

Kyrgyzstan: An Uncertain Trajectory

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I. Overview

Kyrgyzstan, Central Asia's only even nominal parliamentary democracy, faces growing internal and external security challenges. Deep ethnic tensions, increased radicalisation in the region, uncertainty in Afghanistan and the possibility of a chaotic political succession in Uzbekistan are all likely to have serious repercussions for its stability. The risks are exacerbated by leadership failure to address major economic and political problems, including corruption and excessive Kyrgyz nationalism. Poverty is high, social services are in decline, and the economy depends on remittances from labour migrants. Few expect the 4 October parliamentary elections to deliver a reformist government. If the violent upheavals to which the state is vulnerable come to pass, instability could spread to regional neighbours, each of which has its own serious internal problems. The broader international community – not just the European Union (EU) and the U.S., but also Russia and China, should recognise the danger and proactively press the government to address the country's domestic issues with a sense of urgency.

Since violent protests forced the 2010 ouster of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev, successors, including current President Almazbek Atambayev, have provided little economic direction or strong leadership. Relations with the West have soured. The country is increasingly dependent, politically and economically, on Russia, becoming a full-fledged member of the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union in August 2015. The government struggles to control the south, where tensions between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks, the largest minority, have not dissipated since ethnically motivated deadly violence in Osh five years ago. Border skirmishes with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are not uncommon. The Kyrgyz nationalist narrative that emerged after the Osh pogroms is now firmly entrenched and facilitated by a variety of groups across the country. Pockets of religious radicalisation and intolerance, sometimes presented as traditional Kyrgyz values, are also a challenge. Instead of confronting these trends, political parties are incorporating them.

The October elections occur against a backdrop of growing disillusionment with the only semi-functional parliamentary system. Priority tasks for the government should be to temper nationalism, promote political inclusion and genuine reform and manage expectations. It must first develop policies to protect and promote the state's multi-ethnic, multi-denominational nature, rein in unchecked nationalism and tackle corruption. Failure to do so would deepen fault lines in a state and society fractured by the Bakiyev-era legacy and 2010 events. The international community, bilaterally and

multilaterally through organisation such as the EU, UN and Organisation for Security Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) of which Russia is a member, should offer high-level, consistent engagement and expertise, while pressing for reform to support Kyrgyzstan's stated aim of making parliamentary democracy work.

II. Democracy in Name

Kyrgyzstan's turbulent history is unique in post-Soviet Central Asia, where neighbouring countries are dominated by long-serving autocrats. The relatively peaceful overthrow of President Askar Akayev in 2005, during which the centre of power shifted from the north to the south, led to the concentration of authority and resources in the Bakiyev family, which came to dominate both the security services and the economy. Bakiyev's overthrow in April 2010, during which 85 protesters died and parts of the capital, Bishkek, were looted, led to an interim government headed by Roza Otunbayeva of the Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan (SDPK).¹

In June 2010, her government largely of northern liberal elites was faced with ethnic violence in Osh and Jalalabad.² Triggered by the aftermath of Bakiyev's ouster, including allegations that Uzbeks wanted to secede, the violence left 470 dead, almost three quarters ethnic Uzbeks, and more than 2,800 mostly Uzbek homes destroyed; 75 per cent of those detained were Uzbek.³ The security forces' role in the violence remains murky.⁴ An uneasy calm has settled on the south, but the ethnic Uzbek community, some 14.5 per cent of the population, is excluded from power and the target of abuse from a police force that is predominately ethnic Kyrgyz. That it brought the violence upon itself and "patriotic" Kyrgyz prevented a secessionist plot has become an established narrative. The government has been incapable of treating the profoundly damaging impact of the events on inter-ethnic relations. A serious attempt

¹ Crisis Group Asia Reports N°s 97, *Kyrgyzstan: After the Revolution*, 4 May 2005; 183, *Central Asia: Migrants and the Economic Crisis*, 5 January 2010; Briefings N°s 79, *Kyrgyzstan: A Deceptive Calm*, 14 August 2008; 102, *Kyrgyzstan: A Hollow Regime Collapses*, 27 April 2010.

² Ethnic, linguistic and religious composition has changed since the Soviet Union's collapse. The population in 1990 was 4.36 million. According to the 1989 census, ethnic Kyrgyz were 52.37 per cent, Russians the second biggest group, 21.53 per cent and Uzbeks 12.92 per cent. Russian was the main language spoken in the cities and towns, though Kyrgyz was the native language for the majority of the ethnic Kyrgyz population. Russians were concentrated in the northern regions and the bigger southern cities. Uzbeks have historically been concentrated in the Ferghana Valley, Osh and Jalalabad provinces. The National Statistics Committee says today's population is 5.89 million, with 72.8 per cent Kyrgyz, 14.5 per cent Uzbek and 6.2 per cent Russian. Kyrgyz and Uzbeks are Muslim, Russians mostly Orthodox Christian.

³ Crisis Group Asia Report N°193, *The Pogroms in Kyrgyzstan*, 23 August 2010; Briefing, *A Hollow Regime Collapses*, op. cit. "Of the 470 killed, 74% were Uzbek, 25% were Kyrgyz and 1% were other ethnicities or nationalities. Over 90% were men. About 67% of the dead had gunshot wounds (80% Uzbek, 19% Kyrgyz). Most Uzbek died of gunshot wounds (72%), while fatal injuries of Kyrgyz were equally from gunshot wounds (51%) and other means (49%). More than 50% of the deaths occurred in Osh on 11 and 12 June. Of these, the overwhelming majority (nearly 70%) were Uzbek. However on 12 June in Jalalabad, the trend was reversed: six Kyrgyz and one Uzbek died". "Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry into the events in southern Kyrgyzstan in June 2010", 3 May 2011, p. 43.

