

# **ETHNIC POLITICS AND POWER DYNAMICS IN CONTEMPORARY KYRGYZSTAN**

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Nationalism in Kyrgyzstan is deeply rooted in a complex narrative that blends ethnic identity with the concept of civic statehood. Since gaining independence in 1991, political elites have consistently drawn on historical symbols of unity, frequently invoking the legendary hero Manas to reinforce notions of threatened sovereignty and cultural revival. This historical framework has shaped the country's understanding of its internal and external challenges and fostered a collective sense of vulnerability, particularly toward neighboring ethnic groups and foreign influences.

The legacy of the 2010 ethnic violence in southern Kyrgyzstan continues to shape the dynamics of nationalism in the country. The violent clashes between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks left deep scars on interethnic relations, amplifying nationalist rhetoric that increasingly casts minority groups as outsiders or “guests” rather than equal members of society. This collective trauma has allowed nationalism to function both as a political tool for mobilization and as a psychological framework through which many Kyrgyz interpret issues of identity, belonging, and systemic failures.

Since 2020, under President Sadyr Japarov, nationalism has taken on an increasingly populist and consolidationist form. His administration has emphasized the promotion of “national values” over democratic principles, using nationalist rhetoric to justify tighter control over political life and to suppress dissent. This resurgence of ethnic nationalism coincides with ongoing economic dependence on Russia, reinforced by labor migration and complex linguistic dynamics, as well as growing tensions between pro-Russian and pro-Western factions within the country. In this environment, nationalism has become both a unifying narrative and a mechanism for consolidating power, further narrowing the space for pluralism and open debate in Kyrgyz society.

The modern history of Kyrgyzstan as an independent state is deeply intertwined with episodes of ethnic violence and intercommunal discord, particularly in the country's southern regions. The first major outburst of ethnic tensions occurred in Osh Province, a region

predominantly inhabited by ethnic Uzbeks, who, despite comprising only around 13 percent of the national population in 1989, maintained a strong demographic and economic presence in this area. Historical grievances, rooted in decades of complex interethnic relations during the Soviet period, erupted in June 1990 when an Uzbek rights group, Adalat, petitioned Moscow for the annexation of Osh to the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic. In response, the Kyrgyz-dominated Osh City Council announced plans to construct a cotton-processing plant on land belonging to an Uzbek-majority collective farm. This decision triggered violent riots, leaving at least 320 people dead. Order was restored only through the direct intervention of Soviet military forces.

The roots of Kyrgyz-Uzbek antagonism, however, run far deeper. In the early 19th century, portions of what is now Kyrgyzstan fell under the rule of the Uzbek Kokand Khanate. Kyrgyz resistance to this dominance was fierce, with periodic guerrilla attacks launched from mountain strongholds in the Tien Shan. Nevertheless, Kyrgyz forces suffered repeated defeats in 1845, 1857, 1858, and 1873. These historical experiences contributed to the Kyrgyz decision to ally with the Russian Empire later in the 19th century, seeking protection from Uzbek dominance. The 1990 Osh riots, and their brutal suppression, ignited a wave of democratic mobilization that culminated in Kyrgyzstan proclaiming its sovereignty in November 1990, predating the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991.

Ethnic tensions did not subside with independence. In April 2009, the country witnessed another outbreak of interethnic violence when a mob of villagers in Petrovka attacked more than one hundred homes owned by ethnic Kurds, demanding their expulsion. The slow and inadequate response of law enforcement, local officials, and even the presidential administration allowed violence to escalate unchecked, with some authorities openly supporting the forced removal of Kurdish families as a means of restoring order.

The April 2010 political upheaval, which overthrew President Kurmanbek Bakiyev, further destabilized the country and paved the way for a new and devastating wave of ethnic violence. Between May and June 2010, southern Kyrgyzstan, particularly Osh and Jalal-Abad, was engulfed in interethnic clashes between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks. Official figures report approximately 2,000 deaths, though many estimates suggest higher casualties, and between 45,000 and 75,000 Uzbeks fled across the border into Uzbekistan, while countless others became internally displaced. The provisional government's response was widely criticized as inadequate

and politically compromised, failing to protect vulnerable populations despite publicly committing to democratic values.

