

Central Asia: Contemporary Security Challenges and Sources of State Resilience

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Abstract

Taking a deliberately narrow conception of security, defined as the organizational effectiveness of regimes, this paper considers recent incidents of violence in Central Asia (the second revolution in Kyrgyzstan; events in Osh, Zhanaozen and Pamir; and various “terrorist” incidents) to ask which factors have shown their potential to cause conflict and destabilization. In light of this, the paper discusses the sources of legitimacy and state capacity in Central Asian states, concluding that they are “Machiavellian principalities”.

Keywords

Central Asian States of the former Soviet Union; political unrest; authoritarian rule; political elites; armed conflicts; State functions; militant Islam

Given the broad approach to security that is currently dominant, which covers a wide range of topics and features multiple referents, discussions of security challenges in Central Asia can seem like a bit of a mixed bag of problems: from border disputes and terrorism to the “resource curse”, water pollution and the deterioration of physical infrastructure and human capital. While there are merits to leaving the notion of security elastic and open for various interpretations, it is hardly possible to construct a streamlined narrative by enumerating and analyzing all of them. For the sake of intellectual coherence, this article will focus on political security, i.e. the organizational stability of Central Asian states.

Defining the causes of political instability has been a central preoccupation of scholars engaged in policy-relevant research. A number of high-profile projects, such as the Political Instability Task Force (PITF), the Failed State Index produced by the Fund for Peace, and the Index of State Weakness developed by the Brookings Institution, have focused on developing extensive lists of factors conducive to instability and conflict and interlinking them with indices of the weakness or fragility of states. However, in the words of Monty Marshall, a prominent scholar in this field, academic research into the causes of political violence “has been largely inconclusive and difficult to use for informing applied research or prioritizing policy options”.² As for indices of the weakness/fragility of states, they tend to attract a lot of attention but are regularly criticized for being arbitrary and biased.³

The strategy of this paper is to take cues from episodes where violence has broken out in the region in the last few years and, on the basis of an analysis of these events, to define those factors that have already shown their conflict potential. These episodes are: the revolution in Kyrgyzstan that led to the ousting of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev in April 2010; the interethnic riots in southern Kyrgyzstan in June 2010 (the “Osh events”); the violence in Tajikistan’s Pamir mountains in July 2012; the clashes between police and demonstrators in western Kazakhstan (the “Zhanaozen events”) in December 2011; and a series of explosions and shootings ascribed to radical Islamist organizations in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. References to these cases will help to identify the triggers of destabilization.⁴

2 Monty G. Marshall, *Fragility, Instability, and the Failure of States. Assessing Sources of Systemic Risk*, Working Paper of the Center for Preventive Action under the Council on Foreign Relations, October 2008, p. 9.

3 Cf. Lionel Beehner and Joseph Young, *The Failure of the Failed States Index*, World Policy Blog, 17 July 2012, at: <http://www.worldpolicy.org/blog/2012/07/17/failure-failed-states-index>.

4 The absence of Turkmenistan on the list does not necessarily mean that the state-security situation there is superior to those of its neighbours, or that it will prove sustainable in the medium and long term.

Since political stability has traditionally been considered a function of the state and its capacity to maintain order, a review of outbreaks of instability in Central Asian states inevitably leads to the discussion of political systems and their durability. How sustainable are the authoritarian regimes of Central Asia, given the gaps in their legitimacy and their capacity to deliver security and other public goods and services to the population?⁵ What is holding them together and keeping them from falling apart? Crucially, in our attempt to address these questions, we will view states as central but not the only constituents of the political order, and their features and policies, including the occasional recourse to violence, as contributing to or undermining this order.

While discussing the resilience of states, one important aspect is the impact of the external environment. The international context into which the Central Asian states were born is conducive to the preservation of statehood. As Robert Jackson has convincingly argued, in the modern world even failing states can survive due to the dominance of the convention of juridical sovereignty.⁶ Rather than destroy weak Central Asian states according to the “law of the jungle”, the international system tries to “fix” them, providing support for their security and development. This aspect, however, will not be addressed in this article due to limitations of space.

