Kirghizstan: Reality behind Ethnic Riots

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Formerly known as Kirghizia, the Central Asian republic of Kirghizstan is a country of incredible beauty and proud nomadic traditions. Kirghizstan is a land of snow capped mountains, windswept desert and grass-covered steppes. Most of the republic’s 5 million people now live in settled communities. Though for more than 2000 years their ancestors were nomads (King, D.C. 2005). Its first president Askar Aakayev (Encyclopedia Britannica, online) took certain steps which rendered it as an important state and his intellect and smile attracted a wide affection. He was the first non-communist who was elected president of any Asian state (Khan, 2010). He decided to attract Western financial assistance through unbiased approach and economic conditions. So in 1993 Kirghizstan became the first Central Asian country that plunged into the privatization of state owned existing trade and land (Warikoo, 1998; Rashid, 2002). Though, with the passage of time Akayev tended to be more aristocratic.

Kirghizstan made progress on the same wavelength as other Central Asian states achieved in terms of cultural equality, modernity and open-mindedness. It became the centre of trade because goods used to be brought here from China, Turkey, Korea, Thailand, Iran and Dubai and then transferred to other countries. It also remained fore-runner in treaties and relations with international institutions (Kulchik et al., 1996). It is the only country in the Central Asian states which is the member of World Trade Organization. It is worth remembering that Kirghizstan policy is most liberal one of all the Central Asian states. Then suddenly Kirghizstan became a burning issue in international media; as ethnic riots burst out in its major cities of Osh and Jalalabad in which death toll reached up to the figure of 170, including one Pakistani student (BBC news online, June 16, 2010). More than 400 people were wounded. According to associated press “up to a thousand people have crossed the nearby border into neighbouring Uzbekistan” (Al-Jazeera, June 14, 2010)

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Considering Kirghizstan’s riots as ethnic and linguistically riots would be just a surface level analysis. Central Asian states had been living united even before the time of Soviet Union. It is no surprise to find any Tajikstani in Kazakhstan and any Uzbek in Kirghizstan. Kazakhstan is the mixture of more than 130 nations and same is the case with Kirghizstan (Ameer, 2010). Here, ethnic troubles have never been so extreme that people picked up swords. Analysts are regarding recent ethnic riots as a result of failed rebellion of earlier days of 2010. They are of the opinion that the said rebellion was originated on the instructions of western powers.

**Did all this happen all at once?**

Overall the problem originated as follows. Some young people started quarrelling which later on resulted in widespread riots but this is not the fact. People know that these riots are the part of that “Great Game” as Rashid (2002:187) puts it in his chapter ‘The New Great game?’ which has been started among America, Russia and China in this region. This new game aimed at occupying the resources of Central Asia. Its first phase came into view in the form of breakdown of Soviet Union.

After independence of these states Russian dominance continued in Central Asia as it was before but other great powers like America and China came also on the front line. These powers started entangling in the foreign policy of these newly independent states for important geopolitical changes. This rivalry of great powers at its earliest came into view to ‘exploit the oil and gas resources of the Caspian Sea Central Asian states’ (Rashid, 2002:188).

Rashid (ibid) further feels Central Asia confiscated in 9/11 scenario, as the incidents of 11 September changed the game into dramatic posture. Seemingly there was a promise of co-ordination of Russia and China with America for extermination of Taliban and Al-Qaida. This very situation, at once, united these three powers in the war against so called terrorism and Islamic extremism in Afghanistan and Central Asia.

Under the excuse of 9/11, America demanded the establishment of a temporary military base. According to Khan (2010) American administration desired to punish Mulla Umer and his former friend Usama-bin-Ladin; and after this they would be going back. This was the American stance which Askar Aakayev could not figure out and inspite of foreign minister’s objection that ‘27 articles of the agreement are ambiguous’, presidential office issued the order of its acceptance as “American’s are in a hurry”; same as Pervaiz
Mushraf decided hurriedly on account of American pressure and Pakistan has been facing its consequences since then (ibid:8). American Airbase was established on the international Airport Manas in Bishkek.

