

**Exploring Inter-Ethnic Trust and Distrust Generation in Central Asia: Examining
Attitudes Towards Kyrgyzstani State Officials in Uzbek Communities**

Brent Hierman

**Ph.D. Candidate, Indiana University
Bloomington, Indiana, USA**

**Visiting Research Fellow, Social Research Center
American University of Central Asia, Bishkek Kyrgyzstan**

In my previous report to the American University of Central Asia's Social Research Center, I briefly introduced a theoretical framework for examining the generation of inter-ethnic trust and distrust in Central Asia. In that paper, I proposed that one of the factors contributing to inter-ethnic trust and distrust generation is attitudes towards and trust in state officials and institutions. In this second report, I provide some initial analyses of focus group responses to questions about individual attitudes towards the President and towards Kyrgyzstani legal authorities. The focus groups were conducted in four predominately Uzbek communities in southern Kyrgyzstan. A total of eight focus groups were conducted; both a male and a female group were held in each community. There were between 5-10 respondents in each group and they were all held between January 31, 2008 and February 25, 2008. These focus groups are not intended to be necessarily representative of each of the communities. Instead, they are meant to shed light on how certain beliefs are described, justified and discussed in a (albeit somewhat contrived) social setting¹.

This report is composed of three sections. The first section details the criteria used to select the four communities. The second section describes responses to a question that asked the participants to compare the presidency of Kurmanbek Bakiev to the presidency of Askar Akaev. The third section examines participants' responses to questions that asked them to describe their level of trust in the courts and the police.

¹ In order to be able to speak with more confidence about the predominance of certain attitudes in the different communities, I am also conducting a survey in each community.

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Community Selection:

Each of my four selected communities has the following three characteristics:

- 1) Each community has between 250-550 households.
- 2) Each community is described as having a population that is at least 90% ethnically Uzbek.
- 3) Each community is relatively easy to get to by car under normal road conditions.

The process of selecting my communities had two distinct phases. The first phase involved consultation of data from the 1999 National Census of the Kyrgyz Republic, as well as demographic data collected by local authorities. While the data from the 1999 census is certainly outdated, it did provide a general rubric for determining which communities *may* have possessed the characteristics I was interested in. The second phase involved visiting 25 communities in both urban and rural areas² and conducting over 30 interviews with local elites³. These interviews were conducted in part to get more accurate demographic data for the various communities. Based on the information I received from these interviews I was able to select my four communities. **Table 1** provides details about each of my communities, although the names of the communities (or the *okrug/aiyl kenesh* in which they are located) are not listed

Table 1: Details of Selected Communities

Oblast	Town Kenesh/Rayon	Number of Households	Percentage Uzbek
Osh	Osh City	522	100%
	Aravan Rayon	400	95%
Jalalabad	Jalalabad City	420	99%
	Suzak Rayon	386	98%

² In urban areas, I was visiting quartiles (segments of distinct districts), and in rural areas I was visiting villages.

³ I conducted an interview with the community leader (*aiyl boshi/dom kom*) in nearly all of communities that I visited. In rural areas, additional interviews were conducted with *aiyl okmotu* representatives; in urban areas additional interviews were conducted with both *okrug* representatives and with representatives of mayors' offices.

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Presidential Preferences:

The conventional wisdom holds that because many ethnic Uzbek elites had close relations with Askar Akaev that were severed during the events of the Tulip Revolution, ethnic Uzbeks are generally resistant to the presidency of Kurmanbek Bakiev (cf. Fumagalli 2007, Khamidov 9/28/2006) . While my focus group results (summarized in **Table 2**) do not negate this assumption, they do suggest the need to qualify it somewhat. The table below clearly indicates an urban-rural split; while urban groups universally preferred the Akaev regime, three out of four rural groups preferred either Bakiev's presidency or had no clear preference.

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Table 2: Attitudes Towards Akaev and Bakiyev

Location of Community		Presidential Regime Preference	Economic Issues Cited as Justification	Ethnic Issues Cited as Justification
Aravan	Men	Bakiev	X	O
Rayon	Women	No Preference ⁴	O	O
Suzak	Men	Bakiev	X	O
Rayon	Women	Akaev	O	X
Jalalabad	Men	Akaev	X	X
City	Women	Akaev	X	X
Osh City	Men	Akaev	X	X
	Women	Akaev	X	X ⁵

Key: X = mentioned, O = not mentioned

Six of the seven groups that expressed a clear preference for one president or the other cited economic reasons for their preference. That is to say, economic growth or the lack thereof was used to justify the preferences of groups that preferred Bakiev *and* groups that preferred Akaev.

