



Ambassador Stephen M. Young's Interview with NHK-TV

On July 6, 2005, Ambassador Stephen Young met with NHK-TV Correspondent Koji Gondaira in the library of the U.S. Embassy in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan for an interview. The complete transcript follows:

Mr. Young, thank you very much for agreeing to this interview. My first question is about Kyrgyzstan's situation. How do you think the current situation in Kyrgyzstan is?

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to your viewers about Kyrgyzstan. I think that the events of the last three and a half months have been putting Kyrgyzstan very much in the news around the world, but for ordinary citizens of Kyrgyzstan this is an uncertain time. President Akayev had been president for 15 years and his sudden departure was unexpected. But I think it's explained by the fact that over time he became increasingly detached from the problems of his country and was unable to offer solutions to economic growth, battling corruption, or to successfully strengthening the position of ordinary Kyrgyz citizens. So, his departure was not a bad thing for Kyrgyzstan. But the question now is how to replace Akayev with a stable and dynamic new government.



Photo.

Ambassador Stephen M. Young and
NHK-TV Correspondent Koji Gondaira

We are going through a very sensitive transition, which will be marked next week by the election of the new president who will then form a new government. We believe that the new government will begin to address some of the accumulated problems of the Akayev period in a more dynamic way. The United States wants to work with Mr. Bakiev if he wins the elections and with Mr. Kulov, whom very well could become the next Prime Minister, to create a stable, prosperous, and democratic Kyrgyzstan. I believe that's not only in America's interest and Kyrgyzstan's interest, but also in the interests of the region and of all Kyrgyzstan's friends, including Japan.

Do you think Kyrgyzstan is on the right track?

Well, this is the question everybody is asking. Obviously, they have many challenges to take care of. Kyrgyzstan is one of the poorest republics of the former Soviet Union and unlike its neighbors, like Kazakhstan, for example, or Turkmenistan, it has no oil or gas wealth to exploit. Therefore, the Kyrgyz need to exploit their human capital and in that respect I think that they have a very well educated population and there is a very strong educational system that was inherited from Soviet times. It has actually been strengthened here in the last 15 years. They also have a very hard working population, so I think that they have to take those assets and find new economic strategies, which will integrate their economy more closely into their neighbors'. Not only with the Central Asians, but also hopefully, as Afghanistan stabilizes, with South Asia, including, perhaps, India and Pakistan. Also with East Asia, with China, which is, of course, the rising power, and Japan, which is the greatest economic power in the Far East. So, these are the tasks that they have to accomplish but the first goal has to be to create a legitimate new government to show not only to the people of Kyrgyzstan, but friends of Kyrgyzstan around the world that what happened on the 24th of March can be translated into progress here. The United States Government is trying to assist the Kyrgyz people in that process.

You mentioned Mr. Bakiev and Mr. Kulov. It is said that many people are anxious and tense about the cooperation between Mr. Bakiev and Mr. Kulov. Is it real cooperation, people wonder? Could conflict happen or something like that?

Well, we have an expression in English: "politics makes strange bedfellows." What it means is that sometimes people who are not naturally like each other have to work together for the good of the political system and for the good of the country. I believe that the alliance between Kurmanbek Bakiev and Felix Kulov has been based upon a realistic assessment of the problems that Kyrgyzstan faces.

As you can see from the map we have here, Kyrgyzstan is divided by mountains into the North and the South. Mr. Bakiev has grown up in

and represents, in many respects, the interests of Southern Kyrgyzstan, whereas Mr. Kulov is a Northerner. So, I believe working in this tandem alliance they can assure, for all parts of Kyrgyzstan, that the government will be listening to them and will be responsive to their needs. Certainly, it would have been possible for both of them to run against each other for President, but that would be what we call "a winner take all" situation, where the loser would have no influence. This way, according to the agreement that Mr. Bakiev and Mr. Kulov signed, each of them will play a very prominent role in the new government and I think that they will complement each other's strengths. For example, Mr. Bakiev is a very good manager. I think Mr. Kulov has a lot of background in the security area and Mr. Bakiev is a very good expert on developing the economy. So between the two of them they will have complementary skills. There will be some friction. I think there will be some tension, but my understanding is that both of them have come to the realization that they are working together in the best interests of Kyrgyzstan and in the best interests of stability here, so the United States wants to help them succeed. But the first and most important goal for us is to ensure that Sunday's elections are free, fair, and transparent and reflect international standards of democracy.

