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KYRGYZSTAN AFTER THE ELECTIONS

Is the Worst Yet to Come?

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K yrgyzstan is still sunk in deep crisis. The difficulties of forming a new government, institutional weakness, the nationalist drift and latent ethnic conflict in the south of the country are threatening to break the country apart. The parliamentary elections of 10 October 2010 took place in an atmosphere of calm and, of those held in Central Asia, are the first to be recognised as really “free and fair”. Nevertheless, the results have given rise to a complicated situation that will be difficult to manage, both because of fragmentation – the agreement of at least three of the five parties that have obtained representation in the *Jogorku Kenesh* is necessary – and, in particular, the strength of those who want to revoke the Constitution that was approved last June. The protests and demonstrations of some of the parties that did not win seats further hamper the formation of a new Parliament and the consolidation of political and institutional stability. Again, the volatile situation in the south continues stable but tense. The lack of means for reconstruction and reconciliation increases the likelihood of a new outbreak of violence between Kyrgyzs and Uzbeks with the aggravating circumstance that some of the population is stockpiling firearms.

Six Convulsive Months

The violent riots in Bishkek on 7 April brought down the regime of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev. The demonstrators’ assault on the presidential palace obliged Bakiyev to

flee and take refuge in his native town near Jalalabad in the south of the country. Fed up with the situation of economic impoverishment, corruption and the attempt by Bakiyev and his allies to take over the country’s main income-earning sectors, the people and opposition leaders rose against him. The use of firearms by security forces and also by some of the demonstrators, added to the general violence of the events which ended with a death toll of eighty-six and some one thousand five hundred injured. On the night of 7 April, an interim government was constituted, this being headed by Roza Otunbayeva, a figure of widely-acknowledged prestige within the country and a long political and diplomatic career behind her. The new authorities announced the drafting of a parliamentary Constitution and the future holding of parliamentary and presidential elections.

In the months of April and May, the situation in the south of the country took a serious turn for the worse. The followers of the deposed Bakiyev prevented the takeover by regional authorities appointed by the interim Government and stormed government buildings in Batken, Jalalabad and Osh. The first serious interethnic clashes occurred in mid-May. In Teyit, the houses of several relatives of Bakiyev were burned, allegedly by a group of Uzbek demonstrators. In response, hundreds of Kyrgyzs assaulted the University of Jalalabad, which was founded by the leader of the Uzbek community, Kadyrzhan Batyrov. The authorities declared a state of emergency and a night-time curfew.

However tensions kept rising, eventually to explode from 10 to 14 June in Osh and Jalalabad. The interim government was completely overwhelmed by the events. Groups of Kyrgyzs, armed with automatic rifles and using at least two armoured vehicles, attacked neighbourhoods with an Uzbek majority, massacring the inhabitants. The terror thus sown among the population led to a mass exodus of Uzbek women, children and the elderly. Tens of thousands of people crossed the Uzbekistan border, while most of the Uzbek men stayed behind, entrenched in their neighbourhoods. The army finally gained control of the conflict in which between 400 and 2,000 people died, with tens of thousands of refugees and displaced people and massive destruction. In Osh alone, some two thousand buildings were razed to the ground. Despite the seriousness of the situation, the interim Government honoured its promise and held the referendum on the Constitution on 27 June. The need for legitimation through ballot procedure and for going ahead with its reforms schedule and agenda were the spurs of its determination. The Constitution was approved with 90%

Vectors of the Crisis

Political wrangling for power in Bishkek and the unstable situation in the south of the country are two vectors that have determined the deterioration of the situation in Kyrgyzstan.

The Struggle for Power in Bishkek

The parliamentary elections have represented a serious setback for the champions of the new Constitution and the parliamentary option. Omurbek Tekebayev and his Ata-Meken party are the main losers. This does not necessarily mean that they will not form part of the coalition that will eventually prevail in the new Parliament. A hypothetical agreement between the parties closest to President Otunbayeva¹ and those who were behind the April riots is viable although it will be difficult to sideline Kamchybek Tashiev, who was close to ex-president Bakiyev and leader of the nationalist, xenophobic Ata Jurt party, which achieved most votes. All of this adds up to a convoluted, potentially unstable state of affairs.

