and ethnic implications. Akayev relied heavily on connections from his native region of Chui and the north to establish influence over the south, which was previously more populated, numerous, as well as fragile. This not only exacerbated regional inequality, but also fuelled long-standing conflicts, as southern elites and communities were more sidelined in the transfer of power and economic resources. These exclusionary patterns alienated sectors of the populace and contributed to the idea of an "inner circle" administration that was distant from citizens' daily hardships. By the early 2000s, neo patrimonial control was becoming the Akayev government's distinctive feature, preserving superficial institutionalism but operating through informal connections of patronage, favouritism, and coercion (Kubicek, 2011, pp.718-733).

This methodology, while less obviously violent than other authoritarian governments, was extremely disruptive over time: it weakened democratic legitimacy, fuelled discontent among excluded groups, and eventually helped generate the public uprising that drove Akayev out of office in 2005.

A last, but not less important, point that must be mentioned in Akayev’s shift is the regional fragmentation between north and south Kyrgyzstan. While Akayev, a northerner from the Chui area, initially enjoyed widespread national support, his long-term policy shifted toward appointing officials and distributing state resources along regional and clan lines, disproportionately benefiting northern elites. This strategy eventually alienated southern power representatives, particularly in financially and demographically important cities of Osh and Jalal-Abad. The regime's concentration of power around a small group of northern loyalists showed and strengthened a patrimonial logic of control, in which relatives and origins were more important than merit or representation. Over time, the uneven distribution of political access and patronage exacerbated regional tensions, undermining the central government's legitimacy in the eyes of many southerners. These divisions not only harmed national cohesion but also played a critical part in the mobilization against Akayev during the 2005 Tulip

Revolution, with much of the grassroots protest energy coming from the excluded southern provinces. Thus, regional exclusion was both a result of neopatrimonialism and a cause of regime fragility (Collins, 2006, pp.189-190).

As a response to Akayev's growing power, people of Kyrgyzstan started, in the beginning of this century, to mobilize against the president. He promised to rule a free country, a country which would have differed from the Soviet Union and its lack of liberty. When the population understood that the country was progressively becoming increasingly like the Soviet Union, it rapidly started to mobilize. The gradual spread of public discontent throughout Kyrgyz society was one of the characteristics of the protests that developed under President Askar Akayev's administration. Over time, the complaints grew more widespread, involving a range of social groups that were previously politically inactive or detached, though the early opposition came from dispersed and weak sectors. Conditions for widespread dissatisfaction were facilitated by the decline in confidence in democratic institutions, the increase in inequality, and the obvious establishment in corruption and nepotism. This widespread opposition served as the foundation for the Tulip Revolution of 2005, but its origins may be found in the increasing alienation of important socioeconomic groupings during Akayev's second decade in charge (Cummings, 2012, pp.93-97).

Young people and university students, especially those in towns like Bishkek, Osh, and Jalal-Abad, were among the clearest and involved groups inside this changing social scene. Young people were the most enthusiastic segments of society in the early years of Kyrgyz independence, encouraged by Akayev's early promises of democratic change and transparency. However, economic stagnation, a lack of employment possibilities, and growing political repression had severely damaged these aspirations by the early 2000s. The younger generation was one of the first to express opposition to the rising authoritarianism, particularly those who had access to higher education and outside inspirations. Many young activists functioned as crucial agents between community action and national discussion of politics, although not always having official affiliations with opposition parties. They were also particularly skilled at rapidly organizing and spreading messages of resistance because of their enthusiasm, networks, and computer literacy, especially in an environment where state media was strictly regulated (Cummings, 2012, pp.93-97).

Even if students and young people were the most mobilized in this process, all the layers of the society engaged in this early uprising that would have preceded the Tulip Revolution. With a focus on the strategic logic behind nonviolent movements, Erica Chenoweth, professor of human rights and international affairs and Maria Stephan, former US State department official, investigate why civic resistance is more effective than violent insurgency. They claim that widespread involvement is essential to the success of these movements because it lends them more legitimacy, along with pressure on governments. By employing strategic preparation and coordination to take advantage of

regime vulnerabilities, nonviolent organizations can organize a variety of social groupings without the high risks associated with military confrontation (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011, pp. 30-40).

The rural population was another crucial source of dissent, especially in the southern Osh, Batken, and Jalal-Abad regions where political marginalization and economic hardship had become particularly severe. Kyrgyz politics has long been marked by a North-South regional division, but Akayev's growing dependence on northern elites and his marginalization of southern leaders caused a deep sense of estrangement among southern populations. Many Kyrgyz in the countryside believed that development projects in Bishkek disproportionately benefited the capital and its environs, and that their opinions were routinely disregarded. In the South, the nepotism and patronage of the dictatorship were tangible realities that affected everyday life for small farmers, market vendors, and young people without jobs. Dissatisfaction in the South was frequently more urgent and economic in nature than in the capital, where protests tended to be more intellectual or politically centred. The subsequent major mobilizations that started in the South and eventually moved north during the 2005 uprisings were influenced by this regional unrest.

Even though they worked in a progressively oppressive atmosphere, civil society organizations were crucial in establishing a culture of dissent. NGOs and non-state actors briefly flourished in the 1990s, with the help of international organizations that encourage democracy and human rights as well as Western funders. Even though this area had shrunk by the 2000s, multiple groups persisted in their efforts to promote civic engagement, legal rights, voter education, and anti-corruption initiatives. These groups played a key role in recording abuses of power, keeping an eye on elections, and creating local leaders. In certain instances, they even assisted in organizing nonviolent demonstrations or promoted communication between the local government and civilians. Although these groups' influence was unequal and frequently restricted to metropolitan areas, they provided residents with a language to express their complaints and supported a normative framework that accepted peaceful forms of protest (Cummings, 2012, pp.93-97).

Despite operating in an increasingly oppressive environment, civil society organizations played a critical role in cultivating a culture of resistance. NGOs and non-state actors grew in the 1990s, thanks to Western funding and international organizations that promoted democracy and rights for people. The Coalition for Democracy and Civil Society played an important role in voter information and election monitoring, as did Citizens Against Corruption, which focused on exposing abuses of power and fostering transparency. The Kyrgyz Committee for Human Rights (KCHR) regularly recorded human rights breaches, while Interbilim supported grassroots campaigns and civic participation. Although the civic environment shrank dramatically in the 2000s, many of these organizations remained in their attempts to promote public involvement, legal awareness, and nonviolent mobilization. In several situations, they have helped to arrange peaceful protests or encourage

conversation between local officials and civilians. While their influence was frequently limited to urban centers such as Bishkek, these groups provided residents with a means and skills to communicate complaints and helped legitimize peaceful forms of protest within Kyrgyz society (Cummings, 2012, pp.93-97; McGlinchy, 2011, pp.46-48).

When analysing more on depth the reasons behind grievances around Akayev's governance, it is important to bear in mind that, as Gene Sharp argued in The Politics of Nonviolent Action (1973), the intensity and character of these grievances rendered nonviolent mobilization not only strategically necessary but also a type of "active resistance rooted in power analysis" that might threaten the foundations of authoritarian control (Sharp, 1973). The regime's growing reliance on networks of patronage and nepotism was one of the most widespread accusations. Akayev's family members and close friends gained important positions in politics and business as he consolidated power. Many citizens thought that loyalty and blood ties, rather than merit, now determined access to power, changing the laws of social mobility. Widespread hostility was cultivated by this exclusionary dynamic, especially among educated professionals and younger generations. According to the logic of nonviolence theory, this decline in legitimacy reflects the regime's "sources of power" becoming weaker. Theorists such as Gene Sharp have stressed this idea, contending that authoritarian rule can only last if the governed comply and cooperate (Huskey, 2005, pp.132-146).

Apart from political exclusion, economic frustrations was a critical issue. Significant disparities had been created by the 1990s reforms. Privatization and international alliances benefited a small few, while most people faced increased unemployment and challenges. Whole segments of the labour force have been pushed into forced migration or poverty, especially in rural areas. Because they got less governmental funding and infrastructure investment, southern areas like Osh and Jalal-Abad were particularly impacted. Many saw the structural isolation brought about by these socioeconomic differences as having both material and symbolic components. Many people found that the only way to seek acknowledgment and justice was to protest (Huskey, 2005, pp.132-146). During this time, the Kyrgyz state progressively distanced itself from its civic responsibilities rather than acting as an extra layer of protection. As fundamental necessities like healthcare, education, and pensions declined, individuals were forced to deal with an increasingly precarious and corrupted informal sector. Corruption had grown widespread throughout daily business life and was no longer limited to the political elite. Furthermore, a small group of officials with ties to Akayev had benefited from the privatization process, while many regular people had suffered. These results fuelled a perception of economic unfairness that was widely held. The daily episodes of corruption, the economic hardship of peripheral regions, and the obvious prosperity of the president's relatives fuelled popular discontent in Kyrgyzstan (Lewis, 2008, pp. 20-40).

The inaccessibility and politicization of the legal system was another major cause of discomfort, even though that was less obvious than financial suffering or fraud in elections. Under Akayev, the courts progressively ceased to serve as impartial arbiters of justice and instead became tools for strengthening the rule of law. Whereas relatives of Akayev's family and their relationships were allowed to go free of charge, opposition figures, journalists, and civil society players were frequently the targets of purely political trials. The public developed a strong belief that legal institutions were not only ineffectual but also essentially corrupt because of this unequal administration of justice. Prices, complexity, and the requirement for unofficial fees or personal ties significantly restricted the ability of common people to access the courts. A person's closeness to authority frequently determined the outcome of a lawsuit more so than its achievements. Formal dispute resolution was almost pointless due to the lack of trust in legal systems, particularly in rural areas where authorities were already scarce. The notion of achieving justice through institutional methods seemed pointless in such a situation. Nonviolent theory states that citizens are more prone to use extra-institutional forms of resistance, such as nonviolent non-cooperation, when they believe that institutional and legal options are blocked or coopted. Consequently, the decline of Kyrgyz legal power was crucial in persuading many people, especially in the areas, that protest was the only way to confront unfairness and regain a public voice (Lewis, 2008, pp. 161-162; Sharp, 1973, pp. 42-43).

The general view that elections had become a built and useless process, which added to public dissatisfaction with official governing systems, was linked to the erosion of legal credibility. In the 1990s, Kyrgyzstan stood out in Central Asia for its unusually free political atmosphere and contested elections. However, by the early 2000s, the situation had changed dramatically: the political arena had become tightly regulated, with candidates from the opposition often banned or intimidated. The 2005 parliamentary elections were regarded as a symbol of the regime's fall into electoral autocracy, as it will be discussed. There were several reports of vote-buying, voter intimidation, and misappropriation of government funds, and Akayev's family members were publicly active in the contest, raising questions regarding dynastic inheritance. Many Kyrgyz saw these elections as an important moment, with the symbolic promise of democratic participation not just abandoned but publicly derided. Furthermore, the lack of judicial systems to challenge illegal outcomes meant that electoral complaints could not be settled by legal channels. This exacerbated the overall sense of institutional isolation and contributed to the logic of extra-institutional opposition, which was already taking shape in rural areas and among marginalized populations (Huskey, 2005, pp. 140-141). Nonviolent resistance theory emphasizes that when conventional paths of change are consistently closed, even moderate citizens may come to see collective upheaval as their only available means of affecting the electoral process. The apparent violation of electoral legitimacy therefore functioned not merely as a grievance, but as a strategic turning point in the mobilization that resulted in the Tulip Revolution (Sharp, 1973, pp.45-48).

Another significant cause of public discontent under Akayev was the continuous increase in labour migration and intellectual flight in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Many Kyrgyz nationals, particularly those from rural and southern districts, have left the country to find work in Russia, Kazakhstan, and other former Soviet Union countries. This tendency was particularly noticeable in young people, notably recent graduates, and professionals, who faced restricted work opportunities, scarce resources, and insufficient resources at home. In lack of domestic options, emigrating became a common response to economic stagnation and institutional failure. While migrant's resources were a significant component of income for families and national economic stability, they also demonstrated the Kyrgyz economy's growing reliance on external labour markets. This reliance showed not only fundamental financial fragility, but also the state's incapacity to incorporate its own population into a viable national economy (International Crisis Group, 2005, pp. 5-6).

The loss of skilled labour had ramifications outside the economy. It inhibited the ability of regions to organize themselves, prevented the growth of an autonomous middle class, and disrupted intergenerational relationships. Furthermore, migration caused a type of political alienation in which many residents lost faith in the state's ability to provide upward mobility, economic security, and legal protection. According to civil resistance theory, this is a form of social non-cooperation in which citizens gradually remove their involvement from institutions they consider illegitimate or ineffectual (Sharp, 1973, pp. 221-222). Immigration was not characterized as a political act by those who carried it out, but its cumulative effect eroded the regime's social and economic foundations. The noticeable emigration of younger and more educated parts of the population was widely viewed within the country as evidence that success and stability were no longer achievable inside Kyrgyzstan's boundaries. At the same time, increasing dependency on payments exacerbated feelings of dependence and vulnerability among those who stayed. This led to a growing sense of separation, both from the national economy and from promises of freedom. In this setting, migration served as a systemic indication of deteriorating regime’s authority, increasing other concerns and further reducing the scope for reform through institutional methods (International Crisis Group, 2005, pp. 5-6; McGlinchey, 2011, pp. 94-95).

4.4: Akayev’s oppositions: the minds behind the Tulip Revolution

While regional grievances, initial protest, and independent civic participation pushed the Tulip Revolution's early phases, established political opposition actors played a more significant role in the escalation phase, especially in the days preceding the regime's overthrow. When the revolutionary momentum switched from regional upheaval to a national political crisis, individuals who had previously worked under Akayev but had now fallen into opposition or marginalization, such Kurmanbek Bakiyev, Roza Otunbayeva, Felix Kulov, and Omurbek Tekebayev, came back to public

importance. Despite not starting the protest motion, these powerful individuals swiftly established themselves as a bridge between the public and the government, leveraging their media connections, institutional expertise, and reputations to attract support and provide the movement with a political focus (Marat, 2009, pp.127-130).

With a political base in the South that reflected the protests' physical centre, Bakiyev became a crucial unifying point who could both articulate local dissatisfaction and project himself as a suitable transitional leader. Ex ambassador and well-respected conservative Rosa Otunbayeva emerged as a significant legitimacy symbol, especially in the eyes of urban elites and foreign watchers. Even though they were more in the background at this point, Tekebayev and Kulov were still quite important in aristocratic negotiations and political cooperation (Radnitz, 2006, pp.136-138).

Instead of being purely opportunistic, the opposition's participation served as a link between elite-driven transitions and popular mobilisation. Opposition leaders helped turn public anger into a coordinated political challenge by interacting with civil society actors, releasing unified statements, and attending demonstrations. Specifically, this made it possible for what Sharp would later refer to as the removal of support from the regime's fundamental structural foundations by including foreign actors, former military contacts, and intermediate officials in talks regarding a post-Akayev state (Sharp, 1973, p.45-50).

The movement was kept from losing focus or degenerating into division by their status, which also gave demonstrators confidence that there was a viable alternative to the current leadership. This elite interaction did not come without conflict, unfortunately. Many regional organizers and civil society activists doubted the opposition's intentions, believing that well-known individuals would just appropriate the revolution and replicate the same clientelist systems under a different name. The relationship between the ruling class and lower levels actors was, in fact, characterized by mutual suspicion: activists were cautious about losing the moral and collaborative integrity that had characterized the early movement, even as they looked to opposition figures to negotiate with the regime and project power (McGlinchey, 2011, pp. 46–47; Heathershaw, 2009, pp. 393–396).

Yet, the triumph of the uprising was driven by a convergence of interests between marginalized political elites, who coordinated efforts to delegitimize Akayev's rule, and common popular action, particularly in the south, where issues over regional inequalities and fraud in elections fuelled massive demonstrations. It is doubtful that the movement would have succeeded in capturing the capital peacefully or in achieving a minimum coherent transfer of power without the organizational and symbolic strength provided by individuals such as Bakiyev and Otunbayeva. Consequently, the opposition's involvement casts doubt on the idea that the Tulip Revolution was a strictly bottom-up event and shows that even if nonviolent upheavals are based on grassroots activism and peaceful protest, they often depend on elite intervention to bring about real change in the government.

This relationship, in which political players institutionalize popular action, would have long-term effects on the post-revolutionary era, especially because some of these individuals reclaimed their positions of power. Their involvement highlighted the fact that, in hybrid regimes, regime transition frequently involves a compromise between elite replacement and public rebellion instead of a total shift, even though it did not diminish the revolutionary spirit of the Tulip campaign (Radnitz, 2006, pp.136-138).

4.5: The role of International Actors in the Tulip Revolution

While the Tulip Revolution of 2005 was motivated by local anger as well as grassroots mobilization, global actors had an important, even if often indirect, role in creating the greater atmosphere in which the rebellion occurred. Foreign governments, transnational NGOs, and multilateral organizations all had an impact on Kyrgyzstan's political growth all over the post-Soviet era, especially in terms of democracy, civil society support, and election surveillance. These actors did not create the revolution; nevertheless, they helped to create social spaces, disseminate standards, and transfer mobilisation techniques, all of which enabled domestic actors to oppose authoritarian rule (Bayalieva-Jailobaeva, 2014, pp. 360-374).