Eyewitness accounts from the conflict describe systemic targeting of ethnic Uzbeks. Residents report arbitrary detentions of Uzbek men during nighttime raids, often accompanied by violence and looting. One resident of Osh, Minura, described how neighbors organized nightly patrols to protect their communities as law enforcement officers abducted their sons, husbands, and brothers, often without charges. She recounted how her own husband, a businessman uninvolved in the clashes, was beaten in custody before being released. Other witnesses reported the active participation of Kyrgyz military units in the violence, with GRAD rocket launchers deployed against Uzbek neighborhoods. Human Rights Watch documented the destruction of more than 2,000 homes, most of them belonging to Uzbeks. Victims recounted that Uzbek-owned homes were specifically marked with the derogatory inscription “Sart,” while properties owned by Kyrgyz families were labeled with “Kyrgyzstan,” protecting them from attack. Businesses owned by Kyrgyz citizens were left untouched, underscoring the targeted nature of the violence.

In the aftermath, discrimination against the Uzbek minority deepened. Local authorities in Osh and Jalal-Abad reportedly restricted access to humanitarian aid and medical care for Uzbek victims and refused to reissue destroyed identification documents, including passports, effectively preventing many displaced individuals from relocating to safer areas. These events have left lasting scars on Kyrgyz society, entrenching patterns of ethnic division and marginalization that continue to shape intercommunal relations and national politics to this day.

According to Amnesty International, efforts by Uzbek human rights advocates to expose the atrocities committed during the June 2010 violence in southern Kyrgyzstan have been met with severe retaliation by the authorities, who frequently fabricate criminal cases to silence outspoken members of the human rights community. One of the most prominent examples is the case of Azimjan Askarov, who documented instances of Kyrgyz security forces abusing ethnic Uzbeks during the unrest; he was later sentenced to life imprisonment on what many international observers have described as politically motivated and unfounded murder charges. This pattern of repression underscores both the irresponsibility of the interim government in handling the crisis and the enduring vulnerability of ethnic minorities in Kyrgyzstan, reflecting a

broad continuity of state policies aimed at marginalizing and excluding non-Kyrgyz communities.

Following the 2010 violence, the state continued to target Uzbeks under the pretext of pursuing justice for the events of June. Numerous cases have been documented where ethnic Uzbeks were arrested and prosecuted on dubious charges of “inciting ethnic hatred.” For instance, the Alisher Navoi Institute, a Brussels-based human rights organization, reported that on May 5, 2012, in Osh, police detained Abduvokhid Kasimov, an ethnic Uzbek and one of the survivors of the 2010 violence. Similarly, there have been multiple reports of ethnically motivated attacks on Uzbeks in the Osh region, such as the brutal beating of Anvar Eshonov by a group of Kyrgyz teenagers in the village of Nurdor on May 4, 2012. These incidents highlight an entrenched environment of impunity, where perpetrators are seldom held accountable and minority communities remain exposed to ongoing violence and harassment.

The roots of these systemic problems lie in Kyrgyzstan’s historical and social dynamics, particularly the rigid clan-based structure that continues to shape access to power and social mobility. This stratification makes it extraordinarily difficult for minorities to attain prominent positions, particularly in politics and public administration. For example, only one Jewish individual has ever been elected to the Kyrgyz Parliament, and that occurred prior to independence in 1990. That same year, approximately 1,170 of the 6,000 Jews residing in Kyrgyzstan emigrated to Israel, reflecting both rising insecurity and limited opportunities for minority groups. Today, young ethnic Uzbeks often attempt to conceal their heritage by identifying as Kyrgyz when applying for internal passports, hoping to avoid systemic discrimination. Some even modify their names to sound more ethnically Kyrgyz. One young man of mixed Uzbek-Kyrgyz descent from Bishkek, for example, recounted that upon turning sixteen, he declared his mother’s Kyrgyz ethnicity in official documents, stating, “It is easier to be Kyrgyz here.” Likewise, an ethnic Uzbek woman who had changed her official records still faced open discrimination from classmates, who opposed her appointment to a student administrative position solely on the basis of her ethnicity.