The Causes and Triggers of Instability

The Second Kyrgyz Revolution: Self-destructive Predatory Elites

The second revolution in Kyrgyzstan ousted President Kurmanbek Bakiev almost as easily as the Tulip revolution of 2005 had removed President Askar Akaev. After the White House was stormed, Bakiev fled to the south, his family stronghold, and put up weak resistance until the new interim government, together with the US, Russia and Kazakhstan (OSCE Chair at the time), negotiated his safe exit from the country.⁷ The upheaval lasted one week, around 80 people were killed and more than a thousand wounded.

Both Akaev and Bakiev came to power with promises of democracy and justice, yet became authoritarian leaders whose rule was characterized by nepotism and disrespect for the rule of law. In Bakiev’s case, this slide was faster, his attempts to suppress NGOs and the media were stronger, and the corruption was more rampant. He consolidated his power by introducing amendments to the constitution, forming his own party, Ak Zhol, which captured a majority of seats in the parliament, and pouring all available resources into strengthening security services. Bakiev also placed his kin in some of the most important positions in the state: His numerous brothers were put in charge of the State Security Service, the Kyrgyz Embassy in Germany, and the trade delegation to China, and his son Maxim Bakiev was appointed head of the Central Agency for Development, Investment and Innovation, which channelled considerable amounts of money, including external assistance, into private accounts.

The removals of Akaev and Bakiev seem to give credit to Kyrgyz society and its democratic inclinations. However, as the Kyrgyz scholar Shairbek Juraev argues, “ideology played no role in the Tulip revolution” and “political concepts [such] as democracy, liberalism, and even socialism remain alien to Kyrgyz political

5 Cf. Charles Call, Beyond the “failed state”: Toward conceptual alternatives, in: *European Journal of International Relations* 17/2011, pp. 303-326.

6 Cf. Robert Jackson, Quasi-states, dual regimes, and neoclassical theory: International jurisprudence and the Third World, in: *International Organization* 4/1987, pp. 519-549.

7 Cf. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Otunbaeva Allowed Ousted Kyrgyz President Bakiev To Leave, at: <http://www.rferl.org/content/kyrgyzstan-otunbaeva-allowed-bakiev-leave/24948634.html>.

culture”.⁸ He also points out the non-ideological and fluid nature of political parties in Kyrgyzstan – the lack of consistency between the moves and motives of the parties and their stated ideologies, their sudden mergers and the floating of politicians between various parties and movements. The people who gathered at Ala-Too Square in 2010 were moved by frustration with the authoritarian regime, but lacked not only the channels for formalizing their grievances and proposals, but also a political culture capable of accommodating the necessities of a liberal democratic system. Thus, the masses that could overthrow the leadership, while literally showing the strength of democratic power, were not capable of pushing for liberal-democratic reforms, which require a formal institutionalization of checks and balances and a commitment to the rule of law that preserves these institutions and supports individual rights – civil and political. This is the situation that Samuel Huntington in his study of political order in modernizing societies described as the political participation of masses without political socialization.⁹

The story of the two Kyrgyz revolutions allows us to make two further observations in line with Huntington’s model. Firstly, Bakiev’s quick slide toward authoritarianism shows a lack of constraints on such behaviour – there were no formal (parliamentary or party-political) or informal institutions that would serve as checks and balances. Secondly, the ease with which Bakiev was removed demonstrates that despite his efforts to consolidate power, he was not able to do so in a proper way, that is to co-opt the elites and build legitimacy; instead, he quickly squandered the revolutionary credentials he initially had. The lack of resources is partially responsible, but even more so is the highly predatory nature and short-sightedness of Bakiev’s rule.

