



**4D International Journal of Management and Science**

**ISSN No: 2250-0669**

**www.4dinternationaljournal.com**

**Vol. 10, Issue1,-2019**

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**Role of Media in Peace Building: A Case Study of Post 2010-Kyrgyzstan Uprising**

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**Abstract**

The paper is a study on the role and importance of media in the process of peace building. During and after uprising in any country the most suffered are the commoners. Peace building and peace maintaining both are very necessary in such circumstances so that society could resume normal functioning. The reach of media has increased with time. Through this paper it is explained that media is not just a neutral observer during the times of uprising but it has the power to uplift any such situation. From time and again social scientists have discussed about the impact that media can create if it is well organised in itself, and for any media to be well organized requires freedom from censorship. This paper explores the positive role of media in peace keeping process. Peace and violence are two sides of the same coin; peace comes in direct response to violent conflict.. At first the causes and background of the uprising is explained, then co-relation between media and peace is explored. After that role of media in Kyrgyzstan uprising is discussed and then role of media in spreading peace is informed.

**Keywords: Media,peace spreading, Kyrgyzstan uprising,censorship,violent conflicts**

**Introduction**

**Overview of the country**

Kyrgyzstan is a landlocked country in Central Asia, in its north there is Kazakhstan, in the west there is Uzbekistan, Tajikistan is in the southwest and China is in the east. There were a

lot cultures and empires in the prolong history of more than 2000 years of the region. There has been an intersection of great civilizations in Kyrgyzstan through the Silk Road and other cultural and economic entities. Kyrgyzstan achieved its independence from Soviet Union in 1991 but the history of the region shows that there has been a lot of invasions from tribes and clans to the ruling of foreign authorities.

After its independence Kyrgyzstan became a unitary parliamentary republic but there have been issues about ethnicity<sup>1</sup>, poverty, economic conditions, conflicts and uprisings<sup>2</sup>. Ethnic Kyrgyz are in majority while there are significant minorities of Uzbeks and Russians. Russian is the official language of the region while Kyrgyz is also significantly recognized.

In 2010 there were riots and massacre in Kyrgyzstan in which a lot of people lost their lives. There was havoc and tension in the region. Human Rights identify peace and security as global concerns. There have been ample talks on media's role in conflicts but this paper deals with media's role in peace keeping and security. The main focus here is on human rights conditions in Kyrgyzstan, media freedom and Human Rights and the role of media in changing society post 2010 vis a vis peace and security.

### **Methodology**

This research is a qualitative research and uses analytical research methodology for studying in depth about the role of media in peace building. For this purpose a couple of primary and secondary data has been used. The study is an analytical study to not just understand about media's participation in peace but to the larger context that the media propaganda creates war.

This primary data involves government reports and articles, Human rights reports and articles on uprising and peace and secondary data from books, newspaper articles, websites, multimedia content and blogs.

### **Kyrgyzstani media and background studies**

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<sup>1</sup> "Foreigners in Kyrgyzstan: 'Will We Be Banned, Too?', *EurasiaNet*, 15 June 2011, U.R.L: <https://eurasianet.org/foreigners-in-kyrgyzstan-will-we-be-banned-too> (accessed on 24/3/19).

<sup>2</sup> "Kyrgyz private armies incite permanent revolution", *RT Question More*, 17 March 2012, U.R.L: <https://www.rt.com/news/kyrgyzstan-private-army-guards-797/>, (accessed on 2/9/18). Also see "Kyrgyzstan: Economy", *GlobalEDGE*, U.R.L: <https://globaledge.msu.edu/countries/kyrgyzstan/economy> (accessed on 12/5/19).

Media is a device of communication and it works to spread information. In International Relations media is the non-state actor that has the capability to express power through projection, and also it has the strength, to support or change the dimension of any particular uprising or conflict. This paper emphasizes that media is not merely a neutral observer but has an important role in peace and security. Kyrgyzstan attained its freedom from Soviet rule in 1991. This country was then marked by the presence of an active and participatory civil society. But as time changed the other things also changed their course in the region. On paper the freedom of press is granted which depicts that democratic principles are intact in the country but censorship is quite a common feature here. The governing bodies pretend to provide the fundamental rights but in reality everything has to pass a strict scrutiny. The content and the course of reporting are mostly censored in Kyrgyzstan<sup>3</sup>. Also a lot of media groups are state owned and from time to time reporters and media persons have to face ill treatments by the ruling powers. Libel is a punishable offence but it is not really in practice here.

