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Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan: Between Nationalism and Nation-State

In December of 2011, shortly after becoming the President of the Kyrgyz Republic, Almazbek Atambayev told a crowd of Kyrgyz and Uzbeks “only together are we Kyrgyzstan,” adding “those who try to divide us according to nationality and region are enemies of the nation.”¹ At other times, Atambayev has claimed that nationalism is the “main problem” in Kyrgyzstan.²

It is not difficult to see why this should be the case. In 1990, even before the collapse of the Soviet Union, violence between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks had erupted in the city of Osh, in the southern part of Kyrgyzstan. These tragic events repeated themselves in June of 2010, when riots once again broke out in Osh, leading to the deaths of hundreds of people. In the northern part of the country, ethnic Uyghurs and Dungans (Chinese Muslims) have also faced violence at the hands of Kyrgyz nationalists.³ Relations between Kyrgyz and ethnic Russians have been much less hostile, but the frailty of the Kyrgyz economy has meant that many Russians have left the country.⁴

Kyrgyzstan’s ethnic diversity presents a serious problem that the country’s leadership has yet to resolve. At independence, ethnic Kyrgyz made up barely 52% of the population of their own country. Attempts to forge some kind of national identity from

¹ “Атамбаев выступает против любого проявления национализма в Киргизии.” 2011. *РИА Новости*. <http://ria.ru/world/20111201/503308276.html> [accessed 03/29/13].

² “Алмазбек Атамбаев: «Главная беда Кыргызстана – национализм».” 2011. *Комсомольская Правда*. <http://www.kp.ru/daily/25626/792299/> [accessed 03/29/13].

³ “Dungans, Uyghurs Attacked in Northern Kyrgyz Town.” 2010. *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*. http://www.rferl.org/content/Dungans_Uyghurs_Attacked_In_Northern_Kyrgyz_Town_/2007251.html [accessed 03/29/13].

⁴ Hiro, Dilip. 2011. *Inside Central Asia: A Political and Cultural History of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkey, and Iran*. New York: Overlook Duckworth. p. 287.

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the country's disparate and mistrustful national groups have thus far yielded limited results. Although the promotion of Kyrgyz chauvinism seems destined to provoke bloodshed, successive governments have been reluctant to seriously pursue the construction of a civic "Kyrgyzstani" identity. The Kyrgyz Republic is thus in the unenviable position of being trapped between its contemporary existence as a nation-state and the threat of violent nationalism. How President Atambayev and his successors will navigate these shoals remains unclear.

The Kyrgyz, like other groups in Central Asia, never conceived of themselves as "nations" in the modern sense. Instead, place of birth, tribal and political affiliations, and the division between nomadic and settled lifeways were the important markers of identity. It was only during the period of *korenizatsiia*, in the 1920s and 1930s, that Soviet ethnographers began to construct the different peoples of Central Asia into "nations," each with their own distinctive language, history, and traditions. Importantly, Soviet nationalities policy also mandated that each nation, if it met certain criteria, be given its own territory. By creating putative "nation-states" for the different ethnic groups that resided in Central Asia (though not by any means for all of them), the Soviet government fostered the development of nationalist sentiment.

The territorial units created by the Soviet government exist today as independent states. However, whether by design, accident, or simply the practical impossibility of drawing borders that precisely correspond to the actual distribution of different ethnic groups, significant minority populations exist within enclaves outside of their titular republics. Wixman argues that there was, in fact, a deliberate attempt on the part of the Soviet state to divide the Soviet Union's Muslims into antagonistic groups and to

encourage among them national particularism, all in an effort to defuse the counterrevolutionary potential of pan-Turkism or pan-Islamism and to make Muslim populations easier to rule.⁵

Not surprisingly, ethnic particularisms and national antagonisms survived the Soviet collapse. So too did the borders drawn by Soviet ethnographers. However, what had previously been essentially administrative boundaries between constituent republics of the Soviet Union were now international borders between independent states pursuing oftentimes-competing interests. This meant that the large minority populations that lived in these new states suddenly became “beached diasporas,” to use a term coined by David Laitin to describe ethnic Russians in the former Soviet republics.⁶ Moreover, these diaspora populations found themselves in states that were either furiously trying to reassert a pre-existing sense of national identity that had been suppressed during the Soviet period, as in Georgia or the Baltic states, or desperately trying to formulate one.

