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Kyrgyzstan: Central Asia's Island of Instability

Vicken Cheterian

The violent overthrow of Kurmanbek Bakiyev, president of Kyrgyzstan, in April 2010, followed by inter-ethnic clashes in June, produced a new security problem in Central Asia. Kyrgyzstan, once praised as the 'Switzerland of Central Asia' and an 'oasis of democracy', had not previously seen such levels of violence in two decades of independence. The night Bakiyev was overthrown, 84 people were killed and over a thousand wounded, while the inter-ethnic clashes in June claimed as many as 2,000 dead, thousands of houses burnt down, and 400,000 people displaced, including 80,000 who fled over the border to neighbouring Uzbekistan.

The two events had very different roots. The April uprising was an internal power struggle; Western concerns were limited to the continuous functioning of the NATO air base at Manas, near Bishkek.¹ But the June inter-ethnic conflict transformed insecurity in Kyrgyzstan into a global concern which could influence stability in Central Asia and affect the war in Afghanistan.

The April uprising in Bishkek stemmed from the increasing concentration of power in the Bakiyev family, which angered strong northern Kyrgyz clans. Worsening economic conditions had led to generalised anger against the Bakiyev regime; his fall, and his later attempt to mobilise supporters in his hometown Dzhahalal-Abad in the south of the country, then triggered conflict that had been dormant for two decades. Ethnic Uzbeks, who had suf-

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ferred growing discrimination under Bakiyev, mobilised to counter attempts by pro-Bakiyev activists to take over administrative buildings in Dzhahal-Abad. They attacked and burned down houses belonging to the Bakiyevs. Uzbek leaders voiced political demands such as the recognition of Uzbek as an official language, angering the ethnic Kyrgyz majority.

The mobilisation of the Uzbeks and the commencement of a political struggle with the Kyrgyz broke the *modus vivendi* that had developed after the violent inter-ethnic clashes of June 1990,² under which ethnic Kyrgyz dominated the state administration and Uzbeks worked the rich agricultural lands of the Fergana Valley and dominated the bazaars of the major trading cities. Steady migration of ethnic Kyrgyz from impoverished mountain vil-

lages into the cities increased competition over resources such as land, water and jobs, yet it was political uncertainty and the collapse of law and order that triggered the explosion. On 10 June, a fight between two youth groups in the southern town of Osh evolved and spread into anti-Uzbek pogroms lasting four days.

Neither the return from Uzbekistan of refugees who had fled the violence, nor a referendum on a new Kyrgyz constitution held just two weeks after the pogroms, did much to normalise the situation. The clashes in southern

Kyrgyzstan transformed two decades of coexistence between the communities into open ethnic violence. Systematic persecution against the Uzbek minority, officially numbering 750,000 in south Kyrgyzstan,³ continued, often with the support and participation of parts of the military. Human-rights activist Azimzhan Askarov (an ethnic Uzbek), was arrested while collecting information on the June violence, and allegedly beaten in custody.⁴

Kyrgyzstan increasingly resembles a failed state, and lacks the resources necessary to cope with its problems. State institutions are extremely weak and shallow, unable even to defend their own existence. For the second time in five years, a mere 10–15,000 angry opposition activists were enough to bring down a president and overthrow a ruling administration. (In March 2005 Askar Akayev was overthrown in the ‘Tulip Revolution’, heralded at

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the time as the beginning of a new era of democracy and transparency.) The Kyrgyz elite, leaders of regional clans, are deeply divided and engaged in a ferocious power struggle, further undermining state consolidation and pacification, although the anti-Uzbek pogroms in June gave them a semblance of unity. The parliamentary elections scheduled for October 2010 will only accentuate internal political competition and undermine consolidation in the short run.

