Kyrgyzstan

Recovery and Reformation

Policy Perspectives
August 2010

PONARS Eurasia
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THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY
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Kyrgyzstan

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Kyrgyz National flag in front of the Statue of Independence on a central square in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, Friday, April 9, 2010 (AP Photo/Alexander Zemlianichenko).

An Uzbek man who fled from Kyrgyzstan shows his slingshot as he waits for permission to cross into Uzbekistan, near the Uzbek village of Jalal-Kuduk, Monday, June 14, 2010 (AP Photo/Anvar Ilyasov).

Members of a local election commission open a ballot box to count votes after a referendum at a polling station in the southern Kyrgyz city of Osh, Kyrgyzstan, Sunday, June 27, 2010 (AP Photo/Sergei Grits).

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Foreword

Cory Welt
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The regime change and ethnic violence that occurred in Kyrgyzstan in April and June 2010 took participants and observers both by surprise. In April, state-perpetrated violence against protestors led to violent reaction on the streets, leading to the swift collapse of the administration of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev. In June, minority Uzbeks in southern Kyrgyzstan suffered from murderous pogroms and acts of mass destruction that were tolerated, and even supported, by local security forces. With parliamentary elections now scheduled for October, Kyrgyzstan enters a new and highly uncertain period of development, marked by the promise of some of the most ambitious political reforms ever seen in Central Asia but also the specter of state collapse.

The four memos in this collection analyze the causes of Kyrgyzstan's political instability and ethnic violence; assess the government's efforts to implement democratic reform and interethnic accord; and identify policy areas that require further attention if Kyrgyzstan is to avoid sliding into new bouts of instability.

The first two essays in the collection explain what appeared at the time to be inexplicable: the murderous violence against minority Uzbeks in the southern part of Kyrgyzstan in June 2010. *Scott Radnitz* and *Sean Roberts* acknowledge the longstanding economic tensions in southern Kyrgyzstan that had sharpened in recent times and contributed to intercommunal strife. Both maintain, however, that the murderous violence that occurred – reminiscent of an earlier bout of ethnic violence in 1990 – can only be understood by reference to other, noneconomic factors. They insist that the consequences of the violence have yet to fully unfold; the road to reconciliation is long and uncertain.

In his essay, Scott Radnitz answers the question of how the seemingly stable cohabitation of Kyrgyz and Uzbeks rapidly degenerated into violence. Radnitz links the attacks on Uzbeks to the regime change of April 2010: Bakiyev's overthrow pitted supporters of the old regime against an informal alliance of new central authorities and a local Uzbek entrepreneur (and advocate of Uzbek interests), Kadyrjon Batyrov. With an entourage of his own, Batyrov retook a local government building from supporters of the "old guard." In the next weeks, intercommunal tensions grew as, first, Batyrov

was reported to have destroyed a Bakiyev family compound. An ensuing clash led to the deaths of two Kyrgyz; more altercations and rumors of atrocities sparked the attacks against Uzbeks. Radnitz argues that the Kyrgyz government now faces two daunting challenges: overcoming the tenuous control it exerts over the south and confronting what have become totally polarized narratives of ethnic victimhood and blame. The latter, he warns, could prevent authorities from providing security guarantees to Uzbeks, necessary to assure the healthy reintegration of southern Kyrgyzstan.

While Radnitz traces the short-term descent into violence and the hardening of ethnic lines that resulted, Sean Roberts examines longstanding stereotypes and communal divisions in southern Kyrgyzstan. Often devoid of significance in everyday life, he argues, such stereotypes and divisions can unfortunately be harnessed effectively by those seeking to provoke violence. A legacy of intercommunal distrust, differing social networks, and different attitudes toward property were elements of an interethnic divide that could, under the right conditions, be activated to a devastating end. Roberts argues that efforts to address the aftermath of violence ought to focus on regional economic development and rule of law, but they should also be expressly directed toward the provision of shared benefits and the building of intercommunal trust. Warning of the prospects for renewed violence, Roberts argues in favor of developing an "early warning" system of conflict prevention. This could build upon something like the police advisory mission that the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) intends to deploy in Kyrgyzstan but which has recently encountered significant domestic opposition.

The next two essays in the collection assess the prospects for positive political change in Kyrgyzstan. Bakiyev's administration dashed the hopes of many in and outside the country that the March 2005 Tulip Revolution that brought him to power would usher in a new era of democracy and governance reform in Kyrgyzstan and also potentially elsewhere in Central Asia. His ouster and the reforms initiated by the successor government have led to renewed speculation regarding democracy's fate in the region.

Shairbek Juraev and *Pauline Jones Luong* agree that the political outlook for Kyrgyzstan is mixed. Juraev observes that the new (and unelected) president, Roza Otunbayeva, has displayed an unparalleled commitment to democratic rule and has sought to institutionalize that commitment through constitutional reforms that diminish the power of the presidency. However, the decidedly non-peaceful manner of public protest, the ease with which new government officials have slid into traditional norms of patron-client governance, and, finally, the spectacular inability of the new government to prevent mass violence against an ethnic minority have led to doubts about the government's ability to usher in an era of democratic stability. Juraev argues that prospects for sustained political competition are good, but only because of multiple poles of power within the elite and widening regional divisions – aspects of political development that can have as much a destabilizing effect as a stabilizing one. For Juraev, the main questions are whether constitutional reform can effectively channel

elite and regional divisions, and whether political elites will come to respect norms of formal law.

Finally, Pauline Jones Luong takes a harder look at the effectiveness of Kyrgyzstan's new constitution. Jones Luong notes that constitutional reforms are well intentioned and may have some positive effects: they give greater powers to parliament and establish rules to promote political party development. She argues, however, that they do not tackle the underlying deficiencies of Kyrgyzstan's political system. In fact, constitutional reform could unintentionally exacerbate some of these deficiencies, if left unaddressed. First, the kind of mixed presidential-parliamentary system the new constitution establishes runs the risk of blurring lines of authority and creating paralyzing structures of "dual power" within government. Second, innovative reforms that limit the maximum number of seats a party can hold and restrict the president to a single term in office can lead to government paralysis and new incentives for rapaciousness. Finally, the rules established to promote political party development are useful but insufficient for getting parties to develop clear policy agendas and linkages to constituencies.

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Competing Narratives and Violence in Southern Kyrgyzstan

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 105

Scott Radnitz
University of Washington

There are two challenges in accounting for the recent violence between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan. The first is to connect how political change at Kyrgyzstan's national level, specifically the April 2010 coup, reverberated at the local level and made violence possible. The second is to explain how intra-ethnic discord following the change in government transformed into inter-ethnic violence. A series of incremental steps, beginning with the demonstrable weakening of the state, increased the salience of ethnicity as a cleavage able to be mobilized by opportunistic politicians. Since the violence of June 10-14, 2010, ethnicity-based narratives have become deeply entrenched among the public and, worse, embraced by ethnic Kyrgyz security forces in the south, making it very difficult to restore interethnic cooperation or to prevent further violence. This memo traces the emergence, entrenchment, exploitation, and violent consequences of these narratives in Kyrgyzstan.