Table 1: Main Events April – October

7 April: Violent disturbances in Bishkek bring about the overthrow of the regime of Kurmanbek Bakiyev. Clashes between security forces and demonstrators leave a toll of 86 dead and 1,500 injured.

8-9 April: An interim Government is formed, headed by Roza Otunbayeva.

16 April: Bakiyev finally steps down and agrees to move from his refuge in Jalalabad to Taraz in Kazakhstan and subsequently to Minsk (Belarus).

13-14 May: First serious incidents in the south. Bakiyev's supporters assault government buildings in Batken, Jalalabad and Osh. Battles in Jalalabad between groups for and against the interim government. In Teyit, the birthplace of the former president, the houses of several of his relatives are burned, purportedly by groups of Uzbek demonstrators.

19-20 May: Clashes between Kyrgyzs and Uzbeks in Osh and Jalalabad. Several hundred Kyrgyzs attack the television station and the University of Jalalabad, both of which were founded by Kadyrzhan Batyrov, the leader of the local Uzbek community.

10-14 June: Interethnic violence breaks out in Osh and Jalalabad. Tens of thousands of Uzbeks flee to Uzbekistan. Systematic destruction of Uzbek neighbourhoods and businesses. The death toll is between 400 and 2,000.

27 June: The new Constitution is approved with a referendum.

10 October: Parliamentary elections are held.

in favour and a voter turnout of 70%. The new Constitution reinforces the powers of the Prime Minister and Parliament, although the President retains considerable power and space for initiative. Accordingly, some observers question the suitability of describing the new system as parliamentary, since it actually establishes a dual system.

1. Which is to say, the SDKP, Respublika and Ata-Meken parties or, in other words, a coalition between Almaz Atambayev, Omurbek Babanov – the only new face in these elections – and Tekebayev.

The general narrow-mindedness of today's Kyrgyz leaders is one of the country's great handicaps. The presence of "strongmen" – the regional *janas* – all of them with big business interests is more a challenge than incentive for the proper formation of the Parliament. Only the president, Roza Otunbayeva, who has scant control over the present dynamics, seems concerned about anything more than satisfying personal interests. Any parliamentary scenario is therefore possible. For example, Tashiev and Atambayev, theoretically rivals, have suggested that a general coalition should be formed by the five parties. Once again, this is evidence of the negligible importance of programmes and ideologies since the parties are so wanting in content and cohesion that deals between their leaders are what matter.

Nevertheless, the new Constitution or, what amounts to the same thing, the desire for a strong Parliament with a capacity for initiative will continue to be the point of rupture. Ata Jurt and Ar-Namys, the latter led by the former general Feliks Kulov, are in favour of doing away with this Constitu-

of the Kyrgyz institutional framework does not encourage any formal, juridical reading of the situation. Political decisions will win the day. In any case, the start of a new parliamentary period will not contribute towards stability in Kyrgyzstan in the short term, especially bearing in mind that the transitional period is still in force and the calling of presidential elections remains slated for October 2011.

Another major difficulty in achieving a minimum of stability is the fact that, since the results were announced, the leaders and supporters of Butun Kyrgyzstan, another nationalist grouping, are holding rallies in front of the parliament and calling for representation therein.² Similarly, several minority parties have created a joint platform to contest the election results. These claims reveal the extent to which extra-institutional channels rule the day in the country's political mindset. So far, protests and rampaging in the streets have been the most effective way of taking power.

