

# Competing Narratives and Violence in Southern Kyrgyzstan

PONARS Policy Memo No. 105

Scott Radnitz  
*University of Washington*

There are two challenges in accounting for the recent violence between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan. The first is to connect how political change at Kyrgyzstan's national level, specifically the April 2010 coup, reverberated at the local level and made violence possible. The second is to explain how intra-ethnic discord following the change in government transformed into inter-ethnic violence. A series of incremental steps, beginning with the demonstrable weakening of the state, increased the salience of ethnicity as a cleavage able to be mobilized by opportunistic politicians. Since the violence of June 10-14, 2010, ethnicity-based narratives have become deeply entrenched among the public and, worse, embraced by ethnic Kyrgyz security forces in the south, making it very difficult to restore interethnic cooperation or to prevent further violence. This memo traces the emergence, entrenchment, exploitation, and violent consequences of these narratives in Kyrgyzstan.

## **Dealing with Multiethnicity**

When Kyrgyzstan became independent, it inherited a complex demographic problem. Amidst a population of about four million, Kyrgyz were barely a majority, while just under 15 percent of the population were ethnic Uzbeks, who resided in areas contiguous with Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan's economically and politically dominant neighbor. Kyrgyzstan's ethnic complexity was never dealt with directly. After interethnic riots between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks caused at least 300 deaths in 1990, people on both sides preferred to blame a "third force," usually Russia, rather than to examine the underlying causes (at the time, ethnic Russians made up over 20 percent of

Kyrgyzstan's population). President Askar Akayev's vision of a multicultural "common home" provided a fig leaf of harmony for a state officially blind to ethnicity. This does not mean all was well – Uzbeks often complained about being underrepresented in official posts, while southern Kyrgyz were somewhat envious of ethnic Uzbeks' success in business – but this was not unusual for a multiethnic state or any cause for alarm.

### **A Weakened State**

The descent into ethnic violence was sudden, but it followed a gradual loss of control by the state following the overthrow of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev on April 7, 2010. As in 2005, after Akayev's ouster, policemen left their posts and mobs rampaged through the capital. Spontaneously, groups of citizens intent on restoring order coalesced into *druzhenniki*, or neighborhood watch committees, to stop looting and violence. It was clear, at least in the north, that the government could not provide security. It turned out to be equally powerless in the south, as mobs of purported supporters of Bakiyev seized government buildings in the *oblasts* of Osh, Jalalabad, and Batken. (The complicity of Bakiyev or his family has never been substantiated. Given that a favored tactic in the repertoire of Kyrgyz elites is to raid a government office and demand the replacement of an appointee, it is likely that local politicians instigated the seizures.) The interim government, unable to rely fully on the police or army, reportedly called on Kadyrjon Batyrov, a local ethnic Uzbek entrepreneur, to mobilize his supporters and help recover the government building in Jalalabad, which they succeeded in doing on May 14. They reportedly then went to Bakiyev's family's village and, acting without instruction, set fire to their homes.

This event resonated beyond the immediate circumstances, inserting ethnicity into volatile local politics. Batyrov was the wrong man to assist the government, as he was very unpopular – even hated – by many Kyrgyz in Jalalabad. Whereas other Uzbek politicians generally kept a low profile and refrained from making open demands for Uzbek rights, Batyrov was an unusually vocal advocate for Uzbek interests. He had pressed for recognition of Uzbek as an official language, complained about Uzbek underrepresentation in the government, and built a university primarily for the Uzbek community, which stood at a prominent central location in Jalalabad. Like many businessmen in Kyrgyzstan, he also had a coterie of supporters – students and other (Uzbek) beneficiaries of his patronage – who were devoted to his success.

### **Growing Resentment and Threat**

As a result of the general sense of insecurity prevailing in spring 2010, and especially once Uzbeks got involved in street politics in Jalalabad, demands on behalf of the Uzbek community were viewed with hostility by local Kyrgyz. Batyrov complained in a newspaper interview that Uzbeks were being unfairly treated by police, a plausible charge that was nonetheless seen by some, including the interim government first deputy, Azimbek Beknazarov, as needlessly provocative. Some Uzbek leaders also advocated changes to the draft constitution that would benefit Uzbeks, including recognition of Uzbek as an official language. Kyrgyz politicians and journalists accused

Batyrov of advocating autonomy for southern Kyrgyzstan or, more implausibly, union with Uzbekistan. Although autonomy was mooted in the early 1990s, however, it was no longer a serious item on any Uzbek political agenda. But the charges against Batyrov, together with the reforms actually being proposed, provided fodder for nationalist politicians who disliked him and were resentful of Uzbek prosperity and local influence. They now had a pretext to conjure up threats associated with deep-seated anxieties about the Uzbek demographic advantage and to play on widely held stereotypes about Uzbeks as greedy, dishonest, and insular.