⁴ "Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry", op. cit. See also, "Where is the Justice?" Interethnic Violence in Southern Kyrgyzstan and its Aftermath", Human Rights Watch, 16 August 2010.

to examine the violence would also spotlight tensions between northern and southern Kyrgyz political groups, something the government deems too risky to its survival and the state's integrity.⁵

Despite simmering political and ethnic tensions, the government proceeded in June 2010 with a constitutional referendum that produced Central Asia's first parliamentary democracy. Under the 2010 constitution, the president serves a single six-year term and has power to veto legislation and appoint heads of state bodies. Deputies serve five-year terms in the unicameral, 120-seat parliament in which parties are limited to a maximum of 65 seats. The constitution also prohibits formation of parties on ethnic or religious grounds.

The October 2010 elections, held against a backdrop of continued tensions, returned a legislature with the fewest ethnic minorities in the state's independent history.⁶ The SDPK won 26 seats, two less than the strident, southern-nationalist Ata-Jurt, but formed an uneasy coalition with it and Respublika (23 seats).⁷ The SDPK's Almazbek Atambayev was appointed prime minister, but the new government lacked both the wherewithal and motivation to challenge Ata-Jurt's ardent nationalist politics.⁸ A year later, Atambayev was elected president. The "Concept of National Unity and Inter-Ethnic Relations" produced in 2013 under his leadership, is described by Western diplomats as overly emphasising the Kyrgyz language and inconsistently implemented.⁹ Some experts argue it is the best that could be achieved, but "broad and vulnerable to selective interpretation" and avoiding "directly addressing the thorny issue of the rights of ethnic Uzbeks in the aftermath of the June 2010 violence".¹⁰ It remains an insufficient starting point for improving ethnic integration.

⁵ Crisis Group Asia Report N°222, *Kyrgyzstan: Widening Ethnic Divisions in the South*, 29 March 2012.

⁶ Ethnic Kyrgyz hold 88.3 per cent of seats in the current parliament; 5.8 per cent of seats belong to ethnic Russians and 2.5 per cent to ethnic Uzbeks.

⁷ Respublika was formed by the multi-millionaire businessman Omurbek Babanov in 2007, ostensibly as a party of entrepreneurs. Babanov served as prime minister from December 2011 to September 2012. Ata-Jurt was formed in 2006 by the current coordinator of the Centre of Hajj and Umrah, Bazarbai Temishev. Drawing on support from the south, it advocated a return to the presidential system. The party grew in influence after the 2010 events in Osh in 2010 but denies any role in instigating the violence. In October 2012, Ata-Jurt member of parliament Kamchybek Tashiev staged an assault on the White House, the president's office in the centre of Bishkek. He was arrested but acquitted of public calls to violent change of the constitutional system on 17 June 2015. Ata-Jurt and Respublika formed an unlikely merger in October 2014. Ulugbek Akishev, "Видео: 'Ата-Журт' и 'Республика' официально объявили об объединении" ["Video: 'Ata-Jurt' and 'Respublika' officially announced their merger"], Kloop Media, 20 October 2014.

⁸ Kyrgyzstan has had five prime ministers since 2010. Almazbek Atambayev, 2010-2011; Omurbek Babanov, 2011-2012; Jantoro Satybaldiyev, 2012-2014; Joomart Otorbayev, 2014-2015; and Temir Sariyev currently.

⁹ "Концепция укрепления единства народа и межэтнических отношений в Кыргызской Республике" ["The concept paper of the policy of the Kyrgyz Republic for national unity and inter-ethnic relations"], approved by decree of the president, 10 April 2013, www.president.kg/ru/news/ukazy/1878_utverjdjena_kontseptsiya_ukrepleniya_edinstva_naroda_i_mejjetnicheskikh_otnosheniy_v_kyrgyzskoy_respublike. Crisis Group interviews, Bishkek, August 2013.

¹⁰ "Kyrgyzstan, Nations in Transit 2014", Freedom House, 2014; Erica Marat, "Looking for National Consensus in Post-Violence Kyrgyzstan", Europe-Central Asia Monitoring, Commentary no. 24, May 2014. The concept paper also includes an ambitious plan for trilingual education (Kyrgyz, Russian and English) but scant mention of how it might be funded.

Despite the upheavals and persistent concerns about electoral irregularities, Kyrgyzstan maintains its reputation as Central Asia's least authoritarian state.¹¹ However, this masks serious problems of corruption (political and economic), nationalism, ethnic tensions and religious radicalisation that undermine government credibility and threaten state stability.¹² Both parliament and the presidency seem unwilling and institutionally incapable of addressing these issues.¹³ High-level accusations of how money fuels politics have gone unaddressed by all the major parties elected to parliament in 2010 and seeking re-election in 2015.¹⁴ An anti-corruption campaign spearheaded by President Atambayev routinely targets opposition members, but only rarely the ruling SDPK.¹⁵ Ordinary citizens and business persons reportedly encounter corruption routinely.¹⁶

The faltering economy is another concern. Unease with the lack of social and economic progress is likely to grow, as remittances from Russia – 30.3 per cent of GDP in 2014 – plummet, from \$386 million in the first quarter of 2014 to \$230 million in

¹¹ “A considerable number of voters were not on the voter lists and a number of cases of ballot box stuffing, multiple and family voting, vote buying, and bussing of voters were noted. The situation deteriorated during counting and tabulation, with a significant number of polling stations assessed negatively. In a number of cases, protocols were altered or completed by higher-level commissions”. “Kyrgyzstan’s presidential election was peaceful, but shortcomings underscore need to improve integrity of process”, Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, 31 October 2011.

¹² Crisis Group Report, *Widening Ethnic Divisions in the South*, op. cit.

