

Stalin's harvest

The latest outbreak of violence in the ethnic boiling-pot of Central Asia will take generations to heal.

A PLAINTIVE siren wails as a government unit, invisible in the darkness, patrols. "We will shoot anyone on the streets. Military curfew. Do not leave your homes," comes the clipped command in Russian over the loudspeaker. A round of tank-artillery fire rings out. A machinegun crackles a response. This is "calm", of a sort, after the bloody mayhem of inter-ethnic violence between the Kyrgyz majority and the Uzbek minority that broke out in southern Kyrgyzstan on June 10th. But in Osh, as elsewhere, the wounds that have been opened may take generations to heal.



By June 17th nearly 200 people, both Kyrgyz and Uzbeks, had been confirmed dead. Other estimates are far higher. Local Muslim custom requires that the dead are buried within 24 hours. Many people are burying family members at once without registering their deaths. Some 45,000 Uzbeks have registered as refugees in neighbouring Uzbek-majority Uzbekistan. According to the United Nations' children's agency, a total of 100,000 people, mostly women and children, have crossed the frontier. On June 15th Uzbekistan closed its borders, saying it could take no more. Perhaps a further 200,000 people have been displaced within Kyrgyzstan itself.

By day, at least, the streets of Osh are now quiet. Charred vehicles are winched onto dumper-trucks. But markets remain closed. Residents have opened their jars of pickled vegetables, usually reserved for the winter. The town is roughly divided into Uzbek mahallas (neighbourhoods) separated by corridors of mixed-ethnic communities. To the east and west of the city are large concentrations of mostly ethnic-Kyrgyz homes. Behind the barricades marking the entrances to the mahallas, life has been transformed. Women and children have gone. The men who have stayed behind to protect their homes are red-eyed with fatigue. In every mahalla men show pictures on their mobile phones of the dead they have buried. One man presses a DVD on a visiting journalist, saying "Show the world this." It depicts a mass funeral in a field, with more than 20 graves.

Uzbek men are now replacing fallen trees with welded iron barriers, to keep out their attackers "until the peacekeepers arrive". Travelling between the roadblocked mahallas and the

government-controlled centre of town is a dangerous journey. At each end, men armed with sticks eye each other across the divide.

Those who fled also face grim conditions. On June 12th at the border, Uzbekistani guards hesitated as hysterical women sobbed and stumbled towards them. They raised their rifles, but did not shoot. Then they began to allow them across. After the first stampede the bodies of four children lay, crushed to death, in the dust.

Nor are the 45,000 who have registered as refugees in Uzbekistan necessarily that lucky. Most are confined to newly erected camps, even if they have relations nearby. This is causing anguish among the refugees, but is in keeping with the control-freak tendencies of the regime of Islam Karimov, the president, for whom stability, or at least an outward semblance of it, is all.

Most of the refugees are not far from the town of Andijan, where several hundred protesters were shot dead in 2005. The Fergana Valley region of eastern Uzbekistan has also seen an intense crackdown on Islamist extremism, though the bar has been set very low. Some youths have been charged for holding prayer groups.

A well-off local Uzbek near the border on the Kyrgyzstani side is putting up some 200 people, mostly women and children, who are sleeping rough in his yard. At dawn a young man wakes up wailing. His neighbours at home have been shot dead, his house has been burned, and his wife and children are lost.

An Uzbek cameraman has footage of an armoured personnel-carrier going through a crowd of agitated Kyrgyz men as it approaches some Uzbeks. A soldier lowers his rifle. The crack of bullets whizzing past is unmistakable and the cameraman dives for cover. The government claims that some of its vehicles were seized on June 10th. The leader of Kyrgyzstan's interim administration, Roza Otunbayeva, has admitted how weak her army is.

Simmering and boiling over

The origins of the unrest lie both in the recent turmoil in Kyrgyzstani politics, and in the country's history as a former state of the Soviet Union. Alone in Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan has had two "revolutions" since independence in 1991. Its bigger neighbours, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, have had, in Mr Karimov and Nursultan Nazarbayev respectively, one authoritarian leader since 1991. But Kyrgyzstanis have twice overthrown presidents seen as corrupt, nepotistic and dictatorial.

The "Tulip Revolution" of 2005 brought down Askar Akayev, a Soviet-era strongman, who now teaches maths in Moscow. However, his replacement, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, soon started following the fashion among regional leaders. Like Mr Akayev, he beefed up the powers of the presidency. (The constitution has been changed to this effect seven times since 1991.) He also hounded his opponents while tolerating the fast-growing business interests of his family, notably his son, Maksim, who was this week detained as he landed on a private plane at a British airport, seeking political asylum.

