

Kyrgyzstan – a problem far from being solved

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On 19 May, southern Kyrgyzstan saw more in the series of disturbances which have taken place in recent weeks. In Jalalabad, clashes took place between the Kyrgyz population and members of the Uzbek minority which is numerous in this part of the country (three people died). An intervention by the interim government (in the form of the introduction of special forces) was temporarily successful in preventing the conflict from escalating. More than six weeks after the overthrow of Kurmanbek Bakiev and his regime, the situation in Kyrgyzstan remains unstable. The government lacks legitimacy and internal cohesion. The reoccurring disturbances in the south of the country are proof of the government's weakness; it is able to take temporary control of the situation, but not to introduce lasting order. It is unlikely that the interim government in its current form will bring the country out of the crisis; indeed the scale and dynamic of the internal problems admit the possibility that Kyrgyzstan will turn into a failed state. The states of the region have adopted a defensive and passive position towards Kyrgyzstan; Russia has also adopted a 'wait and see' attitude. The ongoing crisis in Kyrgyzstan poses a serious threat to the whole region's stability.

A weak interim government

Despite the lack of significant political competitors, the interim government's position is weak. The ruling team lacks legitimacy (parliamentary elections will only take place in autumn), and the recent decision to entrust the head of government Roza Otunbayeva with the duties of 'president for the transitional period' until the end of 2011 will solidify this state of affairs. In addition, the position of the government and its authority in society are being weakened by increasingly open conflicts among its members (mutual accusations of corruption, and unconfirmed reports that one minister has been arrested), as well as by its clumsy reaction to the clashes in the south of the country.

The interim government's status on the international stage, and above all the attitude of Russia and the neighbouring countries towards it, also remains unclear. Since their initial acceptance of the coup on 7 April, these states have regularly emphasised the new government's lack of democratic legitimacy, and have called into question its right to represent Kyrgyzstan in the forums of the regional cooperation organisations (the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation). The closure of borders by Uzbekistan and (until recently) Kazakhstan is also an important problem, for it is having a devastating effect on the country's economy.

The degree to which the interim government controls the northern and southern parts of the country is clearly different. Since Bakiev's removal, northern Kyrgyzstan has remained relatively stable; in the southern regions, clashes have regularly broken out (such as the demonstration by supporters of the former president on 13-14 May, and the aforementioned Kyrgyz/Uzbek clashes), in which several people have died.

Bakiev's supporters, who are being organised by members of his family still present in the country, do not pose any serious threat to the new government; they can only destabilise the situation locally and intermittently. However, a real threat is posed by the possible escalation of ethnic conflicts (between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks, and between Kyrgyz and Tajiks); these could have disastrous effects for both Kyrgyzstan and for its neighbours. It seems that the interim government has the means to calm down the situation in the south on a localised and short-term basis; however it is unable to introduce lasting order, and even less able to govern effectively.

The situation in Kyrgyzstan is a regional problem

The situation in Kyrgyzstan is the most serious crisis on the territory of post-Soviet Central Asia since the period of the civil war in Tajikistan.

In the short term, the greatest threat is a Kyrgyz/Uzbek conflict in the south of Kyrgyzstan. If this escalates, it would likely bring about uncontrolled public demonstrations in Uzbekistan also, which in turn would pose a serious threat to the internal stability of that country's totalitarian political system.

A further weakening of Bishkek's control over Kyrgyzstan's territory (especially the south) threatens to transform the country into a so-called 'black hole'. This would result in groups of cross-border criminals, and also of fundamentalists and even terrorists (if insurgents from Afghanistan cross over) gaining in strength, with all the associated consequences for Kyrgyzstan's neighbours.

The weakness of Kyrgyzstan's government in the face of its internal challenges, and its limited reliability externally, threatens a political vacuum in the longer term. Any attempt to fill it (which Russia is most likely to make, perhaps under the banner of the CSTO) would strike at the interests of individual states, and disturb the delicate balance of forces throughout the region.

The situation in Kyrgyzstan poses a threat to the economic interests of the neighbouring countries, above all Kazakhstan, which during Bakiev's five-year rule became very closely involved with Kyrgyzstan's economy. The uncertain future of the banking sector (state control over the biggest banks was introduced) as well as the status of the property on Lake Issyk-Kul in which Kazakhstan has made investments (the real estate has now been partially renationalised), exposes it to the loss of some valuable assets.

In the light of how events have developed in Kyrgyzstan so far, the neighbouring countries have remained largely helpless, and their activities have above all been defensive in nature, aimed at avoiding the spread of instability onto their territories. The region's two most important states, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, reacted by closing their borders. Kazakhstan partially reopened its border after Kyrgyzstan cut off water supplies; Uzbekistan's border remains closed, and its defence has been reinforced by the army. In addition, Uzbekistan has imposed an information blockade on the events in Kyrgyzstan.

The lack of reaction to the situation in Kyrgyzstan has been especially noteworthy in the case of Kazakhstan, which aspires to the role of regional leader and mediator in possible conflicts, and which also currently holds the chairmanship of the OSCE. Apart from the diplomatic endeavours coordinated with Russia in the first days after the coup (including help in transporting the overthrown President Bakiev out of the country), Kazakhstan has not taken any action to stabilise the situation. Instead, it has been noticeable that Astana (like the other countries in the region) has been waiting for reactions and initiatives from Moscow (either individually or under the aegis of regional organisations such as the CSTO and the Shanghai group). This helplessness in the face of its neighbour's situation is a hard blow to Kazakhstan's image, and has revealed its lack of readiness to chair the OSCE.

Russia's unclear position

Russia's position towards Kyrgyzstan remains unclear, and serves only to fuel general apprehension. Bakiev's overthrow was in accord with Russian interests; Moscow initially gave the new government its strong political support, as well as some financial aid (US\$20m so far, and a further US\$30m has been promised). Currently, however, Russia's support for the interim government seems more ambiguous; this may be connected with the position Kyrgyzstan's new government has taken on extending the USA's lease on the Manas air base, a decision which is unsatisfactory to Moscow. Some statements by high representatives of the Russian government, which have presented the situation in Kyrgyzstan as extremely negative have contributed to the rise in tension. It cannot be ruled out that Kyrgyzstan's long-term instability may lie in Russia's own interests; Moscow's position in the region could be strengthened, and it could also arrange for a person completely dependent on it to be elevated to power.

The USA's reaction to the situation in Kyrgyzstan has been limited. The two visits paid by US representatives to Bishkek in recent weeks appear to have focused on whether the functioning of the Manas base near Bishkek will continue unhindered, and not on stabilising the situation in the country. Nor has China taken a clear position on the situation in Kyrgyzstan.