¹³ “Президент Алмазбек Атамбаев: ‘Мы добились многого в борьбе с коррупцией в Кыргызстане, но предстоит сделать еще больше’” [“President Almazbek Atambayev: ‘We have achieved a lot in fighting corruption in Kyrgyzstan, but there is still more to do’”], 19 March 2015, www.president.kg/ru/news/5513_prezident_almazbek_atambaev_myi_dobilis_mnogogo_v_borbe_s_korrupsiey_v_kyrgyzstane_no_predstoit_sdelat_esche_bolshe. See also, “Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2014 – Kyrgyz Republic”, U.S. Department of State, 24 June 2015. Kyrgyzstan ranked 90th of 102 countries measured for an “absence of corruption” defined as “bribery, improper influence by public or private interests, and misappropriation of public funds or other resources – with respect to government officers in the executive branch, the judiciary, the military and police, and the legislature” according to “Rule of Law Index 2015”, The World Justice Project, 2015, p. 25.

¹⁴ “Стоимость мандата депутата Жогорку Кенеша может дойти до \$1 млн – Жылдызкан Джолдошева” [“The cost of the mandate of the deputy of the Jogorku Kenesh might reach \$1 mln – Jyldyzkan Dzholdosheva”], K-News, 4 June 2015; “Ширин Айтматова: В кулуарах Жогорку Кенеша говорят, что чиновники дают по 500 тыс. долларов партиям, чтобы попасть в состав следующего парламента” [“Shirin Aitmatova: On the sidelines of the Jogorku Kenesh they say that officials give parties \$500,000 to get into the next parliament”], Vzglyad.kg, 10 March 2015.

¹⁵ President Atambayev said this was because he had hand-picked the SDPK’s party list. “Алмазбек Атамбаев, президент КР: ‘Вступим в Таможенный Союз только на наших условиях’” [“Almazbek Atambayev, the president of the KR: ‘We will join the Customs Union only on our terms’”], Gezitter.org, 23 December 2013. On 22 July 2015, the head of his office, Daniyar Narymbaev, was arrested in connection with allegations of corruption involving attempts to bribe the family of the ex-mayor of Bishkek, Nariman Tuleev, who has been jailed since July 2013 for corruption. “Kyrgyz presidential office’s ex-chief detained”, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), 22 July 2015.

¹⁶ “Although results show that in 2013 unofficial payments are less frequent than in 2008 ... more firms are subjected to bribe requests. Almost a half of firms (49%) reported that unofficial payments are needed in dealing with public officials, up from 37 per cent in 2008”. “EBRD-World Bank Business Environment and Enterprise Performance Survey (BEEPS) At-A-Glance 2103 – Kyrgyz Republic”, The World Bank Group, February 2014. The same survey found that firms considering the court system fair, impartial and uncorrupted dropped from 34 per cent to 9 per cent between 2008 and 2013.

the first quarter of 2015.¹⁷ Unemployment and underemployment are rife; social services are few, and the country's physical infrastructure is in disrepair.¹⁸ The government loses relevancy when it is unable to address these problems. Rural areas face the same hardships as under previous administrations, and protest potential around issues such as living costs is high.¹⁹ A protracted and politicised ownership battle over the Kumtor goldmine and decline in output at the mine in 2014 weaken economic prospects.²⁰

Opposition activists and members of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) allege that police harassment and brutality are routine, a Bakiyev-era characteristic.²¹ Like elsewhere in Russia's sphere of influence, NGOs now face suspicion of being "foreign agents" and accusations of undermining traditional social values. Doubts about Western-funded or orientated civil society are re-enforced by the president, who appears to chart a populist course on the issue.²² A draft law that looked to have majority support in parliament would have empowered the justice ministry to inspect NGOs, request and audit their internal documents, decide whether they comply with their founding goals and, if not, suspend them for up to six months without a court decision.²³ The bill also envisaged criminal liability and imprisonment for establishing NGOs that "incite citizens to refuse to fulfil their civic duties or commit other unlawful acts".²⁴ Critics said it would lead to criminalisation of human rights defenders. Though withdrawn for further discussion in June 2015, observers say it could return to parliament in 2016.²⁵

Atambayev's rule has brought a degree of stability. The egregious corruption of previous administrations has been transformed to some degree by a system that gives more equitable opportunities for monetary gain at least to a larger group of elite politicians and business families. However, a legislator said, "there was a lot of corruption under the previous regimes; nothing has changed today. But in place of family clans, today we have party clans".²⁶ And there is no serious attempt to dismantle the

¹⁷ "Cross-border Remittances via Money Transfer Operators in Breakdown by Countries in Q1 2015", Russian Central Bank, 16 June 2015; "Cross-border Remittances via Money Transfer Operators in Breakdown by Countries in Q1 2014", *ibid*, 25 June 2014. The growth of remittances as a proportion of GDP from 26.4 per cent in 2010 to 31.5 per cent in 2013 also indicates increasing economic reliance on Russia. "Personal Remittances, Received (% of GDP)", The World Bank, http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS?order=wbapi_data_value_2013+wbapi_data_value+wbapi_data_value-last&sort=desc.

¹⁸ Crisis Group Asia Report N°201, *Central Asia: Decay and Decline*, 3 February 2011.

¹⁹ Thus, in high-altitude Naryn province, community activists said, proposals to increase electricity costs fuel discontent as in 2009-2010. Crisis Group interview, Naryn, March 2015.

²⁰ Olga Dzyubenko, Dmitry Solovyov and Larry King, "Output cut at Kumtor gold mine slows Kyrgyz GDP growth in 2014", Reuters, 15 January 2015.

²¹ Crisis Group interviews, NGO employees, October 2014; Issyk-Kul community activist, April 2015.

²² "Almazbek Atambayev: 'There are foreign agents in Kyrgyzstan, it is necessary to speak openly'", 24.kg, 27 July 2015.

²³ On 4 June 2015, of 106 deputies present to vote, 83 supported and 23 opposed the bill. "Законопроект об иностранных агентах парламент принял в первом чтении" ["Parliament approved the bill on the foreign agents in the first reading"], Delo.kg, 11 June 2015, <http://delo.kg/index.php/health-7/8689-zakonoproekt-ob-inostrannykh-agentakh-parlament-prinyal-v-pervom-chtenii>.