After gaining sovereignty in 1991, Kyrgyzstan soon became the focal point of Western democratic initiatives in Central Asia. Because of President Akayev's comparatively liberal government, the country received international media coverage and financial support. The United States, through USAID and other European agencies, started to invest in electoral aid, NGO creation, and media pluralism. Institutions such as the National Endowment for Democracy and the Open Society Foundations financed an extensive number of civil society groups, many of whom later became involved in election monitoring, protest arranging, and activist education. Western-funded non-governmental organizations (NGOs) educated Kyrgyz activists to the ideals of nonviolent resistance and civil mobilization, especially the strategic strategy advocated by Gene Sharp (Sharp, 1973, pp.15-35).

KelKel rebel group was specifically inspired by comparable organizations based in Serbia (Otpor!) and Georgia (Kmara), both of which were key players in the nonviolent Colour Revolutions of the early 2000s. These groups did not act as foreign agents; rather, they contributed to a larger global interchange of thoughts about democratic transformation and civic resistance. KelKel (meaning "renaissance" or "rebirth" in Kyrgyz), a youth organization founded in early 2005, was one of the most visible civil society actors during the 2005 Tulip Revolution. It was inspired by Serbia's "Otpor!" organization and Georgia's "Kmara". KelKel, inspired by the previous Colour Revolutions' nonviolent strategies and symbolic promotion, took a similar method: young, anti-authoritarian, and cantered on peaceful mobilization rather than ideological conflict. Regional NGOs and international

organizations familiar with the Serbian experience provided training and strategic advice to the group's participants, including material based on Gene Sharp's publications and "Otpor!"s activist handbooks (Khamidov, 2006, pp. 85-93).

Although KelKel possessed a limited national organizational framework and a strong rural presence, it was influential in metropolitan areas such as Bishkek, in which it coordinated flash protests, graffiti campaigns, leaflet distributions, and highly visible sit-ins to delegitimize the Akayev dictatorship. Its symbolism, which included a green apple as its trademark (as opposed to the tulip eventually adopted by wider resistance movements), as well as phrases like "KelKel: the future is ours," aimed to integrate youth identity with democratic rebirth. Even if not viewed as the primary motivation supporting mass mobilization in the southern regions, KelKel's significance resided in its symbolic evocation of the pan-regional history of nonviolent youth movements, which placed Kyrgyzstan within a shared repertoire of post-Soviet civil resistance. Its emphasis on decentralized activity, peaceful protest, and visually appealing communication echoed the strategic logic of its Serbian and Georgian predecessors, demonstrating the international spread of protest techniques and the soft power of revolutionary identity (Khamidov, 2006, pp. 85-93).

On the external level, international election surveillance was a major element of this impact, and it had a twofold effect in Kyrgyzstan. On the one hand, organizations like the OSCE conducted independent assessments of election quality, constantly discovering serious flaws in the elections during Akayev's mandate. On the other hand, these judgments undermined the government's legitimacy by providing moral and rhetorical support to domestic players opposing the outcomes. The February and March 2005 elections for legislatures marked a watershed moment. The OSCE investigations revealed ballot stuffing, media bias, and voter intimidation, undermining the government's attempt to depict the elections as democratic processes. Civil society groups, frequently sponsored by foreign funders, assisted in gathering and disseminating evidence of electoral manipulation both locally and globally. The combination of internal dissent and worldwide criticism gave the opposition both recognition and energy (Bayalieva-Jailobaeva, 2014, pp. 360-374).

However, the Tulip Revolution had a global aspect that extended beyond Western players. Russia had a long and complicated relationship with Kyrgyzstan, as both a former imperialist state and a regional hegemon. Russia supported Akayev throughout the 1990s, but by the mid-2000s, its posture had become more equivocal. Moscow remained concerned about Central Asia's stability, but it had grown increasingly suspicious of Akayev's ability to govern efficiently. Unlike in Ukraine and Georgia, in which Russia vehemently opposed the Colour Revolutions, the Kremlin took a less aggressive position in Kyrgyzstan. Despite open hostility to Western-backed democracy promotion, Russia did not interfere significantly to maintain Akayev's authority, instead shifting its backing to the opposition figure of Kurmanbek Bakiyev right after the administration collapsed. This adaptability indicates that

Russia put pragmatic interests, continuity of influence and regional security, before personal devotion to Akayev. The months that followed the revolution also underlined Moscow's willingness to accept political shifts as long as its geopolitical position remained unaltered (Ishiyama & Kennedy, pp. 1177-1191).

Meanwhile, neighbouring authoritarian regimes such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan viewed the revolution with concern and scepticism They viewed the vast events in Kyrgyzstan not as a spontaneous democratic upheaval, rather as the consequence of Western influence aiming at destabilising the area. In the months following Akayev's removal, the governments in question imposed new limitations on NGOs, strengthened regulation of foreign funding, and strengthened censorship to prevent similar movements within their borders. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization, led by China and Russia, provided a platform for expressing objections to external political involvement, demonstrating how the Tulip Revolution got involved in the larger geopolitical competition for cultural impact in the post-Soviet sphere. This privatization of civic society throughout the area was one of the revolution's unforeseen consequences (Kantarci, 2007, pp. 820-829).

While global participation certainly affected aspects of the Tulip Revolution, it is vital to avoid rigid theories that ignore the role of domestic players and structural internal causes. The Tulip Revolution was neither planned in Washington or Brussels, nor was it a puppet rebellion orchestrated by foreign forces. Rather, foreign actors offered resources, tools, and conceptual support to Kyrgyz civil society, strengthening its ability to oppose totalitarian tendencies. Their job was facilitative, not directive. The revolution's success was based on local players' ability grasp the opportunity, capitalize on public outrage, and mobilize across regional and socioeconomic boundaries. The demonstrations in southern places including Osh and Jalal-Abad were motivated by distinct grievances, economic marginalization, regional injustice, and lack of political representation, which could not have been triggered by outside.

In this context, the international influence on the Tulip Revolution must be viewed as part of a larger ecosystem of resistance. Foreign support contributed to the conditions required for nonviolent mobilization, while external validation eroded regime credibility. Regional powers responded by recalibrating their strategies, either to restore control or to prevent further revolutions. The interaction of these factors defined the conditions that the domestic actors worked. However, it was the inherent structure of Kyrgyz society, the history of previous reforms, and persistence that resulted in political change. Thus, the Tulip Revolution was the result of local activity functioning within a global system, rather than international architecture.

4.6: The use of media

The media played a significant and intricate part in the Tulip Revolution. Despite a brief era of press freedom in the early 1990s, Kyrgyzstan's official media system was increasingly under official pressure at the time of the 2005 rebellion. In contrast to neighbouring Central Asian governments like Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, it continued to be semi-open. State-run radios and free media sources were able to co-exist in this mixed media ecosystem, which created a contested area where public debate could still take place. Importantly, it made it possible for opposition organizations to arrange demonstrations, spread information about wrongdoing by the government, and damage the credibility of the Akayev administration. Despite the state's efforts to centralize narrative control through administrative repression and television, local journalists and civil society activists took advantage of the media at their disposal to get beyond official channels. The horizontal networks and widespread complaints that support nonviolent mobilization were developed in part thanks to this media strategy (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011, pp. 35-40).

Independent newspapers such as Res Publica, Moya Stolitsa, and Asaba played an important part in revealing fraud and electoral manipulation in the run to the legislative elections in February and March 2005. Despite vast economic and judicial pressure, these publications continued to release investigative pieces on nepotism, elite enrichment, and vote-rigging, focusing mainly on the candidacy of Akayev's children in parliamentary elections (McGlinchey, 2011, pp. 46–47). In an era when established opposition groups had little influence and legitimacy, the independent press served as an observatory and mobilizer.

Despite court proceedings, tax inspections, and pressure from Akayev, these publications maintained an active audience, particularly among students, activists, and politically informed people located in urban areas such as Bishkek and Osh. In this situation, tactical media mobilization was more than simply educating the public; it was also about fighting authority. It launched what Gene Sharp would call a "nonviolent offensive" in the digital arena, weakening the regime's authority by delegitimization, rather than direct confrontation (Sharp, 1973, pp. 67-70).

Television became the strongest channel in Kyrgyzstan due to its large audience, but it was also the most rigorously censored. State television frequently depicted Akayev as a guarantor of peace and growth, while protestors were seen as destabilizing or controlled by foreign players. Nevertheless, cruel propaganda frequently backfired. In southern districts such as Jalal-Abad and Osh, where frustration was already burning for its economic marginalization, the gap between reality and television stories exacerbated feelings of exclusion. According to Cummings, the state's media strategy created a "perception of cognitive dissonance," with official speech becoming more removed from the realities of ordinary Kyrgyz people (Cummings, 2012, pp.92-95). The discrepancy was evident in February 2005, when state television minimized or disregarded news of protest movements

in the South, only allowing mobile phone texts and word-of-mouth communication to contradict the official narrative, creating a sense of "invisible momentum" between activists.

Although access to the internet remained modest in 2005, the increasing availability of mobile phones, email, and text messaging helped informal coordination among activists. These methods enabled information to spread quickly from village councils and local demonstrations to bigger audiences, resulting in the "decentralized diffusion of dissent" described by Chenoweth and Stephan. Despite the lack of advanced digital platforms, activists were able to use mobile technology to synchronize demonstrations, indicate police warnings, and mobilize followers in real time. This reflects, in a basic sense, the role that social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter would subsequently play during the Arab Spring revolts of 2011. In Egypt and Tunisia, for example, activists used online platforms to organize gatherings, record persecution, and get international attention. While Kyrgyzstan's technological foundation was less sophisticated, its strategic motivation was comparable: media served as both a shield and a weapon, protecting dissidents from isolation while also challenging the regime's narrative dominance (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011; Comunello & Anzera, 2012, pp. 453-470).

During the Tulip Revolution, the ability of media strategy to develop symbols and narratives that united a fractured opposition was very essential. Though the phrase "Tulip Revolution" was invented by external observers rather than local participants, local journalists, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) rapidly adopted flowery and peaceful images to separate the movement from violent protests. Tulip symbols became a visual shorthand for civic resistance and national rejuvenation, with implicit similarities to Georgia's "Rose" and "Orange" revolutions in 2003 and 2004, respectively. By adopting this symbolic framework, activists were able to frame the demonstration as part of a bigger trend of democratic transformation, a vital step in drawing popular support and diminishing the government's ability to portray them as radical (Lewis, 2008, pp. 163-164). Furthermore, several non-governmental organizations involved in voter registration and civic awareness prepared posters and brochures with nonviolent imagery and slogans such as "Democracy begins with your voice" and "Our future is in our hands" that were given on university campuses and in markets. These images supported the notion that peaceful action was both ethical and patriotic (Juraev, 2013, pp. 37-38).

As a result, the media's participation in the Tulip Revolution should be viewed as simultaneously divisive and strategic. It was neither completely suppressed nor entirely free but rather integrated in a hybrid structure that allowed for modest but accessible civic opposition. Opposition parties and civil society actors were successful in constructing counter-narratives and coordinating decentralized protests, using both traditional print media and emerging technology such as mobile phones. Their acts are consistent with the theoretical paradigm proposed by Sharp, Chenoweth, and Stephan, which

views control over the flow of data as crucial to the power dynamics of nonviolent resistance. In this regard, the Tulip Revolution anticipates later revolutions as those in the Arab countries, demonstrating how even limited media exposure, when effectively utilized, may significantly change the path of political rebellion.

4.7: The Tulip Revolution

The Tulip Revolution took place between February and March 2005, marking the end of more than a decade of political dissatisfaction, regional isolation, and systematic manipulation of Kyrgyzstan's democratic institutions. While its spontaneous nature was frequently emphasised in Western media, a closer examination reveals a sophisticated and layered mobilization, founded in profound societal issues and structured by strategic nonviolent resistance. The rebellion was not the consequence of a single organization or leader, but rather of convergent discontents, regional cooperation, and cumulative mobilization that eventually shattered President Askar Akayev's authoritarian pillars of power.

The parliamentary elections, held in two rounds on February 27 and March 13, 2005, provided an instant spark for the uprising. These elections were projected to strengthen President Akayev's hold on the legislative branch and open the way for a potential dynastic succession involving his son Aidar and daughter Bermet. The Central Election Commission, which has long been accused of lacking independence, dismissed numerous candidates from the opposition based on unclear or technicalities. These included "residency violations, failure to submit income declarations, or insufficient paperwork," which were often arbitrarily implemented. The most high-profile issues surrounded the victories of Aidar and Bermet Akayeva, both of whom were elected amid numerous suspicions of manipulation. Their candidacies were viewed not just as nepotistic, but also as a direct affront to the public, representing government attitude. According to Kathleen Collins: "The 2005 elections revealed how far Akayev had moved from pluralism: the contest was not between parties or ideologies, but between the people and a personalized, dynastic regime." Following the first round, dozens of small-scale protests erupted throughout Kyrgyzstan's southern region. These were not instantly revolutionary in tone but sought reprises of illegitimate elections and investigations into local corruption. The official results of the two-round parliamentary election, conducted on February 27 and March 13, 2005, showed that pro-presidential nominees won a commanding majority of votes. According to the Central Election Commission, out of 75 available seats in the new unicameral parliament, at least 53 were won by pro-Akayev people, many of whom were members of the president's relatives, personal group, or business partners. The opposition, which was fractured and weakened by arbitrary disqualifications, media restrictions, and legal intimidation, won only a few seats. The Ar-Namys Party, led by Felix Kulov, an incarcerated opposition leader, was effectively

demolished as a national force through electoral manipulation. In a particularly contentious issue, opposition leader Roza Otunbayeva was disqualified from running outright owing to technicalities relating to her previous diplomatic service abroad (Collins, 2006, pp. 191).

The newly elected parliament was widely seen as illegitimate, not just because of the manner in which it was elected, but also because of who was chosen. Many individuals regarded the presence of the president's son and daughter, Aidar and Bermet Akayeva, as proof of a dynastic plan. In addition, international observers expressed mixed evaluations. While the OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) acknowledged considerable improvements in technical administration over previous elections, it also condemned serious procedural irregularities. In their early findings, the OSCE stated that, despite some positive elements, the elections fell short of international standards in several key areas, including the integrity of the process and equal conditions for all candidates. (OSCE/ODIHR Report, 2005, p.2).

The Tulip Revolution did not start as a planned national insurrection. It developed from a series of localized mobilizations, primarily in southern Kyrgyzstan, which quickly grew because of systemic grievances and Akayev's incapacity to crush opposition without inciting reprisal. The initial cause may be tracked back to the contentious 2005 parliamentary elections, but the first actual act of insurrection came from supporters of opposition candidates in the Jalal-Abad area. The mobilizations in Jalal-Abad and Osh in March 2005 marked not only a local increase of anger, but also the start of a national revolutionary movement that would culminate in President Askar Akayev's overthrow. The southern protests, known as "the Southern Spark," were important since they arose in places historically associated with political exclusion, financial imbalance, and historical alienation from northern-dominated state structures. The Ferghana Valley area, which includes both cities, had been ignored by the Akayev's dictatorship in favour of elites from the north, increasing a regional split that created an ideal environment for political opponents. Many people in Jalal-Abad, first organized by local civil society activists and Kurmanbek Bakiyev supporters, started occupying government buildings, conducting sit-ins, and planning marches calling for Akayev's dismissal. These were not impulsive displays of defiance; rather, they represented a form of organized nonviolent resistance that expressed Gene Sharp's (1973) strategic principles, which emphasized the importance of planning, discipline, and symbolic occupation of public space in successful nonviolent campaigns. The southern protests quickly gathered popularity, not just for their size, but also through the symbolic inversion of state authority, government buildings were repurposed as opposition headquarters, and local officials were pressed to leave or quit (Radnitz, 2006, 132-146). The 2005's movement was not born out of nowhere; it was the consequence of years of previous attempts.

The firsts, most prominent, forms of protest began in Aksy, in March 2002. Azimbek Beknazarov, a politician well-known for his criticism of President Askar Akayev and the actions of his cabinet, was

arrested, triggering the protests in Aksy. Beknazarov had expressed his public disapproval of Akayev for giving up some territory in the Tien Shan mountains to China as part of a 1999 border deal. Public indignation was sparked by his detention in January 2002 on what were perceived as politically motivated allegations, particularly in his native Aksy area. Protesters started arriving in Aksy in March 2002 to voice their opposition to Beknazarov's imprisonment, intimidation by the government, and, more generally, to corruption and authoritarianism under Akayev's leadership. At least five people were killed and numerous more were injured when security forces opened fire on unarmed protestors in the Aksy district's Bospiek town on March 17, 2002. Most of the demonstrators were Beknazarov followers and locals. Witnesses and independent inquiries refuted the government's assertion that the protesters had incited the violence, demonstrating that the demonstration was peaceful prior to the police shooting. International observers, civil society organizations, and human rights organizations all strongly denounced the executions, which stunned the nation. The Aksy disaster revealed Kyrgyzstan's democratic institutions' vulnerability as well as the growing violence of Akayev's dictatorship (Radnitz, 2005, pp. 405-425).

