

Conflict in Southern Kyrgyzstan: political provocation or ethnic confrontation?

Conflict in the South of Kyrgyzstan, mainly in Osh and Jalal-Abad province, manifests a complex nature and needs to be addressed thoroughly by taking into account social history of Southern Kyrgyzstan, character of political regimes in Kyrgyzstan and consequences of liberal reforms tracking from onset of Kyrgyzstan's independence (1991) and challenges to democracy and development in Central Asia.

To start with facts should be presented to give scale of conflict:

- I. Eruption of conflict: the conflict started late evening on the 10th of June, culminated on the 11-12th of June and waned on the 13-14th of June. However, the conflict is not yet over since still certain quarters are blocked by the Kyrgyz military to intercept flight of mercenaries, militants and armed citizens of Osh;
- II. Main tools and participants of the conflict: the tools ranged from cudgels to heavy arms like tommy-guns and sniper rifles and fire-bombs. Participants were young mobs of the Kyrgyz and Uzbek origin, international well-armed and well-equipped mercenaries and militants and national army and police;
- III. Hearth of conflict: city of Osh, home to multiple ethnic groups: Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Russian, Azerbaijani, Tajiks, Tatars and many others. Main competing and confronting ethnic groups are the Kyrgyz and Uzbek. After turning Osh to the epicentre the militants plagued the neighbouring Jalal-Abad province, home to both the Kyrgyz and Uzbek, in order to destabilise the country and ruin the Interim Government of Kyrgyzstan that took power after President Kurmanbek Bakiev had taken flight to Belarus to find refuge under protection of its authoritarian president Alexander Lukashenko;
- IV. Casualties: death toll is 251 people according to official sources and around 2000 and more according to unofficial sources. It is quite uneasy to assess the death toll because suffered inhabitants of the city of Osh buried corpses promptly during the conflict;
- V. Damages: the city of Osh is burnt by 70% media say, social and entertainment facilities almost collapsed, population starved during the peak of the conflict and afterwards and despaired facing lack of medicines and qualified medical care, private residencies, restaurants and shops were looted and private cars were hijacked;
- VI. Refugees: the Uzbek refugees who fled from combat in the city of Osh and Jalal-Abad province numbered 85 thousand people in Uzbekistan and 120 thousand along the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border, according to Red Cross data. Nowadays, they return to their homes burnt and destroyed. On the 23rd of June thirty-three thousand five hundred had returned to Osh;
- VII. Precedents: the recent conflict is the second clash between the two ethnic groups. In June, 1990, both had slain each other until the Soviet troops ceased the hostilities and Soviet authorities punished culprits and instigators;

History: Who is Master of Osh?

Hoary antiquity in Central Asia left a beautiful, gardened and well-groomed city of Osh on Great Silk Road and at a strategic place converging hot Ferghana valley with cool Tien Shan Mountains. This large economic, commercial and cultural centre had connected Eastern Asia to the Middle East and Europe up until the time the Europeans found seaway to India and China thereby vanishing continental trade crucial for economic prosperity, cultural finesse and political dynamism of Central Asia.

The city of Osh located at the easternmost end of the Ferghana valley, which is shared by Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, is home for multiple ethnic groups. Generally, the Uzbeks, nationally minority and locally majority, face the competition of the nationally dominating Kyrgyz, i.e. economic domination skews political domination. Both groups struggle for owning Osh, desirable prize for rival groups.

The Uzbeks are descendants of ancient sedentary Sogdian population who are traditionally excellent traders, agriculturists, restaurateurs and artisans and who adopted the name of Uzbek, nomads of Turkic origin. The Uzbeks were the first to settle in Central Asia out of a legion of nomads who determined the fate of Central Asia in such a way that the nomads from inland of Asia made the kings while the sedentary Sogdians bred in the Persian highest culture permeated public administration and cultural circles and provided economic foundation to nomadic kingdoms. The Kyrgyz, also of the Turkic origin, who traditionally deal with animal husbandry had lived in the mountains and from time to time came into contact with sedentary culture. Up until the Soviet modernisation policies both cultures had coexisted harmoniously in economic and social spheres but tensely in politics. After the Soviet state had settled the

nomad Kyrgyz in the 1930-50s both ethnic groups found themselves in harsh social and economic competition for the same scarce resources.

