

Trends to watch in Kyrgyzstan, 2014

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March 2, 2014

2014 has begun with more border conflict in Kyrgyzstan, as well as government change, and concern over religion and religious institutions. This article will point to several trends to watch this year.

1. Border Issues

As with the year prior, border issues remain the dominant concern in Kyrgyzstan. The Tajik border is once again problematic, as smoldering problems led to low-level armed conflict. Border talks have been intensified, as the regional countries are beginning to realise the necessity of resolving the still unsettled border delimitation and demarcations, but this still remains a larger priority in bilateral relations with Tajikistan than with Uzbekistan.

However, the beginning of this year has also had a strange incident involving a border intrusion from what looks to be a group of Uyghur from China. Official channels have labelled this as an extremist incursion, but it's more likely a case of smugglers. The true narrative will probably never be realised.

It does fit into a larger narrative of regional security, however, as the mission in Afghanistan comes to an end, and as the American military presence in Central Asia becomes less capable. Overall, this year looks as if more conflict will be on the horizon, but there may be some progress at resolving issues.

2. Issues of Islam

The main event that seems to have propelled some backlash against Islamic values and their relationship with Kyrgyz society is the involvement of Kyrgyz youth in the Syrian conflict. However, the sex scandal involving the Spiritual Board of Muslims' Grand Mufti, Rakhmatulla Egemberdiev, as well as a Fatwa by Grand Mufti Maksat Hajji Toktomushev calling for the murder of homosexuals, have created some controversy, and have provided justification for reform of the religious system.

Speaking at the Defence Council meeting on 3 February, President Atambaev criticised what he called the spread of "Arab culture" at the expense of "native ethnic culture," complaining that "there are many people with long beards on our streets now. They force our girls to dress in black instead of light and colourful clothing. This is what widows usually wear here."

The Government has also been cracking down on groups it perceives as illegitimate, such as Hizb ut-Tahrir, although terrorism fears in the wake of possible returning Syrian combatants has caused a suppression of free speech in Kyrgyzstani mosques, much like in neighbouring Uzbekistan. And, given the recent revelation of the Syrian and Saudi educated Imam organising a Jamaat for "nefarious purposes," foreign education (specifically in an Arab country) may soon become an indicator of a security threat for the Government.

As a result of these challenges, the Government has commissioned a Working Group to develop a draft a concept of public policy in the religious sphere in order to reform state policy, by April 1, 2014. Observers should keep an eye on what results emerge.

3. Protests and Political Control

Kyrgyzstan in particular has a reputation for being a central figure in political upheaval, and regularly has protest actions, with an average of about two demonstrations occurring per day. It has become so central, that the protest actions can be seen as a norm of Kyrgyzstan's democratic participation. Importantly, though, the spring remains a central period of time for protest actions, and both the 2005 and 2010 revolutions occurred in the spring. This point, though, becomes especially prevalent following the Euromaidan protests in Ukraine and Russian intervention in Crimea.

Many issues are often raised, but currently the issue of entrance into the Customs Union is becoming quite controversial, but unlike the Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan has no other options on the table. In addition, issues of foreign control over resources continue to plague the Government, with calls for nationalisation remaining the number one course of action for oppositionists. The Canadian-owned Kumtor gold mine and Chinese-owned oil refinery are at the heart of this dispute.

This year has also seen the dismissal of Osh mayor Melisbek Myrzakmatov, and his replacement through council elections, rather than Bishkek's direct selection, by a candidate seen as friendly to the Atambaev regime, Aitmamat Kadyrbaev. This resulted in a large protest in Osh that thankfully remained peaceful. This fits into the wider view of President Atambaev as a burgeoning autocrat however, and more large-scale protests look like a likely outcome, despite reassurances from the National Opposition Movement of Ravshan Jeenbekov.

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