Kyrgyzstan represents the latter case. Having had no previous existence as either a nation or a state, in 1992 Kyrgyzstan nevertheless became a nation-state. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, of course, the creation of the “state” part of this equation was essentially a *fait accompli*; more difficult, however, would be elaborating the content of Kyrgyz national identity. As Eugene Huskey has noted, Kyrgyzstan was essentially forced to build a national identity “from scratch.”⁷ Even more than the other newly

⁵ Wixman, Ronald. 1993. “The Middle Volga: Ethnic Archipelago in a Russian Sea.” *Nation and Politics in the Soviet Successor States*, Ian Bremmer & Ray Taras, eds. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 434.

⁶ Latin, David. 1998. *Identity in Formation: The Russian-Speaking Populations in the Near Abroad*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

⁷ Husky, Eugene. 2004. “National Identity from Scratch: Defining Kyrgyzstan’s Role in World Affairs,” Rick Fawn, ed. Portland: Frank Cass. p. 111.

independent states of Central Asia, he argues, Kyrgyzstan suffered from a "dearth of usable national history from which to build an identity."⁸

Early attempts at elaborating a Kyrgyz national history focused on the territory of Kyrgyzstan itself, as well as the legendary Turkic hero Manas. In his book, entitled *Kyrgyz Statehood and the National Epos "Manas,"* Askar Akayev, the first President of Kyrgyzstan explicitly attempted to root the existence of the new republic in ancient history. He wrote that "[o]nly the combination of the idea of statehood carried by Kyrgyz throughout the centuries and the lasting value of the land on which this idea could find real embodiment has allowed us to create the independent state in which we live."⁹ Moreover, Akayev claimed that Kyrgyz "statehood" was in part a product of the Kyrgyz "national consciousness," which is itself embodied in the epic tale of Manas.¹⁰ The celebration of Manas was, in retrospect, probably an attempt to find a Kyrgyz analog for Genghis Khan, who is claimed by the Kazakhs, or Tamerlane, who has been promoted as an Uzbek national hero.

The problem with formulating a Kyrgyz national ideology around Manas was, therefore, that it was necessarily exclusive and Kyrgyz-oriented. Akayev argued that the Manas epos, which the government spent millions of dollars celebrating in the 1995 "Manas 1000 International Festival" was the "historical chronicle, spiritual foundation, and cultural reality" of the Kyrgyz people.¹¹ Likewise, the emblems on the flag of the Kyrgyz Republic are a sun with forty rays symbolizing the forty Kyrgyz tribes and a

⁸ Ibid. 112.

⁹ Akayev, Askar. 2003. *Kyrgyz Statehood and the National Epos "Manas."* New York: Global Scholarly Publications. p. 9.

¹⁰ Ibid. 11-12.

¹¹ Hiro. 294-295.

stylized representation of a *tyndyk*, the hole in the top of a Kyrgyz yurt. These glorifications of the Kyrgyz's nomadic past did little to persuade the restive Uzbek population in the south of the country, where settled agriculture has long been prevalent, that their interests were being taken seriously in Bishkek.

This perception was likely correct. In *Kyrgyz Statehood*, President Akayev casually refers to the entire population of southern Kyrgyzstan as "Southern Kyrgyz" who are, moreover, "devoted to their nation."¹² Such rhetoric discursively transforms ethnic Uzbeks into Kyrgyz, and implicitly denies their political legitimacy as a group with interests different from those of Kyrgyz. As Morgan Liu notes, "[t]he basic premise of [Kyrgyz] national ideology locates ethnic minorities as structurally secondary to the core purpose of the republic," which is "the fulfillment of the Kyrgyz people's historical destiny in self-rule and collective material/cultural development according to a proud Kyrgyz heritage."¹³ Thus, notwithstanding his slogan that "Kyrgyzstan is our common home,"¹⁴ Akayev's efforts to foster a sort of civic "Kyrgyzstani" nationality were doomed to failure. Despite his inclusive rhetoric, Akayev was unable to move beyond a conception of Kyrgyzstani identity that was primarily built around ethnic Kyrgyz.