Dealing with Multiethnicity

When Kyrgyzstan became independent, it inherited a complex demographic problem. Amidst a population of about four million, Kyrgyz were barely a majority, while just under 15 percent of the population were ethnic Uzbeks, who resided in areas contiguous with Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan's economically and politically dominant neighbor. Kyrgyzstan's ethnic complexity was never dealt with directly. After interethnic riots between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks caused at least 300 deaths in 1990, people on both sides preferred to blame a "third force," usually Russia, rather than to examine the underlying causes (at the time, ethnic Russians made up over 20 percent of Kyrgyzstan's population). President Askar Akayev's vision of a multicultural "common home" provided a fig leaf of harmony for a state officially blind to ethnicity. This does not mean all was well—Uzbeks often complained about being underrepresented in official posts, while southern Kyrgyz were somewhat envious of ethnic Uzbeks' success in business—but this was not unusual for a multiethnic state or any cause for alarm.

A Weakened State

The descent into ethnic violence was sudden, but it followed a gradual loss of control by the state following the overthrow of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev on April 7, 2010. As in 2005, after Akayev's ouster, policemen left their posts and mobs rampaged through the capital. Spontaneously, groups of citizens intent on restoring order coalesced into *druzhenniki*, or neighborhood watch committees, to stop looting and violence. It was clear, at least in the north, that the government could not provide security. It turned out to be equally powerless in the south, as mobs of purported supporters of Bakiyev seized government buildings in the *oblasts* of Osh, Jalalabad, and Batken. (The complicity of Bakiyev or his family has never been substantiated. Given that a favored tactic in the repertoire of Kyrgyz elites is to raid a government office and demand the replacement of an appointee, it is likely that local politicians instigated the seizures.) The interim government, unable to rely fully on the police or army, reportedly called on Kadyrjon Batyrov, a local ethnic Uzbek entrepreneur, to mobilize his supporters and help recover the government building in Jalalabad, which they succeeded in doing on May 14. They reportedly then went to Bakiyev's family's village and, acting without instruction, set fire to their homes.

This event resonated beyond the immediate circumstances, inserting ethnicity into volatile local politics. Batyrov was the wrong man to assist the government, as he was very unpopular—even hated—by many Kyrgyz in Jalalabad. Whereas other Uzbek politicians generally kept a low profile and refrained from making open demands for Uzbek rights, Batyrov was an unusually vocal advocate for Uzbek interests. He had pressed for recognition of Uzbek as an official language, complained about Uzbek underrepresentation in the government, and built a university primarily for the Uzbek community, which stood at a prominent central location in Jalalabad. Like many businessmen in Kyrgyzstan, he also had a coterie of supporters—students and other (Uzbek) beneficiaries of his patronage—who were devoted to his success.

Growing Resentment and Threat

As a result of the general sense of insecurity prevailing in spring 2010, and especially once Uzbeks got involved in street politics in Jalalabad, demands on behalf of the Uzbek community were viewed with hostility by local Kyrgyz. Batyrov complained in a newspaper interview that Uzbeks were being unfairly treated by police, a plausible charge that was nonetheless seen by some, including the interim government first deputy, Azimbek Beknazarov, as needlessly provocative. Some Uzbek leaders also advocated changes to the draft constitution that would benefit Uzbeks, including recognition of Uzbek as an official language. Kyrgyz politicians and journalists accused Batyrov of advocating autonomy for southern Kyrgyzstan or, more implausibly, union with Uzbekistan. Although autonomy was mooted in the early 1990s, however, it was no longer a serious item on any Uzbek political agenda. But the charges against Batyrov, together with the reforms actually being proposed, provided fodder for nationalist politicians who disliked him and were resentful of Uzbek prosperity and

local influence. They now had a pretext to conjure up threats associated with deep-seated anxieties about the Uzbek demographic advantage and to play on widely held stereotypes about Uzbeks as greedy, dishonest, and insular.

After the incident in Bakiyev's village, several politicians openly called for Batyrov's arrest. On May 19, a mob set upon his ironically named People's Friendship University and attempted to set it on fire, but Batyrov's armed supporters fought them off. Two Kyrgyz died in the altercation. At this point, the prosecutor's office, responding to popular pressure, announced a warrant for Batyrov's arrest.

In the period between the events in Jalalabad and the start of violence in Osh, a frame of zero-sum ethnic competition had set upon southern Kyrgyzstan. Autonomy was a red herring. Jalalabad's politicians were clearly taking advantage of nationalist passions to eliminate a troublesome rival, but their actions resonated beyond Jalalabad. The specter of Kyrgyzstan's dismantling was used as a pretext to project blame onto (all) Uzbeks. Uzbeks, in turn, took note of the resurgence of Kyrgyz nationalism. Once the frame of ethnic conflict became salient, small incidents that would inevitably occur in the absence of a strong state were imbued with ethnic implications. The government in Bishkek appears to have been unaware of this dangerous development. Putative defenders on both Kyrgyz and Uzbek sides—underemployed young men—began preparing for battle by organizing and obtaining weapons, probably at the initiative of local elites. Both sides correctly perceived that authorities could do little to stop concerted street action and that they would be able to advance their political and economic interests through mob violence.

The Fuse is Lit

A confrontation along ethnic lines at an Osh casino precipitated an armed assault by unknown assailants at several points in the city. This was followed by a rumor that Uzbeks had raped three Kyrgyz students in a nearby dormitory. Kyrgyz mobs, armed with guns, knives, and clubs, rampaged through Uzbek neighborhoods, killing people and destroying property. Amidst the violence, attackers demanded that Uzbeks leave the country. This suggested that they had internalized propaganda implicating a disloyal ethnic minority connected to a demographically superior state. Resentment of Uzbeks' perceived superior economic status also played a role in the deliberate targeting of Uzbek businesses. Some violence, such as the destruction of the local concert hall and the bazaar, was simply nihilistic destruction by frustrated youths.

When the violence subsided, the government's Soviet-style instinct was to try and sweep the unpleasant events under the rug and put forward a mantra of "friendship of the peoples." Interim President Roza Otunbayeva denied that the violence had an ethnic character or that Uzbeks were the primary victims (contrary to what international news outlets and nongovernmental organizations were reporting). The government hesitated to probe the causes of the conflict and hoarded information, arguing that releasing data, for example on the breakdown of casualties by ethnicity, would inflame tensions. Instead of facing the uncomfortable fact that many ordinary citizens took part in the violence, the government implicated external enemies or people

who were already widely disliked. The head of the National Security Service concocted a conspiracy involving the Bakiyev family, Islamic militants, the Taliban, and Batyrov. A deeper reckoning within society was thus averted.

Yet even if the violence had been incited by "outsiders" with their own agenda, it remained the case that locals were willing participants. Testimony of ethnic Kyrgyz interviewed after the violence reflected a belief that Uzbeks brought misfortune upon themselves by advocating autonomy and making unreasonable demands. This pointed to an unstated presumption among some Kyrgyz that Uzbeks are guests in their country, obliged to obey the rules set by the majority. Kyrgyz were seemingly unable to acknowledge suffering among Uzbeks, who, according to the preponderance of evidence, were the primary victims of pogroms. Instead, ordinary Kyrgyz focused exclusively on Kyrgyz casualties, blamed Uzbeks for the violence, and supported the heavy-handed police methods used to exact retribution for the minority community's purported crimes. Akayev's "common home" had collapsed.