Furthermore, it has been reported that organized crime leaders were involved on both sides: Some became active in the organization of protests, making them more chaotic and violent, while others supported the Bakiev family. The lack of state capacity to organize and control was underpinned by the parody of order that criminal organizations can provide. A very telling example of the permanence of this state of affairs took place in May 2013, when Kumtor gold mine, the “golden goose” of the Kyrgyz economy, was captured by local people and the incident was settled after the officials negotiated with the “people’s representative”, who turned out to be a local criminal leader.¹⁰

Osh Events: Interethnic Tensions

Three months after Bakiev’s removal from power, the southern city of Osh was torn apart by clashes between its two major communities: Kyrgyz and Uzbek. The former were angry that ethnic Uzbeks controlled much of the economy and were allegedly getting richer at their expense, despite the Kyrgyz being the “true owners” of the land. The Uzbeks, in turn, disliked what they perceived as discrimination and exclusion from the political process.¹¹ What started as a brawl quickly escalated, fuelled by rumours of rapes and other atrocities committed by “the other side”. According to official sources, 447 people died and over 2,400 were injured.¹² The interim government, fully realizing its own inability to quell the violence, appealed to Russia and the

8 Shairbek Juraev, Back on track? Kyrgyz authoritarianism after the Tulip Revolution, PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 95, March 2010, p. 3.

9 Cf. Samuel Huntington, Political order in changing societies, New Haven 1973.

10 Cf. Arkady Dubnov, Kirgiziyu snova shtormit [Another Storm in Kyrgyzstan], in: Novaya Gazeta, 6 June 2013.

11 For a more nuanced and in-depth analysis of the events, see: Neil Melvin, Promoting a Stable and Multiethnic Kyrgyzstan: Overcoming the Causes and Legacies of Violence, Open Society Foundations Central Eurasia Project Occasional Paper Series, No. 3, March 2011.

12 Cf. K-News, 15 September 2011, at: http://www.knews.kg/action/3068_obschee_ofitsialnoe_kolichestvo_pogibshih_letom_2010_goda_na_yuge_kyrgyzstana_sostavilo_447_chelovek.

Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), but they could offer only humanitarian assistance. The clashes calmed down largely on their own.

In the aftermath of the conflict, the government and the international community engaged in conflict-prevention measures and activities.

However, according to experts, the conflict potential remains. The centre does not sufficiently control the south, law-enforcement bodies are perceived as biased, and communities remain antagonistic toward each other. Leaders of the Uzbek community were pushed out of the country, which impedes possibilities for co-optation and mutually satisfactory arrangements between the two communities and creates space for new and more radical leaders.

It is not uncommon for the weakening of political order in ethnically diverse societies to be accompanied by eruptions of inter-ethnic tension and violence. Once such an outbreak has occurred, and lacking effective formal instruments for the redress of perceived injustices, the chances are higher that it will reoccur due to grievances and the desire for revenge. The 2010 events in Osh were a repetition of the violent clashes between Kyrgyz and Uzbek communities in 1991. In the absence of a proper political space, nationalism resurges with its ability to deliver symbols and narratives that bring no political culture, but a short-term reassurance for some – the “titular nation” – and a real threat for others.¹³ More upheavals in this area in the future cannot be ruled out.

Zhanaozen Events: Growing Inequality, Discontent and Complex Intra-elite Politics

Kazakhstan is generally seen as a regional “success story”: It is richer, more developed and enjoys greater security than its neighbours. It was therefore shocking for many when violence broke out in western Kazakhstan on 16 December 2011. The decision of the administration of the city of Zhanaozen to hold the celebration of the 20th anniversary of independence day on the main square, where oil workers had been holding daily strike demonstrations for months, ended in bloody clashes between the police and protestors: 16 people died and more than 100 were injured, some as a result of the police’s use of firearms.

