



THE ROLE OF ORGANIZED CRIME AND DRUG TRAFFICKING IN KYRGYZSTAN'S ETHNIC CRISIS

Erik Leijonmarck & Camilla Asyrankulova

On October 10, Kyrgyzstan held parliamentary elections. According to reports, the elections were surprisingly free and fair. Unfortunately, the problem of state criminalization remains. The new government will face a tough task when dealing with this problem. The conflict that erupted in June in southern Kyrgyzstan is generally seen as being driven by external factors, such as Islamic radicals exploiting socio-economic grievances and the extreme politicization of ethnicity and identity. Although these are important factors, the role of organized crime in the outbreak of ethnic conflict should not be overlooked. Behind the conflict lies the interplay between external and domestic factors as well as the link between regional/local organized crime and the corrupt family politics of former President Kurmanbek Bakiyev.

Outbreak of Ethnic Violence

The violent clashes between ethnic Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in southern Kyrgyzstan on June 11–14, 2010 left hundreds of people dead. Most of the infrastructure in and around Kyrgyzstan's southern city Osh was destroyed, businesses were looted, and hundreds of thousands of refugees were forced to flee to neighboring Uzbekistan or to other regions of the country. Some 400,000 ethnic Uzbeks are estimated to have fled to Uzbekistan.

The conflict occurred in the Osh and Jalal-Abad regions where 44 percent of Kyrgyzstan's population lives. According to the official death toll, the June riots left over 390 people dead, while the actual total was likely to be ten times more.

Many accounts of fighting between groups of young Uzbeks and Kyrgyz on June 10 eventually spilled over into mass killings the next morning. International Crisis Group (ICG) reports that a large group of young Uzbeks started rioting in the center of Osh and attacked the Kyrgyz. Kyrgyz groups retaliated by attacking Uzbek neighborhoods. The aggressive mobs were well-organized and often led by special units of gunmen.

Even though the government blames outsiders for the violence, including a variety of Islamic groups (Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Islamic Jihad Union, the Taliban, etc.), ICG reports that the pogroms involved rem-

nants of the Bakiyev political machine, prominent mainstream politicians and organized crime groups, especially those involved in the narcotics trade.

Kyrgyzstan - A Convenient Pit Stop

Although Kyrgyzstan is not a major producer of drugs, it has become an important transit country for illicit Afghan drugs on the way to European markets. Estimates indicate that roughly 20 to 60 metric tons of heroin is trafficked through Kyrgyzstan annually.

Afghanistan is by far the biggest supplier of opium and heroin accounting for roughly 8000 metric tons per year, or 90 percent of the world supply. At least 15 percent of the production is trafficked along the northern route through Central Asia. The Kyrgyz city of Osh, which the UN calls a "regional hub of drug trafficking," is a key link in the northern drug route from Afghanistan. Some lucrative routes for transit of Afghan heroin through Kyrgyz territory are:

1. Badakhshan (Afghanistan) – Gorny Badakhshan (Tajikistan) – Osh (Kyrgyzstan) – Sumgait (Azerbaijan) – Bosnia – Croatia – Western Europe.
2. Badakhshan (Afghanistan) – Gorny Badakhshan (Tajikistan) – Osh, Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan) – Russia – Estonia – Sweden – the US.



3. Badakhshan (Afghanistan) – Gorny Badakhshan (Tajikistan) – Osh, Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan) – Russia – Shulyai (Latvia) – Europe.

The drug trafficking routes that go through the Tajik-Kyrgyz border and reach Russia are not easy to track because they spread to smaller channels passing via several Russian cities. Then the routes meet in Moscow and head further to Europe.

Corruption on the state borders makes tracking of those routes difficult. Since Kurmanbek Bakiyev's downfall in April 2010, the amount of drugs seizures has increased. According to the latest reports, more than four tons of drugs were seized in early September 2010 alone. When Bakiyev was in power he dismantled the UNODC-backed Drug Control Agency (DCA) within the Internal Ministry of Kyrgyzstan in October 2009. This move can only be explained by strong state-crime cooperation and attempts to broaden the room for smuggling and corruption.

According to experts, instability in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan is advantageous to regional drug warlords and criminal networks. It is speculated that regional drug smugglers used the rioting as an opportunity to transport large amounts of drugs through the border. Although there is no concrete evidence of this, it is well known that drug and crime warlords have an interest in creating political and social instability where corrupt and weak state institutions are in control. In other words, regional and local mafia could potentially benefit from a semi-autonomous, semi-criminal anarchic southern Kyrgyzstan.

Bakiyevs' Ace of Crime

Kyrgyzstan's unstable political situation following the April revolution and the ensuing power crisis was obviously a convenient framework for regional and local criminal groups to challenge the stability in the south and the authority of the interim government.

