

## A New Generation of Hope

by Swanee Hunt, Scripps Howard News Service, November 23, 2005

Can you find Kyrgyzstan on a map? Odds are, not. This Central Asian nation of five million, tucked between China and Russia, is home to an American military base servicing Afghanistan and a large Peace Corps delegation with 141 volunteers. It has the potential to become an exemplary democracy—or another hotbed of political unrest.

The Kyrgyz are an ancient people. Their nomadic past is not too distant, and the written form of their language was only introduced about 80 years ago. "I gathered kites and turned them into hawks. I gathered slaves from different tribes and made them a nation," says Manas, the hero from the country's most celebrated epic poem. His statue stands proudly in the center of Bishkek, the capital.

Despite an ancient history, modern Kyrgyz society is young. After decades under communist rule, the country suffers from maladies shared today by other former Soviet republics: rampant poverty, environmental degradation, economic stagnation, and most important, corruption. During my recent trip to Kyrgyzstan, a farm family told me that for common folk, Soviet times were difficult but predictable, and therefore more livable. At least basic needs were met.

In this dismal situation, political unrest comes as no surprise: citizens are outraged as they watch cash being pocketed by corrupt officials. Like the better-known former Soviet republics of Georgia and Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan was recently shaken by a revolution that overthrew the authoritarian government of long-time leader Askar Akayev. Last March, the "Tulip Revolution" brought hope that a new system would be born, but that hope was short lived. As corruption re-emerged, people complained bitterly that nothing had changed except the names at the top.

Mahmud is a student of international comparative politics at the American University of Central Asia (AUCA) in Bishkek. Funded partly by the US Department of State, AUCA attracts bright young people from the region—future leaders of Central Asia. Given the economic situation, the highest hope many students express is to leave the country. "My friends are looking for jobs. They'll do anything. I know a very smart girl who even knows English and was looking to be a waitress or to clean houses."

Mahmud continued: "Students at the university are very intelligent and open minded. They see some spark of hope in their country. They are patriotic. They want to see progress, and eventually, they'll be able to make it happen. Through the revolution, they saw that even the common person can make a difference."

His eyes shone brightly as he described a memorable scene: "A young man was on a horse wearing an orange bandana. As the horse reared, the man lifted up the Kyrgyz flag. Everyone went crazy; they were screaming. A few minutes later, as the crowd pressed forward, the police inside the government palace gates threw down their gear and ran away. Some people climbed over the gates and opened them. Then thousands stormed into the compound. The leaders of the protest were shouting to the crowd. Soon they'd knocked down the doors. One young man opened a window and started waving the flag."

Against that backdrop of unbridled possibilities, Mahmud represents a cohort of young people, in Kyrgyzstan and around the world, who are searching for a better future. They feel more and more distant from politics. And as long as the cancer of corruption is metastasizing throughout a globalized community, their future will remain bleak.

Young people around the world incorporate tremendous energy, which can be directed positively or negatively. If we fail to engage them in creating a more just and secure world, we'll open doors to others eager to offer answers to the fundamental questions we're failing to address.

To paraphrase Manas, it's time for Kyrgyzstan—and the world—to gather its youth and make space for honest, open democracy.