

Kyrgyzstan: a step towards an illusory stabilisation

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The calm manner in which the constitutional referendum has been conducted and the adoption of a new constitution in Kyrgyzstan do not mean a stabilisation of the country; nor will divergent approaches of global powers contribute to it.

Kyrgyzstan adopted a new constitution as a result of the referendum held on 27 June. The new basic law is expected to improve the functionality of the state and democratise it and to stabilise the situation in the country after the April coup and the bloody ethnic conflict in June. Considering the scale of the challenges Kyrgyzstan has to face, the situation seems unlikely to return to normal soon. Stabilisation is also hindered due to limited external support; despite the strong anxiety which the situation in Kyrgyzstan has raised, its neighbours, such as Russia and China, and also the USA, have either adopted a wait-and-see approach or taken limited action. At the same time, the crisis in Kyrgyzstan is a reminder of the existing conflicts of interests in the region and may reinforce them.

The eighth Kyrgyz Republic

The main goals of the referendum and the new (it is the eighth over the past two decades) constitution are to grant legal mandate to the interim government, which took over power after bloody riots had led to ousting of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev last April, and to create a new, more democratic political framework. The constitution, for example, limits the president's prerogatives (this post will be held by Roza Otunbayeva until 2012) and strengthens parliament and its control over the president. The new political system seems to be better suited to the peculiarities of Kyrgyz society and to the fragmentation of Kyrgyzstan's political scene, and reduces the risk of pathologies which accompanied the rule of Bakiyev (and of Askar Akayev before him). The amendment of the constitution was supported by 90% of the voters with turnout reaching 69%. This has to be recognised as a great success for the present authorities, which provides them with an obvious political mandate both at home and in international contacts.

The referendum was aimed at stabilising the situation in the country after the April coup, and secondarily at stabilising and improving the image of the country after the bloody clashes between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in the southern part of the country this June (according to unofficial estimates, approximately two thousand people were killed and hundreds of thousands have been displaced). The calm atmosphere in which the referendum was carried out and guardedly positive comments received from the OSCE, the EU and other organisations, give the impression of stabilisation.

However, this should not obscure real problems. The deep erosion of state structures, the chaos across the country and the limited legitimacy of the state authorities (the parliamentary elections were scheduled for 10 October) makes the government unable to not only to implement rapid reforms but also to administer the country. The situation has been additionally aggravated by the deep economic and social crisis and the increasing importance of local and informal power structures, often with criminal links. There are sharp conflicts inside the interim government (disputes, corruption allegations and dismissals). Maintaining law and order in the country is still the main challenge. The Kyrgyz-Uzbek ethnic conflict in the southern part of the country has been defused but has not been resolved. The scale of the humanitarian catastrophe in the south also seems to be a challenge which the government may be unable to deal with. The threat of local ethnic conflicts in northern Kyrgyzstan is also real. Furthermore, violent political, social and criminal score settling (which has already happened) may also erupt anywhere in the country. Last but not least, there is a serious danger of a local war against Islamic terrorism breaking out in Kyrgyzstan. According to the official opinion of the Kyrgyz security services issued on 24 June, the communal violence in the south was incited by radicals from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and the Islamic Jihad Union, linked to Al-Qaeda, who had previously been fighting in Afghanistan, and were instigated and paid by Maksim Bakiyev, son of the overthrown president. Although such information is difficult to confirm, it is very likely that radicals are penetrating into Kyrgyzstan, which is plunged in anarchy. At the same time, whatever the scale of the real threat, such opinions from security agencies signify a readiness to launch a struggle against alleged terrorists and to use it for political purposes.

International challenges

The challenges the Kyrgyz authorities must face are very serious and closely linked to the country's international environment; the approach taken by global powers and Kyrgyzstan's neighbours affects the way in which the situation is developing in Kyrgyzstan, and external support seems to be a necessary requirement for the stabilisation of the country.

On the other hand, the threat of increasing destabilisation in Kyrgyzstan poses a very serious challenge to the entire region. Kyrgyz tensions and conflicts may spill over into neighbouring countries and upset the fragile regional order. Actions taken by Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan so far have shown that those countries can counteract this only to a limited extent and have hardly any ability to stabilise the situation in Kyrgyzstan on their own.

In this context, the approach taken by global powers, especially Russia, the USA and China, seems to be crucial. The Kyrgyz crisis is threatening also their interests and forcing them to revise their previous policies, which may turn out to be decisive for the situation not only in Kyrgyzstan but also in the entire region.

For a country which aspires to restore its privileged zone of influence in Central Asia Russia has taken a surprisingly restrained approach. It has not granted clear political support to the new authorities, and President Medvedev has consistently forecast an increase in tension and disintegration of the country, which is significantly weakening the interim government and destabilising the situation. At the same time, Russia – ignoring requests from Bishkek –

refused to launch a military intervention during the pogroms in the south and has officially ruled out increasing its military presence in the country. Presumably, this is an effect of distrust towards the new Kyrgyz authorities, resistance from some member states of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and an unwillingness to incur difficulties and costs (also those linked to the country's image) of a unilateral operation.. However, it is difficult to imagine that Russia will remain passive, risking a complete loss of its own and the CSTO's prestige. Russian political and military engagement may be expected with further deterioration of the situation in Kyrgyzstan. Then Russia would be able to count on better understanding and greater support for its intervention (including from the CSTO, for example as part of combating Islamic terrorism) and also could have wider room for political manoeuvres both inside as well as around Kyrgyzstan. However, it is difficult to predict both the effects of such Russian actions and the costs it would have to incur.

The USA has important reasons to become active in Kyrgyzstan but it has limited capability to do so. Central Asia (especially Kyrgyzstan and the Manas airbase used by the USA) is a staging area for the operation in Afghanistan. The interim government is generally unfavourably inclined toward the USA, and this attitude is additionally reinforced by Russian pressure to liquidate Manas. This has forced Washington to attempt to act in Kyrgyzstan through the OSCE (Kyrgyzstan has applied for the launch of a monitoring mission) and to establish closer co-operation directly with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan (the military Training Centre is to be moved from Kyrgyzstan to Tajikistan). This does not contribute to stabilising the situation in Kyrgyzstan and only adds to the risk of Russian resistance against US political and military activity in the region.

China so far has taken only limited measures. It has not converted its growing economic position in Kyrgyzstan and the entire region over the past few years into tangible influence on security issues. Meanwhile, the instability in Kyrgyzstan is perceived by Beijing as a direct and serious threat to Xinjiang. China signalled its support for the stabilisation of the political situation under the auspices of the CSTO and Russia. However, if this does not happen or turns out to be ineffective, Beijing may be forced to seriously revise its policy in this region.

The actions taken by the global powers so far have done little to contribute to improving the situation in Kyrgyzstan. At the same time, there is a concern that the differences between the respective policies of Russia, China and the USA are preventing efficient co-operation at present and, worse still, may lead to increased tension and instrumentalization of the Kyrgyz crisis in the context of political competition in the region.