

CRISIS FACTORS IN KYRGYZSTAN: THE REGIONAL, CLAN, AND POLITICAL STRUGGLE

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Introduction

Kyrgyzstan began building its statehood from the moment it became part of the Russian Federation as an autonomous republic.

It is worth noting that some of the problems existing today date back to the so-called territorial-national separation of the nationalities of the former Turkestan Republic (1924-1925).¹ The faulty national-demographic approach to legitimization of borders and their demarcation led to the formation of regions with mixed populations.

In 1925, Kyrgyzstan acquired the status of an autonomous region within the R.S.F.S.R. and did not become a Union republic endowed with the attributes of a higher state rank until 1936.² However, the borders were not defined and re-

mained this way during the years of the state's independent existence.

The northern Kyrgyz lived in the Issyk Kul Basin and the nearby mountains of Kungai-Alatau and Terskei-Alatau, as well as in the Chu and Talas valleys, but a large part of the population was composed of Russian and Kazakh diasporas.

Clans and tribes of southern Kyrgyz settled beyond the mountain passes of the Ferghana, as well as in the foothills of the Alai and Chatkal mountain ranges located around the Ferghana Valley. There were also large implantations of Uzbeks and Tajiks in Kyrgyzstan. Certain kishlaks (with their adjoining land) populated by Uzbeks and Tajiks are enclaves that are juridically under the control of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. This complicates ethnic relations even more.

In this article, we will try to analyze the present-day political life of Kyrgyzstan from the regional perspective, as well as take a closer look at some aspects of the prehistory of the events that occurred.

¹ See: *Sovetskiy Soiuz: Kirgizia*, Mysl Publishers, Moscow, 1970, p. 62.

² See: *Konstitutsiia i konstitutsionnye akty Soiuz SSR (1922-1936)*, Collection of Documents, Moscow, 1940, p. 64.

Sources of the Crisis

When the Central Asian countries acquired their independence, the borders regarded as administrative boundaries and economic territories in Soviet times became state borders. As the national self-awareness of the local nationalities grew, this gave rise to conflicts. The mentality of the population should also be taken into account. The Kyrgyz have always traditionally been nomadic cattle breeders, while the Uzbeks and Tajiks are mostly farmers.

So the jingoistic sentiments of the local political elites became imposed upon the local specifics of tribal and clan relations, the rivalry between “the south” and “the north,” and ethnic confrontation.³

From the very beginning, the foreign community, as well as specialized publications of international and local media have been keeping a close eye on the conflicts existing on the political stage of Kyrgyzstan and its nearby regions. Suffice it to say that in the past ten years, *Central Asia and the Caucasus* (Sweden) alone has published 15 articles on this topic, while *Central Asian Review* (Oxford), as well as various publications in Russia, China, and other countries have also made a fair contribution.

The perpetual political crisis that has been going on in Kyrgyzstan for the past few years shifted to a new phase in April 2010: armed opposition began between the government and the population, as well as among various clan and regional groups of the Kyrgyz political elites, which subsequently led to ethnic clashes.

It is popular belief that political opposition exists in Kyrgyzstan between the northern and southern clans (to be more precise, families). This widespread opinion, although not entirely correct, does indeed reflect the actual situation to some extent; Askar Akaev, the country's first president, is considered a “northerner,” while Bakiev is regarded as a “southerner.”

The concepts “northerner” and “southerner” apply exclusively to the indigenous Kyrgyz. Within society, kinship and tribal ties still hold strong; great significance is attached to the place a person is born and to which family he or she belongs.

The latent conflict between the regional elites represented by Absamat Masaliev and Medetkan Sherimkulov (first and second secretaries of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Kirgizia representing the South and North of the republic, respectively) in the fall of 1990 brought Askar Akaev, who seemed the most acceptable candidate at the time for the post of first president of the Kyrgyz Republic, to power.

The regional factor became even more striking during the presidential election of 2009; Kurmanbek Bakiev gathered most of the votes in the south of the country. In the Jalal-Abad Region, where he is from, he received 78.2% of the votes, while in the Naryn Region in the north, he won only 29.3%.⁴

It was the regional (regional-clan) factor that played an enormous role in the events that occurred in April 2010 in Kyrgyzstan. They were mainly triggered by Kurmanbek Bakiev's “incomplete legitimacy.” Several regional (mainly northern) clans were against his nomination as president in 2005-2006 and also expressed dissatisfaction with his economic policy.

The lack of consensus among the main political forces of Kyrgyzstan led the republic into a perpetual political crisis that was accompanied and intensified by the socioeconomic degradation going on in the republic.