How is the USA going to support this country in becoming a truly democratic country?

Well, we've already done a lot. We have been supporting the growth of civil society, in particular, the growth of non-governmental organizations here for many years. Kyrgyzstan has a stronger non-governmental organizations' structure than any of its neighbors, which is an accomplishment that former President Akayev gets credit for, because he encouraged that.

We also work very closely on press freedom. In fact, the United States sponsored the first independent printing press, not only in Kyrgyzstan, but also in all of Central Asia. It opened nearly two years ago and it has been giving independent newspapers a chance to be printed without prior censorship and to create competition between the state-run printing press and this other printing press.

We have also worked to encourage the work of political parties in Kyrgyzstan. And all of these things, I think, had some role to play in the activism of the Kyrgyz people in the events of March 24th. What we have been doing since then has been to strengthen the ability of Kyrgyzstan to hold free and fair elections by training election monitors, the use of indelible ink to mark the fingers, so that voters cannot vote more than one time, which was a problem in the past in Kyrgyzstan, and also to work with the government's Central Election Commission to ensure that they have the skills and training to accomplish an election in a nation of 5 million people scattered in many small villages and towns and throughout the very mountainous countryside.

The United States is spending \$4 million of taxpayers' money to support this Sunday's elections and the kind of things we have done -- the ink, the training, the sending of volunteers to the United States to learn something about our American political system -- has all been aimed at giving Kyrgyzstan a better ability to build its own democracy. Of course, democracy has to reflect the culture and the history of the country and there's no one single model, so what Kyrgyzstan develops this year and in the future will have a distinctive Kyrgyz quality to it. But I think countries like the United States, Japan, Germany, Great Britain, Turkey, who have experienced democracy for some time can assist a young democracy like Kyrgyzstan in charting its path through this difficult process.

Why is it important for you to help Kyrgyz become more democratic? You just mentioned overall relations.



Photo: Ambassador Stephen M. Young and NHK-TV Correspondent Koji Gondaira

Well, it is a very good question and I appreciate you asking me that, Mr. Gondaira. Obviously, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the New Independent States, where the Soviet Union used to be, created many challenges. One was how do you develop a national identity for a place like Kyrgyzstan, which was never a country before. It wasn't, perhaps, so difficult in Georgia or Ukraine where they had many decades, many centuries of history as a country, or as an established ethnic territory. But Kyrgyzstan, as you know, was a nomadic society before the Russians arrived in the 1840's, so there were many, many challenges for this country when the Soviet Union collapsed.

The United States has spent over \$800 million in assistance to Kyrgyzstan in a variety of areas -- security areas, economic

development, humanitarian assistance, and educational exchanges, health care -- in order to assist the Kyrgyz people in building a modern society. I think a lot has been accomplished and I think that Askar Akayev deserves some credit for reforms that made Kyrgyzstan a special place. I think, particularly if you look at the rest of Central Asia, that Kyrgyzstan has been a leader in reforms and in democracy over the last fifteen years. Unfortunately, I think President Akayev lost touch with his people. In particular, he didn't realize they were having rising expectations about what the political system could do for them. So, when he allowed the winter parliamentary elections to be flawed, by many false problems, discrimination, government interference, and so forth, the people of Kyrgyzstan were upset and went out

into the streets and in the end Akayev lost the support of his own people, which was the reason, I think, he fled the country on the 24th of March.