The Uzbeks reside in the centre of Osh and several outskirts, some at the very Uzbek-Kyrgyz border, but tracing from old times they mainly form quarters (*mahalla*) thus making themselves an easy target for attacks. However, there are exceptions when the Uzbeks live together with the Kyrgyz and vice versa. The Kyrgyz who settled some decades ago form their quarters that surround almost the whole city. The thriving centre feeds entrepreneurial, laborious, diligent but crafty and huckstering Uzbeks. In contrast to them, naïve, honest, lazy and warlike Kyrgyz bask in political, military, administrative and intellectual fields. Facts of mutual permeations into opposite fields have never broken the established rule.

Rich Uzbeks possess TV companies and numerous restaurants and cafes and enterprises in Osh thereby dictating employment policies in private sector. Most of taxi drivers were the ordinary Uzbeks. The Uzbeks' dominance in the private sector indulged by corrupt Kyrgyz governors and mayors irritated the Kyrgyz. Every ordinary Kyrgyz, both rural and urban, was somehow discontent with the Uzbeks in Osh. Similarly, the ordinary Uzbeks were irritated by the corrupt Kyrgyz officials and had to share employment opportunities with the Kyrgyz. For long time since getting independence the Kyrgyz had a safety valve to restrain the rich Uzbeks overdoing things. Cautious to bluntly quash the Uzbeks in the state claiming adherence to standards of democracy, human rights and political citizenship, in the past the Kyrgyz often resorted to mafia leaders operating in the South. Most of these gang leaders clamping down on the rich Uzbeks were murdered during the five-year rule of President Kurmanbek Bakiev (2005 – 2010) whose family engaged in criminal activities to enrich. Thus, the acquisitive Bakiev family relieved the Uzbeks' burden but undeliberately aggravated tense inter-ethnic relations.

Such tense reality when the corrupt Kyrgyz officials get wealthy and the Uzbek rich men need more power and ordinary citizens suffer could incite the inhabitants of Osh to resort to violence to resolve contradictions but that needed provocations. To avoid conflicts both communities had to keep constant communication with each other. However, such safety valve was inoperative at the time the conflict erupted.

To broader grasp the conflict skipping from local to national grounds, namely political regimes, is necessary.

Political regimes in Kyrgyzstan

Since 1991 Kyrgyzstan has experienced two authoritarian regimes under Askar Akaev (1991-2005) and Kurmanbek Bakiev (2005-2010). Both regimes, toppled down by mass uprisings, characterised with intolerance to opposition, clannish rule and plebiscitary democracy. Following Guillermo O'Donnell, they have been delegative democracies. In order to understand why the violent events occurred in the South some aspects of these delegative democracies must be discerned. Along with these Kyrgyzstan is experiencing democratic regime established by recalcitrant opposition groups that resisted the Bakiev's regime. The democratic regime's fallibility also contributed to the conflict.

Building National State: Being and Becoming Kyrgyz

Kyrgyzstan is first of all home to the Kyrgyz though the government always declares universal values and tries to unify eighty ethnic groups inhabiting this country into one nation. Nevertheless, imbibing loyalty and patriotism to all Kyrgyzstan's citizens appears to be a hard task. Efforts of the state, plagued with corruption and conflictive development, to imbibe loyalty to its ethnic minorities have not succeeded well. In political field being Kyrgyz with quite essential financial and political capital opens career prospects while for ethnic minorities being non-Kyrgyz forces them to form or join groups in which they have certain influence especially on their congeners; anyway, they obey to the Kyrgyz allies and patrons. Thus, up until now only did Russians occupy the top positions in political Olympus, namely, prime ministers, ministers and deputy ministers and members of parliament. The Uzbeks enjoyed the level of MP and deputy ministers and governors.

The ethnic minorities in Kyrgyzstan are exploited during elections. Their votes balloted for presidential candidates and political parties on their famous leader's suggestion are highly cropped by different political groups and parties in Kyrgyzstan. They take part in the politics but they are not assimilated to become Kyrgyz. The Kyrgyz, as nomad culture is open and perceptive to other cultures, are tolerant to the ethnic minorities in Kyrgyzstan. Moreover, their rights to preserve their culture are guaranteed by constitution.

Since 2001 when the Russian language was adopted as official language because most ethnic minorities did not understand the Kyrgyz language to facilitate inter-ethnic communication the Uzbeks on completely different grounds demand making the Uzbek language official. Their grounds are the portion of the Uzbeks in the total population of Kyrgyzstan. They were neither heeded nor encouraged. Generally recognised tolerance to the ethnic groups was going along liberalisation of society in Kyrgyzstan.