Other minority groups in Kyrgyzstan, Russians, Ukrainians, Jews, Germans, Koreans, Tatars, Armenians, and Kazakhs, also live under persistent pressure, with limited legal protections and frequent experiences of bias, harassment, and social marginalization. Human rights organizations report that instances of violence and intimidation are rarely investigated and

are often misclassified as ordinary criminal acts, a strategy reminiscent of what some experts have termed a “silent pogrom.” The lack of accountability, coupled with structural inequality and widespread discrimination, has driven significant emigration among minority populations. Between 1992 and 1997, approximately 470,000 people, around 10 percent of the population, left Kyrgyzstan, with Russian-speaking minorities particularly affected. This outmigration accelerated following the 2005 revolution, as heightened nationalist rhetoric fueled insecurity among non-Kyrgyz residents. According to Vladimir Vereshchagin, an ethnic Russian lifelong resident of Kyrgyzstan, tensions between ethnic Kyrgyz and Russians had been steadily rising since independence, prompting many of his acquaintances to leave the country. The 2010 revolution further intensified these dynamics, with the State Committee of National Security reporting approximately 140 interethnic conflicts between Kyrgyz and various minority groups, including Russians, Uzbeks, Meskhetian Turks, Tajiks, and North Caucasian communities. Nationalist violence has persisted in the years since, reinforcing a climate of fear and exclusion. On August 4, 2014, for example, Kabulzhan Osmonov, an ethnic Uzbek, was attacked and severely beaten by a Kyrgyz nationalist in Osh after being subjected to ethnic slurs. On September 28, 2015, an Uzbek border patrol officer was assaulted near the village of Zhany-Zher after accidentally crossing the border into Kyrgyz territory. On August 2, 2016, in Bishkek, three Kyrgyz men attacked Oksana Zhigaylova, an ethnic Russian, hurling anti-Russian insults and physically assaulting her son; despite clear evidence, the police refused to pursue an investigation. Similarly, on May 18, 2017, following a local altercation in the Nookan District of the Jalal-Abad Region, online platforms were flooded with violent, hate-filled messages calling for the extermination and expulsion of Uzbeks from Kyrgyzstan. On May 21, 2018, three Kyrgyz women assaulted a group of Slavic youths in Ala-Too Square in Bishkek, again using ethnic slurs during the attack. These incidents, combined with systemic inaction from state authorities, illustrate the persistent and institutionalized marginalization of ethnic and religious minorities in Kyrgyzstan, perpetuating cycles of exclusion, violence, and forced migration.

In 2018, Human Rights Watch has documented that, even eight years after the interethnic violence of June 2010, justice for the victims remained elusive. The violence, which disproportionately targeted ethnic Uzbeks, and was followed by widespread arbitrary detentions, ill-treatment, and torture. Authorities have consistently failed to review or overturn convictions

tainted by evidence obtained under torture, leaving many victims and their families without legal recourse or redress.

In its May 2018 concluding observations, the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) expressed serious concern over the “persistence of tensions, notably between the Kyrgyz majority and the Uzbek minority,” and warned that the state’s official interethnic policy, which promotes a singular vision of national identity, lacks genuine inclusivity. The Committee noted that this exclusionary approach risks reigniting historical conflicts and further marginalizing ethnic minority communities.

The case of Azimjon Askarov stands as a stark illustration of the systemic repression faced by those advocating for the rights of Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan. Askarov, a prominent ethnic Uzbek human rights defender, was arrested in the aftermath of the interethnic violence of June 2010. Despite his reputation for documenting police brutality and torture, his efforts to expose systemic abuses made him a target for authorities, who viewed him with deep suspicion, fueled by entrenched prejudices against the Uzbek minority. Accused of inciting violence and complicity in the murder of a police officer killed during the clashes, Askarov was tried and sentenced to life imprisonment in what international observers widely condemned as a politically motivated and deeply flawed judicial process.

