

Peace Building in Osh, Kyrgyzstan

The Role of Local Actors in Context of Political Hybridity

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1 Introduction

“In Kyrgyzstan, the people live on a different planet than their government.” With these words, a local friend from Bishkek, who works for a UN agency, described the current political situation in her homeland, a situation where the state and its institutions are to a certain degree alienated from the majority of its citizens.

This paper will defend the discourse on hybrid political orders as an analytic concept while applying it in the post-conflict context of southern Kyrgyzstan. Contrariwise to the perception of the mainstream discourse on failed states, local realities in contexts of a weak national state are not seen as a void of governance but as being filled with other institutions that provide governance on a local level (Boege et al, 2009a). Boege et al. remind us that “State fragility discourse and state-building policies are oriented towards the western-style Weberian/Westphalian state. Yet this form of statehood hardly exists in reality beyond the OECD world” (2009a: 16). They therefore argue that the concept of hybrid political order, while taking on a more positive outlook on these societies, brings a reconceptualization that opens a focus on new ways of conflict transformation and peace building.

Based on the concept of hybrid political order, this paper will argue that in order to build sustainable peace, it is necessary to (re-)establish a social contract that is based on local realities of governance but where the interaction of different institutions is based on strong cooperation.

In order to test the relevance of this hypothesis in the context of southern Kyrgyzstan, this working paper will follow the questions:

- Who are the actors involved in local governance?
- How do they differ in capacity and legitimacy?
- How do they interact?

The findings in this working paper are based on ten weeks of field research in Kyrgyzstan between March and May 2011. In this time, up to fifty interviews were conducted, of which a majority in Osh.

Care was taken to include respondents from different ethnicities, gender and age into the research. Additionally, observations of daily life situations were of value in order to assess the information given in the interviews.

In line with the research proposal the focus of the research was on the situation in the city of Osh. This focus was chosen because Osh was most affected by the violence in June 2011 and it has an important role as the second biggest city of Kyrgyzstan and is sometimes even referred to as the southern capital. However, the situation in Osh is strongly linked to developments on national level and on local level in surrounding rural areas: two factors that played an important role in the emergence of violence.

Most of the interviews were carried out with the help of an interpreter. The presence of this third person naturally changed the setting of the interview. It can be remarked that age and sex of an interpreter influenced the answers of respondents more than his or her ethnicity.

Due to an early deadline, the findings in this working paper are not based on an evaluation of the full data generated. Accordingly, some issues and points that are raised cannot be answered in this paper but must end, at this stage of the data assessment, with an open question.

2 Hybrid Political Order

In the past few years, the academic and policy oriented debate over peace building and conflict resolution set an important focus on the nexus between violent conflict and the performance of states. Out of the notion that state fragility strongly correlates with the risk of violent conflict, a state fragility discourse emerged that dominates current international security policy of donors, the World Bank and UN agencies (Fischer and Schmelzle, 2009).

However, this mainstream discourse has also raised critique from different sides. One of these critiques was formulated by Volker Boege and his colleagues, working at the University of Queensland in Australia. They argue that the state fragility discourse has a too state-centric view on realities in the global south, where it neglects the cultural context of societies (Boege et al., 2009a). The Weberian/Westphalian state model, which is the point of reference of the state fragility discourse, hardly exists outside the OECD world. While in Europe, state building was a process that took centuries and included years of war, destruction and bloodshed to result in today's states, this model of statehood was implemented in a short period of time in other contexts during the process of colonisation and decolonisation. The result was the emergence, after decolonisation, of a number of states that lacked roots in their societies and, as a consequence, were nothing more than hollow

shells (Boege et al., 2008). As a result of this, new states that emerged after decolonisation lack legitimacy and capacity and are alienated from their people and society.

Even though Kyrgyzstan was never colonised, being a part of the Soviet Union was a similar experience and since its independence the country is searching for a new identity and for a form of governance that is suitable to Kyrgyzstan's context. The International Crisis Group warned after the revolution in 2005, that replaced former president Askar Akayev with Kurmanbek Bakiyev, that Kyrgyzstan was on the edge of becoming a failed state (ICG, 2005). This situation has definitely not become more stable throughout last year that brought another rebellion leading to a new government and a violent conflict in the south of the country.

