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Kyrgyzstan's Regime Change: Causes and Possible Consequences

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Key Points

- ▶ On 7 April 2010 President Kurmanbek Bakiyev of Kyrgyzstan was ousted from power following mass protest and violence in the capital city of Bishkek, with 84 people killed and over 1,000 wounded. Violence erupted in Osh and Jalabad on 10 June 2010, with 400,000 Kyrgyz citizens displaced and a state of emergency declared.
- ▶ A Constitutional Referendum held on 27 June 2010 has resulted in a move from presidential to parliamentary republic status, with a parliamentary election planned for 10 October 2010.
- ▶ A coincidence of powerful internal drivers and the strategic preference of key regional actors make it likely that a 'strongman' in the name of 'law and order' and 'regional stability' will seize power. A presidential republic will be restored.
- ▶ A key question will remain unanswered: what kind of constitution can prevent the debilitating expression of family/clan-based politics?

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Introduction

On 10 June 2010 in the southern Kyrgyz city of Osh violence erupted, spreading to Jalalabad two days later, with reports of armed gangs, inter-ethnic violence, rape, and stampedes at border crossings into Uzbekistan. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), as well as Rosa Otunbayeva the acting interim government Prime Minister and President, stated that over 200 people had been killed, over 2000 wounded, with 400,000 (8% of the Kyrgyz population) displaced – 300,000 internally, 100,000 as refugees into Uzbekistan's neighbouring Andizhan province. China, India, Turkey, South Korea, Germany and Russia amongst others, airlifted their foreign nationals to Bishkek and beyond (see Map: *Kyrgyzstan's Complex Emergency*).

The UNHCR has stated that "We have strong indications that this event was not a spontaneous interethnic clash, we have some indications that it was to some degree orchestrated, targeted and well planned."¹ A report by the OSCE High Commissioner

on National Minorities noted "attempts at ethnic cleansing".²

What were the causes of such violence and what are the likely implications?

Who Needs a Power Vacuum?

Latent inter-ethnic animosity can be understood as the trigger for the civil conflict in the south and as the means through which violence was instrumentalised by Bakiyev clan leaders, behind the scenes power brokers, former advisors and security service loyalists and organized crime figures, to serve other ends.

According to the Kyrgyzstan's 2009 Census Report, "the Kyrgyz share in the total population has increased from 64,9 % in 1999 to 70,9% in 2009. The share of Uzbeks living in the country, in the total population has made up 14,3%, Russians – 7,8%..."³ Although ethnic Uzbeks only constitute a fraction of the total population, they form a majority in some southern provinces. These communities had historically coexisted together and cooperated, ethnic inter-marriage was high, Osh and Jalalabad residents



KYRGYZSTAN COMPLEX EMERGENCY



The boundaries and names used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the U.S. Government.

identified themselves more by city residence than ethnicity and many were bi- or tri-lingual (Kyrgyz, Uzbek and Russian speaking). Nevertheless, ethno-nationalist tendencies which under the Bakiyev regime resulted in a gradual 'Kyrgyzisation' of local government functions (school directors, hospital administrators, local government officers), while Uzbeks dominated economic structures. In addition to social stratification, the global financial crisis resulted in a reduction in remittance money and workers returning to the region from Russia, placing greater pressures on infrastructure and provisions.

Violence created a power vacuum and this served two ends. First, it provided the means through which the Bakiyev clan could reassert its control over the extremely lucrative drug trade flows in the south (see Box: *The Bakiyev Family-Vertical*). Osh and Jalalabad are major drug transit hubs where heroin is repackaged before being exported by plane, train, or land. The large and heterogeneous Bakiyev clan ('eight brothers and the eight brothers each with eight sons') was heavily implicated in drug trafficking. According to one analyst, "After Kurmanbek Bakiyev came to power, all drug lords were killed, and (his elder brother) Zhanybek Bakiyev consolidated most of the drug trafficking in his hands."⁴ President Bakiyev himself disbanded the relatively successful Drug Control Agency (part-funded by the UN and US) in October 2009, placing drugs policing under the Interior Ministry. The US State Department characterized this move as a "significant blow to regional counter-narcotics efforts."⁵

Second, violence served a political objective – namely to demonstrate that the interim government was not in control of the situation, and would have to postpone or cancel the planned referendum on 27 June to adopt a new Constitution underpinning a parliamentary rather than presidential republic. In May 2010 an unedited and unauthenticated 40 minute audio recording played on national TV (KTR), capturing an alleged conversation between Maxim and Janysh Bakiyev, stating the need to recruit 500 men to organize and ferment chaos – "We need to find 500 bastards."⁶ Pierre Morel, the EU Special Representative for the region, points his finger at a combination of Bakiyev clan members and loyalists

who made a "concerted effort" to provoke the clashes in a bid to regain power.⁷ The political analyst Mars Sariev unpicks the nature of this grouping in greater detail, noting that the violence boosted the emergence of a nascent political opposition to the interim government. This opposition consists of *siloviki* – former military and security generals who held high positions under Bakiyev. Omurbek Suvanaliev, a former interior minister and current leader of the Ata-Jurt Party based in southern Kyrgyzstan and Miroslav Niyazov, a former military general and current head of the EI Armany Party are cited as two prominent examples, and Sariev predicts: "As the state falls apart and destabilization continues, I think there could be a seizure of power."⁸

