The Kyrgyzstan Crisis: Past Causes, Present Consequences and Future Course

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The Central Asian state of Kyrgyzstan was recently gripped by bloody violence that resulted in an estimated 2,000 deaths; several thousand people were wounded, several thousand more were turned into refugees, and several hundred houses were burnt during the violence. The fighting seemed to have been between clans, involved criminals, and, eventually, pitted ethnic communities against each other in the southern towns of Osh and Jalalabad close to the borders with neighboring Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. A number of factors combined to play their part in aggravating the situation to such a level. This article will trace the roots of the frictions, examine the consequences of the current flare-up, and will look at the possible course of action for the future of Kyrgyzstan, its political leadership, neighboring states and regional powers.

Among the most direct factors that resulted in such high losses in human life and property was a failure to plan for any breakout of violence on the part of the interim government that ousted the government of President Kurman Bakiyev on 7 April 2010. Criminal elements, supported by political interests on both sides, were openly issuing ultimatums to each other, threatening members of rival groups, and setting the 7 June as the deadline for a showdown. Even though tape recordings of plans to fund 500 agitators to create disturbances in the south of Kyrgyzstan had been circulating for weeks, the interim administration failed to exercise any effective authority. Despite clear signs of an imminent threat, there was no mechanism in place for advance warning, timely counter-measures or for serious steps to be taken that would bring destabilising elements under control1.

Domestically, the lack of trust in the political structure also comes from tension between the south (substantially inhabited by ethnic Uzbeks) and the North (predominantly ethnic Kyrgyz). The violence resulted from a lack of balance between local, political and ethnic Kyrgyz figures in the south (sparked by a contest waged by the family members of former President Bakiyev) with the northern political elites2.

The interim government does not exercise any effective control on southern Kyrgyzstan. Its weakness gave way to a political struggle in the south and to a confrontation between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks. Poverty, corruption, nepotism, and a lack of justice are among some of the main factors that can explain the violence of the Kyrgyz towards the Uzbeks. Hence, a combination of ethnic, commercial and criminal interests are capitalising on frustrations with the government’s shortcomings and the country’s power vacuum. Many forces are clamouring for influence to ensure a stronger bargaining position once the crisis subsides, while the new ruling elite struggles to establish its writ. Whenever power changes hands in the political tussle in Kyrgyzstan, and results in a redistribution of wealth, criminal groups fight it out for the control of resources3. The country’s drug lords, for example, have jumped into the fray, using the chaos to conceal criminal activity and preying on the displaced and dispossessed. Instigated by supporters of the ousted Bakiyev regime, miscreant elements are eager to turn the tables altogether and to jeopardise the 27 June referendum that aims to shift the balance of power from a presidential to a parliamentary system. If all solutions to the past ills and present problems are pinned on the outcome of the mid-summer referendum, its results may not be able to bear the burden of such expectations for bringing any meaningfully productive and lasting changes in the country’s political practices.

Historical factors have contributed to keeping the situation volatile. For many years, owing to its complicated ethnic composition and arbitrary border divisions, the fragility of the

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2 http://www.opendemocracy.net/od‐russia/balihar‐sanghera/why‐are‐kyrgyzstan%E2%80%99s‐slum‐dwellers‐so‐angry.
Ferghana Valley has been dubbed an ethnic time bomb that would need little effort to blow up. The seeds of the violence currently devastating Kyrgyzstan were sown in the 1940s by the Soviet Union. Through social engineering pursued under the leadership of Joseph Stalin, new administrative units were created so that the artificiality of both states and borders became a mechanism for creating ethnic minorities. Administrative realignment was deemed both strategic and political to break down religious and cultural solidarities, and to block the possibility of Pan-Turkic tendencies by differentiating individual ethnic groups from each other, thus eradicating the idea of Turkistan. The policies pursued in the past continue to act as instruments to undermine closeness among communities. Those who planned in the past or schemed in the present aimed to forestall and frustrate any political and ideological unity among groups who speak similar Turkic languages and who share common historical, cultural and religious roots. However, a quick reminder of the background is one thing not often found in Russian commentaries of the Kyrgyz crisis.

The Russian media have been raising questions concerning the ideology, politics, approach and competency of the Kyrgyz leadership, government, political system and political parties. One Russian commentator remarked that, in Kyrgyzstan, “tribal-like tendencies fail to balance wider national interests and frustrate any tendency to bypass clan-centred struggle.” Moscow’s news daily, Nezavisimaya Gazeta, criticised the tendency among Kyrgyzstan’s ruling elites to use power as “an instrument for speedy hoarding of resources for a narrow circle of interests”.

Another Russian political observer noted that although Kyrgyzstan’s first president, Askar Akaev, attempted to portray the country as a progressive democratic state, he failed to take some essential steps. Stanislav Epifantsiev wrote:

All non-titular nations were forced aside into marginalization. The political sphere was practically under the titular nation. Besides those who emigrated to Russia, others were largely preoccupied with a struggle for survival. However, aligning himself with ethnic politics, Akaev ended up as a hostage to clan loyalties.

Epifantsiev concluded that this contributed to cultivating an exclusivist nationalistic tendency as an outcome of what he dubbed an irrational approach of ethnicity-based nationalism. A Russian language blog on Central Asia underlined that the Kyrgyz leadership continued to fail to promote a common civic identity among all ethnic groups of the country.

Russian sources are also critical of the path of political experimentation tried by those who brought about the change in March 2005. The present tensions serve as a bitter dose of reality to overcome the feverish tendency towards democracy. One commentator expressed the hope that recent events may see a slowdown in the anomaly of political activism that has been witnessed since the second change of government in Kyrgyzstan in five years.