Quoting Harry S. Truman makes things more clear that free access to unbiased information is necessary for the society, he says, “You can never get all the facts from just one newspaper, and unless you have all the facts, you cannot make proper judgements about what is going on”<sup>4</sup>. To understand the concepts of democracy the public needs an access to the basic information about their ruling governments but in Kyrgyzstan the information flow is at a halt as there lays a sheet of censorship over most of the news.

Though the country and its constitution provide freedom of speech and press but these rights are actually followed inconsistently over here. There are laws that define how to report on religious or ethnic issues and many a times these laws are used as a pretext to pressurize media persons to report on complex issues. In fact in Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan was the first country to accept libel as a punishable crime. The public in Kyrgyzstan still finds it challenging to know the different aspects of news. Again, there are laws that provide access to public information but projections are different from reality in here.

Kyrgyzstan has been facing continuous ups and downs since its freedom from soviet rule in 1991. From time to time there have been conflicts, economic problems, ethnic tensions,

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<sup>3</sup> “Final report on monitoring and content analysis of ethical standards in print and online media of Kyrgyzstan”, OSCE, 17 January 2013, U.R.L: <https://www.osce.org/bishkek/98786> (accessed on 10/6/19).

<sup>4</sup> Harry S. Truman quote, U.R.L :<https://www.brainyquote.com/authors/harry-s-truman-quotes> (accessed on 22/7/19).

political issues and so on. The 2010 revolution was also on the similar lines. The domestic policy has also not been smooth in Kyrgyzstan, as there has been a tussle between North and South for years. The governors of the region were also falling deaf to the problems of the people and thus further exaggerating the divide. Clans are quite relevant in rural Kyrgyzstan and the upcoming or new political powers often try to overpower the position of clans which result in conflicts. So apart from external reasons, internal reasons also led to uprisings in Kyrgyzstan.

The 2010 uprising was a sequence of marches and protests throughout Kyrgyzstan following which the then President Kurmanbek Bakiyev was forced to leave the country. There were many factors for the uprising but the prime reasons were corruption, poverty and unemployment. A lot of violence happened during all this and ultimately a new parliamentary system was formed in the region.

At that time there were open Human Rights violations, protesters were getting mugged up and killed as well. From common people to journalists everyone was facing a tough time. The Bakiyev government was not efficient anymore to its people. The uprising took place as there was a huge dissatisfaction among people due to the anarchic nature of the government. Ethnic tensions also took place in South Kyrgyzstan, as a larger aspect of the 2010 uprising. A lot of people were killed and wounded but the exact number is still unknown. In early 2011, a National Commission consisting of authorities from the region reported that 426 people died in the clashes<sup>5</sup>.

Post the 2010 uprising there was a new dawn of development in the region. Politics was no longer a government controlled sphere; there was a lot of participation by the public. The mass media also observed a significant development after 2010. The TV channels previously owned by the state started getting transformed into public broadcasting and the print media also significantly gained new readership.

In this paper the term media is taken as a broad concept to describe the role and relevance of different media channels and techniques in peace keeping. A couple of media units such as journalism schools, movies, blogs, internet etc. played a very important role after the uprising in maintaining peace after the revolution ended.

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<sup>5</sup> “National Investigation of the Osh Violence Yields Little Result”, Eurasia Daily Monitor, 26 January 2011, U.R.L : <https://jamestown.org/program/national-investigation-of-the-osh-violence-yields-little-results/> (accessed on 23/7/19).

### Conceptual co-relation of media and peace

From as early as 1920s media and peace have been used together. After studies on the concept of propaganda came, political thinkers as Lasswell<sup>6</sup>, Lippmann<sup>7</sup> and Bernays<sup>8</sup> hypothesized that if media can influence people to back up wars then it can also be used for the development of the society.

Media has both constructive and destructive powers. It can create peace as well as chaos. It is like an instrument which can construct both positivity and negativity. If the media is not suppressed by the government then it can act as a platform for people to put up their voices. Whereas in countries which have a controlled media setup this medium can be misused to create propaganda and false rumours. Also ideas are not anymore limited to traditional forms of media. The reach of media has increased with time. The construction and depiction of information by media is strong enough to impact the society as a whole. Louis Althusser famously known for his theory on ideology says that, “ideologies are circulated by agencies (media here) and help to construct people’s identities. But because this is so subtle and covert, members of society don’t realize this is happening”<sup>9</sup>.