A second response of Soviet pedigree was to put on a theatrical display of force, including deploying tanks and armed personnel carriers to the streets of Osh to create the illusion of control. The government appointed a tough-talking police colonel who threatened to "destroy" anyone who caused trouble. In typical Soviet fashion, televised police operations showed diligent and disciplined soldiers raiding homes of suspects and conveniently uncovering caches of weapons and drugs, displayed and enumerated for all to see. These choreographed scenes showing good guys nabbing bad guys painted a simple and reassuring picture intended to convince viewers that their government was protecting them. What was left unspoken was that all the culprits portrayed were Uzbek.

These scenes and other occurrences implied an alarming disconnect between the rhetoric of the government in Bishkek, which officially maintained a posture of neutrality and legality, and facts on the ground in the south. Eyewitnesses reported seeing uniformed Kyrgyz soldiers firing at Uzbek civilians, handing their weapons to Kyrgyz mobs, and removing barricades for mobs to ransack Uzbek neighborhoods. The national government denied these reports and refused to investigate them, essentially granting the army immunity as it sought to restore stability in the south. The security forces' confrontational approach toward the Uzbek community, including the peremptory order to dismantle barricades, and the persecution and alleged torture of ethnic Uzbeks suggested that military forces shared the sympathies of the local Kyrgyz community and were able to persecute the minority—possibly in contravention of the national government's wishes—with majority approval. In August, the prosecutor-general's office confirmed that 213 out of 243 people in prison for participation in the violence were ethnic Uzbeks.

Tenuous Security and Resilient Narratives

Two lasting legacies of the April 2010 coup and subsequent June violence present enormous challenges to Kyrgyzstan and the broader region. The first is that the state has only tenuous control over (at most) half the country. Not only are paramilitary

groups able to operate on the streets of Osh, but the Kyrgyz army appears not to be operating under complete civilian control. Ominous statements by army officials critical of the interim government implied that the army might take matters into its own hands if instability persisted, at least in the south. Given the ineptitude of the civilian government, military rule may seem an attractive proposition to many who lived through the recent chaos. Otunbayeva's cohort clearly hoped that the referendum that passed on June 27 averted this threat by granting them legitimacy and introducing a new democratic constitution. However, security is a necessary condition for democracy. Kyrgyz citizens, feeling insecure and lacking confidence in their leaders, might be prepared to postpone the latter until the former is assured.

The second problem is that people on both sides have internalized exculpatory and other-denigrating narratives. Previous frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet region left a legacy of hatred and separation that has persisted to this day. Uzbeks that witnessed savage attacks first hand are in no mood to reconcile. On the contrary, without a credible guarantee of state protection, they have every incentive to arm themselves. Even if the current persecution of Uzbeks ceases, absent security guarantees, which could only be provided by a third party, attempts by the Kyrgyz government to disarm Uzbeks will be viewed as threatening and may provoke further violence. Additionally, there will be little hope of restoring formerly mixed neighborhoods. For their part, Kyrgyz, having accepted the myth of Uzbek culpability, expect the government to act on their behalf. There is no overlap between these narratives, leaving no grounds for reconciliation. This is mirrored by the de facto physical separation of ethnic communities in Osh. The government has made minimal effort to address dueling narratives of victimhood and blame, or to investigate crimes evenhandedly, perhaps because it fears rebellious activity by ethnic Kyrgyz if it does so. In a sign that the government itself has been afflicted by kneejerk defensive nationalism, some officials have resisted U.S. and European calls for an international investigation into the violence and a plan to deploy a multinational police force under the auspices of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). This is an uncharacteristic posture for Kyrgyzstan, which was previously eager to work with international actors on all sides.

Conclusion

While recent memories remain fresh, local disputes will continue to be viewed within a frame of ethnic conflict, leaving intact the conditions for further violence and escalation. The government is overwhelmed and internally divided, and it has made no attempt to alleviate the security dilemma afflicting post-conflict areas. The new constitution and upcoming elections are unlikely to moderate prevailing attitudes. Instead, they will produce new incentives for politicians to mobilize voters using ethnic appeals. Intercommunal relations have been spoiled for at least a generation, and there is currently neither the will nor the capacity to repair the damage. The way forward appears bleak.

What's Ethnicity Got To Do With It?

HEALING THE WOUNDS OF UZBEK-KYRGYZ VIOLENCE IN THE FERGHANA VALLEY

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 106

Sean R. Roberts
The George Washington University

Although it appears that opportunistic actors with political and economic motivations provoked the violence that erupted in southern Kyrgyzstan during June of this year, the scale, rapid spread, and vicious character of that violence belies a very real cultural divide between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in the country. Those who provoked the violence were obviously aware of the volatile nature of this divide, which had fostered a similar proliferation of ethnically based physical attacks, murders, and sexual violence in the same cities and towns only twenty years before.

In dealing with the aftermath of the June 2010 violence, it is obviously important to identify who was behind the provocations that initiated this conflict, but it is equally critical to address the volatile ethnic relations that these provocations awoke. This is especially true now that the violence has at least temporarily subsided, and the policy priorities have shifted to healing the wounds from the conflict and mitigating future violence. In order to address the ethnic tensions that exploded in southern Kyrgyzstan between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz, however, policymakers must gain a more sophisticated understanding of how ethnicity is internalized and expressed in the Central Asian context and what role ethnic identity played in this particular conflict.

Why Ethnic Conflict? Primordialists vs. Instrumentalists

In the academic world of ethnicity studies, one of the longest and most heated debates has been that between the primordialists and the instrumentalists. While this is a fluid debate that inevitably has varied nuances, for the purposes of this paper we can sum up the two opposing arguments quite simply. The primordialists believe that ethnicity emerges from long-held sociocultural attachments between people that continue to define and divide us to this day. By contrast, the instrumentalists argue that ethnicity is a relatively new form of identification that obscures divergent interests more related to a competition for resources than to an abstract concept of identity.

To date, much of the discourse on the ethnic dimension of the June violence in Kyrgyzstan has reflected one pole or the other of this debate. The media, at least initially, adopted a strongly primordialist perspective as many journalists suggested that the conflict was rooted in "ancient ethnic hatreds," which were aggravated by Joseph Stalin's arbitrary border demarcations in the Ferghana Valley. In response to this fatalistic interpretation, many regional specialists adopted an instrumentalist perspective on the role of ethnicity in the conflict, stressing the larger political and economic tensions behind Uzbek-Kyrgyz relations.

I would argue that neither of these perspectives taken alone offers a full explanation of why the conflict adopted an ethnic dimension, why the violence was fueled by such passion on both sides, and why it occurred when it did. To fully answer these questions and in order to formulate a means of healing the wounds of June's violence in the Ferghana Valley, one must take a more nuanced perspective of ethnic identity that incorporates both primordialist and instrumentalist perspectives.

