

**Paranoia with a Purpose: Conspiracy Theory and Political Coalitions in Kyrgyzstan**

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## Abstract:

*This article considers the political uses of conspiracy theories (CTs). It is widely accepted that post-Soviet citizens are prone to believe CTs, but there has been little research about the conditions under which politicians endorse conspiracy narratives and why those narratives sometimes become hegemonic. I argue that in times of high uncertainty, CTs have properties that are useful in providing political elites with a focal point for coordination in the absence of other bases for coalition formation. I demonstrate this logic by analyzing the politics surrounding the construction and spread of a conspiracy narrative following violence in Kyrgyzstan in 2010. Politicians with different interpretations of the event coalesced around a contrived conspiratorial narrative, and used it to paper over differences as they formed a ruling coalition. This argument has implications for how to understand the appearance and durability of conspiracy claims in states where political formations are fluid.*

Keywords: conspiracy theory; ethnic violence; Kyrgyzstan; coalitions; political narratives; ethnic nationalism; focal points

In January 2011, the parliament of Kyrgyzstan published the “Conclusion of the National Commission for the Comprehensive Study of the Causes, Consequences and Recommendations on the Tragic Events that Occurred in the South of Kyrgyzstan in June 2010.” The commission had been mandated by the president, and it consisted of some of the nation’s most distinguished politicians, officials, academics, and NGO leaders. It enjoyed a generous budget and took six months to produce. The final report was billed as the authoritative findings about the origins of ethnic violence between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz that had taken place the previous year, and the international media, which had covered the violence, took interest in the conclusions.<sup>1</sup>

The commission’s report called the conflict a “pre-planned large-scale provocation, intended to split Kyrgyzstan and undermine the unity of the people. This monstrous act of sabotage was supposed to explode the situation throughout Central Asia, destabilizing it for many years (National Commission 2011, II.1).”<sup>2</sup> The instigators were “leaders of the Uzbek community” whose objective was to “artificially aggravate the national question.”<sup>3</sup> The report noted SOS signs in Uzbek neighborhoods that were written “with special paint, carefully and of the same type (II.2).” It suggested that they were intended to encourage “forces from Uzbekistan,” or “armed religious extremists” to “orient themselves as to which apartments and houses contain Uzbeks or Kyrgyz (II.2).”

Another set of players implicated in the report was recently deposed president, “K. Bakiev and his supporters,” who sought to “destabilize and explode the situation in the country

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<sup>1</sup> At least 470 people were killed and thousands were injured in the clashes. This figure represents reported and documented deaths, but most experts believe the death toll was higher, as many victims’ families buried the dead without reporting it. See KIC (2011). About 15 percent of the population of Kyrgyzstan is ethnic Uzbek. Uzbeks reside predominantly in the south, in areas contiguous with Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan’s economically and politically dominant neighbor.

<sup>2</sup> Roman numerals refer to sections of the report. The report was published in Russian. All translations are the author’s. See “National Commission” (2011).

<sup>3</sup> By way of background, the report says that after the collapse of the USSR, “the Islamized and nationalist-oriented Uzbek part of the Fergana Valley, the ideas of which come from the Islamic Movement of Turkestan (IMT), seeks to unify Fergana and create a single Islamic state—the Caliphate (National Commission 2011, I.3).”

(National Commission 2011, II.1).” Bakiev’s son Maksim and brother Janysh recruited people from “criminal, terrorist, and extremist groups,” by meeting in Afghanistan with “emissaries and warlords of the Taliban Movement, the IMU [Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan], [and] the UTO (United Tajik Opposition) with the personal involvement of Mullah Abdullah”<sup>4</sup> for the purpose of “destabilizing the situation in Kyrgyzstan (II.3).”

This set of findings struck many observers as odd for a number of reasons. First, the report did not provide any evidence for its main assertions, including the purported intentions of the Uzbek leaders and the meeting of Bakiev’s supporters with Islamist mercenaries. Second, the plot described and the actors implicated in the report conflicted with reporting on the ground during the conflict, which depicted a scene in which ordinary Uzbeks clashed on the streets with ordinary Kyrgyz.

The details also failed to accord with what was known about Kyrgyzstan. First, although some members of the Uzbek community desired greater rights in Kyrgyzstan, they had never taken up arms against the state. Second, there have been few confirmed cases of religious terrorism on Kyrgyz soil. The Islamic movement of Uzbekistan had been mostly destroyed in the US bombing campaign in Afghanistan in 2001, and the UTO was an alliance of religious and secular parties that had fought in Tajikistan’s civil war but never carried out attacks in other countries (Khalid 2014). Third, even if the different parties had had incentives to wreak havoc, they had few common interests over which to collaborate; Bakiev’s secular regime dealt harshly with suspected members of banned religious organizations, and his regime fanned Kyrgyz nationalism that alienated ethnic Uzbeks.

The National Commission report had the characteristics of a conspiracy theory (CT): the assumption that the parties that stood to gain must have deliberately caused the violence; gaps in

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<sup>4</sup> A leading UTO militant.

logic connecting the perpetrators with their purported actions; reliance on insinuation rather than evidence; the putative collaboration among otherwise disparate (and even conflicting) parties working toward common goals; the ease with which the plot was planned and effectively carried out and kept secret; and the invocation of authoritative knowledge of the state to preempt challenges. Later, once the narrative in the report was taken as a self-evident truth, it was used not only to rebut objections but also to call into question the motives of skeptics, as proponents of CTs often do.

Why did the official accounting for the traumatic events in Osh take the form that it did? It has been argued that the post-Soviet region is fertile ground for conspiracy theories due to the sudden political and economic transformations, distrust in society, and abuses of power (Ortmann and Heathershaw 2012; Yabolkov 2014). Yet it is rare that conspiracy becomes an official discourse.<sup>5</sup> The conventional wisdom on CTs articulated by politicians views them as a rhetorical weapon deployed by insecure dictators seeking to distract from their failings to shore up power. This appears to explain the promotion of CTs by the Russian government since the start of the Ukraine crisis. However, Kyrgyzstan at the time not only lacked a dictator, it barely had a functioning government. The conspiracy theory that took shape in 2011 must therefore have served other purposes, but ones which are not anticipated by existing explanations.