Media also acts as a conveyer of message and to explain this further Marshall McLuhan’s media theory is subtle. He says that it is the medium that is important<sup>10</sup>, and in terms of revolution or uprising media acts as a medium which can lead to both peace work and abhorrent communications. It acts as a platform to collaborate people both positively and negatively. Same happened in the case of Kyrgyzstan uprising where media constructed a positive medium which helped the civil society to overcome the aftereffects of war.

McLuhan further explains that there are different ways through which medium affects any society. Media itself is a very influential medium and the messages it passes are captivated very quickly and efficiently by the society.

During the time of any uprising or alike situation when the information is not accessible to the public they become anxious, impatient and can be easily influenced. While a well-

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<sup>6</sup>Harold D. Lasswell, *Propaganda technique in the World War* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1927) p.3-50.

<sup>7</sup> Walter Lippmann, *The Phantom Public* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publisher, 1993) p. 44-66.

<sup>8</sup>Edward Bernays, *Propaganda* (New York: Ig Publishing, 2004) p. 1-10.

<sup>9</sup> Louis Althusser trans. Ben Brewster, *For Marx* (London: Verso books, 2005), p. 21-40.

<sup>10</sup>Marshall McLuhan and Lewis H Lapham, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (U.S.A.: MIT Press, 1994) p. 3-48.

informed civil society nurtures economic growth which leads to the strengthening of the civil society. It is because of these reasons United Nations Millennium Declaration emphasized on the importance of independence of media and the requirement of people to obtain the news<sup>11</sup>. This paper explores the positive role of media as how media can help in peace keeping process. Peace and violence are two sides of the same coin; peace comes in direct response to violent conflict.

### **Kyrgyzstan 2010 uprising and the role of media**

During 2010 Kyrgyzstan was taken aback by the second uprising in last five years (first one was Tulip revolution in 2005). There was a lot of havoc, tension, destruction and bloodshed everywhere. At that time there was a lot of discontentment among public, social and ethnic issues were there, also the enmity between U.S. and Russia added fuel to the fire.

The uprising witnessed a large number of killed, wounded and missing people. Media and media persons were also not spared, many journalists were suppressed and imprisoned. There were heavy rounds of firing and beating of the demonstrators, around 80-85 people were killed during the initial rounds of firing. During all this a lot of people were also displaced, Uzbek minority had to leave for Uzbekistan and around 400,000 Kyrgyzstanis were exiled<sup>12</sup>. Victims later on told the media that they have undergone gang rapes and deadly agonies and have seen mass killing of their friends and families in front of them<sup>13</sup>. Unofficially it was later reported by some media organisations that more than 2000 people were killed during the entire period of uprising.

Over the time the leadership of Kurmanbek Bakiyev became quite autocratic in nature. He became highly corrupt and started misusing his power. As a result people revolted back and the uprising saw a lot of violent clashes and many protesters were left dead and wounded in the process. There was a lot of bloodshed and human loss. Soon Bakiyev realized that he could not contain this uprising and he fled from Kyrgyzstan. Many critics have written about the nepotism, prejudices and exploitation of common man during the tenure of Bakiyev. To

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<sup>11</sup>United Nations Millennium Declaration (2000) was adopted on 8 September 2000. The Declaration has 8 chapters and 32 paragraphs.

<sup>12</sup>“Uzbek refugees from Kyrgyzstan pogrom vow to return”, *The Guardian*, 17 June, 2010, U.R.L: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/jun/17/kyrgyzstan-uzbek-pogrom-refugees> (accessed on 12/6/19).

<sup>13</sup>“Victims recount horrors of ethnic violence in Kyrgyzstan”, *CNN*, 17 June 2010, U.R.L: [http://edition.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/asiapcf/06/17/kyrgyzstan.victims/index.html?section=cnn\\_latest](http://edition.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/asiapcf/06/17/kyrgyzstan.victims/index.html?section=cnn_latest) (accessed on 15/6/ 19).

add to the woes of Kyrgyzstan back in 2010 both U.S. and Russia had political desires in the region and had military bases there, thus manipulating the political scenario of the country.

The uprising began in April 2010 as a series of protests in the Talas region of the country. The leaders in opposition protested against the corruption practices of the government. Very soon the protest got a nation-wide recognition and turned violent as well because the Bakiyev government replied with heavy firing. A state of emergency was levied soon after. As a result there was a lot of mayhem and commotion. Even the capital Bishkek was not spared and protesters in order to take revenge of the mass killing and bloodshed took control over the internal security headquarters and acquired a state run T.V. channel. News portals such as BBC and CNN reported of more than 80 people being killed and 458 being badly wounded in the encounter between demonstrators and the government<sup>14</sup>, though the actual number of people died is still unknown. Bakiyev resigned soon after.