The two rural men’s groups cited positive economic developments under Bakiev’s regime; the following exchange comes from the men in Suzak Rayon:

Oybek⁶: *Compared to how it was during the Akaev era, life is better now.*

Sherzod: *During the Akaev regime everything was broken up and destroyed. The government and economy was a mess. It is only now starting to be put back together.*

Mansur: *During Akaev's time we didn't have tea at school; now we have tea and coffee at school.*

Oybek: *That is right.*

Sherzod: *It is not only tea, now we have computers, and more funding.*

It is important to note that earlier in this focus group conversation, a fourth man had stated that:

⁴ The women were agnostic about which era was better. They agreed that “for us the presidents are the same.”

⁵ There was debate about whether the ethnic situation had indeed gotten worse. One woman denied that it had, while two others asserted that it had worsened.

⁶ All of the names used throughout this report are made-up to mask the identity of my respondents.

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Bohodir: *The president has family who used to live near here, and that is why our conditions are good. For instance, I have traveled outside this area and seen other villages. Compared to other villages, our conditions are better. Unlike us, they don't have any help or assistance from the government or state leaders.*

Similar to the Suzak group, the men's group in Aravan Rayon cited the positive impact of the Bakiev regime on their community's economic conditions:

Jasur: *Things have improved.*

Hasan: *Under Bakiev, material conditions have improved. We are making more money through trade. We can send many of our products to Bishkek. The new road allows both Kyrgyz and Uzbek people to sell their wares in Bishkek. There was more bribery and corruption during the Akaev era. Here over the past 2 years there have been many changes.*

Earlier in this conversation, the group had mentioned that they had had a particularly good harvest the previous fall.

Those that cited poor economic conditions to explain their preference of Akaev's regime over Bakiev's were less prone to cite specific policies that impacted their community than they were to mention high rates of unemployment and inflation. This is illustrated in the following two passages.

From the Jalalabad women's group:

Yulduz: *Under Akaev we had factories and places to work. Now, they have all closed. Now, more and more people need to trade things. They need to work in the bazaar.*

....

Jamila: *Everything has become much more expensive.*

Nur: *I think that throughout the country things have gotten worse. This is the reason that so many people need to go to Russia to work. Even though they sometimes can*

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return to their homes here, they will always need to fly back to Russia to make more money. They can't stay here.

Yulduz: *Men are forced to live alone and this is destroying families. For instance, I have heard that some men secretly have wives in Russia and here.*

From the Osh men's group:

Alisher: *The Bakiev era is much worse. Gas used to be 17 som a liter, now it is 26 som. A bag of flour was 800 som, now it is 1500.*

The discrepancy in attitudes towards the economic conditions under the two regimes suggests that urban and rural areas may have had drastically different economic experiences in recent years. It is striking that all four urban groups cited worsening general economic conditions while none of the rural groups expressed any economic complaints. In fact, two rural groups underscored recent economic improvements in their community.

Unlike the economic justification for preferring one president's regime over the other, there is no variation between groups that cited ethnic relations as a justification for preferring a specific regime; every group that cited ethnic relations in order to explain their preference preferred Akaev. One group, the women's group in Suzak Rayon (which is the only rural group to clearly prefer Akaev) explained their preference entirely by describing their perception of worsening ethnic relations. The following passage documents part of this group's reasoning:

Gulnora: *From the time Bakiev became president, nationalism has increased.*

Nigora: *That is right. What was it that happened in the schools?*

Rohat: *I am a teacher, I can explain. The government tried to reduce the number of hours we could teach Uzbek in our schools. They wanted to increase the hours of Kyrgyz language. However, this caused teachers to get upset and demand that this policy be reversed. Because of the teachers' complaints, we got the hours back*

Nigora: *Yes, for this reason the Akaev period was better.*

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The men from Osh city were more emphatic in their description of nationalism under Bakiev's presidency:

Davron: *Recently everything has changed 100% for the worse. We are under constant pressure now. Under the last president we had more freedom; there were far fewer national problems and there was less overt nationalism. Under the current president, these problems are becoming more and more serious every day. For example, it is compulsory in schools to learn Kyrgyz language, to learn about Kyrgyz history and literature. To make this happen, they have reduced the time to teach Uzbek history and literature*

Salim: *Here is another example; there was an Uzbek political party⁷. It was established with only Uzbek members. The election committee declared that the party couldn't register.*

Davron: *But the reason for this was never openly stated. The local news and the national news didn't report on it. The reason I think they couldn't run for office is because the party was formed by important Uzbek leaders.*

Anvar: *The arrogance of the state's leaders has increased. In the near future there will be a war- nothing else can be said. We are being squeezed and deformed. This is what everyone is saying.*

Trust in Legal Authorities

A recent survey contracted by the OSCE measuring public attitudes towards police officers in the city of Osh found that 76% of respondents disagreed with the statement that the "police treats everybody equally" and 63% of respondents agreed with the statement that the "Police serves to those [sic] who offer money or other favors." (OSCE Report, 2006, 26). In my focus groups, I probed the respondent's levels of trust in both the police and the court system⁸. The results of my focus group (summarized in **Table 3** below) are largely congruent with the findings from the OSCE survey.