His conviction and continued imprisonment epitomize the broader pattern of injustice and ethnic bias embedded in Kyrgyzstan’s legal and political systems. In a hearing before the Chui Regional Court in northern Kyrgyzstan, his life sentence was upheld, with the court dismissing appeals for his release. The proceedings, conducted in Askarov’s absence, were monitored by representatives from the British, German, and Swiss embassies, as well as Human Rights Watch and the United Nations Human Rights Committee, all of whom sharply criticized the Kyrgyz authorities for failing to uphold due process or ensure accountability. The international condemnation of his case underscores the vulnerability of human rights defenders in Kyrgyzstan, particularly those from marginalized ethnic communities, and highlights the entrenched impunity that continues to shield state actors from responsibility for abuses committed during and after the 2010 violence.

In 2017, amendments to the Kyrgyz Criminal Code that altered sentencing guidelines for several offenses provided an opportunity for Askarov’s legal team to seek a review of his case. However, despite appeals from eight international human rights organizations urging EU High

Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini to raise the matter with Kyrgyz authorities during her visit to Bishkek, the courts upheld his life sentence. Human Rights Watch and other rights groups consistently criticized the proceedings as fundamentally flawed. Rachel Denber, Deputy Director of Human Rights Watch's Europe and Central Asia Division, described the case as a "miscarriage of justice," emphasizing that Askarov had been beaten and tortured in custody, denied access to legal counsel, and subjected to a trial that relied heavily on coerced testimonies, including from a co-defendant who later revealed she had been threatened by police. Despite a 2016 Kyrgyz Supreme Court order to review the case, a Bishkek court in January 2017 reaffirmed his conviction on charges of inciting hatred, violence, and complicity in murder.

The situation of the Uzbek minority in Kyrgyzstan has remained precarious since 2010, with systemic discrimination persisting across social, political, and economic spheres. Experts such as Edward Lemon note that structural discrimination remains entrenched, with law enforcement institutions dominated by ethnic Kyrgyz and widely perceived as corrupt, biased, and hostile toward Uzbeks. Uzbeks continue to report widespread discrimination in medical facilities, educational institutions, and workplaces, reinforcing patterns of marginalization and exclusion. The justice system remains deeply skewed, with many Uzbeks convicted on fabricated charges, while perpetrators of violence against Uzbeks, particularly Kyrgyz nationalists implicated in the 2010 massacres, have largely gone unpunished. Data on hate crimes remain scarce, as Kyrgyz authorities neither collect nor release comprehensive statistics, a lack of transparency that obscures the true scale of ethnically motivated violence.

More than a decade after the 2010 violence, the Uzbek community continues to face systemic oppression and the absence of justice or meaningful reconciliation. Human Rights Watch has emphasized that while southern Kyrgyzstan is no longer a site of open conflict, the lack of accountability for past abuses undermines trust and stability in the region. Official data released in 2017 indicated that courts had considered 286 cases involving 488 individuals related to the June 2010 violence, but nearly 4,000 of more than 5,000 registered cases had been suspended, with authorities claiming that suspects could not be identified or located. This narrative effectively denies the disproportionate targeting of ethnic Uzbeks and whitewashes the systematic attacks on their communities. Many cases involving Uzbek victims have yet to be investigated, and the state maintains the position that violence was mutual, with "both sides

equally armed and equally responsible,” a stance that erases the asymmetry of violence, the suffering of victims, and the widespread reports of arbitrary detentions, torture, and biased trials. As one ethnic Uzbek lawyer from southern Kyrgyzstan explained, the lack of accountability has left deep psychological scars within the community. “Psychologically, it stays with you,” he told Human Rights Watch. “An act of reconciliation did not take place. Many friends, people who suffered, whose relatives were jailed – no one ever answered for the abuses. It makes you feel psychologically vulnerable. You still feel vulnerable today.”