The concept of hybrid political order argues that in the absence of a state there is not anarchy. In contrast, these voids of power from the national state are filled with local institutions that determine every day live. Such local institutions and structures are far more important for local people than the concept of a nation state, which is experienced as being in a far distance or even as hampering social development (Boege et al., 2009a).

As an analytic concept, the strength of hybrid political order is its broad perspective that includes, besides the state structures, the role of actors from the realm of customary institutions and civil society (Boege et al., 2009a). It is not the aim of the authors to reject the notion of the state but to set it on the same level as other actors that contribute to governance. This opens the spectrum for analysis that goes beyond state-centrism.

Hybrid political order is an analytic concept, not a normative goal (Boege et al., 2009b). It is not the intention of the authors to display states as negative and hybrid political orders as positive or even as an alternative to the state. Hybrid political order is an analytic concept focusing on local realities that exist now and that differ to a large extent from systems of governance in Western states.

The authors acknowledge that there can be severe problems in hybrid political orders but there are also situations where they work and provide security and peace. It is the aim to analyse hybrid political orders more closely to find out why they are working or why they are not. As Boege et al. formulate it: "The basic question is in what direction developments go – whether hybrid political orders ... can constitute a political community that provides security, peace and a framework for the nonviolent conduct of conflicts." (2009b: 88).

Boege et al. divided the actors with potential for local governance in three sectors: state institutions, civil society and customary institutions (Boege, 2008). With customary institutions the authors refer to institutions that are indigenous to a society, in contrast to Western societal structures. Boundaries

between customary institutions and societal structures are not clear-cut but are instead in a process of constant exchange, adaptation and transformation.

While Boege and his colleagues consider state institutions as one entity, it seems to make more sense in the context of Osh to divide the state into the realm of the national state and the local government, the Osh municipality. Paying attention to the recent historical developments the local government is far more perceived by the population as an independent actor than representing the national state. While the mayor, Melis Myrzakmatov was imposed under the presidency of Bakiyev, the interim government under Rosa Otunbaeva tried to dismiss him in August as a result of his attitude that undermined the new government (Melvin, 2011). This attempt failed, also because Myrzakmatov was and is strongly supported by the citizens of Osh.

3 The situation in southern Kyrgyzstan

The June Events

Klem and Frerks argue that: “violent conflict occurs when the system to moderate and balance the various interests in society has failed to such an extent that a critical number of individuals or groups ignore this system altogether, and resort to violence to further their own interests” (2008). This describes very clearly the situation in Kyrgyzstan in June 2010.

Even though the conflict in June broke out on ethnic lines between the Kyrgyz and Uzbek community, there was no evidence found supporting the thesis of an ancient hatred that resulted in these violent clashes. In contrast, in mixed communities interethnic friendships, work relations and even family ties outlived the violence and its aftermath.

This paper argues that it was not as much a lack of trust between the two communities but a lack of trust in the state structures from the side of the population that resulted in the clashes. The general situation of a lack of legitimacy of the national government was, in context of last spring, underpinned through the rebellion that ousted Bakiyev. This particularly influenced the situation in the south, where Bakiyev’s family was from and where he was supported most (Matveeva, 2010).

In the current situation in Osh, we can speak of a negative peace, as Galtung defined it, where violence is absent, but the root causes of the conflict are not resolved (Klem and Frerks, 2008). In order to reach positive peace, implying a system that is able to manage conflicts in a nonviolent way, it is necessary to re-establish a social contract as defined by Klem and Frerks as: “a metaphor for the generally accepted convention that describes and prescribes the system through which a society

strikes a balance between the particular interests of all its members as well as between individual interests and the interest of the society as a whole” (2008: 50).

The current situation in Osh – a hybrid political order?

The current situation in Osh is determined by the violent events of last June. While the situation between the two ethnic communities is slowly normalizing, other power relations and relations of influence have changed. Like the revolution in 2005, also the overthrowing of the president in 2010 and especially the following June events can be seen as, what Lupsha called, a “window of opportunity”, which allowed actors to gain (or also loose) political influence (Kupatadze, 2008: 283).

The extended family is the strongest entity and support network in Uzbek and Kyrgyz society. Also structures of respect for older people and men over women are important. Especially older men, who are called aksakals, enjoy a lot of respect and have influence beyond their family to an extent that they can rule in so called aksakal-courts over issues in their communities such as divorce.

