

MAJOR FOREIGN INTERVENTION IN KYRGYZSTAN WOULD PROMPT A RUSH TO NATIONALISM BY EVEN THE MOST MODERATE FIGURES

Interview with Dr. John Heathershaw *

Conducted by Jesse Tatum, Associate Editor of CRIA

CRIA: Can you weigh in on the recent upheaval in Kyrgyzstan and summarize what type of international intervention may now be appropriate?



Clearly, the subsequent ethnic violence in Osh was sparked by the political crisis and dynamics of 2010. The political crisis was not essentially ethnic but had ethnic aspects and, more importantly, created the conditions of insecurity which enabled the violence in and around Osh. Those that attempt to read the ethnic violence back to the border delimitations of Stalin's era often miss out this crucial political aspect. Central Asia since 1991 has suffered far less armed conflict (and certainly ethnic conflict) than most security analysts

have predicted and this is testament to the need for exceptional explanations of exceptional violence. But the relative lack of conflict is of no consolation to those that still suffer from the awful ethnic violence in of June.

Regarding intervention, I must make the pedantic point of the scholar of International Relations that intervention is historically understood as deployment of foreign military and/or civilian forces without the expressed permission of the host state. No one is seriously arguing for that in Kyrgyzstan. However, we do use "intervention" more generally to denote consensual as well as non-consensual unilateral and multilateral deployments.

I have weighed in here arguing that most forms of international intervention would be counter-productive in Kyrgyzstan today. A more robust OSCE police mission, deployed very quickly after the Osh violence of June, would probably have been a good thing over the medium-term but it has now been both politicised and weakened in ways which severely limit its ability to do any good. This was almost inevitable given the structure of the OSCE as an extremely weak and divided regional formation. Rapid, effective, multilateral intervention is the pot of gold at the end of the

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rainbow for liberal internationalists. That said, even Russian intervention, which was requested by Otunbaeva, failed to materialise either unilaterally or through the CSTO.

My argument against intervention is twofold. Firstly, there is a domestic political process in Kyrgyzstan which, whilst not able to address all Uzbek political issues (such as language rights) which emerged before June, did lead to a greater than expected number of Uzbeks going to the polls and elected some Uzbek candidates in the October elections. This process is right now keeping conflict within non-violent politics but may be disrupted by a major foreign intervention which would prompt a rush to nationalism by even the most moderate figures. Secondly, the main role for international actors is not to bring peace or democracy to Kyrgyzstan but to avoid taking actions which make these things more elusive – for example, the fuel contracts for the Manas base struck with both Akaev and Bakiev regime figures by the US Department of Defence. Liberal interventions of the peacekeeping- and peacebuilding-type typically lack the modesty and circumspection that is required to ascertain their own impacts.

There have been some excellent short analyses of the Osh ethnic violence and the removal of the Bakiev government in April by my colleagues [Madeleine Reeves](#) and [Nick Megoran](#) as well as a doctoral student of mine, [Asel Doolotkeldieva](#).

CRIA: How do you see the post-election (Oct. 10) coalition talks playing out in Kyrgyzstan? Is a parliamentary system the ‘right’ way for the country at present?

The dominant interpretation in Russia and the region is that a parliamentary system does not provide for the concentration of power (‘power vertical’) which is required in the post-Soviet context. This is a culturally essentialist approach with which I disagree. The dominant perspective in the West is shorn of this essentialism but argues that weak security structures provide opportunities for conflict that endanger the system. This too is an inadequate explanation.

The popular coups (I prefer this term to the celebratory ‘revolution’) of 2005 and 2010 took place not because of the decentralisation of power but because of the centralisation of power to the hands of the Presidential Administration in a state in which the political-economic class had been used to a much freer political and economic environment. Thus, it is not just about opportunity but about the expectations that this greater freedom engendered in the 1990s. In other words it is about the discursive and institutional environment. The opportunity to rebel exists in Tajikistan (but despite recent events) is rarely, if ever, taken because of a discursive and institutional environment which generates low expectations and relatively stable compromises, however unjust.

So, in an environment such as contemporary Kyrgyzstan, greater power for a proportional parliament is the best way forward. Moves to this end in 2005–2006 were stillborn. There is greater hope under Otunbaeva, in my view. But there are considerable risks. A Kulov or Tashiev victory in Presidential elections could start the cycle of increased centralisation and conflict once again. As to the coalition-building, it is difficult to predict the exact composition or the identity of the PM but I think there’s a good chance that there will be a lot of chopping and changing which may precipitate new elections sooner rather than later.

CRIA: What do you make of the recent outbreaks of violence in Tajikistan? How will Islam and the state coexist in the coming months?

The outbreak of violence is only partially about Islam and the state. It is also about central control over regions which have never been fully under the control of Dushanbe. It is about the brutality of conscription as an institution, the hopelessness generated by the difficulties of migration and the

hidden resentment against the government in many peripheral regions. That said, Islamism does serve as a vehicle for opposition in Kamarob and pockets of Tajikistan.

That is what has happened with Ali Bedak's group and its armed conflict with government forces since mid-September. It was easy for this commander to recruit alienated youth and re-form a group which had been dormant as a military formation since the civil war. But let us not believe official pronouncements that this is chiefly a manifestation of regional or global Islamism. It is very much a conflict made in Tajikistan.

However, the question of the co-existence of Islam and the state raises issues that go far beyond this conflict. Clearly the Tajik government does not know how to handle religiosity in its various manifestations because it operates under a (post-)Soviet variant of the secular conceit that religion must be purely spiritual and customary in some banal or 'traditional' sense. Whilst most Hanafi variants of Islam in Central Asia are not properly politicised, they are nevertheless political in that they allow believers to see the injustices wrought by authoritarian governments and economic globalisation much more clearly than things might appear through worn-out ideas of liberal democracy, communism or even nationalism. Banning the veil or harassing the Islamic Renaissance Party won't deal with the increased appeal of Political Islam as political and social critique of arbitrary power and global inequities.

CRIA: Can you summarize the relationship between foreign intervention and authoritarianism in Central Asia?

I would repeat my point about intervention above. There has been only one clear case of foreign military intervention in post-Soviet Central Asia – that of Russian and Uzbek involvement in the Tajik civil war – and it was very much about reinstating 'stable' (read: authoritarian) government.

But international and global relations with Western states and multinational companies provide sustenance to authoritarian regimes as well. U.S. awards of fuel supply contractors, without proper transparency and accountability, increase the prize for those who control government in Kyrgyzstan. This further encourages 'businessmen' and organised criminals into politics.

In the global economy, the very relationships that facilitate foreign trade or investment themselves help sustain authoritarian regimes and rentier states. For example, the IMF and EBRD helped arranged the off-shore tax avoidance schemes which ended up defrauding the Tajik people of hundreds of millions of dollars of revenues from Talco (the state aluminium company) from 2005–2008, according to provisional judgments in the London high court. In this case, the IMF demanded audits of both Talco and the National Bank. Thus, there is a global dimension to both the source of the problem and the (limited) holding to account of oligarchic, authoritarian regimes in Central Asia.