

By Yulia Savchenko

Corruption in Kyrgyzstan has long inhabited every office in the Kyrgyz White House, especially its seventh floor, where president and other top-ranking officials “served” the people. In 2005, amid allegations of unprecedented corruption, President Askar Akaev was deposed in a popular uprising. The country’s new leadership proudly announced that they would put an end to corruption in Kyrgyzstan.

Recently we Kyrgyz celebrated the first anniversary of this promising announcement, begging the question of whether anyone has enjoyed any results thus far. Some probably have, but I have never met these optimists.

The top-down initiative of fighting corruption has never been marked by any visible progress on the ground. Prime Minister Felix Kulov seemed to be the only official who sincerely believed in the idea of rooting out corruption. In the early days of his office, Kulov announced that neither he nor his family members would ever be involved in any entrepreneurial activities in Kyrgyzstan.

Despite the fierce fight with corruption in the high echelons of power in the aftermath of the “Tulip Revolution,” the role model set by the prime minister has never become an overly appealing one on any floor of the White House. The latest civil protests in June 2006 in Bishkek called on the power-holders to put an end to the rampant corruption. The slogans of protesters read “President – stop serving your pockets!” and “No to the MAXIMization of economy” (referring to Maxim, the eldest son of president Kurmanbek Bakiev). Lots of people already have a strong feeling of *déjà vu*; the Politburo kids always liked doing business in Kyrgyzstan.

However, it’s not that other people in the country are standing still, lacking imagination. We tend to excel when it comes to making money illegally. One fascinating phenomenon surfaced during the days of “people’s” revolution and kept flourishing afterwards: buying civic activism.

No, you didn’t misread anything. Rumor has it that the rate to inspire people for expressing will, opinion and sometimes outrage varies nowadays from 100 to 1000 soms (US\$3 to US\$25).

One of the first experiments of this practice was an unquestionable success. A crowd of “protesters” on June 17, 2005, stormed the White House for the second time since the March revolution, demanding that their “candidate,” well known Kazakh businessman Urmatbek Baryktabasov, be registered as a member of parliament. The protests of this “frustrated electorate” were well organized. I saw buses packed with protesters come to downtown Bishkek from local districts. Upon leaving the buses, the crowd was instructed where to move and what to shout. Demonstrators got free transportation, free food and beverages, plus minor payments for the expression of their “free will.” Once the event was over, participants rushed to cars inconspicuously arranged at the perimeter of the main square in downtown Bishkek to collect their earnings.

The process was videotaped, but no one was prosecuted. It was one of the first cases of the reversed corruption – politicians offering money to ordinary citizens. Exciting!

In their daily affairs, Kyrgyz citizens are used to bribing officials for documents or services they need. In a country where average monthly salaries are only 4,000 soms (US\$100) at best, a fortune often is charged for processing paperwork when it needs to be done reasonably quickly or, in some cases, to be done at all.

A recent example is the campaign to issue new national passports in Kyrgyzstan. Here I can be very personal since in June 2005 my passport expired. I urgently needed to get a new document simply to be able to function as a citizen (there is a saying here that you are a bug if you don't have your paper) and, secondly, to be able to apply for the visa to the United States. The timing in my case was most unfortunate: The nationwide campaign on exchanging national passports, launched under the previous government, was deadlocked due to corruption questions. New passport forms were stuck somewhere in Moldova and so presumably no passports were being issued in Kyrgyzstan.

After a number of desperate calls to a number of state agencies, I found out that a dozen or so new passport forms were “reserved for special cases.” For my case to qualify as “special,” I was supposed to pay as much as \$600 – unofficially, of course. That same fixed rate popped up in my discussions with other desperate passport-seekers. Apparently many people were charged the same amount for having their passports done urgently, in spite of the promises of the newly elected government to put an end to corruption. The saga unfolded for almost a year until the head of the Department of Passport and Visa Regimes was finally sent to jail for abusing power. However, he was released after a couple of months.

This is a common scenario: Law enforcement agencies catch officials taking bribes, the officials are imprisoned, then other agencies see that they are released. According to a Ministry of Internal Affairs representative, 150 officials who took bribes were detained during the first six months of 2006, twice as many as during the same period of the previous year. The main question here is how many charges are dropped on their way to Kyrgyz courts?

On the surface, authorities in Kyrgyzstan pursue a “persistent” policy of rooting out corruption. Indeed, if we glance back at all anti-corruption efforts of the power holders in the republic, we find an impressive scale and a variety of actions. In 1999 President Akaev pioneered the process with the Law Against Corruption. In 2003 the Council for Good Governance was established under the patronage of the prime minister. Immediately after the revolution, President Bakiev said that the priority of the new government would be fighting corruption in all spheres. A special state body named National Agency of the Kyrgyz Republic for Prevention of Corruption was established. A year after he uttered his famous words we at least can say that the good will was there. In terms of the political impetus given it's not bad at all – for starters. In terms of the real-life practices, though, there have been no concrete consequences or changes for those who fall victim to the widespread tradition of paying their way through everyday life.

The World Bank recently conducted a study on the dynamics of corruption in 26 post-Soviet countries. The study demonstrates that only Kyrgyzstan and Russia, among those listed, failed in their anti-corruption efforts.

For a bystander, life in Kyrgyzstan appears to be a chain of never-ending financial acts of gratitude for everyday civil services. We need to be grateful to doctors (if we want to stay alive after their interventions), to the educators of our kids, to judges and policemen. And of course to a variety of bureaucrats for the work they do, which is, by the way, already rewarded by taxpayers' gratitude.

According to a survey conducted by the Center for the Study of Public Opinion in Kyrgyzstan, people “normally” show their gratitude by offering money to customs control system (93 percent of respondents), police (90 percent) and the courts and judiciary (66 percent). Among the most corrupt organization were customs, tax inspection (92 percent), militia and departments of internal affairs (90 percent) and the state auto inspection (89 percent). Thus it's indeed safe to conclude that the majority of the population is pessimistic about the Kyrgyz government's ambition to bring corruption to its knees.

The truth is the president himself is far less enthusiastic about fighting the corruption now than he was a year ago. Recently, in a voice full of hesitation, Bakiev said during one of his televised addresses: “We should deal with corruption. We should at least try to decrease it ... somehow.”