Table 2: Results of the Parliamentary Elections of 10 October 2010

Party	Leader	% total votes cast	% total of voters list*	Seats obtained
Ata Jurt	Kamchybek TASHIEV	16.08	8.40	28
SDPK	Almazbek ATAMBAYEV	14.55	7.83	26
Ar Namys	Félik KULOV	14.02	7.57	25
Respublika	Omurbek BABANOV	13.11	6.93	23
Ata-Meken	Omurbek TEKEBAYEV	10.13	5.49	18
		<i>Subtotal 67.89</i>	<i>Subtotal 36.22</i>	
Butun KG	Adakhan MADUMAROV	8.76	4.84	0
Ak Shumkar	Temir SARIEV	4.76	2.63	0
Remaining 22 parties		18.59	7.51	
		<i>Subtotal 32.11</i>	<i>Subtotal 14.98</i>	
TOTAL		100	51.20	120

* Calculation of the seats is carried out on the basis of the total number of voters and not votes cast.

Table compiled by author.

Data from the Kyrgyzstan Central Electoral Commission.

Elements to be taken into account:

- Only five of the 29 parties that stood achieved representation in Parliament.

- The total number of seats is decided in relation with the vote of 36% of the total of the electoral census for the country as a whole. Furthermore, 32% of the votes cast (divided among several parties) are not translated into any seat in Parliament.

tion – approved by referendum barely four months ago – and re-establishing a presidential system. In principle, the mechanisms stipulated in the text of the Constitution with a view to its reform should stand in the way of any precipitous move by these two parties or by any eventual support they might succeed in mustering. However, the debility

2. Prior to the elections, 2,852,419 people appeared as registered in the voter lists. The inclusion, in the course of polling day of an additional 198,456 people on the list of voters swelled the numbers to 3,004,361 people in the total count of voters. This fact changes the number of votes required to exceed the limit of 5% of the total, which then gives access to Parliament. Of the necessary 142,620 votes the figure rose to 150,218 votes. Hence, the 145,455 votes obtained by Butun KG did not materialise in any seat at the end of the day.

One of the few positive aspects of a hypothetical agreement between the southerner Tashiev and the northerner Kulov would be a mitigating of the North-South tensions that prevail in the political relations between Kyrgyzs in both zones of the country. Yet one doubts whether this would have any major impact. The prospect of Tashiev having a strong parliamentary presence with the backing of former president Bakiyev is especially galling for many Kyrgyzs in Bishkek and other northern areas. In fact, the only noteworthy episode in the run-up days to the election was the assault on the Ata Jurt party headquarters by family members of the victims of the April upheavals. Again, such a rapprochement looks paradoxical when one recalls that it is highly likely that a significant number of votes obtained by Ar-Namys came from the Uzbeks of Osh and Jalalabad, who opted for Kulov as an alternative to the rise of Ata Jurt.

However, when it comes to the interethnic violence, not to say ethnic cleansing, that occurred in the south of the coun-

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try, the intra-Kyrgyz skirmishing looks notably diluted. In fact, it is Ata Jurt's capacity for mass mobilisation with its nationalist discourse and rhetoric that makes its expulsion difficult for the rest of the parties. Without the cooperation of Ata Jurt it will be difficult for Bishkek to recover any control over the south. The inability of the present interim Government to impose its authority in the southern zone is one of the main problems in dispelling doubts over the country's future. Yet the nationalist option not only does not contribute towards restoring confidence but it exacerbates the breach between the two communities, aggravating a situation that is already quite complicated enough in itself.

Interethnic Violence in the South

According to UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) figures, at least 75,000 people, mostly Uzbeks, remain homeless after the disturbances of June. No progress is being made in reconstructing houses or – and this is crucial – the razed businesses. The violence in Osh and Jalalabad was neither blind nor irrational. Very much to the contrary, it is possible to trace a pattern of purposeful, systematic destruction that aimed to eliminate the means of livelihood of the Uzbek community. Accordingly, almost all the Uzbek cafes, restaurants and businesses were destroyed. The supposed Uzbek control of commercial and economic activities in the south is one of the recurring ways of fuelling the flames of Kyrgyz xenophobic discourse, which is essentially aimed at the young population of limited education, scant resources and prospects, and prone to violence and revanchism. Any politician seeking to recover this zone will have to give very serious consideration to this segment of the population, which has played a prominent role in the violence.