This essay seeks to elucidate the interplay of CTs and politics using Kyrgyzstan as a case study. I contrast the official accounting of outbreaks of interethnic violence in 1990 and 2010. Although both events took place in periods of political turmoil and institutional change, and under similarly murky circumstances, conspiracy became the official narrative only in the latter case. By analyzing the background conditions and political incentives in the two periods, and

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<sup>5</sup> By this I mean it is endorsed by a broad swath of government officials or backed by state institutions.

paying close attention to the political dynamics in the latter, I am able to identify the factors that made conspiracy an attractive narrative for the political elite following the 2010 violence.

I argue that the 2011 conspiracy narrative was developed as an expedient way for different political factions to coordinate in the formation of a governing coalition. Following the 1990 riots, Kyrgyzstan's ruling class staked its claim to govern on the legitimacy that came from ushering the state to independence, obviating the need for an alternative narrative. Although citizens of Kyrgyzstan, as elsewhere in the former USSR, are inclined toward conspiratorial thinking, prior to 2010 CTs were not widely articulated at the elite level and arguably played a minor role in politics to that point.<sup>6</sup> The conspiracy narrative that emerged was the product of a bargain between Kyrgyzstan's main political factions. In agreeing on an official statement that included each faction's favored interpretation of the violence, Kyrgyz politicians created an elite consensus where discord had prevailed, and manufactured what they believed was a mandate to govern. Even after democratic elections changed the makeup of the government, the conspiracy narrative persisted as a focal point of political discourse used by elites with otherwise diverging interests. The case study shows that a conspiracy theory can become hegemonic not when the mass public is its primary audience, but when its purpose is to act as a source of elite coordination.

### **Conspiracy in Theory and Practice**

A conspiracy theory is "the belief that an organization made up of individuals or groups was or is acting covertly to achieve some malevolent end" (Barkun 2013, 3). A conspiracy

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<sup>6</sup> One major exception was the suspicious death of former presidential advisor Medet Sadyrkulov. But this was a conspiracy theory about the government, not promoted by it. See Najibullah 2009.

*theory* is distinguished by the fact that evidence supporting an assertion about conspiracy is circumstantial and weakly supported rather than manifest.<sup>7</sup> CTs can be simple or elaborate, specific or vague, and petty or grand, but their defining characteristics are their attribution of malevolent agency and the leaps of logic linking the consequential action to the actor(s) who (must have) carried it out.

Early research viewed CTs as irrational and potentially destabilizing. Democratic norms frowned upon beliefs that festered on the margins of conventional politics, and raised the specter of violent dissent and subversion. Scholars investigated the implications of alienation and distrust, which were associated with support for communism and authoritarian leaders (Popper 1966). Hofstadter (1964) identified social and economic marginalization as the cause of right-wing conspiracism. In what can be seen as a latter-day version of his argument, Sunstein and Vermuele (2009, 204) argue that the “crippled epistemology” that drives conspiracism stems from obtaining information from networks that are isolated from the broader society.

More recent work in cultural studies and anthropology rejects the characterization of CTs as deviant or pathological, instead viewing them as an ordinary part of political life. In the last two decades, scholars have linked the popularity of conspiracy theories to economic insecurity and the weakening of institutions. It is argued that the rise of global capitalism has eroded the foundation of social and economic support that once bound people to their communities and weakened governments’ capacity to mitigate the resulting hardship (Parish 2001; Fenster 1999, 70). The globalization of culture and the mass media have undermined conventional authority

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<sup>7</sup> In this paper, even though I refer primarily to the popular term conspiracy *theory*, I use it interchangeably with the term conspiracy *claim*, which is actually a more accurate description of the phenomenon addressed in this essay. Whereas a theory involves a relationship between two variables and a specification about the causal mechanisms, a claim does not demand a full elaboration of the plot. It may simply assert an identification of the perpetrators and the victims, with a suggestion of the motive, but without necessarily describing the causal chain in detail. I also refer to a conspiracy *narrative*, which focuses attention on the story-like elements of the claim and the possibility for the layering or alteration of details as the claim is circulated and adapted for local needs.

figures and methods of knowledge production (Melley 2000). These forces have conspired to engender a pervasive sense of powerlessness and cynicism, and led to a proliferation of alternative belief systems (West and Sanders 2003).

In the post-Soviet world, politics and CTs have long been deeply intertwined. In the Soviet Union, conspiracy was part of the vernacular beginning from the Bolshevik Revolution, through the Stalinist show trials and the international intrigue of the Cold War (Rittersporn 1992; Halfin 2007; Zubok 2009). Suspected conspiracies have played a major role in recent politics in the region, exemplified by the 1999 episode in which Russian security officers were implicated in planting explosives in an apartment building days after explosions had destroyed other residential complexes. These attacks, blamed on Chechen militants, were a major justification for Russia's second invasion of Chechnya in 1999 and helped launch the political career of Vladimir Putin (Dunlop 2014). Recent prominent conspiracy theories include the meteorite that fell in Chelyabinsk in 2013, and the shooting down of the Malaysian airliner over eastern Ukraine in 2014 (Weir 2013; Adomanis 2014).

Despite the recent attention given to Putin's conspiracy campaign since the Ukraine crisis began, there is surprisingly little systematic research on the when and why state actors sometimes decide to endorse CTs. The most common explanation centers on leadership styles and personality traits. Thus, CT promotion has been explained in two opposing ways—as the deluded ravings of madmen, or as Machiavellian scheming by rational actors. Typical psychoanalytic explanations harken back to Hofstadter, seeing conspiracy as a product of delusional thinking or pathology. Daniel Pipes, for example, argues that Middle Eastern leaders who promote CTs share the prejudices, suspicions, and neuroses of their citizens (Pipes 1998, 234-246). Many have argued that Stalin suffered from clinical paranoia (e.g. Robins and Post



1997). Some recent analyses of Putin's behavior argue that, responding to regime change in Ukraine in 2014, he started to "believe his own propaganda" or "lost touch with reality" ("Mr. Putin" 2014).