But all of this could not contain the anger that was prevailing in the country at that time. The uprising that started in April took over to South Kyrgyzstan by June eventually. In the Osh city and its neighbouring areas in South Kyrgyzstan, the uprising changed its course and turned inter-ethnic. In southern part of Kyrgyzstan, Uzbek population is in minority and there are problems between them and ethnic Kyrgyz. Later on it was estimated that more than 400 people died in the uprising and 2000 were badly wounded while more than 400,000 were displaced<sup>15</sup>.

Since its freedom from Soviet rule in 1991 the domestic policy of Kyrgyzstan has been on a rough road. There is always some or the other problem between the north and the south. The new political leaders frequently try to suppress the clans which are quite prominent in the region. The core of uprising in the region is the tussle of power between different tribes.

As Bakiev assumed power in 2005 he promised a lot of developmental work for the betterment of the region. He assured public that things that were neglected during the tenure of Askar Akaev will be given a prominence this time. He showed great interest in depleting corruption and nepotism. Bakiev also said that under his rule there will be a dignified way of living for all the citizens of the country. But his promises faded away with

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<sup>14</sup>"[Kyrgyz president says he won't resign](http://edition.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/asiapcf/04/08/kyrgyzstan.violence/index.html?iref=allsearch)". *CNN*, 9 April, 2010, U.R.L: <http://edition.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/asiapcf/04/08/kyrgyzstan.violence/index.html?iref=allsearch> (accessed on 16/6/19).

<sup>15</sup> "National Investigation of the Osh Violence Yields Little Results", *Refworld*, 26 January 2011, U.R.L: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/4d469cb52.html> (accessed on 12/5/2019).

time and he himself proved to be an anarchic leader and his corruption scandals were world famous.

Both the governments of Askar Akayev and Kurmanbek Bakiyev put severe restrictions on the media. Though on paper rights and freedom was given but there was always a fear of censorship and this was also one of the reasons for uprising as people were frustrated with the government and the limitations it imposed<sup>16</sup>. The traditional forms of media such as newspaper, Television and radio faced a lot of suppression over the ruling periods of both the rulers.

Following the footsteps of his predecessor, Bakiyev had also levied heavy censorship on media and the press. As such the role of media in Kyrgyz revolution is negligible since the traditional forms of media were placed under restrictions. But the social media did play a significant role in propagating the uprising. There were news about the violence, blood and inhuman activities that were going on during the revolution on the internet. This gave people a platform to put up their voices against the tyranny leadership. This does not mean that media instigated uprising but it rather gave people a platform for their collective ideas.

### **Role of media in Peacekeeping**

Human Rights have advocated peace since the beginning of United Nations in 1945. The UN Charter Article 2, preambles (1, 3, 7) gives importance to sovereignty of any state. The article further supports the concept of peace and progress and asks the states to prevent conflict situations so that peace can prevail in states. Media has also given a global recognition to the concept of peace and development.

As mentioned earlier in the paper that 2010 revolution created a lot of havoc and violence. There was a lot of bloodshed, injuries, damages, displacement so on and so forth. After this there were strong needs for peacekeeping measure. It is here the role of media or media as a medium comes forward. Uprising or any other kind of rebellion does not happen in a moment. They build up over extended period of time and sometimes the time frame may be as long as decades. There are many ways through which peace can be promoted and violence can be kept at bay. And media can certainly help in the same, with the correct measures

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<sup>16</sup>Media controversy helps spur protests in Kyrgyzstan', *EurasiaNet*, U.R.L: [www.EurasiaNet.org/departments/civilsociety/articles/eav022205.shtml](http://www.EurasiaNet.org/departments/civilsociety/articles/eav022205.shtml), (accessed on 4/7/19).



media can be an important contributor for peace and security. A correct content in the right direction can help people to overcome the atrocities of any uprising.

Mostly media is recognized for its role in spreading the propaganda rather than helping with peace efforts. Yet its efforts on peace maintenance cannot be ignored. But this relationship should be carefully examined so that media could be used in a most appropriate way for avoiding uprisings and establishing peace<sup>17</sup>.

### **Media efforts after the uprising**

Post the 2010 uprising there has been significant media efforts towards peace keeping in Kyrgyzstan. They are working to provide opportunities for people to overcome the losses of the uprising. Through different measures media created collective consciousness and opened a new ground for people to step forward. The mass media also got a substantial development after 2010. The TV channels previously owned by the state started getting transformed into public broadcasting and the print media also gained new readership.

