



CHATHAM HOUSE

Chatham House, 10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE
T: +44 (0)20 7957 5700 E: contact@chathamhouse.org.uk
F: +44 (0)20 7957 5710 www.chathamhouse.org.uk

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Russia and Eurasia Programme Seminar Summary

Kyrgyzstan One Year after the Violence: Current Developments and Future Challenges

Dinara Oshurakhunova

Coalition for Democracy and Civil Society

Shirin Akiner

University of Cambridge

Mars Sariev

United Nations Development Programme, Bishkek

Alain Déléroz

International Crisis Group

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SESSION ONE: CURRENT DEVELOPMENTS

Dinara Oshurakhunova:

Since the events of April and June last year, there have been various developments in the political arena in Kyrgyzstan. One such political development has been the establishment of a parliamentary system, the first of its kind in Central Asia, a region otherwise dominated by strongman presidencies. The parliamentary system has been in operation for less than a year, so perhaps criticisms for its shortcomings have been made too hastily. Nevertheless, many challenges remain. One such challenge will be the presidential elections in October; will the newly elected president be satisfied with the reduced powers set out by the new constitution, or will there be a return to a presidential system?

Another challenge is the lack of information safety and security. There has been an inundation of media from neighbouring countries, including Russia, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, and this has had the effect of creating a degree of negative public opinion towards the new parliamentary system of government. Consequently, foreign media has undermined the parliamentary system as their portrayal has been generally negative or sceptical. This reflects a general criticism of parliamentary democracy within Russia, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, which view it as a threat to their presidential systems. It also creates a lack of understanding among the people of the Kyrgyz Republic about the positive aspects of parliamentary democracies, thus laying the groundwork for a potentially easy forfeiture of the current system in favour of a presidential one.

Following the June events, regional divisions between the North and South became more salient in the political sphere. This will have a key impact on the upcoming presidential elections, as candidate platforms and political agendas will take a back seat to the importance of regional associations. Such “regional games” will undoubtedly overshadow any meaningful attempts to improve political processes. This, unfortunately, is a reflection of weak state thinking, and will result in the sacrifice of sovereignty for the sake of political self-interest.

Despite these challenges, there have been many positive developments over the past year. First is the fact that parliament has been fully functional for six months and there have been improved relations between the parliament and civil society to support democratic principles. Second, the parliamentary system has created a forum for real political dialogue and competition. Though

regional issues are still salient, corruption has been reduced due to a climate of transparency and openness. Third, the parliament provides the potential for inter-communal reconciliation and cooperation via popular representation. Lastly, the parliamentary system creates an arena for the growth of new politicians, giving the country a chance to discover a new generation of political leadership.

Although progress has been made and there are positive prospects for the future, the conflict that erupted in ethnic violence last summer has not fully been settled, and simmers below the surface. Central authorities have yet to win the trust of all sections of the population. This is reinforced by the behaviour of law enforcement authorities in the south, who are unabashedly corrupt and have committed abuse and brutality along ethnic lines. Their power remains largely unchecked, undermining central authority power and weakening social trust. To remedy this, immediate reform of the police and of the judicial sector is essential. However, to a large extent, reforms have been confined to the level of discussion only; to execute reforms effectively, solid democratic processes are necessary. The issue of reform will also depend on the outcome of the presidential elections and whether or not the new president will implement such changes. Thus, it appears that any substantial reforms have been stalled until the elections are completed. At the same time, the fact that institutional reforms have not been fully implemented also creates the foundation for the political leadership regime to slide into authoritarianism or a strongman presidency.

Reform in the judicial sector is also key for the future stability of Kyrgyzstan, but this process too has faced setbacks. Protests erupted in response to the proposed appointment of judges to a new judicial council. Civil society organizations have criticised this, suggesting instead a public judicial council whereby judges are selected by the public and members of civil society in a bid to reduce corruption and increase transparency. Such reforms are key in ensuring that any decisions made are on the basis of law, and not political party interest. Moreover, an effective judicial system will restore trust among the Uzbeks living in Kyrgyzstan. Ethnic Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan remain suspicious of central authorities and are building their own institutions. This will lead to further isolation and increase the risk of future conflict. There is evidence that the population is increasingly arming itself and the situation remains dangerous.

The international community has played a large role in Kyrgyzstan, particularly in the past year. International assistance has been essential in supporting

conflict resolution, but the support is not balanced; southern NGOs have received substantial financial assistance, while NGOs in the north have been forced to close due to lack of funds. Nevertheless, the international community can be an asset in aiding improvements to be made in the civil society and NGO sector, in developing a free and fair media, and improving self-governance.