Instrumental Dimensions: Land, Economics, and Political Power

Several regional experts have already provided excellent analyses of the instrumentalist nature of the ethnic tension between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz that fueled the June violence. In explaining the root causes of the violence, these analyses point to a variety of economic and political factors in Kyrgyzstan as a whole, as well as to some specific to the relationship between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in the Ferghana Valley.

Taking a primarily economic perspective, David Gullette (OpenDemocracy, June 28, 2010) has concisely outlined the acute economic pressures that have gradually intensified in Kyrgyzstan over the last decade. With official statistics suggesting that over a third of the country's population lives in poverty, there is intense competition for the approximately seven percent of Kyrgyzstan's mountainous terrain that consists of arable land. Furthermore, as Gullette points out, these factors were further aggravated in recent years as global economic pressures led to increased food prices and decreasing remittances from the approximately ten percent of Kyrgyzstan's population involved in migrant labor abroad.

Although Gullette focuses primarily on explaining these economic pressures for Kyrgyzstan as a whole, it should be noted that these factors are particularly acute in the south, which is the most densely populated and most agricultural region in the country. In the south, the competition for arable land is particularly intense, and land reform has resulted in a patchwork across the countryside of very small land plots usually cultivated by single families who compete with each other in a relatively localized agricultural market. Furthermore, the dense population of the region has resulted in particularly high percentages of migrant laborers, especially among Kyrgyz, many of whom have been forced to return home over the last several years in the wake of the global economic crisis.

Adding a more political perspective, Madeleine Reeves (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, July 4, 2010) has stressed that Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in the south of Kyrgyzstan both feel disenfranchised for different reasons. As a minority within

Kyrgyzstan, the Uzbeks have long felt excluded from access to state jobs and political influence. As Reeves notes, this is particularly true for the security sector, including both law enforcement and military. At the same time, the southern Kyrgyz feel themselves at a distinct disadvantage in the urban trade economy of their region, which is largely dominated by Uzbeks. According to Reeves, these mutual feelings of disenfranchisement, along with the general economic and political pressures present throughout Kyrgyzstan at the time, were at the root of the violence that exploded between the two groups.

Both of these sound instrumentalist characterizations of Kyrgyz-Uzbek relations in southern Kyrgyzstan offer critical insights into the immediate economic and political roots of the June 2010 unrest and help us understand why this violence erupted when it did. They do not, however, help us understand the deep distrust between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz that fostered such a rapid and passionate spread of violence and panic between these groups in June of this year as well as twenty years before. To understand the roots of this distrust, one must also examine the historical factors that shape Uzbek and Kyrgyz identity and these groups' views of each other.

Primordial Dimensions: The Nomadic-Sedentary Divide

Popular sources often stress the recent creation of Central Asian ethnic groups as a product of the construction of national republics in the Soviet Union. Although the formation of modern Central Asian nationalities was influenced to a degree by early Soviet nationality policy, this does not mean that the identities of present-day national groups in the region have no basis in earlier cultural differences. In fact, the various national groups in Central Asia can all be traced to cultural divides that have long existed in the region.

Historically, the two most vivid cultural divides in Central Asia related to linguistic differentiation (Turkic vs. Persian language groups) and to lifestyle divergence (sedentary vs. nomadic groups). Historians generally characterize both these divides as representing a continuum, which also included bilingual speakers of Persian and Turkic languages as well as semi-nomadic agriculturalists.

Despite the ambiguous nature of this continuum of difference, it cultivated very real oppositional identities that continue to be articulated in ethnic relations today. The Kyrgyz and Uzbeks of the Ferghana Valley, for example, represent opposing sides of the sedentary-nomadic divide in the region. Although the Kyrgyz of the Ferghana Valley have likely been living an agricultural lifestyle longer than most Kazakhs or northern Kyrgyz, they are relative newcomers to a settled lifestyle compared to the Uzbeks of the region.

As a result, the Uzbeks and Kyrgyz of the Ferghana Valley, despite frequent instances of intermarriage, friendship, and social interaction, maintain strong stereotypes of each other that emerge from a history of distrust between nomadic and sedentary populations in Central Asia. This history of distrust has evolved from a combination of divergent worldviews and a long history of competitive economic interaction.

Characterizing the difference in worldviews between former nomads and long-time sedentary peoples in Central Asia runs the risk of over-generalization and the perpetuation of stereotypes. Still, one can identify some basic concepts on which the two populations generally diverge. The most vivid of these relates to their respective concepts of community.

Historically, we know that nomadic communities were based on kin groups while sedentary peoples formed their sense of community from geographical proximity. Although this has changed since the forced settlement of nomads in Central Asia during the 1920s and 30s, former nomads have retained especially strong familial attachments to this day and longtime settled peoples tend to maintain an extra-ordinary social connection to others within their local neighborhoods (or *mahallas*).

This broad division in ideals of community further translates into divergent perspectives on land ownership and property more generally. Long-time sedentary populations, for example, inevitably have a stronger attachment to their personally owned land than most former nomads, as is evidenced by the many Uzbek male refugees who almost immediately returned to southern Kyrgyzstan even before the cessation of violence in order to protect their property. Among former nomads, land and personal property outside livestock have historically played only a minor role in their livelihood and social structure. While this certainly does not suggest that Kyrgyz or Kazakhs are less interested in accumulating wealth and property than are Uzbeks, it does suggest a different attitude towards property, especially land, and its permanency. These divergent attitudes towards land have generally aggravated conflicts over property between the two groups, particularly in regions like the Ferghana Valley with high population density.

More concretely than these divergences in worldviews, however, the history of socioeconomic interactions between nomads and sedentary people in Central Asia has cultivated a legacy of distrust. Prior to Soviet power, nomads and sedentary populations most often encountered each other at market and on the trade routes between oases. In the market, nomadic groups found themselves at a disadvantage vis-à-vis sedentary people, who were far more experienced traders. Between oases in nomadic herding areas, sedentary people were at a disadvantage and their trading caravans were often the victims of raids by nomadic groups. While nomadic-sedentary interaction was not limited to such encounters, these antagonistic interactions appear to have cultivated long-held stereotypes.

One often hears Kyrgyz suggesting that Uzbeks are "sneaky," "cheap," and "dishonest," sometimes offering the example of their mercantile propensities as evidence of this. Likewise, it is not rare to hear an Uzbek characterizing the Kyrgyz as "thieves," "uncultured," and "lazy," frequently explaining these attributes by their nomadic past. While these stereotypes are not usually expressed explicitly in public contexts, when tensions rise between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks such characterizations of each other can quickly emerge and inflame passionate animosity on both sides.

It is important, however, to qualify the relative influence of these primordial attachments that define Uzbek and Kyrgyz identity. Several generations have passed

since the forced settlement of Central Asia's nomadic population. Since that time, more commonalities than differences have developed in the worldviews and lifestyles of Kyrgyz and Uzbeks. Furthermore, Kyrgyz and Uzbeks do not view each other as historical enemies, as might the Serbs and Albanians or Azerbaijanis and Armenians. Rather, the cultural cleavage created by the nomadic-sedentary divide is part of a collective memory that frames both Kyrgyz and Uzbek consciousness. As such, it is a passionate source of oppositional identity and distrust that, while not inherently antagonistic, can be inflamed by external provocations as well as by political and economic pressures.