The other explanation begins from the assumption that politicians are cynical, manipulative, and calculating. According to this logic, rulers (usually nondemocratic ones) use CTs strategically to distract from their failings and keep the populace docile and enthralled. It is assumed that citizens are susceptible to conspiratorial appeals, and willingly rally around the leader, imbuing him with legitimacy that he cannot acquire through elections or competent governance (Newman 2009; Pomerantsev 2015).

It is possible to find opposing descriptions of the same leaders. Stalin cannily invoked "wreckers" and capitalist "encirclement" to consolidate power and reinforce a vast system of social control. But he was also pathologically suspicious. Saddam Hussein was a virtuoso at divide-and-conquer and claimed to uncover numerous coup plots to terrorize the population into subservience (Karsh and Rautsi 1991, 41). But he was also portrayed as a madman (Hoskins 2004, chapter 5).

While both accounts are certainly accurate in some cases, they tell only part of the story. A cursory glance at newspaper headlines from around the world reveals that it is not only powerful autocrats with cults of personality who favor CTs. In fact, run-of-the-mill tinpot dictators, democratically elected politicians, and political parties of many stripes intermittently claim conspiracies.<sup>8</sup> This fact suggests that CTs are versatile and serve a wider variety of purposes than is commonly assumed. Because they appear in many places and diverse circumstances, there is likely to be no grand theory of when elites use CTs. However, by closely examining cases where the phenomenon appears anomalous and is poorly explained by existing

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<sup>8</sup> For just a small sampling, see "UK, US" 2005; Csaky 2012; Wong 2014.

theories, it may be possible to identify unrecognized causal processes that are applicable to other cases (Seawright and Gerring 2008, 302)

### **Narratives and Collective Action in Tumultuous Times**

Why would a politician deploy a conspiracy theory rather than a different rhetorical trope at a moment of high uncertainty? To answer this, it is useful to depict conspiracy theory as a type of political narrative and examine its special properties.

Narratives are “stories...in which we construct disparate facts in our own worlds and weave them together cognitively in order to make sense of our reality” (Patterson & Monroe 1998, 315). Political narratives are ones put in service of power that “make the case for why those in power are deserving of loyalty or allegiance...” (Brand 2014, 15) Regimes can gain power through coercion or by winning popular plebiscites, but they all seek to justify their existence with reference to specific ideologies, principles, or historical and social referents.<sup>9</sup> The most effective narratives lay the groundwork for a political agenda by making certain ways of thinking about the polity—identity, mission, threats, and integrity of its leaders—appear natural and self-evident (Riker 1996; Wedeen 1999).

At moments of institutional crisis, when uncertainty is high and conventional ways of eliciting collective action are ineffective, sometimes effective appeals can mobilize people to act

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<sup>9</sup> I use the term justification to mean “consistent with the moral consensus in society” (Gilley, 2013, 7). This term is preferable to legitimacy, which is better used to refer to regimes rather than individual politicians, and implies a legal basis to rule. The types of claims analyzed here are interesting precisely because they operate as alternatives to legally grounded claims of a right to rule. I sometimes use the term “legitimize” not in reference to the Weberian concept, but rather in the colloquial sense of “to make something seem acceptable.”

to achieve common goals.<sup>10</sup> For example, ideological narratives enable individuals to attach themselves to a greater cause, “casting larger groups and forces as the actors, and justifying epic actions, reforms, and even violence as the way to reach the dénouement” (Haidt et al., 2009, 115). By lengthening time horizons, ideologies can lead individuals to forego immediate rewards and invest in a collective’s future success, thus helping to bring coalitions into existence (Bawn 1999; Hanson 2010).

CTs lack the positive vision that ideology entails, and they do not provide the psychic or symbolic benefits to galvanize a mass movement. However, in the identification of guilty parties in a major transgression, the narrative has the potential to bring into existence a pragmatic coalition of otherwise disparate actors—a “negative coalition”—whose common bond is its adversarial status in relation to a designated foil (Coser 1956; Beissinger 2013).<sup>11</sup> Two characteristics of conspiracy theories in particular make them useful as a coordinating device for elites in times of institutional flux: salience and focality.

CTs are *salient* in the sense that they cut through the clutter of other discourses. They depict a world that offends common notions of fairness, in which powerful actors exploit the system to benefit themselves at the expense of the body politic. They arouse emotions of resentment and indignation and then sate them with a concise yet complete explanation. They are captivating, replete with narrative elements of plot, character, and suspense (Fenster 1999). These qualities ensure that they will garner attention, if not necessarily assent. Yet they tend to become compelling in turbulent political times, as they provide a semblance of order amidst chaos and certainty amidst confusion.

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<sup>10</sup> I take uncertainty to mean “a nontrivial probability that the structure of political interaction—including rules, players, and power relations—will change in subsequent rounds” (Lupu & Riedl, 2013, 1345).

<sup>11</sup> Along similar lines, Barker (2001, 36) sees enemies as essential to leaders as they seek to cultivate the identification of the populace with the regime, “since by saying who it is not, an individual, community, or group marks out its boundaries more clearly.”

By indicating who is excluded and who is ascendant, conspiracy claims generate common knowledge about political membership that does not need to be expressly articulated (Chwe 2013). In this way, a conspiracy narrative is akin to an instruction manual for the construction of a coalition. The fact that the narrative is likely to be fictitious—and outlandishly so—means that knowledgeable observers understand that its purpose is political rather than descriptive, and can anticipate that observers like themselves will reach the same conclusion. These characteristics distinguish conspiracy from other types of narratives that proliferate in the political ether by making it focal: a point around which actors can coordinate and converge without making the terms explicit (Schelling 1980).

The conspiracy narrative thus works on two levels. Substantively and immediately, it explains the events, names perpetrators, and suggest remedial action. In this way, it helps to restore a feeling of control among observers (Whitson and Galinsky 2008). But its second-order effect—more consequential for the argument presented here—is its usefulness to elites who desire to govern, but understand that they must work within a broad coalition that includes other factions. The common knowledge that a wide swath of elites will benefit from endorsing it provides elites with strong incentives to sign on and, if it serves their long-term interests, to institutionalize it.

