

What's Ethnicity Got to Do With It?

HEALING THE WOUNDS OF UZBEK-KYRGYZ VIOLENCE IN THE FERGHANA VALLEY

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Although it appears that opportunistic actors with political and economic motivations provoked the violence that erupted in southern Kyrgyzstan during June of this year, the scale, rapid spread, and vicious character of that violence belies a very real cultural divide between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in the country. Those who provoked the violence were obviously aware of the volatile nature of this divide, which had fostered a similar proliferation of ethnically based physical attacks, murders, and sexual violence in the same cities and towns only twenty years before.

In dealing with the aftermath of the June 2010 violence, it is obviously important to identify who was behind the provocations that initiated this conflict, but it is equally critical to address the volatile ethnic relations that these provocations awoke. This is especially true now that the violence has at least temporarily subsided, and the policy priorities have shifted to healing the wounds from the conflict and mitigating future violence. In order to address the ethnic tensions that exploded in southern Kyrgyzstan between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz, however, policymakers must gain a more sophisticated understanding of how ethnicity is internalized and expressed in the Central Asian context and what role ethnic identity played in this particular conflict.

Why Ethnic Conflict? Primordialists vs. Instrumentalists

In the academic world of ethnicity studies, one of the longest and most heated debates has been that between the primordialists and the instrumentalists. While this is a fluid debate that inevitably has varied nuances, for the purposes of this paper we can sum up the two opposing arguments quite simply. The primordialists believe that ethnicity emerges from long-held sociocultural attachments between people that continue to

define and divide us to this day. By contrast, the instrumentalists argue that ethnicity is a relatively new form of identification that obscures divergent interests more related to a competition for resources than to an abstract concept of identity.

To date, much of the discourse on the ethnic dimension of the June violence in Kyrgyzstan has reflected one pole or the other of this debate. The media, at least initially, adopted a strongly primordialist perspective as many journalists suggested that the conflict was rooted in “ancient ethnic hatreds,” which were aggravated by Joseph Stalin’s arbitrary border demarcations in the Ferghana Valley. In response to this fatalistic interpretation, many regional specialists adopted an instrumentalist perspective on the role of ethnicity in the conflict, stressing the larger political and economic tensions behind Uzbek-Kyrgyz relations.

I would argue that neither of these perspectives taken alone offers a full explanation of why the conflict adopted an ethnic dimension, why the violence was fueled by such passion on both sides, and why it occurred when it did. To fully answer these questions and in order to formulate a means of healing the wounds of June’s violence in the Ferghana Valley, one must take a more nuanced perspective of ethnic identity that incorporates both primordialist and instrumentalist perspectives.

Instrumental Dimensions: Land, Economics, and Political Power

Several regional experts have already provided excellent analyses of the instrumentalist nature of the ethnic tension between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz that fueled the June violence. In explaining the root causes of the violence, these analyses point to a variety of economic and political factors in Kyrgyzstan as a whole, as well as to some specific to the relationship between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in the Ferghana Valley.

Taking a primarily economic perspective, David Gullette ([OpenDemocracy](#), June 28, 2010) has concisely outlined the acute economic pressures that have gradually intensified in Kyrgyzstan over the last decade. With official statistics suggesting that over a third of the country’s population lives in poverty, there is intense competition for the approximately seven percent of Kyrgyzstan’s mountainous terrain that consists of arable land. Furthermore, as Gullette points out, these factors were further aggravated in recent years as global economic pressures led to increased food prices and decreasing remittances from the approximately ten percent of Kyrgyzstan’s population involved in migrant labor abroad.

Although Gullette focuses primarily on explaining these economic pressures for Kyrgyzstan as a whole, it should be noted that these factors are particularly acute in the south, which is the most densely populated and most agricultural region in the country. In the south, the competition for arable land is particularly intense, and land reform has resulted in a patchwork across the countryside of very small land plots usually cultivated by single families who compete with each other in a relatively localized agricultural market. Furthermore, the dense population of the region has resulted in particularly high percentages of migrant laborers, especially among Kyrgyz, many of whom have been forced to return home over the last several years in the wake of the global economic crisis.

Adding a more political perspective, Madeleine Reeves ([Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty](#), July 4, 2010) has stressed that Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in the south of Kyrgyzstan both feel disenfranchised for different reasons. As a minority within Kyrgyzstan, the Uzbeks have long felt excluded from access to state jobs and political influence. As Reeves notes, this is particularly true for the security sector, including both law enforcement and military. At the same time, the southern Kyrgyz feel themselves at a distinct disadvantage in the urban trade economy of their region, which is largely dominated by Uzbeks. According to Reeves, these mutual feelings of disenfranchisement, along with the general economic and political pressures present throughout Kyrgyzstan at the time, were at the root of the violence that exploded between the two groups.