Ameer (2010) analyses America’s desire to influence the area through different channels. Here, through Manas airbase, it can keep an eye on Russia and China at the same time; it can teach Iran a lesson whenever it wishes and can provide ammunition and food supply to United Nation’s forces in Afghanistan. Apart from this it has a keen interest in Central Asia’s natural resources major part of which is hidden in the land of Kazakhstan’s land, being discovered slowly. America tried to get in Uzbekistan first but Uzbekistan realized soon and soon after a little interaction it closed its doors. Kazakhstan allowed it to use its airbases temporarily in the state of emergency. Only Kirghizstan is the state which played hide-and-seek but as a consequence faced a game of bloodshed.

Analysts regard American Manas base as the bone of contention and further they opine that west was behind the failed rebellion which ultimately aimed at the permanent existence of base in Kirghizstan. In the words of Ameer (ibid) it also conveyed a message to Chinese and Russian presidents present at that particular time in neighbouring state of Uzbekistan that western powers had the capability to carry out any action in any part of the world.

Bakiyev had full American support, when he was re-elected as president of Kirghizstan through manhandling and unfair use of his authority in 2009. He got this Western support because he decreed for the American establishment of American base which was of prime importance in Afghan war and it was serving the purpose of oxygen for American army. After 2010’s failed rebellion Bakiyev who was unwilling to resign as Tkachenko (CNN, April 9, 2010) reported but he had to quit and leave (CNN, April 16, 2010) for life saving. Opposition leader Roza Otunbayeva became the head of interim government. Ethnically Kirghiz, Otunbayeva had an inclination towards Russia (Ameer, 2010). General elections had been announced on 27th June by the interim government. A failed attempt aimed at sabotaging the interim government resulted in ethnic riots.
Kirghiz government has been receiving 30 million dollars from America for providing airbase. When Russia observed the severity of situation that America has established its strong hold which may prove hazardous for the region; they sent for Bakiyev and asked for the closure of American Bases. They offered him an amount of 3 hundred million dollars aid. According to a report published in Nawa-i-Waqt (4 July 2010), this aid was an interest free loan. There was an agreement between the said parties to use the amount for poverty alleviation in Kirghizstan. Three hundred million dollars were issued on the very next day of the agreement, which was an amount equal to the sum of American aid of ten years.

In its response Bakiyev decided to cancel the base agreement and demanded a higher rent from America. Parliament also voted to close the base after two governments i.e. Kirghizstan and America failed to agree on a higher rent for the property. (Andrian, 2009; BBC Feb. 19, 2009). After negotiation a tentative agreement was reached on 23rd June. Under this agreement America would pay 60 million dollars per annum for continued use of facility (Schwirtz, 2009).

In this way he looted both U.S.A and Russia with both hands. This amount was never used for public welfare, rather Bakiyev’s son Maxein Bakiyev availed the hilarious benefits. So forcibly Russia had to mend its ways. Now, Ameer (2010) gives present situation, if Kirghizstan asks for military aid, Russia takes it as Kirghizstan’s internal matter. For that purpose Russia did not grant asylum to Bakiyev, rather it handed him over to another country Belarus.

The Washington Times in its report by Gertz on 13 June 2010 claims that recent clashes in Osh and Jalalabad are an outcome of the work of Russian intelligence, that aimed at the termination of American base in the surroundings of Bishkek. American newspaper claims that Russia wants to create such circumstances which may yield into the surrender of Kirghizstan’s interim government at the hands of Russia and finally they could force Kirghiz government to say Americans for the evacuation of Manas airbase and to go back. A former U.S official familiar with events in Kirghizstan told the Washington Times that the Russian Government, which views Kirghizstan as part of influence, is pressing Kirghiz officials to eventually close the Base.
Siddiqui (2010), in his article about the competition of America and Russia for Kirghizstani land, discusses Kirghiz policy of manipulating American interests in Manas airbase. According to him Kirghiz officials issued a notice in which it was said that 12% value added tax should be paid to the state on all military and non military equipments especially on the fuel for the Afghanistan supplies. Americans insist that they have never paid any tax since the establishment of Manas Air Base. Interim government is of the view that they and their government can’t allow any such assistance to Americans which is against the Kirghizstan’s interests and economy or which may lead to befooling their law. It should be clear that if tax is imposed on supplies to Afghanistan through Manas Air Base at the rate of 12% the amount would exceed trillions of dollars, which may prove helpful for the betterment of Kirghiz economy. If America denies the payment of this value added tax, it would mean that U.S.A has to turn its supply route from Manas airbase towards Pakistan where alarming dangers may engulf it. American blames Kirghizstani government of black mailing in last years and received trillions of dollars. But recent interim government insists that all this black mailing was carried out by ex-president Bakiyev for personal gains “for this reason it did not acted upon its own parliament’s decision” (Akhter, 2010:42). This base agreement faced fluctuations with every change in government. Tensions in the form of cancellation by Bakiyev (Andrian, 4/02/09, Daily Telegraph; BBC news online, 19 Feb. 2009) and deferment of assistance later on June 2, 2010 in the form of suspension of letting American aircrafts to refuel at Manas airbase (Turkish Weekly, June 2, 2010) continued which are tried to get resolved with appropriate agreements (Schwirtz, June 23, 2009, New York Times; Asia-Pacific Daily Report, June 25, 2009) by interim government who decided to extend the agreement for one more year (BBC News online, April, 16, 2010).