Depicting CTs as narratives and contemplating their coalition-building potential differs from the more common question of why people believe them. The fact is that CTs circulate in the popular discourse of many countries, including in Kyrgyzstan, where political uncertainty and fear of conflict prevail. Yet it is rare that a CT becomes a dominant narrative endorsed by state institutions. The cause is unlikely to be found in the intrinsic quality of the claim. Many conspiratorial ideas are compelling, but most are not disseminated widely, much less adopted by

an official commission. This suggests that the surrounding social and political conditions must play an independent role in their adoption. Analysis of the Kyrgyz case is an attempt to elucidate some of these conditions.

### **1990: A Coalition without Conspiracy Claims**

The 1990 riots in southern Kyrgyzstan had the conditions for conspiracism—trauma, uncertainty, and opaque political institutions—and, on the popular level, generated rumors and CTs as one would expect. However, the political incentives of the time did not push the leadership to endorse a CT as an *official* narrative.

Initially a conflict over the apportionment of land during the open political environment of glasnost, local fighting began on June 4, 1990 and spread through the ethnically mixed cities of Osh and Uzgen. When it ended six days later upon the intervention of Soviet troops and the imposition of a curfew, hundreds had been killed. Authorities from Moscow investigated the events, made arrests, and prosecuted several dozen accused perpetrators (Tishkov 1997, 138). In the absence of a public discussion, people's perceptions of the conflict were shaped by their attitudes toward the collapsing Soviet state and the narratives that prevailed within their respective ethnic communities, some of which were conspiratorial. Both communities, while generally aggrieved at the other, also agreed that the residents of the Kyrgyz Republic were not ultimately responsible.<sup>12</sup> Instead, people saw the hand of Moscow lighting the match that sparked the conflagration (Collins 2006, 120). They point to other outbreaks of intercommunal violence in post-Soviet space (particularly the clash between Armenians and Azeris and a pogrom against Meskhetian Turks in the Uzbek city of Fergana in 1989), provide a motive (manufacturing a

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<sup>12</sup> From author's numerous interviews with residents of Osh in the early 2000s.

pretext for continued Soviet control over Central Asia), and offer bits of suggestive evidence (the police stood by and let it happen, the army arrived too late) (Tishkov 1995, 139).

While it is certainly plausible that high-level officials, whether inside or outside the republic, were complicit in setting off the violence, the uncomfortable fact remains that there was enthusiastic participation by ordinary people from Osh, most of whom eluded punishment (Tishkov 1995). By pointing the blame at Moscow, proponents of the theory were foregoing the opportunity to deal with the roots of the problem, which were primarily internal to Kyrgyzstan (Razakov 1993).

As is often the case when the causes and dynamics of an event are complex, the riots presented an opportunity for powerful interests to impose their own, self-serving narrative (Brass 1997). Askar Akaev, who was selected by the Supreme Soviet to be president in October 1990, could have made a conspiracy theory Kyrgyzstan's official narrative either in the aftermath of the riots when Kirgizia was still part of the Soviet Union, or after independence a year later. Such a stance, appropriating the popular wisdom and blaming outsiders, could have enhanced his domestic standing by distancing himself from the old regime. After all, other postcolonial leaders have deployed conspiracy narratives against outside powers as a form of legitimation (Gray 2010).

Yet Akaev did not endorse a conspiracy, against Moscow, the US (whom Moscow sought to blame), or unnamed hidden forces, each of which could have gained credence from some portion of the public. In fact, he did not articulate a concrete explanation for the violence. Instead, he blamed the “dizziness of individual provocateurs and extremists from freedom and democracy” in his memoirs (Akaev 2001, 108). Years later, he referred vaguely to “the struggle

for power, the desire to hold the reins of power, or win them at all costs...fueled by political opportunists for their own personal ambitions” (“V Kyrgyzstane” 2010).

Why did Akaev not propagate an externally driven theory of the Osh riots? Perhaps it was because so much time had passed between the events and independence, and Akaev was confronted with so many state-building tasks, he believed opening old wounds would be a distraction. Yet it was a salient topic in people’s minds, and still could have offered political benefits if he had sought them. It may have been because Akaev valued good relations with Russia, and did not want to antagonize it. Yet there were other possible villains that could have been named, as they were in 2010. It may have also been a personal preference; as a scientist rather than a career politician, Akaev’s instinct led him to be a conciliator rather than a provocateur. Over the ensuing 14 years of his rule, even though he deviated from his initial democratic principles, Akaev did not resort to conspiracizing—at least until his ouster by revolution was imminent, when his spokesman blamed the unrest on “a third force, criminal elements connected with the narcomafia,” and Akaev himself charged that the protests were financed from abroad and connected with Islamist extremism (“Besporyadki” 2005; “Akaev ovbinil” 2005). He was therefore capable of doing so.

Another explanation situates the decision within the political context of the time. In contrast to the period surrounding the 2010 riots, there was in 1990 a strong political consensus that precluded a search for enemies. Akaev did not represent one of the republic’s main political groupings and his selection satisfied the most influential power brokers (Collins 2006, 126). After independence, although the opposition fiercely resisted Akaev’s policies and sometimes accused Akaev of corruption, the regime had sufficient confidence in its material and symbolic resources that it did not need to alter its fundamental justification for rule. The prestige of being a

“founding father,” if only by happenstance, endowed Akaev with a stock of legitimacy that enabled him to preempt serious challenges for a decade and a half.