Also pending is an international inquiry with a view to establishing a reliable account of what happened. It is important to have a credible official figure of the number of deaths, but is also crucial to ascertain how the violence developed, who the ringleaders were, and what role was played by the security forces – Army and Police – during the events. Until this happens, not only will it be impossible to punish the offenders but also to restore trust between the two communities. This particularly applies to the Uzbeks who do not see the army and the police as any guarantee of security but, on the contrary, as one more instrument of the aggression they have endured. The dubious action of both forces during the disturbances widely justifies this perception.³

Accordingly, the present lull in the storm does not encourage any harbouring of optimism. Prevalent among some of the Kyrgyz participants in the violence in Osh and Jalalabad

is the sense of having obtained a partial victory and of having taken a first step. Among the Uzbeks, in contrast, the dominant feeling is one of abandonment, fear and the conviction that it is necessary to organise some form of defence against the next attack. Rumours and re-

sponses reciprocally feed into each other. Thus, for example, many Uzbek children no longer go to school because their parents fear new outbreaks of violence. The absence of these children in the schools reinforces among the Kyrgyzs the belief that the Uzbek 'are cooking something up', thus heightening suspicions, upping the tone of aggression and thereby reinforcing Uzbek fears of new attacks. Among the most persistent and alarming rumours is the claim that part of the population is stockpiling firearms. Whether or not such speculation has any basis in truth, there is no doubt that the desire to be armed is widespread among the population, which is an unmistakable sign of lack of confidence. Confronting these issues is essential if renewed violence is to be avoided.

Notably contributing towards this climate of generalised mistrust are leaders such as the mayor of Osh, Melisbek Myrzakmatov, one of the political figures who emerged in the crises of April and June and who have now consolidated their positions in the country's political panorama. Myrzakmatov opposes the reconstruction of the Uzbek neighbourhoods in their original form (*mahallas*), which is hardly surprising given that he himself most probably played a prominent part in their destruction. Myrzakmatov's mass mobilisation skills, along with those of other nationalist leaders, explain why the interim government in Bishkek, captive to its own weakness, has reneged on

3. See the report by the International Crisis Group, "The Pogroms in Kyrgyzstan", Asia Report, N° 193, 23 August 2010, especially pp. 11-16; and Human Rights Watch, "Where Is the Justice? Interethnic Violence in Southern Kyrgyzstan and its Aftermath", August 2010.

its original desire to go ahead with the deployment of an OSCE mission consisting of 52 unarmed police. Indeed, the attempt from Bishkek to sack Myrzakmatov last August was a resounding failure for the interim Government. To this weakness must be added the fact that, beyond any regional support, the nationalist discourse reaches into many Kyrgyz political sectors. It is significant, for example, that some politicians and public servants in Bishkek describe the Uzbek community in their country as the “Uzbek diaspora”, which, apart from being erroneous, is completely unacceptable if the aim is to re-establish normality.

tributed towards avoiding an escalation of the conflict. For all that, what the future political response of Tashkent might be in case of a new wave of attacks against Uzbeks in the south of Kyrgyzstan remains a big unknown.

In his speech to the UN General Assembly on 20 September, the Uzbek president expressed the need for an independent international inquiry that would make it possible to bring to justice all those who “ordered, organised and executed” the interethnic violence in the south of Kyrgyzstan. This is certainly a rather attention-grabbing appeal from a regime that refused to permit a similar inquiry into the bloody events in



External Actors: Towards the End of the Great Game, at Last?