³ See: *Istoriia i identichnost: Kyrgyzskaia Respublika*, FFE, Bishkek, 2007, 273 pp.

⁴ See: N. Omarov, D. Orlov, “The Main Results of Kyrgyzstan's Domestic Political Development in 2009,” *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, Volume 11, Issue 1, 2010; E. Kabulov, “On the Results of the Presidential Election in Kyrgyzstan,” *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 4-5 (58-59), 2009.

So the reasons leading to the downfall of Kurmanbek Bakiev's regime are as follows: the acute socioeconomic crisis, the unsuccessful attempts to reinforce presidential power, corruption, nepotism, regionalism, clannishness, criminalization of political life, and the acute shortage of economic resources. Some foreign players also sharply criticized Kurmanbek Bakiev's foreign policy.

The Ethnic Factor

The Kyrgyz, who account for a little more than 60% of the population of Kyrgyzstan, usually go collectively to the polls, particularly in the rural areas. Kinship and tribal relations are strong in the villages and everyone participates in such events together. There are political groups in present-day Kyrgyzstan which demand that the country's state structure be formed in keeping with traditions, that is, bearing in mind the historical division of the Kyrgyz into the right and left wing. Others are oriented toward Islamic values, while still others are in favor of reinforcing the secular foundations of the state and modernizing society.

For millennia, Kyrgyz political culture has been characterized by patriarchal traits oriented toward local values (the values of clan, tribe, family) and a strong charismatic leader; *azho*, *kagany*, *bii*, and *manapy* (heads of state or families) were chosen based on their ability to protect and feed their people in the severe conditions of nomadic life.

All of these ethnic traditions taken together were called *kyrgyzchylyk*. A set of rules was also included in this concept based on the hypertrophied idealized national traditions and cultural features of the Kyrgyz people, including *sanzhira* (the genealogy of the origin of Kyrgyz families) and other genealogical traditions.⁵

As noted above, the traditional division of clans into northern and southern is relatively provisional. To a certain extent it reflects the influence of geographical location on the formation of personnel and administrative groups. During the formation of Askar Akaev's personal power regime, it was customary for the so-called northern clans (of Naryn and Issyk Kul) to group around his family, while those with axes to grind rallied around the southerners. It was in the south that the largest opposition to Akaev's regime formed.

The change in state power in 2005 paved the way to redistribution of property, the formation of a new political elite (mainly from among the southerners), and a search for additional resources.

Several experts believe that Kurmanbek Bakiev, protégé of the southern Kyrgyz clans, played the main role in the events during and after Askar Akaev's overthrow. The main bone they had to pick with Askar Akaev's regime was the fact that it was the northern clan that was in power, while the southern clan, which they represented, was left out of the picture.

According to Western experts, Kyrgyzstan could serve as a very good example of how unacceptable it is (from the viewpoint of ideology and political practice) to implement democratic models without taking account of local specifics. "Indirect democratization," which envisages forming civil rights standards parallel to Western society that countries with different forms of democratic rule might have in common, would possibly be more lucrative.

The south and north of the country are essentially different sociopolitical communities. The former nomads are divided into two "wings" (*ong* and *sol*), while there are about another 40 tribes and clans

⁵ See: B. Bogatyrov, "Postreformatorskiy etap v Kyrgyzstane: peregrupirovka sil ili vozvrat na iskhodnye pozitsii?", *Kazakhstan v globalnykh protsessakh* (IMEP, Almaty), No. 1, 2007, pp. 18-20.

at the grassroots level. Whereby these ties are much stronger among the Kyrgyz than among the Kazakh, for example, a factor which also raises political instability. It is characteristic that the Islamist opposition is primarily concentrated in Southern Kyrgyzstan.

The Role of Islam

The Islamic factor in Kyrgyzstan is not only of a domestic political, but also of an ethnic and foreign political nature, that is, most members of Hizb ut-Tahrir are ethnic Uzbeks. A large number of Uzbeks, who form a national minority in Kyrgyzstan, live in the south of the republic and are potential recruits into the ranks of the Islamists. In Kyrgyzstan, there is a big difference between the south of the republic, where religious pilgrimage sites are located, and the eastern areas of the north, where strict Islamic standards do not regulate life to any great extent.

The south of the republic is the most Islamicized. It is not surprising that an increase in the activity of the Hizb ut-Tahrir party was noted during the events that occurred in the south and later in Bishkek. The head of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan was taken hostage.