While memories of the 1990 riots remained bitter at the street level in Osh, elites from both ethnic communities worked to avoid future conflict (Fumagalli 2007). Kyrgyz nationalist parties supported land reform, which was adversarial to Uzbek interests and kept ethnic tensions simmering under the surface. Yet this agenda, supported by less than 5 percent of the population (Anderson 1995, 38), did not penetrate the regime, which endorsed a civic model of minority inclusion in the guise of a “common home.” Although this slogan did not generate policies to address the roots of the conflict, it provided a semblance of accord in interethnic relations and was seldom challenged. Both the ideological opposition and Uzbek activists believed they could best advance their agendas through the formal political system, flawed though it was. In sum, as a result of the political landscape, Akaev’s legitimating narrative survived his presidency (until its final month) and did not necessitate a search for enemies, internal or external, in order to sustain his ruling coalition. While it is difficult to prove why a specific outcome does not occur, the contrast with the 2010 riots will make clear how the tumultuous political circumstances in the latter period created the conditions for the emergence of a different hegemonic political narrative.

### **2010: Narrating Conspiracy Out of Chaos**

The 2011 parliamentary report alleging a consensual plot involving Uzbek nationalists, the Bakievs, and radical Islamists did not emerge from whole cloth. In fact it followed six



months of political discourse focused on those same actors. The rough draft of the narrative was delivered only two weeks after the violence subsided, by Keneshbek Dushebaev, the head of the National Security Services (NSS). As he reported in a press conference on June 25, the security services had cracked the case:

“During the investigation of criminal cases involving allegations of mass riots and clashes in the south, and as a result of its operational activities, the NSS has managed to clarify the role of the IMU [Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan] and IJU [Islamic Jihad Union]. As is well known, their goal is the overthrow of the constitutional order in the Central Asian countries and the construction of an Islamist state caliphate. These organizations are in contact with the movements “Taliban” and “Al Qaeda” (“Keneshbek Dushebaev” 2010).<sup>13</sup>

He then ominously alluded to Uzbek demands for more representation, spearheaded by “radically minded leaders of certain national-cultural centers...insistently demanding national autonomy, the introduction of a second state language, and a 30 percent quota in all state and law enforcement agencies.”<sup>14</sup>

The final but most important part involved the Bakiev family, whose actions connect the dots:

Clan members of the deposed people decided at all costs to regain lost ground. To do this, in April [the president’s son] Maxim Bakiev came into contact with some of the leaders of the IMU in the United Arab Emirates. Then, in early May in Afghan Badakhshan in Bahorak, at a meeting of emissaries and warlords of the Taliban, the IMU, the United Tajik Opposition (UTO), with the personal involvement of Mullah Abdullo and two representatives of the Bakiev family, an agreement was reached to assist the forces of the IMU in the destabilization situation in Kyrgyzstan. For these purposes, Bakiev promised a contribution of \$30 million. The initiators tasked their clients to undermine the political, social, economic, and social fabric of Kyrgyzstan, ignite ethnic and religious conflict, and cow society.

The press conference went on to describe how IMU warlords from Pakistan recruited dissatisfied people in Kyrgyzstan.

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<sup>13</sup> All translations from Russian are the author’s.

<sup>14</sup> The IMU was previously thought to be committed to the overthrow only of the government of Uzbekistan.

In the six months that passed between this short statement and the publication of the 10,000-word parliamentary report, the elements of the conspiracy narrative changed slightly, fleshing out the motivations of the various actors—but the number of prominent Kyrgyz who endorsed it rose dramatically. The first proponents of the narrative were politicians from the south (primarily Osh and Jalalabad Oblasts) who represented aggrieved constituents of Kyrgyz ethnicity, but then endorsement spread across the political spectrum and became official state policy.<sup>15</sup> This was not inevitable. Like many CTs, the Uzbek-Bakiev-Islamist plot device could have died a quick and unceremonious death with few mourners. Its survival can be traced to two contingent factors: an imbalance of power favoring southern Kyrgyz, which resulted in recognition that the central state could not enforce law in the south; and parliamentary elections in October 2010 that revealed the success of candidates who campaigned using the narrative. These factors demonstrated the domestic benefits of endorsing it. As a result, other factions that had little in common with ethnonationalists but sought to justify their position in the governing coalition closed ranks and endorsed the narrative.

Kyrgyzstan throughout its short history has endured significant political turmoil, including a decade of devastating economic collapse following independence, a peaceful revolution in 2005 and a less peaceful regime change in April 2010, and two bouts of ethnic violence. Despite this instability, over two decades of independence, the faces of the elite had hardly changed; Kyrgyzstan inherited a small cadre of officials from the late Soviet period, and citizens were used to seeing the same faces over and over again (McGlinchey 2011). Sometimes they would leave politics or enter the opposition for a time, only to reappear in government several years later. As a result of Kyrgyzstan's personalized politics and low levels of

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<sup>15</sup> The north-south regional divide has been a salient cleavage in Kyrgyzstan's politics, at least since 2005, though some argue that it has been around longer. The divide stems from pre-Russian tribal governance structures and was reinforced in the Soviet era. See Jones Luong (2002).

development, it never developed an institutionalized party system; instead political competition is shaped by pro- vs. anti-presidential affiliation, regional origins, rural populism, and ethnicity.

Beginning in April 2010, Kyrgyzstan found itself in uncharted waters. After Bakiev was overthrown in a putsch, an Interim Government (IG) was formed to run the country until elections could be held in October. The IG consisted of an assortment of opposition figures who had coalesced to oppose Bakiev but were tainted by having previously served in Bakiev's or Akaev's government ("Troubled Transition" 2010). For example, Interim President Roza Otunbaeva had been a foreign minister under Akaev and her prosecutor-general, defense minister, and deputy prime minister had held the same posts under Bakiev. In opposition, they had effectively channeled frustration with Bakiev, but they did not represent a change in the direction of the country and were viewed by the public as self-serving and corrupt (McGlinchey 2011, 108-113).

In the following months, the IG struggled to govern as businessmen, politicians, and organized crime figures jockeyed for property in the absence of effective law enforcement, and for political leverage in advance of the next election. In April and May, local street clashes occurred in the south of the country and escalated into low-level violence. Although most of the fighting occurred among supporters of ethnic Kyrgyz politicians vying for influence, in several cases they pitted Kyrgyz against Uzbeks. Low-level skirmishes escalated into ethnic riots that occurred from June 10-14 in several southern towns, with the most severe violence taking place in Osh and Jalalabad.