Much of the conflict stems from a crisis of competence and confidence in the Kyrgyz government. The popular uprising in April that ousted former President Kurmanbek Bakiyev brought about a change in government, but little change in the substance of governance. The interim regime has been unable to provide the governance or the stability that Kyrgyzstan needed in order to recover from the coup. Corruption is rampant, crippling many essential

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government services. Meanwhile, many appointees of previous governments who are still in the Kyrgyz administration – and who have an interest in the failure of the incumbent government – have been complacent in their duties, further aggravating the country’s crisis of confidence.

Regional observers and the Russian media both pointed out that the Kyrgyz authorities have been unable to act promptly and effectively, creating a yawning gap between the government and its people\(^7\). As an observer from neighboring Kazakhstan put it, with the people’s trust in their authorities being irreparably lost, the situation poses increased long-term challenges to the state’s sovereignty and the political survival of a vulnerable government\(^8\).

As calm is restored, the balance of power in Kyrgyzstan will have shifted. Internal and external forces will no longer be aligned as they have been previously. New loyalties and regional partnerships will have emerged and will require new terms of engagement. Kyrgyz leaders will find themselves more dependent on Moscow than ever before.

Dormant sparks of ethnic friction fanned to rise into flames will not be put off easily or soon. The scars will prove deeper and take much longer to heal. Neighboring communities that have lived side-by-side for generations – with some of them linked through common marriages – will need years to trust one another again. The displacement of 200,000 people within Kyrgyzstan and the exodus of over 100,000 people from southern Kyrgyzstan into Uzbekistan risks destabilising the volatile Ferghana valley where Kyrgyzstan’s borders meet with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan\(^9\).

External interests further complicate the picture. Neighboring states such as Uzbekistan, and regional powers, mainly Russia, may also seek to profit from the crisis to extract concessions from Kyrgyzstan’s inexperienced government and to force it into partnerships which will be in their interests rather than those of Kyrgyzstan. The Uzbek authorities have been placed in a difficult situation by the displaced Uzbeks fleeing Kyrgyzstan into Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan has already admirably responded to the inflow of refugees, and would like to see them safe and cared for, but, at the same time, it remains wary of any influx and external intervention that could destabilise the precarious domestic balance in its border town of Andijan which witnessed mass protests and shootings in 2005.

Although Kyrgyzstan’s interim president, Roza Otunbayeva, is insisting on immediate Russian intervention to stabilise the situation, Moscow is being cautious about the regional consequences and is calculating the political costs and strategic implications of any such engagement. Russia first expressed concern over the situation, then announced that it was seriously reviewing response options, and has since maintained that it would only consider assistance through a multilateral forum such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). The flare-up of the clashes in Osh coincided with the annual summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization held in Uzbekistan’s capital, Tashkent\(^10\). The two-day meeting concluded on the 11 June by calling for “dialogue” between conflicting groups in Kyrgyzstan. Tashkent was clearly hesitant to allow Russia or any other to get too close to its borders. The trade-off will be that all states neighboring Kyrgyzstan or which are part of CSTO would commit troops for a joint deployment of forces. Neither the Russian nor the

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\(^8\) [http://www.ca-news.org/print/408061](http://www.ca-news.org/print/408061).

\(^9\) Deutsche Welle, [http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,5682352,00.html](http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,5682352,00.html).

Uzbek leadership is eager to see a deployment of only Russian troops. Hence Moscow is in no rush to jump into an unwelcome adventure. It is becoming increasingly evident that the deployment of a peacekeeping force will eventually be necessary. In the meantime, every delay raises the cost of the conflict, not only in terms of life and blood, but also in concessions that the Kyrgyz government will have to make in return for cooperation with the interim president. It also exposes the interim authorities’ incompetence, leading some pundits to predict yet another change in the government. The longer Russia waits to help restore stability, the greater the chances that the next Kyrgyz government’s fate will become welded to the Kremlin’s goodwill and support. So far, Russia’s only promises have been to provide transport for relief supplies and to help evacuate the affected population. This restraint reflects Russian reluctance to get entangled in an adventure less than a year after its conflict with Georgia over Ossetia. The dust has hardly settled but Russia’s soft underbelly in its southern region of Caucasia remains far from safe and secure. As an alternate risk-mitigating strategy, muses commentator Stanislav Minyn, Russia could facilitate a transformation in Kyrgyzstan by leaning on the Kyrgyz leadership to change its political mentality and practices. Such an action by Russia would, in the long-term, serve its interests by ensuring a stable backyard. Another question that the Kyrgyz situation poses is whether, under the current circumstances, a climate of constraint will encourage the authorities in the United States and Russia to arrive at new terms of reference to deal with low-intensity conflicts in their respective or potential zones of interest. Such an approach could open ways to encourage inter-state, regional and international efforts for meaningful peace building. Owing to its complicated ethnic composition and arbitrary border divisions, the fragility of the Ferghana Valley has been on the radar of international organisations for some time. Recent events demand a fresh review as to what forms of effective risk-management solutions could have been offered to the newly independent states of Central Asia, and how effectively they could address the real needs of ordinary Central Asians in those vulnerable valleys. These two questions are worth consideration in order to develop a matrix to learn lessons and also develop insights on possible future measures that could help in the event of a repeat of such tragic incidences as we are now witnessing.

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14 Nezavisimaya Gazeta, Moscow 16 June 2010, “Kyrgyzia: To Meddle or Not Meddle?”