²⁴ "Парламент отозвал законопроект об иностранных агентах и запрете пропаганды ЛГБТ" ["Parliament withdrawn bills on Foreign agents and anti-LGBT propaganda"], KyrTag, 29 June 2015.

²⁵ Crisis Group interview, UN official, Bishkek, July 2015.

²⁶ Crisis Group interview, member of parliament, Bishkek, June 2015.

graft and cronyism at the heart of politics. “That would mean dismantling how they hold on to power”, said a Western diplomat.²⁷

Marriages of political convenience ahead of the elections, such as Ata-Jurt and Respublika, or the nominally social-democratic party Ata-Meken attempting to place ardent nationalist Osh ex-Mayor Melis Myrzakmatov third on its list despite a July conviction for abuse of office do little to enhance trust in the party system.²⁸ Closed lists in both national and local elections, whereby the party picks the candidates and their order on the list, and the voter selects only the party, deny the electorate opportunity to choose candidates whose success is tied to how they serve constituents. A number of elected officials say the system is no longer capable of representing voters or effecting change. An SDPK city councilor in a city with a population of 70,000 some 62km from Bishkek commented:

There is no communication or bond between the leadership and the people. Politicians’ and parties’ goals today are not to improve the lives of local people, but to only take official positions, authority and seats. The current system is not working. Parties appoint members to the city council by party lists; this is bad ... we get commands from above ... the parties do not work for the people; they do not improve local infrastructure; they do not build roads.²⁹

The hasty and only partial introduction of electronic voting for the parliamentary elections will not fully address ballot stuffing and other perennial irregularities.³⁰ Experts also question government figures on how many voters have submitted their biometric data, now a prerequisite to voting.³¹ A judge who questioned the constitutional legitimacy of this was dismissed.³² “If for whatever reason people can’t cast their vote on the day, the elections will be labelled fraudulent by parties who don’t make the threshold”, warned an elections expert.³³

In 2011, the threshold to enter parliament was raised from 5 per cent to 7 per cent, and in 2015 the deposit a party must make to contest the elections rose from 500,000

²⁷ Crisis Group interview, Bishkek, March 2015.

²⁸ Crisis Group Report, *The Pogroms in Kyrgyzstan*, op. cit. Mahinur Niyazova, “Омурбек Текебаев: Меня не интересует прошлое Мелиса Мырзакуматова, нам важно, что он не марионетка сегодняшней власти” [“Omurbek Tekebayev: I am not interested in the past of Melis Myrzakmatov, it is important for us that he is not a puppet of today’s government”], 24.kg, 7 July 2015. The electoral commission, however, blocked Ata-Meken’s manoeuvre, citing Myrzakmatov’s July conviction.

²⁹ Crisis Group interview, Kara-Balta, February 2015.

³⁰ “If smart ballot boxes don’t work we will count manually, this is not a total electronic elections as you can see in Estonia. This is a combination”. Senior presidential advisor, Crisis Group interview, Bishkek, April 2015.

³¹ By mid-July, 68.79 per cent of 3,777,499 eligible voters had submitted biometric data according to the government. “В Кыргызстане на 22 июля биометрическую регистрацию прошли 2 миллиона 598 тысяч 809 граждан” [“In Kyrgyzstan 2 million 598 thousand 809 citizens have completed biometric registration by 22 July”], State Registration Service, 23 July 2015, <http://biometrika.srs.kg/statistics/150-v-kyrgyzstanie-na-22-iulia-biometrichieskuiu-ri>. Aigerim Mambetova, “Более миллиона кыргызстанцев не прошли биометрическую регистрацию”.

³² Marat Uraliev, “Судья Сооронкулова намерена судиться с Советом судей Кыргызстана” [“Judge Sooronkulova intends to sue the Judicial Council of Kyrgyzstan”], Vecherniy Bishkek, 19 June 2015. In April, a former high-ranking official said, “[regarding] our courts, we have not moved one centimetre, changing the courts and judges ... this is the essence of authoritarianism”. Crisis Group interview, Bishkek. Sooronkulova is now 29th on the Ata-Meken party list.

³³ Crisis Group interview, Bishkek, February 2015.

soms to five million soms (approximately \$7,200 to \$72,000).³⁴ The former measure may result in a more manageable legislature that is likely to be focused on continuity ahead of the 2017 presidential election.³⁵ The international community, including Russia, as well as the government stress the importance of smooth transitions in both election years and view an orderly, credible parliamentary vote as a key stage in this. Unlike in Ukraine, Russia not only shares the West's interest in a stable Kyrgyzstan, but also sees value in demonstrating it can maintain relations with a democratic state.³⁶

Persistent and robust dialogue with the government over the integrity of the democratic process, beginning with how the parties operate, is required. The government would likely resist an effort of its bilateral partners to initiate this conversation, but simultaneous messaging from the EU, UN and OSCE on human rights, democracy and the rule of law could bolster the attempt.

III. Filling the Vacuum

The real and perceived failures of successive governments to manage affairs and project power beyond the capital have enabled the rise of nationalism and religious radicalisation. In the five years since the Osh violence, the Uzbek community has retreated from the public and political spheres. In an attempt to avoid direct confrontation with southern political parties, the government has refrained from defining what national identity and patriotism mean in multi-ethnic Kyrgyzstan. The elections, particularly if viewed as botched in any way, could provoke a wave of popular discontent with nationalist overtones. The lack of political reform also means that youth, ethnic minorities and the devout are excluded from mainstream participation. Political Islam is increasing, and senior officials anticipate it will consolidate before the 2020 parliamentary vote. If prevented from entering politics, these groups could become a focal point for protest.

