

Exploring Regime Instability and Ethnic Violence in Kyrgyzstan

Eric McGlinchey



ERIC MCGLINCHY is an Assistant Professor of Government and Politics at George Mason University and the author of *Chaos, Violence, Dynasty: Politics and Islam in Central Asia* (2011). He is also a National Asia Research Fellow. The introduction to this article, as well as Dr. McGlinchey's other publications, can be found on his website ≈ <http://mason.gmu.edu/~emcglinc/>. He can be reached at <emcglinc@gmu.edu>.

KEYWORDS: KYRGYZSTAN; POLITICS; POLITICAL INSTABILITY; ELITE POLITICS; ETHNIC VIOLENCE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This article explores the causes of Kyrgyzstan's enduring political instability and periodic ethnic violence.

MAIN ARGUMENT

At least 350 people died and more than 100,000 people were displaced in clashes between ethnic Kyrgyz and ethnic Uzbeks in southern Kyrgyzstan between June 10 and June 14, 2010. Most explanations for the violence focus on incidents immediately preceding the conflict: a brawl between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz at a casino, the alleged rape of Kyrgyz women at a university dormitory, and turf wars between crime syndicates. While these actual and alleged precursors no doubt helped spark the ethnic riots, this article suggests that structural causes—political elite fragmentation and a civil society that can readily be mobilized for both liberal and illiberal ends—are behind the June 2010 ethnic violence and Kyrgyzstan's enduring political instability. Roza Otunbayeva's interim government has overlooked these deep-seated structural challenges. Most notably, the government's attempt to establish democratic credentials immediately after assuming power in April 2010 undermined the elite status quo and, in so doing, prompted political entrepreneurs to defend their interests through violent street protests. In short, the Otunbayeva government's decision to dissolve the corrupt and compromised national parliament alienated elite constituencies critical to the maintenance of power and order in Kyrgyzstan's south.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

International partners can better engage the complex constellation of Kyrgyz authorities and thereby assist them in mitigating ethnic conflict by recognizing the following two realities, which, though unsettling, nevertheless deserve emphasis:

- Rapid attempts to create the formal institutions of liberal democracy can undermine illiberal yet peace- and stability-sustaining institutions of autocracy.
- The Kyrgyz national government does not enjoy a monopoly of power across state territory; thus, foreign policy toward Kyrgyzstan must take into account regional as well as national-level configurations of authority.

What explains the June 2010 violence in southern Kyrgyzstan that left more than 350 people dead and led to the dislocation of more than 100,000 ethnic Uzbeks? The causes offered after the conflict are as contradictory as the rumors that circulated before entire neighborhoods in Osh, Jalal-Abad, and Bazar-Korgon were set ablaze. There are, for example, elite-centered arguments, such as that recently ousted president Kurmanbek Bakiyev and his Jalal-Abad rival, Uzbek businessman Kadyrjan Batyrov, were behind the violence. There are also arguments centered on political structure, such as that the interim government was too weak to prevent rural Kyrgyz migrants in the south from seizing on violence to settle long-simmering grievances with wealthier Uzbeks in cities such as Osh, Jalal-Abad, and Bazar-Korgon. And then there are the contingency-centered arguments: allegations that rapes and casino cheats sparked the ethnic conflicts.

Although there is a degree of truth in each explanation, their causal weight fades when the violence is placed in comparative perspective. Kyrgyzstan was ripe with elite machinations in March 2005 in the weeks leading up to and following President Askar Akayev's ouster, yet the country did not suffer widespread ethnic unrest during this period of political upheaval. The Kyrgyz central government has long been weak; even when city streets are free from protestors, executive power is contested in Bishkek and often altogether absent in the regions. Likewise, one need only browse the popular chat site known as the Diesel Forum to see that allegations of one ethnic group's injustices against another provide a steady background hiss to Kyrgyz politics.¹ In short, many purported causes of the clashes in June 2010 are, in fact, constants of Kyrgyz state-society relations. Understandably, analysts seize on these hypotheses because the violence of June 10–14 shines a painfully bright light on the elite plottings, rumors, and government weakness that immediately preceded the deadly ethnic conflict. Nevertheless, the key to the 2010 events rests in deeper institutional variations that, in turn, generated the proximate causes widely reported in the press.