Healing the Wounds of Violence and Mitigating Future Conflict

The June 2010 violence between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in southern Kyrgyzstan that reportedly killed as many as 2,000 people, injured thousands others, and led to the displacement of approximately 100,000 should not be viewed as an isolated crisis that now has passed. The personal pain from this violence felt by both Uzbek and Kyrgyz communities will not quickly fade from memory, and there remains a substantial risk that violence will flare up again, whether provoked or not. A renewal of violence could also spark further conflict and instability in neighboring countries, such as Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, and have negative consequences for the reconstruction effort in Afghanistan, which relies on this region as a transport corridor for supplies. In this context, it is critical that the international community launch an extensive effort to assist the Kyrgyzstan government to heal the wounds of June's violence and mitigate the prospects for renewed conflict, especially as the country prepares for what will likely be hotly contested parliamentary elections.

Regional experts who have stressed the instrumental dimensions of the ethnic tensions between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks have already suggested a variety of excellent policy recommendations for the international community to address the aftermath of the June violence. David Gullette, for example, has noted the importance of fostering increased economic development throughout the country as a means of preventing future violence, and Madeleine Reeves has emphasized the need for a more viable rule of law in Kyrgyzstan that can mitigate corruption and ethnic-based political patronage.

These are both critical areas of development for Kyrgyzstan and require a more serious commitment of resources from the international community and substantial political will from the government of Kyrgyzstan if the country is to move forward. That being said, these are also long-term goals that can be expected to take years, if not decades, before directly impacting the lives of Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in the Ferghana Valley. Moreover, both economic and political development efforts are capable of provoking new violence if not implemented with sensitivity to the cultural cleavages that continue to foster distrust between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz.

For these reasons, rapidly deployed economic and political development efforts in southern Kyrgyzstan must seek to directly address Kyrgyz-Uzbek relations, recognizing that cultural cleavages exist between these communities that transcend external factors. Such efforts must include attempts to build trust in these communities

through joint programs that emphasize common interests and de-emphasize differences. Such interventions might include local economic development projects aimed at rehabilitating shared assets such as roads, sports facilities, and schools. While such micro-level development projects cannot be expected to significantly impact the overall livelihood of the people involved, they are critical to building the trust needed to promote the longer-term success of larger economic and political development efforts in the south of the country.

Finally, it is important to recognize that the June 2010 violence has dramatically increased the risk of renewed violence for the foreseeable future. For this reason, both the government of Kyrgyzstan and the international community should invest in a reliable and independent early warning system that can alert those outside the Kyrgyz and Uzbek communities in the south of any increase in risk for renewed violence. At the same time, both the government of Kyrgyzstan and the international community must be ready to listen to and act on the warnings such a system generates.

Furthermore, in light of the recent findings of Human Rights Watch (HRW, August 16, 2010) regarding the complicity of local law enforcement in June's violence, it is critical that the government of Kyrgyzstan seek ways to rebuild local trust in law enforcement among all ethnic groups, Uzbeks in particular. In this context, it is particularly troubling to note the opposition to the proposed police advisory mission of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) that has been expressed by many ethnic Kyrgyz, including numerous prominent politicians. The deployment of this advisory mission would be a very positive step towards both rehabilitating the image of local law enforcement among the people of southern Kyrgyzstan and the establishment of an independent mechanism for an early warning system of conflict prevention.

Such safeguards cannot guarantee the prevention of further violence, but they can hopefully reduce the risk. Given that large incidents of vicious and passionate interethnic violence have erupted between the same communities in the same places twice in twenty years, it is time that both outsiders and local authorities recognize that more is at play in such violence than external provocateurs and macro-level economic and political pressures.

The Third Restart

CHALLENGES FOR DEMOCRACY IN POST-BAKIYEV KYRGYZSTAN

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 107

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In April 2010, the second president of Kyrgyzstan, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, was ousted from power after bloody clashes between authorities and protesters. He finally settled in Belarus, following the trajectory of his predecessor Askar Akayev, who ended up in Moscow after the Tulip Revolution of 2005. Opposition leaders, most of whom served under both Akayev and Bakiyev, established an "interim government" and promised to develop a system that would prevent rule by one person or family. The successful ouster of a corrupt authoritarian leader—the second time in five years—once again revitalized hopes that Kyrgyzstan has indeed put an end to authoritarianism and corruption. Doubts persist, however, about whether the Kyrgyz elite, and society in general, will be able to develop a viable alternative political system governed by law and democratic values.

April 2010: Mixed Reactions

In April 2010, new leaders came to power in Kyrgyzstan promising, for the third time in twenty years, to "root out" the faults of the preceding system and build a genuinely democratic one. The opposition leaders, who formed a self-proclaimed interim government, announced they would create a system that would prevent the usurpation of power by a single person and, thus, return the country on the path toward democracy.

Presidential Leadership and Constitutional Reform

There is some ground for optimism. First of all, the personality of the interim government leader and now president, Roza Otunbayeva, appears to be a much better fit for democracy development than that of Bakiyev in 2005. As opposed to many political leaders of Kyrgyzstan, Otunbayeva conveys a deep belief in democracy. She understands the concept and its value for Kyrgyzstan. She spent years in Western

countries, is fluent in English, and, importantly, remains one of very few political leaders not known for corruption.

Secondly, the interim government demonstrated a strong determination to root out the detrimental elements of Bakiyev's presidential rule and lay down the basis for a fundamental revision of the political system. The new leaders dissolved parliament, arguing that it was an illegitimate body due to the massive fraud that accompanied the 2007 parliamentary elections. Constitutional revisions were launched immediately with strong rhetoric about the need to develop a parliamentary system in Kyrgyzstan. This turn of events was in stark contrast to the aftermath of the Tulip Revolution, when both the constitution and the parliament were left intact, much to the disappointment of the opposition.

Violence and "Business as Usual"

Nonetheless, the April 2010 events received a much cooler welcome from academic and political circles around the world compared to the Tulip Revolution. Many of those who lauded the "will of the people" in 2005 now appear concerned about the violent pattern of power changes taking shape in Kyrgyzstan. Observers suggest that the protesting crowds were less representative and more aggressive than before.

Moreover, the majority of the new government leaders have never really been known for their democratic beliefs, but rather for their dubious endeavors. Immediately after seizing power, some political leaders lost no time entering the race for key positions and appointments, apparently to strengthen their internal support base within the state apparatus. One key seat is an appointment as head of the state customs service, which is generally believed to be a prime cradle of large-scale corruption. Within a week, three persons were nominated, each propelled by three different interim deputy prime ministers.

Finally, the tragic events in May and June that left thousands dead highlight, among other things, the weakness of the central government vis-à-vis emerging local, belligerent, and sometimes well-armed groups.

In the context of democratization in Kyrgyzstan, the views outlined above suggest opposite interpretations of current developments. For some, the April events reflect a return to the path toward democracy and, thus, an important episode in the country's democratic transition. Others view the violent regime overthrow of April as reflective of the destination of post-Soviet development in Kyrgyzstan—a place featuring a weak central government and a constant struggle among fragmented, ideology-free political groups and a weak relevance of formal law. Paradoxically, both arguments appear compelling.