Bakiyev had no support from external actors; from 2000 to 2002, he was Akayev’s prime minister. His transition from an established figure to a government opponent started with his resignation, which was formally connected to the government's conduct of the Aksy events in 2002, a pivotal moment in Kyrgyz history. The Aksy tragedy created a pattern of political mobilization that would culminate in 2005 and signalled the start of more militant community opposition. Bakiyev separated from Akayev after resigning and progressively started to participate in resistance actions. He was already a prominent member of the People's Movement of Kyrgyzstan, a coalition of opposition groups attempting to overthrow Akayev's growing central and nepotistic leadership, by the time of the 2005 legislature elections. Bakiyev's condemnation of Akayev was notable since it concentrated on the leader's attempts to win political posts for his family members, particularly his daughter Bermet and son Aidar, who both competed for parliamentary seats in 2005, as well as a decline in democracy and poor management of the economy.

4.8: From South to Bishkek: Elite Defections and Regime Collapse

As the physical and metaphorical centres of opposition to a government that came to be viewed as corrupt, autocratic, and regionally partial, the southern cities of Jalal-Abad and Osh were essential in the overthrow of President Askar Akayev during the Tulip Revolution. These regions, which are part of the traditionally underprivileged Ferghana Valley, have long been neglected economically and politically. Power and wealth had become disproportionately concentrated in the northern areas under Akayev's rule, especially in Bishkek and the Chui Valley, as oligarchs connected to the president's closest associates controlled the government and the economy. This regional disparity was a structural

aspect of Akayev's neo patrimonial authority, which depended on business relationships ingrained in the North, rather than merely the result of slow growth. Consequently, even though they made up a substantial percentage of the country's population, southern elites and people saw themselves as politically excluded (Juraev, 2013, pp.31-42).

A key turning point in the revolt occurred in early March when government buildings in Jalal-Abad were strategically occupied. These acts were not uncoordinated and locally driven; rather, they demonstrated the increasing competence of civil society participants and opposing activists. Local government buildings were taken over by protesters, who also expelled public servants and installed alternative power structures. The ideas of nonviolent resistance outlined by Gene Sharp (1973), who highlighted the significance of institutional disengagement, prolonged public disobedience, and symbolic disruption as crucial tactics in eroding authoritarian control, were mirrored by these activities. In Kyrgyzstan, where the post-Soviet state still mostly depended on the appearance of government power and the aura of administrative control, the symbolism of taking over state facilities was especially potent. The demonstrators in Jalal-Abad and, shortly afterwards, Osh, successfully transformed the emblems of government authority by converting these structures into resistance headquarters. Local officials frequently resigned or fled because they were unable or unwilling to resist. The Akayev regime's demise began with this breakdown of provincial administrative authority (Juraev, 2013, pp.31-42, Sharp, 1973).

One of the most notable aspects of the southern mobilization was its cross-class and cross-generational character. Students, civil society activists, religious leaders, small business owners, and ordinary villagers all took part. Though political opposition figures such as Bakiyev and Otunbayeva would later play important roles in national leadership, the revolution's early stages were mostly driven by citizens reacting to local situations. As Scott Radnitz (2006) has demonstrated, many of the organizational networks that facilitated the revolution were founded on informal patronage and connections to the community instead of official political organizations. This decentralized framework strengthened the rebellion by rendering it less subject to the regime's coercion or annihilation. In fact, the demonstrations in the South grew stronger precisely because they were not centrally coordinated, enabling them to react rapidly to oppression, modify tactics, and preserve local legitimacy (Radnitz, 2006, pp. 63-70).

A further significant characteristic of the southern protests was their firm commitment to nonviolence. While emotions were high and some clashes with authorities occurred, the movement mostly avoided the anarchy or reprisals that could have justified official repression. This strategic decision was informed in part by the experience in Aksy, where the use of lethal force had disastrous consequences. It also reflected the increasing significance of nonviolent training programs and civil society education initiatives, some of which were funded by international organizations like Freedom House

and the National Democratic Institute. These organizations, while highly divisive in certain areas, provided training in election monitoring, protest strategy, and media engagement, which proved critical in maintaining the movement's growth. The southern protesters' exposure and discipline put huge pressure on the central administration, especially when international media began to cover the events with more attention. The regime's customary measures of censorship, selective arrests, and bureaucratic harassment were unable to quell an uprising that was both locally and nationally significant (Khamidov, 2006, p.7).

The protests in Osh, Kyrgyzstan's second-biggest town, escalated, pushing the scale of the conflict even farther. Osh, with its significant Uzbek minority population and history of interethnic conflict, was a potential hotspot. Nevertheless, the revolt remained focused on political reform and electoral justice, with no divisive slogans or sectarian aspirations. Civic leaders in the city helped organize marches, community meetings, and symbolic acts of resistance, such as turning their backs on government speeches and waving red tulips, symbols that would later give the revolution its name. The protest movement's growth from Jalal-Abad to Osh, and then to Bishkek, exposed the enormous reservoir of resentment and despair that had built up in the South over years of marginalization. In Kyrgyz culture, the tulip is a springtime flower associated with renewal, new beginnings, and hope, a powerful metaphor for political transformation following years of stagnation under Akayev. The revolt took place in March 2005, coinciding with the start of the spring season and Nowruz, the Persian New Year, which is widely celebrated in Central Asia as a period of renewal and fight to oppression. The tulip served as a natural and culturally significant emblem of what many believed would be a national rejuvenation (Termikulov, 2013, pp. 93-111).

The revolution had now effectively reached an important phase, having taken over institutions and vital hotspots. Yet, The Tulip Revolution culminated in the final days of March 2005, when demonstrators from around Kyrgyzstan, notably in the south of the country, began a deliberate and planned march to Bishkek, the capital. This so-called "march on Bishkek" was not a single occasion, but rather an active and developing system of intensifying civic struggle that eventually brought down Askar Akayev's growing discontent. The choice to march on the capital was motivated by a combination of populist rage and planned strategic pressure, as the opposition recognized that Akayev's strength lay not only in physical institutions, but also in symbols of legitimacy and central authority centralized in Bishkek. Their base of support was unusually diverse: peasants, students, small business owners, former officials, teachers, and unemployed youth joined the movement, reflecting wide societal opposition to Akayev's reign. Protesters did not have firearms, and there was no military party inside the movement, which is important to understanding why the state was eventually unable to quell the revolt. marches, public speeches, occupation of public areas, and distribution of symbolic items including red tulips, reflected a deliberate compliance to the principles of strategic nonviolence as outlined by theorists such as Gene Sharp (1973), who emphasized that

political power is fundamentally dependent on the obedience and cooperation of those who rule. The marchers in Kyrgyzstan were not just seeking Akayev's resignation; they were also withdrawing their consent to be ruled by what they saw as a corrupt and unjust dictatorship. The "withdrawal of consent" was not limited to the people. Most importantly, as the movement moved toward the northwest, symptoms of elite defection and institutional immobility started showing up (Termikulov, 2013, pp.93-111; Sharp, 1973).

Police officials, especially at the local and provincial levels, became increasingly unwilling to suppress the protests. In some cases, police and soldiers abandoned their posts or simply allowed protesters to pass. In other instances, local governors or bureaucrats resigned or vanished from public view. The Ministry of Internal Affairs, which oversees internal security, delivered confusing orders, reflecting the regime's increasing confusion and lack of authority. Sharp's theoretical framework identifies these as classic signs of a regime's "pillars of power" collapsing when the military, police, civil service, and media cease to defend the ruling elite; authoritarian governments are exposed as structurally vulnerable.

To properly comprehend the structural breakdown of the Akayev dictatorship after the Tulip Revolution, it is necessary to dig deeper into Gene Sharp's theoretical notion of the "pillars of power," which is key to his framework of strategic nonviolence. Sharp argues in The Politics of Nonviolent Action (1973) that political power is not monolithic or self-sufficient, but rather relational and dependent, relying on the partnership and compliance of organizations and social categories. The military, police, civil service, court, media, educational institutions, religious authority, and economic elites make up the "pillars" that support any system. A government's strength, particularly a totalitarian one, is determined not only by its repressive apparatus, but also by the extent to which these sectors continue to actively support or passively comply with its authority. When the support diminishes, whether through disobedience, desertion, or defection, the system becomes emptied out and can be overthrown without the use of armed insurgency (McGlinchey, 2011, pp. 50-53; Sharp, 1973, pp. 62-74).

This is exactly what happened in Kyrgyzstan during the Tulip Revolution, where Sharp's concept finds one of its more factually striking expressions in a post-Soviet setting. A perfect instance of this occurred on March 24, 2005, when protestors stormed the presidential headquarters in Bishkek and faced little resistance from security officers. Many members of the police and presidential guard resigned or abandoned their positions, indicating a breakdown in the regime's repressive infrastructure. Earlier that week, in southern regions such as Osh and Jalal-Abad, local officials and law enforcement refused to quell protests, allowing opposition groups to gain traction. These moments of defection and passive noncompliance demonstrate the withdrawal of major "pillars of

power" that Sharp views as necessary for maintaining any autocratic system (Radnitz, 2005, pp. 144-145).

In Kyrgyzstan, several of these pillars began to disintegrate within immediate effect in March 2005, causing the Akayev administration to collapse quickly. The military forces, which have usually provided critical support in authoritarian circumstances, most dramatically displayed both inactivity and outright withdrawal as protests increased. In crucial moments of the revolution, police officers stepped down, left their duties, or allowed demonstrators to occupy public buildings, first in the southern cities and then in Bishkek. There were few physical confrontations and almost little planned repression during the final capture of the city, implying that state intimidation lost effectiveness precisely because its agents no longer considered the regime as legitimate or worth preserving. In an analogous way the administrative structure started to disintegrate civil officials, regional leaders, and the president's legislative friends fled or stayed immobilized as the uprising gained strength (Ortman, 2013, 137-152)

The governmental media, another important pillar in narrative authority, was also jeopardized: opposition forces were able to seize broadcasting infrastructure, and the rise of independent journalism, mobile communication, and NGO reporting created a pluralized information sphere that challenged the government's monopoly on reality. The economic elite, many of whom had previously supported Akayev out of patronage or mutual advantage, began to distance themselves from the regime as political instability threatened their interests. In a framework based on informal networks and neopatrimonialism loyalties, these adjustments in loyalty were important. Even members of the judiciary and election commission, who were legally mute, were viewed as corrupt and unable to stop the rebellion's march, helping to the disintegration of government credibility (Ortman, 2013, 137-152; Sharp, 1973, pp.62-74).

According to Sharp, nonviolent movements do not seek to eliminate the state or its structures, but rather to undermine the regime's influence over its pillars by switching loyalty or increasing non-cooperation. The Tulip Revolution accomplished just this: it weakened Akayev's legitimacy not by building a military assault or physically capturing him, but by making the continuation of his rule fundamentally unsustainable. The resulting power void was caused by citizen disobedience, elite recalculations, and symbolic ruptures in the state's legitimacy, rather than sheer force. In this aspect, the revolution's nonviolent nature was not a coincidence, but rather a strategic necessity that proved to be more effective than any armed resistance in Kyrgyzstan. By giving the administration a violent "enemy" to crush and exhibiting widespread, cross-regional discontent, the movement produced an environment in which Akayev's ongoing leadership became untenable. Sharp's model of the pillars of power enables us to perceive the Tulip Revolution as a consistent, yet decentralized, campaign of strategic non-cooperation that successfully undermined authoritarian control from within. The

quickness of Akayev's demise, virtually overnight, makes sense not as an anomaly, but as an inevitable result of an ongoing deterioration throughout the very systems on which his presidency was based (Ortman, 2013, 137-152; Sharp, 1973).

4.9: The victory of a non-violent mobilization

As the events of March 24, 2005, developed, the political structure that had sustained President Askar Akayev for more than a decade collapsed with startling rapidity and a remarkable lack of formal opposition. From the start of the day, the atmosphere in Bishkek was filled with expectancy. The city had already seen occasional protests and acts of civil disobedience in recent days, but it was the arrival of large groups of demonstrators from the south, from Jalal-Abad and Osh, which transformed protest into revolutionary upheaval. These protestors, many of whom had travelled for days and were emboldened by the regime's apparent failure to control previous mobilizations, went to Ala-Too Square in larger quantities. Students, pensioners, opposition activists, and ordinary citizens were amongst many who had been disappointed by years of repression, corruption, and broken promises. What brought them together was not a particular party or views, rather a similar feeling that the elections had been manipulated and that the dictatorship could no longer be permitted to rule unopposed. Despite their outrage, the throng stayed mostly calm, singing slogans, waving red tulips, and demanding Akayev's dismissal (Pelkmans, 2005, pp.147-157).

By mid-morning, it was clear that the government had either lost control or was reluctant to assert it. Police officers and National Guard forces stationed near government buildings, expecting to prevent protesters, did not oppose the rebels advance onto Akayev's residency. In numerous situations, police officers just dissolved away without directives, revealing not only logistical chaos but also a deeper moral and institutional indifference. Local leaders knowing of the demonstrators' size, as well as the possible ramifications of violent repression, decided not to intervene. Other people in accordance with Sharp's notion of strategic nonviolent action, may have recognized that the regime was no longer stable and chose to emigrate passively rather than be implicated in its eventual demise (Sharp, 1973). The protesters then proceeded to take key points of political authority, entering state televisions, evacuating government offices, and encircling the White House, the heavily guarded presidential residence. The fall of the White House was dramatic, but completely unopposed (Pelkmans, 2005, pp.147-157)

Despite some reports of minor fights and occasional property damage, there was no serious violent opposition. Protesters broke through the gates, ascended the staircases, and into the heart of the regime's administrative structure without confronting firearms or widespread arrests. Inside, they saw offices abandoned, documents dispersion and state officials already gone. By the time the public had fully filled the building, President Akayev had gone. According to several sources, Akayev was flown

by helicopter from Bishkek to his hometown Chui Valley, and then to Karakol in the Issyk-Kul area, a northern base where he intended to reorganize. However, seeing the scale of the rebellion and the lack of military or political support, he quickly fled to Kazakhstan and later he travelled to Moscow, where he remained in self-imposed exile until April 4, 2005, when he submitted his formal resignation from overseas. His departure was quick, silent, and mostly invisible to the public. There was no broadcast statement, military stand, or institutional transition, only a power void in his departure (McMillan, 2005, pp.43).

Akayev's flight without a final confrontation is especially notable when viewed through the lens of nonviolent resistance doctrine. As Gene Sharp pointed out, dictatorships collapse not when their leaders are physically removed, but because their sources of power, obedience, legitimacy, and institutional support are gradually eliminated. Akayev was not deposed by an armed militia or an external coup; rather, he was left without law enforcement tools, reliable allies, or public trust (Sharp, 1973). His departure to Russia was not an escape in the classic sense, but rather a realization of his own insignificance: he no longer governed anything because the apparatus that had formerly supported him had been cut out from inside. The rapidity with which this occurred emphasizes a key point made by Sharp and later by Chenoweth and Stephan: when nonviolent movements reach a threshold of mass participation and are able to provoke elite defections, authoritarian regimes can collapse with stunning rapidity, even if they appeared stable only weeks earlier (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011, pp. 34-35).

The reasons for this collapse were several. Years of governmental decline, via neopatrimonialism, electoral manipulation, and regional exclusion, had already eroded Akayev's grip on Kyrgyzstan. The government's legitimacy was fragile, relying on persistence and pressure rather than the backing of the public. When the population realized that its strength was not in its arms, but in its inability to give in, Akayev's power collapsed. The police's inaction, the lack of parliamentary reaction, and the quiet of northern elites, who had once been his greatest base, signalled the retreat of the regime's main support mechanisms, or, as Sharp put it, the irrevocable disintegration of the pillars of power. It is especially shocking that no member of the elite attempted to openly support the presidency in the last moments. In a context of rapidly shifting loyalties and moral fear, self-preservation outweighed loyalty (Khamidov, 2006, pp.9).

The White House assault turned into a nationally cathartic event that was captured on camera and broadcast, showing people taking back power from an unfair and distant government. Additionally, maintaining both local and international legitimacy became possible by the takeover's nonviolent nature. Akayev would have tried to use the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) to defend an uprising or invoke Russian military assistance if the revolt had become violent. Instead, the regime was denied this legitimacy by the peaceful nature of the revolution, which also made outside

intervention politically challenging. Even if they were wary at first, the international world soon realized that the events were an internal manifestation of democratic aspirations (Khamidov, 2006, pp.7).

