

Political and Social Instability in Kyrgyzstan

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Region: [Asia](#)

Global Research, June 26, 2010

[Strategic Culture Foundation](#) 24 June 2010

Although clashes between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in Osh and Jalal-Abad are no longer that high, it is still too early to talk about stability. Dozens of thousands of refugees remain in Uzbekistan, scared to return to their homes. Many of them have nowhere to go at all. The interim government has already declared restoration of Osh a 'national project'. Eyewitnesses say armed men in masks are driving across the city in armored vehicles, and sounds of gun shots still can be heard.

Some observers say the conflict between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in Osh and Jalal-Abad is by far not over yet. A Kyrgyz expert Askar Mambetaliyev told the 24kg news agency: "...The conflict in Osh has not been settled, there is just a decline in rioting until a new wave of violence erupts". Mr. Mambetaliyev blames this on psychological consequences of the conflict: "...It is like when your feelings are seriously hurt. To recover, we need effective psychological, social and political solutions. People in power should be strong-willed and responsible. Editor for the CentreAsia web site, Mr. Khlyupin, added that decline in rioting can be explained by the time of planting season but new violent clashes are very likely to continue.

There has been much debate on whether the recent bloody clashes were 'ethnic'. The head of the Kyrgyz interim government Roza Otunbayeva was interviewed by the Russian Kommersant daily. When asked to comment on why the number of Uzbeks affected by rioting was larger, she answered that "Uzbeks were well-armed and, as Kyrgyz think, had been preparing for the clashes beforehand...Moreover, first Kyrgyz in both Osh and Jalal-Abad had nothing but sticks, knives and stones on them. Later they took arms from the police". However, reports from the scene said that those poorly armed were Uzbeks.

An example to illustrate comes out of the Uzbek village of Nariman, which was stormed by the Kyrgyz special task forces on 21 June after the locals had refused to destroy the barricades. The Kyrgyz side used helicopters and other military warfare during the operation. Two civilians were killed, and 23 more wounded. Officials said the Nariman operation was "preventive", aimed at withdrawing arms possessed by the locals. Seven men were arrested on suspicion of criminal activity. The locals denied the allegations saying that the arms had been secretly brought to the village during the storm. Such incidents only undermine Uzbeks' confidence in the interim government. Before the rioting began, Uzbeks used to make one third of the Kyrgyz southern population.

When we focus on the roots of the conflict, we should keep in mind that Uzbeks had long been viewed by Kyrgyz as potential separatists. In a report "On major threat to Kyrgyzstan's territorial integrity" released on the Vremya Vostoka (East Time) web portal owned by the Institute for Strategic Analysis and Forecasting, the author Zh. Saadanbekov says that for

the first time in history Kyrgyz have turned into ethnic minority due to mass migration, high death and low birth rates. As of today, the Kyrgyz population in southern areas of the republic numbers about 1 million, while Uzbeks are turning into majority.

This explanation is quite popular among the Kyrgyz journalists promoting the idea of 'Uzbek threat'. A survey conducted by Ferghana.ru showed a great number of nationalist articles in newspapers calling for people to fight Uzbeks. The Alibi weekly describes ethnic situation in the republic in the following way: "...on the one hand, Tajiks are seizing our lands, on the other-Uzbeks are approaching, and moreover, there are Dungans and Uighurs among us who are doing what they want". The article warns that "Uzbeks will become even more impudent unless we all join efforts to defeat them". In view of this, one should hardly be surprised at how violent the recent clashes were.

The Russia-speaking population in Kyrgyzstan yet remains beyond the conflict, though there were some casualties among Russians as well. Observers say they did not see any anti-Russian slogans written on the walls. However, ethnic Russians and those holding Russian citizenships were also affected by the riots in Osh and Jalal-Abad. On 18 June some 100 refugees-Russians, Uzbeks and Kyrgyz, most of them Russian citizens, were flown from Bishkek to Domodedovo airport in Moscow. In an interview with a correspondent for the Komsomolskaya Pravda, most of them said they did not want to stay in Russia, but they just had nowhere to go despite holding Russian passports.

Apart from refugees, Russia has seen the growing number of people willing to move to Russia as part of the Repatriation of Compatriots program. On the first days following Kurmanbek Bakiyev's resignation, the number of visitors to the Russian Embassy increased three-fold. Now, observers say, people are spending days in queues there. According to some reports, the list of citizens willing to obtain Russian citizenship has already expanded to 500. People are going to move to Russia together with family members amid a threat of new riots. Despite the outward appearance of good relations, the Russian-population of Kyrgyzstan is no longer certain about their future.

Most refugees are arriving in Russia from northern areas since no more Russians are left in southern Kyrgyzstan. According to the 1999 census, only 7% out of 600,000 Slavic population of Kyrgyzstan lived in the south, while most were concentrated in Bishkek and the nearby Chuisk region and also in the Issyk-Kul district. In late 1990s, only 40,000 of Slavs inhabited the southern areas. By early 2007, the total Russian-speaking population in Kyrgyzstan dropped to 470,000. By January 2010, only 5,000 Russians remained in the south. Unemployment was blamed for such high level of migration. Most Kyrgyz migrants arrive in Russia from the labor-abundant agrarian south.

Meanwhile, Kyrgyzstan is waiting for new riots believed to take place ahead of the national referendum on constitution scheduled for 27th of June. This time, tensions are expected to hit the northern parts of Kyrgyzstan. The authorities have tightened security in the region, with special task forces blocking all roads leading to the country and inspecting vehicles. A new coup was reported in the country on 22 June...We know who they are but cannot put them in prison since they are talking about peaceful protests though we understand their plot". On the same day the 24kg news agency reported that eight provocation attempts had been suppressed in Bishkek. The situation was either far from stable in other Kyrgyz towns. On 3d of June, a conflict nearly broke out between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in Tokmak, when 2 shells were thrown at Megapolis entertainment centre. On 9th of June 5 people were injured in explosion at Megacity shopping mall.

Instability in Kyrgyzstan paves the way to the most dangerous ideas. Thus, a member of the Association of Border Cooperation in Kazakhstan, Marat Shibutov, said that it would be “the right decision to divide Kyrgyzstan between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan”, otherwise the Kyrgyz republic will be inevitably turned into a center for production and exports of drugs. Mr. Shibutov mentioned a NATO operation in Yugoslavia as a precedent. A possibility of entering the Russian Federation as autonomy has been widely discussed in Kyrgyzstan. Very few people there and abroad still believe in prosperous future for the republic.

Translated from Russian by SCF.

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