KYRGYZSTAN: A CASE STUDY FOR CONFLICT POTENTIAL*

History of the Conflict

Kyrgyzstan is a land-locked country of 4.5 million persons located between China, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. It lies on the northern edge of a zone of conflict that extends from western China to the Caucasus and beyond. Running through this crisis-ridden region is a set of high mountain ranges that has contributed to the area’s economic backwardness, its ethnic diversity, and its political marginalization as distant provinces of multinational states. This last feature of the region changed fundamentally in recent years with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of successor states, eight of which lie along the zone of conflict. Without a common political culture or mature institutions that could resolve disputes within or between these new states, some individuals, groups, and countries in the region have resorted to violence to press their claims.

Although Kyrgyzstan is not currently the site of armed conflict, it has felt the effects of violence in neighboring states, whether through the inflow of refugees from the civil wars in Tajikistan and Afghanistan or the efforts of warring parties in Afghanistan to use Kyrgyzstani territory as a transshipment point for armaments and drugs. In October 1998, border guards seized 700 tons of weapons en route from Iran to Afghanistan. Moreover, in June 1990, Kyrgyzstan was the scene of one of the most serious outbreaks of ethnic violence in Soviet history. In one week, interethnic fighting left approximately 250 Kyrgyz and Uzbeks dead in the southern province of Osh, which lies at the eastern end of the Uzbek-dominated Ferghana Valley. The spark for the conflict was a decision by a local Communist Party secretary, an ethnic Kyrgyz, to grant land to poor Kyrgyz settlers; the land came from a collective farm whose members were Uzbek. As Uzbeks on both sides of the Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan border rallied to the defense of the Uzbek collective, Kyrgyz came down from the hills on horseback to join

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the fray. Only the intervention of Moscow, which dispatched Soviet army troops to the region, prevented a greater catastrophe.¹

The events in Osh were part of an epidemic of interethnic violence that swept across the southern rim of the Soviet Union at the end of the Gorbachev era. In Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Uzbekistan, ethnic minorities found themselves the victims of violence dispensed by titular nationals who were driven by a volatile blend of rising economic insecurity and ethnic consciousness. Stripped of their Soviet identity and the mythology of proletarian internationalism, citizens were vulnerable to the seductive calls of ethnic entrepreneurs who sought to assert the cultural and political hegemony of the titular nationalities.² In Kyrgyzstan and in most other countries in this zone of conflict, the nationalizing movements unleashed at the end of the Soviet era have abated in recent years, due in considerable measure to the consolidation of power by cautious, internationalist-oriented leaders with long experience in Soviet institutions. Given the sensitivities of the Kyrgyzstani president, Askar Akaev, to the interests of the country’s ethnic minorities as well as its titular nationals — and to the feelings of the president of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov — a recurrence of interethnic violence on the scale of the Osh events seems unlikely in the near future. Leaders in the region appear to have been sobered by the intensity of the violence and by the realization that, in the absence of Soviet mediators or troops, the stakes of ethnic conflict have risen immeasurably. However, the rise of Islamic sects among Uzbeks living in southern Kyrgyzstan and the increasingly imperious behavior of President Karimov are now threatening to polarize the Uzbek and Kyrgyz communities anew.

There are other social cleavages in Kyrgyzstan that have the potential to develop into serious fault lines that could engender violence. The most notable of these is the north-south rift within the ethnic Kyrgyz community itself. To this point, the group that feels itself disadvantaged — the southerners — has limited itself to complaints about the patronage and investment policies that, it believes, maintain disproportionate political and economic power in the hands of elites from the capital, Bishkek, and surrounding northern regions. Barring some cataclysmic event, or the accession to power of a northern leader wholly inattentive to the demands of the south,