Territorial facts and other interests of Central Asian States and Afghanistan are in the favour of Russia, going against U.S.A; which America also realizes that if Manas airbase is ceased, it would have very adverse effects on the war against terrorism in Afghanistan, analyses Akhter (2010) in his article ‘Ethnic riots in Kirghizstan’. Importance of Manas airbase can be assessed by the fact that dozens of oil tankers remain always present at this base, which supplies 40 lac litres of fuel to Afghanistan. If airbase is closed,
then the Qandahar operation would remain incomplete for which American and NATO forces are preparing. Closure of Manas would be beneficial for Russia as well as China. This base is being proved a constant headache for China and Russia because U.S.A is preparing terrorists and sending them to China. China is the only regional country who has many interests in Kirghizstan.

“China’s role in Central Asia remains the most unpredictable of the three superpowers, but Beijing may be the most important player in the future (Rashid, 2002:201) China shares 800 km long boundary with Kirghizstan and the Chinese state of Xinxiang border in which a large number of Muslim Community resides.

Rashid (ibid) further brings China’s interests in this area into light. According to him, China’s primary objective in 1990’s was to make sure for Central Asian States to control Uighur political activities strictly on their grounds and keep their minorities away from supporting Uighur locality in Xinxiang province. In this very province, America, by instigating clashes, has been blaming religious extremists. China’s other main strategic interests were to reduce tension on its long borders with Russia and Central Asia, to reduce the Chinese troops posted on these borders and to settle down the clashes and claims on each other’s territories from the time of Tsars.

In Gorno-Badakhshan especially and other states where there are heavy gold deposits, China claims 30% of Tajik territory along with Tajik-China border (Munro, 1995). China Chinghai Five, Chinghai Forum 2000 and Chinghai Organization (SCO) 2001 are the parts of a chain of dialogue in which leaders promised to make Anti-terrorist Centre effectively functional. According to Rashid (2002), it was with this aim of settling these disputes that China seems quite active in Central Asia. While Anderson (1999:97) feels its ‘intentions of replacing Russia as the major influence’.

While for Russia, the player of Great Game, the significance of Kirghizstan can be assessed by the fact that Russia has also established a military base. Russia set this base at Kant in 2003 to provide air support to the rapid deployment force (Cooley, 2009). Siddiqui (2010) points towards that memorandum signed by Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and his the then
Kirghiz counterpart Bakiyev in August 2009 on the opening of a Russian training centre for Russian and Kirghiz soldiers and the deployment of additional troops in the Central Asian Republic (up to 500 soldiers). The troops are to operate in Kirghizstan under the aegis of the collective security Treaty Organization (CSTO).

Kirghiz sources opined with reference to this treaty that the government accreted for the deployment of additional forces after a detailed consultation and analysis. CSTO has also formulated an army on the blue prints of NATO which is called as Rapid Reaction Force (ibid).