The political weakness of the interim government should not be overlooked, particularly its inability to exert authority over the Interior Ministry and army garrisons in the south, which human rights observers and Rosa Otunbayeva have accused of being complicit in attacks, robberies and violence: "We have been left with a demoralized police force, stuffed with Bakiyev personnel... We have security forces, many of whom joined one side in this conflict in the south."⁹ The interim government consists of an alliance of three formerly opposition parties and its authority is commensurate with its ability to take a united stance. Unfortunately, the glue that holds this alliance together is opposition to the ousted Bakiyev regime, particularly the former President himself and immediate family members, rather than a clear vision of Kyrgyzstan's future political order.

27 June 2010 Constitutional Referendum

Within this context, the constitutional referendum planned for 27 June 2010 went ahead. Rosa Otunbayeva argued that "Holding this referendum has become necessary because we must create a legal framework. If we allow any delays, this will threaten us with further instability."¹⁰ It must be held in order to address the Bakiyev legacy of "corruption, lawlessness and judicial arbitrariness" and "leave behind the Bakiyev constitution forever, which would again restore the former clannish and mafia-style pyramid of power."¹¹ Finance Minister Temir Sariev stated: "Canceling the referendum would mean success for those destructive forces. That's why the

Box: The Bakiyev Family-Vertical

Kurmanbek Bakiyev: 60, family leader, former President

Maksim Bakiyev: son, 33 years old, headed *Central Agency for Development, Investment and Innovation* – corrupt fuel sales, power generating companies privatized at knock-down prices

Janyshbek Bakiyev: brother, headed *Presidential Guard Service*, which on 7 April 2010 killed 84, wounded 1,000 in Bishkek – implicated in the drug trade

Akhmatbek Salievich Bakiyev: brother, informally called 'Khan' in Jalalabad region – implicated in drug trade

Marat Bakiyev: brother, was Ambassador to Germany and Norway, deputy head of Kyrgyz KGB successor agency

majority of the population demands the referendum proceed as planned, whatever the difficulties and moral issues involved. The fate of the state and the people is at stake.”¹²

The referendum was monitored by 189 international observers representing more than 30 countries and 18 international organizations (for example, CSTO, CIS, OSCE, SCO, ODHIR), plus 30 accredited foreign media outlets. More than 90% voted “yes”, and around 8% voted against it. Some 2.7 million people were eligible to vote, and turnout was nearly 70%.¹³ Despite this, Kamchybek Tashiyev, a prominent politician from southern Kyrgyzstan and a leader of the Ata Zhurt party and former Emergency Situations minister, predicted: “Kyrgyzstan is not yet prepared for the transition to a parliamentary form of government and needs strong presidential power. We are not ready for that even geopolitically,” arguing that “the leading political forces will not recognize the referendum results.”¹⁴ Other Bakiyev loyalists supported this contention. Zaynidin Kurmanov, ex-speaker of the *Jogorku Kenesh* (parliament), stated: “The holding of an illegitimate referendum, and as a result, the adoption of the illegitimate constitution of a parliamentary republic could result in an escalation of protest demonstrations.”¹⁵

Collective Security?

Rosa Otunbayeva reportedly invited the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) to intervene with peacekeepers on 12 June when the violence was at its height, but then redacted this invitation. These events have sparked serious debates as to the likelihood of an external intervention force – perhaps an UN-mandated peacekeeping mission and/or third party mediators that would form a political buffer zone. Kimmo Kiljunen, the Special Representative for Central Asia of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, raised the notion of an international police operation that would create an “atmosphere of trust” and enhance stabilization efforts.¹⁶ The crisis presents an opportunity to move beyond zero-sum logic into relationships based on multilateral cooperation, building trust, and addressing shared threats collectively.

Such interventions would aim to prevent localized violence from spreading and facilitate humanitarian crisis relief operations. Pierre Morel noted the potential spill-over effects: the situation is “difficult, very difficult, because apart from the future of the country, it puts into question the security and stability of the entire Central Asian region.”¹⁷ The potential to export strategic dysfunctionality is considered high and includes the following possible spill-over effects: the disruption of freight rail between Afghanistan and Uzbekistan exacerbates social tensions in Northern Afghanistan; Kyrgyzstan becomes a Uighur insurgent base, threatening stability in China’s neighbouring

Xinjiang province; and, the consolidation of an economic black hole in southern Kyrgyzstan dramatically increases drug transit and so HIV/AIDs in Russia/China.