Criminal investigations and judicial proceedings arising from the June 2010 interethnic violence in southern Kyrgyzstan have been profoundly flawed, disproportionately targeting the ethnic Uzbek minority. These processes were marred by arbitrary arrests, ill-treatment, and documented cases of torture, while prosecutorial authorities persistently refused to investigate allegations of abuse. Courtroom proceedings were frequently disrupted by physical attacks on defendants and defense lawyers, creating a climate of fear and intimidation. According to data cited by the human rights organization Bir Duino in submissions to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), over 70 percent of those criminally prosecuted in connection with the June 2010 events were ethnic Uzbeks. Out of 105 individuals convicted for killings during the violence, 97 were ethnic Uzbeks and only seven were Kyrgyz, highlighting the disproportionate impact on the Uzbek community.

Ethnic Uzbeks in southern Kyrgyzstan continued to experience pervasive fear and insecurity, particularly in relation to law enforcement and the judiciary. As one ethnic Uzbek human rights defender told Human Rights Watch, “as far as the courts are concerned, and in terms of political representation, nothing has changed,” emphasizing the continuing risks faced by minority activists who sought anonymity for fear of reprisals. This entrenched marginalization reflects broader structural dynamics: from the perspective of the northern political elite, the southern population, disproportionately comprising ethnic Uzbeks, is regarded as a “second tier” within Kyrgyz society, often dismissed as an underclass and treated with overt hostility.

Ethnic minorities remain systematically disadvantaged under Kyrgyzstan’s nation-building policies, which prioritize a monoethnic conception of statehood at the expense of pluralism. Ethnic Uzbeks report discrimination in employment, commerce, and access to public services, while large-scale infrastructure projects in predominantly Uzbek areas are frequently

implemented without community consultation, displacing residents and deepening grievances. Legislation targeting extremist content online has been selectively enforced against Uzbeks, reinforcing patterns of surveillance and criminalization.

Following his December 2019 visit to Kyrgyzstan, UN Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues Fernand de Varennes observed that ethnic relations in the country “remain fragile,” with the persistent underrepresentation of minorities and the unfair treatment of ethnic Uzbeks by law enforcement posing risks of renewed interethnic tensions. The rise of Kyrgyz ethnic nationalism has, in some respects, begun to approximate exclusionary and authoritarian ideologies, cloaked in appeals to “traditional values” but in practice eroding fundamental rights and freedoms. One prominent example is the ultranationalist Kyrk Choro (“Forty Knights”) movement, formally registered as the Public Association Kyrgyz Choroloru. Established in 2010 and invoking the epic of Manas as a source of ethnic pride, Kyrk Choro openly targets ethnic, religious, and sexual minorities, as well as human rights organizations and political dissidents. Its members have conducted unauthorized raids on establishments employing foreigners, harassed civil society organizations, and coordinated with state agencies despite lacking legal authority. The group’s leader, Zamirbek Kochorbaev, has explicitly dismissed the constraints of law, signaling the movement’s growing influence within an increasingly nationalist and illiberal political environment.

This pattern of systemic bias extends beyond the Uzbek minority. Incidents of violence and xenophobia have targeted other ethnic and foreign communities. In 2019, for example, an English teacher from Nigeria was killed after being assaulted during a verbal altercation in central Bishkek. In May 2020, violent clashes erupted in the Sokh exclave in southern Kyrgyzstan, a disputed border region with Uzbekistan, leaving dozens injured, homes destroyed, and interethnic tensions further inflamed. Similarly, in August 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic fueled nationalist sentiment, leading to violent attacks on Pakistani citizens in Bishkek, including a medical student and volunteer who had been assisting in local healthcare efforts. Foreign students from India, Pakistan, and African nations increasingly report harassment and physical violence.