A. Nationalism

In 2013, the government set Kyrgyz-language competency as the cornerstone of national identity. Its role, as outlined in that year's concept paper, made clear this applied to all ethnic groups. The document underscored the government's inability to challenge ethnic Kyrgyz nationalist dominance of politics, partly for fear of re-igniting protests in the south.³⁷ This is mainly at the expense of Uzbeks, though it also unnerves Russian speakers, including ethnic Kyrgyz in the north, chiefly Bishkek, who do not speak the language. A senior presidential adviser said it is vital that Uzbeks learn Kyrgyz if they want to be part of society; otherwise, they will remain on the margins, in low-paying jobs, and fodder for recruitment by religious extremists.³⁸

³⁴ "Конституционный Закон КР 'О выборах президента КР и депутатов Жогорку Кенеша КР'" ["Constitutional Law of the KR 'On the elections of the president of the KR and the members of parliament of the KR'"], Article 68, 2 July 2011. Nurzada Тунаева, "Жогорку Кенеш повысил избирательный залог для политических партий до 5 млн сомов" ["Parliament of Kyrgyzstan increased election deposit for political parties to 5 million soms"], K-News, 9 April 2015.

³⁵ Crisis Group interview, Russian diplomat, Bishkek, April 2015.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ "Country Reports on Human Rights Practices", op. cit.

³⁸ Crisis Group interview, Bishkek, April 2015.

In 2014, the option of taking the school graduation exam to qualify for university in Uzbek was abolished. The Uzbek community did not protest for fear of drawing unwelcome attention.³⁹ After the 2010 Osh events, it understood it was not welcome in political life.

Any challenge to the Kyrgyz nationalist narrative about those events meets a knee-jerk reaction. Parliament declared the head of the Kyrgyzstan Inquiry Commission – a research body Otunbayeva created following the Osh violence – persona non grata after it presented its findings.⁴⁰ The U.S. decision to give its Human Rights Defender Award in July 2015 to Azimjan Askarov, an ethnic Uzbek leader imprisoned since 2010, resulted in swift cancellation of the 1993 bilateral cooperation agreement, a reaction that fitted the pattern of intense sensitivity to criticism at the highest levels of the government.⁴¹

Since 2010, a number of Kyrgyz nationalist groups have emerged on the political scene. Some have just a handful of supporters, but others claim thousands of adherents across the country. Their growth should be seen in the context of the new Kyrgyz nationalism. They represent a variety of views, from moderate to extreme. Some have garnered media attention due to vocal positions on gay rights and headline-grabbing actions such as raids on brothels frequented by foreigners.⁴² Others focus on environmental issues, government reform, community initiatives or anti-immigration; all advocate anti-corruption measures and say they are responding to government ineffectiveness. Not all abide by the rule of law. Kyrk-Choro, a high-profile group with an anti-immigration and consumer protection agenda and a track record of raiding businesses and brothels, has an ambiguous relationship with law enforcement. No formal charges for holding people against their will during such raids have been pressed, and Kyrk-Choro says it has an agreement with the interior ministry that permits its activities.⁴³

These groups are active in north and south, are forging national networks and enjoy the cautious support of some politicians. An Ata-Jurt legislator said:

If these groups are helping out the state, well done. They are working to eliminate bad things that happen, and I welcome groups like them who help the state to work. I do not hear about such groups in the south, but I hear about them here [in

³⁹ “Kyrgyz abandon Uzbek for secondary-school graduation test”, RFE/RL, 13 March 2014. Crisis Group interview, U.S. diplomat, Bishkek, April 2014.

⁴⁰ Crisis Group Report, *Widening Ethnic Divisions in the South*, op. cit., p. 3.

⁴¹ “The Statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs ... on presenting the U.S. State Department Human Rights Defender Award to Azimzhan Askarov”, 15 July 2015, www.mfa.gov.kg/news/view/idnews/269. The cancellation came into effect on 20 August. Its impact on aid from the U.S. is uncertain. Arslan Sabyrbekov, “Kyrgyzstan denounces cooperation agreement with the U.S.”, *The Central Asia – Caucasus Analyst*, 27 August 2015.

⁴² “Видео: Концерт группы Kazaky в Бишкеке сорван ‘противниками геев’” [“Video: The concert of Kazaky band was disrupted by ‘the opponents of gay’”], Kloop Media, 18 October 2014; “Видео: Как ‘борцы за ценности’ напали на кыргызских девушек и китайских мигрантов”, [“Video: How ‘fighters for values’ attacked Kyrgyz girls and Chinese migrants”], Kloop Media, 30 December 2014.

⁴³ “Кыргыз Чоролору: Мы действуем по соглашению с МВД, Генпрокуратурой и ГКНБ” [“Kyrgyz Choroloru: We act according to the agreement with the Ministry of Internal Affairs, General Prosecutor’s Office and the State Committee for National Security”], Kloop Media, 31 December 2014.

the north]. We are a multi-ethnic state. I don't support their nationalistic ideas, but their help to the state is useful.⁴⁴

Most Western observers associate Kyrgyz nationalism with the 2010 violence or the more recent promotion of intolerance, such as the breaking up of gay-rights (LGBT) events as an affront to Kyrgyz traditional values.⁴⁵ In Crisis Group interviews, however, leaders of seven nationalist groups each professed to respect the country's multi-ethnic nature; some said Kyrgyz nationalism could be modernised.⁴⁶

Nationalist groups have also evolved in some respects so as to create broader policy platforms. Kalys, for example, which gained notoriety for harassing the LGBT community as "alien to the Kyrgyz mentality and traditional family values", says it wants to devolve power to provinces and districts; strengthen the prime minister; appoint ministers with expertise; have mayors appointed by the electorate, not the city council; introduce education and health care reforms; and reform the civil service to reduce corruption.⁴⁷

Despite some policy ideas that might correspond to many assessments of what could constitute meaningful reform, Western-funded and orientated institutions are understandably cautious. That will not stop Kyrgyz parties from seeking their support, however.⁴⁸ A former minister said:

Patriotic groups such as Kyrk-Choro are from the marginalised part of society ... but they can easily be used as an instrument – not only for something, but against something as well. They could be short-lived, but they certainly can be used to create instability.⁴⁹

A high-ranking member said Kyrk-Choro's concern is law and order issues, such as immigration, corruption and consumer protection, not ethnic, and that it refrains from raids on businesses in the south because "the situation is too fragile".⁵⁰ But since 2010, the only portion of the population with freedom to discuss national identity is the ethnic Kyrgyz portion. Neither nationalist groups nor the government seem aware of or, for now, interested in challenging this. Nevertheless, a more immediate concern is that some of these groups have already demonstrated disregard for the rule of law and the rights of others and have elicited no more than a limp response from the police. In

⁴⁴ Crisis Group interview, Bishkek, April 2015.