In the light of this treaty, Kirghizstan’s Defence Minister made the statement that in Kant’s base would not be under the sole control of Russian army, rather it would work under the control of Central Asian Army though this military base would work according to Russian laws. After the establishment of military and deployment of additional forces it was obvious that Russia would not let America to play freely. Along with this it was supporting Kirghiz interim government. At this very time when riots were continuing in Kirghizstan, Russian president Dmitri Medvedev consolidated Russian military power in this state by sending hundreds of commandos of 31st Leading Brigade Airborne Division under the cover of protection of Kant Military Base in three cargo planes (ibid). Apparently it seems that U.S.A will have to close its base in Manas and for this purpose Russia has created such circumstances that U.S.A does not seem to be staying there for long. And if U.S.A has to go back from Kirghizstan, its retreat will affect its ongoing war on terror in Afghanistan. Where U.S.A is already facing turmoil, it seems that its dreams to occupy Central Asian oil are shattering.

There are many internal and external causes of the regional internal tension and present riots. Some of these are as following:

1. Unbalance and deprivation of the spirit of independence. Still Central Asian States and even Russian government itself thinks that the real cause of their economic, political and intellectual problems is the period which started after the Russian disintegration.

2. Delay in the democratic process which resulted in a state of war and some Islamic movements became its victim.
3. According to Atif (2005) one of the main reasons is “weak basis of Islamic school of thought. After a prolonged banishment when they got a chance to work, this school of thought could not compete rationally in right way”.

4. Old system and old constitution is the root cause of the problem

5. Continuous refusal of the enactment of democratic reforms which resulted in unrest in the country

6. Violence and terror of the leaders

7. Refusal of ex-president’s allies to accept the defeat and their insistence on resistance

8. Dangerously increasing corruption and nepotism in the leaders

9. Avoiding talk about the fundamental problems and resultantly forcing the opponent Islamic forces to go for the only available solution i.e. armed struggle

10. Present government is a group of people belonging to different ideologies in which there is no leader to play the central role

11. Failed and confused policy of the leaders, asking help from America and then Russia

12. Distribution of American weapons secretly in the society and American secret base mission is quite successful in its spy activities under the umbrella of culture

13. A network of American NGO’s in the state. Free courses in America are being organised for youth and in this way future American agents are prepared.

14. Route of Afghan narcotics towards Osh, Jalalabad and Batkan from Tajikistan and then towards China, Russia, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.

To conclude it can be said that Central Asian authorities won’t be able to solve problems like unrest unless they realise and analyse the issue accurately and
pass through self-accountability. There is no doubt in the fact that after living a prolonged span under the Russian tyranny, they could not formulate the policies and accurate system which was in harmony to their own conditions and this is the reason for which unrest is prevailing in all Central Asian States including Kirgizstan.

Islam is a major power in all these Central Asian States. Central Asian leaders can’t deny the facts for the long time and they can’t tread the right path by rejecting the wishes of their subjects.

Whatever is being done after 9/11 and how these states were being manipulated for great powers’ own interests should be enough to open the eyes of these rulers. If leaders of Kirgizstan and other states think that they could gain respect, protection and avoid economic depression through the American friendship and aid or they could achieve peace under Russian umbrella then they must realise that these powers have their own interests and these leaders have opted for a very weak support. Borrowed light can’t guarantee permanent spark. It is to be understood that they could not protect their freedom, faith and integrity without self-dependency, self-reliance and generating their own power. Self-reliance and strengthening one’s country is a way to assure its security. It is necessary for these states to produce an atmosphere of trust its own people. There should be personal and political freedom. Opposition should be tolerated. Politics and economy should be kept open for capable people as it is better for all i.e. ruling elite as well as common people. There should be a relationship of trust and co-operation between the public and the ruler’s in spite of increasing tension.

These nations are much developed in the fields of science and technology but it is the need of time that they must adopt the policy of self-reliance. Self-reliance neither means total independence (which is hard to attain) nor does it mean being isolated. Rather, it means that a country must have a strong hold and grasp on resources so that they only may formulate their own policies according to their own aims and objectives. It must be kept in view in the development of Muslim countries that it is a moderate Ummah. If it got intervened by extremists and politics of violence it will lose its beauty and nature as it may become a stigma on its face. Whether it is personal life or collective, Islam is against violence and tyranny rather it promotes
brotherhood, tolerance, co-operation and co-ordination. At this time there is a need of close co-operation in the Muslim world in the fields of economy, politics, education and technology. Media’s effective development and organization is necessary for better presentation of Muslim viewpoint on international scenario. If Kirghizstan and other Central Asian states take the events started since 9/11 as an alarm, wake up from numbness and slumber for reconstruction, further steps would not be hard.
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