That is not to say that Kyrgyzstan has solved all of its problems, but I think if you put it into the context of Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan has done more, both in developing a democratic society and developing economic freedoms, than any of its neighbors. The United States has been very involved, not only in for what we can do for the Kyrgyz people, but also for the symbol that a modern, democratic, and prosperous Kyrgyzstan can convey to its neighbors. I think, for example, that human rights activists and democracy activists in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan have received a lot of encouragement by the changes in this country and see this is as an example that they can follow in their own countries. So the reason the United States believes Kyrgyzstan is important is, not only because we want to help 5 million people of Kyrgyzstan, but also because we believe a more democratic Kyrgyzstan can help lead other countries in this region, that are, unfortunately, more authoritarian, into more progressive policies.

I think if you look at the difference between Kyrgyzstan in the last three months and Uzbekistan there is a very clear distinction. Kyrgyzstan used peaceful methods to follow a transition from the old Akayev regime to the one that will be elected by this Sunday's democratic elections. In Uzbekistan, unfortunately, in May, when people took to the streets to express their grievances, the government used extensive military force to put down what was essentially, for the most part, a peaceful demonstration and they shot into these crowds. We don't know how many people died, but estimates run from a couple of hundred to maybe more and we believe that this is no way to solve the problems of Uzbekistan. We believe that, in fact, a dialogue with the people and democratic processes are better ways to resolve tensions and difficulties within Uzbekistan and in that respect the example of Kyrgyzstan could be very helpful.

Mr. Ambassador, what do you think about the influence of Uzbekistan in this incident, especially in the southern region of Kyrgyzstan with Islamic extremists? What do you think about such things?

Kyrgyzstan, because of its geography and the fact that southern Kyrgyzstan surrounds Uzbekistan's Fergana Valley, pays very close attention to this area. I think the Kyrgyz were very concerned with the instability that arose in Uzbekistan and they want stability, but they don't want stability by repressive means. What the Kyrgyz people are trying to do is to create stability on democratic principles, so to the extent that Uzbekistan is unstable and undemocratic it poses new challenges to Kyrgyzstan. As you know, about 500 Uzbek people fled into Kyrgyzstan in May, as a result of unrest in Andijan, and many of them remain in camps in southern Kyrgyzstan today. The United States is working with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in trying to find a solution to allow those refugees who qualify for UNHCR refugee status to go from Kyrgyzstan to third countries and resettle. This is according to the Geneva Convention and also the Convention Against Torture. We are working closely with our Kyrgyz colleagues to ensure them that this is a reasonable and just solution on the plight of these 500 people. In the long run, I think Kyrgyzstan wants stability, just like Uzbekistan, but they are prepared to be more democratic in the way in which they search for that -- and I hope that the example of Kyrgyzstan will have a positive influence on Uzbekistan.

You raised the question of Islamic extremism, which is an important one in all parts of Central Asia. To the extent that people are not doing well economically, are out of work, are hungry, are discouraged, the appeal of Islamic extremism might grow. Therefore, I think it is in the interests of the international community -- the UN, the OSCE, the EU and major contributors like Japan, Switzerland and the United States -- to work with Kyrgyzstan and to work with other countries of Central Asia to create stable democratic and economic development, so that the appeal of Islamic extremism will go down. We have seen what neglect of these problems can bring in Afghanistan, where the Taliban created essentially a medieval government that was extremely repressive to its own people. But after 9/11, with the help of a Coalition force that included the United States and dozens of other countries, we have been able to bring Afghanistan from the Middle Ages into the 21st century. And I am very proud of the progress that Hamid Karzai has accomplished there. I know that Kyrgyzstan and the other Central Asian governments pay very close attention to Afghanistan, because they believe a more stable Afghanistan can contribute to stability and progress in this area of the world. And, conversely, an unstable Afghanistan can promote extremism, terrorism, narcotics trafficking, and other forms of instability. So, the interconnection of this world is something I hope your viewers in Japan will understand better through this program.

About the Revolution. The Kyrgyz government changed so suddenly. Did you expect that this kind of rapid revolution would happen in Kyrgyzstan?