After the incident in Bakiyev's village, several politicians openly called for Batyrov's arrest. On May 19, a mob set upon his ironically named People's Friendship University and attempted to set it on fire, but Batyrov's armed supporters fought them off. Two Kyrgyz died in the altercation. At this point, the prosecutor's office, responding to popular pressure, announced a warrant for Batyrov's arrest.

In the period between the events in Jalalabad and the start of violence in Osh, a frame of zero-sum ethnic competition had set upon southern Kyrgyzstan. Autonomy was a red herring. Jalalabad's politicians were clearly taking advantage of nationalist passions to eliminate a troublesome rival, but their actions resonated beyond Jalalabad. The specter of Kyrgyzstan's dismantling was used as a pretext to project blame onto (all) Uzbeks. Uzbeks, in turn, took note of the resurgence of Kyrgyz nationalism. Once the frame of ethnic conflict became salient, small incidents that would inevitably occur in the absence of a strong state were imbued with ethnic implications. The government in Bishkek appears to have been unaware of this dangerous development. Putative defenders on both Kyrgyz and Uzbek sides – underemployed young men – began preparing for battle by organizing and obtaining weapons, probably at the initiative of local elites. Both sides correctly perceived that authorities could do little to stop concerted street action and that they would be able to advance their political and economic interests through mob violence.

### **The Fuse is Lit**

A confrontation along ethnic lines at an Osh casino precipitated an armed assault by unknown assailants at several points in the city. This was followed by a rumor that Uzbeks had raped three Kyrgyz students in a nearby dormitory. Kyrgyz mobs, armed with guns, knives, and clubs, rampaged through Uzbek neighborhoods, killing people and destroying property. Amidst the violence, attackers demanded that Uzbeks leave the country. This suggested that they had internalized propaganda implicating a disloyal ethnic minority connected to a demographically superior state. Resentment of Uzbeks' perceived superior economic status also played a role in the deliberate targeting of Uzbek businesses. Some violence, such as the destruction of the local concert hall and the bazaar, was simply nihilistic destruction by frustrated youths.

When the violence subsided, the government's Soviet-style instinct was to try and sweep the unpleasant events under the rug and put forward a mantra of "friendship of the peoples." Interim President Roza Otunbayeva denied that the violence had an ethnic character or that Uzbeks were the primary victims (contrary to

what international news outlets and nongovernmental organizations were reporting). The government hesitated to probe the causes of the conflict and hoarded information, arguing that releasing data, for example on the breakdown of casualties by ethnicity, would inflame tensions. Instead of facing the uncomfortable fact that many ordinary citizens took part in the violence, the government implicated external enemies or people who were already widely disliked. The head of the National Security Service concocted a conspiracy involving the Bakiyev family, Islamic militants, the Taliban, and Batyrov. A deeper reckoning within society was thus averted.

Yet even if the violence had been incited by “outsiders” with their own agenda, it remained the case that locals were willing participants. Testimony of ethnic Kyrgyz interviewed after the violence reflected a belief that Uzbeks brought misfortune upon themselves by advocating autonomy and making unreasonable demands. This pointed to an unstated presumption among some Kyrgyz that Uzbeks are guests in their country, obliged to obey the rules set by the majority. Kyrgyz were seemingly unable to acknowledge suffering among Uzbeks, who, according to the preponderance of evidence, were the primary victims of pogroms. Instead, ordinary Kyrgyz focused exclusively on Kyrgyz casualties, blamed Uzbeks for the violence, and supported the heavy-handed police methods used to exact retribution for the minority community’s purported crimes. Akayev’s “common home” had collapsed.