Dueling narratives about the violence quickly developed along ethnic lines. Kyrgyz politicians and citizens in the south accused Uzbeks of provoking the fighting. They focused particularly on Kadyrjon Batyrov, a businessman and patron of the Uzbek community who had

advocated for greater Uzbek representation in government following Bakiev's ouster. Several southern Kyrgyz MPs worked through the Ata-Jurt (Fatherland) party to advance ethnonationalist claims. Its leader Kamchibek Tashiev alluded darkly to the role of Uzbeks in the violence, saying "When smaller ethnicities conflict with titular nations, and try by force to get some power or political preferences in the country, it could lead all of us to a new dead end" (Temirov 2010). The remark reflected local ethnically charged discourses that were pervasive among the party's political base in the south. In numerous interviews, Tashiev and others repeated the claim that the clashes had been a deliberate plot by Uzbeks to gain power, the failure of which led them to destabilize the country (Ivashenko 2010).

The IG, meanwhile, was consumed by internal squabbling and found itself paralyzed when the riots began. Otunbaeva took the drastic step of requesting assistance from the CSTO (a regional security body of seven former Soviet states) to help restore order, but was rebuffed. With no common bonds other than having formed an opposition coalition several months earlier, and lacking a governing agenda, members of the IG found themselves on the defensive. As they scrambled to respond to the crisis, the government did what their revolutionary forebears have done for centuries: accused their predecessor of masterminding the plot (Tackett 2000). To lay the blame on Bakiev was not absurd—he was highly corrupt and did in fact rally supporters in Osh after fleeing from Bishkek, a move that threatened to ignite street clashes. However, the IG used his unpopularity to fuel allegations that the Bakievs had deliberately (and effectively and secretly) caused interethnic violence out of spite, despite the absence of evidence for this claim

(“Ekspert” 2010). One of the brothers, Akmat, was captured in July and charged with a number of crimes, including inciting ethnic violence.<sup>16</sup>

Although the IG emphasized Bakiev’s culpability, it refrained from scapegoating Uzbeks—not necessarily because they were ethically opposed, but due to the risk to Kyrgyzstan’s (and their own) reputation.<sup>17</sup> Since Kyrgyzstan’s economy collapsed in 1992, the country has been heavily reliant on assistance from international organizations. By 2010, it had an external debt of \$2.5 billion (or 56% of GDP) (“Kyrgyzstan Country Report” 2010) with no ability to pay it off, and it qualified for President Bush’s Millennium Challenge Corporation in 2008.<sup>18</sup> The violence attracted the attention not only of the international human rights organizations, but also of Western donor countries, which were aware of reports that army and police units were complicit in the violence and that Uzbek casualties twice outnumbered Kyrgyz ones. As a result, leaders in the IG were cognizant of the importance of pursuing justice, or at least the perception of it, and sought to distance themselves from nationalist appeals. This explains why it authorized an international investigation, described below, in addition to the National Commission.

The IG’s conciliatory approach provoked a backlash among southern Kyrgyz and laid bare the domestic costs of meeting international demands. In late June Otunbaeva supported a plan for the OSCE to send 52 unarmed police officers to supervise law enforcement and protect Uzbeks in the south, but she was opposed by protests led by southern Kyrgyz politicians and was forced to rescind the offer (Karabayev 2010). Bishkek’s limited ability to enforce its writ in the

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<sup>16</sup> The crimes include “organizing mass disorder and violent attacks on law-enforcement officials, extortion, illegal use of private lands, illegal procurement and possession of weapons, illegal construction, and creating and participating in an illegal armed group during ethnic clashes (“Former Kyrgyz” 2010).”

<sup>17</sup> Most IG members were running for parliament and hoping for a position in the government. The exception was the interim president Roza Otunbaeva, who announced she would step down after the presidential election.

<sup>18</sup> See <https://www.mcc.gov/pages/countries/program/kyrgyz-republic-threshold-program>.

south was made plain when Otunbaeva attempted to fire Melis Myrzakmatov, the ethnonationalist mayor of Osh. When Myrzakmatov was summoned to meet the president in Bishkek, his bodyguards reportedly fought off an attempt by the president's security team to detain him, after which he returned to Osh where thousands of his supporters had taken to the street to support him (Higgins 2010).

In the months before the October 2010 parliamentary election, southern Kyrgyz candidates played on nationalist resentment as the basis for election appeals. The results of the election ratified the perceived political strength of Kyrgyz ethnonationalism, as Ata-Jurt received the largest number of votes and parliamentary seats. This development reaffirmed politicians' perception of the national mood—angry and vindictive—even though Ata-Jurt's vote share was 16% and non-nationalist parties had won the majority (Doolotkeldieva 2010). In the following two months, the five parties that met the parliamentary threshold jockeyed to form a coalition government.

In the coalition that emerged in December 2010, two months after the election, compromises were struck. It was in the process of negotiation that the conspiracy narrative emerged as a consensual source of legitimation. Formally, the coalition parties Ata-Jurt, the Social-Democratic Party, and Respublika (the latter two comprised mostly of northerners) controlled 77 of 120 seats in parliament and divvied up the portfolios of prime minister, first deputy PM, and parliamentary speaker. Informally, they agreed on a common narrative. The bargain involved mutual recognition of each other's preferred narrative. Northern elites held no particular animus toward Uzbeks and sought to preserve Kyrgyzstan's international image, yet they acquiesced in endorsing the ethnonationalist component of the narrative. Members of Ata-Jurt were Bakiev supporters and shared his political base in the Jalalabad region. Bakiev's ouster

and replacement by predominantly northern politicians represented a blow both to people living in that region and to southern elites who lost power. Their endorsement of the anti-Bakiev portion of the narrative represented a concession, although it also helped dissociated themselves from the disgraced—and now widely despised—former president. The final element of the purported plot, Islamic extremism, reflects a longstanding discourse of the security services in the region and a claim many believed would be attractive to the West. This narrative thread found its way into the rhetoric of politicians seeking to discredit their opposition or disavow local sources of conflict in the early 1990s, and saw resurgence with American involvement in Central Asia after the 2001 terrorist attacks (Schoeberlein-Engel 1994; Khalid 2014).<sup>19</sup>