⁴⁵ Baktygul Chynybaeva and Farangis Najibullah, "Kyrgyz group wrecks day against homophobia" RFE/RL, 18 May 2015.

⁴⁶ "I don't like the word patriot or patriotic; this word lost its value. Everything is now being labelled patriotic. I consider myself nationalist, but nationalist who loves his country, loves Kyrgyzstan, loves his people and his history If you are nationalist it doesn't mean you are a Nazi. There is a big difference between the two. I am not against any other ethnicities, but I just want to be able to be me". Crisis Group interview, Kalys, Bishkek, April 2015.

⁴⁷ "Видео: Митинг против НПО и 'гей-пропаганды' в Бишкеке" ["Video: Meeting against NGO and 'gay-propaganda' in Bishkek"], Kloop Media, 12 March 2014. Crisis Group interview, Kalys, April 2014.

⁴⁸ Kalys announced election support for Zamandash. "10 общественных организаций и две политические партии присоединились к партии 'Замандаш'" ["Ten public organisations and two parties joined 'Zamandash'"], 24.kg, 4 September 2015.

⁴⁹ Crisis Group interview, Bishkek, April 2015.

⁵⁰ "We are not trying to work with the south a lot, because of different ethnicities there. It is a very fragile region. [In the future,] we will try to do more work on promoting friendship between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz there". Crisis Group interview, Bishkek, April 2015.

the event of tensions around the parliamentary elections, their leaders may not be able to control supporters.

A broad debate is needed. Politically ambitious nationalist groups should be held accountable for their policy platforms. The government should urgently lead in redefining what national identity and patriotism mean in Kyrgyzstan. The 2013 concept paper on inter-ethnic relations should be re-formulated to put less emphasis on the Kyrgyz language and more on ethnic minority participation in public and political life.

B. *Political Islam*

Kyrgyzstan is a majority Muslim country. Attitudes toward Islam's role in politics are changing, but the constitution forbids religious parties and religious groups from pursuing "political goals".⁵¹ Civil society now includes a broad spectrum of groups and views and a growth in the number of organisations professing the Islamic faith.⁵² Several members of parliament, where a prayer room was opened in 2011, are openly religious. President Atambayev donated land for construction of a mosque in honour of those who died during the ouster of ex-President Bakiyev.⁵³ A 2013 survey found that one fifth of 1,600 NGO leaders believed the government should adopt laws that conform to Sharia (Islamic law).⁵⁴ Political Islam's impact may be minimal on the 2015 elections but is likely to grow during the next five-year cycle. A senior presidential adviser commented:

Islam is a very serious question for various reasons: our location, for 70 years we were kept apart from religion; now we have very zealous converts, and the pendulum is swinging from atheism to Islam Newly converted Islamists are trying to be part of events in the country; internally [we have] poverty, externally, Syria. We must respond by improving people's lives.⁵⁵

Being Muslim is a facet of Kyrgyz and Uzbek identities.⁵⁶ In the evolving political narrative after the ouster of Bakiyev and the Osh events, however, ethnic identity trumps common religious identity. Islam is now used as both framework and justification for a wave of "patriarchal nationalism", a senior UN official said.⁵⁷ For some politicians, this is acceptable, because it shows Kyrgyz "good ways to live".⁵⁸ Others are critical of Islam's growing influence in society and politics:

⁵¹ "International Religious Freedom Report for 2013 – Kyrgyz Republic", U.S. State Department, 28 July 2014.

⁵² "Неправительственные организации и процессы принятия решения органами власти" ["Non-Governmental Organisations and Decision-making Processes of the Institutions of Authority"], National Institute for Strategic Studies of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2014.

⁵³ Svetlana Moiseyeva, "Атамбаев отдал свой участок под строительство мечети в честь 'апрелевцев'" ["Atambayev contributed his private site for the construction of a mosque in honour of the victims of 2010 'April events'"], Vecherniy Bishkek, 6 April 2015.

⁵⁴ "Состояние и перспективы развития неправительственного сектора Кыргызстана – Отчет по исследованию" ["The State and Perspectives of Development of Non-Governmental Sector of Kyrgyzstan – Research Report"], Association of Civil Society Support Centres, 2013. The highest support was in Batken, 62 per cent; Osh, 44 per cent; and Chui, 29 per cent. 48 per cent responded "absolutely disagree", 24 per cent "rather disagree", 8 per cent found it difficult to answer.

⁵⁵ Crisis Group interview, Bishkek, April 2015.

⁵⁶ 75 per cent of the Kyrgyz population identify as Muslims.

⁵⁷ Crisis Group interview, Bishkek, August 2014.