Shirin Akiner:

Over the last 20 years in Kyrgyzstan, two separate narratives have emerged: one is of a country struggling to establish itself in the post-Soviet era but still possessing potential and hope for the future, even stretching so far as an 'oasis of democracy'; the other is a darker narrative, one of violent protests, crime and killings, one example being the Tulip Revolution in 2005 and, of course, the events of last summer. What is curious is that in such a country with regular elections, a relatively strong civil society and press, why is it that the only way people feel they can voice their opinion is by taking to the streets in violent uprisings? The violence of last June has abated, but the situation is far from improving; at best it has stagnated, and at worst Kyrgyzstan faces further decline due to a complete collapse of infrastructure and social services. One of the main reasons for this stagnation is the disconnect between the urban elite – who are educated, professional and affluent – from the majority of the population, particularly those living in rural regions, who face poor economic prospects, a lack of education opportunities and higher levels of unemployment. This disconnect centres primarily around the socioeconomic divide, which has largely been ignored thus far.

Economic issues are salient, but have thus far been subordinate to debates over the appropriate political system for Kyrgyzstan. There are no perfect political systems. Leaders are a reflection or product of a specific cultural, social, and political background. Therefore, the context and framework in Kyrgyzstan should be one of concern, particularly because the young generation are so passionate about their country; how that passion is manifested or harnessed will produce a different variety of leadership. Perhaps there has already been a shift in the social and cultural background. This is indicated by two things: one, just a month after the June violence, an NGO launched a campaign on how the state defends transgender individuals from harassment, which is surprising given the cultural and social context; two, the constitutional referendum that established a parliamentary

democracy. These events signify a possible shift toward progressive thinking and policy and should be monitored in the upcoming months.

Then there is the question of the West: everyone needs help and assistance, but how is that help to be used effectively? Kyrgyzstan receives more money than any other Central Asian state, but little of that has produced enduring change in the economic system. The key question is what the next generation of citizens will do with external financial assistance and how they will choose to rebuild their country. It is unlikely that the West will tire of funding Kyrgyzstan's development, primarily because it is still part of a Cold War way of thinking, and removing Western presence or influence in the region would open the door for Russian influence. Moreover, Kyrgyzstan plays—and will continue to play—a key geopolitical role in the region due to its proximity to Afghanistan and the Manas Transit Center.

Lastly is the issue of Kyrgyzstan's neighbours. The attitudes of the neighbouring countries range from irritation to anger. Kyrgyzstan has put itself in a highly dependent position, relying heavily on assistance from its neighbours. So when Kyrgyzstan makes demands of its neighbours, they see it as ingratitude for their help. Such tension between Kyrgyzstan and its neighbours, however, is not for foreign mediation to solve; it must be resolved among the Central Asian states. China has maintained a relatively low profile vis-à-vis Kyrgyzstan in the political sense but has invested heavily in infrastructure and natural resource development, which helps build essential trade and transport networks, thus integrating Kyrgyzstan into the region economically.

Despite all these challenges and factors, ultimately Kyrgyzstan and its citizens must decide their own priorities and must think in very realistic terms about how to deal with its neighbours, address questions of the West, and ensure a future of economic stability and prosperity.

Questions and Discussion:

A participant began the discussion with a comment that the UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office is reviewing its policy towards Kyrgyzstan, and the key question for policy makers is whether or not a country like Kyrgyzstan is simply a field on which external actors play. Is Kyrgyzstan a post-Cold War paradigm of spheres of influence? What kind of role will it play in the period leading up to 2015, as ISAF winds down?

A comment was made about long-term prospects for economic integration, particularly given border crossing issues on the Kazakh-Kyrgyz and the Uzbek-Kyrgyz borders. In response, one of the speakers noted that there is very little cooperation—either bilateral or multilateral—in the region, but this does not have to be Kyrgyzstan's fate. The speaker cited Tajikistan's success in building foreign relations with its partners, while Kyrgyzstan, thus far, has merely insulted or offended its neighbours and partners. This comment was followed by a question about the effect of more “poisonous” forms of globalization on the region, particularly with regard to narcotics and human trafficking. A further question was posed about the role of the Northern Distribution Network (NDN) into Afghanistan, and whether there is any potential for the private sector to ‘piggyback’ onto cross-border cooperation and infrastructure that the NDN is meant to build. However, linking the Central Asian states together with the NDN could also create problems or tensions; one way to prevent this is by negotiating regional agreements on issues such as agricultural export standards, livestock standards, etc.