Popularization of Islamic fundamentalism is coming up against serious obstacles in the north of the country. The main factors hindering the participation of most local Kyrgyz in the fundamentalist movement are the existing influence of the Slavic and now also Western cultures, the development of the market economy, and the presence of ethnic minorities there.

Some radical Islamist groups succeeded in becoming officially registered by the Ministry of Justice in the southern regions of the country and particularly in the cities of Osh, Jalal-Abad, and Batken. According to official data, there are more than 1,000 mosques functioning in Osh and its adjoining territory. The fundamentalist ideology espoused by the Uzbeks living there, as well as agitators coming in from Tajikistan, is keenly felt.⁶

According to some data, Kyrgyzstan occupies second place in CA (after Uzbekistan) in terms of the number of Hizb Ut-Tahrir members, most of whom are young people between the ages of 18 and 25. The party is actively preparing to fight for political power.⁷

Political Culture

On the whole, the political culture of the Kyrgyz people is passive in nature with a predominance of traditional orientations and an indifferent attitude toward the country's political system (activity of the political institutions and central government). Nevertheless, an interest is seen in political life at the local level, which greatly raises the importance of the regional factor. The political landscape of post-Akaev Kyrgyzstan is extremely fragmented. With a total population of 5.8 million people, 2.6 million of the country's citizens have the right to vote. This small electorate has 58 registered political parties and just as many movements and unions to choose from. There are also at least 30 opposition parties in sharp confrontation with each other.⁸

⁶ See: A. Krylov, "Religion in the Social and Political Life of the Republic of Kyrgyzstan," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 6 (42), 2006; E. Kurmanov, "Hizb Ut-Tahrir in Kyrgyzstan," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 3 (15), 2002; I. Mirsaitov, "K voprosu o protivodeistvii idei "Khizb ut-Takhrir" v Kyrgyzstane," *Kazakhstan-Spektr* (Kazakhstan Institute of Strategic Studies, Almaty), 2006, No. 2, pp. 34-38; No. 3, pp. 31-39.

⁷ See: D. Satpaev, "Goriuchaia smes," *Vremia*, 17 June, 2010, p. 18.

⁸ See: M. Suiunbaev, *Geopoliticheskie osnovy razvitiia i bezopasnosti Kyrgyzstana (globalny, regionalny i natsionalny aspekty)*, Institute of Integration of International Educational Programs, Kyrgyz National University, Bishkek, 2005.

The uncontained political struggle in Kyrgyz society led to the firm conviction that impunity and permissiveness are indispensable attributes of democracy. This kind of legal nihilism coupled with the low political culture (both of the political environment and of society as a whole) is making society react very sensitively to any use of force by the state and, as a result, giving leash to all kinds of headstrong ideas and trends.

A distinguishing feature of Kurmanbek Bakiev's presidential term was the family-clan factor, which was extremely regional (southern) in nature. The opposition forces thought that Bakiev was essentially preparing to transfer power, as per custom in a dynasty, to his younger son.

Experts pointed out that Bakiev's secretariat came up with corresponding reforms and long consulted with the elites about how best to carry them out. Before the kurultai opened, the president travelled to the south of the republic, to Osh and Jalal-Abad, where he enjoyed greater support. At the meetings with the aksakals, he promised to open branches of the Central Agency for Development, Investments, and Innovations there and transfer the Ministry of Defense to Osh, which would automatically lead to redistribution of financial flows in favor of the south. Bakiev hoped that this would help him enlist the support of the local elites in nominating his son, who is regarded with suspicion in traditionalist circles (he is half-Russian and does not speak Kyrgyz).

Kyrgyzstan at the Crossroads

In the small hours of 11 June, 2010, Kyrgyzstan, CA, and the whole world were shocked by the ethnic clashes that began: hundreds of people were killed, thousands wounded, tens of thousands became refugees, and the cities of Osh and Jalal-Abad stood in flames. These horrific events were taking place while a summit of the states of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) was being held in Tashkent. The interim government of Kyrgyzstan asked the countries of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) to bring in peacekeeping forces.

But the meeting of security council secretaries of these countries held in Moscow on 18 June, 2010 refused to render armed support to the existing regime, although they did provide humanitarian aid and help in evacuating the wounded and making arrangements for the refugees. Roza Otunbaeva, head of the interim government, called for reservists to be recruited into the army and civilians to be disarmed. In order to make her government legitimate, a national referendum was scheduled on 27 June, 2010 to adopt a new constitution, in accordance with which Kyrgyzstan was to become a parliamentary rather than presidential republic. And in order to draw the maximum number of voters, people were allowed to vote without identification documents. Certain sources indicate that this was when some Uzbek and Tajik refugees began returning to Kyrgyzstan.

