

## **Bishkek's Night of Looting**

**Author:** [IWPR Central Asia](#)

Shops plundered and some set on fire, with some suggesting the looting is partly a deliberate ploy to discredit Kyrgyzstan's new rulers.

Residents of the Kyrgyz capital were left in a state of shock by the outbreak of mass looting and arson in the night that followed the ousting of President Askar Akaev.

There are some suggestions the lawlessness could have been incited by figures from the old regime who wanted to create havoc before they left.

IWPR contributors saw crowds of 500 and upwards ransacking and burning supermarkets, boutiques, currency exchange offices and even hairdressing salons.

What made the disorder even more alarming is that the looters included apparently law-abiding citizens as well as people who looked as though they might be criminals.

People threw off their shoes and tried on the latest Italian designer fashions. Young girls struggled to drag away computer equipment, while old ladies made off with packs of macaroni.

Some of the attacks were directed at shopping malls controlled by members of President Akaev's family, and people were heard justifying the robbery as reprisals against Akaev, his relatives and associates.

Major shopping centres that were pillaged and vandalised included Silk Way, Beta Stores, Dordoi Plaza, the Chinese-run GOIN and the Narodny chain of supermarkets. But smaller businesses were also hit such as shops, restaurants, internet cafes, currency exchanges offices, automatic cash machines and the Madina wholesale market.

Some places were deliberately set on fire.

In the middle of the night, young supporters of the opposition helped repel an attack on the Hyatt Hotel by apparent looters.

Worryingly, the Oruzheiny Store was robbed of the firearms it had on sale.

On March 25, crowds gathered in a number of places in the capital – the largest of them at the TSUM store which has so far not been looted. The owners of shops within the store complex formed a cordon round the building to guard their property. The first attempt of the crowd to rush the building failed.

The health ministry said there had been two recorded fatalities, one from a gunshot wound and the other from a stabbing. A member of parliament, Temirbek Sariev, said later on national television that one woman had fallen from the third floor of the Bereket shopping centre, another person was knocked down by a car, and a third was shot dead by security guards at a mall.

Local media said around 360 people had been injured, 170 of whom were taken to hospital.

A surgeon at a Bishkek clinic, who gave her name only as Olga, told IWPR, "Most of the people who've been brought in here were injured while attempting to protect their property at Madina, the big wholesale market. People have come in with broken bones, major bruising and skull trauma. We are totally shocked."

Meanwhile, IWPR learned that foreigners were leaving the country in haste. Most of the foreign embassies are closed.

All government offices, schools and universities in Bishkek have officially closed until at least April 4. Bank staff are improvising their own defence teams.

National television is currently appealing to responsible citizens to form ad hoc militias to keep order. Many regular police have put on civilian clothes out of concern for their own safety.

Media in Russia - the Moscow TV channels are an important news source in Kyrgyzstan - have dismissed the unrest as "typically Asian", using the pejorative term "aziatchina".

But on the ground, there is speculation that although many of the looters are plainly opportunists, there is an element of organised trouble-making aimed at discrediting the "tulip revolution", as the March 24 revolt is being called.

There's some evidence to support that view: a number of the looted goods were transported away in large trucks and expensive cars with no number plates.

Some of the opposition leaders have suggested that highly placed political figures could be sponsoring the unrest to destabilise the political transition, referring in particular to Akaev's son-in-law Adil Toigonbaev, a prominent businessman.

"It's his revenge on Kyrgyzstan," said an opposition figure who asked to remain anonymous. "At the end, he wanted to drive us to marauding and discord so that people would start killing each other. He hired local bandits and sent them to his own commercial property, since they don't belong to him any more."

Arkady Dubnov, a Central Asia-watcher who writes for the Moscow newspaper Vremya Novostey, told IWPR that "in these situations, marauding is inevitable. One of the reasons for the extent of the disorder is the completely unexpected speed of events. No one expected it to happen this fast. No one expected the regime to fall apart like a house of cards, or that it would drive the people into chaos. A power vacuum is being created, one that is hard to fill."

Many people in the city expressed relief that Felix Kulov, once the head of Kyrgyzstan's security service, has been put in overall charge of law enforcement by the emerging interim leadership.

Kulov appeared on TV on March 24 to call for calm and warn trouble-makers they would be punished. He had only just been sprung from a jail outside Bishkek where he was serving a long sentence handed down after what many observers said was a clearly politically-motivated trial for corruption.

Policemen in riot helmets reappeared on the streets at at one location on March 25. Gunshots could be heard in the city from several directions.

Earlier during the day, there were long queues at the few shops selling bread, and people stocked up on other foodstuffs. The only shops that were open were selling food, and they closed in the early afternoon. Food prices rose.

Residents were left hoping that hot tempers would be dampened by the rain and strong winds now sweeping the city.

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**Location:** Central Asia  
Uzbekistan  
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