Rising Kyrgyz nationalism has turned Uzbek villages and neighbourhoods into occupation zones. The pogroms were committed by angry Kyrgyz mobs, but there is evidence that both the local police (dominated by ethnic Kyrgyz) and the army took part.⁵ Harassment of ethnic Uzbeks in the south continues, and the well-off and the better educated among them are emigrating en masse to Kazakhstan and Russia. The current mood of helplessness among ethnic Uzbeks could evolve into acts of resistance against mounting oppression, turning southern Kyrgyzstan, or the eastern edge of the Fergana valley, into a foyer of instability menacing not only Kyrgyzstan, but also neighbouring Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

Kyrgyzstan was one of the poorest Soviet republics, next to the neighbouring Tajikistan, and since becoming independent it has relied on remittances from Kyrgyz migrant workers in Russia and on international aid. Following the outburst of violence, Bishkek made several requests to the Russian authorities for military assistance, and to the broader international community for help. Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, who on several occasions expressed the fear that Kyrgyzstan could fall into a prolonged civil war, declined to intervene militarily.

The West has shown hesitant signs of willingness to engage. The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) agreed to send a contingent of 52 unarmed police to south Kyrgyzstan as 'monitors'. Yet even this limited mission has been heatedly criticised by Kyrgyz politicians, including Defence Minister Ismail Isakov, raising questions about President Roza Otunbayeva's ability to control her armed forces.⁶ (Another politician highly critical of the OSCE presence is Osh Mayor Melis Myrzakmatov, who is increasingly challenging the Bishkek authorities and strengthening his position as leader of the south.) Rivalry between

Washington and Moscow over geopolitical influence in Kyrgyzstan and competition over military bases was one of the factors that destabilised the Bakiyev regime, and this rivalry seems to be continuing. One reason why so many Kyrgyz politicians oppose the OSCE police mission is Russia's own opposition.⁷

Kyrgyzstan urgently needs cash to avoid further social upheaval. A donor conference in July in Bishkek led to international pledges of \$1.1 billion to help Kyrgyzstan recover. Many donors, however, will have a hard time justifying such aid back home, with Kyrgyzstan's image transforming from a friendly country engaged in pro-Western reforms to one associated with nationalism and repression of minorities.

The Kyrgyz authorities blamed the June clashes on both the remnants of the old regime (and specifically the family of Bakiyev) and militants of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). Keneshbek Dushebaev, head of the Kyrgyz National Security Services (the local offshoot of the Soviet-era KGB), said in a press conference that the violent events in southern Kyrgyzstan were the result of a plot between Maxim Bakiyev (son of the former president) and IMU militants, adding that 'international terroristic organisations are trying to create a bridgehead for winning positions in Kyrgyzstan'.⁸

The IMU originated among youths from the Uzbek city of Namangan in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse. Its ideological leader, Tahir Yoldash, took refuge in Tajikistan in early 1993 and took part in the civil war before he founded the IMU in 1996. Later the IMU moved its forces to Afghanistan and established direct ties with the Taliban and Arab jihadist groups, as well as Osama bin Laden. The group carried out a terror campaign within Uzbekistan, with car-bomb attacks in Tashkent in February 1999, and in summer 1999 and 2000 it took over mountain villages in the Batken region of Kyrgyzstan and undertook attacks deep into Uzbekistan. The US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 put an end to IMU activities in the Fergana Valley, as the organisation suffered major losses.

Although there has not been significant IMU activity in post-Soviet Central Asia for some eight years, its spectre seems still to haunt Western decision-makers. Remnants of the IMU forces fled with Taliban and al-Qaeda survivors to Pakistan's tribal areas. The IMU established bases in North

and South Waziristan, amassing up to 2,000 fighters of various nationalities including Uzbeks, Tajiks, Uighurs and Chechens. NATO is worried about increasing Taliban influence in northern Afghanistan and the reappearance of IMU militants in Kunduz, where they can exert influence over the local ethnic Uzbek population.⁹ The IMU might also try to spread its activities northwards to Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, and disrupt NATO supply lines for the Afghanistan war effort.