Among many such steps, one example is the School of Peace-making and Media Technology. It was established in June 2010 after the ethnic violence in southern Kyrgyzstan. This particular school was created with the idea to propagate the importance of peace in the entire community and especially among youth. Its functions included training on the basic concepts of peace building, to observe the contents of media and to help the local communities that are devastated post uprising situations. In here a lot of experienced professionals are employed who very well understand the sensitiveness of war related issues.

There are noteworthy efforts that are being established through the media to upkeep peace efforts in Kyrgyzstan after 2010. Through education, culture and Human Rights remarkable work is being done so that people could forget the mayhems of the past. Another example could be Bir Duino Kyrgyzstan (BDK). This organisation was although established much before 2010 (back in 2000) but it works in a substantial way to encourage Human Rights in the region. There are films, theatre and civil campaigns to educate people on Human Rights issues. After 2010 BDK has been actively making documentaries that promote peace in the

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<sup>17</sup>Gadi Wolfsfeld, *Media and the Path to Peace* (U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2004) p. 8-44.

region. An international festival of documentary films on Human Rights 'BirDuino Kyrgyzstan' is held on a yearly basis.

This film festival is the only one of its kind in Central Asia. And also films from different corners of the world are accepted here. The participant countries include USA, Belgium, South Korea, Great Britain, Canada, Zimbabwe, Sweden, Poland, South Africa, France, Netherlands, Germany, Serbia and Kazakhstan. Despite obstacle in the ways, BirDuino keeps on working for the welfare and betterment of the society.

So the peace keeping efforts of media are quite pertinent in the region and in a way or the other media organisations are doing things for the society after the uprising. Another of their effort is Novi Ritm organisation. In here a couple of journalists (who are well versed with conflict situations), academicians and commoners work for different projects to maintain peace in post uprising situations. Though they run a variety of other projects as well but peace building is the main concern.

Also there are media monitoring groups. These groups work to see if hate speech exist in the media or not. Through a specific methodology the skilled members analyse the different forms of media. Also they investigate how peace issues are covered by the media and how it affects the internal politics of the region.

Hence through multiple ways the media organisations of the region are working for the development and betterment of the society in post uprising situations.

### **Conclusion**

Though this paper has limitations in terms of traditional forms of media as they were highly restricted during 2010, and still they are in a developing phase in Kyrgyzstan. But the alternate forms of media are really working hard for maintaining peace keeping efforts in Kyrgyzstan. As Walter Lippmann says that media can't be a replacement for the insufficient social establishments, it can be powerful only if the social institutions are powerful. For example just like any propaganda that is created before the war can't all alone cause the war similarly peace efforts of the media also can't wrap the war on its own. To yield more results media need the company of different social institutions so that peace building could become a success. Media can be an important aspect of peace building but solely it is not adequate. It has its limitations and can work mostly to help in the problems of communication, whereas there may be other profound reasons of uprising.

It is not the responsibility of media to protect Human Rights but it works as a carrier of news and information between the state and its people, although it is important for the media persons to work in a sensible way in uprising situations. The media organisations that are bothered about peace development can also promote Human Rights by giving importance to different virtues of democracy.

Media organisations can provide a great assistance for peace management in any uprising but they are also backed up with their limitations. For example media is not efficient enough to handle armed rebellion or uprisings. Media can provide a great assistance in promoting peace and security but this is not all. Much more is required to promote peace and the entire burden can't be applied to media only. There are two roles of media one that instigates peace and the other that promotes propaganda. For the initial role media can help by questioning the authorities and also creating suitable institutions that help people to overcome the crisis in war situations. While on the other hand media institutions can also become mere puppets in the hands of the governing authorities and create propaganda.

Also role of local media is very important in any uprising situation. If the media is free from censoring and is well developed it is useful for both national and international viewers and helps in connecting on a global scale, during the times of crisis. There are two sides of a coin and so is the case with media, it could act as a vehicle of violence by spreading false news and can manipulate the emotions of people, and at the same time it could be an answer to the plight of common man by appreciating Human rights and presenting the correct picture of the scenario.

Hence media alone can't be the answer to any uprising or rebellion situation and so was the case in Kyrgyzstan. There have been many significant efforts that have been taken by the media, including improving the conditions of youth and children in the region but substantial steps are required from the authorities to improvise the damages that have been done. There should be ample social and governmental schemes and plans for people to live up again in free air.

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