Contestation Through Polarization

The fragmented nature of political elites, and society as a whole, has provided a favorable environment for the development of political contestation in Kyrgyzstan, including in the days when the regimes of Akayev and Bakiyev looked their most oppressive.

Political Elites

Most top political leaders in Kyrgyzstan are actors on their own and not linked to each other or to an electorate. As many accounts suggest, political parties and ideologies in Kyrgyzstan are more imitation than reality, and the key difference between those in power and those in opposition has been the very fact that some possess power and others do not. A good example is a remark by Kubanychbek Isabekov, who until recently was a vice-speaker of parliament from the *Ak Jol* party. He said he would join the opposition unless the new authorities stopped firing his relatives from their jobs and auditing his pre-April 2010 performance in parliament. In another illustrative case, Azimbek Beknazarov, one of the leaders of the interim government, directly threatened to organize a "third revolution" if he was dismissed from power by his peers in the interim government. Such modes of opposing the government are not necessarily related to the demands of specific constituencies, and they do not arise from values and ideologies; rather, they are driven by a far more simple dichotomy of "in-power vs. not-in-power." Within this is a powerful source of political contestation.

Society

Political contestation has also been fed by fragmentation within Kyrgyz society. The division into multi-layered kinship-based groups, often competing for control over land and pasture areas, is a key element of most descriptions of pre-Soviet Kyrgyz people. Similar divisions, now enriched by geographic elements based on Soviet-created *oblasts* and *raions* (regions and districts), appear very relevant in post-Soviet Kyrgyz politics. In analyzing the Kyrgyz opposition, Eugene Huskey and Gulnara Iskakova (*Post-Soviet Affairs*, July-September 2010) have noted that politics in Kyrgyzstan remains "very local," with one's attachment to a "village or district" prevailing over loyalty to the nation, an *oblast*, or other such units.

Obviously, the depiction of Kyrgyz political elite as clear representatives of different clans, ethnic groups, or other large sociopolitical structures is not accurate; the notion of "representation" has been largely irrelevant in Kyrgyz politics. However, deep-rooted kinship-based (and, often overlapping, locality-based) solidarities provide the most available and potent political support for leaders at critical moments of political struggle, such as elections or street demonstrations (often following elections). Dethroned Bakiyev found firm support in his home village in Jalalabad. Similarly, residents of the Kemin district were nearly the only ones who expressed support for Akayev after March 2005.

Thus, despite the efforts of Akayev and Bakiyev to suppress and marginalize opposition, political competition has been sustained, to an important degree due to power-seeking political elites and the persistence of kinship- and locality-based solidarities.

Current Advantages

After April 2010, the new leaders made it clear that the primary political goal of the interim government was to create a system that would prevent the emergence of

another "super presidency." They pursued this aim by adopting at least two key institutional innovations: a redistribution of power to strengthen parliament (and government) vis-à-vis the president and the establishment of a limit in number of seats (65 out of 120) that any party may hold.

The decisiveness of the new leadership to enforce new rules that could help democratization conveys some optimism. Many suggest that the way the constitutional amendments were developed and voted on was not terribly democratic and that the interim government forced them through. Still, one may hope that these institutional changes will lead to a more effective balancing of various political groups, without any particular one rising above the rest. This would help democratize the system even without committed democrats.

Current Hazards

Current political dynamics, however, also pose some serious risks. The first challenge, increasingly articulated within Kyrgyzstan, is the risk of further localization/ regionalization of national politics. Free and fair elections will most likely reveal the parties' weak linkages to social groups and, contrarily, strong linkages to specific parts of the country, something that the authoritarian state machine used to cover up.

For example, in July 2010, Adakhan Madumarov, leader of the *Butun Kyrgyzstan* party, received a very aggressive reception in Talas, and he was forced to cancel a planned party meeting. He was accused of working with Bakiyev in the past, likely a legitimate point. However, the incident in Talas was preceded by a series of well-attended meetings in the southern Batken and Osh *oblasts*. Subsequent media and informal web-forum discussions of the incident tended to underline the regional rather than political aspect of the story.

The division of Kyrgyzstan into areas that support various political groups is not a unique phenomenon. The regional threshold requirement will lead many parties to work hard to ensure receipt of a minimum number of votes in all parts of the country. Nevertheless, in the context of Kyrgyzstan's political culture, even minor signs of "regionally"-colored representation will most likely reinforce the conventional discourse of regionalism, something that appears more and more to be an existential issue for the country. Some local analysts have already been predicting that "southern-based" parties will be the government's core opposition. Illustrative has been the active opposition of the Osh mayor, Melis Myrzakmatov, to the deployment of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Police Advisory Group in southern Kyrgyzstan, despite Otunbayeva's support for the OSCE proposal. The Osh City Council, ostensibly under the mayor's guidance, adopted a resolution to "reject" deployment of the OSCE police group, a decision with dubious legal but clear political implications.

The institutionalization of the rule of law is another key challenge. To this day, Kyrgyzstan's political elites have demonstrated an utter disregard for legal procedure. Both Akayev and Bakiyev felt comfortable revising the constitution to fit their current political interests. President Otunbayeva remains powerless against her peers from the

"interim government" who keep issuing highly dubious decrees that challenge existing laws and the constitution. After the April events, the interim government heavily referred to the "will of the people" as the source of their legitimacy; in July 2010 the mayor of Osh also referred to the "will of the people" when explaining his protest against Otunbayeva's plans to dismiss him. A consensus on the primacy of formal law over alternative sets of norms is very weak, not only among Kyrgyzstan's elite but among the general population.

The weak relevance of formal law combined with strong political fragmentation poses an important challenge for the development of democracy in Kyrgyzstan. The new changes in the constitution that empower parties in parliament to set up a government will require a high level of civility and cooperation from political leaders, something rarely observed in Kyrgyz politics.

Conclusion

Opposition leaders have had trying times since coming to power in April 2010. The legitimacy of Kyrgyzstan's governing institutions remains under question while the interim government's decrees have been further contributing to a legal mess. The finance minister has said that the state budget is in a critical state. The search for external assistance has become a daily business for President Otunbayeva. All problems have been blamed on either the former regime and family of Bakiyev or to the inevitable side effects of the interim period. In this light, the October 2010 parliamentary elections will be a serious test of the new political system.

The constitutional revisions adopted in the June 2010 referendum have created a path for the development of a competitive political system that will provide more power to parties in parliament and less to the president. A consensus regarding the negative impact of the rules of Akayev and Bakiyev is strong, as is also the need to strengthen the role of political parties.

However, transforming this opportunity into real positive change will require addressing some serious challenges. Ideally, political parties should start becoming more national and less regional, with values and visions competing rather than individuals. Can the fragmentation in Kyrgyz politics fit with a political system featuring a strong parliament? The persisting importance of localism and blood-based solidarity coupled with largely opportunistic motives of political leaders and the weakness of the state apparatus will pose an important trial for democratic development.