Liberalised Society versus Corrupt State

Kyrgyzstan singles out among Central Asian countries as hearth of incessant political conflicts due to its unique experience. In 1991 top leaders of Kyrgyzstan chose to radically pursue liberal policies in economy and politics, social sphere and culture. As a result, on one hand, they spawned a strong civil society, diversity of political parties and leaders and, mostly importantly for understanding Osh events, free expression of culture by ethnic groups; on the other hand, they did not engender economic growth and improvement of living standards and did not abate corruption. In the economic realm, unreformed and rotten to the core public administration hampered economic growth.

As known from human history, situation in which liberal society faces corrupt state is a detonating mixture. The corrupt state machinery steered by lacklustre politicians does not tackle well socioeconomic issues while the liberal society demands efficiency of authorities and public officials, struggles for justice and demounts ineffective rulers. Particularly in Kyrgyzstan, intermittent conflicts entail public disorder and destructive elements, especially criminal milieu, abuse impotence of state. The state, especially public coercive and security bodies, at crucial times hardly stops social chaos; however, the society will not surrender to dictatorship in the face of the chaos. Kyrgyzstan has been experiencing the chaos since 2005, year of Tulip Revolution.

Two Bouts of Revolution in Kyrgyzstan

In Central Asian countries preservation of features of traditional society does not allow full protests against inefficiency and corruption of authorities, thereby, providing long-term presidencies. Kyrgyzstan is unique in Central Asia as its people have routed two authoritarian presidents. Proliferation of liberal ideas, lack of natural resources, state corruption, robust civil society and activities of the opposition never allowed presidents to repose. President Askar Akaev fled to Moscow in March 2005 after gerrymandering parliamentary elections; President Kurmanbek Bakiev fled to Belarus in April 2010 after wide social unrest in several regions and capital provoked by illicit privatisation of national assets, review of social security regulations and high tariffs for electricity. If political causes predetermined the first revolution, social causes did the second one. Both presidents tried to consolidate the power in their families' hands. Their families had concentrated large financial and political resources before their debacles and flights abroad.

Poverty produces disorderly citizens prone to marauding, paid protests and facile manipulations of politicians. Therefore, concomitant to both revolutions were mass pillages, public disorder, hyperactivity of criminal milieu and new regime consolidation. After the 2005 revolution social masses got flair of their power, permissiveness and impunity allowing politicians to masterly manipulate them.

The recent revolution in April 2010 brought to power a group of politicians who have long opposed to Akaev and Bakiev. After the flight of Bakiev they nationalised the enterprises embezzled by Bakiev's family, formed Interim Government, convened Constitutional Assembly to elaborate new constitution and called referendum on the 27th of June, 2010, and parliamentary elections on the 10th of October, 2010. The members of the Interim Government intend to establish parliamentary form of government that better precludes usurpation of power, corruption of state heads and is conducive to democracy and human rights.

In this chaotic situation when the state governed by the Interim Government is feeble and the society is disorderly the conflict in the city of Osh and Jalal-Abad province was staged.

Violent events in the South

The armed clashes in the city of Osh and Jalal-Abad province proved to be planned action. The analysis of background and current of events show that such intensive conflict could not occur without provocation and misinformation. The baseline features of the conflict are fault of communication between the Kyrgyz and Uzbek communities in Osh and negligence of the Interim Government.

Background of Conflict

Several events in spring 2010 predated the recent clashes and armed conflict in Osh. First of all, it should be recalled that the Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in Osh closely and operatively cooperated not to spark inter-ethnic conflicts in Osh on the 7th of April, the day mass uprisings forced Bakiev to flee.

In the first decade of April, in the outskirts of Bishkek, capital of Kyrgyzstan, the Kyrgyz youth under pretext of squatting lands owned by local people attacked the Turks, one of ethnic minorities in Kyrgyzstan, and burnt their houses. As official investigation found it out they were provoked by the Bakiev's supporters in Bishkek.

The relations between the Uzbeks and Kyrgyz fractured in mid-May in Jalal-Abad province, Southern Kyrgyzstan, intensifying mutual suspicions and prejudices. In the context of May events the Interim Government made use of one Uzbek leader in Jalal-Abad, Kadyrjan Batyrov and his armed supporters, to resist violent protests organised by Bakiev's family who derives from Jalal-Abad. In the heat of the fight Kadyrjan Batyrov and his armed supporters burnt the houses of the Bakievs in Jalal-Abad and demanded 50% representation of the Uzbeks in state bodies throughout Kyrgyzstan. Such behaviour enraged the Kyrgyz who demanded Batyrov's arrest and punishment; however, they did not undertake any retaliation. Accused of kindling inter-ethnic discord he fled abroad.