The government imposed a state of emergency and quickly restored order, yet the events revealed a number of weaknesses in the system. First, the protesters were oil-industry workers who believed they were not benefitting from the wealth that they were producing, while top managers and officials were getting rich. In the eyes of the local population, this non-equitable use of natural resources was aggravating inequality and became seen as a form of injustice that undermined the legitimacy of the state. Second, the Zhanaozen events demonstrated a lack of mechanisms for managing differences of opinion and social tensions, a labour conflict in this case. Oil workers had been on strike since the spring and were becoming more desperate as they were pushed into a corner. Their strike had been declared illegal, some workers fired, and both workers and their family members had been harassed.¹⁴

Thirdly, Zhanaozen shed some light on the destructive potential of elite factionalism and the links between some officials and the criminal world. Video recordings showed that there were provocateurs mixing with the

13 For an alternative assessment of nationalism in Kyrgyzstan, see: Nick Megoran, *Averting Violence in Kyrgyzstan: Understanding and Responding to Nationalism*, Chatham House Russia and Eurasia Programme Paper, 2012/03, December 2012.

14 Cf. Human Rights Watch Report, *Striking oil, striking workers. Violation of labor rights in Kazakhstan’s oil sector*, 10 September 2012.

protestors on that tragic day.¹⁵ Later it was reported that the ex-governor of Atyrau Province Bergei Ryskaliev, who was removed from his post and arrested on charges of organizing a criminal group and embezzling public money, was also suspected of instigating violence by sending members of his criminal group to Zhanaozen on the eve of the events.¹⁶ There were rumours about the involvement in this of other officials further up the power hierarchy. These revelations triggered speculations about the readiness of some elites to undermine stability in the country for their own purposes.

Violence in Pamir: An Attempt at Power Consolidation

In July 2012, the government of Tajikistan launched a special security operation in the remote Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAO). The official reason was to suppress the local “criminal group” led by Tolib Ayombekov, head of a border unit on the Tajik-Afghan border and a former United Tajik Opposition (UTO) commander. He and his militia men were accused of drug smuggling, having ties with the Taliban and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and killing local security services general Abdullo Nazarov.

Over 3,000 security personnel entered Khorog, the capital of the GBAO, on July 24, and subsequent fighting resulted in 70 casualties on both sides. Although the government officially acknowledged only one civilian casualty, there were independent reports that dozens of civilians had been killed or injured. A ceasefire agreement was reached between government officials and fighters with the help of the representatives of the Aga Khan, the spiritual leader of the Ismaili branch of Islam. It was broken, however, when, on 22 August, Imomnazar Imomnazarov, another former opposition commander, was killed in his home in Khorog. The murder of Imomnazarov, a respected authority in the region, was followed by violent protests and another bout of fighting. Representatives of the Aga Khan intervened again and were able to broker a new agreement, according to which government forces were to leave the Gorno-Badakhshan region.¹⁷

The Tajik government’s official explanations of events in Khorog have been questioned by observers. Before he was killed, Imomnazarov gave an interview in which he stated that Nazarov had falsely reported to his superiors that the UTO fighters were planning to launch a coup against President Emomali Rakhmon, and that this was the main cause of the government security actions.¹⁸ Some experts believe that the goal of the operation was to establish central control over lucrative drug trafficking operations, others argue that at least part of the reason was to consolidate control over the remote region and secure the loyalty of local elites in the run-up to presidential elections planned for 2013.¹⁹

In the aftermath of the civil war, President Rakhmon has been able to suppress active opposition and eliminate former UTO commanders viewed as latent opposition. Gorno-Badakhshan remained a region over

15 Cf. *ibid.*; see also: Mariya Yanovskaya/Daniil Kislov, God posle Zhanaozena. Sudy nespravedlivy, oppozitsiya obezglavlena, repressii usilivayutsya [One Year after Zhanaozen. The courts are unfair, the opposition decapitated, repression intensified], *Fergana.news*, 16 December 2012, at: <http://www.fergananews.com/articles/7571>.

16 Cf. Proveryaetsya informatsiya ob uchastii lyudei Bergeya Ryskalieva v sobyitiyakh v Zhanaozene, – ‘j’ [The information about the participation of Bergei Ryskaliev’s people in the events in Zhanaozen is checked – ‘j’], *i-News.kz*, 28 August 2012, at: http://s2.i-news.kz/news/2012/08/28/6583167-proveryaetsya_informatsiya_ob_uchastii_lyudei_berge.html.