The international perception of the Tulip Revolution evolved quickly. While first reactions were cautious and hesitant, notably from Russia and Western powers, many international observers rapidly saw the events as a genuine manifestation of democratic will. The United States, which used to view Akayev as a moderate leader in Central Asia, quickly shifted its position, expressing support for democratic processes and pushing for a peaceful transition of authority. Similarly, organizations like the OSCE highlighted the significance of honouring the people's will and encouraged the new government to maintain the rule of law. Russia, on the other hand, responded more ambivalently. Even if the Kremlin did not actively oppose the regime transition, it observed the revolt with caution, fearing that it would be an example for similar revolutions in its own sphere of influence. The differing responses reflected greater geopolitical objectives, but overall, the mainly peaceful nature of the revolt allowed Kyrgyzstan to avoid international criticism and be rather cautiously embraced as part of the broader wave of post-Soviet liberalization (Lewis, 2008, pp.1137-1154).

Nonetheless, Akayev's unexpected departure created a power vacuum and an atmosphere of insecurity. Vandalism erupted in areas of Bishkek within hours of the regime's demise, and political leadership was split among several opposition factions. Kurmanbek Bakiyev, one of the main opposition figures, would become interim president, but the lack of a clear succession plan revealed one of the paradoxes of nonviolent revolutions: while they can destabilize regimes quickly and legitimately, establishing a new order is a far more complex and often contentious process. It is also shocking that no member of the elite tried to openly defend the president in the final stages, in the face of continually shifting loyalties and moral anxiety, self-preservation trumped allegiance. This quiet is understandable given that many political and economic elites had already begun to reorganize themselves in expectation of regime change. Akayev's credibility had fallen so severely because of years of failed promises, nepotism, and fraudulent elections that few saw political or personal benefit in defending him. Supporting a failing president risked eventual marginalization or reprisal under new leadership, whilst remaining neutral or defecting provided a safer alternative. In this context, even previous allies chose to forsake him, hastening the regime's demise (Olcott, 2005, pp.6).

The Tulip Revolution remains one of the most powerful examples of strategic nonviolent opposition in the post-Soviet era. What started as a regional protest electoral manipulation in southern Kyrgyzstan quickly escalated into a national citizen uprising that overthrew an established totalitarian dictatorship. Despite its apparent spontaneity, the revolution was the result of decades of political dissatisfaction, regional marginalization, and civil resistance education. Its authority emerged not from armed conflict or violent overthrow, but from citizens' combined rejection to follow and

legitimize a political structure they no longer saw as legitimate. According to Gene Sharp, regimes fail not when they are openly assaulted, but when their "pillars of power", obedience, consent, and institutional support, are strategically destroyed from within (Sharp, 1973). In Kyrgyzstan, these pillars fell one by one: the police walked away, state bureaucrats quit, and the regime's symbolic and physical authority crumbled in the face of constant, concerted, and nonviolent opposition. The revolution's triumph served as both a theoretical validation of Sharp's main discoveries and tangible evidence of common people's ability to overthrow authoritarianism without resorting to violence. Furthermore, the Tulip Revolution confirmed major findings from Chenoweth and Stephan's empirical research on nonviolent campaigns. Widespread involvement across class, geographic, and gender boundaries gave the movement legitimacy and durability. Elite defections, from the security services and administrative bureaucracy, accelerated the regime's downfall. In particular, the revolution's nonviolence allowed it to maintain moral authority, denying the regime an excuse for brutal repression and enabling an easier transition in the short term. In strategic terms, the revolution demonstrated that authoritarian power can be successfully questioned by nonviolent means, even in contexts of neopatrimonialism governance and weak formal institutions, particularly when movements are decentralized, adaptive, and capable of mobilizing shared symbolic narratives.

However, although the Tulip Revolution was an important turning point in Kyrgyzstan's political development, it did not address the fundamental structural problems that had enabled authoritarianism in the first place. The neo patrimonial logic of government, the regional imbalance between north and south, electoral abuse, and the fall of the official structures were not completely abolished in the months following of the Tulip revolution; rather, they were reshuffled. The post-Akayev administrative elite, particularly Kurmanbek Bakiyev, swiftly resumed many of the discriminatory and clientelist policies that had triggered the rebellion. This continuity underscores a key contradiction of peaceful revolutions: while they can effectively remove authoritarian rulers, they do not always result in democratic institutions or norms. In a lack of long-term institutional reform and civic responsibility, the political vacuum provided by revolutions can be grabbed by new elites, resulting in a cycle of grievances, unhappiness, and disappointment (Heathershaw, 2008, pp.389-406).

The Tulip Revolution therefore must be interpreted in the limits of its historical setting, even though it is acknowledged as a significant accomplishment of strategic nonviolence. A regime was overthrown by the revolution, but the system was not rebuilt. It demonstrated both the strength of group effort and the vulnerability of democratic transition in the absence of societal support. In doing so, the Tulip Revolution serves as a reminder of what nonviolence can achieve when power is understood as relational and conditioned, and it also serves as a warning for future movements, it serves as a warning that overthrowing an authority figure is just the start of a much longer and more challenging battle to change the political system itself, yet it additionally shows what nonviolence may accomplish when power is viewed as interpersonal and flexible.

4.10: Reflections on Strategic Nonviolence in Kyrgyzstan

The Kyrgyz experience with nonviolent resistance in 2005 exemplifies how the concepts proposed by Gene Sharp and Erica Chenoweth appear in varied, context-dependent ways. Sharp claimed that the success of nonviolent action is dependent on its capacity to weaken a regime's pillars of support through mass non-cooperation, legitimacy withdrawal, and strategic disruption (Sharp, 1973, pp. 42-45). Sharp emphasized in From Dictatorship to Democracy (1993) that dictatorial regimes rely on the internal behaviours of fear, submission, and political disengagement in addition to physical repression. One of his main conclusions is that peaceful resistance needs to focus on changing people's perceptions of their connection with authority as well as instituting change. This is especially evident in Kyrgyzstan, in which a generalized sense of fatalism has been fostered by years of disillusionment with both Soviet and post-Soviet structures. This political weakness was broken by the 2005 protests, when common people, particularly in the South, used mass mobilization to reclaim their collective agency (Sharp, 1993, pp. 33-36).

Civilians in Kyrgyzstan organized to oppose the profoundly ingrained neopatrimonialism system that had come to characterize the Akayev administration, in addition to authoritarian governance. Akayev gradually renounced his early reformist persona starting in the mid-1990s, establishing unofficial connections of patron-client ties, relatives, and regional allegiance to consolidate his control. Institutional decomposition and pervasive feelings of exclusion and injustice, especially in the southern regions, were fostered by the concentration of political appointments, access to public resources, and business opportunities in the control of the president's closest relatives and a small northern elite. In addition to undermining official democratic structures, this type of neopatrimonialism governance widened geographical divides and eroded public confidence in the government (Heathershaw, 2008, pp.389-406; Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011, pp. 10-12).

A diversified coalition of protest actors emerged because of this widespread dissatisfaction. In Bishkek, youths organized with southern rural peasants; local entrepreneurs, opposition candidates, and political elite defectors teamed up with independent media and civil society organizations. Their mixed mobilization proved crucial to the Tulip Revolution's impetus, even though their motivations differed, ranging from regional complaints and socioeconomic disappointments to calls for fair elections and honest governance. The results of Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan (2011), who conducted a systematic analysis of over three hundred opposition initiatives between 1900 and 2006, show that nonviolent movements with widespread support from society have a much higher chance of success than those that rely on more limited or violent tactics. This dynamic is in close agreement with their findings (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011, pp. 10-12).

Therefore, it is impossible to comprehend the Tulip Revolution's success without acknowledging the strategic power of its social scope. The movement's ability to resist repression, spread its message through unofficial networks, and organize large-scale mobilizations like those in Jalal-Abad and Osh, which were later echoed in the capital, was made possible by the involvement of a diverse range of actors, spanning age, geography, class, and occupation. A key factor in undermining Akayev's residual claims to legitimacy and inciting more elite defections was the belief that the movement represented a broad segment of Kyrgyz society rather than a specific political opposition. Furthermore, the mobilization's nonviolent nature made participation easier and less dangerous, particularly for young people, women, and middle-class urbanites who may have been reluctant to join a violent uprising otherwise (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011, pp. 49-55).

However, the Kyrgyz scenario also validates lessons from scholars such as Kurt Schock, who advises that the effectiveness of nonviolence rests not only on involvement or tactics, but also on the ability to adapt to repression while maintaining discipline and using political opportunities (Schock, 2005, pp. 126-129). Schock underlines that the success of nonviolent movements is determined not only by moral positioning or mass participation, but also by their capacity to withstand oppression, tactically adapt methods, and leverage political weaknesses in the ruling class. His concept of "dynamic repertoire," which argues that effective campaigns employ a variety of disruptive and constructive methods over time, is particularly pertinent to the Kyrgyz setting, as opposition groups deployed a combination of protest, citizen monitoring, and strategic alliances with defecting elites. In this regard, the Tulip Revolution exemplifies Schock's contention that nonviolence, to be efficient, needs to be adaptable, coordinated, and firmly rooted in local grievances, rather than spontaneous or politically motivated (Schock, 2005, pp. 126-129).

Furthermore, the use of electoral fraud as a motivating grievance, the inclusion of community actors educated in resistance strategies, and the careful avoidance of violent escalation all demonstrated a tactical sophistication that was far from accidental. According to Adam Roberts and Jack DuVall, nonviolent movements frequently succeed not because they are morally superior, but because they are operationally intelligent, capable of disrupting elite ties and projecting legitimacy among the masses (Roberts& DuVall, 2006, pp.9-14).

Nonviolence served as both a moral choice and a pragmatic necessity in Kyrgyzstan, given the opposition's limited repressive tools and the international attention given to the 2005 vote. Even if the revolution eventually exposed the limitations of institutional change, it remains a potent illustration of how unarmed resistance, powered by long-standing social grievances and reinforced by international instruction, can oppose and topple authoritarian regimes, even in weak and peripheral states.

CHAPTER 5: THE COLOURED REVOLUTIONS, A COMPARISON

5.1: Upheavals in post-soviet realities

The fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 caused a significant geopolitical and sociopolitical breakdown resulting in a complex environment of state-building, economic turmoil, and shifting political identities across the former Soviet states. This transitional period was marked by significant uncertainty as newly independent states struggled to establish functioning democratic institutions, rule of law, and accountable governance while also dealing with the traces of authoritarianism, fraud, and weak civil society. In the early 2000s, a wave of public uprisings, later called the "Colour Revolutions", emerged as a stark embodiment of citizens' aspirations for political change, transparency, and democratic accountability. The most notable of them were the Rose Revolution in Georgia (2003), the Orange Revolution in Ukraine (2004), and the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan (2005). While each developed in its own unique national and historical context, these revolutions have frequently been grouped together as "Colour Revolutions" due to their shared timeline, symbolic promotion, and visible participation of oppositional forces calling for political renewal. Their fast occurrence prompted many historians and observers to see them as interconnected episodes in a larger regional pattern of political transition in the post-Soviet sphere, rather than distinct national events (Borjas & Doran, 2012, pp. 1143-1203).

Although these revolutions had a chronological and geographical context, they were formed by vastly diverse internal dynamics, elite configurations, and institutional frameworks. As a result, a comparative study can offer insight not only on the mechanics of regime disintegration, but also on the many paths that arose in their wake. Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan were all controlled by entrenched ruling elites that were regarded as corrupt and unreliable, and all had contested elections that sparked widespread mobilization. Nevertheless, the rate of societal deterioration, the form of the political opposition, the nature of political legitimacy, and the level of regime personification varied significantly across the three countries (Lane, 2013, pp. 1-23).

The political science literature has sought to understand the Colour Revolutions using various analytical approaches. Some interpretations have concentrated on elite betrayal and a crisis of credibility, claiming that these revolutions were elite-level struggles in which governments lost their ability to manage political succession through authoritarian rule. Others have emphasized the importance of external variables like Western democracy advancement, worldwide media coverage, and the development of transnational advocacy networks. Others have stressed structural features such as civil society, geographical divisions, and the strength of state institutions, particularly the judiciary and security system. Every of these explanations adds valuable information, but the distinctive nature of each event shows that no single explanatory model is enough. Instead, a comparative perspective

that considers both similarities and differences is required for comprehending how different post-Soviet regimes dealt with growing popular dissatisfaction and challenges to their authority (Lane, 2013, pp. 1-23).

The Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan, discussed in the previous chapter, makes an especially persuasive case for comparative study. While it has some superficial similarities with the Georgian and Ukrainian upheavals, such as the role of polls and broad charges of authoritarian reorganization, it occurred in a far more fragmented and disorganized way. The rebellion lacked a clear leadership, the protest movements were regionally split, and the post-revolutionary government swiftly devolved into rivalry among factions (Marat, 2006, pp. 117). This contrasts strongly with the more centralized and strategic revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine, where opposing leaders like Mikheil Saakashvili and Viktor Yushchenko succeeded to seize office with significant international and local support. The question that arises is how identical structural triggers, namely electoral disenchantment, loss of regime legitimacy, and popular mobilization, could yield such disparate political results in these three examples.

5.2: The Rose Revolution in Georgia: Political Change and Comparative Reflections

Georgia's Rose Revolution began in November 2003 as an immediate reaction to profound political, economic, and social concerns that had built throughout the previous decade of independence. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Georgia faced significant economic difficulties, internal wars in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and a precarious state-building process. Eduard Shevardnadze, a former Soviet foreign minister, took charge in 1992 pledging security and change. Originally praised as a statesman capable of leading Georgia to democracy and Western integration, his term was characterized by widespread corruption, clientelism, and the entrenchment of political and corporate elites. The recovery in the economy was slow, public services deteriorated, and public trust in institutions eroded progressively. By the early 2000s, growing dissatisfaction with the political establishment was exacerbated by the idea that Shevardnadze grew more autocratic and opposed to significant shifts (Nilsson, 2015, pp. 85-103).

The election for parliament on the 2nd of November 2003, was the turning point moment, with rampant fraud, voter intimidation, and vote count manipulation. Domestic monitoring organizations, as well as international observers such as the OSCE, uncovered major irregularities that called into question the legitimacy of the official results. Public fury grew, and opposition leaders called for a massive demonstration in Tbilisi and other towns. Youth movements, particularly Kmara ("Enough"), were essential in mobilizing younger generations, organizing public rallies, and portraying the movement as a peaceful struggle for democracy. The demonstrations escalated on November 22, 2003, when demonstrators stormed the parliament building while Shevardnadze was speaking to the

newly appointed legislatures. Faced with immense pressure from the public and the loss of police and military assistance, Shevardnadze resigned the next day, clearing the way for rapid presidential elections in January 2004, which brought Mikheil Saakashvili to power with a large majority.

The Rose Revolution, which culminated in President Eduard Shevardnadze's peaceful resignation in November 2003, is regarded as one of the most emblematic manifestations of regime change in the post-Soviet area in the early 2000s. The Georgian revolution was triggered by widespread dissatisfaction with institutional corruption, electoral fraud, and economic stagnation, as well as the November 2003 legislative elections, which were widely condemned for evident cheating and vote manipulation. In contrast to Kyrgyzstan's Tulip Revolution, when splintered regional and ethnic connections hampered resistance organization and cohesiveness, Georgia's resistance managed to unite around a relatively cohesive leadership and shared political vision. Mikheil Saakashvili's rise, along with significant figures such as Nino Burjanadze and Zurab Zhvania, provided the movement with a charismatic and organized political front capable of channeling the public's anger into a long-term and planned campaign for political reform. This leadership cohesion contrasted with the Tulip Revolution's more dispersed and poorly planned protest methods, in which many conflicting groups and provincial elites hampered rival groups' unity and damaged the movement's overall unity.

The Rose Revolution in Georgia, which ended in President Eduard Shevardnadze's peaceful resignation in November 2003, is seen as one of the most symbolic examples of regime transition in the post-Soviet sphere during the early 2000s. The Georgian revolt was sparked by significant popular disgust with institutional corruption, electoral fraud, and economic stagnation, as well as the November 2003 legislative elections, which were widely denounced for obvious fraud and vote-rigging. In contrast to the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan, where fractured regional and clan affiliations hindered opposition mobilization and unity, Georgia's opposition was able to coalesce around a cohesive leadership and shared political program. Mikheil Saakashvili's development, in addition to major leaders such as Nino Burjanadze and Zurab Zhvania, gave the movement a charismatic and organized political front capable of directing public concerns into a prolonged and planned drive for political reform. This leadership unity stood in contrast to the Tulip Revolution's more dispersed and poorly structured demonstration systems, in which various contending factions and regional elites impeded opposing movements' unification and weakened the movement's general cohesion (Fairbanks, 2004, pp. 110-124).

The Georgian opposition's tactical structure also benefited from a strong civil society and a media environment that, while controlled, allowed for some independent reporting and mobilization. Civic groups, youth movements like Kmara, and non-governmental organizations played parts in distributing information about electoral fraud and coordinating protests, resulting in a level of political involvement and comprehension that had previously been lacking in Kyrgyzstan. The movement's

symbolism, which focused on the rose as a nonviolent symbol of change, helped rally public support and place the protests within a narrative of democratic regeneration and national resurrection (Fairbanks, 2004, pp. 110-124). Contrarily, the Tulip Revolution, while caused by allegations of electoral malpractice and political corruption, didn't have a comparable unified civil society infrastructure and was characterized by more spontaneous and regionally divided mobilizations, often fuelled by local grievances and elite power struggles rather than a coherent reformist agenda (Marat, 2016, pp. 117).