However, arguments to counter intervention are powerful. Getting an intervention force into Kyrgyzstan would be easier than getting it out. The complex emergency looks set to represent a credibility trap and quagmire that is expensive, prolonged, and more than likely bloody. In a ‘war among the peoples’ (no borders or uniforms), intervention forces run the risk of being caught in the cross fire and disowned if the provisional government falls, and so perceived of as an occupying force, one that would be caught up in internal power struggles. For the CSTO a dilemma presents itself: to intervene risks failure; not to intervene brings into question its purpose and capability (in terms of resources, equipment and political will to enact collective security responsibilities through peacekeeping missions). Is the CSTO a Potemkin-like structure, designed to support imperial illusions (‘sphere of privileged interest’) but unable to withstand realities (‘sphere of reluctance’)? Current inaction undermines present credibility; future potential action would have the same effect, only accelerated.

The Lull Before the Storm?

Looking forward to the 10 October 2010 parliamentary elections – what is the prognosis? A coincidence of powerful internal drivers and the strategic preference of key regional actors all conspire to restore the *status quo ante*. The nexus between organized criminal groups, *siloviki* and former Bakiyev loyalist is strengthening, while the interim government is set, following the referendum, to fragment. Omurbek Tekebayev as deputy head of the interim government has already declared that he and the Ata-Meken Socialist Party would run in parliamentary elections, and so intends to resign on 10 July taking the acting Interior Minister Bolotbek Sherniyazov with him¹⁸ Will campaigning parties succumb to ethno-nationalism, with suspicion, hatred, fear and divisive revenge rhetoric predominant? According to Alik Orozov, Secretary of Security Council, a new round of violence could be triggered by the arrival of 15-20 gunmen in Bishkek. The deputy head of the Kyrgyz National Security Service, Sergey Bazhenov has noted: “Everywhere in Osh, there is a sign of a [possible] recurrence of the events. Therefore, we are taking every necessary measure to stabilize the situation, but I want to stress that the situation is very serious.”¹⁹

External Stakeholder Preferences?

External factors will also shape the strategic future of Kyrgyzstan. On 27 July a Donors Conference will take place in Bishkek, with the World Bank and IMF

represented amongst others, focusing on the need to address the humanitarian crisis (not least shelter and sanitation in refugee camps as Winter approaches). What will be the key message? Will donors conclude that although aid is needed, the absence of a credible impartial state authority operating in the south means that humanitarian efforts will be used to consolidate zero-sum clan based politics and so further instability and violence in region? If so, an important external stabilizing factor can be discounted.

When looking to regional actors we find Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Russia all favour super-presidential systems – likeminded, predictable and easy to negotiate with. Indeed, were a functioning effective Parliamentary democracy to emerge in Kyrgyzstan – with procedural and performance legitimacy – equating the status quo with stability would not be viable. Remarkably, President Medvedev himself has delegitimised the parliamentary process, noting that the referendum increased the possibility of state “degradation and, unfortunately and very likely, disintegration”.²⁰ The United States views Kyrgyzstan through the prism of operations in Afghanistan and the necessity of maintaining the integrity of the Bishkek-located Manas Air Transit Centre within the Northern Distribution Network. The United States did not offer comment on the result of the 23 July 2009 Presidential election when President Bakiyev received 80% of the vote in a rigged election – ‘stability first’ is clearly the dominant mantra. China views Central Asia through an economic prism and wants no disruptions to energy and mineral exports needed to feed Chinese consumption and underwrite internal Chinese stability.

A Power Grab?

Under such conditions, it is entirely possible that internal power-brokers could trigger new violence in order to seize power in the name of law and order and regional stability and with the tacit support of neighbours. This presupposes a prior agreed redistribution of strategic economic assets (in particular the drugs trade, control of customs posts and the Kara-Su and Dordoi markets that border Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan respectively),²¹ and the selection of a ‘strongman’ from the military or security services as the public face of the supposedly new order – in reality, the expression of the *status quo ante* where combinations of repression and clan pacts prove the most effective strategy for regime stability.

If no prior agreement can be reached, then internal instability continues. Persistent poverty and unemployment will hinder economic security; political repression, human rights violations will undermine political security; inter-ethnic, North-South and urban-rural tensions and grievances which have never been consistently and genuinely addressed will continue to be manipulated by local elites; the mismanagement and depletion of rather limited natural resources will be ongoing; the rule of law will remain a dream. Regional narratives linking instability with parliamentary processes will be validated, predictions of ‘Chaosistan’ – the Afghanization of Central Asia – will be further instrumentalised to ensure regime stability and elite continuity in neighboring states.