This highlights another, though related, issue in Kyrgyz politics: a widespread disregard for formal law. Both Akayev and Bakiyev fell from grace because they were accused of manipulating the law for personal gain. Now the Kyrgyz nation faces the well-deserved but extremely challenging task of accepting and defending the law as the primary set of sociopolitical norms.

Recurring Referendums

THE STRUGGLE FOR CONSTITUTIONAL "REFORM" IN KYRGYZSTAN

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 108

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With the adoption of its new constitution by referendum on June 27, 2010, Kyrgyzstan made history by becoming only the second state in post-Soviet Eurasia (after Moldova, and not including the Baltics) to adopt a "parliamentary-style" form of government.[1] Equally worth noting is the fact that Kyrgyzstan is the only post-Soviet state to depose two directly-elected presidents within five years via popular mobilization. Not coincidentally, it has also changed its constitution and electoral laws most frequently.

It is reasonable (if not imperative) to ask, then, whether Kyrgyzstan's recent constitutional changes can effectively address the underlying issues that have precipitated the dual outcomes of political upheaval and institutional instability. My contention is that while the following items are bold steps in the right direction—instituting checks on presidential usurpation of power, transferring authority to the legislative branch, empowering party candidates while limiting single-party dominance—these new measures alone will not resolve any of the country's core problems. In fact, they may actually serve to exacerbate some of them.

Proximate Causes and Underlying Issues

A critical review of the most frequently cited proximate causes of the events in April 2010 actually reveals the deeper roots of Kyrgyzstan's latest "revolution," which is perhaps more aptly described as a series of popular uprisings that began in the northern part of the country (specifically Talas, followed by Naryn and Bishkek) and led to the resignation of the incumbent president, Kurmanbek Bakiyev. I will refer to this hereafter as the "April events."

Disillusionment with Democracy

Some analysts have characterized the April events in Kyrgyzstan as a reflection of popular disillusionment with democracy in general and a widespread rejection of

[1] While many analysts have declared that the new constitution established a "parliamentary system" in Kyrgyzstan, I deliberately do not use the term here because it does not fully conform to the standard definition of a system of government in which the executive is chosen by, and responsible to, the legislature.

elections as a legitimate mechanism for succession in particular. Certainly, such claims are not unfounded. After all, within less than a year after his election in June 2005 there was good reason to doubt Bakiyev's commitment to the "liberal democracy" promises of the so-called Tulip Revolution of March 2005. Not only did Bakiyev and his close advisors, which included family members, engage in overt efforts to concentrate power into their own hands, they also actively persecuted political opponents, intimidated journalists, and violated civil liberties. The Bakiyev regime also blatantly manipulated both the December 2007 parliamentary and July 2009 presidential elections through a combination of preventing prominent opposition candidates from running for office and committing electoral fraud. Furthermore, they rigged the October 2007 constitutional referendum that codified an excessive centralization of powers in the presidency and a new system for electing deputies to the national legislature based exclusively on closed party lists, which was designed to guarantee an outright majority for the newly formed pro-presidential party *Ak Jol* (True Path).

At the heart of Kyrgyzstan's "authoritarian turn"—first under former president Askar Akayev, and then under Bakiyev himself—is an institutional struggle between two branches of government that has its origins in the constitutional debates of the early years of independence. Importantly, Bakiyev did not merely renege on his commitment to "liberal democracy," he also violated an explicit agreement with the opposition leaders who brought him to power and who sought the transfer of significant political authority to parliament. It is Bakiyev's failure to de-monopolize power that formed the crux of his subsequent battles with the opposition. For example, this was the primary grievance motivating parliamentarians, former ministers, and civil society activists to form the opposition movement *Za reformy*! (For Reforms!) in the spring of 2006.

However, popular disillusionment is as much about too much democracy as it is about not enough. Simply put, since the adoption of Kyrgyzstan's first constitution in May 1993, the country has experienced continuous referendums altering the terms codified in this document—nearly one referendum every other year since October 1994. The tendency to rely on hastily organized referendums to amend the constitution has created voter fatigue (particularly as they have come to be increasingly associated with fraudulent results). Moreover, referendums have served to weaken parliament in two respects: 1) indirectly, because going straight to the public circumvents parliament's role in debating, proposing, and enacting such changes; and 2) directly, because most of these so-called "reforms" reduced the power of the legislative branch vis-à-vis the executive branch. Not surprisingly, the two are related.

Overreliance on referendums as a tool for engineering constitutional reform from above has also contributed to pervasive institutional instability in Kyrgyzstan. For example, in the country's short history, only once (2000) has the parliament been elected according to the same rules as the election that preceded it (1995), making it difficult for politicians to predict which factors (other than perhaps "buying" their seat) would improve their chance at success. Rather, the electoral rules helped convince most candidates that being a member of a political party was not one of these factors. The

2000 rules, for example, allocated only a fraction of 105 seats through proportional representation and disadvantaged smaller parties by increasing the size of the electoral district in which each candidate had to compete. Subsequent rules, introduced by referendum in February 2003, eliminated proportional representation altogether and further enlarged the electoral districts. Even the 2007 electoral law, which theoretically should have promoted party development by introducing a closed party list system for all 75 seats in parliament, had the opposite effect in practice because it also mandated that parties clear relatively high thresholds to gain seats (i.e., 5 percent in every *oblast* plus the cities of Bishkek and Osh in addition to 5 percent nationwide, and based on all eligible voters rather than just votes cast). One clear consequence of these rules has been a strong disincentive for politicians to join political parties, let alone invest in party development as a strategy for electoral success—a topic the subsequent section addresses in greater detail.

Weakness of the State, not Strength of the Opposition

Another common view of the April events is that they should be attributed to the chronic weakness of the state in Kyrgyzstan rather than the strength of its opposition. Again, there is some validity to this. The reason that the process unfolded as quickly as it did is clearly a function of the state's inability to respond effectively, either administratively or militarily, to both the grievances motivating the popular uprisings that precipitated Bakiyev's ouster and the uprisings themselves. Also, the opposition is undeniably fragmented. One indication of this is the sheer number of political parties; over 100 attempted to register for the 2007 parliamentary elections. The only thing that seems to have united the 14 leaders of the provisional government that assumed office after Bakiyev resigned is that at some point in their political careers they all became his opponents (though most, in fact, started as his allies and/or members of his government).

At the same time, the opposition has exhibited a certain resilience under both Akayev and Bakiyev. Despite Akayev's repeated assaults on legislative power by referendum between 1994 and 2003, parliament continued to assert its role as a law-making and oversight body. Prominent opposition leaders also continued to pressure Bakiyev in 2006 and 2007 to honor his inaugural pledge to support constitutional reform limiting executive power vis-à-vis the legislature. More importantly, Kyrgyzstan has managed to maintain a fairly robust civil society, and its population is still willing to take to the streets to demand good governance. Even as the opposition grew increasingly silent after 2007, local nongovernmental organizations continued to not only criticize the government openly but also more effectively address issues of local concern, such as poverty alleviation and access to clean drinking water.