International engagement also varied between the two cases. Georgia's Rose Revolution drew widespread attention and tacit support from Western governments and international organizations, which saw the movement as an opportunity to push for democratization and Western integration in a strategically vital state. This external backing, exhibited in the form of diplomatic pressure, election monitoring, and civil society financing, strengthened the opposition's credibility and ability to oppose the authoritarian government. Kyrgyzstan's Tulip Revolution, while not completely isolated from international actors, faced a more ambiguous and fractured external context. The country's geopolitical situation, trapped between Russian influence, Chinese interests, and the strategic presence of the United States, meant that foreign participation was less concentrated and more contingent. The Kyrgyz opposition faced a more complex and unpredictable international backdrop, limiting its capacity to retain power and execute long-term changes following the revolution (Nilsson, 2015, pp. 85-103).

The divergent results of these two revolutions are further demonstrated by post-revolutionary trends. Saakashvili's administration launched aggressive programs of institutional reform, anti-corruption initiatives, and attempts to realign Georgia's foreign policy towards Euro-Atlantic cooperation after the Rose Revolution quickly installed a new political class. The early post-revolutionary period was characterized by a level of political stability and institutional cohesion that Kyrgyzstan did not have, notwithstanding complaints about democratic regression and authoritarian inclinations in subsequent years. In contrast, the Tulip Revolution created a more precarious political climate marked by elite rivalry, rivalry, and frequent instability. In addition to deeply ingrained regional differences and poor state institutions, the lack of a strong opposition leader like Saakashvili made it difficult to form a cohesive government and jeopardized the chances for long-term democratic growth. The Tulip Revolution stays relevant as a symbol of the difficulties faced by hybrid regimes where institutional weakness and dispersed political elites restrict the transformative power of popular uprisings, whereas the Rose Revolution can be interpreted as a successful regime substitution with a distinct progressive agenda (Nodia, 2005, pp. 38-52).

The Rose Revolution demonstrates how a combination of unified opposition leadership, a mobilized and tactically aware civil society, and targeted international assistance can contribute to a smooth

handover of authority and the potential of post-revolutionary state-building. On the other hand, the Tulip Revolution highlights the challenges that grassroots movements encounter when opposition fragmentation, regionalism, and uncertain international engagement limit their capacity to transfer mass mobilization into long-term political change. This comparative examination not only emphasizes the diversity of the so-called Colour Revolutions, but it also promotes a more nuanced understanding of how structural factors and political agency interact to influence the results of revolutionary events in post-Soviet republics.

5.3: The Orange Revolution in Ukraine

The political trajectory that culminated in Ukraine's Orange Revolution of 2004 is only fully comprehended if it is contextualized within the larger historical trends that formed the country from the late Soviet era onwards. Ukraine saw a renaissance of political discourse and national consciousness in the 1980s, thanks to Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika and glasnost initiatives. These had been suppressed during the Soviet period. The 1986 Chernobyl tragedy, with its disastrous human and environmental effects, sparked public dissatisfaction with the Soviet regime. Widespread outrage at Moscow's initial attempts to cover up the magnitude of the tragedy and its lasting repercussions weakened trust in central authorities while strengthening civic mobilization, particularly among the intelligentsia and rising grassroots groups. Environmental demonstrations which sparked after the Chernobyl tragedy in the late 1980s quickly turned into more explicit political demands for autonomy and, eventually, independence.

Ukraine gained freedom peacefully in 1991, thanks to a December 1991 referendum in which more than 90% of voters favoured autonomy, marking the end of centuries of imperial dominance by Russia and the USSR. However, during the early 1990s, the excitement of independence was reduced by an extensive financial collapse induced by the rapid disintegration of the centrally planned economy and the chaotic transition to a market system. Economic output collapsed, inflation skyrocketed, and living conditions fell precipitously, paving the way for the establishment of oligarchic elites who profited themself by privatizing state assets. Political life in Ukraine during the 1990s was distinguished by volatility and frequent government transfers as successive leaders sought to reconcile the country's vast ethnic, linguistic, and geographical divides. Under President Leonid Kravchuk (1991–1994), the country experienced a fragile pluralism but little institutional consolidation. His successor, Leonid Kuchma, elected in 1994, promised economic reforms and closer ties with both Russia and the West. While his early years saw some economic stabilization, they also witnessed the entrenchment of a hybrid regime in which formal democratic institutions coexisted with authoritarian practices, clientelism, and pervasive corruption (Beissinger, 2013, pp. 574-592).

Under President Leonid Kravchuk, who stayed in charge from 1991 to 1994, Ukraine witnessed uncertain pluralism with no institutional consolidation. Leonid Kuchma, the next president, was elected in 1994 with promises of economic reforms and better connections with Russia and the West. While his early years were marked by economic stability, they also saw the establishment of a hybrid government in which formal democratic institutions coexisted with authoritarian tactics, clientelism, and widespread corruption. By the turn of the millennium, Kuchma's government had become more autocratic. The 1999 presidential election, in which he defeated communist challenger Petro Symonenko, was characterized by media manipulation and political intimidation. The concentration of media ownership in the hands of pro-government oligarchs harmed civil rights even further, guaranteeing that television, the primary source of knowledge for most Ukrainians, remained tightly controlled by the government. The 2000 "Cassette Scandal," in which hidden tapes related Kuchma in the kidnapping and murder of investigative journalist Georgiy Gongadze, sparked a crisis of legitimacy, and prompted the "Ukraine Without Kuchma" demonstrations (Kuzio, 2005, pp. 167-190).

The Rukh (People's Movement of Ukraine), established in 1989, was the primary instrument for national renewal, articulating a vision of a sovereign Ukraine based on democratic administration and cultural self-determination. Although the Soviet administration first accepted Rukh as an intellectual organization, it swiftly evolved into a broad-based political movement that played a critical role in rallying support for freedom. This trend culminated in the 1990 "Revolution on Granite.

The "Revolution on Granite" in October 1990 was a watershed moment in Ukraine's late Soviet history, and it served as a clear prelude to subsequent large protests. The movement, launched by university students at Kyiv's October Revolution Square, revolved around a hunger strike seeking Prime Minister Vitaliy Masol's departure, early multi-party elections, the nationalization of Communist Party property, and a refusal to sign the suggested Union Treaty. Despite not all requests being met, this was the first effective public mobilization in modern Ukrainian history to result in tangible changes in politics. Figuratively, the Revolution on Granite developed an array of protest, occupation of public space, moral framing, and broad societal inclusion, which would return in 2004 with the Orange Revolution (Onuch, 2017, pp. 133-139).

The growth of demonstration, public suspicion of centralized authority, and the hybrid political order that formed during Kuchma's mandate created the institutional and cultural prerequisites for the Orange Revolution of 2004. By the early 2000s, Ukraine's political landscape had settled into two diverse and opposing views for the country's future. On one side, there was a pro-Western, reform-oriented bloc that advocated for European integration, strengthening of democracy, and the elimination of entrenched corruption. On the other hand, a pro-Russian, status-quo-oriented parties emphasized keeping tight economic and political relations with Moscow, supporting the oligarchic system, and fighting Western encroachment. This split was more than just ideological; it

represented deeper historical, linguistic, and regional conflicts between the Ukrainian-speaking western and central areas and the Russian-speaking east and south (Way, 2005, pp. 131-145).

The 2004 presidential election marked the breaking point between these two groups. Outgoing President Kuchma, damaged by the Gongadze affair and increasingly isolated abroad, endorsed Viktor Yanukovych, the Prime Minister and his political protégé. Yanukovych's candidacy received significant support from wealthy oligarchic networks, as well as open Russian assistance, including official endorsements from President Vladimir Putin. Opposing him was Viktor Yushchenko, a former Prime Minister whose reformist credentials and pro-European position garnered him widespread support, particularly among young people and in western regions. Yushchenko's campaign was bolstered by the unexplained poisoning he received in September 2004, which left his face permanently deformed and was perceived as a political assault (Kuzio, 2005, pp. 29-44).

The election process suffered by chronic misuse of government funds, strong media bias in favor of Yanukovych, and allegations of voting intimidation. Despite these challenges, Yushchenko won the first round of the election in October 2004, leading by a slight margin and triggering a second round of voting on November 21. This second round was marked by widespread electoral fraud, as recorded by both domestic and international monitors, including the OSCE. The official tally declared Yanukovych the winner, despite considerable evidence of ballot stuffing, voter list manipulation, and vote building (D'anieri, 2005, pp. 231-249).

The evident aspect of the fraudulent scheme sparked an immediate and unprecedented outpouring of popular support. In the days following the second round of voting, hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians gathered in Kyiv's Independence Square (Maidan Nezalezhnosti), sparking what became known as the "Orange Revolution", named after the colour used by Yushchenko's candidacy. Protesters built tent cities, seized central public spaces, and remained present despite severe winter conditions. The movement relied significantly on the protest traditions established during the Revolution on Granite, including the strategic use of nonviolent resistance, symbolic framing, and broad coalition-building among many socioeconomic groups.

The takeover of Kyiv's centre square immediately grew into a national movement, with parallel demonstrations breaking out in other Ukrainian cities. The social mix and mobilization techniques were like those that would later define Kyrgyzstan's Tulip Revolution. Students, civil society organizations, and independent media outlets all played important roles in maintaining growth, while those in opposition meticulously coordinated messages to prevent violent escalation and maintain popularity. International parties, particularly Western nations, the European Union, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), exerted diplomatic influence on Ukrainian authorities to conform to democratic ideals (Dyczok, 2005, pp. 241-264).

The pressure created by the large street mobilization in late November and early December 2004 pushed Ukraine into an urgent political crisis. As the demonstrations continued, Ukraine's Supreme Court made an unprecedented step of engaging directly in the electoral process. On December 3, 2004, the Court overturned the results of the fraudulent second round, finding clear evidence of negligence, and ordered a new run-off on December 26th. The outcome of this case not only highlighted the independence and potential assertiveness of Ukraine's court under conditions of increased public scrutiny but also indicated how continuous citizen pressure may push government agencies to function as effective judges in conflicts over politics. The recheck of votes was carried out under significantly more transparent and scrutinized circumstances, with extensive control from domestic and foreign observers. In this third and crucial round, Yushchenko won with 51.99% of the vote against Yanukovych's 44.20%, ending nearly two months of intense public agitation. His inauguration in January 2005 was largely regarded as a victory for democratic values, election integrity, and citizen participation in the post-Soviet environment (Dyczok, 2005, pp. 241-264).

Although the uprising successfully prevented the establishment of an authoritarian electoral process and established an important precedent for popular resistance to fraudulent elections, it did not address Ukraine's major structural difficulties. The alliance that had formed around Yushchenko was large but ideologically diverse, including pro-Western liberals, moderate nationalists, reforming technocrats, and pragmatic oligarchs. Once the common goal of eradicating electoral fraud was met, fractures within the movement began to appear. Disagreements over economic policy, anti-corruption reforms, and relations with Russia and the West rapidly weakened the post-Orange government's stability. By 2006, political tension between the Orange forces and their pro-Russian opponents had resurfaced, resulting in Yanukovych's political comeback as Prime Minister. This highlighted a major shortcoming of the revolution: even though it altered the immediate course of Ukrainian politics, it did not result in a determined, irrevocable break with the hybrid regime structures of the 1990s (Polese, 2013, pp. 143-165).

Internationally, the Orange Revolution was viewed via several views. In Western cities, it was seen as clear evidence of the attractiveness of democratic values and a victory for civil society over authoritarianism in the post-Soviet era. Nevertheless, it was seen with mistrust and anxiety in Moscow, as part of a succession of Western-backed "colour revolutions" aimed at undermining Russian power in its neighbouring countries. Russian media and political elites described it as an internationally planned revolution rather than an indigenous movement, a narrative that would later shape Moscow's reactions to regional political problems. The events of 2004 consequently have an ambiguous position within Ukraine's present history, serving as both a time of remarkable civic mobilization and democratic assertion, as well as an episode whose revolutionary potential was eventually limited by long-standing institutional and political constraints. The Orange Revolution not only impacted Ukraine's internal political scene in the short term, but it also changed the geopolitical

dynamics of Eastern Europe, making Ukraine a key player in the ongoing struggle between inclusion into Euro-Atlantic frameworks and continuous alignment with Russia (Beissinger, 2013, pp. 574-592).

5.4: Coloured revolutions compared to the Tulip Revolution

Despite being commonly categorized in the general heading of "Colour Revolutions," a comparison of the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan, the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, and the Rose Revolution in Georgia shows that their internal dynamics, social bases, and political outcomes differed greatly. Similar political inspirations were generated throughout the post-Soviet area by their common beginnings, which included electoral fraud, ingrained corruption, and a deterioration in state's credibility. However, the results show how crucial national settings, leadership styles, institutional resiliency, and global involvement are in determining how these revolutions unfold.

Each revolution's trajectory was determined by the existence or lack of cohesive opposition organizations. The rise of a unified political front in Georgia under Mikheil Saakashvili, together with individuals like Nino Burjanadze and Zurab Zhvania, who positioned themselves as a convincing and charismatic substitute for Shevardnadze, was advantageous to the Rose Revolution (Fairbanks, 2004, pp. 110-124). Viktor Yushchenko was at the centre of Ukraine's Orange Revolution; his personal battle, represented by his poisoning, inspired widespread sympathy and provided the revolution with a central focus. However, the Ukrainian opposition was more diverse, and the wide alliance of oligarchs, technocrats, liberals, and nationalists quickly fell apart following the revolution. The Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan, on the other hand, lacked a uniting leader or agenda. Elites from the north and south divided the opposition, with leaders like Kurmanbek Bakiyev and Felix Kulov focusing on their own goals rather than developing a unified vision. Unlike Georgia or Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan's revolutionary movement swiftly deteriorated into factional negotiations after Akayev was removed due to the lack of unity among its leaders (Kuzio, 2005, pp. 29-44; Marat, 2006, pp. 117).

There were also notable differences in the ability between the independent media and civil society to organize the public. In Georgia, a coalition of nongovernmental organizations and the youth movement Kmara were instrumental in organizing peaceful rallies and portraying the uprising as a nonviolent fight for freedom. Opposition perspectives were spread, and electoral fraud was exposed thanks in large part to independent media. Civil society in Ukraine also proved to be important: student groups, grassroots activists, and independent media sources used the 1990 "Revolution on Granite" protest's example, which allowed the Orange Revolution to sustain broad mobilization (Onuch, 2017, pp. 133-139). In Kyrgyzstan, however, civil society was weaker and more localized. Mobilization was frequently spontaneous and regionally divided, driven by local grievances and clan rivalries rather than a unified democratic narrative. Without a strong NGO field or independent media

to maintain nonviolent protest, the Tulip Revolution lacked the symbolic and organizational power of its Georgian and Ukrainian predecessors (Cummings & Ryabkov, 2013, pp. 19-30).

Furthermore, institutions served as both obstacles and catalysts of revolutionary change. In Ukraine, the court, especially the Supreme Court, had an important part in voiding the fraudulent election results and ordering a rerun in December 2004, transforming popular mobilization into a legally recognised transition. This emphasis on institutional means distanced Ukraine from Georgia, where Shevardnadze resigned due to public pressure and elite betrayal rather than legal intervention. Georgia's weak state institutions hindered the regime's ability to suppress protests while also allowing the opposition to capture power rapidly when the incumbent departed. Kyrgyzstan's institutional weaknesses were far more obvious. State institutions were divided along regional lines, security forces were untrustworthy, and the court lacked independence. Once Akayev left, there was no institutional framework capable of channeling revolutionary energy into a cohesive political transition, leaving the arena free for elite competition (D'anieri, 2005, pp. 231-249).

Another factor to bear in mind is how external involvement influenced the character and legitimacy of the Colour Revolutions. Georgia's Rose Revolution benefited from extensive Western intervention, such as OSCE election monitoring, Western-funded NGOs, and diplomatic pressure, which provided international legitimacy and bolstered the opposition's democratic narrative. Ukraine also had considerable Western backing, with the EU, the US, and international organizations putting pressure on the Kuchma dictatorship to accept the Supreme Court decision and recognize Yushchenko's triumph. In both countries, Western actors saw the uprisings as part of a bigger picture of post-Soviet democratization and Euro-Atlantic integration. Kyrgyzstan, on the other hand, found itself in a more difficult geopolitical situation. Located at the intersection of Russian influence, Chinese strategic objectives, and American military presence, it received little regular external backing (Pashentsev, 2016, pp. 113-116).

The aftermath of each revolution highlights their diversity. In Georgia, Saakashvili implemented ambitious reforms to eradicate corruption, rebuild state institutions, and realign foreign policy toward the West. Although later criticized for authoritarian tendencies, the early post-revolutionary period was distinguished by a level of security and institutional stability that Kyrgyzstan lacked. Ukraine's post-Orange trajectory was more fragile: while the revolution prevented the establishment of electoral dictatorship, the ruling coalition's heterogeneity resulted in conflict, policy incoherence, and Viktor Yanukovych's ultimate political return. In Kyrgyzstan, the Tulip Revolution failed to establish a long-lasting reformist administration. Instead, it set off a cycle of instability and authoritarian cuts, exposing the limitations of revolutionary transformation in circumstances with weak institutions and fractured political elites (Tucker, 2007, pp. 535-551).