Even before the coalition pact was signed, law enforcement organs were targeting the purported masterminds of the conspiracy. Beginning in late 2010, the security services intensified a crackdown against suspected Islamic radicals, who were also predominantly Uzbek. The informal power structures in the south, comprising politicians, businessmen, and the security services, took advantage of the weakness of the central government by systematically persecuting ethnic Uzbeks for crimes associated with the June violence, entrenching their political and economic domination, and making the claims in the narrative self-fulfilling. The government's acquiescence to the scapegoating of Uzbeks was manifested in Bishkek's hands-off approach to the systematic discrimination against Uzbeks on the ground (Human Rights Watch 2010).<sup>20</sup> Batyrov was put on trial in absentia, having received asylum in Sweden, and sentenced to life in prison in October. At the same time, the government continued to publicly

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<sup>19</sup> NSS head Dushebaev, who was in charge of the most powerful security agency during the coup and violence, and who first articulated the conspiracy narrative, was himself considered close to Ata-Jurt, but had also conflicted with Bakiev (Laruelle 2012, 46; Marat 2010, 11).

<sup>20</sup> Even Otunbaeva, considered the most principled and pro-democracy member of the government, made subtle gestures to the dominant discourse: "By surrounding herself with Kyrgyz ethnic symbols but without stressing the importance of equal citizenship, the president inadvertently indicated her support for the idea that ethnic Kyrgyz are the country's core group" (Khamidov and Marat 2011).

condemn Bakiev, seize assets from his family, prosecute former associates who did not enjoy political protection, and request extradition of Bakiev family members abroad (“Ethnic Uzbek” 2011; “Bakiev Nephew” 2011).

The National Commission’s report, which came out nearly seven months after the violence, should then be seen as a ratification of the conspiracy narrative that had taken root and evolved during that time. But why did the commission go along? The chairman, Abdygany Erkebaev, a nationalist-oriented scholar of philology, selected the members to represent a diverse group of politicians, security officials, academics, and civil society activists. Its mandate was ambitious—to uncover the roots of the violence, anticipate consequences, and make recommendations. Its website showed working trips as the members interviews local officials and met with ordinary citizens, giving the impression of a serious and thorough investigation.<sup>21</sup>

Reports leaked from commission hearings and interviews conducted by the author reveal a different reality. In the course of the commission’s work, several independently minded activists quit, and in the end only 22 out of 30 members signed (Bakirov 2011). Though commission members traveled to Osh and met with officials, their meetings were held in public and did not reveal new information.<sup>22</sup> In private sessions, the commission was briefed by the NSS, which also gave input into the writing of the report.<sup>23</sup> In the end, Erkebaev and his assistant wrote the report without consulting other members, who were simply asked to endorse it.<sup>24</sup> International observers grumbled in protest, but it was too late—the document affirmed the national consensus; conspiracy simply served too many interests. Prominent elites who failed to

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<sup>21</sup> See <http://south.kloop.kg/>

<sup>22</sup> Author’s interview with Member 1 (Bishkek, December 2014).

<sup>23</sup> Author’s interview with Member 2 (Bishkek, December 2014). In an interview following the report’s release, Erkebaev referred several times to relying heavily on materials from the National Security Services (Ivashenko and Yanovskaya 2011).

<sup>24</sup> Author’s interview with Member 1 (Bishkek, December 2014).



support it left themselves exposed to the charges that typically fall upon conspiracy “deniers,” including lack of patriotism and sympathy for the enemy. This was the fate that befell an Uzbek lawyer and member of the commission who refused to sign on to its conclusions. He found himself subject to a parliamentary commission to investigate his “ethics” and singled out by Ata-Jurt’s Tashiev: “He does not agree with the conclusions of the commission. In addition, he continues to support Uzbek separatists” (“Uzbek? Nakazat’!” 2011).

### **A KIC in the Guts**

The degree to which the report reflected a political consensus that Kyrgyz elites considered sacrosanct can be seen in their defensive response to a direct challenge of their narrative. In July 2010, the Interim Government, reeling from the violence in the south and desperate for external support, complied when a group of European diplomats insisted on conducting an independent investigation of the Osh violence. Chaired by Dr. Kimmo Kiljunen, a former Finnish lawmaker and Special Representative for Central Asia of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, the Kyrgyzstan Inquiry Commission (KIC) “was mandated to investigate the facts and circumstances relevant to incidents that took place in southern Kyrgyzstan in June 2010...[and] determine responsibilities and make recommendations”(KIC 2011, ii). It conducted interviews with more than 750 witnesses and examined “700 documents and many thousands of photographs and video extracts (Ibid. 2011, ii).”

Kiljunen’s report, published in May 2011, reached conclusions that refuted the national report, and provided substantial evidence to back up its findings. It concluded that Uzbeks were specifically targeted by Kyrgyz mobs, the army and police were passive but sometimes complicit

in the violence, and the government made few and feeble efforts to end the violence for several days. It found no evidence of a plot involving the ex-president and his family, Uzbek separatists, or Islamic movements abroad. Furthermore, the report criticized police raids on Uzbek homes and politicized prosecution of Uzbeks in the months following the violence, seeing “serious violations of international human rights law” (iii). It recommended further investigations, prosecution of human rights violators, and the establishment of a truth and reconciliation commission.

This ostensibly apolitical endeavor did not sit well with Kyrgyz lawmakers, some of whom called the report “unacceptable” and “biased.” Shortly after its release, 95 out of the 96 members of parliament present in the chamber voted to declare Kiljunen *persona non grata* and ban him from Kyrgyzstan for life. The parliament sent out a press release calling the KIC report one-sided, a threat to national security, and an incitement to ethnic hatred (Aktalov 2011).