A participant made a comment about the economic situation in Kyrgyzstan with an emphasis on the mining sector. He described the current economic situation as problematic, with an ambiguous future, due to recent actions taken by the government against mining companies. Since 2010, the new government has revoked 600 mineral licences, about 40 percent of the total number of licences issued. Given that the mining sector comprises one-third of overall GDP and 50 percent of total exports, such actions do not bode well for Kyrgyzstan's economic future. Moreover, political factions have begun debating the nationalization of Kumtor gold mine, which—if it occurs—would deal a heavy blow to the economy. Despite these developments, Kyrgyzstan has great potential in that its main natural resource is gold, and not oil or gas; harnessing this would be sufficient to make a huge economic leap. One of the speakers responded by saying that most of the licences were issued in the previous regimes, under an entirely corrupt and hidden process, which increased popular mistrust against international companies. As a result, international assistance and investment is associated with Western assistance and investment, which has negative connotations in public opinion.

The next question was on the role of Islam as a political and social force, and whether or not it was increasing. One of the speakers responded by saying that Islam is playing a relatively active role; an increasing number of mosques are being built, and there is a Muslim prayer room in the parliament building. While there are tensions between various Islamic groups, the overall strength of Islam's role has increased, primarily due to a loss of trust in the central

authorities. With no one in power to rely on, more Kyrgyz citizens turn to religion. This poses a potential threat as Kyrgyzstan may experience an 'Afghanization' or increase in Islamist extremism, but it can also play a positive role, as seen in the role played by Islamic groups in the rebuilding of Jalalabad.

This was followed up by a question on trade, and whether Kyrgyzstan was seeking to join the Russia-Kazakhstan-Belarus Customs Treaty Union. One of the speakers responded that joining a customs union or economic partnership is essential for Kyrgyzstan, but that the leadership must take active responsibility and must make a concrete decision to improve their economic prospects.

An observation was made that the country is in political limbo pending the presidential elections in October, which may be, in part, due to the lack of anyone in Bishkek with real understanding of or authority over events in the south. One of the speakers responded by saying that not only is there a North-South divide, but there is an additional division between Bishkek and the regions. There has been a marginalisation of the regions in both political and economic terms – in the economic sense, investments have largely been focused on Bishkek, while ignoring the regions. This has resulted in a decrease in central authority influence in the regions.

A participant made the comment that Kyrgyzstan must find a way to solve its problems, but this implies that Kyrgyz society actually has the abilities and resources to do so. Is it realistic to believe this is possible? One of the speakers replied by saying that the problem with independence for any country is that someone must take responsibility for what happens after. Thus, Kyrgyzstan needs to make a conscious decision on how to best develop its independent state. Thus far, a large amount of attention has been paid to democratic development only, which is due, in part, to international pressure to consolidate Kyrgyzstan's democracy, but at the expense of social or economic elements.

A participant made the comment that there is a perception that Kyrgyzstan has political competition and a tradition of popular movements. However, this is illusory, and what is really happening is a small circle of elites are merely shifting posts and competition goes no further than competing amongst themselves. This, in effect, has created a 'conspiracy' among the political elites to manipulate the public.

Another participant asked about the Kyrgyz diaspora in China, specifically about how many Kyrgyz are estimated to live in western China, and what kind of links or ties they maintain to Kyrgyzstan. One of the speakers noted that it is difficult to accurately determine the number of Kyrgyz living in western China because they have been subsumed into the Uighur population there.

Another question was asked about constitutional changes and the possibility of a return to a presidential system. One of the speakers replied, saying that the constitution adopted last year stipulates that there can be no amendments until September 2020. thus, the real question is whether or not the political elite will take steps to revoke this clause in order to return to a presidential system. It remains a possibility, as some argue that a presidential system is more suited to Kyrgyz society and since the population feel insecure and are therefore more inclined to accept a strong leader to ensure security and stability.

SESSION TWO: FUTURE CHALLENGES AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Mars Sariev:

The collapse of formal political structures has led to the explosion of the political mafia in Kyrgyzstan, and political clans have taken advantage of this in power distribution mechanisms. These political clans are based on informal ties or links and form individual relationships based on power and influence. The role of clans has increased since the June 2010 events as they are seen as the best guarantee for security and status concerns. This, however, may also have made the North-South regional divide more salient as the clan mindset or mentality differs between the regions; clans are not based on familial ties, but regional allegiances. This power arrangement has defined the current political situation; thus, the role of local clan groups has risen, based on an infrastructure inherited from the Soviet Union. Civil society is in an embryonic state and political institutions are an illusion; behind these are clan interests vying for power. Thus, lines of conflict should be seen not as political struggle but as clan ideology. Despite this, Roza Otunbayeva was elected

president even though she wasn't linked to one clan; this was helpful for the reconciliation process.