On a local level, communities are further organised by street-leaders. These informal leaders are entitled to issue a proof of residence for people living in their community and are also strongly involved in solving local problems in their communities. After the June Events, they were involved to a large extent in distributing humanitarian aid, as international organisations depended on their cooperation in order to assess the need of the people and relied on their assistance for distributing humanitarian aid. Through this work their position and influence became stronger.

Another feature of these informal leaders is their function as mediators with state structures or institutions. If people encounter a problem they turn first to their street leader or aksakal. When possible, problems are solved on the local level. In the case, where an interaction with state structures is needed, it is often the street-leader who facilitates this interaction as a mediator. This is the case since they are experienced as much closer than state actors. Street-leaders entertain relations with the people on a personal level, are often less corrupt than state institutions and their work is not bound on office hours.

Kyrgyzstan has a very active and strong civil society. This is reflected in the large number of civil society organisations that are working in and around Osh. These public funds and NGOs are working in different fields, such as human rights, youth, conflict resolution, but also in fields related to the improvement of infrastructure. These local organisations are largely supported by international donors for programmes towards conflict resolution, peace building or even capacity building of local

self-governance and monitoring of state structures. In this situation it is no surprise that civil society organisations often show more capacities than state structures.

As mentioned earlier, the legitimacy of the national state is very weak. On many occasions people explained their opinion of the national state in words such as: “They [the members of parliament] have their problems and deal with their problems and we have our problems and we deal with our problems.” With these words a Kyrgyz citizen of Osh explained the situation. The statement shows how alienated the national government (referred to as “they”) is, from “us” the people. Additionally, he said that the deputies only “work for their own pockets”. This situation did not change with the new government. People feel actually that corruption on the national level became even worse under the interim government. This high level of corruption undermines the legitimacy and capacity of the state on all levels.

Additionally, this feeling of mistrust in southern Kyrgyzstan is accompanied by a feeling that Bishkek and the national government are far away from local realities. The overthrow of Bakiyev was not actively supported in the south. This lack of support for the interim government became manifest in the commemoration of its first anniversary at 7 April 2011. While the national government announced this day as a day of grief for the people who lost their lives in the April uprising, the Osh municipality announced that in Osh people should commemorate the victims of the June violence. This is even more remarkable since some people in Osh see the interim government and the president as directly responsible for the June Events.

The local government shares the low level of capacity and high level of corruption with all state structures, but it is interesting to note that the legitimacy of the mayor, Melis Myrzakmatov is very high. He is supported by a lot of people from different ethnic communities. As a reason for their support for him, people told me repeated that he “cleaned the city”, “planted flowers” and “built fountains and parks”. It remains here a question, why people support the mayor out of these irrational reasons but it can be remarked that legitimacy is often not bound on institutions but on a specific person. In general, as in the case of the mayor of Osh, it is not the institution that is trusted but the person.

The Perception of Security Forces as a Threat: an Illustration

The dominant conflict in Osh that still remains until today is between Uzbek communities and the law enforcement bodies of the state. While these institutions have always been corrupt, corruption

changed with the June Events: ethnic minorities were overwhelmingly targeted and the level of corruption increased.

After the June Events, arbitrary arrests happened on a daily basis. It were often young Uzbek men who were arrested, accused of having been involved in the June violence and released after they paid a bribe. Not all Uzbek communities were evenly targeted by this arbitrary demeanour of police officers. These events currently still happen but they have become less. This development can be seen in context of a general normalization of the situation in Osh.

Besides arbitrary arrests, Uzbek communities also fear illegal house searches at night time and harassment of migrant workers at the customs control at Osh airport. These Uzbek migrant workers who come back home from Russia are forced to pay arbitrary taxes to the customs control. In this situation, the law enforcement bodies of the state are perceived by targeted communities as a threat to personal security.

In this situation is the local government unwilling or unable to play a role in conflict transformation and this, additionally undermines the legitimacy of the state structures. In one community, a group of street-leaders told me that they had written a letter to the municipality about these issues and asked for help but they never received an answer. These people moreover, reported that they are afraid to go to the municipality by themselves and to complain about the situation. "We are afraid to go there and talk to them about these things, because, after some days, the police men can come to your house."

With the political institutions not addressing this conflict, informal leaders implemented mechanisms on micro level in order to protect citizens. Street-leaders informed the citizens of their area that in case of a problem with the police, they should call their street-leaders. Street-leaders on their side would call people in higher positions and then everyone should gather with the police. By gathering such a large number of informed people immediately, they would try to solve the problem in a transparent way and in front of everyone.

