Uncomfortable Questions Remain Unanswered in Kyrgyzstan

Following the ousting of Kurmanbek Bakiev in April, which resulted in the deaths of around 90 people, Kyrgyzstan once hit the news on June 10 following the sudden outbreak of mass violence between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in the southern city of Osh. The violence, which began late in the evening of June 9 and continued largely unchecked until June 13, resulted in the deaths of at least 300 people and possibly as many as 2,000, the displacement of an estimated 375,000 people (mainly ethnic Uzbeks) and around 37,500 left homeless following the destruction or arson of their properties. The violence spread through the region, including to Jalalabad, where a further 400 homes were destroyed. While there were casualties amongst both of ethnic groups, it appears that it was the Uzbek community that has borne the brunt of the violence both materially and in terms of lives lost.

More than a month later, there are still many questions over what exactly happened, not least who was behind the tragedy and possible motivations for provoking interethnic clashes. Reports have indicated that the violence was premeditated. Witnesses and investigators have indicated that the republic’s security forces, which are almost entirely made up of ethnic Kyrgyz, were active in the attacks and there have subsequently been widespread reports that local law enforcement officers in Osh continue to target Uzbeks for arbitrary searches and detention.

Despite initial talk of peacekeeping forces being deployed, the international response to date has focused on providing humanitarian assistance to those affected and supporting the government’s efforts to stabilise the situation. More recently, there have been plans for the OSCE to send international police monitors to Osh. However, this proposal has met with strong local disapproval, with Osh’s mayor, Melisbek Myrzakmatov, claiming to have the situation under control and that attention should be turned to rebuilding the city. This view is exacerbating fears amongst Uzbeks that the systematic destruction of mahallas was pre-planned with the aim of forcing the Uzbek population out, particularly since reconstruction plans appear to indicate that new building projects are to be undertaken on the sites of the destroyed Uzbek quarters.

As more has become known about the circumstances surrounding the events and talk of independent investigations continue, a notable trend has been growing Kyrgyz resistance to portrayals of ethnic Kyrgyz as the aggressors and Uzbeks as the victims. Local officials have criticised international media coverage for presenting a one-sided version of events that ignores the suffering of Kyrgyz affected by the violence and have claimed that the effect is to alienate the overwhelmingly ethnic Kyrgyz law enforcement agencies. Some local media outlets have gone further, actively laying the blame on Uzbeks for the violence.

While both the events and the circumstances surrounding them have rightly been the subject of considerable discussion both locally and nationally, uncomfortable questions remain about the relationship between ethnicity and statehood in Kyrgyzstan. Despite official claims to the contrary, there is much to suggest that in practice ethnicity is currently being viewed by many in the republic as a zero-sum game, with the primacy and privileging of ethnic Kyrgyz over other ethnic groups seen as a de facto precondition for Kyrgyzstan’s statehood and sovereignty. There is growing anti-foreigner feeling in the republic over what is seen as unnecessary meddling by uninformed outsiders who do not understand local values and mentalities. Although such a reaction may be understandable, if such views are left unchallenged by the authorities in favour of a more nuanced and inclusive approach, then talk from the government about facilitating reconciliation and the notion of Kyrgyzstan being a multiethnic "common home" rings increasingly hollow.

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Photo courtesy of ‘Save the Children,’ an international humanitarian organization that has been working in and around Kyrgyzstan since 1992 and is currently providing emergency relief supplies.