17 Cf. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Deep dive: the Aga Khan in Tajikistan, 6 September 2012, at: <http://www.rferl.org/content/transmission-deep-dive-tajikistan-aga-khan/24700508.html>.

18 Cf. I. Imumnazarov: Vlasti khoteli pokazat’ svoyu silu vsemu Pamiru [I. Imumnazarov: The government wanted to show its strength throughout the Pamirs], 10 August 2012, *ASIAPlus*, at: <http://news.tj/ru/newspaper/article/i-imumnazarov-vlasti-khoteli-pokazat-svoyu-silu-vsemu-pamiru>.

19 Cf. Jim Nichol, Tajikistan: Recent developments and US interests, Congressional Research Service Report, 31 August 2012, p. 5.

which Rakhmon was not able to consolidate power due to its remoteness and de facto autonomy. The Aga Khan enjoys more legitimacy and provides more public goods than the state in the region. In terms of security, the government is challenged by local power brokers, militia men and drug lords.

“Terrorist Acts”: Radicalization of Society

After two decades of speculation about the potential for violent Islamist radicalism in Central Asia, this prophecy seems to be coming true. In Kazakhstan, a series of suicide bombings and other alleged terrorist attacks occurred in 2011: a suicide bombing at the security offices in the city of Aktobe and a car bombing in the capital city of Astana in May, a shootout between the police and Islamists in the village of Shubarshi in Aktobe Province in June, an explosion at the regional administration building and a suicidal bombing in a residential area in the city of Atyrau in October, claimed by the obscure Jund al-Khalifah (Soldiers of the Caliphate) organization, and a shootout between police and alleged terrorists in Taraz in November. Kazakhstan’s Office of the Prosecutor-General claimed that Jund al-Khilafah was formed in mid-2011 by Kazakh citizens in Pakistan’s tribal area and was dedicated to “waging a jihad on the territory of Kazakhstan”.²⁰

In the meantime, in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan, the security services have been grappling with the activities of a “Kyrgyz” terrorist organization identified as Jamaat Kyrgyzstan Jaish al-Mahdi (Kyrgyz Army of the Righteous Ruler). It is reported that this organization bombed a sports facility and attempted to bomb a police station in Bishkek in 2010, and killed three policemen in early 2011.²¹

In Tajikistan, September 2010 was marked by dramatic events: a suicide car bombing that resulted in two dozen deaths or injuries among police in the northern city of Khujand and a shootout between security forces and militants in the Rasht Valley east of the capital city of Dushanbe that also ended with dozens of casualties. Responsibility for the bombing was claimed by an obscure terrorist group, Jamaat Ansarullah, allegedly the Tajik branch of the IMU.²²

In Uzbekistan, in May 2009, a police checkpoint was attacked on the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border, attacks took place in the border town of Khanabad and four bombings occurred in the commercial district of Andijan, including at least one by suicide bombers. Uzbek officials blamed the IMU. In August 2009, a shooting in Tashkent resulted in the death of three alleged IMU members and the capture of other group members.²³

The governments of Central Asian states perceive Islamist radicalism to be a major threat and act accordingly. Uzbekistan, which has already experienced large-scale clashes between the authorities and Islamists, has been most brutal in suppressing any form of dissent. Thousands of people have been imprisoned on charges of extremism and terrorism. In Tajikistan, the only country where an Islamic party is legally allowed, the government has adopted legislation restricting religious activities, and members of the Islamic Renaissance

20 “Dzhund al’-Khalifat” organizovana grazhdanami Kazakhstana dlya razvyazyvaniya dzhikhada na territorii Respubliki Kazahstan [“Jund al-Khilafah” has been organized by the citizens of Kazakhstan to unleash jihad on the territory of the Republic of Kazakhstan], Kazakhstan Today, 9 November 2011, at: http://www.kt.kz/rus/power_structures/dzhund_aljhalifat_organizovana_grazhdanami_kazakhstana_dlja_razvjazivaniya_dzhikhada_na_territorii_respubliki_kazahstan_1153547408.html (author’s translation).