The long-term strategy for Kyrgyzstan must involve self-identification if the country is to move away from ethnic politics. The future of the country is also dependent on the maintenance of the parliamentary system, though there are pressures to return to a presidential system. This is primarily due to the fact that a presidential system is perceived to secure rights and stability. Despite this, there are positive prospects for the future. The political climate is likely to heat up, but conflict can be used as a catalyst for positive change. Moreover, the parliamentary system provides the opportunity for new leaders and new ideas to arise. This is being facilitated by Otunbayeva's attempts to inject new life into the political sector by supporting civil society growth and free media, for example.

What role can be played by external players? The US has played an instrumental role in providing assistance to civil society. The relationship between Moscow and Bishkek, however, is more complicated. Moscow appears to be unsure of whom to have rapprochement with among the Kyrgyz elite.

Ultimately, regardless of all other factors, the future of Kyrgyzstan depends on the self-identification of Kyrgyz elite, who must make a conscious decision whether to build a multicultural society or not. If Kyrgyzstan is to be stable, a multicultural society must be established. This will take time due to the clan system, so the political elite must find a way to expedite the process by making behavioural changes and by changing the political system and media. Such positive changes are opportunities for people to voice their opinion in free media, the power to re-elect judges, and increased transparency. To achieve this, the elites must engage new figures in society to have a wider understanding of the situation. They need to incorporate new voices and a new generation in government in order for a real democracy to be achieved.

Alain Déléroz:

There are two big dangers for the future stability of Kyrgyzstan: internal and external. The biggest internal danger is the rise in Kyrgyz nationalism. This will determine how ethnic groups will be able to work with each other in the future, and it poses a challenge for the next president who will be elected in October. The rise in nationalism has also contributed to the instability in the South. Bishkek cannot control the southern region, and as a result it has become a

de facto separate region with its own political leaders and refusal to implement presidential decrees. Moreover, police in the south have become unruly and brutal, committing attacks and harassing people along ethnic lines. There is evidence that the police have beaten ethnic Uzbeks, taken their children hostage and demanded money for their release. The rise of nationalism cannot be ignored; the minority population is key for ensuring GDP growth and economic stability. In one region of Kyrgyzstan, tax income this year is only 24 percent of last year's figure as a result of the violence. There is a lesson here for the political class – persecution of minorities leads to a fall in GDP.

The external danger for Kyrgyzstan is its immediate neighbourhood. This became evident in the reactions of the neighbouring Central Asian states during the events of last year. Kazakhstan closed its borders and failed to push for OSCE or CSTO intervention; Uzbekistan provided limited support by opening its borders for Uzbek refugees, at least for a short time; Tajikistan is closely linked to the violence in the southern regions of Kyrgyzstan due to drug trafficking networks emanating from the Pamir Mountains. Kazakhstan is the one neighbouring state that can help ensure the security of the Kyrgyz Republic, but it has yet to fully grasp its regional power role. It is vital that Kazakhstan steps up to assume this responsibility; if Kyrgyzstan implodes, it will be a huge problem for Kazakhstan. Thus, Kazakhstan must be pushed to see Kyrgyzstan not as a problem but as a small partner and to help it develop and stabilise.

China is a key neighbour, and it remains nervous about the current developments in Central Asia. Due to the prospect of an influx of Kyrgyz refugees, China has taken active steps to ensure the delimitation of the Kyrgyz-Chinese border in Xinjiang. In a region best with problems, Chinese investment is vital. It accounts for less than 1 per cent of total Chinese foreign investment, however, a quick glance at the number of visits by Central Asian officials to China shows the significance this investment has for the recipient states.

Russia has a rather clueless outlook, especially regarding developments in the south. Even as events there were unfolding in June 2010, it was reported that Russian intelligence knew little of what was really happening on the ground. Moreover, Russia views the difficulties encountered by Kyrgyzstan's parliamentary system with an element of *Schadenfreude*; this attitude is shared by most of Kyrgyzstan's neighbours due to the nature of their own political systems.