Table 3: Attitudes toward Criminal Justice System

⁷ This is in reference to the political party, *Rodina*.

⁸ The OSCE survey did not have an item measuring trust in the court system.

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Location of Community		Trust in Courts	Trust in Police	Corruption Cited as justification for level of trust	Ethnicity Cited as justification for level of trust
Aravan	Men	Low	Low	X	O
Rayon	Women	High	Indifferent	O	O
Suzak Rayon	Men	Low	Indifferent	X	O
	Women	Low	Indifferent	X	O
Jalalabad City	Men	Low	Low	X	O
	Women	Low	Low	X	O
Osh City	Men	Low	Low	X	X
	Women	Low	Low	O	X

Key: X = mentioned, O = not mentioned

As depicted in this table, the groups expressed nearly universally low levels of trust in both the police and the courts of Kyrgyzstan. Three rural groups were coded as indifferent towards police because of their reported low level of contact with police officers. For example, when asked how often they call the police, respondents in the women's group in Suzak Rayon stated:

Gulnora: *We never call the police. They have no business here.*

Nigora: *No, we never call them.*

Q: *How often are the police seen here?*

Nigora: *You didn't understand what we said. They are never here. The police never come to our village.*

Gulnora: *They come maybe once time a year. That is it. Only one time a year.*

Dilnoza: *The people here solve our own problems. That is better anyway.*

Gulnora: *If some crime occurs here, we would call our oq soqollar⁹ and our community leaders. They would resolve the problem.*

Rohat: *But no crime occurs here. All of our things are open to the street, and nothing disappears¹⁰.*

⁹ Respected older men.

¹⁰ This woman was referring to the house where the focus group was being held. It was a fairly new construction, and had not yet been gated. Only curtains separated the compound from the street.

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Nigora: *But if crime did occur, we would follow our community leaders. For instance, if someone came here with a reputation for acquiring things through stealing, no one would employ him. He would have no work.*

The men's group from Aravan Rayon also reported infrequent interactions with the police. As the passage below indicates, this group reported that the community had even tried to construct institutional arrangements under which circumstances when police needed to be called would be even less frequent. However, this group reports that this effort was thwarted.

Jasur: *In our community, robbers tried nine times to steal a cow, they were successful six times. No one has found the robber. In fact, the crime wasn't even investigated. If we make our case to the policemen, they will just sit and talk to their co-workers, rather than help us. If a police officer comes out here, we will need to pay for the gas, and pay for to host them¹¹. After all that, the police won't find anything.*

Q: *So it seems that you solve criminal matters yourself, and it seems that you don't get help from the police, is that right?*

Jasur: *We suggested that we could solve small crimes ourselves, such as by introducing a fine that robbers would need to pay if they are caught, but the police did not appreciate our suggestions.*

Hasan: *Now if a crime happens the police will round up a bunch of people, label them suspects, beat them, threaten them, take their money and then find them guilty of a crime whether they did it or not.*

Jasur: *You can say that ordinarily we don't rely on courts or police. We know that won't find justice through them.*

Q: *So if you don't take rely on the police, how do you solve them?*

G'ayrat: *We would like to solve them ourselves, but they will not permit us to do so. They have made it obligatory for us to call them.¹²*

¹¹ Earlier in the discussion the group addressed some of the structural factors that impeded police efforts, such as an imbalanced police-to-citizen ratio and insufficient budgetary allotments.

¹² This group did admit that they had instituted *posbonlar* (security guards) to patrol the streets. The men and women of the village in Suzak Rayon also hired guards to secure their community and their fields.