Mr Bakiyev is also in exile. After the security forces opened fire on unarmed demonstrators in April, and more than 80 people were killed in clashes in Bishkek, the capital, he was forced to flee. Belarus's Alyaksandr Lukashenka, naturally sympathetic to the plight of a fellow post-Soviet strongman, offered him sanctuary.

He was replaced by the interim government, led by Ms Otunbayeva, a former ambassador and foreign minister. It is largely made up of disaffected members of Mr Akayev's or Mr Bakiyev's regimes. The small political class is both close-knit and fractious. In an interview with The

Economist in May, Ms Otunbayeva grumbled about the difficulty of getting her colleagues to agree on anything.

However, they were committed to a referendum on June 27th, in which voters would be asked to approve a switch to a parliamentary system. Ms Otunbayeva insists the vote will go ahead, though with so many people displaced, and security still doubtful, that may be unwise. The first elections under the new system, which would incorporate many safeguards against the rise of another dictator, would be held in October. If genuine, this would be a radical shift not just for Kyrgyzstan, but for Central Asia as a whole.

The interim government blames the violence on the Bakiyevs. They retain support among ethnic-Kyrgyz residents of the south, the family's base and stronghold. Several times since April there have been clashes between government forces and Bakiyev loyalists. The government's case is bolstered by a recording posted on YouTube in mid-May, purporting to be of a telephone conversation involving Maksim Bakiyev. In it he says he intends to bring down the government by causing unrest in the south. A foreign-ministry official says mercenaries from the badlands of Tajikistan and Afghanistan were hired.

It is not just the interim government that detects an organising hand behind the violence. A UN spokesman, too, said there was evidence indicating that it began on June 10th with five simultaneous attacks in Osh involving men wearing masks and carrying guns. One target was a gym known to be frequented by criminals, an attack on which was bound to provoke a violent reaction. Aleksandr Knyazev, a political scientist from Kyrgyzstan, says the perpetrators were both Bakiyev-financed criminal gangs and ethnic-Uzbek groups financed by someone else.

The south is another country

Even if the spark came from outside—and first reports suggested that the initial cause was no more than a fist-fight in a gambling den—there was no shortage of dry tinder. In the chaotic weeks after Mr Bakiyev surrendered his seat in Bishkek, opportunistic mobs indulged in looting and score-settling across the country. In the north, around Bishkek, Kyrgyz gangs attacked enclaves of Russians and Meskhetian Turks.



It was in the south, however, that latent resentments manifested themselves most bitterly. Kyrgyzstan is divided both geographically—by high mountains—and ethnically (see map). In the north the legacy of Soviet rule is evident in a more Russified culture. Most of the country's

ethnic Russians live there, but so do Dungans (or Hui, a Muslim people of Chinese origin) and some ethnic Germans. The south is closer to Central Asian traditions and is more ethnically mixed. Most of Kyrgyzstan's Uzbeks, who make up about 15% of its 5.4m people, live in the south, along with some Tajiks. Indeed, around Kyrgyzstan's bit of the Fergana Valley—the eastern rim of the ethnically mixed heartland of modern Uzbekistan—Uzbeks form a narrow majority.

This is not the first time ethnic conflict in the area has claimed lives. In June 1990, during the last days of the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic, street brawling in Osh over land disagreements turned bloody. About 300 people died before Soviet troops restored order, and a curfew was imposed for the whole summer. Mr Akayev was appointed president, with instructions to keep the country's ethnic frictions in check.

Kyrgyzstan is one of the poorest countries formed by the break-up of the Soviet Union. But the north, around Bishkek (formerly Frunze) is more developed, with some industry. The south is more agrarian and devoutly Islamic. Only two usable roads through the mountains link north and south. It takes a day to drive from Bishkek to Osh.

Mr Akayev, the strongman, was a northerner. Under him southerners felt neglected and unrepresented. When the southern Mr Bakiyev came to power he appointed a northern prime minister, Feliks Kulov, in an effort at inclusion. Ms Otunbayeva, the interim president, was born in Osh, the second-largest city in the country and the south's biggest. But after many years in the north and abroad she is no longer seen as a real southerner.

Uzbeks, who are under-represented in central government, regional administrations and the army, have long felt politically excluded. Whereas historically the Kyrgyz were nomadic herders, Uzbeks were settled farmers. Now the stereotype is that they make a living in the bazaars. The two groups often have very different outlooks, for example on the role of women. Kyrgyzstan is the first Central Asian country to have a woman as president.

The south is also a nest of spies from Uzbekistan—including taxi-drivers, businessmen and others, on the lookout for extremists or for other threats to the Karimov regime, such as members of a banned opposition party. The killing in 2007 of Alisher Saipov, a prominent ethnic-Uzbek journalist in Kyrgyzstan, shows Uzbekistan's readiness to meddle elsewhere to further Mr Karimov's perceived interests. Its secret service is said to have long crawled all over Osh and Jalal-Abad, the other big southern town, as if it was its own back yard. As the International Crisis Group, a think-tank, says in a 2008 report, northern Kyrgyzstani politicians complain that Uzbeks in the south make excessive demands for political rights, but have allowed Uzbekistan's secret service free rein there since the Andijan massacre.