NATO and EU members have a tendency to see the region only through the prism of the Northern Distribution Network (NDN). This has distorted their ability to accurately follow political and economic developments in Central Asia.

The upcoming presidential elections will be important for Kyrgyzstan, but this inwards looking situation prevents the Kyrgyzstani government from a broader view that will allow the development of a coherent foreign policy.

Questions and Discussion:

Ambassador Baktygul Kalambekova began the discussion by saying that Kyrgyzstan is undergoing a difficult period. However, when Kyrgyzstan emerges from this, the experience can serve as a model or lesson for other countries. Kyrgyzstan is open for discussion and dialogue, and welcomes all perspectives on what is happening. One example of this is the acceptance of the Kyrgyzstan Inquiry Commission (KIC). Kyrgyzstan has had 20 years to develop its identity and democracy, and this matches not only the historical mindset of the state, but its future mission.

There is considerable optimism that Kyrgyzstan will come through; the international community has provided technical and financial assistance. Ultimately though, there is no toolkit for Kyrgyzstan's situation; the Kyrgyz people and government are still searching for the best way to stabilise the situation.

Another participant asked a question about the impact of East-West links, particularly in reference to the new railway and highway being built from China via Central Asia. One of the speakers responded that thus far, there are only bilateral approaches to such developments in East-West links, but there needs to be a wider regional approach for Kyrgyzstan to benefit.

Another question was asked about when exactly the international community realised what was happening in Kyrgyzstan, particularly the rise in nationalism. What was its cause? A comparison has been made with the Balkans, but perhaps a better analogy would be Germany in the 1930s? The rise in nationalism is a new phenomenon, as recent as the past two years. This was a result of a mixture of the economic, social and cultural situation and the actions of the political elite. One way to combat the rise in nationalism is through the development of media and press.

A participant commented that the depiction of Kyrgyzstan is a very fragmented one. How can such fragmentation be overcome, and are there any unifying factors to overcome such divisions? One of the speakers responded by saying that the division has been a result of the Akayev regime's decisions taken after independence, when in the aftermath of the 1990 Osh riots, he declared Kyrgyzstan as a common home for all people while trying to develop support for the titular nation. Another division was created by granting Uzbeks power in the business or economic sphere, while at the same time—and paradoxically—denying them meaningful political participation. These actions have made Uzbeks isolated, living almost in their own state within the Kyrgyz state. Perhaps one way to overcome such divisions is to increase the participation of Uzbeks in the political sphere and in law enforcement.

Another participant asked about 'exit' as a response to the violence. Many Kyrgyz citizens – especially Uzbeks – sought temporary Russian visas, seeing Russia as a place to settle. Given the exodus (albeit temporary) of Uzbeks, what are the prospects for incorporating them into the government and creating a parliamentary system that will truly reflect Kyrgyz society and contain growing nationalism? One of the speakers commented that the exodus was not only to Russia, but to Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan as well. Russia made efforts to set up a system of protection for migrants, as did Tajikistan. However, those refugees who fled to Uzbekistan had little protection. While there is increasing xenophobia in the Russian Federation, there have also been developments within the Duma to increase migrant rights.

Another participant asked about the relationship between the drug trade and the Osh events. One of the speakers answered by analysing the various responses to the drug trade in Central Asia. For example, Turkmenistan realised drug trafficking was detrimental to its country and as a response has attempted to secure the Turkmen-Afghan border. As a result, the drug route has been rerouted through Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, posing a host of new problems for those countries. For Kyrgyzstan, it has increased corruption and instability. For example, every six months local militia commanders rotate, which raises questions about the role they play in drug trafficking. It appears that the June 2010 events were at least partially prepared or facilitated by people who wanted to fan the flames of inter-ethnic tensions to cover up drug trafficking conflicts.

A question was asked about the atmosphere of predatory law enforcement in Osh and Jalalabad, and whether or not it is reformable. One of the speakers

commented that the political side appears to be stuck. The one thing that can be improved or reformed is the judicial process. One positive change that has been made in this respect is the instalment of the new Prosecutor for Osh. The police, however, are in dire need of significant reforms, but may be more difficult to change.

A question was asked about the reaction of Kyrgyz elite to the Kiljunen report [the KIC report], and about the public perception. The political elite declared the report's author, Kimmo Kiljunen, *persona non grata*; does this reflect public sentiment as well? One of the speakers responded by saying that the reaction toward the KIC report has generally been negative, but that Kyrgyzstan should listen to all points of view since a real democracy allows all opinions to be voiced.