The present crisis ran its course because of internal factors, which also explain it. Despite the local taste for conspiracy theories which, incidentally, exempt local actors from responsibility, there is no evidence of any interference by external agents in the evolution of the situation, either in the genesis or development of the crisis. Indeed, the international isolation of the interim Government has been one of its chief difficulties. Nevertheless, action by some international actors could be fundamental in what happens next since Kyrgyzstan is a dependent country and susceptible to pressure from outside.

Uzbekistan has played a positive role in this crisis. First, it allowed tens of thousands of people fleeing from the violence in Osh and Jalalabad to cross its borders, although it is highly questionable whether the subsequent return of the refugees to Kyrgyz territory was wholly “voluntary”. Second, Tashkent’s response was an exercise of restraint. It is evident that the Uzbek Government has no wish to get embroiled in the conflict in south Kyrgyzstan, as is manifest, for example, in its rhetorical moderation and the deployment of its forces to protect the Kyrgyz minority in Uzbekistan from possible, although not very probable attacks. All these measures con-

tributed towards avoiding an escalation of the conflict. For all that, what the future political response of Tashkent might be in case of a new wave of attacks against Uzbeks in the south of Kyrgyzstan remains a big unknown. In his speech to the UN General Assembly on 20 September, the Uzbek president expressed the need for an independent international inquiry that would make it possible to bring to justice all those who “ordered, organised and executed” the interethnic violence in the south of Kyrgyzstan. This is certainly a rather attention-grabbing appeal from a regime that refused to permit a similar inquiry into the bloody events in Andijan in May 2005. This declaration and others voiced by the Uzbek president – asking, for example, for the dismissal of the mayor of Osh – show the extent of his concern over the nationalist drift in Kyrgyzstan since, even while it may go very much against the grain, Tashkent could be pushed to intervene in the conflict. All options of intervention would entail serious risks for Uzbekistan. In spite of the superiority of its armed forces, direct military intervention would be a hazardous step for the regime to take. On the other hand, supplying arms to the Uzbek community so that it might defend itself would involve a huge risk since the south of Kyrgyzstan is one of the bastions of radical Islamic activism – the main threat to Tashkent – and, in its helplessness, this community is increasingly receptive to its message. Hence, providing weapons could turn out to be counterproductive although the controlled handover of small batches could be considered as a simpler, more viable alternative for Tashkent. This factor, in conjunction with illegal trafficking in arms from different origins, could give rise to a critical scenario. It remains to be seen how far the Kyrgyz nationalist leaders who want to put more pressure on the Uzbek communities can go in a project that only makes the situation increasingly tense while also whittling away at the room for manoeuvre of internal and external actors.

The great powers have kept a low profile in the Kyrgyz crisis and, of course, lower than might be suggested by the popu-

larly subscribed to, but limited, lens of the new Great Game, which presupposes the existence of irreconcilable geopolitical interests between the different parties while conferring a crucial geostrategic significance on Central Asia. The role of Russia has been somewhat surprising in that the Kremlin implicitly backed the forced removal of the former president Bakiyev even though the parliamentary option is not to Moscow's liking. President Medvedev himself had no qualms about stating, only days before the constitutional referendum, that the new system could favour a takeover by Islamic extremists. Indeed, it is highly likely that the Kremlin turned a deaf ear to the desperate pleas of Bishkek for emergency troops precisely because the Otunbayeva Government refused to cancel the constitutional referendum. Moreover, of course, there was the fear of being trapped in a hornets' nest and because of the problems involved in specifying, in the present context, an agreement for the establishing a Russian base in Osh under the auspices of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). In any case, Russia will continue