In the end, although Akayev's idiosyncratic ideas won him some measure of support among Uzbeks, they were not enough to provide a secure foundation for the incipient Kyrgyzstani national identity. After Akayev's ouster in the Tulip Revolution,

¹² Akayev. 299.

¹³ Liu, Morgan. 2012. *Under Solomon's Throne: Uzbek Visions of Renewal in Osh*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press. p. 11.

¹⁴ Khamidov, Alisher. 2000. "Akayev Wins Reelection Amid Fraud Claims." *Eurasianet*. <http://dev.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav103000.shtml> [accessed 03/29/13].

the new government of Kyrgyzstan rapidly assumed a rather less conciliatory attitude toward minorities.

During the Bakiyev period, the position of the Uzbeks was eroded even further. Bakiyev himself had built up his power base among ethnic Kyrgyz in the south during his tenure as an official in Jalal Abad, and his popularity allowed him to largely ignore the interests of Uzbeks. A worsening economic situation, rampant corruption, and clan-based nepotism led to a perception of ethnic favoritism and discrimination. These factors, along with concerns on the part of ethnic Kyrgyz that Uzbeks were monopolizing the best agricultural land in the fertile Ferghana Valley, meant that tensions between these groups continued to escalate.¹⁵ The problem was further exacerbated by Bakiyev's use of the security services, which were run by his brother, Janysh Bakiyev, to clamp down on minority unrest.¹⁶

Tensions boiled over in June of 2010 when, in the wake of Bakiyev's ouster, ethnic riots broke out once again in Osh. Although an uneasy peace was eventually restored, the new government has faced intransigence from Kyrgyz nationalists in the south, who advocate a tougher line toward Uzbeks.¹⁷ Unsurprisingly, the governments of interim president Roza Otunbayeva, and that of her successor, Almazbek Atambayev, have blasted Kyrgyz nationalism as both "criminal" and an existential threat to the

¹⁵ Armstrong, Paul. "Explainer: Kyrgyzstan's Ethnic Unrest." 2010. *CNN World*. <http://www.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/asiapcf/06/15/kyrgyzstan.violence.explainer/index.html?s=PM:WORLD> [accessed 03/29/13].

¹⁶ Khamidov, Alisher, Erica Marat. 2011. "The Danger of Ethnic Nationalism in Kyrgyzstan." *Central Asia-Caucasus Institute Analyst*. <http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/5515> [accessed 03/28/13].

¹⁷ "Mayor of Osh Rejects Otunbayeva's Government." 2010. *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: Kyrgyzstan – Country in Transition*. <http://kyrgyzstan.carnegieendowment.org/2010/08/mayor-of-osh-rejects-otunbayevas-government/> [accessed 03/28/13].

Kyrgyz state.¹⁸ This stance, however, leaves post-Bakiyev Kyrgyzstan in much the same place as it was before the Bakiyev interlude: in rejecting Kyrgyz chauvinism, it still needs to find a way of formulating a historically rooted “Kyrgyzstani” identity that can appeal to all of the country’s minority populations.