In-between the society revealed corruption among the members of the Interim Government. Some forces eavesdropped on the phones of these members and uploaded their talks on Internet. Similarly, talks between the K. Bakiev's son, Maxim Bakiev, and brother, Janysh Bakiev, were eavesdropped on. They discussed a plan of sending armed groups to destabilise and spread chaos in the country before the referendum and foil parliamentary elections. Such a plan was directed to undermine the Interim Government and to convince the masses that in Kyrgyzstan the central power is easily removed and shuffled.

Later on the eve of the clashes in Osh, the rich Uzbeks of Osh declared for separatism on the Uzbek TV. They might have believed in Uzbekistan's help in fighting crumbling central power and might have been instigated by the Bakiev's family to get independence or autonomy. The Interim Government neither detained the separatists nor punished Batyrov for committing crimes in Jalal-Abad. The members of the Interim Government as well as their respective parties were mainly preoccupied with upcoming referendum and parliamentary elections. Security agencies seem to have not been on alert of possible provocations.

Another factor that contributed to the conflict was the translation of new constitution into the Uzbek language. Coupled with the Batyrov's demands of the Uzbeks' promotion to power this translation enraged the Kyrgyz. As mentioned above, the status of the Uzbek language has long been bone of contention.

Conflict in the city of Osh

The clashes and armed conflict in Osh and Jalal-Abad province broke out at the night of the 10th of June. An angry mob of armed Uzbek youth gathered on central streets and, when Chief of Osh police arrived at their venue to dispel the mob, they opened fire at him. The police retreated since no immediate and adequate response was available at the time. The mobs of youth launched attacks on public buildings, shops, hotels, student dormitories after signal rockets were fired in night air. Noteworthy to say, similarly armed mobs fired and flung grenades at trade centres and fired with grenade discharges at refuelling stations in Tokmak, one of northern multi-ethnic towns.

On the 11th of June, the Kyrgyz descended from the mountainous villages. Armed with cudgels, knives and fire bombs they attacked the Uzbek quarters but Uzbeks firearms mowed them down in the streets. On the 12th of June, the Kyrgyz after having dealt with the military and police managed to get the firearms. This time the Uzbeks suffered casualties. The ethnic confrontation culminated on the 12th of June and waned on the 13-14th of June.

On the 13-14th of June, the instigators extended mass riots into the Jalal-Abad province where the Uzbeks live compactly. They burnt city of Jalal-Abad and pillaged the downtown but failed to spark the conflicts there since local authorities had already warned the citizens of provocations.

It should be said that for several days the state abandoned the inhabitants of Osh. Total chaos reigned in the city: mass pillage, carnage, lack of energy. The disorder frightened and debilitated ordinary citizens who somehow could protect their houses but lacked firearms. The mobs and instigators were burning houses and demolished urban infrastructure. The organisers of the mass riots had prepared the Kyrgyz and Uzbeks groups separately. They were not local Kyrgyz and Uzbeks. The "Kyrgyz" groups attacked the Uzbek quarters and the "Uzbek" groups attacked the Kyrgyz areas. In the Uzbeks areas they announced that large numbers of the Kyrgyz are approaching the Uzbeks while in the Kyrgyz areas they announced that the army of Uzbekistan had invaded the city of Osh to protect the Uzbeks. The rumours evoked mass exodus of the Uzbeks to the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border and of the Kyrgyz to the mountains. To enhance the effect of the chaos the organisers had hired international thugs, mainly former members of Tajik opposition who had waged civil war in Tajikistan in 1992-1997 and cannot return to Tajikistan after perpetrating heinous crimes and Latvian snipers. The snipers indiscriminately shot Osh inhabitants to enflame inter-ethnic conflicts.

The organisers of the mass disorder had prepared and possessed psychological and mortal weapons. They adroitly capitalised mutual ethnic distrust, suspicions and prejudices. According to their calculations, the Kyrgyz would defend the sovereignty and integrity of Kyrgyzstan. The location of Osh is so crucial for Kyrgyzstan and for the Kyrgyz that if Osh is lost to any separatist group, for example, Uzbek rich men in Osh, Kyrgyzstan and the Kyrgyz are lost. After that the Batken province sandwiched between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan will automatically be swallowed by Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Finally, the Kyrgyz would vindicate national pride by not allowing a new Kosovo on the map. The rich Uzbeks might have had illusion of dominance and seeming majority and dreamt of separatism, especially after expected backing by Uzbekistan. They would declare independence at most and demand autonomy at least after their possible political success.