When taken together, these revolutions demonstrate how comparable systemic causes, such as electoral fraud, corruption, and eroding regime legitimacy, can create vastly different outcomes depending on the interplay of local and foreign variables. Georgia is a quite effective example of revolutionary reform based on leadership cohesiveness, civil society strength, and constructive international involvement. Ukraine demonstrates both the potential for popular mobilization and the fragility of revolutionary coalitions in split cultures. Kyrgyzstan demonstrates the vulnerability of revolutions in weakly institutionalized nations, where geographical disparities, fractured management, and ambiguous global participation prevent public mobilization from resulting in long-term political change. Colour revolutions should not be viewed as an inevitable process of democratization, but rather as unique experiences shaped by the interaction of leadership, institutions, and foreign influences in individual country settings.

While Georgia was a relatively successful case of regime change in which unified leadership, civic mobilization, and international engagement came together to depose an entrenched autocrat and establish a reformist government, Ukraine demonstrated the dual potential and fragility of popular mobilization in a deeply divided political system. The Orange Revolution demonstrated the power of nonviolent protest, combined with institutional and international support, to overturn fraudulent elections, but its aftermath exposed the challenges of maintaining unity in diverse coalitions. In contrast, Kyrgyzstan demonstrated the serious limitations of revolutionary transformation in weakly structured nations, whose fractured elites and regional conflicts reduced mass mobilization to little more than a vehicle for elite cycle.

These examples demonstrate that the Colour Revolutions must not be viewed as a single wave of democratization. Rather, they must be viewed as context-specific events, with national leadership structures, institutional resilience, civil society capabilities, and international participation all having a significant impact on both the short run of mobilization and the long-term durability of political transformation.

5.5: Final considerations on post-soviet revolutions

The comparison of the Rose Revolution in Georgia, the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, and the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan reveals that, while all three uprisings were sparked by electoral fraud, corruption, and low regime legitimacy, their internal dynamics, institutional frameworks, and outcomes differed significantly. Georgia's Rose Revolution of 2003 was distinguished by the emergence of a cohesive and tactically skilled opposition, led by Mikheil Saakashvili, who were successful in portraying themselves as a viable and charismatic alternative to Shevardnadze’s dictatorship. The mobilization of young movements like Kmara, together with a strong civil society and independent media, ensured that collective action was not only large-scale, but also organized,

symbolically strong, and globally recognizable. Western support, manifested in OSCE monitoring, Western-funded NGOs, and diplomatic pressure, further strengthened the opposition's legitimacy and offered the conditions for a peaceful change of power, resulting in Saakashvili's success and a reformist agenda focused on Euro-Atlantic cooperation. Western support, manifested in OSCE monitoring, Western-funded NGOs, and diplomatic pressure, further strengthened the opposition's legitimacy and offered the conditions for a relatively peaceful change of power, resulting in Saakashvili's success and a reformist agenda focused in Euro-Atlantic cooperation (Fairbanks, 2004, pp. 110-124).

While tense elections served as the direct catalyst for Ukraine's Orange Revolution (2004), it took place in a more polarized societal context. Viktor Yushchenko, while capable of organizing popular support, operated in a society divided between pro-European and pro-Russian orientations, with linguistic and regional schisms defining his political views. The mobilization surrounding Kyiv's Maidan Nezalezhnosti was outstanding in scope, relying on nonviolent methods (developed during the Revolution on Granite), and extensive cooperation among civil society, students, and independent media outlets. However, while the Supreme Court's annulment of the fraudulent vote and the subsequent electoral re-run represented an institutional breakthrough, the heterogeneity of the Orange coalition, which included liberals, nationalists, technocrats, and pragmatic oligarchs, soon weakened the unity of the post-revolutionary system (Fairbanks, 2004, pp. 110-124).

Therefore, while the Orange Revolution is rightfully seen as an effective case of civic mobilization forcing authoritarian retreat, it failed to result in an important rupture from ingrained oligarchic frameworks, leaving the political system open to future instability, as evidenced by Yanukovych's return to power. In comparison, Kyrgyzstan's Tulip Revolution in 2005 unfolded in a significantly less controlled and coherent manner, reflecting the country's weak institutions, frail civil society, and deep regional and clan rivalries. While electoral fraud in the 2005 parliamentary elections sparked protests, the movement lacked the uniting leadership of Saakashvili or Yushchenko. Instead, organization was split between northern and southern elites, with personalities like Kurmanbek Bakiyev and Felix Kulov pursuing their own conflicting objectives rather than expressing a common reformist vision. When President Akayev ran away the uprising swiftly deteriorated into elite negotiation and regional competition due to the lack of a unified opposition system (Cummings & Rybakov, 2013, pp. 19-30).

Furthermore, international engagement in Kyrgyzstan was more spread and ambivalent: the US, Russia, and China all had strategic objectives in the country, but no one provided consistent support to the opposition, leaving the revolution without the same level of external legitimacy as Georgia or Ukraine. The eventual outcome was not the construction of a new political direction, instead being the continuation of instability, authoritarian tendencies, and recurrent unrest in the years that succeeded. Taken together, these differences show that, while the Colour Revolutions were united by their

symbolic contrast to authoritarian election fraud, they should be viewed as two separate periods shaped by national leadership structures, social cleavages, institutional resilience, and the international balance of power (Cummings & Rybakov, 2013, pp. 19-30).

While Georgia exemplified a relatively successful case of regime change in which unified leadership, civic mobilization, and international engagement worked together to take down an established autocracy and setting up a reform-oriented administration, Ukraine demonstrated the dual potential and fragility of popular mobilization in a deeply divided political system. The Orange Revolution revealed the incredible power of popular protest, paired with court intervention and international pressure, to overturn fraudulent election results. However, its long-term path demonstrated the fragility of revolution alliances may be when they are composed of diverse players with opposing views and strategic agendas. The failure of Yushchenko's administration to establish a unified reform program or eliminate oligarchic networks revealed the structural resilience of hybrid regimes in the post-Soviet area, where democracy might be introduced but not easily maintained (Bessinger, 2013, pp. 574-592; Nilsson, 2015, pp. 85-103).

On the other hand, Kyrgyzstan demonstrated the serious limitations of revolutionary transformation in the face of inadequate state institutions, fractured elites, and entrenched regionalism. The Tulip Revolution was led less by a unified reformist vision and more by alliances among multiple groups, thus once Akayev was deposed, the movement swiftly devolved into a power struggle between opposing elites. Kyrgyzstan's revolution failed to deliver a democratic victory because it lacked a uniting leader, a consolidated civil society, and constant international backing (Marat, 2006, pp. 117).

Taken together, each of these incidents demonstrate that the so-called Colour Revolutions cannot be seen as a uniform wave of democratization or as identical instances of "people power" overturning dictatorships. Instead, they must be viewed as regionally entrenched experiences in which systemic factors, leadership dynamics, institutional strength, and international engagement significantly influenced both the form of mobilization and the long-term viability of its results.

Georgia illustrated how elite unity, civil society activism, and supporting outside involvement might open up opportunities for reformist transition. Ukraine demonstrated both the potential of peaceful protest in enforcing institutional responsibility and the fragility of revolutionary victories when elites and society did not get along. Kyrgyzstan demonstrated the fundamental vulnerability of revolutions in weakly institutionalized nations, where the lack of ideological leadership and the persistence of regional differences reduced public opposition to little more than a tool of elite turnover. In this light, the differences between the Rose, Orange, and Tulip Revolutions highlight the diversity of post-Soviet realities: while all three arose from similar grievances about electoral malpractice and declining regime legitimacy, their outcomes were determined by the interaction of domestic and global factors restricted to each national context, rather than by shared structural causes. Far from being a single

wave of democratization, the Colour Revolutions represent a range of options, from relative reformist consolidation to partial democratic openings to outright instability and retreat (Finkel & Brudny, 2014, pp. 15-36).

CHAPTER 6: THE LEGACY OF THE TULIP REVOLUTION

6.1: The aftermath of Akayev's fall

This chapter looks at the Tulip Revolution's legacy and how it has affected Kyrgyzstan's political evolution since 2005. It examines the period immediately following Akayev's overthrow as well as the longer-term course of Kyrgyz politics, which is characterized by cycles of popular mobilization, repeated constitutional crises, and promises of democratic transformation. Through an analysis of Kurmanbek Bakiyev's rule, the 2010 uprising, Roza Otunbayeva's interim government, and later events leading up to the Japarov era, the chapter illustrates the paradox of the Tulip Revolution: although it showed the transformative power of nonviolent resistance in overthrowing established leaders, it also illustrated the challenges of establishing democratic institutions in an environment characterized by nepotism and elite division.

In the turbulent hours following Akayev's departure, Kyrgyzstan experienced a political vacancy. Protesters vandalized government buildings and stores in Bishkek, highlighting the lack of strong state power. The Supreme Council (Jogorku Kenesh) had the immediate task of maintaining order and constituting an interim government. During this upheaval, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, an acclaimed southern politician and former prime minister who had emerged as one of the revolution's most important leaders, was named interim president and prime minister. He was selected to symbolize both continuity and change: continuity because he was a member of the old elite and change because he rose to power as a result of a nonviolent mass mobilization demanding responsibility and reforms (Freedman, 2009, pp.843- 861).

The sudden Akayev's collapse highlighted the issue of legitimacy. Although some Kyrgyz citizens applauded the collapse of what they saw as a corrupt and nepotistic regime, others were concerned about the risk of instability. Akayev himself described the revolution as a coup, stating that he was deposed by criminals and ambitious politicians rather than legitimate democratic movements. However, in Kyrgyzstan, the narrative of a "people's revolution" dominated the public conversation. Civil society groups and opposing parties hailed March 2005 as a win for nonviolent protest, repeating the language of Georgia's Rose Revolution (2003) and Ukraine's Orange Revolution (2004). This framework raised hopes for the country's political destiny.

One of the government's first tasks was to find a balance within the northern and southern elites, whose antagonism had long influenced Kyrgyz politics. Kyrgyzstan's politics have long been impacted by regional identities, with the north historically dominating during Akayev's administration. Bakiyev, a native of the southern Jalal-Abad region, wanted to solidify authority without losing the strong northern connections. To do this, he reached an important agreement with

Felix Kulov, a northern political figure, former vice president, and chief of the National Security Service who had been incarcerated by Akayev. Kulov came out from jail following the Tulip revolution and rapidly became a significant symbol of northern political aspirations. In April 2005, Bakiyev and Kulov announced a power-sharing agreement: Bakiyev would run for presidency in the July elections, while Kulov would become prime minister if Bakiyev won. This agreement was designed to stabilize the delicate political equilibrium and keep regional divides from bursting into violent clashes (Pelkmans, 2005, pp. 147-157).

At the same time, the interim authorities had the enormous task of restoring basic administration. The impulsive breakdown of the centralized government provided an opportunity for criminal organizations and regional politicians to establish themselves. Reports surfaced of organized groups seizing control of businesses, markets, and even local government offices in the south. International institutions, including the OSCE and the United Nations, expressed worry over escalating instability and urged the new leadership to restore law and order (Epkenhans, 2006, pp. 210-221). The Kyrgyz state's vulnerability was exposed: although the revolution deposed an unpopular president, it did not demolish the corrupt mechanisms that support politics, nor did it create a strategy for reforming its institutions.

The election for president on July 10, 2005, became the focal point of the transition phase. With Akayev in exile and the opposition split, Bakiyev emerged as the undisputed favourite. He got support from much of the opposition, as many leaders believed that unity was required to consolidate the revolution's successes. Kulov, honouring the arrangement, declined to run and instead collected northern support for Bakiyev's nomination. Bakiyev won the election with a huge margin with 88.7 percent of the vote, which was regarded as an endorsement for reform. International observers, including the OSCE, recognized advances over previous Kyrgyz elections, although they still pointed up irregularities such as ballot stuffing and misuse of administrative resources (Pelkmans, 2005, pp. 147-157).

Although this formal triumph, the following post-revolutionary period was fraught with ambiguity and competing demands. Many residents expected the Tulip Revolution to result in true democracy, increased openness, and the end of elite corruption. Civil society organizations advocated for constitutional revisions to lessen the presidency's power, while foreign investors promised help for democratic institution construction. Others have been sceptical: the fact that authority had passed from one elite faction to another, rather than to new political forces, cast scepticism on the possibility of genuine transformation.

6.2: The Bakiyev’s presidency, between promises and disillusionment

Kurmanbek Bakiyev's victory in July 2005 was first viewed as prominent. Many Kyrgyz voters saw his crushing victory as the structural culmination of the Tulip Revolution, a sign that the corrupt and nepotistic practices of the Akayev era would be replaced by transparent administration and constitutional change. For the first time since independence, it appeared that nonviolent protest could result in an increased democratic political system. Bakiyev claimed in his inaugural speech to eliminate corruption, limit presidential power, empower parliament, and uphold the rule of law. The promises made matched the fundamental requests of the demonstrators who had taken Bishkek's main centre just months before (Sari, 2012, pp. 131-150).

Even in these early days, contradictions were obvious. Bakiyev's ascendancy was not the outcome of a cohesive political movement, but of an elite negotiation, as evidenced by his agreement with Felix Kulov. The power-sharing arrangement temporarily fixed Kyrgyzstan's regional divides but did nothing to solve the state's structural weaknesses. Indeed, by choosing Kulov as Prime Minister, Bakiyev ensured that his administration would continue to be controlled by established political leaders rather than reformist outsiders or civil society representatives. Throughout late 2005 and 2006, the Bakiyev-Kulov coalition weakened. The two had quite different perspectives of Kyrgyzstan's development. Kulov stressed the need for institutional change and the necessity to strengthen legislative supervision, while Bakiyev wanted to maintain the presidency's broad powers. The friction became apparent during discussions over a constitution revision. Under popular pressure, Bakiyev organized discussions to write a new constitution, but he continuously opposed provisions that would have severely limited the power of the president. Civil society organizations condemned him for violating the spirit of the revolution, while opposition parties claimed that aspirations of democratization were being broken (Sari, 2012, pp. 131-150).

In April 2006, thousands of people gathered in Bishkek to demand Bakiyev to follow his campaign commitments. Protesters requested a deadline for constitutional reform, an end to nepotism, and specific laws to fight corruption. Instead of responding with reforms, the president sought to strengthen his power base by depending more on his family and southern ties. Many of his brothers were appointed to crucial government and security positions, while his son Maxim emerged as a powerful economic figure, laying the groundwork for the regime's family-centred control. For many Kyrgyz, this reflected the same type of nepotism that had disgraced Akayev.

The most outstanding indication of frustration occurred in November 2006, when opposition forces organized large-scale protests in Bishkek, bringing tens of thousands of people to Ala-Too Square. These protests lasted more than a week and were the largest mobilization since the Tulip Revolution itself. Demonstrators called for constitutional revisions to limit presidential power and strengthen parliament, accusing Bakiyev of cementing personal rule and obstructing reform. Facing considerable criticism, Bakiyev reluctantly signed a new constitution on November 9, 2006, which limited some

presidential powers, particularly in the nomination of government personnel. Initially, this was a success for the opposition and civic society. Bakiyev, however, immediately demonstrated his ability to manipulate the constitutional structure to his benefit. Utilizing parliamentary differences and legal difficulties, he launched a countermove that ended in December 2006, when deputies connected to him voted for a new version of the constitution that restored many of the powers he had recently lost. This political move, which involved giving reforms under pressure only to reverse them once protests diminished, demonstrated both the strategic inadequacy of opposition groups and the tenacity of the presidency's power. It also marked a watershed moment in Bakiyev's presidency: whereas the first year was distinguished by promises of democratic transition, by the conclusion of 2006, it was evident that he had no plans of eliminating the authoritarian mechanisms left by Akayev (Nikolai, 2010, pp. 138-149).

The initial stages of Bakiyev's administration demonstrated the fragility of revolutionary change in Kyrgyzstan, as well as the contradictory results of nonviolent activism. The Tulip Revolution revealed the outstanding power of peaceful protest in deposing an established ruler: thousands of ordinary individuals forced the resignation of a president who had appeared unbeatable only months before. In the near term, this emphasised the potential of solidarity and appeared to corroborate the notions advocated by nonviolent resistance thinkers such as Gene Sharp, who believed that ruler's authority depends on the obedience and cooperation of their subjects. However, the speed and ease with which Akayev was deposed revealed an essential flaw: peaceful demonstrations can force change in the government, nevertheless without ongoing changes in institutions, they frequently keep the basic structures of power intact (Pelkmans, 2005, pp. 147-157).