Well, I expected there to be some change, but the rapidity of it, the quickness of it, was a surprise for many people. It showed that in the end President Akayev's regime had little authority left in the country, because, as you might recall, when a crowd gathered on the 24th of March and were making their demands, President Akayev simply fled. He didn't resign. He only did that later out of Moscow. He simply got into a helicopter, I guess, and left the country with his family. So, yes, it was a surprise. But I do think that the development of civil society, of a legitimate political opposition, of a limited free press in Kyrgyzstan, and so forth all made a contribution to those changes and gave Kyrgyzstan the opportunity to take what was really an unexpected challenge -- the loss of the Akayev government -- and turn it into a success. And that's what I think the election occurring on Sunday is all about. If we can see an internationally monitored election that meets international standards, then a legitimate new government with a legitimate president, a legitimate prime minister, and a legitimate

cabinet can begin to address the accumulated problems of economic stagnation, corruption, unemployment and instability in an effective manner. And I think my country and really the international community -- because I know the Japanese have a very strong assistance program, so do the Europeans, so do some of our other international organizations, like the EU and OSCE -- we can all work together with Kyrgyzstan to make sure that the promise of the events of March 24th is realized.

That is the goal of my Embassy and I work very closely with my friends in the diplomatic community toward that accomplishment. So, I think it is an exciting time to be here and I think that it's important to say that Kyrgyzstan is important for the symbolism of what it is doing, because if Kyrgyzstan succeeds in this economic and democratic transition, it will provide a very strong example to its neighbors -- and also to the biggest neighbor of all, which is China. China has had great success economically, but, unfortunately, it has not matched that with the kind of democratic reform that I think most of its neighbors would like to see. If you look at China today it is increasingly surrounded by democracies: South Korea, Japan, the Philippines, Taiwan, Indonesia, Thailand, India, Mongolia and now Kyrgyzstan. So I think there's a lesson here. It is that in the 21st century, and especially as you develop economically, you must give voice to your own people and allow them to have a say in their future. Without that I think you cannot have true stability and to me that is the promise of the dramatic changes that we're experiencing here in Kyrgyzstan.

One more question. How do you think this confusion, this chaos in Kyrgyzstan was brought about? Some say that this complicated situation was caused by Western countries or because of the intervention of the West?

Well, I think, that would be an insult to the Kyrgyz people to suggest that somehow outside forces had brought in change that was not welcome. I think if you talk to Kyrgyz, whether political officials or ordinary citizens, they will say that they believe they created this transition. And that the involvement of the outside powers like the United States and the West, was only to work with them, both before and after these changes, to provide what guidance and advice we might. The changes of the 24th of March, if you analyze them carefully, were purely driven by Kyrgyz people. And I understand you've talked to Mr. Bakiev and Mr. Kulov, both of them were very important players in the political development of this country. So was Rosa Otunbaeva, who is now the Foreign Minister, and a number of other officials here. I doubt that any of them would say that this was caused by outside forces. They wanted change; they wanted to give Kyrgyzstan more democracy. And they took advantage of the unhappiness of the Kyrgyz people, after a falsified election in February and March, to bring that change to this country.

As an American, I am proud that we have been supporting that change. But it would be unfair both to the Kyrgyz people and to the truth to suggest that somehow it was caused by us. I would like to say that there is sometimes the impression that the United States, Russia and China are competing here in Kyrgyzstan. I don't think that's really accurate. I think that all of us want to see a stable, modern, prosperous Kyrgyzstan emerging from what's going on here and that is why Peking, Moscow, and Washington have looked to emphasize common interests in this country and not to compete. The United States does support a Coalition Airbase outside of Bishkek, which is supporting the war against terrorism in Afghanistan. But our Airbase is not competing with the Russian Airbase at Kant, which is also part of an attempt to provide for security in this country. And I think that your viewers should understand that in the modern post-Soviet world such rivalries and competitions are in nobody's interests. So, therefore, I would hope that all outside players in Kyrgyzstan, including the United States, Europe, Asia, and the former Soviet Union would look to complement one another's activity in the interests of building a modern Kyrgyzstan. Thank you very much for giving me the chance to speak with you.

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