Although such an identity has yet to be fully articulated, there are some indications that religion may be viewed as a component. Fully 80% of the Kyrgyz population identifies as Muslim, with most of the rest professing the Russian Orthodox faith. President Atambayev has been careful to reassure Orthodox Christians that their rights will be respected. In one interview, he reaffirmed that Orthodoxy was one of the “traditional religions of Kyrgyzstan” and that that he believes that “the development of Orthodox Christianity in Kyrgyzstan would help... stop the exodus of the Russian-speaking population and will... facilitate the strengthening of Kyrgyzstan both politically and economically.”¹⁹

Furthermore, while commemorating the opening of a new mosque at Solomon’s Throne in Osh, one of the most holy sites in Central Asia, Atambayev argued that “[t]he Muslims of Osh should become a uniting force for all city dwellers,” regardless of their ethnicity.²⁰ “[E]very citizen of Kyrgyzstan,” he said, “should remember that they are part

¹⁸ “Выступление Президента КР Розы Отунбаевой на праздновании Дня Независимости Кыргызстана.” 2010. Белый Парус.
<http://www.paruskg.info/2010/08/31/31482> [accessed 03/29/13].

¹⁹ “Atambayev Promises Support for Orthodox Christians in Kyrgyz Republic.” 2012. *The Orthodox Church: OCP Media Network*.
<http://theorthodoxchurch.info/blog/news/2012/02/atambayev-promises-support-for-orthodox-christians-in-kyrgyz-republic/> [accessed 03/29/13].

²⁰ “Kyrgyz Leader Says that Muslims Should Act As Uniting Force in the South” 2011. BBC Monitoring Central Asia Unit.

of ‘a single nation.’”²¹ The new mosque, moreover, was opened on the anniversary of the 2010 violence, symbolically positioning Islam as a uniting and healing force in society, as opposed to the ethnic violence that had previously wracked the city. Meanwhile, the government has been increasingly regulating Islam, and there have been debates about whether or not imams should become employees of the state.²² Such developments signal that the state may see a well-regulated, institutionalized form of Islam as being a force that could potentially unify Kyrgyz and Uzbeks. This view is echoed on the ground by imams in Osh, who claim that “Islam is the thing that keeps the peace between people.”²³

Even so, there are numerous potential pitfalls that the government must avoid if it decides to try to use religion to undergird Kyrgyz national identity. The first is that Kyrgyzstan itself is an officially secular state. There is no small amount of resistance in Kyrgyz society to the idea of giving Islam – or religion in general – a more prominent role in the affairs of the state.²⁴ Flirting with religion therefore runs the risk of introducing new cleavages into the already fractured Kyrgyz society. Secondly, Uzbeks and others, such as Uyghurs, are commonly viewed as being particularly susceptible to religious extremism. The fact that, in Kyrgyzstan, the membership of Hizb ut-Tahrir, a banned Islamist organization, consists almost entirely of ethnic Uzbeks does little to

²¹ “Massive Mosque Opens in Osh on Anniversary of Clashes.” 2012. *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*. <http://www.rferl.org/content/kyrgyzstan-osh-anniversary-mosque/24610498.html> [accessed 03/29/13].

²² Sultankulova, Saijkal, Timor Sydygalayev. 2013. “Должны ли быть имамы госслужащими?” *Общественная Телерадиокорпорация*. <http://ktrk.kg/ru/content/dolzhy-li-byt-imagy-gossluzhashchimi?tid=5> [accessed 03/28/13].

²³ “Osh Mosques are Symbol of Reconciliation.” 2011. *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*. <http://www.rferl.org/media/video/2280180.html> [accessed 03/29/13].

²⁴ “Светскость и Ислам в Кыргызстане: конфронтация или союз?” 2010. *IslamDag.ru*. <http://www.islamdag.ru/vse-ob-islame/2692> [accessed 03/29/13].

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combat such stereotypes. The very ethnic divisions the state hopes to overcome thus undermine the unifying potential of Islam.

In the final analysis, then, Kyrgyzstan will remain for the foreseeable future a nation-state without a nation. Attempts to articulate a generally acceptable civic national identity have thus far been desultory and unrealistic. The pivot toward ethnic Kyrgyz chauvinism during and after the Bakiyev period has yielded bloody results. Recent attempts to find a common ground in religion have some potential to unify, but instrumentalizing religion is itself a perilous strategy. Thus far, Atambayev has, out of necessity, charted a moderate and conciliatory course. Whether his legacy will be a unified Kyrgyzstan that can weather economic hardship and ongoing ethnic tensions remains to be seen.