Also a number of human rights organisations and activists are working on this conflict. In coordination with the OSCE, a booklet was printed that listed ten organisations working on human rights, which included a short description and telephone numbers in order for people to know who to turn to in situations where their rights are violated. These organisations assist people with information, counselling and mediation with the police and other state structures.

A further dangerous dynamic of this conflict is the attitude of Kyrgyz citizens towards it. While all Uzbek respondents at least heard of these issues, several Kyrgyz people interviewed denied that

these things happen. Moreover, one respondent, who worked himself for an NGO involved in conflict resolution, got very emotional after touching on this subject. He took on the stand that this was a lie spread by Uzbeks and that these things do not happen. This is a very dangerous dynamic in a still very volatile situation between the two ethnic communities. It deepens the gulf between them while in the current situation rebuilding trust is so important for preventing further conflict.

4 Uzgen; how a hybrid political order prevented violent conflict

Further insight in the understanding of how a hybrid political order can “...constitute a political community that provides security, peace and a framework for the nonviolent conduct of conflicts” (Boege et al., 2009b: 88) brings an analysis of the situation in Uzgen during the days of violence of June 2010.

Uzgen is a small town that lies between Osh and Jalalabad at the main Osh-Bishkek highway in southern Kyrgyzstan. While, during these days in June 2010, violence sparked in Osh, Jalalabad and some other smaller places, the situation in Uzgen town and also in the surrounding areas that belong to Uzgen raion (district) remained stable.

As the deputy mayor of town explained me, in these days it was not the situation that Osh and Jalalabad were “hot” and Uzgen was “cold”. In Uzgen itself, an escalation was immanent; however the joined effort of all institutions and leaders of the society was able to prevent violence from breaking out.

After news of the events in Osh reached Uzgen at 2 am in the night of June 11th, the city administration gathered all people with influence including aksakals, quarter leaders, representatives of youth groups, deputies and civil society organisations at 3 am. Throughout the night, they established contacts to the village administrations in Uzgen raion, and called them and other informal leaders to come to Uzgen.

In a joint effort they stated to patrol in the city and the raion in order to reach out to the people, to explain to them the situation and to advise them to stay at home. These operations were carried on for four days. This work included a special focus on addressing the youth and to disprove spreading rumours that Kyrgyz from outside were ready to attack Uzgen that was overwhelmingly populated by Uzbeks.

These efforts that included informal leaders, religious leaders, civil society organisations, the administration and deputies were carried out under the command of the Uzgen mayor’s office. As

the deputy mayor described it: “They worked in parallel. The first group went to the villages and the second group was working in the city. This centre [the city administration] was the resource centre, we coordinated all the actions, all the information was coming here.”

In the situation of Uzgen, it was a strong coordination of all actors involved in local governance under the leading role of the local government that consolidated in a system that was strong enough to prevent violent conflict. Moreover, it needs to be remarked that Uzgen had received training and assistance in conflict mediation since the town had experienced a violent interethnic conflict in 1990. The OSCE and local NGOs worked in Uzgen with state institutions and informal leaders on ways of conflict mediation that influenced their capacity to react to the June Events.

5 Conclusion

This paper defended hybrid political order as a valuable analytic tool to grasp and assess local realities of governance that differ from the western-model of statehood. In overcoming the state-centric view of the failed state discourse it was possible to capture informal ways of governance and pay attention to the potential of informal leaders in conflict transformation.

In contrast to the state structures, other institutions have a higher level of legitimacy and capacity. The first and most important point of reference are informal institutions such as street-leaders. In this context different realms of governance interact in various ways. Informal leaders have in many aspects the role of bridging the gap between the population and its government or replace state institutions.

In the specific situation, where security forces are perceived as a threat to personal security, informal leaders and especially street-leaders have a great potential for conflict transformation. The question remains if their role and especially their capacity and efficiency would stay on the same level if the context changes. Further analysis is needed on the power relations that work on them, that determine their capacity and legitimacy, and their resilience to change.

As the case of Uzgen showed, a strong cooperation of all realms of local governance is essential for a framework that has the capacity to resolve disputes non-violently. I would argue that the role of a lead institution is needed in order to guarantee this cooperation. In Uzgen, it was the local government that took up this role. At this point it has to remain a question if this role is necessarily or ideally filled by state structures or if also other institutions could be strong enough to guarantee this cooperation.

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