A second response of Soviet pedigree was to put on a theatrical display of force, including deploying tanks and armed personnel carriers to the streets of Osh to create the illusion of control. The government appointed a tough-talking police colonel who threatened to “destroy” anyone who caused trouble. In typical Soviet fashion, televised police operations showed diligent and disciplined soldiers raiding homes of suspects and conveniently uncovering caches of weapons and drugs, displayed and enumerated for all to see. These choreographed scenes showing good guys nabbing bad guys painted a simple and reassuring picture intended to convince viewers that their government was protecting them. What was left unspoken was that all the culprits portrayed were Uzbek.

These scenes and other occurrences implied an alarming disconnect between the rhetoric of the government in Bishkek, which officially maintained a posture of neutrality and legality, and facts on the ground in the south. Eyewitnesses reported seeing uniformed Kyrgyz soldiers firing at Uzbek civilians, handing their weapons to Kyrgyz mobs, and removing barricades for mobs to ransack Uzbek neighborhoods. The national government denied these reports and refused to investigate them, essentially granting the army immunity as it sought to restore stability in the south. The security forces’ confrontational approach toward the Uzbek community, including the peremptory order to dismantle barricades, and the persecution and alleged torture of ethnic Uzbeks suggested that military forces shared the sympathies of the local Kyrgyz community and were able to persecute the minority – possibly in contravention of the national government’s wishes – with majority approval. In August, the prosecutor-general’s office confirmed that 213 out of 243 people in prison for participation in the violence were ethnic Uzbeks.

### **Tenuous Security and Resilient Narratives**

Two lasting legacies of the April 2010 coup and subsequent June violence present enormous challenges to Kyrgyzstan and the broader region. The first is that the state has only tenuous control over (at most) half the country. Not only are paramilitary groups able to operate on the streets of Osh, but the Kyrgyz army appears not to be operating under complete civilian control. Ominous statements by army officials critical of the interim government implied that the army might take matters into its own hands if instability persisted, at least in the south. Given the ineptitude of the civilian government, military rule may seem an attractive proposition to many who lived through the recent chaos. Otunbayeva's cohort clearly hoped that the referendum that passed on June 27 averted this threat by granting them legitimacy and introducing a new democratic constitution. However, security is a necessary condition for democracy. Kyrgyz citizens, feeling insecure and lacking confidence in their leaders, might be prepared to postpone the latter until the former is assured.

The second problem is that people on both sides have internalized exculpatory and other-denigrating narratives. Previous frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet region left a legacy of hatred and separation that has persisted to this day. Uzbeks that witnessed savage attacks first hand are in no mood to reconcile. On the contrary, without a credible guarantee of state protection, they have every incentive to arm themselves. Even if the current persecution of Uzbeks ceases, absent security guarantees, which could only be provided by a third party, attempts by the Kyrgyz government to disarm Uzbeks will be viewed as threatening and may provoke further violence. Additionally, there will be little hope of restoring formerly mixed neighborhoods. For their part, Kyrgyz, having accepted the myth of Uzbek culpability, expect the government to act on their behalf. There is no overlap between these narratives, leaving no grounds for reconciliation. This is mirrored by the de facto physical separation of ethnic communities in Osh. The government has made minimal effort to address dueling narratives of victimhood and blame, or to investigate crimes evenhandedly, perhaps because it fears rebellious activity by ethnic Kyrgyz if it does so. In a sign that the government itself has been afflicted by kneejerk defensive nationalism, some officials have resisted U.S. and European calls for an international investigation into the violence and a plan to deploy a multinational police force under the auspices of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). This is an uncharacteristic posture for Kyrgyzstan, which was previously eager to work with international actors on all sides.

### **Conclusion**

While recent memories remain fresh, local disputes will continue to be viewed within a frame of ethnic conflict, leaving intact the conditions for further violence and escalation. The government is overwhelmed and internally divided, and it has made no attempt to alleviate the security dilemma afflicting post-conflict areas. The new constitution and

upcoming elections are unlikely to moderate prevailing attitudes. Instead, they will produce new incentives for politicians to mobilize voters using ethnic appeals. Intercommunal relations have been spoiled for at least a generation, and there is currently neither the will nor the capacity to repair the damage. The way forward appears bleak.

*This publication was made possible by a grant from Carnegie Corporation of New York. The statements made and views expressed are solely the responsibility of the author.*

© PONARS Eurasia 2010