The departure of Akayev did not result in the rise of new political actors or a significant restructuring of governmental structures. Rather, authority was absorbed by familiar elites, who recreated the same patronage and regional rivalries under a new jurisdiction. What began as a victory of civic bravery later became a resurgence of executive power, with Bakiyev manipulating constitutional rules and boosting his family's power in the same way that Akayev had done. This caused a severe sense of disillusionment among citizens, many of whom had hoped that nonviolent action would lead to democratic progress. For example, youth groups like KelKel, which participated heavily during the 2005 revolution, immediately expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of true reform, while opposition figures such as Omurbek Tekebayev accused Bakiyev of abandoning the revolution's democratic aspirations. Instead, they witnessed how the revolution's promises collapsed out, increasing mistrust about the prospect of a political reform (Juraev, 2013, pp. 31-42).

In retrospect, the period from 2005 to 2006 might be considered as the watershed moment when the Tulip Revolution's revolutionary potential was lost. Although nonviolent protest was successful in removing Akayev, it did not establish a structure to ensure that future leaders were held responsible or

bound by the law. The Tulip revolution's short-term success in overthrowing an autocrat became, paradoxically, the source of its long-term weakness: by focusing on Akayev rather than the more complex institutional arrangements that endured authoritarian rule, the movement created space for another tyrant to reestablish dominance (Nikolai, 2010, pp. 138-149).

6.3: Constitutional crises and street politics

The period from 2006-2007 was a key point in post-revolutionary Kyrgyzstan, when the battle between the presidency, legislative power, and public activism culminated into a cycle of constitutional crises and street politics. What set Kyrgyzstan apart from many of its Central Asian neighbours at the time was not just the survival of autocratic methods, but also the fact that politics took place on the streets as well as in government halls. The Tulip Revolution justified public protest as a tactic for political bargaining, and both the opposition and the government continued to use it. This time revealed both the persistence of nonviolent techniques in Kyrgyz politics and their incapacity to achieve long-term institutional effects in the absence of elite consensus.

The first significant test of Bakiyev's administration occurred in spring 2006, when opposition parties and civil society groups held demonstrations demanding that he fulfils his commitments toward constitutional reform. Protesters in Bishkek and other towns demanded a new constitution that would limit presidential powers, strengthen parliamentary supervision, and provide a clear system of checks and balances. Their objections were not vague: Bakiyev had immediately begun consolidating power within his family and southern networks, creating resentment in citizens who had recently deposed Akayev for similar violations. The administration replied with a combination of concessions and stalling tactics, appointing commissions to develop a new constitution but putting off any substantive reforms. Bakiyev was obliged to make a concession due to pressure. On November 9, 2006, he signed a new constitution that limited some presidential powers, particularly those related to the nomination of government officials, while strengthening the function of parliament. This result was largely regarded as a success for the opposition and nonviolent mobilization, demonstrating that continuous street pressure could force concessions from the executive. But this achievement was short-lived. Within weeks, Bakiyev and his allies in parliament began moving to reestablish his control. Pro-presidential deputies submitted a rewritten constitutional framework in December 2006, taking advantage of technical gaps and opposition divisions to return many of the powers Bakiyev had recently renounced. The November constitution was little more than a stopgap measure, repealed once protests lost traction (Shukuralieva, 2012, pp. 30-56).

The pattern was repeated in April 2007, when a new round of protests blocked Bishkek. Demonstrators accused Bakiyev of breaking his promises, distorting legal rules, and promoting corruption. The mobilization was massive, thousands tented in central Bishkek, waving banners

demanding "Reforms Now." Another time, the opposition's inability to maintain cohesion weakened the cause. Tensions between northern and southern factions, as well as disagreements over whether to call for Bakiyev's resignation or additional constitutional reforms, divided the demonstration's alliance. After conflicts between demonstrators and police, the protests dispersed without producing any substantial outcomes. Bakiyev emerged weakened but still in power, having proved his ability to resist huge mobilizations (Kupatadze, 2013, pp. 56-76).

The constitutional crisis of 2006-2007 exposed two key forces that impacted Kyrgyzstan's future course. Firstly, it demonstrated the enduring importance of nonviolent street politics: mass protest remained a viable and recurring form of political expression able to obtain compromises from governments. Secondly, it demonstrated the limitations of such mobilization in the absence of institutional stability. Since the opposition was unable to turn popular successes into long-term reforms, and Bakiyev effectively manipulated constitutional issues, the protests created instability rather than transformation. The outcome was a cycle of mobilization and rollback, in which the administration routinely made short-term compromises only to re-establish power after the people departed (Kupatadze, 2013, pp. 56-76).

Overall, this time proved that nonviolent protest in Kyrgyzstan worked either as an instrument for questioning political power and as an indication of the vulnerability of governmental institutions. On the one hand, regular people's capacity to take over public areas and question the presidency's authority set Kyrgyzstan apart from more authoritarian Central Asian governments such as Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, where protests were quickly suppressed with blood (Bakker, 2006, pp. 108). On the other side, the reliance on protest as a substitute for established accountability procedures revealed the vulnerability of Kyrgyz politics. By the end of 2007, Kyrgyzstan was trapped in a paradox: nonviolent mobilization was alive and recurring, but its political influence was fleeting, undercut by elite division and a lack of long-term changes.

6.4: New elections and socio-economic crises

The constitutional crises of 2006-2007 resulted in a watershed moment for Kyrgyz politics: the legislative elections of December 2007. After fighting multiple waves of protest and effectively regaining presidential authority, Kurmanbek Bakiyev moved to solidify his position via an electoral process meant less as a democratic practice and more to institutionalize executive power. The president dismissed parliament in October 2007 when the Constitutional Court overturned previous reforms, giving him a chance to reshape the balance of power in his favour. New electoral laws were implemented, transitioning the system from single-mandate districts to a national proportional system with high requirements. On paper, this change was seen as a step toward modernizing Kyrgyzstan's fragmented party system and strengthening political organizations. It was a meticulously orchestrated

strategy to exclude independent candidates, suppress smaller opposition parties, and gain a parliamentary majority for a pro-presidential group (Laurelle, 2012, pp. 39-49).

The key component of this plan was the formation of Ak Jol, “Bright Path”, a quickly constructed political party associated with Bakiyev. It was not a true cultural power, but rather an electoral tool meant to consume administrative resources, organize patronage networks, and offer the appearance of support from the public. Opposition parties had severe barriers. The electoral rules required any party to exceed not only a national 5% barrier but also a regional threshold in each region, posing an impossible challenge for groups with disparate geographical bases. Furthermore, the Central Electoral Commission, which was dominated by Bakiyev supporters, disqualified parties on technical grounds and manipulated registration procedures. The campaigns took place within a context in which state-controlled media supported Ak Jol, while opposition rallies were subjected to bureaucratic persecution (Laurelle, 2012, pp. 39-49).

In the December 2007's polls, Ak Jol won a landslide victory, winning more than 70% of the vote and most seats in the new parliament. Many important opposition organizations, notably Ata Meken, were prohibited from joining the assembly after the Central Electoral Commission rejected them due to suspected violations. International reporters, including the OSCE/ODIHR, gave harsh judgments, citing serious violations ranging from ballot stuffing and intimidation to the abuse of government resources. The elections did not fulfil international criteria for fairness and openness, undermining Kyrgyzstan's democratic objectives (Anghelescu & Dzardanova, 2023, pp. 43-61).

The resistance was not eliminated; it remained active in civil society and regional strongholds, but its formal political presence was significantly reduced. The elections exposed the structural inadequacy of nonviolent mobilization in the absence of institutional safeguards: while protesters frequently demanded acceptance, they did not prevent Bakiyev from reestablishing authority through manipulated electoral processes. Instead of ushering in competitive politics, the revolution established a cycle in which widespread mobilization might temporarily limit presidential power but not prevent its eventual re-consolidation. By the end of 2007, Kyrgyzstan's democratic experience was in decline, with the re-emergence of a presidentially dominated system that mirrored the Akayev era. Although the resistance's official presence was considerably reduced, it continued to be strong in civil society and in local strongholds. Despite being denied representation in parliament, opposition parties like Omurbek Tekebayev's Ata Meken (Fatherland) and Almazbek Atambayev's Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan (SDPK) persisted in organizing protests and voicing popular discontent. Youth organizations like KelKel continued to be active at the local level as well, while being progressively sidelined by government pressure. Even though demonstrators regularly called for accountability, Bakiyev was able to regain power through fraudulent elections, exposing the structural limitations of violent mobilization in its lack of institutional safeguards (Doolotkeldieva, 2007, pp. 26-50).

But, if the 2007 parliamentary elections solidified Bakiyev's political supremacy, the years following have highlighted the profound instability of his social contract with the Kyrgyz people. Between 2008 and 2009, Kyrgyzstan experienced a series of rising socioeconomic crises that revealed the regime's inconsistencies: as Bakiyev and his closest associates acquired extraordinary wealth and influence, regular citizen's living standards stagnated or deteriorated. The disparity among elite wealth and peasant suffering fuelled growing discontent, provided the stage for new agitation.

Kyrgyzstan's already weak economy, which was highly based on remittances, agriculture, and small-scale trade, was exacerbated by the global economic crisis of 2008. The prices of basic commodities, particularly food and fuel, have risen, putting a strain on low-income people. Prices decimated earnings and savings, while unemployment remained high, particularly among youths and rural communities. During the same period, public services degraded. Chronic electricity shortages afflicted the country, with rolling blackouts in the winter of 2008-2009 leaving many houses without heat or lighting. Infrastructure breakdowns highlighted the state's inability to deliver basic welfare, further delegitimizing the government in the eyes of the public (Nikolai, 2010, pp. 138- 149).

Although the rest of the population had difficulty, Bakiyev's family and close allies appeared to prosper. His son, Maksim Bakiyev, became a key player in the government, in charge of the Central Agency for Development, Investment, and Innovation, which managed major privatizations and investments. Allegations of corruption, cronyism, and rent-seeking increased as vital economic sectors including energy, telecommunications, and finance, which were controlled by networks related to the presidential dynasty. Privatization arrangements were often regarded as unclear, with insiders profiting at the expense of the public. These occurrences heightened the feeling that the revolution's accomplishments had been captured by a small elite, repeating the same patterns of nepotism and corruption that had caused Akayev's demise. By 2009, discontent was evident: while Bakiyev was re-elected in July of the same year after another profoundly fraudulent electoral process, the atmosphere in the country had moved significantly towards rage and disillusionment. The Tulip Revolution worked in deposing a president, but it did not change the fundamental principles of elite dominance and rent-seeking. As living conditions deteriorated and the divide among rulers and the ruled increased, the atmosphere was prepared for another outbreak of widespread rebellion (Nikolai, 2010, pp. 138- 149).

6.5: 2010's uprisings and Otunbayeva interim government

The accumulating tensions of the Bakiyev regime exploded violently in April 2010, as a wave of huge protests and violent clashes deposed the president in a matter of days. The insurrection was not a spontaneous outbreak, but rather the result of years of socioeconomic suffering, elite rivalries, and growing dissatisfaction with the Tulip Revolution's unmet expectations. The initial spark came in the

form of substantial utility price increases announced in early 2010. Electricity and heating rates increased by up to 100%, dealing a severe setback to families already burdened by unemployment, inflation, and frequent blackouts.

Discontent rapidly deteriorated into public hostility. In late March and early April, opposition leaders such as Roza Otunbayeva, Almazbek Atambayev, and Omurbek Tekebayev organized demonstrations in regional towns such as Talas and Naryn, mobilising networks of activists, NGOs, and local elites who were excluded from the president's elites. On April 6, demonstrators in Talas seized government buildings, clashing with police personnel and sparking a chain reaction. Protests quickly spread to Bishkek, where thousands gathered in Ala-Too Square. On April 7, the conflict hit its climax. Police officers used tear gas, stun grenades, and live bullets against the demonstrators, leading to more than 80 deaths and hundreds of additional injuries. Despite the brutality, demonstrators stormed the presidential compound, the White House, forcing Bakiyev to escape the country. Within hours, the system that appeared to be stable following the 2007 elections fell apart brutally (Termikulov, 2010, pp. 589-600).

The intensity and repercussions of the April 2010 rebellion were different from those of the Tulip Revolution. Whereas 2005 had been nonviolent, 2010 was characterized by violence, revealing a regime reluctant to give up power voluntarily. However, on both occasions, public mobilization proved decisive: despite manipulating election systems and controlling the police, Bakiyev was unable to overcome the overwhelming pressure of an indignant community. The events highlighted a repeating pattern in Kyrgyz politics: authoritarian consolidation was only achievable up to a point, after which the regime's failure to offer material advances or allow criticism led to its demise. The uprising emphasized Kyrgyzstan's political paradox: a society powerful enough to organize, but institutions too weak to channel that mobilization into long-term transformation (Termikulov, 2010, pp. 589-600).

Following Bakiyev's exile, an Interim Government emerged, led by Roza Otunbayeva, a senior diplomat and one of the few female leaders in post-Soviet politics. The temporary government worked fast to restore order and assert legitimacy. Her first duties were challenging: restoring security, stopping Bakiyev supporters from returning, and resolving the problems of a violently traumatised community. Bakiyev officially resigned from exile in Belarus on April 15, but his family and allies continued to exert influence from outside. The Otunbayeva administration distinguished itself from its predecessor by attempting to institutionalize rather than personalize power. Recognizing the hazards of another presidential dictatorship, the temporary authorities launched a constitutional reform process aimed at establishing a republic governed by parliament. On June 27, 2010, a national vote passed a new constitution that divided executive power between a prime minister and a president with limited authority. This change was heralded as a watershed moment in Kyrgyzstan's post-independence

history, breaking away from the country's traditional presidential system. By emphasizing parliamentary politics, the interim government intended to prevent authoritarian consolidation and build a more democratic, competitive system (Huskey, 2005, pp. 483-490).

However, the obstacles facing Otunbayeva's government were enormous. The state institutions were weak, the economy was uncertain, and the security condition remained unstable. In June 2010, just a few months after the revolt, Kyrgyzstan was rocked by ethnic violence in the southern cities of Osh and Jalal-Abad, when conflicts between Kyrgyz and Uzbek exploded. According to government estimates, approximately 400 people were murdered (independent groups say the true figure is closer to 2,000), many were injured, and hundreds of thousands of Uzbeks fled across the Uzbek border (Melvin, 2001, pp. 165-193).

Kyrgyzstan's southern regions, particularly Osh and Jalal-Abad, have long been ethnically mixed, with considerable communities of Uzbeks living alongside ethnic Kyrgyz. Uzbeks were approximately 14% of the national population, but in several southern regions they were the local majority. Tensions between the two groups were not recent: disagreements over land, political representation, and economic opportunity had already erupted, most notably during the 1990 Osh riots, when battles over land and political exclusion killed hundreds of people. By 2010, economic stagnation, unemployment, and the breakdown of Bakiyev's patronage networks following his fall had exacerbated these long-standing problems. Satellite imagery and independent research revealed that entire Uzbek neighbourhoods were systematically demolished. Human Rights Watch and the OSCE said that police officers either failed to intervene effectively or, in some cases, contributed to the violence by arming Kyrgyz groups and attacking Uzbek villages. The incident highlighted the limits of revolutionary change: despite Bakiyev's removal, profound social and ethnic divisions in Kyrgyzstan persisted, threatening to destabilize the fledgling democratic experiment (Megoran, 2005, pp. 555-580).

Considering these setbacks, Otunbayeva successfully led the country toward a new political framework. Under her leadership, legislative elections were arranged and held in October 2010, resulting in a pluralist legislature with no single party in control. For the first time in Central Asia, a parliamentary system evolved, while imperfectly, indicating a potential shift away from the region's ingrained authoritarianism. Otunbayeva did not try to prolong her term beyond the interim period, a rare show of moderation in a political environment dominated by personal ambition. This move increased her credibility and aided the country's growth, even while the state's structural flaws remained unsolved.

The April 2010 rebellion and the Otunbayeva interim government thus represented simultaneously a break and a continuation of Kyrgyzstan's political path. On one hand, it marked an important change from Bakiyev's authoritarianism, motivated by popular mobilization and culminated in the region's

first experience with democratic government. On the other side, the brutality of the uprising and following ethnic confrontations exposed Kyrgyz society's inherent vulnerability and the challenge of transforming radical mobilisation into long-term democratic administration. The 2010 events, like the Tulip Revolution, demonstrated the power of nonviolent (and often violent) activism to remove previous leaders, as well as Kyrgyz system's ongoing inability to cement these triumphs into stable, accountable governance. The Otunbayeva period provided an idea of what was possible: a pluralist order based on parliamentary competition. Even if the temporary government tried to establish order and legitimacy, the deeper fractures in Kyrgyz society indicated that the cycle of revolution and disillusionment was not over (Huskey, 2005, pp. 483-490).

6.6: From Otunbayeva to the present, between instability and geopolitical interests

Following Roza Otunbayeva's interim administration from 2010 to 2011, Kyrgyzstan began a new era of political growth, alternating between cautious institutional experimentation and recurring authoritarian impulses. Almazbek Atambayev's election in October 2011 was the first peaceful and constitutional transfer of power in the country's post-independence history, bringing new optimism for the consolidation of democracy in a region characterized by persistent authoritarian administrations. Atambayev's leadership was marked by efforts to boost state capacity and reestablish executive power over the fractured political system that developed in the aftermath of the April 2010 revolution.