21 Cf. Burlikan Sarygulova, Zaputannoe delo “Zhaishul’ Makhdi” [The complexity of “Zhaishul Makhdi”], Radio Azattyk, 2 May 2013, at: http://rus.azattyk.org/content/kyrgyzstan_sarygulova/24974316.html.

22 Cf. Khairullo Mirsaidov, Vostok Tajikistana prevrashchaetsya v goryachuyu tochku [East Tajikistan turns into a hot spot], Deutsche Welle, 21 September 2010, at: <http://www.dw.de/восток-таджикистана-превращается-в-горячую-точку/a-6028690-1>.

23 Cf. Alexei Volochevich, Perestrelka v Tashkente. Popytka reportazha s mesta proisshestiya [Gunfight in Tashkent. Trying to report from the scene], Fergana.news, 30 August 2009, at: <http://www.fergananews.com/articles/6283>.

Party of Tajikistan are regularly harassed. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have taken similar measures as well.

The repressive policies of the states of Central Asia fit their authoritarian profile. As experiences in the rest of the Muslim world show, however, harsh suppression of Islamist movements might be a short-term solution and breed further radicalization of certain groups in society.

The Central Asian States: Facets of Weakness and Sources of Resilience

The above cases can be analysed in terms of states lacking legitimacy and capacity, which would be in line with the current general discourse on state weakness/fragility. The PITF project calculates the Index of State Fragility based on an assessment of the legitimacy and effectiveness of a state in the areas of security, politics, economy and social welfare (where the worst possible score is 25, which stands for “extreme fragility”). The scores assigned to Central Asian states in the 2011 report are: Kyrgyzstan – 14, Uzbekistan – 13, Tajikistan – 12, Kazakhstan – 10, Turkmenistan – 10.²⁴ The earlier Index of State Weakness (2008) developed by the Brookings Institution offered the following ranking based on 20 indicators grouped into economic, political, security and social welfare baskets (on a scale from 0 to 10, with 0.00 being the worst score): Turkmenistan – 5.27, Uzbekistan – 5.30, Tajikistan – 5.35, Kyrgyzstan – 6.39, Kazakhstan – 6.92.²⁵

Although the methodology and results differ, the overall approach is the same. The more capacity and legitimacy a state has, the stronger it is, and vice versa. However, although the Central Asian states keep on “failing”, they do not disappear. This is also the case with regard to many other states around the world that have serious gaps in capacity and legitimacy. This means that in the absence of a liberal-democratic order standing on the twin pillars of legitimacy and capacity, there is some other kind of order that keeps these states together.²⁶

In our view, the state in post-Soviet Central Asia seems to have transformed into a Machiavellian principality. On one side, Central Asian leaders are trying to play the game, with updated techniques and technologies, of the skilful prince who is able to be both a fox (co-optation of elites, frequent rotations of individuals in government, tight control the official political space) and a lion when required, as in some of the examples when resorting to violence also had a clear and intended demonstrative effect (the military campaign in Gorno-Badakhshan and the Zhanaozen events). If they cannot play this game well, they will be ousted, as was President Bakiev. Central Asian “princes” keep order, but an order that is not based on the rule of law – although an instrumental rule by law is still kept for general guidance, only to be arbitrarily disregarded if circumstances call for it. On the other side, individuals are trying to play a parallel game: Driven by promises of wealth or at least better conditions, individuals are aware of the real rules for getting what they want. In formal terms they are mostly law-abiding, and certainly do not contest the laws or challenge the authorities, even when these are dysfunctional, because they know how to get round them.

In the absence of the rule of law, what is left of politics and the state is a bureaucratic structure where governmentality is reallocated to the discretion of small sovereigns, who also participate in the Machiavellian

24 Cf. Monty Marshall/Benjamin Cole, Global Report 2011 “Conflict, Governance, and State Fragility”, Center for Systemic Peace, Vienna, VA, 2011.

25 Cf. Susan Rice/Patrick Stewart, Index of State Weakness in the Developing World, The Brookings Institution, Washington, DC, 2008.