Both of these sound instrumentalist characterizations of Kyrgyz-Uzbek relations in southern Kyrgyzstan offer critical insights into the immediate economic and political roots of the June 2010 unrest and help us understand why this violence erupted when it did. They do not, however, help us understand the deep distrust between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz that fostered such a rapid and passionate spread of violence and panic between these groups in June of this year as well as twenty years before. To understand the roots of this distrust, one must also examine the historical factors that shape Uzbek and Kyrgyz identity and these groups' views of each other.

Primordial Dimensions: The Nomadic-Sedentary Divide

Popular sources often stress the recent creation of Central Asian ethnic groups as a product of the construction of national republics in the Soviet Union. Although the formation of modern Central Asian nationalities was influenced to a degree by early Soviet nationality policy, this does not mean that the identities of present-day national groups in the region have no basis in earlier cultural differences. In fact, the various national groups in Central Asia can all be traced to cultural divides that have long existed in the region.

Historically, the two most vivid cultural divides in Central Asia related to linguistic differentiation (Turkic vs. Persian language groups) and to lifestyle divergence (sedentary vs. nomadic groups). Historians generally characterize both these divides as representing a continuum, which also included bilingual speakers of Persian and Turkic languages as well as semi-nomadic agriculturalists.

Despite the ambiguous nature of this continuum of difference, it cultivated very real oppositional identities that continue to be articulated in ethnic relations today. The Kyrgyz and Uzbeks of the Ferghana Valley, for example, represent opposing sides of the sedentary-nomadic divide in the region. Although the Kyrgyz of the Ferghana Valley have likely been living an agricultural lifestyle longer than most Kazakhs or northern Kyrgyz, they are relative newcomers to a settled lifestyle compared to the Uzbeks of the region.

As a result, the Uzbeks and Kyrgyz of the Ferghana Valley, despite frequent instances of intermarriage, friendship, and social interaction, maintain strong stereotypes of each other that emerge from a history of distrust between nomadic and

sedentary populations in Central Asia. This history of distrust has evolved from a combination of divergent worldviews and a long history of competitive economic interaction.

Characterizing the difference in worldviews between former nomads and long-time sedentary peoples in Central Asia runs the risk of over-generalization and the perpetuation of stereotypes. Still, one can identify some basic concepts on which the two populations generally diverge. The most vivid of these relates to their respective concepts of community.

Historically, we know that nomadic communities were based on kin groups while sedentary peoples formed their sense of community from geographical proximity. Although this has changed since the forced settlement of nomads in Central Asia during the 1920s and 30s, former nomads have retained especially strong familial attachments to this day and longtime settled peoples tend to maintain an extra-ordinary social connection to others within their local neighborhoods (or *mahallas*).

This broad division in ideals of community further translates into divergent perspectives on land ownership and property more generally. Long-time sedentary populations, for example, inevitably have a stronger attachment to their personally owned land than most former nomads, as is evidenced by the many Uzbek male refugees who almost immediately returned to southern Kyrgyzstan even before the cessation of violence in order to protect their property. Among former nomads, land and personal property outside livestock have historically played only a minor role in their livelihood and social structure. While this certainly does not suggest that Kyrgyz or Kazakhs are less interested in accumulating wealth and property than are Uzbeks, it does suggest a different attitude towards property, especially land, and its permanency. These divergent attitudes towards land have generally aggravated conflicts over property between the two groups, particularly in regions like the Ferghana Valley with high population density.

More concretely than these divergences in worldviews, however, the history of socioeconomic interactions between nomads and sedentary people in Central Asia has cultivated a legacy of distrust. Prior to Soviet power, nomads and sedentary populations most often encountered each other at market and on the trade routes between oases. In the market, nomadic groups found themselves at a disadvantage vis-à-vis sedentary people, who were far more experienced traders. Between oases in nomadic herding areas, sedentary people were at a disadvantage and their trading caravans were often the victims of raids by nomadic groups. While nomadic-sedentary interaction was not limited to such encounters, these antagonistic interactions appear to have cultivated long-held stereotypes.

One often hears Kyrgyz suggesting that Uzbeks are “sneaky,” “cheap,” and “dishonest,” sometimes offering the example of their mercantile propensities as evidence of this. Likewise, it is not rare to hear an Uzbek characterizing the Kyrgyz as “thieves,” “uncultured,” and “lazy,” frequently explaining these attributes by their nomadic past. While these stereotypes are not usually expressed explicitly in public

contexts, when tensions rise between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks such characterizations of each other can quickly emerge and inflame passionate animosity on both sides.

