
Fragile states

How to improve the situation in Kyrgyzstan

Prof. Michelle Leighton

The ancient routes of the Silk Road that traverse Kyrgyzstan led over centuries to the establishment of many diverse ethnic communities and cultures. Today, the environment in the country has become extremely fragile, leaving many communities impoverished and in conflict with their neighbours. The newly elected government may have less time than it thinks to make a difference.

In many respects, Kyrgyzstan exemplifies many of the world's poor countries that are emerging from conflict. New leaders spend enormous amounts of time seeking to rebuild their fragile state by transforming political processes, issuing new decrees, erecting or tearing down statues, and changing personnel in institutions. They hope to secure their country's future development and gain legitimacy from their public – only to find that the lack of institutional capacity, systemic corruption, and rapidly deteriorating natural resources and infrastructure threaten the human security and development their country so badly needs. This could, once again, ignite political conflict. The rational path leading toward stability would suggest a serious attempt to address these specific problems. Yet, it seems, so often this does not happen.

After Kyrgyzstan gained independence from the former Soviet Union in 1991, the country endured two bloody revolutions, the last in 2010 which was followed by massive ethnic violence that created 110,000 refugees and displaced 300,000 people. With the recent election of a new President, the question is whether the country can finally move beyond exercises in state-building, ethnic division and corruption. The significant needs of its population, most still living in poor agricultural communities, must be addressed.



Uzbek families are on the run: ethnic disturbances in Kyrgyzstan have already claimed hundreds of lives and forced some 400,000 people to leave the fragile state.

Waiting and hoping:
at the Uzbek school in
Osh, a woman reflects on
political reforms. The
new Kyrgyzstan govern-
ment has promised that
life will improve for the
population.





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The years after gaining independence have been marked by corruption, repression of civil society, environmental damage, ethnic violence and revolution. Unemployment and poverty have increased, as has migration to Kazakhstan and Russia. Remittances sent back to families in Kyrgyzstan accounted for 32% of the country's GDP in 2010 – the third-highest in the world behind Lesotho (ranked second) and neighbouring Tajikistan (ranked first).

Though 75% of lands were privatised, they became less productive, with the country importing large amounts of key staple goods, such as 43% of its wheat. Members of farm families are increasingly using migration to cope with falling farm incomes, to help their families survive.

Low productivity in agriculture is in large part due to three phenomena. First, soil erosion has become a significant problem, more than 65% of arable land is now affected. Second, with three to four extreme weather events occurring yearly and continuing rural poverty, Kyrgyzstan remains highly prone to disasters. Heavy hailstorms, floods, and landslides in winter, frosts in spring, and droughts in summer make it difficult for communities to farm profitably. The third key contributor is the government's lack of investment in farm communities – either to improve their security from weather-related disasters or to foster access to training on sustainable land management.

These critical problems affecting the majority of the Kyrgyz population are due to get worse. If new climate models are correct, temperatures throughout Central Asia will increase by 2°C by 2020. The predicted rapid rise is likely to lead to more weather-related disasters and agricultural impacts in Kyrgyzstan. Moreover, international agencies are predicting that food prices in the country will continue to rise, and the government has warned that energy will become more scarce.

It is uncertain whether increased food and energy prices would spark a revolt. But, it would not be the first time. Sudden price hikes led to the protests of April 2010. After police opened fire on the civilian protestors, killing 86 people, a massive public gathering staged a new revolution, effectively ousting the Bakiev government. The power vacuum left by the change in regime stimulated conflict among clans in the south and led to widespread ethnic killings in Osh and Jalabad.

The question remains to what extent the new government will reorient its priorities toward serious investment in the struggling and vulnerable agricultural communities that comprise the bulk of the electorate. International donors have pledged assistance, but with the declining economy in Europe, this might not be for long. The government may have a small window of opportunity in which to act, that is, to undertake real collaboration with affected communities to target their micro-climate, micro-project, and micro-financing and insurance needs. The investment in education, training, and agricultural extension programmes and infrastructure accessible at village level is rather an old concept, but one that bears revisiting. As revolutions come and go as they have in Kyrgyzstan, and as climate change poses greater challenges, the government could do worse than to focus on building community resilience to environmental change.