When it comes to the weakness of the opposition, then, the real issue is not its degree of fragmentation but lack of depth. More concretely, the key problem is that political parties with a large core membership and a sustained popular support base are nonexistent. Aside from perhaps the Communists, parties in Kyrgyzstan are associated with a few key leaders rather than a specific program of action. They are anemic

organizations; even those few parties that have persisted since the early 1990s (like *Asaba* and *Erkin Kyrgyzstan*) are hardly visible except just prior to national elections, and they rarely win more than a handful of seats.

As noted above, part of the reason that political parties are so feeble is that the electoral system has heretofore provided politicians with a strong disincentive for engaging in party development. The chronic weakness of political parties in Kyrgyzstan, however, can also be linked to the increasingly zero-sum nature of political competition. As power has become concentrated in the executive branch, winning a seat in the legislature as a means to gain access to decision-making authority (let alone promoting a particular policy agenda) has become less appealing. Rather, it is a means to gain access to resources via presidential patronage. The repeated attempts to build a pro-presidential party (or "party of power") in Kyrgyzstan, first under Akayev and then under Bakiyev, should have come as no surprise. This has been a common pattern across post-Soviet Eurasia, which is dominated by strong presidents and weak legislatures. What is surprising (and, indeed, heartening) is that both Akayev and Bakiyev failed. They did so largely due to the relative strength of civil society.

Endemic Poverty and Corruption

The April 2010 events have also been directly attributed to the abysmally low standards of living and rampant "state theft" that has come to characterize Kyrgyzstan, despite its initial promise as the frontrunner in Central Asia for adopting political and economic reform in the early 1990s. According to this view, desperate citizens of the country took to the streets because they were fed up with the government's continued failure to eradicate endemic poverty and corruption.

This view obviously has some merit. By most accounts, the Bakiyev regime displayed a greater degree of hubris and greed than its predecessor, enabling the presidential family to amass enormous personal wealth at public expense. More specifically, the protests that eventually led to Bakiyev's resignation were spurred at least partly by a precipitous increase in electricity prices (alongside heating and water) that resulted from Bakiyev's continued efforts to exploit Kyrgyzstan's hydroelectricity sector for his own benefit and that of his relatives. The most recent privatization of *Severelektro*, the energy distribution system that serves most of northern Kyrgyzstan, to a company whose new owner is allegedly a business associate of Bakiyev's son, Maxim, is a case in point. The company was sold with the understanding that tariff increases would follow.

However, an entire body of research on civil wars and revolutions has demonstrated that grievances alone are insufficient to generate mass uprisings, particularly successful ones. Pervasive poverty and corruption in Kyrgyzstan certainly play an important role but not in the way that analyses of the April events often suggest. Counter the conventional wisdom that natural resource-poor states are more likely to democratize because elites have less to gain by capturing the central state apparatus, it is precisely the dearth of resources that has fueled corruption as well as the constant elite infighting that has contributed both to the country's instability and the

government's ineptness. It is the fact that there is so little to go around and the stakes are so low—in comparison, for example, to Kyrgyzstan's petroleum-rich neighbors—that its elites have engaged in a "politics of pettiness," struggling to control and then squander the country's paltry resources before they are squandered by someone else.

The "politics of pettiness," moreover, is reinforced by the zero-sum nature of competition in a presidential system. With increasing centralization of executive power, the only way to gain control over and benefit from what little resources the country has becomes either to win (and retain) the presidency or to win (and retain) the favor of the president. The presidency, in turn, becomes the key source of generating and distributing patronage rather than the key arena for making and enforcing sound economic policy. Public goods become privatized accordingly, and the government's operating budget suffers immensely as a result. It is no coincidence that the two potentially largest sources of state revenue—the hydroelectricity sector and, most recently, the U.S. air base at the Manas International Airport—have been the prime targets of corruption under Bakiyev. As both these examples demonstrate, Bakiyev has gone even further than Akayev not just to derive benefit from existing resources but to expand those resources so as to maximize the distribution of benefits to his cronies.

Can the Constitution Deliver?

In order to effectively address Kyrgyzstan's underlying problems, the new constitution must enable its leaders to accomplish three goals:

1) firmly establish the locus of power in the legislative branch;
2) alleviate political and institutional instability; and
3) foster the development of strong political parties.

Although the new constitution represents a vast improvement from its predecessor, it falls short in realizing any of these goals. Moreover, there is a real danger that some of the new constitutional provisions will have unintended consequences that serve to undermine some of these goals.

On the one hand, the new constitution achieves a better balance of power between the executive and legislative branches by substantially reducing presidential power and transferring greater authority to parliament. The president is no longer able to unilaterally appoint heads of administrative bodies that are directly subordinate and accountable to his or her office, including the heads of local state administrations (*akims*), the secretary of state, and the chairman of the Central Election Commission. The president's ability to influence the legislative process has also been significantly curtailed. For example, he or she is no longer entitled to submit draft laws to parliament, suspend legislation and regulatory acts, or most importantly, call a referendum without the consent of a majority of parliamentary deputies (and 300,000 voters).

On the other hand, despite the lofty description of the new constitution as establishing the first parliamentary democracy in Central Asia, it does not firmly shift

the balance of power into the hands of the legislative branch. As corroborated by Ukraine's recent experience, the heart of the problem lies in elevating the status of the prime minister without fully diminishing the powers of the president or clearly enumerating his or her spheres of authority vis-à-vis the president.

Similarly, although the new constitution has the potential to promote political and institutional stability by restricting the use of referendums and making competition less zero-sum, it is also likely to create instability by prohibiting a single party from occupying much more than half the seats in parliament (65 out of 120). While this might block any future attempts to form a "party of power" in Kyrgyzstan, it will also make it difficult for parliamentarians to form a majority and, thus, to elect a prime minister and effectively pass legislation. Some of the other provisions aimed at preventing another presidential usurpation of power are, while well-intentioned, equally shortsighted. Limiting the president to a single term, for example, may have the unintentional effect of exacerbating corruption because the incumbent will have a much shorter time within which to amass personal wealth (and no scheduled elections to hold him or her accountable).

Finally, the new constitution establishes some of the necessary conditions for the development of strong political parties, including a) empowering the legislative branch such that the presidency is not the only political office worthy of competition; b) maintaining an electoral system based on proportional representation (with closed party lists); c) increasing the number of parliamentary seats (from 90 to 120); and d) reducing the threshold requirement to 5 percent of total votes cast. Also, in a move unprecedented in post-Soviet Eurasia, the new constitution virtually eliminates the parliamentary privilege of criminal immunity, which will undoubtedly reduce the number of office seekers who are merely interested in protection from prosecution for illicit business practices (or worse).

And yet, none of these conditions are sufficient to foster party development. In order to sustain themselves, parties must have depth, which means moving beyond charismatic leaders to building strong linkages with their constituents and local civil society groups. In order to do this, however, they must first establish a consensus on which to build these linkages. This, in turn, will require placing a clear policy agenda above an opaque personal one—something party leaders in Kyrgyzstan have not seemed willing or able to do. Constitutional change alone cannot rectify this shortcoming; it takes political elites dedicated to making party competition, not presidential power or patronage, central to policy determination. Only then will politicians as well as voters have a stake in the electoral success of parties.


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