Sinophobia is another pervasive issue in Kyrgyzstan. Deep-rooted fears that Chinese economic investments could lead to territorial concessions, demographic changes, and cultural assimilation have fueled hostility toward Chinese nationals. In 2018, local residents in southern

Kyrgyzstan burned down a Chinese-owned gold processing facility, reflecting a broader pattern of violence and resistance to Chinese economic activities. Although Beijing has increased cultural and economic engagement in an attempt to mitigate these sentiments, anti-Chinese attitudes persist, exacerbated by widespread awareness of human rights abuses in China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, which has resonated strongly with Kyrgyzstan's Muslim population.

The plight of the Uyghur minority in northern Kyrgyzstan illustrates the severity of these dynamics. Despite historical roots in the region, Uyghurs face widespread social prejudice, extortion by police, and routine harassment by local authorities. Many work as small-scale traders, a livelihood that exposes them to arbitrary inspections, confiscations, and demands for bribes. Anti-Uyghur sentiment has intensified amid Kyrgyzstan's growing political and economic alignment with China. Seeking to demonstrate loyalty to Beijing, Kyrgyz authorities have surveilled Uyghur organizations, curtailed cultural activities, and, in some cases, extradited Uyghur activists to China despite credible fears of torture and persecution.

One prominent case involved Kasardji Zeki, a Uyghur activist linked to the "Eastern Turkestan" movement, who, along with several associates, was arrested on charges widely criticized as fabricated and politically motivated. Following his arrest, anti-Uyghur rhetoric proliferated in Kyrgyz media, framing Uyghur organizations as extremist or terrorist groups. Ordinary Uyghur entrepreneurs have similarly faced extortion, property confiscation, and physical violence; the Kyrgyzstan Committee for Human Rights documented cases in which Uyghurs such as Z. Halilov and Sh. Omorov were illegally detained and tortured to extract bribes from their families, sustaining severe injuries including fractured ribs and head trauma.

In May 2025, UN human rights experts raised concerns regarding Kyrgyzstan's extradition of Uyghur asylum seekers to China, warning that such transfers exposed individuals to severe human rights violations, including torture and indefinite detention. This practice has intensified fear within the Uyghur community, fostering silence and self-censorship among those seeking to avoid persecution.

Overall, Kyrgyzstan's ethnic minorities remain subject to systemic discrimination, economic marginalization, and political exclusion. State authorities not only fail to protect minority communities from nationalist violence but frequently enable or participate in abuses, perpetuating a climate of fear, impunity, and structural inequality.

Nationalism in Kyrgyzstan reflects deeply entrenched structural inequalities that prioritize the titular Kyrgyz population while systematically sidelining ethnic minorities. Since gaining independence in 1991, the Kyrgyz majority has asserted dominance across nearly all aspects of public life, including politics, governance, law enforcement, and economic administration. This predominance is reinforced through institutional mechanisms, clan-based patronage systems, and nationalist narratives that place Kyrgyz identity at the core of the state's legitimacy. As a result, minority groups such as Uzbeks, Uyghurs, Russians and other Russian-speaking ethnicities are frequently excluded from meaningful political participation and remain significantly underrepresented in decision-making processes. These imbalances exacerbate social divisions, particularly in regions where minority populations are concentrated and where economic and political marginalization is most pronounced.

The elevation of Kyrgyz identity as the cornerstone of national statehood has cultivated a political environment in which nationalism serves simultaneously as a tool of cohesion and exclusion. Policies and practices increasingly prioritize the interests of the majority population while neglecting to ensure equal rights and security for non-Kyrgyz citizens. Historical episodes of interethnic violence, notably in 1990 and 2010, combined with the ongoing underrepresentation of minorities in government institutions and law enforcement, underscore the persistent fragility of interethnic relations. Without comprehensive reforms aimed at dismantling systemic discrimination, enhancing minority representation, and guaranteeing equal access to justice and economic opportunities, Kyrgyzstan risks deepening cycles of division and instability. In this context, nationalism continues to act as a significant impediment to inclusive governance and sustainable social cohesion.

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