26 As mentioned earlier, the external environment, international recognition of their sovereignty and foreign assistance play a very important role, however, external factors alone cannot explain the durability of weak states.

game.²⁷ The Zhanaozen events and consequent investigations showed the level of autonomy and corruption of local “sovereigns” like the former governor of Atyrau Province Bergei Ryskaliev.

Adopting an expression that Kafka used to describe society, the state is transformed into “a nobody in a dress suit”.²⁸ It still has some capacity to frighten people, which is particularly evident in the continuous questioning of what will happen when the prince dies, but it lacks real power (to persuade people to do what it wants them to do) and therefore, from time to time, it has the necessity of showing its ability to resort to violence.

In their turn, some individuals who are unable to adapt group together and resort to a form of violence that turns out to be blind, as in the case of Islamist radicalism in Central Asia. In fact, however, this violence only serves to add weight to demands for securitization: dissenting voices that try to open public spaces can be cast out by being put on a continuum with those groups that use violence, and political discourse can be closed down as disturbance with the acquiescence or even on the request of the population.

In the classical liberal-democratic conception, a system is able to provide security in terms of certainty of expectations when it is founded on a stable core – the state with formal institutions and the rule of law – that allows both for daily fluctuations and differences and for long term transformations. Tensions between stability and change are present, but they are channelled through formal procedures that try to be as inclusive as possible.

The cases that we have considered here are rather the extreme expression of a different norm. They show that a system can have a core instability – personalization of the state, Machiavellian games, evanescent formality and power that lead to an empty but real violence – upon which stability and order can be precariously built in an ongoing process only by the continuous negotiations of the participants. The system works on the assumption of the existence of the state, but it is given stable motive force mostly by individual self-regulatory norms at all levels: from the micro-level of individual interactions, through the medium-level of groups and networks, up to the macro-level of extraordinary informal (in the eyes of the state) institutions such as religious authorities, collective protests and strikes, criminality and revolts.

As for post-revolutionary Kyrgyzstan, the only non-authoritarian state in the region, the level of informality and spontaneity of order there is even higher. Formal institutions are so fluid and insubstantial that the state has to almost openly share authority with local power brokers and criminal groups. This flexibility of the state makes it resilient in the short-term, but inherently unstable, as demonstrated by the two revolutions and the Osh events. Whether it will be able to escape from the low-capacity trap remains to be seen.

Conclusion

An analysis of the major incidences of violence in Central Asia over the last few years (2009-2013) highlights the presence of considerable gaps in legitimacy and capacity in the states of the region. Some of them, such as Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, lack capacity and legitimacy to the extent that they can be considered “semi-fictional” states, unable to control the whole territory of the country. They are also incapable of resolving conflicts without external intervention and assistance, as the Osh and Pamir events showed. The state in Kazakhstan has more capacity and legitimacy, but its resource-based inequitable growth has created


27 See Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, London 2004, p. 83.

28 Quoted in Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob: Arendt’s Concept of the Social*, Chicago 1998, p. 184.

considerable discontent. The situation is complicated by elaborate intra-elite politics and the seeming readiness of some factions to use violence to achieve certain goals. This rivalry may become more acute in anticipation of the departure of President Nursultan Nazarbayev from the political scene. In Uzbekistan, the state has a highly developed apparatus to keep its citizens in check and in fear, and also faces the biggest security and legitimacy challenge from Islamists, radicalized in part by the repressive policies of the state.

In this article, we argue that the model of stability based on the legitimacy and capacity of the state is relevant for Central Asia but does not explain the resilience of Central Asian states. The strength of weak (to various degrees) Central Asian states is embedded in a type of order that is different from the classical liberal-democratic conception. The resilience of the system is not built around formal institutions, inclusiveness and the rule of law, but rests on a fluid base of personalized “princely” power, demonstrative use of violence and informal rules that are created by the population and organize their expectations. The cases we have considered show that such a system can provide stability in the short and medium term, notwithstanding outbreaks of violence, while the general equilibrium maintains this spontaneous order, but can also generate instability that can result in the degradation of the system into disorder.





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