While the causes of the ethnic turmoil in June are still under investigation, both Kyrgyz officials and the international community link the violence to the overthrow of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev. Researchers Andrew Bond and Natalie Koch, point out that organized crime was an issue also under the country's first president Askar Akayev, but the regime change in March 2005 marked a dramatic

shift in state-crime relations. It was at that time that local criminal groups infiltrated Kyrgyzstan's political establishment on an unprecedented scale.

The new president Kurmanbek Bakiyev and members of his family soon established control over locally organized crime networks and main drug-trafficking routes through southern Kyrgyzstan. The now ex-president's younger son Maxim Bakiyev was previously in charge of Kyrgyzstan's Central Agency for Development, Investment, and Innovation embracing the country's long-standing trend of nepotism and state-level corruption. Several days after the June turmoil with an Interpol arrest warrant for sponsoring and organizing ethnic turbulence, he was detained by the British Border Agency officials at a small airport near Farnborough in Hampshire. Since then, British officials have refused to extradite him to Kyrgyzstan. The ex-president's brother Akhmat was ostensibly involved in drug and criminal enterprises in the southern Kyrgyzstan, while his second brother Zhanysh was regularly handling intimidation practices against the president's political opponents.

Erkin Mamkulov, a government official, stresses that Akhmat Bakiyev used to control local criminality and drug smuggling businesses: "It is quite fair to say that unrest, pogroms and killings- destabilization in the country is convenient for those who support anarchy, including local drug lords. That is why during the latest ethnic clashes it could definitely be possible that the Bakiyevs' used all their means including their connections with drug lords." Moreover, the current government is claiming that Islamists were directly involved in destabilizing southern Kyrgyzstan. They also stated that Bakiyev's relatives sponsored their [Islamists] activities during several days of mass killings in and around Osh. However, these allegations have not been proven.

Even though the fusion of political and criminal forces preceded the rule of Bakiyev, the problems grew worse during his rule. The pre election interim government (under President Roza Otunbayeva) acted carelessly during and after the June event and has been either unsuccessful or unwilling to securitize the problem to the degree necessary. Many experts are still concerned about the criminal links among some politicians that are in power today.



Murky Link between Drugs, Crime and the State

It is hard to draw general conclusions about the real causes of ethnic conflict. It is also hard to measure the role of the drug industry and transnational or local crime. Although the link is clearly there, its “cause and effect” characteristics are very ambiguous. The administration during Bakiyev’s presidency was corrupt and utterly profit-oriented; the economy was largely under the direct control of the president’s family, and therefore, it was often hard to determine a clear boundary between the state economy and the shadow economy since most major economic “deals” were made under “legal cover.”

It is apparent, however, that with the Tulip Revolution in 2005 that brought Bakiyev to power, Kyrgyzstan stepped up the process of criminalization of both state leadership and society, characterized by massive money laundering, “merging” of state institutions with local criminality, and the murders of several parliamentarians due to various drug- and crime-related issues.

A weak state and corruption in Kyrgyzstan during the past years made drug trafficking and criminal activities easier. In the meantime the general economic situation deteriorated, dragging people into extreme poverty. The increasingly nationalistic mood featuring the failed post-independence identity-building politics in conjunction with a growing income gap, the criminalization of society and popular grievances against the authorities worsened the already tense and explosive situation.

Several interlinking factors played a role in the outbreak of violence. To link crime to the conflict while dismissing other factors may not give the whole picture, but it can provide insight into the problem both on the domestic and regional levels. It also demonstrates that ethnic conflict in Kyrgyzstan can take a violent form. It is evident that a corrupt state coexisting with transnational and local organized crime increases the risk that an uneasy situation will escalate into a serious conflict.

Even in the current setting the recent parliamentary elections showed that the nationalistic mood in the country is still a driving force both for politicians and for their supporters. According to the latest results of the election, five parties made it into parliament. Even though no party gained a solid majority, the unexpected success of the big-

gest party, Ata-Jurt, raises suspicion that the ethnic conflict, which erupted in summer, may have benefited the party’s nationalistic campaigning.

Analysts hope that the elections will constitute an important contribution to the democratization process, but the problem of state criminalization in Kyrgyzstan is not easy to solve. The new government will face a tough mission if it tries to rid the administration from criminal influence.

Erik Leijonmarck is a Junior Research Fellow with the Institute for Security and Development Policy. Camilla Asyrankulova is a Project Associate with the Institute for Security and Development Policy.

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The Institute for Security & Development Policy

Västra Finnbodavägen 2, SE-13130 Stockholm - Nacka

E-mail: info@isdp.eu / Tel: +46(0)8-41056953

Website: www.isdp.eu

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