

An increasing crisis in Kyrgyzstan – moving towards a fallen state

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In recent months the situation in Kyrgyzstan has systematically deteriorated and over the last two weeks violent protests have been held both in the north and south of the country. They have demonstrated the weakness of the central government and the degree to which the country has disintegrated. In spite of this, Kyrgyzstan will most likely not be threatened with another revolution in the vein of those of 2005 and 2010 since the opposition is divided and marginalised at the central level and the interests of influential local actors in the south of the country are not currently under threat. Furthermore, in the long term any further destabilization in Kyrgyzstan or the erosion of the state and the disintegration of the country pose a serious threat to the country and a great challenge for the remaining states in the region.

The context

The revolution of 2010 saw President Kurmanbek Bakiyev who came from the south of the country ousted and brought to power the elite from the north. The country remains on the brink of collapse. Kyrgyzstan's problems are chronic and systemic and the most important of them are the escalating social and political division between the north and the south of the country (the main dividing line of the political conflict), the financial insufficiency of the state dependent on foreign aid. In the broader context it is the insufficiency of the whole economy, the erosion of the state's structures, ethnic tensions in the south between the Kyrgyz and the Uzbek minority and also the problem of "black holes" – areas which remain beyond the control of the central government where local structures (including criminal ones) are growing in importance.

This latter phenomenon is most visible in the south of the country, controlled by influential local actors who have de facto total control of this region and do not obey decisions from the central government despite the fact that they are not openly separatist. The mayor of Osh (the largest city in the south and the second largest in the country), co-responsible for the ethnic conflict of 2010, Melis Myrzakhmatov is the most important in this group. Despite having been formally dismissed by the central government in 2010 Myrzakhmatov still holds his position and in 2012 his political party won the local election.

Kyrgyzstan is also struggling with external problems. It has seen an escalation in the number of incidents at the borders with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan in the south of the country. It is expected that the stability in the region will be affected following the withdrawal of the ISAF forces from Afghanistan scheduled for 2014. Furthermore, the interests of the main players come face to face in Kyrgyzstan. In 2012 Kyrgyzstan signed an economic and military agreement with Russia, whereas in May this year the Kyrgyz government decided to revoke the lease of the Transit Centre in Manas, signed with the US, from 2014.

The escalating crisis

Recent protests in Kyrgyzstan have revealed the extent to which the country's current problems have escalated. Following the revolution of 2010 protests have been fairly frequent but they have been of a low intensity. They died down or were effectively quashed and channelled by the government. Over the last two weeks the situation has deteriorated: there have been violent protests in both the north and the south. The protests against the operations of the Kumtor gold mine (which generates 12% of Kyrgyzstan's GDP) in the Issyk-Kul district in the north of the country, continued until 3 June and resulted in 50 people being injured. The protesters demanded to be paid damages for the destruction of the environment caused by gold mining and to have social allowances increased for miners (the mine is now the property of the Canadian company Centerra Gold). Until 5 June there were also protests in Jalal-Abad, the second largest city in the south of the country after Osh; they were aimed at supporting the protesters in Kumtor. The protesters in Jalal-Abad demanded that the mine be nationalised and that imprisoned opposition leaders be released. During the demonstration the local administration building was stormed into and attempts were made by demonstration leader Meder Usenov to take over power. The self-appointed governor Usenov was arrested; he was, however, released under guarantee from members of parliament from the south due to ongoing protests by his supporters and a blockade of the road which links the north and the south. Following a series of protests the head of the security services (GKNB) and the governor of the Issyk-Kul district were dismissed and the Kumtor mine remains closed, which will affect the country's economy.

The conflict over Kumtor has been settled for the time being – the government has three months for talks with Centerra Gold about the future of the mine. A new division of shares and increased taxes for the Canadian company should not be ruled out. The demonstrations also revealed the state's far-reaching weakness (protests subsided only after direct interventions from Prime Minister Zhantoro Satybaldiyev) and the ongoing disintegration of the state into separate regions, not controlled by the central government.

The outlook

Despite the growing internal problems and further possible local protests and revolts, the scenario which envisages a revolution and a change in power in Kyrgyzstan in the coming months seems rather unlikely. This is due both to the marginalisation of the opposition and the weakness of the central government. The opposition from the south of the country is divided (between the parties Ata Dzhurt and Butun Kyrgyzstan), it is marginalised (Butun Kyrgyzstan is not represented in the parliament and the leader of Ata Dzhurt Kamchybek Tashiyev is serving a sentence for an attempted illegal take-over of power in October 2012) and it is compromised in the eyes of their voters (after Tashiyev was arrested, despite threats of a revolution, his followers did not succeed in collecting more than 5,000 people together at one time). Paradoxically, another factor which decreases the likelihood of a revolution is the weakness of the central government. The interests of influential local actors (for example the mayor of Osh Melis Myrzakhmatov) are currently not threatened, and they are thus not interested in challenging the status quo in which the elite from the north holds power at the central level while the south enjoys large informal autonomy and full freedom of action at the local level.

However, in the longer term the country's internal problems may lead to a complete destabilisation of the state—another revolution or, in the worst case scenario, even a collapse and fragmentation of the state. Nor should it be ruled out that external actors, currently uninterested in a change of power in Kyrgyzstan, in the face of escalating problems in the country will use revolutionary sentiments to realise their interests. The deteriorating situation in Kyrgyzstan also has regional implications – the threat of Kyrgyzstan's destabilisation and its impact on neighbouring states presents a challenge for the states in Central Asia, particularly in the context of already existing dangers or those which have been forecast, such as: social tensions, threats posed by Islamic radicalism, a decreased level of security after 2014 and challenges the states are facing, in particular the issues regarding the succession of power in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.