Most woeful thing is that the armed clashes caused flight of thousands of refugees from Kyrgyzstan to Uzbekistan which from time to time was opening and closing the borders. Thousands of Uzbek people waited to pass the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border and escape to Uzbekistan.

Whatever the detailed reasons why the armed conflict erupted it reflects the difficulties of building democracy in Central Asia.

Central Asian Immunity to Democracy

The liberal-minded West castigates Central Asia without considering its past, historical experience and political traditions. Central Asia, like other areas in the Orient, has long lived in paradigm of communal economy and politics later doubled with communist rule. The authority and property were indivisible. Those at the helm controlled economy and control of the economy implied being at the helm. In Central Asia such traits shaped in clanship. As Kathleen Collins puts it, the clanship predetermined concluding informal pacts in every Central Asian country after the break-up of the Soviet Union. These clan pacts helped keep political stability but precluded democratic development. With this intertwined were scarcity and imbalance of resources, overabundance of population and workforce. Moreover, continental location of the region and no access to sea and effective trade, absence of cores of national states make building democratic state impossible. All these characteristics challenge development and democracy building.

In such unfavourable conditions the democracy in Central Asia resembles ochlocracy that leads to violence and killings, disorder and chaos. Whoever possesses money can wield power since the masses which desperately need money are easily employed by such money-bags. In attempt to build democracy Kyrgyzstan is groping between bad and very bad versions of development. Advancement to democracy is painful and contradictory. Retreat to authoritarianism is more painful than advancement and does not satisfy the society. As a result, violence, instability, clanship and inter-ethnic tensions bring to poverty and backwardness which, in their turn, feed those violence, instability, clanship and inter-ethnic violence. The vicious circle is difficult to break through.

Conclusion

The Osh events are of complex nature and different aspects account for the eruption of the conflict:

- 1) Social history accounts for tensions between the Uzbeks and Kyrgyz. These tensions can be adroitly manipulated by politicians;

- 2) Contradictions of building national state in multi-ethnic society account for the character of relations between the Kyrgyz and other ethnic groups. The Kyrgyz did not definitely choose whether national state must be built on dominance of one ethnic group serving as umbrella for the rest and taking responsibility for security and development of the country or share equal rights and responsibilities with the rest of the ethnic groups. At the same time, state did not imbibe loyalty to all its citizens;
- 3) Confrontation of liberal society with corrupt state accounts for incapacity of the state and proneness to chaos and disorder. Mainly the security structures, police and army are victims of this confrontation: they are impotent to predict and prevent violence and stop the violence after it has erupted. Mafia and drug traffickers want such chaos as chaotic South might be ideal place to make their bloody business;
- 4) Experience of two revolutions during which the society in Kyrgyzstan have revealed the worst traits account for easily manipulated social masses with shattered morals and proneness to violence. Violence has become characteristic to the society in Kyrgyzstan after these two revolutions;

All in all, among the reasons the closest to the truth is irresponsibility, short-sightedness and negligence of the Interim Government that knew of possible inter-ethnic provocations by the Bakiev family and their supporters in the South and did not take preventive measure towards violent conflicts. One of key members of the Interim Government recognised that the government had committed blunders by unheeding the southern problems. The Interim Government' decisions and preoccupation with the upcoming referendum and parliamentary elections created chaos in Kyrgyzstan. All government members seemed to try to get their piece of cake without consideration of their behaviour and decisions impacting peace, stability and provision of security. National interests and security vulnerable to external and internal possible subversive actions meant less than their care of taking seats in the future parliament. Their political games disappointed the ordinary citizens.

Knowing their weaknesses and lust for power the Bakievs adroitly capitalised the blunders of Interim Government which committed tactical miscalculations by flirting with the Uzbek irresponsible leaders who claimed separatism and activation of the Uzbeks in high politics thereby enraging the Kyrgyz. The Bakievs and their supporters perfectly staged the scenario to knock together the Kyrgyz and Uzbeks.

The power is not plaything. After taking it, leaders must take responsibility of integrity and sovereignty of the state and security of its citizens. The Interim Government failed to provide security to Kyrgyzstan's citizens.