On the national stage, he tried to balance the complex interplay between parliament, the presidency, and the prime minister, a triangular arrangement established by the 2010 Constitution, which deliberately weakened presidential authority in order to avoid the personalization of power that characterized the administrations of Askar Akayev and Kurmanbek Bakiyev. Atambayev operated in this hybrid system by advocating for a 2016 constitutional referendum that shifted certain powers from the presidency to the prime minister, strengthening the position of the Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan (SDPK), which he personally controlled. Originally described as a step to promote parliamentary democracy, opponents pointed out that it mostly reinforced Atambayev's party network, increasing neopatrimonialism practices in the name of institutional change. In foreign policy, Atambayev distanced Kyrgyzstan from US security influence by closing the Manas Transit Centre in 2014, a key hub for NATO operations in Afghanistan, while also strengthening relationships with Moscow and ensuring Kyrgyzstan's membership in the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) in 2015 (Halidov, 2022, pp. 115-130). Atambayev in his five-year mandate, operated in continuity with Otunbayeva, marking a fundamental step for Kyrgyzstan, which was getting closer to being a free country, despite some allegations of nepotism made by Atambayev’s opposition.

The subsequent election of Sooronbay Jeenbekov in 2017 appeared to indicate continuity, as Atambayev had chosen him as the next president. Nevertheless, Jeenbekov's presidency quickly

devolved into an open rivalry with his predecessor, demonstrating the fragility of elite alliances and the volatility of patronal politics in Kyrgyzstan. By 2019, Jeenbekov had revoked Atambayev of his presidential immunity, began penal proceedings against him, and oversaw his arrest after violent battles between Atambayev's followers and police officers. The peak of tension occurred during the October 2020 legislative elections, which were widely criticized as illegitimate and overwhelmingly favored pro-government parties. Mass protests began in Bishkek, quickly escalating into a political crisis, resulting in the annulment of election results and Jeenbekov's resignation on October 15, 2020. This period, often known as Kyrgyzstan's "third revolution," was similar to the upheavals of 2005 and 2010, but varied in its speed and the unexpected ascent of a new political actor: Sadyr Japarov. Japarov, a populist politician undergoing a jail sentence for kidnapping a local governor, was released by protestors during the commotion and quickly took control as prime minister and acting president (Achylova, 2024, pp. 318-336).

In January 2021, Japarov reinforced his authority by dominating the presidential elections with about 80% of the votes, while a separate referendum strongly backed a return to a presidential system, reversing the 2010 constitutional experiment. The so-called "Khanstitution" of 2021 granted the president broad powers, including control over the judiciary, the authority to dissolve the legislative body, and the establishment of the People's Kurultai, an undemocratic council with extensive legislative authority. These steps completely tore apart the checks and balances that had defined the post-2010 system, bringing in an evident autocratic shift. While Japarov characterized the measures as necessary to address political instability and establish decisive leadership, others saw them as institutionalizing personal authority. The decrease in democratic standards was reflected in subsequent Freedom House assessments, which lowered Kyrgyzstan's rating from "Partly Free" to "Not Free," citing restrictions on media, civil society, and political opposition (Doolotkeldieva, 2017, pp. 26-50).

Kyrgyzstan saw major democratic declines starting in 2021. Independent media sources like Kloop were shut down, NGOs were targeted under a new "foreign agents" statute like Russia's "foreign agents" legislation, and journalists and activists were arrested on unsubstantiated accusations of radicalism or destabilization. The narrowing of political space coincided with a populist movement emphasizing sovereignty, traditional values, and antipathy against alleged foreign involvement. Japarov presented himself as a champion of national unity and stability, using nationalistic language to win the masses. At the same time, his administration pursued ambitious economic initiatives, including building up infrastructure like the Balykchy-Bishkek railway and discussions for the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan rail route, which aimed to transform the country into a regional transportation centre. Kyrgyzstan's economic performance increased at first with budget surpluses and rising revenues in 2022-2024, although most of this growth remained susceptible to foreign events and primarily reliant on transfers from Russian labour migrants (Doolotkeldieva, 2017, pp. 26-50).

These internal changes took place within a larger regional and global framework that influenced and, in numerous ways, limited Kyrgyzstan's destiny during the past ten years. Japarov's focus on patriotism and sovereignty reflected a larger trend in Central Asia toward the consolidation of executive power, bringing Kyrgyzstan closer to the authoritarian paths of its neighbors, like Tajikistan and Kazakhstan. Bishkek's dependence on Beijing and Moscow as its principal global allies demonstrated continuity: China solidified its economic role through the Belt and Road Initiative, especially in the infrastructure and energy sectors, while Russia continued to play a crucial role through labor migration remittances and security cooperation within the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Since the U.S. Manas air base closed in 2014 and the atmosphere became less friendly toward Western-backed organizations and media following 2021, a distinct discontinuity in the decline of Western influence also became apparent. The hybrid character of Kyrgyzstan's post-2021 evolution is highlighted by this combination of a dramatic decline in civic pluralism and diplomatic continuity toward China and Russia (Reuters, 2024; Reuters, 2025).

Locally, Japarov confronted ongoing issues due to unresolved territorial disputes, particularly with Tajikistan. The situation worsened severely in September 2022, when violence in the Batken district killed over one hundred people and displaced thousands of civilians. Although periodic violence had long plagued the Fergana Valley, the 2022 conflict was the bloodiest yet, demonstrating Central Asia's fragile intergovernmental ties. In the months that followed, Kyrgyzstan increased border operations, resulting in the so-called Khujand Treaty, signed in March 2025 with Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, which delimited substantial areas of the boundary and reconnected critical trade and transportation links. This diplomatic success, while substantial, was fragile and relied on all sides' s political commitment to maintain cooperation.

Kyrgyzstan is an ideal example of the challenges that frequently follow post-revolutionary political transformation.Kyrgyzstan is avoiding the dynastic dictatorship seen in several of its Central Asian nations, but its democratic systems have slowly deteriorated. The 2010 Constitution's guarantee to limit the president's authority with a parliamentary-presidential compromise has been undermined by Japarov's "super-presidentialism." What has arisen is not only a return to pre-2010 norms, but a hybrid system that incorporates popular legitimacy, institutional control, and neo patrimonial management. Security has been secured not thanks to the growth of legal institutions, but by the concentration of power in the presidency, which is supported by nationalist propaganda and targeted oppression.

This pattern highlights a larger structural problem: popular mobilization in Kyrgyzstan has been efficient at removing problematic leaders, but it is failing in establishing democratic norms, thus replicating a cycle of upheaval and authoritarian rule (Lewis & Sagnayeva, 2020, pp. 77-95).

At the regional level, Kyrgyzstan's diplomatic participation, including the 2025 Khujand Treaty with Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, indicates a pragmatic realization that domestic stability necessitates

external stability. However, the continuance of unresolved socioeconomic inequities, high economic reliance on external players, and the shrinkage of civic space call into question Japarov's framework's durability. Rather than being a straight development toward either democracy or dictatorship, Kyrgyzstan's post-Otunbayeva trajectory exemplifies the instability of hybrid regimes in which moments of pluralism mix with, and frequently lead to, authoritarian regression.

CONCLUSION

The Tulip Revolution of March 2005 has been recognized as an iconic event not only in Kyrgyzstan's contemporary history, but also in the larger panorama of post-Soviet governance. As the very first and sole "colour revolution" in Central Asia, it exemplified both the potential and the contradiction of nonviolent protest. On the one hand, it revealed the power of nonviolent mass movement to undermine and overthrow an established authoritarian leader. On the other hand, it demonstrated the limitations of such movements in bringing about long-term institutional change and ending the vicious cycle of neo patrimonial dynamics that has characterized Kyrgyz government since its independence. In this respect, the Tulip Revolution was successful in the short term, since it ended Askar Akayev's long reign, but it was ineffective overall, as the country immediately reverted to authoritarianism under Kurmanbek Bakiyev, resulting in new discontent and upheaval in 2010.

According to the study literature on nonviolent conflict, the Tulip Revolution exemplifies the strategic logic highlighted by authors such as Chenoweth and Stephan in their studies of resistance tactics. Nonviolent resistance is more successful than violent insurrection because it reduces barriers to participation, strengthens social alliances, and increases demonstrators' legitimacy. In Kyrgyzstan, protests occurred following the seriously defective parliamentary elections of February and March 2005, attracting support not only from Bishkek's intellectuals but also from rural people in the south, showing the demonstration's inclusive nature. This wide base of participation weakened the regime's ability to portray the opposition as a fringe or radical group. Additionally, nonviolent protest triggered conditions for layoffs and changes in loyalties within the police body, as underlined by Ackerman and Rodal (2008) and confirmed by Chenoweth and Stephan. The choice by Kyrgyz police to avoid large-scale repression, combined with Akayev's subsequent evacuation from the nation, demonstrates the strategic significance of military neutrality in determining the result of peaceful revolutions.

The processes that permitted Akayev's downfall can be further clarified by Brian Martin's (2015) concept of the "backfire dynamic" and the older concept of "political jiu-jitsu." When state violence is used against unarmed protestors, it frequently undermines the regime and motivates wider opposition. Despite repression in the Kyrgyz Republic was limited in comparison to other authoritarian regimes, moments of confrontation, like arrests of opposition members and attempts to break up protests, had the paradoxical consequence of attracting more individuals to the cause. These backfire consequences are strongly reliant on the power of civil society and the ability of opposition networks to amplify state brutality. While Kyrgyzstan lacked the strong institutional structures observed in other colour revolutions, private media and informal networks performed critical roles in disseminating information and exposing Akayev's regime as corrupt. Thus, the Tulip Revolution conforms to

theoretical expectations: minimal persecution of nonviolent protestors, in an environment where civil society could still operate, undermined rather than reinforced the regime.

Given these conceptual analogies, the Tulip Revolution highlights the basic challenges faced by nonviolent movements in the face of enduring structural constraints. Although nonviolent action can quickly bring about political transformation and overthrow an authoritarian leader, it infrequently succeeds in changing the institutional basis of authoritarianism. The overthrow of Akayev in Kyrgyzstan did not destroy the client-based system of government; rather, it only restructured elites. This demonstrates one of the paradoxes of nonviolent revolts: while they are successful in causing disturbances, their capacity to establish long-lasting democratic governments is still up for debate.

The normative boundaries of the uprisings itself as well as the tenacity of established elites are major contributors to this outcome. Despite their successful mobilization against presidential corruption and electoral fraud in 2005, opposition groups and civic activists missed a comprehensive and realistic plan for systemic change. Instead of positively articulating an alternative style of administration, their demands were primarily phrased in negative terms, such as opposing cronyism and removing Akayev. Because of this, there was no reliable plan for reorganizing institutions, stopping neopatrimonial behavior, or setting up systems of accountability after power changed. The ability of nonviolent action to develop into a democracy-building force was undermined by the lack of a clear political project. The Tulip Revolution constituted the classic instance of what researchers of contentious politics refer to as a "reactive" movement: one that was able to bring disparate groups together against an unpopular ruler, but was unable to maintain unity after the immediate goal was accomplished (Bunce & Wolchik, 2010, pp. 43-68).

This interpretation is consistent with Bunce and Wolchik's more general contention that public-motivated regime change does not always lead to the consolidation of democracy, especially in situations where neopatrimonial procedures, nepotism, and rivalries between regions predominate in political life. In the Kyrgyz situation, the newly elected administration resorted to well-known networks of bribery and regional imbalance due to a lack of a positive and forward-thinking vision. As a result, the very fact that nonviolent action was successful in ousting Akayev paradoxically exposed its shortcomings: in the absence of a viable and aspirational substitute, protest was only a means of bringing about political change rather than a basis for lasting change accomplished (Bunce & Wolchik, 2010, pp. 43-68).

The Kyrgyz case demonstrates the dual nature of nonviolent techniques. On the bright side, they galvanize broad society groups, lowering the costs of engagement, and provide ethical legitimacy that violent conflicts frequently lack. This not only encourages regime defections, but it also increases the cultural significance of civic power, promoting narratives of action among individuals. However, the limitations are equally obvious: nonviolent campaigns often focus solely on eliminating a leader,

ignoring long-term processes such as institution-building, rule of law, and elite leadership. Following Akayev's departure, Kyrgyzstan lacked political norms and institutional safeguards to prevent the rapid rise of a new autocratic leader. This cycle emphasizes the importance of combining nonviolent mobilization with more incisive structural improvements, which were noticeably absent in 2005 (Radnitz, 2006, pp. 146).

The influence of the Tulip Revolution went outside Kyrgyzstan, gaining symbolic significance in discussions about democratization more generally as well as in Central Asia. In contrast with the Rose Revolution in Georgia or the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, the Kyrgyz rebellion occurred in a territory with weak democratic traditions and significant geographical restrictions. Kyrgyzstan, the only Central Asian country to have a colour revolution, suddenly stood out in an otherwise repressive region. However, the ensuing resurgence of authoritarianism demonstrated the challenge of maintaining democratic achievements in an environment ruled by Russian influence, Chinese prosperity, and minimal Western engagement. The revolution's symbolic significance was apparent, but its practical impact on the course of Central Asian administration was limited. Indeed, the Tulip Revolution failed to create a regional "domino effect", highlighting the importance of contextual circumstances in defining the spread of nonviolent movements (Way, 2008, pp. 55-69).

Yet the legacy of the Tulip Revolution keeps influencing Kyrgyzstan's politics. Later events, such as the 2010's riots, were impacted by the 2005 experience, demonstrating that citizens still believed that governments were capable of being held responsible through collective resistance. This endurance of protest culture distinguishes Kyrgyzstan from many of its neighbouring countries and demonstrates the long-standing heritage of peaceful mobilization, even in a lack of established democracy. Civil society participants, youth organizations, and independent media sources continue to use the Tulip Revolution's symbolic value to demonstrate that nonviolent action can change the direction of governance, even if only momentarily. At the same time, the revolution highlights the difficulties of avoiding political breakdown. When consecutive uprisings fail to provide real gains, popular disenchantment grows, and the validity of protest may be questioned. Kyrgyzstan's loop of upheaval and disillusionment has generated a sceptical political atmosphere, with periodic mobilization but difficult long-term institutional transformation. This implies a broader lesson for nonviolent resistance theory: overthrowing a dictator is only the first stage, and without long-term post-revolutionary reform, the initial victory may descend into instability or authoritarian decline (Ackerman & Rodal, 2008, pp. 123-140).

In this unstable context, the contribution of civil society along with nonviolent action remains both potential and risky. On the one hand, the history of mass protest remains as a check on potential authoritarian excesses, preserving some degree of plurality in Kyrgyz politics. On the other side, recurring upheavals without institutional implementation risk locking the country in a cycle of

instability in which each new government is discredited and deposed before long-term changes can take hold. The task for Kyrgyzstan is to redirect the spirit of nonviolent movement toward positive state-building rather than periodic regime change. This would entail building independent institutions, modernizing the legal system, and limiting the widespread influence of oligarchic networks, all of which are difficult but necessary if the Tulip Revolution's legacy is to be claimed as a foundation instead of a transitory moment.

In conclusion, the Tulip Revolution exemplifies both the potential and danger of nonviolent resistance in societies experiencing political change. It demonstrates the strategic effectiveness of nonviolent techniques in overthrowing authoritarian governments while also reminding us of the vulnerability of revolutionary victories when deeper institutional reform is lacking. Its legacy is thus one of ambivalence rather than clear triumph or failure: a symbol of opportunity but also warning of the risks of disappointed expectations. Kyrgyzstan's future will be determined less by theoretical calls for democratization and more by the country's ability to deal with the structural legacies that have historically obstructed its political growth: established patronage systems, regional disagreements, financial dependence, and the persistent influence of foreign powers. The Tulip Revolution showed that although popular mobilization can be an effective tool for overthrowing long-standing leaders, it is not enough to bring about the institutional changes required to address Kyrgyzstan's more serious structural issues. Demonstration runs the risk of staying a short-term disturbance rather than a basis for long-term change if responsible institutions, checks and balances, and a clear vision for change in politics are not concurrently built. In this way, the uprising demonstrated the potential of peaceful protest to change immediate political results as well as its drawbacks in achieving the wider consolidation of democracy which numerous citizens had hoped for.

The future importance of the Tulip Revolution will be measured not by how well Kyrgyzstan implements a Western-style system of democracy, instead by how long the political class and citizens can maintain the momentum of nonviolent participation to promote gradual reforms, improve mechanisms for transparency, and establish a political culture less reliant on individualistic leaderships. The revolution's consequences cannot be viewed as immutable or "set in stone"; instead, they must be considered in the context of the intricate relationship between history, regional dynamics, and internal structures of power that keep affecting Kyrgyzstan. In this regard, the Tulip Revolution is more than just a story of popular success or a brief period of resistance; it is a vivid representation of the contentious and unequal process of state formation and civic engagement in post-Soviet Central Asia. Its lasting significance lies in how it exposed both the potential and drawbacks of nonviolent resistance, pointing out the challenges of converting mobilization into lasting political change without presuming that Westernization immediately corresponds with national well-being or institutional consolidation.

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