⁵⁸ "Islam is spreading out not only in the south, but also all over Kyrgyzstan. I like that Islam is bringing good ways for people to live, and it is showing them good examples to live by. ... [If an Islamic

2,000 mosques [have been built] in just 25 years. This is not soft power ... we have huge mosques, poor mosques, but in every village we have a mosque. School used to be compulsory; now the mosque is [We] could have an Islamic party in the future.⁵⁹

In some areas of the country, tension between secular and religious identity is expressed as a generational divide:

Religious radicalisation is a problem, especially among young people. ... The secular state is losing, and youths find what they are looking for in religion ... we can see the conflict between the older and younger generations, between the religious and not religious in villages and towns, conflicts between the state officials and religious persons.⁶⁰

In a small percentage of the population, this encourages religious extremism.⁶¹

The government and politicians seem uncertain of how to address Islam's relationship to national and political identities. Some politicians use religious gestures to bolster their reputations, while the government's control of religion targets religious and ethnic minorities.⁶² The president approved a concept paper on religion in November 2014 that states religious organisations may not be involved with political parties, yet a prominent legislator publicly expressed hope the Union of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan would help his party raise the deposit needed to contest the elections.⁶³ A UN specialist on democracy and governance said, "we see the influence of Islam in this parliament, more than ever ... secularism is already troubled".⁶⁴

The response of the government and the security services alike to the intersection of religion and politics is at best muddled.⁶⁵ The issue is framed as a security matter when it concerns Uzbeks but tolerated when it forms part of a "patriotic" ethnic Kyrgyz narrative.⁶⁶ The U.S. State Department noted:

party emerged in the future,] I will support it, because I am a Muslim". Crisis Group interview, Ata-Jurt parliamentarian, Bishkek, March 2015.

⁵⁹ Crisis Group interview, former senior official, Bishkek, April 2015.

⁶⁰ Crisis Group telephone interview, Batken, April 2015.

⁶¹ Crisis Group Europe and Central Asia Briefing N°72, *Syria Calling: Radicalisation in Central Asia*, 20 January 2015.

⁶² Mushfig Bayram and John Kinahan, "Kyrgyzstan: Religious Freedom Survey, November 2014", *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*, vol. 35, issue 1, Article 4, 2015. "Country Reports on Human Rights Practices", op. cit.

⁶³ "Концепция государственной политики Кыргызской Республики в религиозной сфере на 2014-2020 годы" ["The concept of the state policy of the Kyrgyz Republic in the religious sphere for 2014-2020"], approved by decree of the president, 14 November 2014, www.president.kg/ru/news/ukazy/4901_podpisan_ukaz_o_kontseptsii_gosudarstvennoy_politiki_kyrgyzskoy_respubliki_v_religioznoy_sfere_na_2014-2020_godyi. "I think we can find five million soms. I hope the Union of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan will help us The objective of our party is the revival of values. We need state ideology for development. So far we have not had it. We are just the bad copy of the Western states. We have all sins of the capitalist system: prostitution, immorality, corruption. We have child-beggars everywhere. People forgot about morality". Tursanbai Bakir Uulu, Erk party leader, press conference, Bishkek, 24 March 2015.

⁶⁴ Crisis Group interview, Bishkek, April 2015.

⁶⁵ Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Bishkek, June 2015.

⁶⁶ "Kyrgyzstan: Religious Freedom Survey", op. cit.

According to NGOs in the South, arrests and harassment of individuals allegedly involved in extremist religious groups – predominantly ethnic Uzbeks – increased. Attorneys reported that detained persons often sought to avoid physical abuse or the court system by quickly paying off the arresting officers. Attorneys believed this practice was most prominent in the South.⁶⁷

A presidential adviser said, “ensuring fundamental human rights and civil liberties for all – in line with Kyrgyzstan’s constitution and international commitments – regardless of denomination or ethnicity would be an important step”.⁶⁸ However, the government has systematically failed at this. High-profile cases such as Askarov’s or the arrest in February 2015 of the ethnic-Uzbek imam from a popular mosque in Kara-Suu, a predominately Uzbek town near Osh, on extremism charges, do little to inspire confidence among the Uzbek community.⁶⁹ Meanwhile, fading ethnic Kyrgyz politicians such as Nurlan Motuev are free to hold press conferences declaring their allegiance to the Islamic State (IS) without any public follow-up from law enforcement.⁷⁰

The international community should make clear that such double standards weaken the state’s credibility, exacerbate social fault lines and leave the country vulnerable to internal or external shocks. This message needs to be delivered consistently, even though the government may react unfavourably, as shown by the scrapping of its cooperation agreement with the U.S. The UN and the OSCE give the West and Russia joint mechanisms for advocating reform. Russian diplomats say they seek cooperation with the West in Kyrgyzstan.⁷¹ However, Russia has greater leverage. It is the main source of aid and investment and the destination for thousands of Kyrgyz migrants each year, such that Kyrgyz officials say they had no choice but to join the Moscow-dominated Eurasian Economic Union.⁷² Through the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), it is also the country’s security guarantor.

A stable Kyrgyzstan is a priority for Moscow. Bilaterally and through multilateral organisations, it should urge the government to take an inclusive, measured, consistent approach to both nationalism and political Islam. If Russia wants to avoid being asked to intervene militarily in a domestic crisis, as it was by Otunbayeva in June 2010, preventive engagement with the next parliament is required.

IV. Democracy Matters

Kyrgyzstan importantly demonstrates that a Central Asian state can move beyond authoritarianism. Its ability to realise genuine parliamentary democracy, however, is complicated by growing disillusionment with an inept political elite, the legacy of Osh 2010 and an economy increasingly dependent on remittances.

As in other states in the region, space for civil society is closing, and the supporters of “Western” values such as human rights are increasingly viewed with suspicion.

⁶⁷ “Country Reports on Human Rights Practices”, op. cit.

⁶⁸ Crisis Group interview, Bishkek, April 2015.

⁶⁹ “Kyrgyzstan silences popular Imam with extremism charges”, EurasiaNet.org, 17 February 2015.

⁷⁰ Motuev said, “I would love to hold Islamic revolution here if people support me”, and: “If I was a president, I would call everyone to convert to Islam. If they don’t want to turn to Islam they will have to leave the country”, 24 March 2015.

⁷¹ Crisis Group interview, January 2015.

⁷² Crisis Group interview, presidential adviser, Bishkek, April 2015.

