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A Word of Advice for Nazarbayev

By Konstantin Sonin

When I started writing this column a week ago the working title was "Some Advice for Askar Akayev." Events in Kyrgyzstan have unfolded so quickly, however, that the former president is no longer in a position to benefit from my advice, which was: "Don't rig elections" and "Don't put people behind bars for political reasons."

There are undoubtedly situations in which a leader simply cannot negotiate with the opposition, when concessions only whet his rivals' appetite and the leader's own lieutenants are so entrenched that they're terrified at the prospect of surrendering power. But this was emphatically not the case in Georgia, Ukraine or Kyrgyzstan, all of which have recently seen a change of regime. In all three cases, the opposition would have continued to work within the existing system if not for the meddling of the current leaders. By falsifying election results and throwing their rivals in jail, these regimes turned opposition leaders into revolutionaries.

The simple idea that when people's votes aren't counted they take to the streets applies not only to the Commonwealth of Independent States. Politicians in those Baltic countries where a significant proportion of the population does not have the right to vote should realize that by denying these people the right to express their discontent at the ballot box they are laying the groundwork for revolution.

Case in point: The Kremlin's distrust of democratic elections is rather remarkable. After all, the current leadership owes everything to the relatively free parliamentary elections of 1999 and 2003. The 2004 presidential election, which provided President Vladimir Putin with a low level of legitimacy, was a fairly rare phenomenon: The election itself was rigged but the results were not. The lesson to be learned is that if the president's approval rating is 60 percent, you can rig the electoral process on one condition: His approval rating has to be real, not a fiction intended for the president's eyes only. How the president is supposed to gauge his popularity accurately in the absence of a free press is another matter.

In any case, my advice to Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev is: "Don't falsify election results." If his party or his daughter in a single-mandate district election receives 60 percent of the vote without ballot-stuffing and a clampdown on television, no opposition at home or abroad will frighten them. If not, Nazarbayev would be better off allowing his supporters to lose an election rather than fleeing the presidential palace in a helicopter one day and spending the rest of his life wrangling in the courts with the government of his own country over some assets in a Swiss bank. I'm thinking, of course, of the late Philippine leader Ferdinand Marcos. He won his first two terms in free and fair elections, but when it came time for him to step down, he decided to stay in power, leading to 10 years of military dictatorship, stolen elections, mass demonstrations, and finally a suitcase, the airport and Paris.

The example of Marcos also demonstrates that leaders are well advised to think about what their former allies are in jail for. If the official charge of abuse of power is correct, the crowds in the streets won't free them and carry them on their shoulders to the presidential palace. If the official charges were fabricated, however, it's better to let these people go and perhaps even to apologize. Otherwise they'll get out of jail on their own and emerge mad as hell and more attractive than ever, like Yulia Tymoshenko. This is my advice for Nazarbayev, but I have no objection if anyone else wants to put it into practice.

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