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This preference to at least solve minor crimes internally without involving the judicial system was expressed by respondents in nearly every group. For example, when asked whether they relied on the police, the women in Jalalabad said:

Nur: *It depends on the sort of crime. If it is a big crime then we will call the police. If on the other hand, a chicken is stolen, we will solve it ourselves.*

Q: *Do the police come here often?*

Yulduz: *Only when we call them. And we don't do that often. We don't even know who the officials are at the police station.*

Nur: *That is right. We don't. I don't even think that the men who live here know. And if the police do come to investigate a crime, they will never find what they are looking for. If you have had something stolen, they will not find it. They'll tell you "It was fated that way." That is how they explain to you why they can't find what they are looking for. If you want them to actually find stolen items you'll need to give money to the police. Then they may find it.*

Q: *Do you trust the courts in Kyrgyzstan?*

Jamila: *No*

Nur: *No*

Muhabbat: *No. They are not just!*

Yulduz: *They only demand money.*

Nur: *They are not truthful. For a price they will say anything.*

While corruption was widely cited in the different groups as the main reason for distrusting the behavior of the courts and (to a lesser degree) the police, the men's and women's groups of the city of Osh justified their lack of trust in the police and court system partially as a result of their perception of ethnic discrimination. This is evident in the following passage from the women's group:

Dildora: *Currently, we don't trust the police at all. What type of problem could they resolve? What could they do for us?*

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Saida: *We don't know who really solves criminal matters in this community. Although, generally we rely on some of the oq soqollar¹³; we bring our problems to them. We never bring our problems to the police. The reason is that the police is almost all Kyrgyz. We are Uzbek. The nationalities are divided and we can't trust them.*

Ethnicity is clearly salient in the responses from the men's group as well. For example:

Malik: *Here in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbeks can never be a member of the police. I was even trained as a policeman, but I can't get a job. Why is that, do you think?*

Salim: *It is because of Nazism.*

Nurriden: *In the whole republic, only Kyrgyz men can become police officers. This is completely unjust. Even though Uzbeks are 16% of the population, there are no Uzbek police officers.*

Shuhrat: *Not only that, but they also beat us and harass us. They are not humane.*

Salim: *Here is an example: I needed to resolve a problem with my father's pension. It seems that his documents had disappeared in Bishkek. I found them all again. I went one day, and they told me that they needed to see his passport. The next day, they claimed to need another document. Every day I went they placed a new obstacle in front of me. Finally, I brought all the documents to the prosecutor I was dealing with. He was a true nazi. He cursed my father and I and called us sarts¹⁴. He was laughing as he said it. With this one word he destroyed any possibility of justice.*

Davron: *This is the side that the police and the courts support.*

While the groups in the city of Osh reported being mistreated by legal authorities because of their ethnicity, respondents in other communities denied that ethnicity played a role in determining the misbehavior of the legal authorities. The following passage is from the women's group in Jalalabad:

¹³ Older respected leaders.

¹⁴ Pejorative term that is considered very insulting for Uzbeks.

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Nur: *The courts do not behave differently to different people. If you are Kyrgyz, you have to pay money and if you are Uzbek you have to pay money. No one experiences justice.*

Yulduz: *The only thing that matters is money. If you pay money, the court will favor you.*

Interestingly, earlier in the conversation this same group had discussed a recent string of unsolved murders involving ethnically Uzbek taxi drivers. The women (and the men's group, for that matter) believed that the murders were in-part ethnically motivated. Despite this perception, they did not view the justice system as an overt mechanism of discrimination.

One possible explanation for the variation in the Osh city groups is the supposed police involvement in exacerbating an incident that began on December 31, 2007 in the Turan district of Osh. After an apparently drunken brawl between young Kyrgyz and Uzbek men resulted in several injuries, including a severe injury to the son of a high ranking member of the police, unmarked police cars supposedly began rounding up young Uzbek men who lived in the district.¹⁵ For several weeks, this event was widely discussed across the city and may well have influenced the answers given by the Osh focus groups.

Conclusion

This report represents an initial attempt to synthesize and analyze the results of the focus groups that I conducted in four Uzbek communities in southern Kyrgyzstan. Since focus groups allow for a structured discussion on various topics, I conducted these groups in order to help flesh-out the survey that I am also conducting in each of these communities. The value of this methodology is that it allows respondents to speak in their own voice and to explain their attitudes to the researcher *and* to the others in the group. This can potentially provide compelling insights such as those discussed above. For example, although the level of trust in courts was nearly universally low, in the city of Osh this distrust took on an ethnic dimension which was absent in the other communities. More than likely, a survey would not have detected this relationship. Additionally, the variation found in these focus group responses suggests that

¹⁵ In reporting on this incident I am less concerned with what *actually* happened than with what was widely *believed* to have happened, as it is the perception of events that influences individual attitudes.

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researchers should be careful about essentializing ethnic Uzbek attitudes in southern Kyrgyzstan; the variation between different communities may indicate a fragmentation of opinions and experiences at the community level (and more than likely at the individual level as well).

Work Cited

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