Although there was no convincing evidence of involvement by Islamist militants in the events of southern Kyrgyzstan in June, international officials seem to fear the risk of militants moving north from Afghanistan. UN Special Envoy Miroslav Jenca was quoted as saying that 'there is a threat of extremism in the Ferghana valley and, more broadly, in Central Asia as a whole, in the sense that Central Asia borders Afghanistan'.¹⁰ Robert Blake, US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs, was even more explicit: 'There is, I think, particular concern about the southern border with Tajikistan, and the possibility that some militants from Afghanistan might try to come up through that border to try to exploit the situation in Kyrgyzstan'.¹¹

But the greater threat to regional security is not militant Islam, but aggressive nationalism. Following the collapse of communism, ethnic-nationalism caused waves of destructive wars in the Caucasus and the Balkans. In the former, grass-roots nationalist movements overthrew the ruling nomenklatura, while in the latter the Yugoslav-era apparatchiks turned to nationalism to legitimise their rule. In Central Asia the nomenklatura stayed in power by adapting their state-centric ideology, insisting on the importance of preserving Soviet-era borders. Following the Osh pogroms Uzbek President Islam Karimov gave only limited humanitarian assistance to ethnic Uzbek refugees, and sent them back as soon as things calmed down. He refrained from defending the cause of ethnic Uzbeks in Osh, blaming the events on unspecified 'outside forces'.

The question is whether such a neutral position is sustainable for Uzbekistan if anti-Uzbek violence and persecution continues in Kyrgyzstan.

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Although the state in Uzbekistan is strong, it is authoritarian, and Karimov is ageing. Neither the mechanisms of succession nor the policies of his successor can be known. Repression of ethnic Uzbeks in southern Kyrgyzstan could spread victimisation narratives and encourage radical ideologies. In the absence of Uzbek nationalist organisations to mobilise ethnic Uzbeks, radical Islamic organisations could find fertile ground in the Fergana Valley. Blaming the anti-Uzbek pogroms on militants linked to al-Qaeda does not reflect reality, but if the Kyrgyz authorities do not listen to the concerns of the Uzbek population of southern Kyrgyzstan and make at least symbolic gestures in bringing justice for their suffering, Bishkek and neighbouring capitals could soon see radicalisation and Taliban-style insurgencies in their own backyards.

Notes

- 1 Clifford J. Levy, 'Upheaval in Kyrgyzstan could Imperil Key U.S. Base', *New York Times*, 7 April 2010.
- 2 Conflict between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz over land appropriation led to violent clashes exactly two decades earlier in Osh and neighbouring Uzgen, claiming over 300 lives. It was stopped only by the intervention of the Soviet army.
- 3 Ethnic Uzbeks comprise 13.8% of the 5.2 million population of Kyrgyzstan. *CIA World Factbook*, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/kg.html>.
- 4 'Urgent Action: Human Rights Activist Beaten in Custody', Amnesty International, 25 June 2010, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/EUR58/005/2010/en/abe6383b-368e-4546-801b-4443265ffb4b/eur580052010en.pdf>.
- 5 Clifford Levy, 'Army's Hand Suspected in Kyrgyzstan', *New York Times*, 16 June 2010.
- 6 Grigori Mikhailov, 'Osh – Gorod Stakha' (Osh – City of Fear), *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 21 July 2010: http://www.ng.ru/cis/2010-07-21/6_osh.html.
- 7 Viktoria Panfilova, 'Kirgiziya ne toropitsya priglashať evropeyskikh politseyskikh' (Kyrgyzstan is not in a Hurry to Invite European Police), *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 8 July 2010, http://www.ng.ru/cis/2010-07-08/6_msk.html.
- 8 Daniyar Karimov, 'International Terroristic Organizations are to Organize New Unrest in South Kyrgyzstan', 24.kg, 24 June 2010, <http://eng.24.kg/politic/2010/06/24/12268.html>.
- 9 Quil Lawrence, 'Taliban Return to Northern Afghanistan', NPR, 9 August 2010, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=129036420>.
- 10 Olga Dzyubenko, 'Kyrgyz Turmoil Could Breed Islamist Militancy – U.N.', Reuters, 17 June 2010.

- 11 'Top US Official Warns of Islamic Extremist Threat To Southern Kyrgyzstan', Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 27 June 2010, http://www.rferl.org/content/Top_US_Official_Warns_Of_Islamic_Extremist_Threat_In_Southern_Kyrgyzstan_/2111509.html.