More specifically, this article finds that the intersection of Kyrgyzstan's enduring undercurrent of autocratic instability with a new leadership's reluctance to engage this instability led to the deadly violence in the summer of 2010. The article is organized as follows:

- ∞ pp. 82–87 explain how Kyrgyzstan, in contrast to neighboring Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, has witnessed repeated convulsions of political instability. These convulsions, though they produce an environment more permissive

¹ The Diesel Forum is hosted at <http://diesel.elcat.kg/>.

of ethnic conflict, are not determinative of deadly conflict. Instability can be managed.

- ≈ pp. 87–94 argue, however, that the interim government that came to power on April 7, 2010, failed to manage the instability in two critical respects. First, it neglected to appreciate the extent to which regional networks of authority are critical in projecting central power and ensuring stability. Second, the interim government failed to recognize the extent to which citizens' perceptions of agency—that is, the ability to change power configurations through extra-constitutional and violent means—could affect interethnic relations just as much as these perceptions of agency have shaped national-level elite politics.
- ≈ pp. 94–98 conclude by drawing policy implications from this analysis.

Rather than embracing Kyrgyzstan's well-established networks of authority, the interim government instead disbanded the one national-level institution through which members of the Kyrgyz executive branch can bargain and co-opt regional elites—the parliament. The immediate dissolution of the former regime's parliament is a mistake that none of Kyrgyzstan's previous executives had made, and one for which the new Otunbayeva government and Kyrgyz society have paid dearly. Understanding how failures made by the political elite interacted with Kyrgyzstan's enduring political instability lays the foundation both for a more accurate explanation of the June 2010 violence and for prescribing how similar violence can be avoided in the future.

EXPLAINING KYRGYZSTAN'S ENDURING POLITICAL INSTABILITY

The central research question that this article addresses can be formulated in two ways:

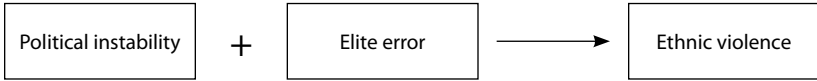
1. Why has post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan witnessed deadly ethnic violence, whereas neighboring countries such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have not?
2. Why did 2010 post-putsch Kyrgyzstan suffer deadly ethnic violence, whereas 2005 post-putsch Kyrgyzstan did not?

These two phrasings of the ethnic violence puzzle are helpful because they highlight two critical components of the causal chain that produced the June 2010 bloodshed in Osh, Jalal-Abad, and Bazar-Korgon (see **Figure 1**).

This section focuses on the first element of this causal chain, Kyrgyzstan's endemic political instability. The reason why Kyrgyz politics are so unstable lies as much in Moscow and the events of the late *perestroika* period as it does

FIGURE 1

Causes of Kyrgyzstan’s 2010 Ethnic Violence



in present day Central Asia. In the second half of the 1980s, Soviet general secretary Mikhail Gorbachev and the central Communist Party leadership intervened in both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to restore political order in the wake of violent mass protests. Gorbachev intervened in Kazakhstan to restore order following the December 1986 uprising against the appointment of an ethnic Russian to the republic’s top administrative post. Moscow intervened once again in June 1989 when ethnic riots in Uzbekistan’s Fergana Valley undermined First Secretary Rafik Nishanov’s authority. Gorbachev did not intervene, however, in June 1990, when deadly ethnic riots on the Kyrgyz side of the Fergana Valley eroded the legitimacy of First Secretary Absamat Masaliyev and led to the fragmentation of the Kyrgyz political elite.

In February 1990, in an effort to sideline establishment elites opposing perestroika reforms, Gorbachev decreed an end to the Communist Party’s monopoly on power. His goal at the time was to revitalize the party and eliminate deadwood through political competition. In the Kyrgyz case, competition eliminated Masaliyev and, with him, the elite unity that had characterized the Kyrgyz polity. Whereas Islam Karimov in Uzbekistan and Nursultan Nazarbaev in Kazakhstan carried their united parties—albeit under new names—into the post-Soviet period, the new and narrowly elected Kyrgyz executive, Askar Akayev, struggled to solidify authority while balancing the competing interests of Kyrgyzstan’s narrow and fragmented political elite.

These diverging perestroika legacies have a profound effect on how Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Kazakh elites make decisions. Coordinated attempts to overthrow the executive are considerably easier to mount when potential elites are few in number. Although Kyrgyz elites likely intuitively understand that the probability of their inclusion in a new leader’s winning coalition is greater than the probability that their Uzbek and Kazakh counterparts would similarly be rewarded, the following example of the “selectorate model” advanced by Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, James Morrow, Randolph Siverson,