Blame Uncle Joe

Until the Soviet Union started to define its Central Asian territories in 1924, the region never had precise borders. Before Russian colonisation in the late 19th century, the boundaries of the different khanates shifted back and forth. The nomadic Kyrgyz and Kazakhs largely ignored the concepts of states and boundaries anyway.

After the October revolution of 1917, new autonomous republics were created. In 1924 Stalin divided the region into different Soviet republics. The borders were drawn up rather arbitrarily without following strict ethnic lines or even the guidelines of geography. The main aim was to counter the growing popularity of pan-Turkism in the region, and to avoid potential friction. Hence, the fertile Fergana Valley (formerly ruled by the Khanate of Kokand) was divided between Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

Some of these borders were redrawn several times until 1936. After 1991, this led to lively demarcation disputes among the newly independent countries. In addition, some small pockets of territory are nominally part of one country but geographically isolated from it. Kyrgyzstan, for example, has seven enclaves, two belonging to Tajikistan and five to Uzbekistan.

This has been only one cause of prickly relations between the “stans”, which are linked by Soviet-era roads, gas pipelines, electricity grids and other infrastructure. Water, in particular, is very sensitive. Mountainous Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are the sources of much of the water that irrigates Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. The upstream countries want to develop their enormous hydropower potential. This is opposed, especially by Uzbekistan.

The downfall of Mr Bakiyev seems to have opened a new rift between Kyrgyzstan and its neighbours. Neither Mr Karimov in Uzbekistan nor Mr Nazarbayev in Kazakhstan wants to see protest spread across his country's borders. Both closed them after the April unrest, putting severe economic strain on the interim government. Kazakhstan also limited the time Kyrgyzstani migrant workers could stay. “Our neighbours are very hostile,” says Isa Omurkulov, the mayor of Bishkek, who then plays up to their fears by threatening to “export our revolution”. After the unrest in the south, Kazakhstan sent more troops to its border.

Friends like these

All three big external powers in Central Asia—America, China and Russia—have a big interest in the region's stability. China sees it as an important source of gas and other energy supplies. It is also, more alarmingly as seen from Beijing, a possible inspiration for Islamist nationalists in what was once “East Turkestan” and is now China's region of Xinjiang.

Both America and Russia, for their parts, maintain military bases in Kyrgyzstan, both near Bishkek. The American Manas air base, or “transit centre”, as it is now called, is used for supporting American and NATO troops in Afghanistan. It is an important part of a northern supply route developed because of the vulnerability of convoys coming through the Khyber Pass from Pakistan. Russia's base in Kant is part of an agreement by the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, which groups together seven members of the former Soviet Union, to set up a counter-terrorism base in the region. But the former imperial power still sees Central Asia as very much its own stamping-ground.

The Manas base has been a source of friction. Last year Mr Bakiyev promised Russia it would be closed and was promised aid. He reneged on the deal when America increased the rent it was paying. That is one reason why Russia was suspected of having a role in his downfall. And though domestic pressures were probably enough to unseat him, Russia was certainly quick to recognise and help Ms Otunbayeva's government.

Russia did not, however, rush troops to its aid when Ms Otunbayeva asked for them, as the violence in the south span out of control. It limited itself at first to sending paratroopers to secure the base at Kant, and then sending relief supplies. In April Dmitry Medvedev, Russia's president, described Kyrgyzstan as “on the verge of civil war”. Russia presumably has no desire to be sucked in, as it was in Afghanistan in 1979—and certainly not without international backing.

Ms Otunbayeva insists there are no plans to throw the Americans out of Manas. But many of her colleagues accuse America of having pandered to Mr Bakiyev's corrupt and dictatorial whims in exchange for access to Manas. They allege that Maksim Bakiyev profited from the fuel-supply contracts for the base. This claim is being investigated by America's Congress. The privately-held company which has the Pentagon contract denies any knowledge of Maksim

Bakiyev's involvement in the firms they deal with. NATO has suspended flights by air-to-air refuelling tankers from Manas.

Even if the world's big powers share an abiding interest in the stability of Central Asia as a whole, and hence of Kyrgyzstan in particular, they seem to have little idea how to achieve it. So far they have tended to compete for influence. But with an eye on the ethnic and religious tensions in the region, and the vulnerability of brittle authoritarian systems, it may be time to start co-operating.

Fonte: The Economist, June 17th 2010. Disponível em: <www.economist.com>.

Acesso em: 23 jun. 2010.

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