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NB: The views expressed in this paper are entirely and solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the GCSP.

¹ “UN agencies fear escalation in Kyrgyz ‘ethnic tinderbox’”, *Agence France Presse* (English), Geneva, 15 June 2010.

² “OSCE says attempted ethnic cleansing underway in Kyrgyzstan”, *Deutsche Presse-Agentur*, Vienna, 15 June 2010.

³ National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, “Main social and demographic characteristics of population and number of housing units”, in *Population and Housing Census of the Kyrgyz Republic of 2009*, Book 1, Bishkek, 2009, p.18.

⁴ P. Leonard, “Heroin trade a backdrop to Kyrgyz violence”, *Associated Press Worldstream*, Jalal-Abad, Kyrgyzstan, 24 June 2010; F. Weir, “Kyrgyzstan failure could boost Afghan drug trade, Islamist radicals”, *The Christian Science Monitor*, 25 June 2010.

⁵ P. Leonard, *op.cit.*

⁶ “Recordings of telephone conversations with voices of famous individuals posted on YouTube”, *AKIpress News Agency*, Kyrgyzstan, 20 May 2010; N. Meo and R. Orange, “Princeling and the revolution: A tape recording allegedly shows that the son of the deposed Kyrgyz leader planned the recent wave of ethnic violence in a bid to seize power”, *The Sunday Telegraph*, London, 20 June 2010, p. 30.

⁷ “EU Envoy Warns of Regional Risk from Kyrgyz Instability”, *Radio Free Europe*, 23 June 2010.

⁸ “As Kyrgyzstan Prepares for Referendum, Government Faces Predictions of Collapse”, *Radio Free Europe*, 24 June 2010.

⁹ D. Solovyov, “4 die in raid by Kyrgyz security forces; Rights groups says soldiers beat villagers”, *The Gazette*, Montreal, Osh, Kyrgyzstan, 22 June 2010, p. 19A; “Kyrgyz police officers, soldiers accused of marauding in Kyrgyz southern city”, 24.kg website, Bishkek (in Russian), 24 June 2010.

¹⁰ D. Solovyov, “4 die in raid by Kyrgyz security forces; Rights groups says soldiers beat villagers”, *op.cit.*; “Interim leader notes importance of constitutional referendum for Kyrgyzstan”, *Kyrgyz Television 1*, Bishkek (in Russian), 22 June 2010.

¹¹ “Kyrgyz interim leader urges nation to back new constitution in Sunday referendum”, *Kyrgyz Television 1*, Bishkek (in Russian), 24 June 2010.

- ¹² "As Kyrgyzstan Prepares for Referendum, Government Faces Predictions of Collapse", *Radio Free Europe*, June 24, 2010.
- ¹³ S. Shuster, "Kyrgyzstan endorses new constitution; New constitution strips power from the president and gives more authority to parliament", globeandmail.com, 28 June 2010.
- ¹⁴ "Kyrgyz politician expects constitutional referendum to fail", *Interfax news agency*, Moscow (in Russian), 26 June 2010.
- ¹⁵ V. Panfilova, "Kyrgyzstan is continuing to arm: the referendum could result in an escalation of the conflict in the republic", *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* website, Moscow (in Russian), 25 June 2010, p 6; J. Lillis, "Kyrgyz leaders urged to halt 'illegitimate' referendum", *The Independent*, London, 25 June 2010.
- ¹⁶ "Thousands of Refugees Returning as Kyrgyzstan Prepares for Referendum", *Radio Free Europe*, 23 June 2010.
- ¹⁷ "EU Envoy Warns of Regional Risk from Kyrgyz Instability", *Radio Free Europe*, 23 June 2010.
- ¹⁸ "Kyrgyz deputy interim leader to resign after referendum", *AKIpress news agency* website, Bishkek (in Russian), 27 June 2010.
- ¹⁹ "Top Kyrgyz security officer warns of recurrence of ethnic violence", *Kyrgyz Radio First* programme, Bishkek (in Russian), 25 June 2010.
- ²⁰ "Election in Kyrgyzstan must form proper government – Medvedev", *Russia & CIS Military Newswire*, 25 June 2010. In response, the interim government's deputy leader Omurbek Tekebayev stated: "Some top officials from different states have spoken about a possible Afghanization of Kyrgyzstan, about a break-up of the state. I mean the statements by President Dmitry Medvedev and others. It is possible they have been misinformed, that they blindly believe the officials from their special services who have long been at the service of the local oligarchs." "Kyrgyzstan slams Russia over 'Afghanization' fears", *Agence France Presse* (English), 27 June 2010.
- ²¹ E. Marat, "Criminalization of the Kyrgyz State before and after the Tulip Revolution", *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 2008, pp. 15-22.

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