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to have considerable influence in the future of the situation in Kyrgyzstan. To give just one example, except for Ata-Meken, the leaders of all the parties that won seats have travelled to Moscow in a bid to obtain support. The EU sees Central Asia as an area of priority interest and has been closely following matters although with little involvement or influence. The United States has remained very cautious about the events in Kyrgyzstan. Beyond the potential consolidation of a democratic system, the chief point of interest for the United States is the Manas Air Base near Bishkek, which is of crucial logistical support for its troops in Afghanistan. Consequently, the base has been a recurring theme in a number of meetings and hearings in the US House of Representatives. Now that withdrawal from Afghanistan is in sight, it is questionable whether Washington would opt for direct intervention. For Beijing, the stability of Central Asia – especially of those countries with which it shares a border and with populous Uyghur communities – is of strategic interest. However, the Chinese scope for action is limited because of anti-Chinese sentiment in Kyrgyzstan as well as its own principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of other countries. Finally, Kazakhstan is the other actor with great capacity to influence the situation in Kyrgyzstan. During the crisis in April, the Astana-based government, as the incumbent rotating president of the OSCE, played a significant and positive role in facilitating Bakiyev's exit from the country, from his safe haven in Jalalabad. Nevertheless, the total or partial closure of the Kazakh border for a good part of the last six months has strangled Kyrgyzstan in economic terms. Notwithstanding its low profile, there can be no doubt that the potential collapse of Kyrgyzstan could entail serious consequences for everyone.

Why Kyrgyzstan Matters

Kyrgyzstan – small by regional standards but with a surface area similar to that of Great Britain – is the only Central Asian republic that has opted, although with meagre results so far, for opening up and democratisation. Getting through this crisis will therefore depend on the viability and credibility of the promotion of democracy in the remainder of the Euro-Asian space in the coming years. This is even more the case when the local population in general is increasingly fed up with the democratic option, which is fundamentally the cause of economic difficulties and political instability in recent times. It explains why the population could vote for one option and then its opposite not long afterwards, since it is stability rather than ideological positions that interests people most. The association of democracy and instability is used by the neighbouring regimes to justify their authoritarian character and lack of reforms.

Likewise, a number of external actors – and not only Russia and China – also consider that strong regimes offer better guarantees of stability. All the same, and bearing in mind that periods of transition are those of greatest vulnerability and risk, it is a good idea not to lose sight

of the fact that the selfsame Kyrgyz example demonstrates that authoritarianism and institutional weakness may offer short-term guarantees but a great deal of uncertainty in the medium and long terms.

The regional and international relevance of Kyrgyzstan also increases with the prospect of a hypothetical state collapse. A new failed state in Central Asia could drag with it other especially vulnerable states such as Tajikistan and even Uzbekistan, the latter with the prospect of presidential succession looming. The rise of organised crime and Islamic fundamentalism in the southern zone of Kyrgyzstan compound the chances of institutional disintegration. A scenario of this type would facilitate the spread of both phenomena and this would have an impact, for example, on the security and interests of the European Union and Russia. One should recall that a good part of the Afghan heroin that is consumed in Europe comes through Central Asia, and preferably Tajikistan or Kyrgyzstan. Indeed, Osh is deemed to be the main regional centre of redistribution and renegotiation of the drug. From the standpoint of border monitoring and the police struggle against drug trafficking, Kyrgyzstan is a key link.

Finally, Kyrgyzstan represents at once a responsibility and an opportunity for the international community and the EU. First, is the responsibility to protect the victims of conflicts and to fulfil commitments undertaken: Kyrgyzstan is a member of such organisations as the OSCE, the CSTO and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, all of which have among their aims that of providing and guaranteeing the security of their members. The development of a solid architecture of security in European space, whether on the Atlantic or the Asian

side, will not be achieved by overlooking scenarios that raise problems. On the contrary, these challenges must be faced. The credibility of these initiatives and forums concerned with security is, then, at stake. Yet, even though the falling apart of the country could involve serious consequences for actors like Russia, the EU, China and the US, Kyrgyzstan also represents an opportunity for promoting joint actions and cooperative approaches that could go beyond the restrictive framework of geopolitical rivalries in the Euro-Asian space. Such a project requires vision and political will. The risks of potential institutional collapse in Kyrgyzstan or the outbreak of armed conflict in the south of the country are too great for these issues to be dodged.