The initiators of the NGO bill, a senior presidential adviser said, are “trying to discredit liberal values”.⁷³ The president’s foreign policy has moved the country firmly into the orbit of Russia, whose diplomats stress the strategic importance of its independence but question the value of most NGOs. Domestic NGOs in Osh are on “survival mode”, said a UN official; international NGOs face increasing hurdles; and the foreign ministry appears hesitant to meet with Western diplomats.⁷⁴ Maintaining dialogue is all the more important given the political investment made since the 2005 ouster of President Akayev. That it is possible is shown by the example of the UK, which managed tensions around the Kyrgyz government’s request for extradition of Maxim Bakiyev, the son of the former president, and improved bilateral relations in a short time by initiating high-level visits and cooperation in areas of mutual interest such as criminal justice.⁷⁵

Failure to kick-start political and economic reform and questionable attempts to regulate religious and ethnic affairs leave Kyrgyzstan vulnerable, internally and externally. To reduce the risks, the government should engage in a national dialogue with a wide variety of stakeholders, including ethnic minorities. The West and Russia should support this initiative. As part of the dialogue, the 2013 concept paper on inter-ethnic relations should be revised to emphasise ethnic inclusion rather than language obligations. Reinstating the option of taking the school graduation exam for university entrance in Uzbek could stimulate that community’s confidence in the process and show commitment to redressing rights. Many activists, both nationalist and religiously-leaning, are young and feel excluded. Youth forums at local and national levels and participation in the political process could help to moderate their positions and so pre-empt their disruptive potential at times of political or socio-economic stress.

Western interest in Kyrgyzstan has waned since the Manas airbase was closed in 2014, but it would be short sighted to let relations drift.⁷⁶ China is vigilant but restrained on Kyrgyz domestic matters.⁷⁷ Russian diplomats urge broad international support and say, “Kyrgyzstan depends on the countries of the world, Russia, Kazakhstan, its neighbours, China, U.S., Europe They cannot develop without our help”.⁷⁸ Russia is, moreover, deeply involved in Kyrgyzstan’s security: Colonel-General Vladimir Shamanov noted recently that its airborne battalion tactical groups are on 24-hour standby to assist Kyrgyzstan and its neighbour, Tajikistan, should events in Afghanistan or elsewhere warrant.⁷⁹

In a Central Asia that is brittle and increasingly connected to mutual concerns such as uncertainty in Afghanistan and the growth of IS, Kyrgyzstan’s shaky democratic credentials have regionwide security implications. Should its domestic situation crumble, the instability could well spread. Tensions with Uzbekistan fester, with neither government displaying the wherewithal or motivation to address them. Resource

⁷³ Crisis Group interview, Bishkek, April 2015.

⁷⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Western diplomats, Bishkek, February, April, June 2015.

⁷⁵ In June 2010, Maxim Bakiyev fled to the UK by private jet and applied for asylum. Maxton Walker, “Kyrgyz president attacks UK for ‘hosting a guy who robbed us’”, *The Guardian*, 14 July 2013.

⁷⁶ Manas was leased by the U.S. to support the war in Afghanistan, 2001-2014.

⁷⁷ As it is elsewhere in Central Asia. Crisis Group Asia Report N°244, *China’s Central Asia Problem*, 27 February 2013.

⁷⁸ Crisis Group interview, Russian diplomat, Bishkek April 2015.

⁷⁹ “Пик ВДВ всегда впереди” [“The Airborne always looks ahead”], *Krasnaya Zvezda*, 30 July 2015.

competition between ethnic groups in border areas is high, predictably seasonal and largely unaddressed.⁸⁰ Violence there could respark animosities inside Kyrgyzstan.⁸¹ The country is also vulnerable to external pressures. Instability in Uzbekistan or Tajikistan could impact the broader Ferghana Valley region, including southern Kyrgyzstan. October's elections and policies pursued thereafter will test Kyrgyzstan's commitment to the inclusive, progressive society achievement of which would be of mutual strategic value to all its international partners.

V. Conclusion

Failure to address ethnic tensions, corruption, extreme nationalism and religious radicalisation would take Kyrgyzstan further down the path to failure. Violent unrest, which would become a real risk, could quickly have an impact on both immediate neighbours and wider international partners, particularly Russia, which could be called on to intervene. Lack of reform has fostered an environment that excludes ethnic minorities, youth and the religiously devout from mainstream political participation, while allowing Kyrgyz nationalism free rein to dominate. The foundations for a stable, multi-ethnic, tolerant state can only be laid if both the government and political parties take steps to redress this. Merely managing a smooth transition between 2015 parliamentary and 2017 presidential elections is unlikely to produce lasting results, while further undermining public confidence in democracy.

The government's 2013 concept paper on "National Unity and Inter-Ethnic Relations" is a modest but insufficient effort. The government and each party should commit to inclusive political dialogue with a wide variety of actors, north and south, including nationalists, ethnic minorities and religious groups, to identify common concerns and promote civic and political cooperation. This may mean at the outset dialogue with groups with abrasive agendas and little experience, but they are an unavoidable part of the political landscape. Left on the sidelines, they may become even more inflexible. Russia and the West should support such initiatives at the local as well as national level. By assuming the role of guarantor of Kyrgyzstan's security, Moscow has a special interest in seeing its ally remain a reasonably viable state.

The goals for the authorities and their partners should be to review where post-2010 ethnic and religious policies have led and to develop a shared strategy for an inclusive path forward. Russia and the West share interests in Kyrgyzstan that gives them a unique opportunity for constructive collaboration. They should use the OSCE and UN, which are well-placed to assist, to jointly encourage the government. Kyrgyzstan's reputation as Central Asia's most progressive state is not undeserved, though it is a relative one and beset by problems. Moving now to address those problems would strengthen the country's long-term prospects.

Bishkek/Brussels, 30 September 2015

⁸⁰ Crisis Group Europe and Central Asia Report N°233, *Water Pressures in Central Asia*, 11 September 2014.

⁸¹ Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Bishkek, June 2014.

Appendix A: Map of Kyrgyzstan



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