A government working group released a rebuttal to the report that took issue with many aspects of the report’s methodology and conclusions.<sup>25</sup> It also hinted at—but did not provide evidence for—an alternative account of why the conflict occurred and who was to blame. The report pointed to “factors which illustrated that the conflict was provoked. The KIC was unable to establish who planned and instigated the conflict (4).” According to the working group, the instigators were “third parties...including the representatives of the overthrown government of the 7th of April, and both criminal and radical nationalist groups (6).” The mastermind was Bakiev, along with his associates: citing a phone conversation that the KIC found not credible, the report argued “a plan was developed to spread conflict in the country, this [sic] was recorded in Bakiyev’s conversations which took place on the 29th of April (7).”

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<sup>25</sup> The quotations in this section come from “Comments by the Government” (2011). Attribution is uncertain, as it cites as authors “representatives of the presidential apparatus of the Republic of Kyrgyzstan, the Government of the Republic of Kyrgyzstan and independent experts.”

By the time the KIC report was released, Kyrgyz politics had stabilized in ways conducive to the politicians in power at the time. Perhaps one point in the rebuttal aptly summarizes the true reasons for rejecting the KIC report: “official investigations which lay the blame on suspected guilty parties, in an already unstable situation in the south of the country, may lead to new sources of tension, which directly contradicts the aims and mission of the KIC (4).” Once the narrative was solidified, any challenges to it that might lead to a wider search for justice could indeed be destabilizing, not because the public would object, but because it would disrupt the elite consensus.

### **Conclusion: The Virulent Virtues of Conspiracy**

The events of 2010 were eerily reminiscent of events that happened almost exactly 20 years earlier, yet the official explanation was diametrically opposed. The different outcomes are not due to Akaev’s decision to appeal to a civic notion of identity whereas his successors were ethnonationalists. In fact, most people in the 2010 Interim Government had served before, many under Akaev, and had previously endorsed his nation-building policies. Neither did the 2010 government simply adopt an exclusionary platform that privileged majority Kyrgyz over minority Uzbeks. The official narrative involved more actors and a grander plot than was necessary to legitimate ethnic domination. Political incentives were the key to understanding the content of the narrative and its wide acceptance.

It is assumed that political leaders turn to conspiratorial rhetoric when they hold substantial power that they are afraid of losing. I turn this logic on its head and show that elites may also deploy CTs as the glue to hold coalitions together where power is dispersed. In the

study of the social significance of conspiracy theories, emphasis is usually placed on their divisive nature (Welch 2006). Yet the flipside is that they act as a focal point of unity that can have a stabilizing effect on politics. The unity does not last forever; when disparate factions come together out of common enemies, this is not a durable form of cohesion (Beissinger 2013). Political squabbling indeed occurred in Kyrgyzstan throughout the period when the narrative was still fresh, and new fixations dominated politics as the 2010 events receded into the past. Yet the fundamental elements of the conspiracy narrative remain in place to this day, and there has been no reconsideration of the essential “facts.”

CTs are viewed as attractive to those who consume them due to the psychological attraction of their simplicity, and the entertainment value they provide (e.g. Knight 2002). Their producers also find them attractive, for their versatility. In settings like Kyrgyzstan where the political class is corrupt and despised, it is typical for ordinary people to believe CTs in which elites are the perpetrators. Politicians act with the knowledge that they are believed to be violating the public trust, and can use CTs to redirect people’s grievances. Top-down conspiracy claims reframe the axis of division, presenting (some) elites and (some) popular groups as being on one side as fellow victims, pitted against an enemy that also cuts vertically across the social divide. CTs can also stretch horizontally, expanding to include new disliked actors and new wrinkles into the plot. Once people accept the premise of hidden and power forces, the barrier for introducing new protagonists into the narrative is low (Fenster 1999).

Following on the arguments made here, future research on CTs can benefit from situating them in their social and political context. Recent events in Russia and Ukraine have put CTs in the spotlight, reviving claims that the post-Soviet region is especially prone to CTs. This is a difficult assertion to evaluate—and there are other regions that might also claim this

distinction—but the region certainly carries historical legacies that push in that direction (Ortmann and Heathershaw 2012). Despite this fact, CTs are neither a constant nor always determinative of political outcomes. The findings from the Kyrgyzstan case suggest a more fruitful avenue of research is to consider the effects of political competition on CT production.

The association between tyranny and conspiracy is taken for granted. Yet while dictators enjoy unrivalled control over the political agenda and may legitimate their rule through conspiracy, competition in politics may allow “a hundred flowers” of conspiracy theory to bloom, as observers of politics in Russia in the 1990s or in Pakistan today can attest. The degree of contestation may affect not only the number of CTs in the public sphere, but also their diversity. Likewise, because ideas rarely move in only one direction in more open political systems, there is likely to be some interplay of between mass conspiratorial beliefs and dissemination of CTs by political entrepreneurs. In some situations, leaders may innovate by crafting conspiracy narratives from fragments of discourse, and in others merely act as a sounding board for fully formed popular narratives.

A final issue that has been raised but not systematically studied is the extent to which elite conspiracy narratives resonate with the public—and whether it matters. The National Commission’s narrative, which was implausible on its face, provided just enough basis in fact to give the narrative a foundation, while the compelling details, connections between the protagonists, and the magnitude of the crime gave it its emotional pull. Evidence from interviews suggested that the public largely agreed with the official interpretation, especially in the south (Megoran 2012; Laruelle 2012). Yet there was no guarantee that this narrative would have staying power. In fact, CTs that are too outlandish or incredible may be viewed as a sign of desperation or “crying wolf.” Where the public has a say in the matter, as in elections, it

sometimes rejects on their merits politicians who rely heavily on conspiracy theory.<sup>26</sup> In Kyrgyzstan, there are no precise figures on public opinion about the narrative. In any case, this was a secondary consideration. Politicians in Kyrgyzstan do not expect to be popular. Because the CT served the interests of the elites above all, its staying power depended not on its believability but on its usefulness to them.

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<sup>26</sup> Examples include the defeat of the Sandanistas in Nicaragua in 1990 and Mikheil Saakashvili's ouster in Georgia in 2012. It is not clear if these outcomes occurred despite or because of the incumbent's conspiratorial tendencies.

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