It is difficult to keep from thinking that the events in Kyrgyzstan were an immense political provocation aimed at undermining peace and stability in CA, which also means throughout the world. But there is no direct evidence of this hypothesis, and only time will provide an answer to all the questions. We are left to agree with those politicians who believe that only the Kyrgyz people themselves can resolve the ensuing problems.

The referendum held in Kyrgyzstan defused the situation somewhat, but all the problems involving administration of the country have still not been resolved. According to the first official

122 pp; B. Torogeldieva, "The Formation and Nature of Political Culture in Present-Day Kyrgyzstan," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 1(55), 2009.

decrees issued by the new leadership, at the end of 2010, parliamentary elections are to be held in Kyrgyzstan. The political parties that win will form the government, which will be subordinate to the parliament.

As for the presidential election, it is to be held in September 2011, until which time Roza Otunbaeva will perform the functions of the head of state. In so doing, it is stipulated that she cannot run for president. However, keeping in mind the specifics of the local mentality, this in no way means that she will not try.

The new Kyrgyz leadership has been doing some interesting things: it has abolished the anti-corruption committee (evidently the main bribe-takers belonged to it), and it is looking, among other things, at the possibility of re-examining several decisions about water supply to some regions of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan and about the status and property rights of certain citizens and foreign states to resort buildings and land near Lake Issyk Kul. It is still not clear what other measures the new leadership will carry out, but one thing is evident: Roza Otunbaeva and her associates need the support and understanding of the republic's population.

One important detail is worth noting: the countries neighboring on Kyrgyzstan (Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan), as well as Russia, the U.S., and international organizations (the SCO, CSTO, European Union, and OSCE) were keeping a low profile with respect to the events going on in the republic.

Tajikistan and Uzbekistan opened their borders to refugees, and they did not stop people from returning to their destroyed homes after the tension in the Osh and Jalal-Abad regions began to drop.

Kazakhstan helped Kurmanbek Bakiev, who was still the legitimate president at the time, to leave the country. He was received by Belarus. In addition, as OSCE chairman, Kazakhstan did not allow foreign interference and rendered humanitarian aid to the inflicted areas of Kyrgyzstan.

This was evidently the reason that Roza Otunbaeva made her first foreign visit to the capital of Kazakhstan, where Astana Day celebrations were being held on 5-6 July, 2010. These celebrations brought together not only the heads of the CIS states, but also of countries of the Far Abroad. This gave Roza Otunbaeva the opportunity to establish personal contacts with many leaders and explain her position with respect to pacifying the situation in the republic and building a democratic Kyrgyzstan.

As for Russia and the U.S., which have their own strategic interests in Kyrgyzstan, they showed tact and understanding of the situation. Russia did not respond to the request to bring its peacekeeping forces into Kyrgyzstan; it merely sent a contingent of 150 special force officers to ensure that the civilians at its military base in Kant were able to go about their normal business. At the same time, it issued the republic the first installments of loans and rendered humanitarian aid and assistance in transporting the wounded out of the conflict zones.⁹

The open confrontation in Kyrgyzstan is gradually abating. The first steps taken by the new leadership of Kyrgyzstan have largely been welcomed by politicians and experts. The main problem being discussed is changing the presidential form of governance to the parliamentary. Some see this as a positive move, that is, progress along the path of democracy and rejection of authoritarianism, while others are worried that it may bring extremists or confessional fundamentalists to power.

With 58 registered parties and movements (and just as many semi-legal and illegal formations), it is very difficult to obtain a majority in parliament or even form a functional coalition. In addition, a further increase in clannishness and political tribalism is possible.

⁹ In this respect, we can recall how in 2005 Russia gave President Askar Akaev asylum after he fled from Kyrgyzstan; he continues to live in Russia to this day and is working at one of Moscow's universities.

In Lieu of a Conclusion

The political transformations that have occurred and are occurring in sovereign Kyrgyzstan show that the political culture of the Kyrgyz nation, which is undergoing modernization, is mixed, polarized, and segmented in nature. It is distinguished by different value orientations, contradictions between traditionalism and modernism and between secular and religious orientations, and the differences between the subcultures of the urban and rural population, the electorate of the capital and the provinces, and the Kyrgyz and the members of other nationalities.

In our opinion, weakening of the state power structures, intensification of the socioeconomic crisis, and prolongation of the political instability will be a determining trend in the domestic political development of Kyrgyzstan in the short and mid-term.

The historical past is making itself known, and traditionalism is very difficult to overcome. We may be the witnesses of many more transformations still to come in Kyrgyzstan.