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KYRGYZSTAN FACES CRUCIAL ELECTIONS

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For the first time in post-Soviet Central Asia, the result of a presidential election is not evident beforehand. This is a healthy sign, to be sure, but neither the context of deep crisis nor the candidates themselves offer reasons for optimism.

The country is weighed down by a long and profound crisis in governance. The early 90's plans to convert Kyrgyzstan in a prosperous, democratic country, "the Switzerland of Central Asia" as they said at the time, were a total fiasco. In March 2005, what was known as the tulip revolution put a bloodless end to the regime of Askar Akayev, the first president of independent Kyrgyzstan. Nevertheless, hopes were soon dashed. A period marked by nepotism and corruption was succeeded by something much worse. In addition to authoritarianism and electoral fraud, the regime of Kurmanbek Bakiyev was characterized by the sacking of the country at the hands of a band of political machine with ties, in many cases, to all kinds of criminal activities.

The people's frustration at the deterioration of their living conditions led to the April 2010 revolts in the capital, Bishkek. In contrast with his predecessor, Bakiyev did try to quell the protests with violence. This was not sufficient to keep him in power, but it left a balance of 90 dead and 1,500 wounded. For some time, the country teetered on the edge of collapse. In the south, particularly, where political confrontation combined with ethnic tensions to produce a brutal outbreak of violence in June of the same year. The almost 500 dead, 2,000 wounded, 400,000 citizens displaced, and 3,000 homes and businesses destroyed, are ample testimony to the magnitude of the disaster. But the depravity of the perpetrators of this attempt at ethnic cleansing can only be appreciated in all its crudity through the stories of the victims, the great majority of whom belong to the Uzbek minority.

Despite this, the interim Government was able to go on with its agenda and approve, by referendum, a new Constitution that considerably reinforces the role of Parliament. Roza Otunbayeva, the interim president since the fall of Bakiyev, is known for her democratic outlook and personal integrity. Unfortunately for Kyrgyzstan, she cannot run in these elections (owing to constitutional restrictions) nor does she have a power base in the country. In any case, her ability

to control the situation is limited. Recent months have been marked by serious confrontations between the members of the three-party coalition that dominates Parliament, and the reawakening of ethnic tensions in the south. This is the context in which presidential elections will be held on October 30 in Kyrgyzstan.

Almazbek Atambayev, until recently the Prime Minister, is the absolute favorite to win and, in the circumstances, he can be considered nothing short of a "lesser evil". A hypothetical second round between the two candidates with the most votes would carry the greatest potential danger. Some candidates, such as Kamchybek Tashiev or Adakhan Madumarov, enjoy significant support in their southern strongholds. The custom of organizing street riots as a form of pressure is too entrenched not to be expected. And even more so when taking into account the nature of the main candidates, such as Tashiev, for example, who is known not only for his aggressive nationalism but also for his penchant for resorting to fisticuffs to resolve political confrontations. Not in vain does this ex-boxer recruit many of his followers from among the cream of the most sordid gymnasiums. Many of these followers, in point of fact, were the main instigators and executors of the inter-ethnic violence of June 2010.

The north-south split is a determining factor in the Kyrgyz political panorama. Traditionally, the northern Kyrgyz people have dominated the political stage in Bishkek. Nevertheless, in recent years the ascent of southern leaders, former president Bakiyev among them, has been noteworthy. Though not the only exponents, these leaders are characterized by a more exacerbated nationalism. Nationalism is on the rise all over the country and, from a conceptual point of view, the positions of the northern and southern Kyrgyz leaders are very similar. Their difference lies in the fact that the ascent of the southern nationalists emerges in an environment that features ethnic polarization, since the Uzbek minority is mainly concentrated in Osh and Jalalabad, capitals of the southern zone and the Kyrgyz part of the Valley of Ferghana. Institutional abandonment and the lack of opportunities for the future give rise to sympathy on the part of young Uzbeks for Islamist organizations operating in the zone. The young southern Kyrgyzs, who are also Muslims, but with a much milder degree of Islamization, refer derisively to the Uzbeks as "Wahhabis". The rise of criminal groups devoted to narcotrafficking or to the contraband of Chinese products, in combination with the impoverished social situation, put the final strokes on an explosive panorama.

For some years, remote Kyrgyzstan occupied an outstanding place on the agenda of the great powers. For years the Kyrgyz leaders, like many others in the region, have fed off (and reaped the benefits of) the narrative of the so-called new "great game" that confers a crucial geostrategic importance to Central Asia. But changes in the agenda of the great actors have arisen. For the U.S., the air base of Manas, close to Bishkek, continues to offer important logistical support for the mission unfolding in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the U.S. is planning its withdrawal from the Afghan theater of operations and has relaunched its military cooperation with Uzbekistan, a country which, from a logistical and strategic viewpoint, turns out to be more valuable than Kyrgyzstan. Russia also has an air base in the country and has not abandoned its rhetoric of reaffirmation in the post-Soviet space, but their refusal to intervene during the interethnic conflict in June 2010 is a significant precedent of their limited capacity to act as the guarantor of regional security and stability. China does not have a military presence there and, even though in the past few years there have been persistent rumors about Chinese interest in opening a base, it seems unthinkable that such a thing should materialize, not only because of the deep anti-Chinese distrust of the Kyrgyzs but also because of the manifest opposition of Moscow to the idea. The EU behaves erratically, here as elsewhere, but Kyrgyzstan con-

tinues to be the best lever for their supposed stake in regional democratization, even if the capacity of Europe to exercise influence is very limited.

For all these reasons, if the situation comes to a head, it is improbable that any of these actors should show the will and/or the capacity to intervene in the agitated and complex hornet's nest that Kyrgyzstan could become. A clear result in the coming elections and a greater degree of responsibility on the part of the main political actors of Kyrgyz will therefore be crucial to assure some degree of stability in the future.