



The Domestic Challenge to Kyrgyzstan's Milestone Election

While Kyrgyzstan's 15 October elections are a rare milestone for Central Asian democracy, the campaign is exposing dangerous fault lines. In the largest city of Osh, the new president will have to face down robust local power brokers, defuse Uzbek-Kyrgyz tensions and re-introduce the rule of law.

Kyrgyzstan's forthcoming presidential elections on 15 October are a milestone for Central Asia: for the first time, a president from the region will voluntarily stand down at the end of his constitutionally mandated term. Kyrgyzstan has come far in the seven years since the tumultuous events of 2010, when President Kurmanbek Bakiyev was ousted in Bishkek and ethnic violence engulfed the southern city of Osh, killing over 400 people, mostly Uzbeks.

The presidential race is tight and unpredictable. Sooronbai Jeenbekov, from the southern province of Jalalabad and representing the ruling Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan (SDPK) party, faces Omurbek Babanov, a wealthy independent candidate from the northern province of Talas, still closely aligned with the party he formed in 2010, Respublika. But whoever wins the ballot will face renewed north-south regional tensions as well as rivalries within Osh, where the memory of violence is still fresh and small arms abound.

The central government in Bishkek has long struggled to exert its authority over Osh, a city of 276,000 people situated over the mountains in the Ferghana Valley and lying along a route used by traffickers of Afghan opium. More than 43 per cent of the local population

are ethnic Uzbeks. In a speech in the city on 28 September, Babanov inadvertently showed how high tensions are. After urging Uzbeks to protect their rights, he swiftly was denounced by leading government figures for inciting ethnic hatred and supporting Uzbek separatism. Osh appears calm, but complaints of local government corruption, mismanagement and lawlessness suggest root causes of the 2010 bloodshed remain unaddressed.

Once controlled by the now-exiled former Mayor Melis Myrzakmatov, a virulent Kyrgyz nationalist allied with former President Bakiyev, Osh has been transformed from the fiefdom of one powerful man into the playground of a handful. Today's power brokers in the city, all ethnic Kyrgyz, owe little to Bishkek. After the new Kyrgyz government sacked Myrzakmatov in 2013, elections to replace him narrowly were won by Osh's current mayor, Aitmamat Kadyrbayev. Since then, Bishkek has missed opportunities to rebuild its influence in the city or forge better relationships with the local government.

Kadyrbayev himself was accused of participating in confrontations against the central government that preceded the ethnic clashes in Osh. He was convicted for his alleged role in seizing the Osh regional administration

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building in 2010, but the judgment was overturned two years later and he was acquitted. Kadyrbayev maintained that the charges were politically motivated. He is now loosely aligned with two other powerful southern actors: Rayimbek Matrayimov, the country’s deputy customs chief, widely regarded as one of the richest people in Kyrgyzstan; and Suyun Omurzakov, the former head of the Osh city and regional police forces, who is now deputy minister of the interior. Although both men now hold national positions, they still exert significant influence in the city.

Reports in the polarised Kyrgyz-language press tend to portray Omurzakov as either a champion of law and order, or associate him with allegations that Osh authorities have allowed a local sports club to train thuggish youth, serving as another tool for power brokers. The club’s manager, Omurzakov’s brother Uluk, denies the accusations made against the club and its members.

Mayor Kadyrbayev meanwhile, has aroused irritation in Osh with high-handed behaviour reminiscent of his predecessor, Myrzakmatov. Notwithstanding Myrzakmatov’s own abuses, under his rule the Osh city administration was a unified force that was relatively accessible to residents and responded to their requests in a reasonably timely manner. This is no longer

the case. Broadly speaking, the new Osh elite appears less interested in providing services and garnering popular support than in squeezing the city for its material enrichment.

Any attempt by the victor in the 15 October election to reassert central power over Osh will be risky, as the city’s local power brokers could react by mobilising their respective constituencies, banking on popular dissatisfaction that could spill over into violent confrontation. Outgoing President Almazbek Atambayev was a relatively skillful manager of the competing interests of regional strongmen, even if he did not seek to rebuild Bishkek’s authority in Osh. Should Jeenbekov, believed to be hostile to Matrayimov and Kadyrbayev, be elected president, he could seek to remove these power brokers and replace them with his own southern allies. Babanov, lacking roots in the region, might attempt the same. A struggle over control of elite networks in a city still full of arms and latent ethnic tensions could spell disaster.

Yet doing nothing about growing tensions in Osh is not a good option either. However difficult the task, the next president will need to promote genuine reconciliation between the Uzbek and Kyrgyz communities in the south. Rooting out corruption and reinstating the rule of law should top his agenda. Foreign donors, including Russia and China, should engage the Kyrgyz government on these issues even as they recognise that things will be slow to change and difficult to discuss.