It is important, however, to qualify the relative influence of these primordial attachments that define Uzbek and Kyrgyz identity. Several generations have passed since the forced settlement of Central Asia's nomadic population. Since that time, more commonalities than differences have developed in the worldviews and lifestyles of Kyrgyz and Uzbeks. Furthermore, Kyrgyz and Uzbeks do not view each other as historical enemies, as might the Serbs and Albanians or Azerbaijanis and Armenians. Rather, the cultural cleavage created by the nomadic-sedentary divide is part of a collective memory that frames both Kyrgyz and Uzbek consciousness. As such, it is a passionate source of oppositional identity and distrust that, while not inherently antagonistic, can be inflamed by external provocations as well as by political and economic pressures.

Healing the Wounds of Violence and Mitigating Future Conflict

The June 2010 violence between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in southern Kyrgyzstan that reportedly killed as many as 2,000 people, injured thousands others, and led to the displacement of approximately 100,000 should not be viewed as an isolated crisis that now has passed. The personal pain from this violence felt by both Uzbek and Kyrgyz communities will not quickly fade from memory, and there remains a substantial risk that violence will flare up again, whether provoked or not. A renewal of violence could also spark further conflict and instability in neighboring countries, such as Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, and have negative consequences for the reconstruction effort in Afghanistan, which relies on this region as a transport corridor for supplies. In this context, it is critical that the international community launch an extensive effort to assist the Kyrgyzstan government to heal the wounds of June's violence and mitigate the prospects for renewed conflict, especially as the country prepares for what will likely be hotly contested parliamentary elections.

Regional experts who have stressed the instrumental dimensions of the ethnic tensions between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks have already suggested a variety of excellent policy recommendations for the international community to address the aftermath of the June violence. David Gullette, for example, has noted the importance of fostering increased economic development throughout the country as a means of preventing future violence, and Madeleine Reeves has emphasized the need for a more viable rule of law in Kyrgyzstan that can mitigate corruption and ethnic-based political patronage.

These are both critical areas of development for Kyrgyzstan and require a more serious commitment of resources from the international community and substantial political will from the government of Kyrgyzstan if the country is to move forward. That being said, these are also long-term goals that can be expected to take years, if not decades, before directly impacting the lives of Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in the Ferghana Valley. Moreover, both economic and political development efforts are capable of provoking new violence if not implemented with sensitivity to the cultural cleavages that continue to foster distrust between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz.

For these reasons, rapidly deployed economic and political development efforts in southern Kyrgyzstan must seek to directly address Kyrgyz-Uzbek relations, recognizing that cultural cleavages exist between these communities that transcend external factors. Such efforts must include attempts to build trust in these communities through joint programs that emphasize common interests and de-emphasize differences. Such interventions might include local economic development projects aimed at rehabilitating shared assets such as roads, sports facilities, and schools. While such micro-level development projects cannot be expected to significantly impact the overall livelihood of the people involved, they are critical to building the trust needed to promote the longer-term success of larger economic and political development efforts in the south of the country.

Finally, it is important to recognize that the June 2010 violence has dramatically increased the risk of renewed violence for the foreseeable future. For this reason, both the government of Kyrgyzstan and the international community should invest in a reliable and independent early warning system that can alert those outside the Kyrgyz and Uzbek communities in the south of any increase in risk for renewed violence. At the same time, both the government of Kyrgyzstan and the international community must be ready to listen to and act on the warnings such a system generates.

Furthermore, in light of the recent findings of Human Rights Watch ([HRW](#), August 16, 2010) regarding the complicity of local law enforcement in June's violence, it is critical that the government of Kyrgyzstan seek ways to rebuild local trust in law enforcement among all ethnic groups, Uzbeks in particular. In this context, it is particularly troubling to note the opposition to the proposed police advisory mission of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) that has been expressed by many ethnic Kyrgyz, including numerous prominent politicians. The deployment of this advisory mission would be a very positive step towards both rehabilitating the image of local law enforcement among the people of southern Kyrgyzstan and the establishment of an independent mechanism for an early warning system of conflict prevention.

Such safeguards cannot guarantee the prevention of further violence, but they can hopefully reduce the risk. Given that large incidents of vicious and passionate interethnic violence have erupted between the same communities in the same places twice in twenty years, it is time that both outsiders and local authorities recognize that more is at play in such violence than external provocateurs and macro-level economic and political pressures.

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